

THE ROAD TO WEIRD

Early's ghost
Harpo Marx is seeing things



PEGGY TIBBETTS



**THE ROAD
to
WEIRD**



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PART ONE

CARLY'S GHOST

CHAPTER 1

Thumping against the wall, Carly Baillie nudged the overstuffed box through the back door into the kitchen. She danced it to the center of the red tile then slapped the dust from her hands. Realizing there were two more doorways to squeeze through, she thought about unpacking that beast right there.

Her mother, Liz, and sister Jackie argued as they hung the drapes on the living room windows.

“These ugly old things look gross in here!” Jackie complained.

“They look just fine for now,” Liz countered. “Besides, we can’t afford new ones.”

Peeking into the living room, Carly was struck by the way the geometric print of the drapes reminded her of home. The afternoon sun reflected off the glass and bounced on the floor beneath the window. She ached at the thought of the house where she’d spent all of her twelve years. Grandma and Grandpa Baillie still lived in St. Paul. She longed to go over to Ellen’s and get out of all this work.

She’s probably forgotten about me already, Carly thought. *Steamboat Springs is a long way from St. Paul. This must be what homesick feels like.* She stared down at the box of books.

“I need some help!” she hollered, punching her glasses up the bridge of her nose.

“With what, Carla?”

Her mother always called her Carla. Her dad used “Carly.” Everyone else did, too, except Liz, who stood in the doorway squinting at the obstacle in the middle of the floor.

“Leave it for your dad. It’s too heavy,” she pronounced.

“He left it on the back steps for us to move,” Carly told her.

“Oh! Then let me try.”

She stooped and shoved the awkward carton gingerly. A stray wisp of auburn hair fell down from the pile on top of her head. Carly knew her mother wasn’t strong enough to handle it alone. Bending down, she pushed while her mother tugged.

“Jackie!” Liz gasped. “A hand, please.”

Tossing back her shoulder-length red hair, Jackie propped her lean body against the staircase and applauded. Her green eyes flashed as she smirked at them.

“Fatty, Fatty two-by-four!” she sang. “Can’t get through the kitchen door!”

“Get out of the way!” Carly shouted.

“Jackie,” Liz scolded, “get over on the other side and help your sister push.”

Carly knew she could slide it through the door if her mother would only steer. Adding Jackie to the task was like wrestling with a bee. She’d probably get stung.

“Everybody ready?” Liz asked. “One, two, three, push!”

With one heave the box wedged diagonally in the doorway.

“Carly! You idiot!” Jackie snapped. “You didn’t push!”

“I did, too!”

“Then you pushed the wrong way!” Jackie shouted.

Bang!

Cold hands clutched Carly’s bare arms. She screamed.

CHAPTER 2

“Knock it off,” Jackie griped.

Mike Baillie hugged Carly. “Did I scare you, kiddo?”

She shuddered. “Yeah! What was that noise?”

“Maybe something fell. Sassy’s probably chasing mice upstairs,” he said. “Cleaned up a few droppings in your closet yesterday.”

“Mike, help me with this box,” Liz ordered. “Go check on the cat, Carla.”

“Anything to get out of a little work,” Jackie chided her.

Anything to avoid you! Carly thought as she jumped the steps two at a time. At the top of the stairs, she noticed her bedroom door was closed. As she pushed it open, a cold draft sent a chill through her body. But the balcony door was shut tight. So was the window.

She recalled the night before last when she rode up with her dad in the cab of his semi. They had seen a light on in the upstairs window. Her mother and Jackie had arrived earlier in the day so at first she thought they left the light on; but her room had been dark and empty when she dumped her sleeping bag onto the cold floor. Now, from that same window she watched as her dad trudged uphill to the truck. No doubt he would tote more boxes down to the cabin for them to unpack. Moving was such a pain.

Carly couldn’t remember a time when her parents hadn’t dreamed of living in Colorado. In the spring, when Mike and Liz had driven his rig out to Steamboat Springs, he found work hauling materials for a construction firm.

“No more cross-country hauls,” her dad promised. “I’ll be home nights and weekends.”

As enticing as her parents tried to make it sound, Carly never imagined the move would turn into such a hassle. For one thing, Jackie was furious. As a freshman last year, she’d performed with the high school dance line. Carly knew all about the long, hard hours of practice she’d put in to get there—Jackie only reminded everyone daily. Even so, Carly figured it didn’t hurt that her sister was a hottie with a magazine model figure. Compared to her, Carly felt like Cousin Itt.

Jackie was no Miss Congeniality to begin with, but when forced to give up dance line she waged a holy war. Somewhere there were sisters who actually shared a bedroom, but theirs was a battleground most of the time. Therefore, when Liz and Mike described a grand log cabin by the river, Carly was thrilled to find out she’d have her own room at last.

“The place was empty,” Mike had told her grandparents. “We got a steal.”

“There’s the cutest bedroom at the top of the stairs, with its own balcony overlooking the river,” Liz had related.

“Something about that room reminded me of Carly,” her dad said.

Although she didn’t understand how a bedroom could remind him of her, she never questioned his judgment. A room with a balcony sounded like a fantasy come true.

“Why should Carly get the best room?” Jackie had bickered.

“You’ve never even seen it!” Carly argued.

“How am I s’posed to go live in some old house I’ve never seen, in some stupid town I’ve never even been to!” Jackie cried. “It’s so unfair! I’m staying here with Grandma and Grandpa.”

For one brief moment, Carly had thought her prayers were answered. The next minute her hopes were

dashed, since Grandma and Grandpa Baillie refused to let Jackie move in with them. When the school year ended, Liz and Mike dragged her kicking and screaming to their new home in the mountains.

Carly's image stared back at her from the windowpane. Thin blond hair hung in loose strands around her pudgy freckled cheeks. She'd forgotten to brush it today. Adjusting her wire-rimmed glasses, she smoothed the stray hairs. A cool breeze touched her shoulders, and she shivered. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a shadow on the balcony.

Opening the door, she drifted onto the tiny porch, and a splash of sunshine warmed her. Her dad called the bubbling stream below the Big Elk River, a mere mud puddle compared to the mighty Mississippi back in Minnesota. Yet she stared at the water gushing over the jagged rocks as though caught in a trance.

Sassy, the red tabby, leaped onto the railing. She arched in fear, her fur bristled as two white-faced cattle loped clumsily down the path from the aspen grove. She hissed at them as they nuzzled the lush grass in the yard.

"Don't worry, Sass. You're safe up here." Carly scratched behind her ears.

Surveying the yard over as far as the red log shed, she felt comfortable here, even though the cabin was not exactly how she'd pictured it. Her mother loved the great stone fireplace in the living room. Mike had asked the real estate agent about it.

"The Sawyer family laid those stones by hand" was the explanation. "In fact, they built the entire cabin."

This "cabin" seemed more like a log mansion to Carly—four bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a sunroom. The first floor alone was bigger than their house in St. Paul.

"So, this is where you're hiding." Liz's voice echoed from the bedroom. Sassy jumped off the railing and bounded inside. "Didn't mean to scare you."

Carly noticed how her mother's green eyes glistened as she gazed at the river then up to the mountain peaks.

"Nice view out here," she said.

"Fabulous!" With the back of her hand Liz brushed a wisp of hair. "I've dreamed of a place like this my whole life."

Carly rolled her eyes. "I know."

They both watched below as Jackie plopped down on the riverbank and stretched her legs.

"I guess everyone's taking a little break," Liz commented. "This moving gets old pretty quick."

"Not for Jackie," Carly said. "She makes us do all the work."

"Leaving St. Paul was especially hard on her. It's going to take some time for her to adjust."

"I wish she wouldn't take it out on me."

Liz reached over and tucked Carly's hair behind her ears.

"Don't worry. She'll get over it."

"Let's get these boxes out of the way!" Mike hollered from the back door.

Carly groaned. "I thought he was taking a break."

Tossing up her hands, Liz surrendered. "Back to work!"

CHAPTER 3

Carly stretched her legs across the picnic bench on the deck, blocking the sun's glare with the book she was reading. Sweat rolled down the side of her thigh. From where she sat, she could see Jackie baking on a lounge by the river.

For the first time in a week, she wasn't teamed up with her mother and sister, washing one more filthy window or painting another boring wall. Yesterday they'd painted her room orange—Carly's choice.

"Gag me with these orange walls," Jackie had fussed.

"You don't have to look at them," Carly defended.

"For sure." Jackie shuddered. "Actually, I hate this room. For one thing, it's cold. Now it's disgusting."

When they put it all back together, Carly loved the new look. Everything from her old room fit as though it was made for the space. The wooden three-quarter bed her dad bought at the used furniture store was covered with the patchwork quilt Grandma had sewn. Next to that was her desk, minus a leg that broke off during the move. She'd wedged a block of wood under the bottom drawer to keep it level.

Carly hated to admit it, but Jackie was right about the cold. Night before last a chilly draft woke her up. And her door slammed shut all the time—in broad daylight, in the middle of the night. Her dad promised to fix it at the same time he checked out the draft. Probably the tenth of never now that he'd started his new job.

Jackie carried the lounge over and set it on the deck behind Carly.

"Too shady by the river."

"You're already fried," Carly warned her.

Ignoring that, Jackie asked, "Where's Sassy?"

"Haven't seen her."

"Were you walking in your sleep last night? Or what?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Carly replied.

"I heard you walking back and forth in the hallway," Jackie accused, as if it was a crime.

"Wasn't me." She remembered reading late and waking in the morning with the lamp still on and the book at her side.

"Liar!"

"But you didn't actually see me. Did you?" Carly pointed out.

"Knock it off. You don't scare me!" Jackie retorted.

A shiver rolled up Carly's spine and tingled across her shoulders. Someone was watching them. But who? And where? Sunshine glinted off the windows of the sunroom. Shielding her eyes Carly thought she saw a shadow on the balcony. When she blinked, it disappeared. *Who's there?* Her mouth fell open.

"What is your problem?" Jackie taunted.

"Bet I know where Sassy is." She dashed through the front door.

The sunroom's glass doors vibrated as she opened them. Carly froze. There! Upstairs! She distinctly heard creaking along the wood floor in the hall. Sassy! Her legs ached as she tiptoed slowly up the steps.

"Sassy. Kitty-kitty." Her voice echoed in the emptiness.

Her bedroom door was closed again, although as usual she'd left it wide open. Perhaps Sassy was shut inside. The door seemed to resist as she turned the knob. Punching her glasses against her brow, she peered around the small room. Because of the slanted ceiling, her closet door looked as if it were built for a dwarf. Something

scratched at the other side, and flinging it open, Carly gasped.

"Prr-eow!" Darting between her legs, Sassy skidded to a halt on the rumpled throw rug.

Spooked by her own cat, Carly felt foolish as she stroked the soft fur.

"What were you doing in my closet?" Remembering what her dad had said about mice, she peeked inside. A draft surrounded her like cold hands. Goosebumps rippled along her bare arms. She trembled. "This is stupid. I'm not afraid of mice."

Ducking her head, she explored within. Next to the door was a tall box spilling over with toys. Fishing with her hand, she pulled out a suitcase full of doll clothes and her balding Malibu Barbie. The poor thing looked so old and dirty. She hadn't noticed the smudges and tangled, thin hair when she and Ellen played Barbies just a few weeks ago.

Her arm brushed against Tigger's faded yellow hind paws sticking straight up out of the box, his head buried in the clutter. Carly liberated her favorite toy from his frozen somersault. Tigger had always leaned against her pillow at the old house. Hugging him to her breast, she retreated from the closet and nestled him back on his rightful throne.

Why did everything change? she wondered. It was as if she'd packed her whole life into a box. Like the past, something about this new room haunted her. Curiosity lured her back to the closet, where she pulled the string on the light socket. The bulb's glare revealed a trapdoor cut into the floor. Kneeling down, she pried the edge with her fingers. The hatch wouldn't budge. *What's under there?* She tried to imagine the floor plan below.

Bumping her head against the short doorframe, she dashed out and bounded downstairs to the sunroom. Knowing her bedroom was above, she studied the ceiling for the outline of a trapdoor. Inside the sunroom closet, she pushed aside garment bags but found only more log rafters.

"How long have you been out here?" Carly heard her mother's voice on the deck.

"How should I know?" Jackie whined. "I fell asleep."

"You should know better than to lay out in the sun without protection. Go inside!" Liz shouted. "Carla! Where are you?"

Carly stepped out of the closet in time to see Jackie burst through the front door. Red welts blotched the exposed skin around the edges of her bathing suit.

"Crispy critter!" she teased.

"Don't say another word," Jackie snarled as she ran past.

Hands on hips, Liz stood inside the doorway. "Did you have any lunch yet?"

Carly shook her head. "I didn't notice I was hungry till now."

"Of course!" Liz tossed up her hands. "You saw me and thought of food."

Heading for the kitchen, Carly mumbled, "I'll just make myself a P-and-J."

"Mom!" Jackie wailed from upstairs. "It's killing me! Put something on it. Quick!"

"I'm on my way!" Liz hollered.

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Carly sat alone in the kitchen, munching on a sandwich as Jackie's curses echoed through the hall and down the stairs.

Bang!

Her bedroom door slammed. She swallowed, nearly choking on the bread.

CHAPTER 4

The next morning, Carly opened her eyes and sniffed the air. She hated the taste but loved the aroma of fresh coffee. Her stomach grumbled. The sound of voices filtered up the stairs. She knew instantly it couldn't be her dad—he'd left for work at dawn.

Putting on her glasses, Carly sat up and peeked out the window. A Cadillac the color of warm vanilla ice cream was parked in the driveway. After dressing in a T-shirt and jeans, she crept downstairs to the kitchen. Seated at the booth with her mother was an older woman wearing a suit the same color as that car.

"Good morning, Carla," Liz said sweetly. "Come and meet our neighbor, Mrs. Stetson."

Neighbor? She knew there wasn't another house within a mile of their place.

"I declare! It's Lucy Baines, not Missus Stetson."

"We don't have any neighbors," Carly blurted.

Lucy Baines Stetson laughed. The ends of her harsh yellow hair rolled under, looking as if she'd set her hair with a big doughnut.

"Five miles up the road. At the Stetson Ranch," she was saying. "Douglas and me been away at our home in South Car'lina." She left the last word hanging in the air like a question without an answer.

Evidently, her accent was Southern. Carly studied her pasty pink makeup and wondered how long it took to paint those eyebrows.

"Since Mr. and Mrs. Stetson own the next ranch up the river," Liz explained, "that makes them our neighbors."

"Oh." Carly dropped an English muffin into the toaster. Somehow, this woman did not look like a rancher.

"How do you like it here so far, darlin'?" Lucy Baines practically swallowed the word *darlin'*.

"Okay. I guess," she answered.

"Steamboat is chock full of things to do! There's tennis courts, the swimming pool, the library," Lucy Baines rattled off. "Y'all enjoy horseback ridin'?"

Carly raised her eyebrows. "Are you kidding? My grandpa and grandma gave me riding lessons for my birthday this year."

"Then you should fit right in!" Lucy Baines said cheerfully. "The stables are right near town."

"Oh, Mom," she swooned. "Can I? Please?"

"We'll see." Liz stood up. "More coffee?"

"No more for me, Liz, darlin'," Lucy Baines rose to her feet. "I declare! Haven't been inside this lodge in years. Born and bred a Southern belle and all, I'm nosy by nature. Mind if I take a little stroll down memory lane?"

"Not at all," Liz said politely. "Follow me. I'll give you the ten-cent tour."

Carly lathered her English muffin with extra jam and stood quietly against the doorway to the living room. Lucy Baines clasped her hands, admiring a painting on the wall.

"What a lovely landscape!"

"Do you really like it?" Liz asked.

"I do!" she gushed. "Who's the artist?"

"I am." Liz beamed. "It was a birthday present for my husband, a long time ago. We spent our honeymoon at Estes Park. I made some sketches and painted this. I call it Mountain Memory."

For a moment, Carly thought her mother actually swelled in size. She liked the painting, too, but she'd heard that story a thousand times.

"Do you have any others?" Lucy Baines asked.

"Just a few landscapes I did back in college," Liz replied. "Now that the girls are older, I hope to get back into it."

"I declare! You're just as talented as our Western artists at the Plaza Gal'ry. Ya must go see mah friend, Hanna Whiteman," Lucy Baines insisted. "She's been lookin' high and low for an assistant manager."

"I'd love to work in a gallery!" Liz exclaimed. "I did some part-time work at an arts and crafts store last year."

She yakked with Lucy Baines as they strolled into the sunroom. Carly tagged along. This was breaking news that her mother wanted to be an artist again. She thought she'd outgrown that like the chicken pox.

Lucy Baines twirled around. "Such a delightful space! What are your plans in here?"

"This is our den." Liz frowned at the ironing board set up next to a basket heaped with clothes. A half-dozen boxes, still packed, had been stacked against the wall. "At the moment, it's disguised as a utility room."

"The Dormans had a regular greenhouse in here. Chockfull of flowers and vegetables." Making a sweeping gesture with her arm, Lucy Baines added, "Never had much luck with gardening myself. I declare! That Sally Dorman had the greenest thumb."

Liz smiled. "The real estate agent only told us about the family who built the cabin."

"That would be the Sawyers. Back in thirty-five," she explained. "Course that was before mah time. Douglas grew up with some of the Sawyer cheel-drun."

"How long did they live here?" Carly asked.

Lucy Baines hesitated, then replied, "Oh, twenty years or more. Mr. Sawyer died here. That was before I married Douglas. The Thorpe fam'ly was livin' here when I moved to the ranch. They're the ones started that big flap about it bein' haunted and all."

"As in ghosts?" The revelation fascinated Carly.

"Such an old house, it's bound to have a colorful history," Liz spoke up hastily.

Lucy Baines patted her arm. "I'm glad you feel that way. It's time to shake off those ol' rumors."

"What rumors?" Carly persisted.

"Oh, footsteps. Slammin' doors. Bunch of nonsense, if you ask me!" she proclaimed.

Bang!

Carly winced. "There goes that slammin' door."

Liz laughed nervously. "I'm sure it was only Jackie."

Lucy Baines glanced at her watch. "I would just love to meet your Jackie. However, I do have errands to run 'fore lunch."

"That's probably for the best," Liz said, rubbing her hands together. "Jackie isn't feeling very well. She has a sunburn."

"Mercy!" cried Lucy Baines. "Has she seen a doctor?"

Liz shook her head. "It's nothing serious. She's keeping aloe vera lotion on it."

"I do hope she's better soon," she said sincerely. "Now don't forget what I said about the gal'ry."

"I'll be sure to stop by there." Liz walked her to the door.

Lucy Baines turned and waved at Carly. "Take care of your sister, y'hear?"

Carly rolled her eyes.

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After lunch, she rode into town with her mother, leaving Jackie alone in her misery.

In the car, Liz said, "That was so nice of Mrs. Stetson to drop by this morning."

"You mean Lucy Baines," Carly drawled. "I declare! She talks funny."

"Carla!"

"Like you didn't notice."

Liz smiled. "She's just different, that's all. The best part of moving is meeting new people. Soon you'll be making new friends."

"I wish." She wondered where she was supposed to find all these new friends.

"Look! That must be the riding stable." Liz pointed as she drove by.

"Aren't you going to stop?"

"Not today," she said as they pulled into the plaza parking lot.

"What are we doing here?" Carly didn't hide her disappointment.

"Looking for the Plaza Gallery."

Liz steered Carly past a video game arcade, a great-smelling taco stand and an ice cream shop. By the time they stopped outside the Plaza Gallery, she felt thoroughly disgusted. Shoving her hands in her pockets, she followed her mother through the door.

Inside, she discovered a bright little gallery with woven rugs and blankets draped over wooden railings. A glass cabinet displayed handmade turquoise-and-silver jewelry. She admired the earth tones and round lines of the hand-thrown pottery. Sitting cross-legged on the plush carpet, she played with the miniature wooden train while her mother waited patiently for the silver-haired lady's attention. She was on the phone taking one call after another, her voice loud and graveled.

Finally, she hung up and Liz moved toward her.

"Excuse me."

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "How may I help you?"

"That's okay," Liz said. "You're so busy."

"*Swamped* is the word I'd use." The woman stepped out from behind the counter. She wore a blue tailored suit. Offering her hand to Liz, she said, "I'm Hanna Whiteman. This is my gallery."

Liz shook her hand. "Liz Baillie. Mrs. Stetson—Lucy Baines—said you're looking—"

"Good! She called me. You're here about the assistant manager's job," Mrs. Whiteman interrupted. "My previous assistant opened his own gallery in Telluride last month. I simply cannot run this place alone."

"I've never managed a gallery before," Liz confessed. "But I'm definitely eager to learn."

Mrs. Whiteman looked pleased. "It's a title, really. I do all the buying. Richard, my accountant, takes care of the books. What I really need is someone I can count on to be here during scheduled hours."

"I can handle that," Liz said.

"I like your enthusiasm," Mrs. Whiteman observed. "I've interviewed quite a few already. But they're all so young. Truthfully, I had someone more mature in mind, like you."

"You won't be disappointed," Liz assured her.

"Lucy said you folks bought the old Sawyer lodge."

"We just moved from Minnesota. That's my daughter Carly over there."

Hanna Whiteman smiled at her. "Once we get back to keeping regular hours, this phone won't ring off the wall."

"I have some time now, if you'd like to show me around," Liz offered.

Mrs. Whiteman studied her watch. "This is rude, I know, but I have another appointment. Be here tomorrow morning at nine-thirty. We'll talk salary, and I'll show you around. Let's consider this first month a trial period for both of us. How does that sound?"

"Great!" Liz replied. "I'll see you tomorrow then."

She ushered Carly out the door and across the mall to the ice cream shop.

"I don't believe this!" She grinned, then ordered two banana splits.

"Did she just hire you for that job?" Carly knew something was up. Her mother hardly ever allowed her to eat a banana split.

"Yes! Assistant manager of the Plaza Gallery." She sighed. "Doesn't that sound fabulous?"

"Do you even know how to do that?"

"I think I'm ready for the challenge."

The waitress served their ice cream. Carly dug in, relishing the treat.

Her mother's face glowed. "Just think! We'll have extra money for a pool membership. Maybe even riding lessons. Won't that be fun?"

Carly considered the plus side then added, "Please don't make Jackie babysit me. I'm old enough to take care of myself."

"I expect you and Jackie to cooperate, or this will never work," Liz warned. "I need your support."

"Better tell that to Jackie," Carly muttered.

They finished their ice cream in silence. Carly didn't have a problem with her mother taking that job. It was the thought of spending every day under her sister's thumb for the rest of the summer that made her flesh crawl.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual locales events or persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

THE ROAD TO WEIRD

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