

Whispers From the Past

Sarah and Jason's Story
(Book Three in the Angel Series)



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Chapter One

*Charles City County, Virginia
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Sarah Wellington-Barnes turned down the gravel drive as instructed by her daughter, Victoria. Tori, as she preferred to be called, sat in the passenger seat of their green Ford Explorer holding Sarah's new iPhone. Tori groaned. "Oh, Mom. It died. How are we going to find the house now?"

“We were almost there, weren’t we?”

“Maybe, but there are other houses on this road. Like that one. That can’t be it. Or that one over there. That one is hideous, please don’t let that be it. Look at that one, it’s falling down.”

“We’ll find it. Did the phone just die? Where’s the car charger?”

“It’s in the back with everything else. Oh wait, it’s not dead.” Tori sighed in relief. “I’ll open the maps again.” She looked at the phone for a minute. “Oh crap! We lost the signal. I’m getting nothing here. This is ridiculous, Mom. How are we going to live way out here in the sticks with no cell service?”

“We’ll get Wi-Fi and it’ll be fine,” Sarah said, hoping that would be true.

She looked around at the small houses. They were looking for a house that Sarah had inherited from her deceased husband six months ago. A house that she had forgotten existed but had been in Seth Barnes’ family for many years. He told her about inheriting the house shortly after they started dating years ago, but he hadn’t wanted to do anything with it. So it sat empty for many years. It had taken Sarah six months to decide what she wanted to do with the house. She finally decided to leave her big two-story suburban house in Virginia Beach, the home she and Seth had moved into shortly after they married in 1991, the house Tori grew up in for the past fifteen years. That house had too many memories of her husband, too much sadness about their lives which were forever changed. She had to get away. She longed for a change of scenery and time to mourn and get used to living life without Seth.

Their family home had sold at the beginning of March. The real estate agent she had hired said houses sell quicker in the spring and she had been right. On March 1st it went on the market and in three days they had an offer for asking price. She had agreed, of course. The sooner she left all the memories the better.

Her husband had been a Navy SEAL and left for a mission in Iraq a year-and-a-half ago. While on duty the previous fall, Seth suffered a fatal shot. In one quick moment, their lives had changed forever.

Sarah had gone back to the lawyer’s office in the Courthouse area of Virginia Beach on a cold day in November and asked about her husband’s property again. The lawyer gave her the deed and keys to it as well as the address and directions on how to get there. He also gave her a rundown of the history of the house, which had been built in the 1700s and was originally called Misty Hill Plantation. It had changed hands many times through the years but had been left for ruin when the last tenant died fifteen years prior.

“It has good bones but it needs a lot of work,” Mr. Bacardi had warned her.

“Why has it been abandoned for so many years?” she’d asked him.

“Rumor is it’s haunted.”

The hairs on her arms stood on end when he’d said that.

“Do you believe in ghosts, Mrs. Barnes?”

“I don’t . . . I don’t really know.” It was something she’d only read about in books or seen in scary movies, although her daughter claimed she had the ability to see them sometimes. Going to church had led Sarah to believe that such things were angels, demons, or just someone’s wild imagination. She wasn’t sure, in Tori’s case, just what was going on.

“If you decide you don’t want the property, you might have a hard time selling it,” Mr. Bacardi had said.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“I can send someone from the real estate company to clean it up for you if you’d like.”

“That won’t be necessary. We can clean it ourselves,” Sarah had said, thinking it might be therapeutic.

So on Easter Sunday, rather than attend church or have a family picnic as in years past, Sarah and Tori were moving out to the country. It wasn’t their first Easter without Seth but the first one when where they knew he wouldn’t be coming back. Previously in years when Seth was in town, Easter weekend had been spent coloring and hiding Easter eggs for Tori, going to church on Sunday and then spending the afternoon in Colonial Williamsburg walking through the spring gardens.

Sarah looked straight ahead as the smaller houses disappeared and there was only a narrow lane with live oak trees on either side, draped together in the middle, and a big white house in the distance.

“This is getting spooky,” Tori said, looking around.

“Where are the written directions? I gave them to you when we left home.” She caught herself. This new house would be their new home. Their house selling so quickly had been unexpected and threw Sarah for a loop, trying to get the house cleared out within a month, give Seth’s old clothes away, and pack up to move eighty-nine miles away.

Tori moved the blanket on her lap, knocking off her favorite small teddy bear into the floor – a gift from her dad when she was much younger. She picked the brown bear with a faded purple ribbon, put it back in her lap, and then shuffled around some papers in the door’s pocket.

“Found it!” Tori said. “Keep going. It’s that big white house straight ahead.”

“Okay, good.” Sarah had been to the house only once when Seth took her there to spend Christmas with his great-grandmother, Victoria, Tori’s namesake. They never went back before Victoria passed, so Sarah couldn’t remember exactly where to go.

It was in a quaint country area called Charles City County between Williamsburg and Richmond near the James River. As they got closer, Sarah could see the white two-story Victorian house with four lattice columns across the front and a covered wraparound front porch. There was an old barn in the distance on one side along with other smaller outbuildings.

“Are all these trees ours now?” Tori asked. “How big is the property?”

“There’s supposed to be five acres of land around it.”

“Who’s going to mow all that grass? Not me.”

Sarah glanced at her daughter and sighed. Tori didn’t want to do anything since her father had died. She had no motivation even for schoolwork or playing the piano, both of which she had previously enjoyed. Sarah hoped that this move would help her and her daughter both through the grieving process. “We’ll figure it out.”

Sarah parked the car out in front of the house on the circular driveway. On closer inspection, she could see that the lawyer had been right about it needing some work. In her opinion, it needed a *lot* of work. The lattice on the front porch was broken in places. The rounded turret on one end of the porch looked crooked. Some of the shutters flanking the windows looked like they were hanging by a thread. It had certainly changed since the last time she saw it. That had been about nineteen years ago. She suddenly remembered Seth teasing her that she could fix the place up after he was long gone. She had not been amused then and was not amused now either.

“OMG, Mom. This place is falling apart. How can we live here?”

Sarah wondered the same thing as she got out and slammed her driver’s door shut. She walked around the gravel driveway towards the front porch, noting that there was a piece of wood missing on the porch floor. “I don’t know but we’ll make the best of it. Be careful,” she said as she walked up onto the porch.

She took the house keys out of her jeans pocket and unlocked the front door. Tori joined her and the two went inside for a look.

It was empty except for some sheers on all the windows. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling in nearly every corner. The floors were dusty and the air smelled musty like an old basement.

Sarah walked over to her right into what she guessed was the living room. “Let’s get some fresh air in here,” she said as she unlocked one of the windows and tried to open it. It was hard to move and she grunted as she pushed it up halfway. The cool breeze flowed in, chilling her bare arms. She had forgotten her sweater in the Explorer.

“Mom, this is awful. Who’s going to clean all of this? Not me.”

“Tori, I know it doesn’t look good right now, but with some cleaning, it’ll be great. You’ll see. But I’m going to need your help. I can’t do this alone.”

Tori frowned at her and then turned around and walked down the hall. Sarah followed after her, holding her tongue. She wanted to say more, but she let her daughter do her own exploring. Sarah suspected Tori wouldn’t be happy anywhere she lived at this moment. She wanted her father back and no house, big or small, was going to fill up the empty void in her heart. Sarah would have to be mother and father to her now. They would make it, just the two of them. They had to. They had no other choice.

Sarah’s own dad had died of cancer when Tori was just one year old, and Sarah’s mom had lived alone in Williamsburg until recently when they found out she had Alzheimer’s. Sarah had one older brother who lived close by with his wife and son and they owned a bed and breakfast. Sarah and Tori had gone to her brother’s for Christmas like they normally did just a few months ago, but without Seth, it didn’t feel right anymore. She considered it good luck when she discovered that Seth had a family home in Williamsburg so she could be close to her family again. They could start new traditions. Maybe she would even invite them over for Christmas this year.

Therefore, moving out in the boonies to Misty Hill Plantation made sense to her. It was a new, fresh start for her and Tori, a chance to make new memories with family supporting them.

After grabbing their suitcases and carrying them inside, Sarah and Tori spent several hours cleaning that afternoon. They started with the bedrooms first since that was where they would be sleeping that night. The moving truck was supposed to be there by nightfall with their furniture and the rest of their boxes. The water and electricity had been turned on, thankfully, so Sarah had gotten the broom and mop out of her Explorer and a bottle of cleaning solution, and she mopped after Tori swept. Tori also cleaned the windows with some Windex and Sarah had wiped down the walls.

After cleaning, they were hungry, so Sarah drove up Route 5 to see if there were any grocery stores. The nearest one she had seen on the way to Misty Hill had been a convenience store nearly back in Williamsburg, which was a pretty good drive. On Route 5, they passed signs for a couple more historic plantations and then saw a road that passed through. She turned right on instinct, knowing that the James River was to the left. They would explore that way another day. On the small tree-lined road, they came to a convenience store and gas station, where she pulled in and filled up her tank. When she went inside to pay, she asked the store clerk where the closest grocery store was.

“If you keep going up this road towards the north, you’ll want to turn right on 60. That’ll take you to a Food Lion, ma’am,” a young black-haired man with olive skin told her. He looked barely old enough to work and was perhaps Tori’s age.

She thanked him and bought a bag of baked chips for them to munch on in the car. They soon found Food Lion and shopped for a few meals’ worth of groceries. On the way back, they found a pizza place and were delighted to learn they could have food delivered to their new house.

When they got back, Sarah put groceries away, noting she would have to clean the kitchen next. One of the cabinet doors squeaked when it was opened and closed, which was sort of a quaint sound but wondered if the hinges needed a little oil. There were so many things her husband had done that she would have to learn to do herself now. He had been gone a lot, being in the military, but she would write down a list of things for him to do when he returned. The list would be for her now.

She didn’t know the first thing about repairing or restoring a house, however, and would need to hire a carpenter to do the work. She wondered who she could get that was close by and tried to look it up on her phone, but the service was not good. She made a note that the next morning, she had to call the local phone company to see about getting Wi-Fi in the house. After she put a box of granola cereal into the cabinet with the squeaky hinge, she plugged her phone in to charge it.

“Mom, someone’s coming,” Tori said from the nearby living room.

“Are you getting one of your feelings?” Tori had the uncanny ability of being able to predict when someone was coming.

“No, I actually saw a truck go by.”

“Maybe it’s the moving truck.”

“No, it’s a pickup truck. An old pickup truck, like that black one in one of those eighties movies you watch.”

“Maybe it’s the pizza.”

“It kept on going, so I don’t think so.”

Sarah joined her in the living room and looked out the windows. “Which way did it go?”

“That way,” Tori said, pointing towards the back of the property.

“Did you see who was driving it? A man or woman?”

“Man. He was actually kind of cute, for an old guy.”

“How old?”

“Your age.”

“Thanks a lot,” Sarah said. “You stay here and wait for the pizza and I’ll go have a look.”

Sarah put a long taupe sweater on, a cardigan of Seth’s that he had bought on their trip to England five years ago, and she stepped outside. The wind had picked up a little and she wrapped the sweater around her chest and held on to her elbows. She walked around the house towards the back, seeing some outbuildings around the property. The first building was small, rectangular and made of brick. Another taller building was behind that, a small well beside the first building, and then there was a small house that had been painted blue with white trim. It was really cute, had a front porch with spindle railing, and was in much better condition than the main house. She wondered why. There was a dirt path that led up to it from the main house. She walked up two steps onto the porch and peered into one of the windows, noting a desk with a lamp on it next to another nearby window. This would be a nice place to do her work.

After working for eighteen years as a medical transcriptionist, Sarah’s boss decided to close the business and move into another field of work. Sarah had been devastated. First she’d had to endure living without her husband; now she would have to endure getting a new job and all that it entailed. She had been notified of the change in March right after putting her house up for sale. She had worked at home ever since Tori was born and hoped to continue doing so here at Misty Hill. It was another reason she needed to get the Wi-Fi going so she could download work onto her computer if she found a new job.

She walked around the small house when she heard a truck pull up in front of the house. It was either the pizza being delivered or the moving truck. Walking around the other side of the yard towards the front, she found a neglected garden with a small pond on that side of the house. A small wrought iron table and chairs with chipped black paint stood at one end of the pond under the shade of a weeping willow tree. Sarah thought this would make a nice spot to have morning coffee or tea in the afternoon, after it was weeded out and flowers planted. Maybe she could put some of those big orange fish in the pond.

She hurried around the house and as she came to the front porch, Tori was taking the box of pizza in her hands and tipping the driver, a young guy with curly blonde hair.

The driver left and Sarah walked with Tori into the house

“Where’d you get the money to pay for the pizza? I forgot to leave some out for you.”

“From your purse.”

“Oh.” Sarah hoped she didn’t get more cash than was necessary. She had become a little unpredictable since her father died and Sarah had even caught her lying about where she was on more than one occasion.

They sat down on a built-in bench in a sunny room just off the kitchen and started eating.

“I couldn’t find a truck anywhere out back,” Sarah said. “There are a lot of old outbuildings on this property. It used to be a plantation. Maybe somebody else lives back there in one of the little houses. That one straight across there is fixed up real cute.” She pointed toward the cottage, which faced the sunroom.

“I hope it’s in better condition than this place. I’m going to be so sore tomorrow from using muscles I’ve never used,” Tori said, sighing.

“I know, Tori. Please just try to be patient. I’ll hire somebody to come and help fix it up.”

“We got our pizza from Johnny Depp. Did you see him?”

There was a hint of excitement in her eyes Sarah hadn’t seen in quite a while. “What?”

“Well, not really, but he sure looked a lot like him. Chocolate brown eyes, curly mop-top hair, yum.”

Sarah took a piece of the thin-crust pizza, hearing a nice crunch as she bit into it and tasting the delicious saltiness of the cheese and pepperoni.

While they were eating, they heard banging noises.

“What in the world?” Sarah asked.

“I told you somebody was around.”

“Well, I didn’t have a chance to look in all the buildings. I guess someone could have been in one of them.”

Sarah handed the box of pizza to Tori and took her half-eaten piece with her as she walked to the outside door of the sunroom. She had a hard time opening it but it finally gave way with a few hard tugs. Another thing that would need to be fixed. Outside, she listened for the noise again and realized it was coming from the small cute cottage. She walked across the grass, her heart beating fast as she wondered who was on her property. She hoped it wasn’t an escaped prisoner or some homeless person who had ventured onto the property and moved in.

Turning the handle slowly, she opened the door and saw a tall, dark-haired man facing her. He wore jeans that melded to his body just right and a loose beige Henley shirt. He held a hammer in his hand and looked up at her, obviously startled.

“Who the hell are you?” they both asked simultaneously.

Chapter Two

“You scared the life out of me, woman,” the man said to Sarah.

“What are you doing on my property?” she asked.

“*Your* property?”

“Yes, mine.” She folded her arms across her and looked defiantly at him. Whoever he was, she wanted him to know that she owned the property. She had always been a relatively quiet person who only spoke up when she had something to say or when she was around people she knew really well, but Seth had taught her to stand up for herself when needed and be more assertive. Her body still reacted whenever she was involved in a confrontation, and her hands shook slightly at this interaction with the tall man. She didn’t want him to see her nervousness so she balled her hands up into fists in an effort to still them.

“Did you recently acquire this property? Because you haven’t been here before today,” he said.

“How long have *you* been here?” She glanced around the room, noting that there was one big room on the left, a set of stairs in the middle leading up, and another room to the right. The room the man was standing in was the kitchen. There was a round table and chairs in the front corner of the room by the front window. A big fireplace was tucked between a side window and dark wooden cabinets. Beyond that, she couldn’t see anything else in that room. The floors were made of hardwood but she noted holes in some of the planks. The white walls looked dirty with stains.

She glanced back up at the man and he placed the hammer that he had been holding down on the dining table. “A while,” he answered.

“Who gave you permission to stay here? You *are* living here, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am. I’ve been fixing up the place.”

“It doesn’t look like you’re doing a very good job of it.”

“I’ve been working here in the kitchen house first.”

Sarah made a mental note of what he called this little house. “Why here? Why not start with the bigger house, since you’ve just come in and made yourself at home?”

“I wanted to start with a smaller project.” He combed his curly dark brown hair off his forehead with his fingers, revealing dark sideburns that connected to a dark beard. “Look, I do apologize for trespassing, but I’ve been here for six months and no one has been here except your real estate agent. Do you know that she didn’t even look in any of these outbuildings? She’s not very thorough at her job.”

“She’s not my real estate agent. Mine lived in . . .” She almost said Virginia Beach but she didn’t trust this stranger enough to reveal too much about herself. “Anyway, I’ll have to speak with my lawyer about all of this.”

“Lawyer?” He walked towards her and she backed up a little. “Now see here, I’ve done no harm. I’m even fixing the place up, as I said. How about if I start repairing the big house for you in exchange for letting me stay here in this cottage and we don’t involve the lawyers?” He flashed her a smile that might persuade some women, but not her.

She eyed him suspiciously and wondered who he was and why he didn’t want lawyers involved. Her earlier thought about an escaped convict living on the property came back to her. Had she been right?

“Have you escaped from prison or are you just homeless?” she asked him bluntly.

His smile disappeared. “I . . . neither.”

She raised her eyebrows up at him in disbelief.

“I’m not a convict and I’m not, well, technically I’m not homeless because I’ve been living here.”

“Where did you come from? Where did you live before? How did you find this place?”

“Do you always interrogate everyone you meet? One question at a time, please. Let me see, first question, I’m from Virginia originally. In fact, I was born on this property.”

“Wait, what?”

“Second question, I’ve lived all over the world. The last place I lived before coming back here was London, England.”

Sarah’s eyes widened and she once again thought about her husband at the mention of England. They had spent ten glorious days in London, just the two of them, celebrating their fifteenth wedding anniversary three years ago. “But what about . . .”

He cut her off. “Question number three, well, that refers back to number one really. My aunt lived here when I was born. I came back to find family. Everyone has gone on now . . .” He drifted off and looked away, seeming to be hiding some painful feelings.

“Have you lost someone you love?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

His deep brown eyes met hers quickly. Piercing, dark-chocolate brown eyes. She swallowed. She had to admit that he was quite handsome in a rugged way, not that she was looking. “Yes,” he answered hoarsely. “Many people.”

She blinked. “Oh.” She thought it must be sad to lose a lot of family members and wondered why he had lost so many.

“So about that offer . . .” He looked at her expectantly with his hands on his hips, in those jeans that fit him so well, hugging all the right places.

She shook her head lightly to bring herself out of his spell. “What?”

“If you would allow me to remain here in this cottage, I’ll help you fix you up the big house. I’m a handyman. I fix houses.” He reached into his back pocket, produced a wallet, and pulled out a card, which he handed to Sarah.

“I see.” His name was Jason Barnes. “Barnes is your last name?”

“Yes. I didn’t catch your name.”

“Sarah Barnes.”

He extended his hand to shake hers and then froze. “Sarah?”

The way he said her name made her think maybe he knew who she was. She frowned. “Are you related to my husband, Seth?”

“Seth?”

“Yes. You said you lived here before. You see, I just inherited this property from my husband. He . . . he passed away six months ago.”

She looked away and then felt his warm hand squeeze hers. She hadn’t realized he was still holding her hand. It was comforting, the most comfort she had felt since Seth’s passing, and the nervousness she had felt earlier drifted away for a moment.

“I’m so sorry. His name was Seth Barnes?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

He let go of her hand. “What are his parents’ names?”

“Winston and Coralee Barnes. His grandfather’s name was Abraham Barnes. That’s all I know about the Barnes family.”

Jason was quiet for a moment and looked away. “It’s possible we could be related.” He looked back at her. “You say you inherited this property?”

“Yes. I had forgotten that my husband owned it. I learned of the inheritance after his passing.”

“Maybe we could do one of those genealogy searches and find out if your husband and I are related. *Were* related,” he clarified, clearing his throat.

She studied him, wondering if she should let him continue to stay on her property or not. He could really be a relative of Seth's since they shared the same last name. She didn't think it would hurt anything for him to stay in this little cottage, away from the main house. She would have to make sure that the locks on the doors were in good and proper working order. He also promised to help her fix up the house. For free.

"What's your experience in fixing homes? How long have you been doing it?"

"Oh . . ." He looked at the ceiling momentarily. "Many years."

"Have you ever been arrested?" she had to ask him.

He hesitated. "Yes."

She was surprised. "What for?"

He sighed before saying, "Suspicion of murder but I was innocent and they let me go."

She was shocked. She hadn't been too far off when she had suspected a criminal. Had he really killed someone? She had to ask him. "Did you do it?"

"No." He didn't hesitate.

What would Seth have her do? On the one hand, he might be dangerous. He might have actually killed someone and then came out here in the country to hide from the law. On the other hand, it would be nice to have a man on the property with her and Tori. It would make her feel a little bit safer. Especially if he were related to Seth. He could be a cousin.

"Hey, at least I was honest with you," he said, obviously sensing her hesitation. "I could've lied about it."

"That's true," she agreed. She decided to go with her gut, which told her that this man was safe. "You may stay."

Jason looked relieved and smiled a genuine smile, not a fake one, which lit up his whole face. "Thanks very much, ma'am."

A truck could be heard pulling up in front of the house.

"Oh, that's probably the moving truck."

"Do you need any help?"

"Well, sure, if you aren't too busy."

"I'm not," he said, glancing at the chair rail he had been hammering when she first came in. "It can wait."

The two of them walked over to the house as Tori came out. She walked over to them. "There you are, Mom," she said, glancing at Jason with a frown on her face.

Sarah heard Jason suck in his breath. "Victoria?" he whispered.

Tori wrinkled her forehead, looking confused. "Do I know you?"

Sarah was also confused. How could Jason possibly know her daughter's name? "Are you sure you don't know my husband?" she asked him.

Jason shook his head. "I'm sorry. You look like my . . . you look like my aunt when she was young."

"Was her name Victoria?" Sarah asked.

Jason looked at her. "Yes."

"That's my name too," Tori said. "But I go by Tori. What a coincidence."

Jason laughed lightly. "Yeah, what a coincidence. Maybe we *are* related."

Sarah briefly thought about Seth's great-grandmother Victoria, but Jason looked too young for her to be his aunt.

They worked on getting the furniture and boxes moved into the house until sunset. Sarah often glanced at Jason while carrying boxes in and out of the house, wondering if he was really her husband's cousin. He'd have to be a distant cousin to not know if they were related or not. She couldn't wait to get the Wi-Fi going

and start an Ancestry account for herself as well as Seth's family to see if they were related. Jason pointed out many things that needed to be fixed in the rooms as they carried boxes in.

As the sun went down, blazing deep orange across a field and between the trees out back, Sarah stood in the kitchen and looked around at her new property. She had a good feeling about this house and about having a possible cousin of Seth's around to help her out.

Jason startled her out of her reverie. "I have to go pick up my son."

She didn't realize he had a son. "Oh," she said, turning around to face him. His face had an amber glow in the setting sunlight. "Thank you so much for all your help today. How can I repay you? Would you like a beer?"

"No, I better not since I'm driving. I would like to take a raincheck on that, though."

"Sure."

Sarah walked him to the front door and watched him leave. She heard his truck come around the house a few moments later. Sarah deduced that he was the one who drove the truck that Tori had heard earlier.

As she looked around at all the boxes in this dilapidated house, she felt Seth's presence all around her. Even though she longed to feel his strong, muscular arms around her once again and missed him like crazy, she felt like he approved of her taking over his family's home. It still made her wonder why he never wanted to do anything with this property before, but as she wiped a tear out of her eye, she felt good about starting fresh here in this house. She would do her best to make it a good home for her and Tori.