



FLORA'S PLACE

By Derrolyn Anderson

"Hey Amy... can I get a plain soda and a glass of the house chardonnay?"

"Coming right up."

Sheila sighed and leaned against the bar while I filled her order. "I wish you weren't closing up tonight. I wanted to go check out that new sports bar."

I cast her a sidelong glance. "You mean you want to check out the new bartender?"

"Me? Never!"

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much."

"Can it Shakespeare." She flashed a toothy grin, aware that I knew she was a total flirt. "Let's just call it a sociology experiment."

Sheila was my college dorm-mate, studying psychology while I majored in English literature. She'd gotten us both much needed summer jobs in a tiny Sierra foothill town along with free rent at a family friend's ski cabin.

I had a little more restaurant experience, so I manned the bar and filled in for the manager while she worked the dining room of a fashionable restaurant set in a refurbished gold-rush era boardinghouse.

I set up the glasses and poured the wine, bending down to scoop some ice for the soda. I reached for the soda gun just as Ted the waiter appeared and handed me his order.

"What are you doing after work?" Sheila asked him. "Wanna go grab a drink in Placerville?"

"Sorry sweetie, I have a hot date," Ted replied.

"I'll go with you tomorrow," I said, taking pity on her.

"I'm holding you to it," Sheila replied as she flounced off with her tray.

I read Ted's order and groaned. "I need to go down to the cellar for that bottle."

"Want me to go?" Ted teased me. "I'm not afraid of her."

"Very funny." I smirked at him even as a shiver ran down my spine. "I'll be right back."

I spun on my heel and made for the door at the end of the bar. A gust of musty air greeted me as I opened it and descended the creaking wooden steps, flipping on the light switch along the way.

I knew it was my imagination, but whenever I was down in the cellar I felt uneasy, as if I were being watched by someone ... or something.

It didn't help matters that the restaurant was reputed to be haunted by the ghost of its original proprietor, Flora Arnold.

Flora was a large, no-nonsense kind of woman who had arrived in the early frontier days along with the forty-niners, fording her way through waist-high snow drifts with a fifty pound sack of flour strapped on her back. She set up a makeshift kitchen in a tent, and made her fortune taking in laundry and feeding the hungry miners that flooded into the Sierras.

Flora became a trusted community leader and de facto banker, and eventually built a sturdy boarding house that was now the home of the restaurant that bore her name. Flora's stern visage watched over the hostess stand from a photo hung on the wall at the entrance, her hair pinned up, her mouth set in a firm line, her square jaw thrust out with a defiant air.

More than one customer claimed to smell the scent of her lavender perfume wafting through the dining room, enthralled by the idea of her spirit still presiding over the premises. There were frequent sightings of her apparition in the upstairs windows, a solid woman with her hair piled high in her signature bun as she kept vigil over the main street below.

Flora's ghost was also legendary among the kitchen staff, who told tales of the aroma of phantom pies baking in the ovens, appliances turning on and off by themselves, and spice racks being mysteriously rearranged. Angering her was blamed for every mishap, whether it be a spilled mise en place or a scorched pan sauce.

Sheila scoffed at all the stories, considering them to be nothing more than silly rumors, but I wasn't quite so sure. On this particular night I felt an oppressive presence in the air, and as much as I could use the extra pay I wished I hadn't agreed to close the place on my own.

A single bare bulb cast an eerie light in the cellar, illuminating the cases of wine and cleaning supplies that lined the stone walls. The Dangling light rocked gently, creating moving shadows that made the cellar come alive. I knelt down to retrieve the bottle of wine I needed and when I stood up I felt a blast of icy cold air on the back of my neck that made me spin around in fright, dropping the bottle.

It shattered, leaving a dark stain on the floor.

"Dammit!" I exclaimed, cursing myself for being so jumpy.

Now I had a mess to clean up on top of everything else.

I snatched a replacement bottle and hurried back up the stairs to find the door had closed behind me. The light began to flicker and then went completely out, throwing me into pitch-blackness. I told myself it was only faulty wiring in the old building as I groped for the doorknob.

When I finally found it the door wouldn't budge. I could feel my heart beat in my throat as I put my shoulder into it.

Panicked, I started pounding on the door frantically until it popped open and I spilled out into the bar, breathing hard.

“Are you okay?” Ted asked, taking the bottle from me.

“The—the door stuck,” I managed to gasp.

A regular sitting at the bar chuckled. “Flora strikes again.”

Flustered, I got back to work, keeping one eye on the clock. Time dragged, but the rest of the night was uneventful. When the dinner service was over and the kitchen crew had clocked out I made sure the wait staff did their side work and gave last call to the stragglers seated at the bar.

“She you at the cabin,” Sheila waved goodbye as she left.

When the last customer cleared out I began my closing routine, putting all the liquor bottles away and locking the cabinet. I did one last check of the dining room and locked the front door. I brought the cash till upstairs to the office where I sat to make my deposit. Just as I locked the envelope into the desk drawer I heard the faint strains of old-time piano music coming from the bar area.

I froze, and the hairs on the back of my neck rose. Was someone playing a joke on me? When I peeked my head out of the office the music stopped. I mustered up the courage to go back down to the main floor and found the restaurant as quiet and deserted as I had left it. I took my car keys out of my purse and set them both on the hostess stand, ready to make a quick getaway.

I still had to clean up the spill in the basement.

I toyed with the idea of simply leaving it, but I’d been entrusted with the place, and I hated the idea of the owner arriving in the morning to find a mess.

Now that I was alone in the building, I wasn’t taking any chances this time. I dragged a heavy wooden barstool over to the cellar door and propped it open. I descended the stairs and flicked the light switch, relieved when it came on and blazed brightly.

“Just let me get this cleaned up and I’ll be out of your hair,” I said aloud.

I felt like I was being watched as I hurriedly swept the broken glass into a dustpan and used some paper towels to mop up the wine. I bagged everything up, raced up the stairs and breathed a sigh of relief when I deposited the garbage into a large bin in the kitchen.

Just as I turned to leave I saw a something move out of the corner of my eye. A shadow stood in the dark recesses of the kitchen, a shadow darker than the dark room.

A shadow in the shape of a tall woman with a bun.

Clumsy with fear, I stumbled out to the hostess stand to find my car keys were no longer where I had left them. I dumped out my purse in disbelief, but they were nowhere to be found. I cast about frantically, retracing my steps in a panic as the feeling of being watched became almost overwhelming.

Was I going crazy or was Flora trying to get my attention?

Exasperated, I cried out loud, “Why won’t you let me go?”

All at once the cellar door I'd propped open slammed shut, and I nearly jumped out of my skin. I looked in horror to see that the chair holding it open had been returned to the bar. That was it—I snatched my cellphone, unlocked the front door and fled out into the street.

It was a safe small town, the kind of place where the locals knew each other's business and looked out for one another, but tonight there wasn't a soul in sight. The street was lined with art galleries and antique shops, but they were all closed for the night, and the air was eerily still.

I called Sheila from the sidewalk out front, and tried to describe the events of the night to her.

The more I talked the more I realized how insane I sounded.

"Calm down Amy," she said. "Just come home and we'll talk about it over a nice glass of wine."

"That's the problem!" I exclaimed. "I can't find my car keys. I looked everywhere but they've just disappeared! Can you please bring me my spare key? It's in my jewelry box on the dresser."

"Okay," Sheila replied. "I'll be there in a few minutes."

I paced back and forth in front of the restaurant with my eyes glued to the door illuminated by a sign that proclaimed "Flora's Place".

After the longest ten minutes of my life Sheila pulled up and parked, holding my spare key out the window.

"I need to go back in to get my purse and lock up," I said in a quivery voice. "Will you please come with me?"

Sheila stepped out of her car. "Fine, but I'm sure you just let your imagination run away with you. Your subconscious mind is creating all of this drama."

I hugged myself defensively. "Whatever."

With Sheila by my side, I felt braver, and drawing a deep breath, I followed her back into the restaurant. She looked around the room. "Okay. Where was the last place you saw your keys?"

"I put them on the hostess stand right before I went down to the cellar."

She looked, and right where I had left them, were my keys.

I gasped. "I swear to God—they were gone! I'm totally serious!"

Sheila spoke slowly, like you would to a small child, "I know you think they were gone, but sometimes your mind plays tricks on you."

"They were gone!" I insisted.

"Look," she said, trying to placate me, "I'd be creeped out in this place all alone too."

Suddenly, Sheila's phone rang and she answered it. "Sherriff Johnston?" I could hear a man's voice on the other end of the line and saw Sheila's eyes fly open wide. "Oh my God," she said, "No, I'm at Flora's Place. Amy's right here with me. Yes, yes, we're both fine."

the relief in the sheriff's voice was palpable.

Sheila swallowed hard and her shocked eyes met mine as she answered him, "Yes. I'll—uh, I'll see if we can stay at my aunt's place in Sacramento tonight. I'll call you in the morning."

When she ended the call I learned the shocking news. The propane tank at our little ski cabin had exploded, immediately engulfing the little A-frame cabin in flames. The blast was so violent that the windows of the cabin next door were completely blown out. Fire crews were working to put out the flames, but the roof had already collapsed and the building was expected to be a complete loss.

My mind was racing. "If my keys hadn't disappeared. I'd have been home. We both would have been there."

"It was Flora," Sheila said solemnly. "She saved our lives."

"There are more things in heaven and earth ..." I paused to look around the restaurant. The place didn't seem quite so sinister anymore. "Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Sheila shook her head with amusement, "English majors."

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THE END

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