

THE SEER



*Last Dance*

LINDA JOY SINGLETON

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First e-book edition © 2010

E-book ISBN: 9780738716848

Cover design and ring illustration by Lisa Novak  
Editing by Rhiannon Ross

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Flux  
Llewellyn Worldwide Ltd.  
2143 Wooddale Drive  
Woodbury, MN 55125  
[www.fluxnow.com](http://www.fluxnow.com)

Manufactured in the United States of America

This book is dedicated to the memory of four talented and wonderful friends whom I miss and will never forget:

Dona Vaughn (author of *Chasing the Comet*)

Linda Smith (author of *Mrs. Biddlebox* and *Moon Fell Down*)

Eileen Hehl (author of numerous YA and adult romance novels)

Karen Stickler Dean (author of the YA series, *Maggie Adams*)

My grandmother's voice was hushed, the lines of her face accentuated by soft lamplight, as she began to talk. In the quiet of night, I could almost pretend the three of us—Nona, Dominic, and I—were sitting around a campfire telling ghost stories. Instead, we were inside Dominic's loft apartment and Nona wasn't telling us tales.

The truth was far scarier than fiction.

The antique silver box she'd given me lay heavy in my lap. It was cool to the touch, with tarnished edges and raised half-moon and star designs embossed into the lid. "Pandora's Box," I'd teased when Nona had first showed it to me.

And I was right.

The contents themselves weren't dangerous. In fact, when I'd lifted the lid to look inside, I'd felt let down. I'm not sure what I expected—maybe jewels or rare coins. That would have been more exciting than a faded photograph, an old Bible, and a tiny silver charm in the shape of a cat.

"Before I explain about the box," Nona said in a shaky voice. "You should know more about my great-great-grandmother."

"Don't tire yourself." The concerned look Dominic gave my grandmother irritated me. He wasn't even related to her—a handyman/apprentice who looked about my age, but didn't attend school. All I knew was that Nona invited him to live at her farm because he possessed unusual talents. Secrets had drawn them close, and I couldn't help but feel left out.

"I appreciate your concern," Nona told Dominic with a fond smile. "But resting just wastes valuable time. The only thing that can cure me is the herbal potion my great-great-grandmother Agnes created for an aunt who suffered from the same hereditary illness I now have. It's important you understand about Agnes. She had the family mark of a seer, like Sabine."

I reached up to touch the black stripe in my blond hair. Before Nona's hair turned silver, she'd had one, too. She told me it signified amazing psychic abilities. But when I was little, I'd been ashamed of it. Kids called me a freak and said I didn't wash my hair. Once I'd taken scissors and cut out the dark streak. It grew back, but I never grew used to being different. Even now, after

my gift had helped to save a friend's life, I yearned to be normal.

My grandmother was talking again, and I leaned forward in my chair so I didn't miss a word. "Agnes lived over a hundred years ago in a small town where people were expected to behave in a certain way," she explained. "Women raised children and were good wives. They dressed, acted, and even thought alike."

"My mother would fit in there," I said bitterly.

"That's probably true." Nona cracked a wry smile. "But it was a terrible place for someone with a gift."

"Like us."

My grandmother nodded. "Agnes was widowed young and had to raise her four daughters on her own. She created herbal remedies for everything from upset stomachs to bad breath. She also gave advice—telling things that always came true. She could predict the future for others, but not herself. So when she spurned the advances of the married mayor, she had no idea his anger would result in malicious rumors. Suspicious townsfolk turned away from her, whispers of witchcraft spread."

I frowned. "That's so unfair."

"When has life been fair to those born different?" Nona shook her head sadly, then continued. "When a neighbor woman became ill and died for no obvious reason, the mayor accused Agnes of poisoning her with a headache potion. That night Agnes' eldest daughter, who also had the gift, warned her mother she was going to be arrested for murder. Her only choices were to stay and risk a death sentence, or run away."

"What did she do?" I whispered, gnawing on a fingernail.

"She was brave, not stupid. A neighbor offered to care for her daughters while Agnes fled to distant cousins who had settled in the West. Her plan was to send for her daughters when it was safe. Unfortunately, that never happened."

I held my breath, imagining this heartbreaking scene. Four little girls hugging their mother, tears falling as they said good-bye, not knowing it would be their last time together. Or maybe they did know, which would make it worse.

Glancing over at Dominic, I could tell he was moved by the story, too. Was he thinking of the mother he'd lost too soon?

Nona paused for a moment, a glazed look coming over her face. I knew that look now and what it meant. I held my breath, struggling to stay quiet while she found her way back into memories. Seconds later, Nona's eyes sharpened and I let out my deep breath.

"As I was saying," Nona went on with a determined lift of her chin, "Agnes went out West. No one knows where for sure. But a year passed with no word from her—until a package was delivered to her daughters. It came with the sad news that Agnes had died and she wanted her daughters to have the box."

"This one?" I lifted the silver box.

"Exactly." Nona nodded. "Inside were four charms and a note saying the charms would lead to the hidden location of her remedy book. But the girls never got a chance to search. The friend couldn't care for them anymore and they were adopted into separate families. Before they split up, each girl took a charm as a keepsake."

I picked up the silver cat that was no bigger than my thumbnail. "Your great-grandmother chose this one?"

"Yes," Nona answered as she stared at the photo. "Florence was the eldest, so she kept the box for her most precious belongings: this charm, the family Bible, and the last photo taken of her sisters and mother. That's Florence in the middle."

She pointed to a serious-looking girl of about eight. Her hair was pulled back in a braid, and she had the same strong, straight nose as Nona. Her mother, Agnes, didn't look any older than I was; yet she'd been a wife, mother, and widow. She sat in a stiff-backed chair with her four daughters circled around her.

"You can tell Agnes loved her daughters," I said wistfully, thinking of my own mother who didn't like me much. "Did the sisters ever get back together?"

"No," Nona answered sadly. "Not in this world anyway."

I set the photograph back in the box, and lifted up the silver cat. "What did the other three charms look like?"

"I don't know. There's no record of that."

"Or of what happened to the sisters," Dominic added grimly.

"So you don't have any idea where the remedy book is?" I asked.

"No. And it's my only hope." My grandmother's gaze was haunted as she

reached out to grasp my hand. “That’s why I’m asking you and Dominic to find it for me.”

*I never want to go through another day like this again*, I thought as I crawled into bed after midnight. All the drama with my friend Danielle—finding her bleeding to death and rushing her to the hospital, then coming home to Nona’s horrible news. I still couldn’t believe my grandmother was losing her memories and could slip into a coma within six months. Danielle would recover ... but I wasn’t so sure about Nona. And that terrified me.

Emptiness echoed in the soft rustle of my sheets and the eerie quiet of my room. Darkness had never been my friend. It breathed with living, moving shadows that whispered to me. So I kept a nightlight lit. I had dozens of nightlights arranged in a glass case; a collection I’d started when I was five and had been scared by my first ghost. He was harmless—a one-armed soldier who was lost between worlds. Since then, there had been many other-world visitors. They didn’t scare me anymore because Nona had explained the difference between ghosts, spirits, and angels. And I’d gotten close to my spirit guide, Opal.

Still, even though I was sixteen, I always slept with a nightlight.

Hoping to find help from the other side in my dreams, I chose a cat-shaped nightlight. I plugged it in and whispered a fervent prayer for Nona to get well.

Then I closed my eyes and dreamed.

\* \* \*

I was one with a rain-scented breeze, soaring with a sense of freedom. I expected my dreams to carry me over a hundred years into the past, but I found myself drifting in a different direction, as if someone called my name, beckoning me to follow.

The first thing I was aware of was laughter—soft, sweet, and feminine. I saw the girl as if I was looking down from a cloud. Her hair fell in waves of caramel brown, rippling as she twirled on an outdoor pavilion. There were others there, too: girls in tight sweaters, rolled-up socks, and full mid-length skirts and guys in buttoned-shirts and stiff-looking slacks. But the brown-haired girl shone bright, leaving others in shadows. Her every move radiated like the sun. She

laughed and twirled and teased. The guys begged for her attention, while the girls glared and gossiped from the sidelines. The wooden floor was her stage; she was The Star.

Then the scene changed.

Someone new arrived, parting through the girl's sea of admirers. With a single look, the tall dark-blond stranger captured her attention, curling his hand in hers as they stole the dance floor.

Lightning flashed daggers against a dark sky.

Rain began to fall on the pavilion.

And they danced.

\* \* \*

I jerked up in my bed, my head spinning to an unfamiliar melody. I was drenched in sweat, and my nightgown clung to me as if I'd been caught in a storm. Blinking, I looked at my illuminated bedside clock and was surprised that only twenty minutes had passed since I'd fallen asleep.

My heart pounded like I'd been running, and I breathed deeply to calm myself.

*What just happened?* I thought in confusion. I'd wanted a vision of my ancestors and the remedy book. Instead, I'd been shown something very different. I didn't know who the dancing girl was, but I sensed she wasn't related to me and had no connection to the missing charms.

So why had she invaded my dreams?

I clenched my pillow. It wasn't fair! I should have control over my own mind. Did I need to concentrate harder? Perform some kind of ceremony with candles and incense? Recite a chant?

Nona would know what to do, but I resisted the urge to rush to her for help. She was counting on me now and I had to be strong for her. Besides, I could imagine what she'd advise—"Listen carefully to your dream messages because they could lead to important discoveries."

But I'd dreamed the wrong dream. I needed a vision of Agnes or her daughters—not a flirtatious dancing girl.

*Stay out of my head,* I thought to the girl. *I don't care who you are or what*

*you want. I don't have time to deal with you.*

Then I tried again to connect with my ancestors. Breathing deeply, in and out, over and over until my anger faded to fatigue, weariness settled over me, and my eyes closed ...

A storm stirred a wicked brew of danger. I was swept along like a speck of dust, blowing wild in a dangerous wind. Dark clouds boiled and thunder rumbled. Excitement soared as I sensed a shift of time and place. Gray shrouds parted and down below on a rocky outcropping I saw a familiar figure.

The caramel-haired girl.

Not her again! Anger clouded my vision. This wasn't supposed to happen. I fought to open my eyes, to retreat from this mental cage. But wind whipped me closer, trapping me in my own dream.

Unwillingly, I watched. The girl wasn't alone. The dark-blond stranger stood beside her, his arms outstretched, imploring. Something had gone wrong, terribly wrong between them. She glared and shouted at him. Emotions swirled in reds and purples, a tornado of rage. I couldn't hear her words, but felt overwhelming anger and pain.

The world shuddered, shifted, and the scene shattered into confusing images. I glimpsed a rocky cliff, a steep drop to rocks and broken trees. A long-dead tree, split into pieces, spiked to a point like an offering to the sky.

The girl was falling, flying over the cliff's edge. Her scream, shrill and sharp, tumbled through empty air.

And then silence.

My alarm blared for the third time before I reached to shut it off.

“Quiet already,” I grumbled, waking to a sense of dread. It took a moment for my head to clear and to vaguely remember my unsettling dreams. A girl in fifties clothes ... dancing and flirting ... a scream. Something horrible had happened. What? Images flitted in my mind, then slipped away. Trying to understand made my head throb. So I stopped trying. A weird dream didn’t matter anyway. Only Nona mattered.

I was glad it was Saturday and there was no school. But I had a nagging feeling that something major was happening today. Dread grew when I glanced at my wall calendar. A black slash crossed today’s date. I groaned.

This evening I had to face my worst nightmare.

*My mother was coming.*

I’d been avoiding her calls, making excuses not to talk to her for months. I mean, what was the point? We’d only get into another argument because I wasn’t perfect like my nine-year-old twin sisters. Everything seemed so easy for Ashley and Amy. They were musically talented and attended a private performing arts school. They were tall and willowy, with Dad’s satin-black hair and Mom’s violet-blue eyes; a combo that was gaining them fame as models. Since they were identical, most people thought they were alike, but I knew better. Ashley was outspoken and as ambitious as our mother, while Amy was studious and eager to please.

I’d given up trying to please my mother years ago. She rejoiced in my twin sisters’ talents, but my spooky abilities scared her. You’d think she’d be used to supernatural stuff after growing up with Nona, but instead it had a reverse affect. Mom lived in the land of denial and blamed me for being different. Dad accused her of overreacting. He didn’t believe in anything outside the legal facts in his law library, and thought I was as normal as my little sisters. So he often took my side. But that ended when he became a partner in his law firm, and started working eighty-hour weeks. He wasn’t around to defend me after I’d foretold the death of a popular football player. When even close friends turned against me and I’d been kicked out of school, Mom sent me to live with her mother. I loved

being with Nona, but my mother's betrayal hurt.

*I would never forgive her.*

Burying my head under my pillow, I was tempted to hide in bed. I needed a long rest after all the drama yesterday. Things got out of control with Danielle and I'd risked exposing my psychic ability. Still, I was glad I'd helped save her life. I just hoped no one figured out how I'd known where to find her.

Finding the cure for Nona's illness would be much harder. Everyone involved was long dead. Sure I saw ghosts, but they usually appeared when they wanted something from me—not the other way around. I didn't know how to contact a particular ghost. Entities on the other side didn't exactly carry cell phones. And contacting my ancestors through dreams had failed. So now what?

*Since when did you forget about me?* a sassy voice asked in my head.

"Opal? Are you there?" I whispered. I never physically saw my spirit guide the way I did ghosts and angels, but rather sensed her presence. I knew her proud smile and the critical arch of her dark brows well. For someone who'd been dead for hundreds of years, she could be really bossy, but she could also be a trusted friend.

*Of course I'm here,* she said in her usual impatient manner. *Otherwise, you would be conversing with yourself.*

I lifted the pillow off my head, keeping my eyes closed since it was easier to see Opal that way. "Can you help Nona?" I asked.

*My duty is to guide you along your chosen path.*

"Then tell me where the remedy book is so I can help Nona."

*That is beyond my knowledge.*

"Why?" I demanded.

*Because I simply do not know.*

"But you have to! My ancestors must be on your side somewhere, can't you ask them where the book was hidden?"

*Sabine, you try my patience by failing to realize our worlds are vastly different. What matters to you is often of little consequence here. Your life is your own to live, my humble role is one of guidance.*

"Then guide me to the book!"

*The path to what you seek begins in your soul. Search out wisdom from those*

*with like minds. Mistakes are inevitable and great sorrow can be a stern teacher.*

“What do you mean ‘great sorrow?’” I sat up straight in bed, clutching covers to my chest. “I’m not going to lose Nona. I won’t let it happen.”

*Disease is only one way to be trapped in an earthly body and a lost soul waits to be set free. Do not withdraw when assistance is sought.*

“Would you stop talking in circles and just tell me what to do?”

*Do as your grandmother asks.*

“I don’t understand.”

*But you will ...*

She broke the connection, and I opened my eyes to an empty room.

Determination pulsed through me. Nona had asked me to find the remedy book, and that’s exactly what I would do. Also, I’d make Nona’s life easier by taking over the housework and cooking. I could even help her home computer dating business, Soul Mate Matches, by answering phones and organizing her files so efficiently she’d never lose her computer password or important papers again.

Confidently, I sailed into Nona’s office.

My grandmother sat at her desk, absorbed in the computer screen, jotting down notes with one hand while snacking on a pumpkin muffin with the other. She looked so vibrant, with shining gray eyes and rosy color in her cheeks; it was hard to believe she was ill.

“Good morning, Sabine.” She tapped her keyboard, bringing up photographs of dozens of smiling women. She clicked on more keys until only a woman with reddish brown hair and a round freckled face was on the screen.

“How are you feeling?” I asked cautiously.

“Never better. I think I’ve found a match for Kenny Campbell. Beatrix Frayne is over thirty, loves animals, and volunteers at a Boys and Girls Club. If their astral charts are compatible, I’ll arrange a meeting.” She gestured to a plate of muffins. “Help yourself. They’re still warm.”

“Thanks,” I said, reaching for one. Then I glanced around Nona’s office. “How can you find anything with so many piles, folders, and boxes scattered all over?”

“It is a mess,” she admitted with a chuckle. “But I have my own system.”

“A little organizing couldn’t hurt. Let me help.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“But I want to,” I said, picking up two thick piles of papers.

“No! Don’t mix those up!” Nona flew from her chair and snatched the papers. “It took hours to compile these files of over-fifty men with musical talent. And the other pile is recently divorced Taurus women.”

“Then I’ll help by typing these.” I turned to a box filled with Post-it notes. “You’ll be able to find all the information in one place.”

“Well ... I guess that couldn’t hurt.”

It didn’t hurt me, but Nona winced when I dumped the box on the floor and began organizing. I tried, really I did, but how was I supposed to know “Hairy Fish and Bell Frog” meant a new client named Harold Trout would be a good match for Annabelle Hopper? Just when Nona stopped me from shredding a list of new client numbers, the doorbell rang.

I rushed to answer it.

“Hey, Sabine, are you ready?” my friend Penny-Love greeted, looking like a freckled angel in jeans and boots. Her full name was Penelope Lovell, but her nickname, like her white T-shirt, was a good fit.

“Ready?” I stared at her blankly. “For what?”

“Duh.” She ran her polished ruby-red nails through her copper curls. “Sabine, did you fall off the planet or something? You promised to go shopping, you know, to buy decorations for Fall Fling Dance. The Booster Club is counting on us to have everything by next Saturday.”

“I forgot.” I gave a rueful smile. “Things have been hectic lately.”

“So I heard. I couldn’t believe when Jill told Kaitlyn who told Amber who told me that you were there when Danielle was found half-dead on the football field. What happened? Why didn’t you call me?”

“Sorry. Everything was crazy—rushing to the hospital and then staying until Danielle’s family showed up and I found out she was going to be okay. I didn’t get home till late,” I said evasively. Penny-Love was great fun, but she was also a great gossip. I had to be careful what I revealed to her. If she knew a psychic vision had led me to Danielle, the news would be all over school in a flash.

To change the subject, I pointed to the driveway. “Where’d you get the car?”

“My oldest brother. He needed Dad’s car to impress a girlfriend, so he offered me his rusty reject. It’s not much, but it runs fine.”

I looked dubiously at the rust-brown dented Mustang on our gravel driveway. One tire was half the size of the others, making the car lopsided.

“It’s great you got wheels,” I told her. “But you’ll have to go without me.”

“Why?” she demanded.

“Because Nona needs me to—”

“Nonsense,” my grandmother interrupted, coming up behind me. “I don’t need anything. You go out and have fun.”

“I can’t leave you.” I shook my head. “Not until you’re better.”

“Nona looks better than ever to me,” Penny-Love put in as she greeted my grandmother with a hug. Both romantics at heart, they’d become quick friends. “So how’s the love biz?”

“Blooming like a garden! I signed up three new clients this week.”

“Getting paid for matchmaking is like the best job in the world,” Penny-Love said. “If you ever need an assistant, give me a call.”

“It’s a deal.” My grandmother smiled.

“You don’t need an assistant, you have me. And I’m not going to leave you alone.” I folded my arms across my chest. “I want to help.”

“You can help best by not helping,” Nona insisted. “I know you mean well, Sabine, but I’ll get more accomplished alone.”

“And we have important things to shop for today,” Penny-Love added firmly.

Cornered by both of them, how could I argue?

So for the next few hours, I put worries aside and shopped.

There wasn’t a mall in Sheridan Valley, a medium-sized blend of suburbs and rural farms, so we drove into Sacramento. It wasn’t a long drive, about forty minutes by freeway. Penny-Love had funds from the Booster Club and a mile-long list of things to buy: crepe paper, paper plates, plastic silverware, colored paper, paint, glitter, and more. When we finished, Penny-Love talked me into hitting the clothing stores and trying out extreme fashions. I tried on a wild purple plastic mini dress and she slipped into a silver sequin gown with a slit down to her belly button. We paraded around the store, receiving weird looks

from other customers and suspicious looks from the clerks. Bursting into laughter, we changed back into our T-shirts and jeans, then hit the food court.

After serious contemplation, I chose Chinese and Penny-Love bought the largest cheeseburger I'd ever seen. Amazingly, she ate the whole thing—plus a jumbo platter of French fries.

Then we went into a jewelry boutique and I found a pair of funky piano-shaped earrings perfect for my sister Ashley. My twin sisters' birthday party was in two weeks, and Amy had begged me to come in her last email. Since it was going to be held at an amusement park, where I could easily avoid my mother, I'd agreed to go.

I wanted to show my sisters how much I missed them with special gifts, so I convinced Penny-Love to stop at a used bookstore. Amy collected vintage series books like Nancy Drew. I checked her list of most sought-after titles—and struck pay dirt with a shiny green book titled, *The Haunted Fountain*. When I found an autograph from the author, I knew this was a great find—and for only eight dollars!

When we returned home, I felt better than I had in days.

Until I saw the midnight-black Lexus parked in the driveway.

Penny-Love heard my low gasp and turned to me in concern. “What is it, Sabine? You just went totally white.”

“I’m okay.” I swallowed hard.

“You don’t sound okay, but whatever.” She glanced over at the Lexus. “Wicked car. Whose is it?”

“My mother’s.” I resisted the urge to run away. “She wasn’t due for two hours.”

“Maybe she hurried because she missed you.”

I snorted. “That will be the day. She doesn’t want anything to do with me.”

“I don’t believe it. Parents can’t resist messing with their kids’ lives like a bad habit. It’s all, you should do this or why aren’t you doing that, but we always make up and hug afterwards. It’s normal to clash with your mother.”

“Nothing’s normal with us. It’s complicated—and hard to talk about.”

“You *never* talk about your family,” she accused.

“There’s not much to tell. My mother hates me, so I’m living here now.” I took a deep breath, then stepped out of the car. “I’d better go inside.”

“Will you be okay?” she asked, twirling a red curl around her finger.

“Sure.” I forced a weak grin. “My mother already kicked me out of the house. What else can she do?”

I was about to find out.

Mom looked her usual perfectionist self, wearing a tailored gray suit, matching heels, and an uptight smile. She started off with fake polite talk, asking about school and friends. Not that she cared. I mean, she wouldn’t even look directly into my face, as if she was afraid of what she might see—or more likely—what I might see. And she kept glancing around, as if expecting a ghost to suddenly pop out.

When she turned to Nona and asked for a private moment with me, my pulse jumped. It took all my willpower not to grab Nona and beg her to stay with me.

Instead, I lifted my chin defiantly as I faced my mother. “Okay we’re alone, so spit it out. What do you want?”

“Sabine, there’s no reason to use that tone with me,” she said. “I’m your

mother and no matter what you may think, I do love you.”

“Yeah. It shows.”

“Are you still angry with me?”

“Of course not.”

“Sending you away was harder on me than you.”

“Oh, really?” I arched my brows skeptically.

“Of course. But I’m relieved it’s all worked out for the best. You’re doing well in school and have new friends. Your sisters tell me you even have a boyfriend. What’s his name?”

I hesitated, unwilling to share something so personal, but not comfortable with a direct lie. “Josh DeMarco.”

“DeMarco? Is he Italian?”

“I don’t know,” I said icily. “Or care.”

“I was simply asking a question. I’m sure he’s a charming boy, and I’d love to meet him when I have more time. It’s obvious you’re thriving with your grandmother. You always preferred her anyway. Instead of being angry because I arranged for you to stay here, you should thank me.”

“Thank you,” I said in a voice dripping with sarcasm. “Is there anything else?”

“Well ...” She glanced down at her clenched hands. “There is something I need to discuss with you. I came here so we could talk away from the twins.”

“Why? Are they okay?” Alarm leaped in me. “Amy hasn’t had a bad asthma attack, has she?”

“No, nothing like that. But I’m concerned about Ashley’s friend, Leanna.”

I’d never heard the name. “What does that have to do with me?”

“Leanna is the younger sister of that boy from your last school.” She pursed her lips. “The one who died.”

Guilt and pain slammed into me, but I masked my emotions with a shrug. “So?” I folded my arms across my chest. “That still has nothing to do with me.”

“But it does,” my mother insisted. “Leanna will be at your sisters’ birthday party. It could be awkward and remind everyone of that unpleasant time.”

“I’ll stay out of her way.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be enough.”

My stomach clenched. “What do you mean?”

“If you love your sisters, make sure they have a happy birthday.”

“How?” I asked icily.

She met my gaze squarely. “Don’t come to their party.”

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