

THE LANARK CHRONICLES

Book Two

GHOST GOD

— W.D. MCKAY —

Chapter One

It had been ten years since the abduction.

Bobbi scratched her ear and sighed loudly as she sat alone, cross-legged on the soft, warm carpet of brown pine needles and dead leaves high on the hill overlooking Lanark. It was one of her favourite places. A good-sized clearing surrounded by a mixed forest of pine and maple, broken up by rugged outcroppings of granite and pockets of soft earth filled with long grasses. The hill gave her the privacy and peace she needed – now almost daily. On the ground in front of her, the summer breeze pushed at the dead leaves, scattering them around her feet.

Looking down the hill to the town, she could see the old grey limestone spire of the town hall – now a museum, filled with papers and artifacts from the town's earliest settlers. An interesting place if you were interested. Boring as dust balls if you weren't.

Parts of the streets were just visible, weaving haphazardly in and out of the leafy canopy of autumn-tinged oaks and maples before her. To her left, in the distance, she could make out the dull steel track of the railway as it snaked along the river, disappearing into the rolling hills and blue-green fields of rich farmland. Bobbi smiled as her eyes followed the tracks. *It won't be long now*, she thought.

Uncrossing her legs, she lay back, crunching the soft leaves. The emerald sky glistened at her in the late afternoon sun. The few woolly clouds she could see just seemed to hang there, as if they had no particular place

they needed to go. *A perfect day*, she thought, as a small gust tossed a dead brown leaf onto her shirt. She absently reached for it and slowly crushed it to dust.

Ten years today.

Ten years since Tawni, her identical twin, the sister she never knew, was taken by Maggluk.

“The bastard,” muttered Bobbi. *Don’t swear*, she reminded herself, *it makes you sound like Mace*.

And ten years since her precious pet rabbit, Yatey, was ruthlessly murdered by the alien. “Bast-” Catching herself, she blew out a breath.

Then, like a shadow in the dark, the old thoughts crept into her mind. Again. *Dammit*.

The days following the revelation of Tawni’s existence and disappearance had been some of the worst she’d ever known. She remembered the rage, overwhelming sadness, and desperation she’d felt then. And for the days and weeks after. A living nightmare for a seven-year-old.

A part of her tried for a long time to hate her mother for not telling her about Tawni, but she was never able to pull it off. She loved Janel too much. Needed her too much. After seeing what the abduction had done to her own mother, crying all the time – for days – she would do anything to help her get past the pain of it all. And, much to her surprise, that seemed to help Bobbi with her own pain.

But Tawni is still gone, and God knows where. Or if she’s even alive. Bobbi twirled a length of her nearly-waist-long blonde hair, remembering it was that very night she’d sworn off ever using her powers or One presence again. She closed her eyes and felt a small tear slowly trail its way down her cheek. The memory of that night was permanently etched on her brain as if it had happened yesterday . . .

Wiping her tears on her sleeve, Bobbi climbed onto Janel’s bed and pulled her mom into her arms. Janel was inconsolable. Taking a deep breath, Bobbi said, “Mom, I’m sorry. You didn’t

know Maggluk had found out about Tawni. But why didn't you tell me about her? I could have helped. Maybe even stopped him."

Janel looked at her daughter and tried to speak but the words wouldn't come. Recovering somewhat, Angelina joined them on the bed, too stricken to speak, as David sat respectfully on the far corner of the queen-sized mattress.

The room had chilled somewhat, now that the night air had free rein through the blasted-out window. No one cared. Angelina looked to Bobbi and in a hoarse whisper said, "Honey, you have nothing to be sorry for – it's your mom and I who should have explained things to you . . . a long time ago." She pushed her hair back. "And we didn't. We were wrong."

Bobbi looked at them both, not knowing how to fix this. How to make it right. She felt like she had let them down. She should have been able to stop Maggluk. At the same time, she felt betrayed. How could her own mother have kept such a secret? Why would she do such a monstrous thing?

Janel pulled back a little from Bobbi, feeling overwhelmed at the expression of pain and anger in her daughter's eyes. Grabbing a handful of tissues from the box on the nightstand, she blew her nose; she knew she had to tell Bobbi everything.

Gathering herself, she looked to Angelina who nodded her consent, and then to David said, "You might as well hear this too."

David gave an almost imperceptible nod, feeling like his head had been hit with a plank.

"Bobbi, as you know it happened a long time ago. When the doctors told me I was pregnant with you I was overjoyed. And then they told me I was going to have twins – I could scarcely believe it." She paused, searching Bobbi's eyes, praying she understood, before continuing. "Everything went well and then the big day came and there you were." Janel stopped again as a small frown creased her forehead.

"Go on," prompted Bobbi, "I already know where babies come from."

Janel felt self-conscious at Bobbi's deadpan reply. "Of course you do. So there I was with two perfect baby girls. I named you both right away." She could feel her eyes starting to well. "And the very next day, Tawni was gone."

Bobbi stared at her, not understanding. "What do you mean?"

Janel trembled as she looked to Angelina for encouragement, but Angelina's head was down, staring at the tears that had splashed onto her palms resting on her lap.

"Bobbi, she was stolen."

"Sweet Jesus," whispered David.

"Right out of the nursery in the hospital. The day after she was born. The police came, questioned everyone, checked the security tapes, and searched for weeks – but she was just gone. No one has ever learned who took her. And no one has seen her since."

Bobbi's eyes welled as she listened to her mother's quavering voice. She could feel the heat behind her eyes rushing ahead. Taking a deep breath, she forced it to back off.

Angelina stepped in. "Bobbi, it broke your mother's heart. And mine. But it was you who gave your mom the strength to go on. She was never going to let anything bad happen to you. We searched everywhere ourselves, for months – and nothing."

"Why didn't you ever tell me?" asked Bobbi, her anger flooding to despair.

"Honey," said Janel, "you're still very young, only seven. I never wanted to frighten you. I only wanted to protect you. I thought I was doing the right thing. I would have told you, but wanted to wait until you were older."

"And now we've lost her again," choked Angelina, sadness flooding her heart.

Far below, the iron bells in the townhall tower sent their clangs up the hill. Four o'clock. Bobbi opened her eyes and thought, *Auntie Angelina was right, we had lost her. Again.* Letting out a deep sigh, she unthinkingly spread her fingers wide over the crushed leaf under her hand. As the rainbow

of colours flowed silently across her fingertips, the leaf bits instantly reassembled themselves in time to dance away on the next gust. Not noticing, she pushed herself up on her elbows.

There was no point in thinking about Tawni again. *Yeah, right. Lot of good that will do me, as if I don't think about her every day.*

Standing up, she brushed leaf bits out of her hair and tightened her ponytail. *Time to go. Dr. Mace might be coming for dinner tonight. And Auntie too.* She smiled.

Crossing the small clearing, she paused for one last look at the town before heading back down the wooded trail. *I love it here, but I wish I had never met up with Maggluk, his powers, and his pain. And God help him if I ever do again.*

“Bas-” She bit her lip.

Turning away, she headed into the forest feeling troubled. A moment later she stopped with a scowl and looked back to where she'd been sitting. *Something doesn't fit. After all these years, something just doesn't fit.* The long grasses nodded lazily at her. With a shrug she headed back down the trail, supper on her mind.