

## **A HAUNTING IN AMHERST**

Our dream of owning a Bed and Breakfast Inn was finally coming true. I felt giddy watching my husband Jay unlock the deadbolt then push open the heavy oak front door of our Victorian house. The previous owners were so motivated to sell that before we even made an official offer they told our realtor that we could keep, at no extra cost, all of their restored 19<sup>th</sup> century fine antique Eastlake furniture, Persian floor rugs, ceiling and wall coverings, untouched original portraits, authentic artwork, and early 20<sup>th</sup> century incandescent electric lamps.

As we walked into the large foyer, it was like stepping back in time to 1886, which was the year the Williams, one of New England's wealthiest families, built this beautiful and spacious home in the small agricultural town of Amherst, Massachusetts. Their house was just a short bike ride from the homestead of Emily Dickinson, the 19<sup>th</sup> century American poet. There was such amazing history on our street and in the region itself.

Admiring the decor, we practically stumbled over each other moving swiftly through the seemingly endless hallways and rooms. Finally, we stopped and gazed out a third floor window that overlooked our pristine backyard. The grass glistened in the late autumn sunlight. Behind our property, I saw a frail looking elderly neighbor smile and clap as she watched her daughter push her granddaughter on a swing.

"We did it, babe," Jay said. "After cleaning this place up good and doing the minor bathroom renovations, we'll be ready for business in a few short months!"

“I’m so excited!” I replied.

We hugged for a few moments.

“Guess we better start unloading our stuff from the van,” he said and quickly disappeared down the two flights of stairs.

I was about to follow him when a large portrait on the wall caught my eye. It was of a precious little girl smiling and laughing while running in the backyard of this house. Wearing a lovely Victorian style dress, she had shoulder length ash blonde hair, ivory skin, and sapphire sparkling eyes. At the bottom right hand side of the portrait, an unknown artist had written in lazy cursive penmanship *Ann Williams, June 29, 1894.*

Caught up in the wonder of what her life may have been like living here, I barely had time to jump back when the portrait crashed to the hardwood floor. My heart pounded through my chest.

The gold frame’s brackets must have loosened up over time. As far as I could tell, the portrait miraculously wasn’t damaged. As I leaned it up against the bottom wall, I felt the hair near the back of my neck being tickled and ruffled. I whipped around. Of course there was no one there. Lightly scratching my neck, I quietly laughed and composed myself.

“Heather, are you coming?” Jay called from below. His voice echoed.

“Be right there,” I shouted back.

By dusk we had lugged all of our boxes inside and unpacked essential items and toiletries. While I wiped and disinfected the kitchen, Jay drove to a local pub to pick up our favorite Friday night dinner – a large extra cheese pizza and six pack of Samuel Adams beer.

After twenty-five minutes of cleaning, I collapsed into a kitchen chair. The last rays of sunlight sprinkled through the edges of the kitchen window curtains. I basked in the quiet tranquility and splendor of our Victorian home's beauty and felt my excitement of it becoming a successful bed and breakfast business.

Just then the front door opened then slammed shut. The foyer floor boards made a patter of creaking.

"Good timing. I'm starved," I called out to Jay.

No response.

"Babe, I'm in the kitchen," I said louder.

No response again.

I got up and walked into the foyer. It was empty. I walked into the front parlor. No Jay. *Where did he go with the food and beer?* Come to think of it, there wasn't even a hint of pizza aroma. Baffled, I gazed out the large bay window in the front dining room.

To my surprise, Jay was just pulling up the driveway in the Camry and then parked it. With the pizza and six pack in hand, he strode up the walkway. I opened the front door for him.

"I found this great pub, babe. The pizza smells incredible," Jay said. The aroma was heavenly.

"So weird...I heard you come into the house a few minutes ago," I said.

“Obviously not because here I am now,” he said coyly and kissed my cheek.

We walked into the kitchen.

“I literally heard the front door open and close. Then I heard your footsteps,” I insisted.

“I don’t know what to say except it’s a bit drafty in here and it’s a very old house.”

I shrugged and cracked open a beer.

“Taste this,” Jay said handing me a slice of pizza. I gobbled it down.

As we enjoyed our dinner, I soon forgot about the prior incident. We discussed our overall business and marketing strategy, schedule of making minor upgrades to the bathrooms, and security measures.

The next morning Jay began setting up our new computer in the cozy modern office that once served as a very large pantry. An oversized glass double door sealed the wide opening to separate the room from the kitchen. Jay was brilliant with computer technology and clearly didn’t need my help.

“So I guess I’ll start dusting the four hundred rooms,” I said.

“Aren’t there more like five hundred?” Jay asked and winked at me.

“Not looking forward to this part at all,” I whined.

“I’ll clean all the bathrooms when I’m done here. Fair?”

“I knew there was a reason I married you,” I responded.

He flashed that sexy crooked smile that had won me over 12 years ago and still sent shivers through my body.

I made my way through all the beautifully kept rooms on the first and second floors. After climbing the stairwell to the third level, I decided to change up my dusting routine and work backwards beginning with the last room located in the east wing.

Turning the bedroom door handle, I suddenly felt a strange, tickly sensation against the back of my right thigh. Letting go of the knob, I firmly brushed my hand against the skin a couple of times. The sensation stopped. It must have been a bug. That's when I heard a faint cry. Standing perfectly still in the silent hallway, I listened more intently. A little girl was weeping. Maybe the backyard neighbor's granddaughter had tripped or fell off that swing. I walked down the hall and peeped out several back windows. There was not a soul in our neighbor's yard or anyone walking on the adjacent street. It was now eerily quiet.

The distant crying sounds began again. I ran to that back room and turned the door handle. The door wouldn't open, almost like someone was on the other side pushing it closed. This was crazy! I took a few steps back and then slammed myself so hard against the heavy wooden door that when it finally opened I stumbled and fell onto a beautiful, small canopy bed. It stood in the middle of the most exquisite bedroom that I don't even remember seeing when we walked through the house before with our realtor.

Based on the pink and lavender color scheme, a wooden toy box, and a shelf lined with porcelain dolls, it was clear this room once belonged to the Williams' daughter, Ann. I lay on the bed taking in the beauty. When I looked up at the ceiling, there was a small door with a dropped rope pulley that probably led up to the attic. Standing on the bed, I grabbed the pulley. The door

opened down with eight small steps. I felt a light breeze waft down from inside the pitch black attic. I closed the door and got back to cleaning.