

Guardian Spirit

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SARAH MARTIN BYRD

Lucky  Press

ATHENS, OHIO

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Published by:

Lucky Press, LLC, PO Box 754, Athens, OH 45701-0754

Email: books@luckypress.com SAN: 850-9697

Visit the publisher's website at www.LuckyPress.com

Visit the author's website at www.SarahMartinByrd.com

Purchase order fax: 614-413-2820 email: sales@luckypress.com

ISBN: 978-0-9844627-2-8 (trade paperback)

ISBN: 978-0-9844627-1-1 (hardcover with jacket)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2010925470

Book cover photo by Sarah Martin Byrd ~ Author's photograph by Jerry Byrd

Book design by Janice Phelps, LLC

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Byrd, Sarah Martin.

Guardian spirit / Sarah Martin Byrd. -- Athens, Ohio : Lucky Press, c2011.

p. ; cm.

ISBN: 978-0-9844627-1-1 (cloth) ; 978-0-9844627-2-8 (pbk.)

1. Victims of family violence--Fiction. 2. Cherokee magic--Fiction.
3. Young adult fiction. 4. North Carolina--Fiction. I. Title.

PS3602.Y74 G83 2011

2010925470

813.6--dc22

1009

~ In Memory of ~

BILLY THOMAS MARTIN

*Here's to you, Daddy. You were, like me, far from perfect,
but I've always loved you anyway.*

VERLIE PRUITT MARTIN

*Grandma Verlie, thank you for showing me
there really are spirits among us.*

~ Acknowledgments ~

First of all, thank you Estes and Thelma Wagner for sharing your enchanted cabin in the woods. The first time I saw it, I knew there was magic there.

My sincere thanks goes to Jo Martin Harris, who quickly transformed from acquaintance, to editor, to friend. I am forever indebted to you for sticking with me through all the red marks and side notations. Your insight and expertise pushed me to make this the best book I possibly could. I will always hold you in the highest regard.

To the first reader of *Guardian Spirit*, my daughter, Wendy, thank you for being the guinea pig for my original words, I wouldn't have trusted them with anyone else.

To Emma, my granddaughter, I hope you'll always remember your time with Gi-Gi. You are so very special to me.

To Jerry, my friend and husband, I know you totally don't understand what I do, yet you have been patient with me while I live my dream, thank you.

To Kay Martin, my friend and best cheerleader, thanks for taking the time to read my stories. I loved seeing genuine enjoyment in your eyes as you told me how much you enjoyed my books.

To all who have suffered the sting of a hand, been degraded by words spoken in hate, or treated un-justly, *Guardian Spirit* is for you. Sometimes nothing can help, lest a miracle...so close your eyes and believe.

To Janice Phelps Williams, Founder and Publisher of Lucky Press, I am so glad I sent *Guardian Spirit* to you. I believe it was put in your hands for a special reason. A truly heartfelt thank you doesn't seem quiet enough. I look forward to working with you in the years to come.

And to the One who has been performing miracles since the beginning of time, whose spirit abides among us, I dedicate this book to You, the One from whence I came, and to which I shall someday return.

I close in peace, and in great hope of healing for all.

~Sarah Martin Byrd

*But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee:
and the fowls of the air, and they shall tell thee.*

~Job 12:7

~ Chapter One ~

*A*n elderly woman wearing a soft apron sits in the porch swing of a lilac Victorian house. The early May breeze through the mountains lifts a wisp of her gray hair from the long braid at her back. She brushes it aside absentmindedly as she loses herself in the fading afternoon sun.

Down the stem of a bent daffodil to its bulb, her mind travels like electricity across the roots to those of a nearby hickory tree. Down from there and even farther into the earth's core, the roots mark her path to the old cave where she meets her guides for another of many similar encounters.

"We are glad to see you," says one.

"As always, I am honored to be here," she says. "And soon?" she says, "Is it soon? All the signs seem . . ."

"Yes," says the elder, "and your part is written and told to the heavens."

He nods to the bear at the cave entrance. The woman takes a deep breath, smelling the smoke of the fire inside the circle. All the elders are silent. All are ready. The bear disappears.



“Where are we going, Mama?” twelve-year-old Sadie Madison asked. “We’ve been driving for two days now. You said it would take two days. Aren’t we about there?”

Millie Madison looked over at her headstrong oldest child, and then peeked at the curled up form of Sammy, her five-year old son, who lay in the back seat. Overwhelming love stirred inside her and hot tears threatened to flow down her cheeks. She couldn’t let Sadie see any of the emotion she held deep inside: fear, pain, and worst of all the uncertainty.

Millie felt the place where the growth was removed from the back of her neck. Every time she turned her head, the grinding of scar tissue vibrated through her ears. How long would it take? Two months, two years? No one could tell her exactly when. They were just sure it would eventually sprout new growth just like a seed potato, the new taking over and the old left to rot away.

Millie forgot to watch the highway for just a second. She was as tired as she had ever been in her life.

God, she silently pleaded, please let this work. I know you’re leading me back to the cabin, but what then? What am I going to find? It’s been over twenty years since my last trip up this mountain. What if it’s not even there? What if it is? Has Grandma sold it to someone else? Will she be there? How old would she be now? Grandma was almost twenty years older than Mama who would have been fifty now, so Grandma should be almost seventy.

Millie vaguely remembered that day all those years ago when her mama had packed up their clothes one rainy morning and told her they were going away for a while. That while had been everlasting—forever until now. But today she was going to be home, her home-away-from-home those first seven years of her life.

Millie’s mother told her it was for the best that she didn’t see her daddy and grandparents, and as time passed Millie had almost forgotten what they looked and smelled like, except for Grandpa. He always smelled like a freshly opened pack of chewing tobacco. Millie found out that Grandpa passed away more than ten years before. That day before her mother died, she found

out a lot more. Millie had always thought her daddy had sent them away, but before her mother went to sleep forever, she cleared her conscience. She said she'd left Jonathan, Millie's father, because she had fallen in love with Luke Turner, the man with whom she spent the rest of her life. Luke had been a good stepfather to Millie, and their lives had been okay, except for the times her mother would get really sad. Sometimes it would last a few hours and sometimes several days. She would lock herself away in her room with the shades pulled tightly closed. Millie would hear her praying over and over for God to grant her peace.

Now as an adult Millie understood. She imagined that her mother never got over the guilt of taking her away from her daddy, a father who died before she could find him again.

Millie's mind traced too many deaths, too much pain.

"Mama . . . Mama, are you going to answer me?" Sadie asked.

"I'm sorry, Sadie Girl. I don't know where my mind was." Millie said.

Sadie Girl was what her mama called her sometimes. It made Sadie feel a special closeness to her mama, like she was her special girl and nobody else's.

"Yes, we're almost there. We should be pulling in within the hour."

"In where?" Sadie asked. "Where are we going?"

"Look around. What do you see?"

Sadie gazed out the front windshield. In front of her loomed a big wall of mountains.

"I see hills."

"Those aren't just hills, those are the Blue Ridge Mountains and they hold magic in them."

"Magic, what kind of magic?"

"Oh, Sadie. That is something I can't explain. It's a sensation you'll have to feel for yourself. I was very young when I left these hills, but I haven't forgotten their enchantment. Now as I get closer I can almost sense it as strongly as the day I left."

Up that winding mountain road they drove, jostling through the curves woke Sammy.

"I'm hungry. When can we stop and eat?"

As Sammy sat up, he rubbed his eyes and looked out the window up ahead at the mountains and then down through the valleys. He could see for miles, both ways.

"What is all that stuff down there? Where are we?"

"Those are houses and barns and land. It's the same way it would look from the sky if we were up in an airplane."

"I'm not going up in any airplane. I saw that picture in the newspaper when one fell out of the sky. I'm never going to do that, never."

"No, honey. We're not going to fly in an airplane, we're going home."

A terrified look crossed Sammy's little face, his eyes misted and he caught his breath. "Home? But I thought we didn't ever have to go back there again. You promised." Sammy's voice was soft and shaking.

Millie stopped the car at the next pullover. She turned around and looked into her son's eyes, bright with fright. The cut beneath his eye was healing nicely, but the whole side of his face was still a dark purple.

"Come here, Sweetie."

Sammy crawled over the seat and snuggled up next to his mama.

"No, we're not going back to Texas. We are far, far away from there now. Look at me, both of you. I promise you as long as there is breath in me your daddy will never lay another hand on any of us ever again, especially you two.

"Let me tell you about the home we're going to. Many years ago when I was a little girl, I stayed with my grandma and grandpa. They would pack up the old Ford truck with food and supplies, and we'd head off to the cabin. I can't wait for you to see it. It's the most extraordinary place in the world—small with two bedrooms and a kitchen. The living room has a big, old fireplace with a hand-looped rug in front of it. We used to sit in front of that fire at night and eat popcorn. Grandma read me books until I fell

asleep. All the while she made fun of the silly noises coming out of Grandpa as he slept in his chair. But the best part was the sounds. On warm nights, we sat out on the side porch and listened to the creek ripple or sometimes roar when it had rained a lot. In the mornings we'd be wakened by the animals."

"Animals? What kind of animals?" both children asked at once.

"Well, mostly birds and turkeys. There are huge, gigantic oak trees all around the cabin. Their enormous limbs hang down almost touching the roof. Those limbs are also the roosting place for all the local game. Grandpa always used to fuss, and try to run them off, so they wouldn't wake us up every morning. But occasionally when they would roost somewhere else, he'd go in and out of the door a dozen times every evening looking for them. 'I wonder where they are, Ann,' he'd say. He'd tell us they were our guardian angels looking down and watching out over us. I can almost hear them now—gobble, gobble, gobble—and the loud swishing of their wings as they took flight."

"Mama, you're fibbing. Turkeys are raised in big houses. They don't live out here in trees," Sammy said, giggling at his mama's attempt to sound like a turkey.

"Now . . . have I ever fibbed to you?"

"No," Sammy said, hanging his head a little.

"What other animals live there?" Sadie asked.

"Oh gosh, kids, you're just not going to believe it. You can look out the kitchen window every evening and again at sunrise and see the deer running and playing in the bottoms below. Young bucks will stand on their hind legs and paw at each other trying to see who is the stronger of the two. And the ornery old does will bunt the sides of another weaker one if she comes too close to something she is eating. They seem quite selfish, but it's really just their instinct to survive."

Survive? Yes, that was exactly what she would do. She was determined to bunt heads with anyone who stood in her way. She would be like that strong female deer as she stands against the

elements protecting her young. Millie had been the weaker one for way too long. From this day forward no one would ever hurt her family again.

“What else is there?” Sammy asked, wide-eyed.

“There are twitchy little squirrels scampering all about, rabbits hopping around, and noisy old raccoons and opossums. I know there are bears, too, even though I never saw one. Grandpa and I saw tracks down by the spring creek one day. But the most special to me of all the animals were Heidi and Hannibal.”

“Who were they?” Sammy asked with his eyes all big and shining.

“Why, they were our outhouse chipmunks.”

“What are outhouse chipmunks?” Sadie asked with a roll of her eyes.

“First of all, do you guys know what an outhouse is?”

“It’s a house that is outside,” Sammy chimed in.

“No, silly,” Sadie corrected him, “it’s a toilet outside in a little building.”

“A toilet outside? How does that work?”

“You’ll just have to see it, Sammy, to understand. You both have seen pictures of chipmunks haven’t you?”

“Yes,” they said.

“Well, Heidi and Hannibal lived behind a board inside the outhouse. They were black and white and fluffy. Every spring they’d have their babies behind that board. As the babies grew, they’d come and go out of a hole between the rafters until one day when they would all go their different ways making homes of their own. But every winter our furry friends would come home to the outhouse. They would gather up papers, twigs, and leaves to rebuild their little nest behind the board. They would stay all winter, and come spring, the whole cycle would start over again.

“The first winter we met them, they almost gave Grandpa a heart attack. It was just before Thanksgiving and we had gone up to get everything ready for the family get-together. As usual,

Grandpa took the broom up to the outhouse to sweep and clean it out. Grandma and I heard him holler and ran out of the cabin to see what was the matter. There Grandpa stood, holding the broom up like a weapon at four glowing little eyeballs huddled up in the corner. Who was the most afraid that day, the chipmunks or Grandpa? We'll never know, but Grandma and I always said Grandpa was.

" 'What are them things?' Grandpa said. 'Them varmints almost jumped on my head when I opened that door.'

" 'Look, Millie, it's just a couple of cute little chipmunks,' Grandma told him.

" 'Cute my eye!' Grandpa said. 'I'm going to kill them pests. Just look there, they've shredded that whole roll of toilet paper. Take in all this mess!' he roared. Grandma calmed him down by saying, 'Leave them alone, they'll probably run off now since you've scared them half to death.' But they didn't leave, they stayed right through the winter and were back again the next fall and the next and the next. From that day on, going to the outhouse was an adventure.

"I believed Heidi and Hannibal could hear and understand me when I talked to them. They became my best friends, other than Grandma. We had to be real careful though and make sure we kept the toilet paper done up tight in a bag with a twisty tie, because if you left it even a little bit open, the chipmunks would dig the paper out and add it to their nests."

Sadie noticed her mama's face glowed remembering the good things. She hoped she and Sammy would find that kind of happiness up here in these mountains.

Millie leaned her head back on the seat for a minute, letting all the fond memories fill her thoughts. She hadn't even known she'd had all these things in her head. Recollection after recollection came flooding back. Again she prayed. *Please God, give me time to share the magic with my children.*

"Are you all right?" Sadie asked.

"Yes, I'm fine, just remembering . . . Are you ready?"

“Oh, one more thing kids: I’m not sure what we’ll find when we get there. Someone else may be living there, but I want you to at least see it, even if we might not be able to stay.”

“Why haven’t we ever been here before?” Sadie asked. “How could you have gone this long not seeing your grandma since she was your best friend when you were little?” So many things just didn’t make sense to Sadie.

Cranking the car, Millie answered her inquiring young daughter the best way she knew how. “Some things are better left unsaid, especially when the dead are not here to defend themselves.”

This didn’t satisfy Sadie, but she dropped it for now anyway. As Sammy crawled to the back seat, the Suburban turned back onto the highway.

“Here we go, kids. Next stop Skunk Cabbage Bog.”

“Where and *what* is Skunk Cabbage Bog?” Sadie had taken about all the mystery she could stand for one day.

“That’s the name of the road the cabin is on. Grandma christened it after the green, leafy stuff that grows in the creeks coming out of these mountain springs. It is light green with big leaves and it tastes awful, or at least that’s what I remember. Grandma would pick it in the springtime and cook it for Grandpa. It would stink up the whole cabin for days. Grandpa loved it. I never could understand how anyone could love to eat a weed, especially one that smelled so bad. The good part was when Grandma cooked the greens she heated me up a can of tomato soup and fried hushpuppies with lots of catsup, probably the best meal in the whole world. Maybe the cabbage will still be there and I’ll show it to you.”

“Mama, I want some hushpuppies. I’m hungry.”

“We’ll put that on our first grocery list, Sammy, when we’re settled in,” Millie said.

It was early May and everything was coming to life in the mountains—plants, baby animals—and the maples were budding red, setting the hills on fire. Millie’s chest grew tight with anticipation and hope.

“What does bog have to do with skunk cabbage!” Sadie asked.

“Oh yeah, the bottomland has bogs,” Millie said.

“What is a bog?” Sammy asked, a bit of concern crossing his face. Bog sounded scary to him.

“A bog is very low, wet, spongy mountain land. In fact the bogs are a dangerous place to go. Grandpa never let me wander far from him. He always said the bogs would suck me up if I stepped into one of them.”

“Do monsters live there?” Sammy asked, his eyes getting bigger by the minute.

“No, silly,” Sadie said. “There’s no such thing as monsters.”

Millie wasn’t so sure about that, for they’d just left one in Texas.

“Well, Mama said something would suck you up. What would it be but monsters?” Sammy’s eyes grew moist with fright.

“Mud. Really, you will just sink up in it; it won’t suck you up. It’s just mud, not something alive,” Millie said, trying to calm Sammy’s fears.

“Does anything live in the bogs?” Sadie asked.

“Yes, as a matter of fact—little tiny turtles and, of course, snakes and lizards and such.”

“Little tiny turtles? How tiny?” Sammy asked.

“Very tiny. They are called bog turtles, and I believe they are the smallest turtle in the world. They are also very special. I remember men in uniforms with high boots coming up here to the bogs a couple times a year to try to find them. They would count each one they saw and compare the numbers to the time before. They are almost extinct. I only saw one. It was perched on the edge of a rock close to the bank one day when Grandpa and I were walking in the pine grove. Grandpa said it was a very special thing to get to see one. They like to hide from humans, and not many people ever get a glimpse.

“I remember it wasn’t any larger than a quarter. It was black with yellow on its shell. We stood very still and just watched it sitting there doing nothing. I squatted down and looked right in its eyes, and it looked into mine. I wanted to pick it up, but Grandpa

said that it was wild and touching it might hurt it. So I just sat there on the ground, me watching the bog turtle and the bog turtle watching me. I sat doing that until Grandpa got bored and said, 'Let's go.' I wanted to stay longer, but it was almost suppertime.

"As I walked off, I looked back. The turtle was still there. It had turned around and was watching me leave. I never really thought about it until now, but it was as though he was trying to tell me something with his eyes. Oh well, I guess I'll never know what it was."

"I miss Grandpa Luke," Sammy said. Talking about Grandpa had stirred up thoughts in his head.

"I know you do, but we can't see Grandpa Luke. He lives too close to Daddy. Maybe he can come and visit us sometime when we get settled."

"Can he? Oh boy! Can he?"

"I hope so, Baby, I hope so."

"Do you think Grandpa Luke will always be sad now that Grandma Lindsay is in heaven?" Sadie asked.

"I don't think so, Sadie Girl . . . Time has a way of healing our hurts and worries."

~ Chapter Two ~

Time had helped Millie. Her mother Lindsay had died from an automobile accident almost a year ago. She had been a good mother and grandmother. Millie would never let her children know the things her mama had told her the day before she died. Children didn't need to know about how lives and families are torn apart because of the weakness of the flesh.

Mama had stripped her away from her daddy and grandparents because she had been selfish. She thought life with Luke would be better than it was with her daddy. That day almost a year ago, Lindsay shared her soul with Millie and told her daughter that she had made a huge mistake all those years ago. Even though Luke was a devoted husband, Lindsay had never stopped loving Millie's daddy Jonathan. Lindsay Turner had begged her only child Millie to forgive her, to pardon her for taking her away from her daddy, to exonerate her for not helping her leave Brad years ago.

Lindsay hadn't wanted Millie to take the kids away from their father, as she had. But, Lindsay had no idea of the torture Brad Madison put Millie and the children through. No one knew but Sadie, Sammy, and her, for most of the bruises, burns, and cuts were hidden by clothes, and their battered spirits were tucked

deep inside away from the world's eyes. After Lindsay passed away, Luke didn't come around too often. He had heard Lindsay tell Millie everything, and he also shared in the guilt. Meanwhile Brad became bolder and crueler once no one was popping in on them.

Sadie's arm being pulled out of the socket was "an accident"; she'd "fallen off the bed." Candle burns on Millie were hidden, especially from her children. Every day Brad added some new kind of persecution, until three days ago when Millie felt sure Brad was finally going to kill one of them. Sammy had been Brad's punching bag that day. If Millie and Sadie hadn't come in when they did, Millie wasn't sure Sammy would be sitting in that back seat right now. They had both jumped on Brad's back and somehow pulled him off the little boy. That evening Millie knew her marriage was over. Brad had looked at them with the eyes of a madman or devil—Millie couldn't decide which one he was—and vowed to put them in a place away, far away. She knew he was not going to stop until he had killed one or all of them.

That night Millie finally admitted to herself that she and her children had to escape. She fell asleep behind the locked door of her children's room with her arms locked tightly around each of them. Under her pillow lay the long two-pronged fork she used to flip chicken on the outside grill. She had never killed anything more than a fly, but as she felt up under her pillow, her fingers rested on the coldness of the stainless steel. She'd do whatever she had to do. She'd had enough and her children had born witness to way too much. In a fitful doze, Millie dreamed of a little cabin way back in the woods. By morning it was clear to her. She knew where to go.

She got up and tiptoed out of the bedroom with the fork in her hand. All was quiet. Brad would occasionally leave and not wake her to fix his breakfast. Thankfully this was true of that morning. She threw everything she could into paper sacks and cardboard

boxes and loaded the children into her five-year-old Chevy. With one stop at the bank, Millie cleaned out their savings account. Thankfully Brad was a tightwad, so there was plenty of money to tide them over for quite a while.



Millie slowed the car. “I think it’s just around this next curve.”

So many years . . . maybe she wasn’t even on the right road? At her last visit she had only been seven. But fortunately there had been many trips in those seven years. Sure enough as they rounded the bend there was a small green rectangular sign that read: SKUNK CABBAGE BOG. It wasn’t the same sign her Grandma had hand-painted. It was more official as if the county or state had put it up. Either way, it was there and this was the right road.

As Millie steered into the narrow dirt drive, a feeling of peace overwhelmed her. It was a comfort that surpassed anything she’d felt in a long time.

The confined road was barely wide enough for the vehicle. Tree limbs overhung the roadway. Years of rain had washed deep gullies making for a bumpy ride. It was obvious no one had traveled this cabin road in many years. Millie was glad, but judging by the condition the road was in, there was no telling in what shape she’d find the cabin, if it were even still standing. The denseness of the woods made it seem darker and more mysterious than it actually was. Millie took a deep breath and felt her grip tighten on the steering wheel.

~ Chapter Three ~

Dr. Lewis Townsend excused himself from his patient. "I'll be back in just a minute, Mrs. Henderson."

A cold sweat popped out on his forehead and the familiar roaring began in his ears. This was the usual routine when the pictures in his mind's eye appeared. This started when he was a young boy. He should be used to it, but he wasn't.

"I'll be right back, Laf," Lewis called to his secretary as he walked into the bathroom. He sat down on the shut lid of the toilet and closed his eyes, listening as the voices came alive in his head.

"Please, won't you stop? I know if I have just a few minutes, I can find the root to make the fever tea. It will help my people." Tomeka says.

His answer is a hard blow to the left temple from the soldier's heavy rifle.

Lewis cradled his aching head in both hands. Giving himself a minute, he finally stood. Running his fingers across his forehead, he fully expected to feel the knot. Then as always, the pain subsided and he saw a flash of the huge black bear.

The bear trudges up an oak-spiked hillside and between the rhododendron thickets until he reaches a rock outcropping, stops, and unfurls slowly upright on his hind legs revealing his broad shoulders. He swats at the left side of his face with his paw and releases a faint moan.

At the end of the day Lewis finished his paperwork, as always he added the date, May 8, 1968. He had many strange days in his forty-eight years, but this one so far was at the top of the list. Flashes of the black bear had appeared to him all afternoon.



"I'm scared, Mama," Sammy said.

"Scared of what?"

"Those bog monsters you told us about."

"Not bog monsters, just little tiny turtles. There's nothing to be afraid of. You're going to love this place."

Sadie sat up on the edge of the seat and took in every detail of the narrow dirt path. She could see nothing but trees. They were in the middle of a giant forest of mostly white pine. Looking sideways, she crooked her neck up to the sky and could barely see the tops of some of the trees.

"Oh, no . . ."

"What's wrong?" Sammy asked, a little bit of fear still shining in his eyes.

"The log chain is still across the road."

As Millie looked in front of her, she saw the great big hoops of the rusted logging chain. She also saw that it was still securely fastened with the familiar lock. She remembered the many times when Grandpa would stop and Grandma would open the glove compartment to pull out the set of keys that always stayed there. Grandma would jump out of the old truck, go to the lock, insert the key, and just like magic, it would pop open and the chain would plop to the ground. All the while Millie sat beside Grandpa

on the edge of the seat, watching Grandma. But today there was no magic key in the glove compartment; Millie pulled it open anyway just to check.

“What are we going to do now?” Sadie asked.

And then as if something had flipped a switch on in her brain, Millie spoke out loud, “Knothole.”

“Knothole? What are you talking about?” Sadie asked.

“Grandpa used to leave a key in a knothole of a tree for his brother Stan to use when he came up here hunting, but which tree? Okay kids, we’re going on our first adventure, a key-in-the-knothole hunt. I believe it was on the driver’s side of the road. Let’s go find a key.”

Sadie was pretty sure her mama was going a little crazy. All Sadie could see were giant trees. While most of them were white pine, there were also some humongous oaks and tall, skinny poplars. Last fall she did a scrapbook of all of the tree leaves around their house for school, so she was pretty good at identifying what species they were, even though the trees did look a bit different here in North Carolina. Sadie reached down, pulled open the door handle of the car, and walked around the front to where Millie and Sammy were standing.

“I can vaguely remember the day I watched Grandpa hide that key. I was sitting in the truck right here, but I can’t remember if I was looking ahead or behind me. Anyway I know it’s here close. Let’s start searching.”

Millie grabbed the hands of her children. They went behind the car and walked back the way they came. They weaved back and forth searching every tree for close to an hour.

“We’re never going to find it. There’s no way to get around, the trees are too big and close together on each side of the chain. And I’m hungry,” Sadie said.

Millie led the way to the car and opened up the back. Inside she lifted the cooler lid. She took out three colas and handed one to each of them.

“Okay, what will it be? Bologna or peanut butter and jelly sandwiches?” she said.

“Peanut butter and jelly!” Sammy said, acting excited even though Sadie couldn’t imagine what there was to be excited about. Sandwiches were all they’d eaten for three days.

“Again?” Sadie said. She couldn’t help but admit to herself that she was becoming a bit nervous about this adventure stuff.

“For now, it’ll have to do until we get settled in somewhere and buy supplies.”

Working from the tailgate of the Suburban she made them all PB&Js. She helped Sammy jump up on the gate to sit, and then started to help Sadie.

“Lord, Mama, I believe I can handle it by myself. I’m not five, you know.”

“Okay, sorry.” Millie admired her independent daughter as she released the grip she had on her arm and watched her hop up on the makeshift seat. Sometimes she forgot the things Sadie had seen and been through her entire life. She had never been allowed to be a child. Sadie seemed more like twenty than twelve.

Leaning against the side of the car, Millie ate without tasting. She was beginning to get a little anxious. It would be dark in a few hours and she had to get them settled in for the night somewhere. About that time she heard a noise in the underbrush to the right of her. She looked over and saw a squirrel scamper up an old dead oak, its branches long past bearing any acorns.

“That’s it! That’s the tree! It’s dead now. That’s why I didn’t recognize it.”

She put down the remainder of her sandwich and ran to the backside of the tree. There the hole was! She reached up and let her fingers examine the inside. She felt around everywhere—no key. By this time Sadie had helped Sammy off the tailgate and they were standing beside her.

“It’s got to be here. I *know* this is the tree.”

Millie fell to her knees and put her hands over her eyes. She would not cry, she couldn’t scare the kids. They’d seen enough tears. She lowered her hands and started to rise and saw it. Right

at the base of the trunk it lay. It wasn't shiny and new anymore; in fact it was brown and rust covered. Millie picked it up ever so gently as if she'd found a precious diamond.

"Let's go try it," Millie said as she held the key tightly in her hand.

All three headed for the locked gate. Millie knelt down and took the lock in her hand. Flipping it upside down, she put the key to the hole. She wiggled and worked, but it wouldn't go in.

"Sadie, go and get my nail file out of my pocketbook."

Running, Sadie was back in a flash with the file in her hand. Millie set to work, rubbing away at the built up rust. When she thought it was enough, she stopped, picked up the lock again, inserted the tip, and then the entire key into the hole. A twist to the right and the lock flung open as if brand new.

"Yes!" Millie shouted as she jumped up and down.

The kids joined in the celebration. Their first hurdle had been mastered, and hopefully this would be one of many accomplishments. Millie slipped the key safely into the pocket of her jeans.

"Let's go. Nothing to stop us now."

Away they went back to the car, mother, daughter, and son, hand in hand. It was sad that something so simple had made them so happy. They'd known very little joy these past years. It wouldn't take a whole lot to keep them content as long as they were safe and had each other. Millie could only pray for a miracle.

After gathering up the picnic, Millie cranked up the car. She only pulled forward far enough to get passed the fallen chain, and then stopped.

Stepping out of the car, Millie said to Sadie, "Will you help me put the chain back up? It's unlikely anyone will come this way, but we'll lock ourselves in just in case."

Sadie picked up the heavy chain and handed the end around the tree to her mama. Millie slid the lock through two links and used the heel of her hand to hit the bottom as the top was wedged against the tree. Snap, it was locked.

Sammy was hanging out the car window. "Did you get it?"
"Got it, Sammy, with the help of your sister."

Sadie had been Mama's helper all her life. Millie would tell Sadie, "I've got to go do these errands for your daddy. Sammy's asleep. Will you please sit by him, and as soon as he wakes, play with him, so he doesn't get in your daddy's way?" Sadie had learned a long time ago to stay as far from him as possible. He wasn't always mean, but you never knew when he would be, and it seemed he was getting viler more and more often. Helping her mama tiptoe around him had always been a way of life for her.

Sadie had tried her best to help. She had often lain awake at night when her daddy was on a rampage, listening for any sign of him trying to hurt her mama. Thankfully she was listening a few months ago. By the time Sadie got into her parents' bedroom, her mama's lips were turning blue from his overpowering fingers clasped tightly around her throat.

Sadie would never forget that night for as long as she lived. Jumping onto the bed, she beat her father with her fists. He let go his hold on Millie's throat as he backhanded Sadie across the mouth. The blow flung her small body off the bed and onto the floor.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, you little weakling? I swear you get more like your mamma every day. You're going to wind up just as useless and pitiful as she is."

With that he slapped Millie, stepped off the bed, and kicked Sadie in her side on his way out the door. At that moment what little love she'd managed to have for him died, never to be reborn. She knew it wasn't right to hate someone, and that the Bible says children should honor their mother and father, but she didn't care. God would just have to punish her. Right then she didn't really care, she just knew she hated him and she was anything but a weakling. From that night on, Sadie prayed that she and her brother and mama could go far, far away from him, and then she'd pray for God to forgive the way she felt.

With her window down, Sadie felt the stirring of the cool mountain breeze blowing through her tangled red hair. She knew her prayers had been answered. God wasn't mad at her. He understands because He had seen it all, yes, all of it. Everything was going to be okay, she just knew it.

Pulling the cranked car into gear, Millie lightly stepped on the gas. What would they find? Butterflies fluttered around inside her. She was anxious and happy and scared all at the same time.

"It's just around this bend in the road, kids. Do you see it? There it is!"

Millie stopped a short distance from the cabin. She just sat there and stared. Nothing yet everything had changed. She couldn't help it—tears poured down her cheeks. She was home, and a peace she'd not known for two decades welled up inside her.

"Do you think your grandma Ann still lives here? It is so grown up. It looks like a fairy tale dream I have often. Mama, I just love it. May we go in?" Sadie spoke in an almost whisper.

Sammy on the other hand just kept leaning over the front seat looking at this strange new place.

"Mama, may we?" Sadie whispered again.

Snapping out of her reverie, Millie coasted down the weed-grown driveway and came to a stop right at the front door. She opened her door, and motioned out the children.

"Do you hear it kids?"

"Hear what?" Sadie asked, stepping out.

Sammy crawled over the seat and slid out the door to the ground. He folded his hand into Sadie's, listening.

"What is it?" Sammy asked.

"That's Brush Creek and it sounds like it is running full. It winds all around the side of the cabin and up through the bottom. Come on, I'll show you."

Grabbing Sammy's other hand, the three strolled toward the rippling sound. In just a few steps, they were past the enormous tree stump. Millie ran her hand over it. The last time she saw it, it

had been a magnificent white oak. Then they spotted the glistening waters of the creek down the steep bank below, rushing from all the spring rains.

"May we stick our feet in?" Sammy asked.

"You'll have to wait till it gets a little warmer. If I remember correctly, it's pretty cold even in the heat of summer, and since it's only May eighth, it'll be extremely cold."

Sadie was taking it all in. In the growing dusk of the late afternoon, it was getting really dark in the thick woods. The huge trees that surrounded them were cutting off what little sunlight remained. Over to the left a movement caught Sadie's eye. As she fixed her gaze toward the sound, all she saw was a flash of white. Millie saw it at the same time.

"A deer . . . kids, look."

Sammy jumped. He wasn't used to seeing wild animals unless they were behind a fence at the zoo.

"It's all right. It won't hurt you. We must have scared it. I'm sure it's not accustomed to visitors."

Sadie wasn't scared. She started walking toward where the deer had been, hoping she'd spot another one.

"Come on, Sadie. Let's go check out the cabin," Millie said.

Convinced there wasn't another deer, Sadie turned and followed her mama and brother toward the overgrown cabin. Bushes and vines had grown up past some of the windows, and the roof was covered in green spongy moss.

Millie didn't go to the door but confidently walked to the first window on the right side of the cabin. It all felt familiar, except this time Millie didn't need her grandpa to boost her up so she could reach the door key. It was always hidden on the top of the shutter. Stretching up on her tiptoes, she quickly wrapped her fingers around the cold metal. Then she made her way to the front door. Millie touched the handle of the screen door. Slowly she opened the wooden frame. A fluttering overhead made her step back and let the handle go. She almost knocked Sammy down. After all, he was clinging to her.

"What the heck?" Looking overhead, Millie realized she had disturbed a nest of birds that had found a home over the frame of

the door. She stepped back upon the step, so she could see it clearly now, and in it were three little speckled heads.

"Come here, Sammy."

Millie picked him up and landed him on her hip.

"Can you see them? Sadie, do you see?"

"Oh . . . baby birds. What kind are they? They're so cute," Sadie said.

"Will they peck us?" Sammy asked, still scared of yet another wild creature.

"No, they won't peck you. They're way too small for that. Anyway we can't touch them. If we get our scent on them, their mama and daddy won't take care of them."

They stood watching what Millie determined to be baby wrens. But really the children couldn't agree since they certainly weren't used to identifying baby birds in the wild.

"Let's go in the side door so we won't bother them."

With that, Millie reached down, taking her wide-eyed children by the hands. Three steps up and they were on the back porch. A few more steps and Millie put her hand on the screen door's rusty handle. This time she looked overhead: no feathery friends this time.

With the key still safely in her hand, she moved the tip into the hole. After a bit of wiggling and prying, it finally went all the way in. Someone might have tried to jimmy the lock, but Millie wouldn't voice her concern out loud. Sammy was spooked enough.

"Are you ready, kids?"

Sadie quickly answered, "Yes," and Sammy looked to be on the verge of tears.

As she turned the key to the right, Millie heard the lock click and knew they were in. She placed the door key with the chain key in her pocket. Her hand on the knob, she willed herself to turn it. Why was she holding back now? Why was there a fine bead of sweat on her upper lip? Why, because this was their future, their haven of safety and peace.

“Open the door. I want to see inside,” Sadie said.

Millie slowly turned the lovingly worn brass knob and the door squeaked open. Wider and wider it parted. With both children standing behind her peeking around, she finally gave it one more shove, and it flew all the way open. The first thing they all noticed was the musky smell of old.

“Yuck, what is that stink?” Sammy asked, taking a step back and holding his nose.

“Smells like stinky socks, doesn’t it?” Sadie said.

“Well, I guess it does a little bit, but I believe it’s just musty because it’s been closed up for many years. I really don’t think anyone has stayed here since I was a little girl.”

Stepping in, Millie adjusted to the semi-darkness and scanned inside the small room. Late afternoon shadows washed away what little sunlight that was left. In a minute, she transfixed on an object over in the corner behind the kitchen table. It was her little red wagon, and in it sat Teddy. She remembered that she always left him at the cabin, so she’d have something to sleep with when she was here.

She was given the brown teddy bear for her first Christmas by her grandma Ann. Walking toward it, she was oblivious to the cobwebs that clung to her as she made her way across the room. She reached down and took the bear lovingly in her arms.

The children heard her ever so quietly say, “Oh Grandma, where are you? I need you so badly.”

Sadie held Sammy’s hand as she watched her mama rock the stuffed animal back and forth. It was several minutes before Millie snapped back to reality and the tasks before her.

~ Chapter Four ~

Ann Hampton threw her legs over the side of the bed just like she had every morning at six-thirty for as many years as she could remember. She didn't need an alarm clock. Her aging body was used to the routine. Ever since she and Jake had closed down their little country store close to twenty years before, that's the time she got up. She always felt a bit guilty for sleeping later. When they were working, they'd be up by five and opening the store by six-thirty.

Now there really wasn't any use getting up at all. Every day was the same—dress, eat, read the paper, straighten the house, eat again, do some outside chores and of course, her daily walk. Strolling down the road was her favorite thing to do. It was one of the few pleasures Ann had left in her life. She set out almost every morning usually the same route. Taking a left at the mailbox took her a mile down the road to her grandparent's old homeplace and the springhouse. Here she would stop for a minute, sip a little water out of the aluminum dipper that hung on a nail, then start back up the hill toward home. Just like every day Ann's mind wandered back in time, before Jake her husband died, before Milie disappeared, and before Jonathan her son had left her too.

For the better part of the last twenty-three years, Ann's thoughts had been tormented. With a few written words of farewell from her daughter-in-law, Lindsay, back in 1945, Lindsay was gone and with her Millie, Ann's only grandchild. Ann would never forget that blessed spring day April 22, 1938, when Melissa Ann Hampton entered the world. It was love at first sight, not because it was her grandchild and she was supposed to love her, but it ran deeper than that. Millie was her only son's flesh and blood, and Ann didn't know how she could possibly love anything or anyone more than him, but she could tell it was going to be a close race. Of course, she wasn't worried because she believed you could never love too much. Little Millie had Ann's heart strings tied all up in knots right from the beginning.

During those precious seven years before they vanished, Ann and her granddaughter had spent so many happy hours together. Ann sometimes wondered if that was one of the reasons Lindsay had run off with Millie. Was she envious that Millie always wanted to stay at Granny Ann and Pappy Jake's? Was Lindsay upset that Millie would rather run off with her and Jake to the mountains, and spend the weekend at the cabin, than stay home?

Ann's walk was the same every day, with the same unanswered questions.

Lindsay's note had been short and to the point. Ann had it word for word in her memory:

Dear Jonathan,

I am going away today. I need to sort some things out in my head. I don't know what's wrong with me. I know I should be happy but I'm not. When I get settled I'll let you know where I am and you can visit Millie.

Lindsay

That was the last her husband and his family ever heard from Lindsay. She never let Jonathan know where she went. For the next three years he searched every waking moment for them, running to the mailbox the second he heard the brakes squeak to a stop on the postman's car, praying there would be a letter from Lindsay. He spent every dime he had, and Jake and Ann gave him every cent they could spare. Jonathan hired a man who was supposed to be real good at finding people, but nothing turned up.

He slowly but surely drank and mourned himself to death. His wife and child had fallen off the face of the earth; he had no reason to live. Ann tried to help him get through it by consoling him, telling him they were out there somewhere and would turn up, but they never did. Jonathan never quit trying to find them.

Lindsay's hand didn't hold a sharp-edged knife to Jonathan's heart; but she'd killed him just the same. She just did it from the inside out.

Jonathan had been gone for three days, and as usual Ann and Jake knew where to find him. They loaded up in their old '47 Ford pickup and headed to the mountain. They'd found him at the cabin before and that's where they found him this time. As they pulled in sight they saw his car, but no smoke rose out of the cabin's chimney. Ann said nothing as her heart swelled with dread. She felt sure it would explode any minute. When they stepped out on that frigid January morning, they both had that foreboding feeling even before they opened the door. Sometimes Ann hated the intuition that had been passed down to her by her grandma, and sometimes she wished she had more of it.

Jake turned the knob on the front door, and it opened easily. It wasn't locked. He hesitated before slowly pushing it open. As the door swung in, he and Ann stepped across the threshold. The sunlight streamed in the kitchen windows that were facing east, but the couple didn't feel the warmth. Their eyes scanned the room, nothing. As they walked through the sitting room they stopped in front of the first bedroom door. Their eyes found him at the same time. The release of Ann's held breath broke the silence.

"Oh God, Jake!" Ann whispered.

They didn't have to touch Jonathan to feel the cold. His eyes were wide open. He was curled in a ball facing the door. Fingers on one hand gripped around the whiskey bottle. Lying in the circle of his other arm, he held Teddy, Millie's special bear, tightly to his heart.

Ann's knees threatened to buckle as she made the long few steps to her only child's side. Kneeling beside the bed, she laid her head on the teddy bear that lay on Jonathan's heart. There she stayed for a long time crying softly, trying to believe she'd feel the beating of his heart. A thud brought her back to reality. She saw Jake crumpled on the floor clutching his chest.

"Jake, what's wrong?" Ann rushed to him.

"I just had an awful pain here in my chest, took my breath away."

Jake started to get up, but a rush of queasiness overtook him, and he threw up on the floor before he knew what had hit him.

Ann ran to the kitchen and was thankful there was a bucket of water in the sink. She took the rag from the countertop and tried to dip it into the bucket, but there was a frozen layer of ice on top. Reaching into the drawer, she grabbed a big butcher knife and chopped into it, breaking it into large hunks. Dipping the cloth into the freezing water, her hands barely felt the stinging cold as she pulled the cloth out of the bucket, wringing it out. She made her way back to Jake and laid the cloth over his face.

"We've got to get you to the hospital. Go slow. I'll try to help you stand."

Leaning down, Ann looped her arm under his armpit. Together they got him on his feet. Near the door, Jake turned back to Jonathan.

"We can't leave him here by himself."

"It's okay. He's not alone anymore. We've got to get you to the hospital. I won't survive another loss today."

The force of sheer willpower got Jake loaded up into the old truck. Ann ran to the driver's side door, flung it open, and jumped in. As the motor turned, she looked up and realized she hadn't shut the front door.

She ran to the door. She couldn't leave it open for animals to get in. Standing on the top step, she reached in and grabbed the knob. All of a sudden a warm breeze blew through the house and out the door. The warmth of it brought a flush to Ann's face, and then she saw an animal through the kitchen window: a giant black bear running down the hill toward the creek. Never had she seen a bear here, even though they'd seen the signs. Now she didn't have time to dwell on it. She closed the door and ran to the truck. Going past the chain gate, she didn't stop to lock it.

Twenty minutes later they were at the little community hospital in Spartan. Jake had experienced the first of several heart attacks he was to face over the remaining five years of his life.

After he was stable, Ann called the police and gave them the address of the place they would need to send the coroner to pronounce her thirty-three-year-old baby dead.

Since that day Ann had returned to the cabin only once. After getting Jake home and after Jonathan's funeral, she went back. The chain gate was still down and the door unlocked. As she entered, Ann whiffed the smell of dried vomit. She took the same bucket of water from the sink and another rag from the cabinet and set out cleaning the floor. When she was done she walked through the little cabin. The laughing sounds of Jonathan and his little girl were gone forever now. Reaching down, she picked up Teddy from the bed where it had been pried from Jonathan's stiff fingers. She drew it to her and rubbed its furry softness against her cheek. Memories and grief mixed as tears flooded her cheeks. How could she live without them both?

After a long time, Ann became aware of the darkening shadows in the room. Late afternoon had given way to evening. She walked to the kitchen and placed Teddy in Millie's little red wagon. That was where she'd look for it if . . . when . . . she came back.

Ann made one more study about that precious place of remembrances. At the side door, she threw her hip against the wood to make sure the lock had caught. Then she went to the front door, mashed the button on the door knob to lock it, pulled it

closed, and walked head hung and heart heavy to the olive green truck. She had to get home to Jake. He was all she had left.

Up the long path of a driveway Ann stopped past the chain gate, knocking the truck out of gear and setting the emergency brake. She stepped to the back of the truck. Then she reached down and picked up the chain, stretching it around the tree, and put the lock through two links and snapped it shut with the heel of her hand, hitting the bottom of the lock as the top rested against the tree, just like she'd seen Jake do a thousand times. Back in the truck she released the brake and pushed the gear stick up into first.

As she looked up, that same bear she'd seen earlier ran right in front of the truck. Ann watched as bulks of fat flopped on the sides of the black bear as he lumbered his way through the thick woods. Ann watched until he was completely out of sight. She hadn't realized it, but all of a sudden it had gotten real hot in the truck. She took off her thick wool jacket and stroked the fibers, wondering if the bear's coat was just as coarse.

Ann drove away and did not go back to the cabin for eighteen years. Sometimes she would come to the gate and sit. Over the years, especially after Jake died, it was as if she needed to make sure it was still locked, holding all the wonderful times and memories on the inside, safe but not forgotten. She would remember and pray just as hard as the first day Millie was gone that she'd find her. She'd never stopped searching; that's how, the sheriff's department came to know Ann by name.



This morning as she pulled her slippers on, she knew she had to go to the gate. Overwhelming urges to ride to the mountain enveloped her consciousness. Today just might be the day she'd unlock the gate, just maybe today . . .

~ Sarah Martin Byrd ~

Born at the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Sarah Martin Byrd learned early on that to succeed, you must work. She learned this from her overachieving father who drove her to excel at all her endeavors.

Since age fifteen, through two careers, she has written stories, poems, and articles. After many strokes of the pen, she retired to compose full-time. *Guardian Spirit* is her first published novel. She also enjoys writing children's books and has finished three.



Sarah likes stories that have grit to them. Life isn't always a bed of roses, so she writes the truth. In forming her characters, she takes bits and pieces of different people she's known or imagined through the years and forms personalities that readers may not always like but will be able to connect with or be fascinated by.

The author resides, still, at those foothills with her husband of over thirty years. Aside from her books, her best friend is her daughter. Sarah's granddaughter also occupies many happy hours of her days.

She hopes you enjoy *Guardian Spirit* and will be inspired to find your own magic.