

Steele Secrets – Sample

1.

Here's what I know:

Ghosts don't show up for just anybody.

When I was 17, though, I didn't know that. I didn't even really believe in ghosts, I guess. Except for that story about the woman who stood on a dark country road and got a ride with a man passing by. When they told us that one at Halloween in third grade, I felt my skin wiggle up my neck.

But regular ghosts, the ones that haunted specific people. Nah, I didn't think much about them.

Mostly, then, I was thinking about high school and what extracurriculars would get me into UVa, if I decided to go there. Oh, and Javier. Sometimes, I thought about Javier. The way his hair fell across his face, but not in that Bieber way. More Johnny Depp. And I thought about how odd I was that at 16, I was enamored with Johnny Depp when most of my friends thought he was that "old guy" from "those pirate movies."

Then, as now, I knew I was a little "unique," but mostly, I was okay with that. Having the world's coolest mom helped.

Mom worked as a therapist, a counselor, a shrink, a psychologist - whatever you wanted to call her - she really helped people. I saw it every day. When people left her little office with the big windows at the back of our old farmhouse, they looked lighter, more even. Sometimes, they smiled.

She helped me feel the same, even though I occasionally had to warn her about psychologizing me. Most of the time, though, she was just a really good listener, a big supporter, and a worrier. It's probably ideal that a mom be a worrier, especially when she's the only parent.

My dad died before I was born, so I don't remember him at all. Sometimes, I ask Mom about him, and she's told me what she knows - how they met, the kindness of his heart, how excited he was to be having a baby. But truthfully, I didn't really think about him much at all. Really, I didn't. I know that sounds like I was in denial about missing my father, but I wasn't. I think I might have liked having a man around more, but I didn't miss MY dad. I didn't know him.

All that's to say I was a pretty normal kid until that day.

I was in the garden picking green beans after school. We had eaten and frozen so many green beans that Mom and I had made up a term for the condition - green-bean-free envy - but we also didn't believe in wasting food. Mom having to raise me and get her PhD at the same time had been really tough financially when I was little. Plus, Mom saw enough clients who barely could afford groceries - she did lots of counseling on a sliding scale - that neither of us took for granted the food we could have.

So I was out there, despite the green-bean-free envy, picking the last of the beans and tugging up the dwindling plants with glee. October is about the latest a good regular garden crop will make it in the Virginia mountains, and these guys had pushed their luck right up to the middle of the month. Now, it was time they took their final trip to the great compost heap.

I plucked a bean from the last plant, and when I stood up, I was in a graveyard. Really, it happened just like that - I bent over to pick a bean, and when I lifted my head, I was in a totally different place. No swimmy sky. No motion sickness. No TARDIS. Just me, somewhere new, as if the graveyard had slid in around me while I stood in our garden.

It took me a few seconds to get oriented to where I was, of course, and I saw some small houses across and up the road and a few gravestones - the words carved into a few barely visible.

I knew almost immediately that I was on Pleasant Mountain Road - I rode it every day on the bus to and from school - so I wasn't really scared. More puzzled. But not really puzzled about how I'd gotten there - that question would come later. I'd seen enough sci fi TV to know that it was wise to focus on the where and not the why when thrust into these situations. You never knew what might be coming at you next.

Green bean still clutched in my left hand, I stood there and looked around. I was just about a half-mile from home, and I knew this bend in the road well. Sometimes in the evenings, Mom and I walked this stretch. But I didn't know there were graves here. Didn't even understand why that might be the case. Most of the cemeteries I knew stood beside churches or behind big walls and iron gates. I'd never seen one just in the middle of a field like this.

I was standing there, slowly turning in circles when I smelled pipe smoke. That sweet smell that made my friend Amy's basement so special because her dad smoked that pipe. I loved that smell.

But Amy's dad wasn't around here. In fact, I couldn't see anyone anywhere. Walking a few feet toward the road, I kept turning my head, trying to find the source of the smell. I even looked behind some of the tall trees - oaks? walnuts? But no one was there.

So I took a seat amongst the stones. I realized that some people might find that disrespectful or even creepy, but I liked graveyards. They were always quiet, and they told stories. Names and dates, and sometimes little messages that showed how much someone was loved, or how other people thought of them - "Beloved angel" - "Wife of." I didn't like the "wife of"s much.

I leaned back against a big rock - one that looked like it had just been plucked from the field over a ways. I didn't see any words on it, but I still thought it was a gravestone. It was lined up with a bunch of others. . . and some smaller stones were in a row about 6 feet away.

I was pondering the graves and wondering if I might need to walk on back home when he appeared in front of me.

I stood up quickly, part from fear, part from startle, part from training - it's always polite to stand when an older person enters. I felt my heart pound against the back of my ribs and clenched my fists at my sides.

At first, I thought he was just some guy who had wandered up the road and into the graveyard. I was old enough and had enough friends who had been in risky situations with men to know this could be bad news - a strange man coming up to me in a deserted graveyard on a quiet, country road. I felt my feet spread apart - ready to fight or to run, I couldn't tell you. I didn't take off immediately only because of that training again - it wasn't polite to run from someone who wasn't chasing you.

As I watched him come closer, I studied him. He was wearing blue pants - like work pants but rougher, and without a zipper. They looked handmade and so did his shirt. The fabric almost looked like burlap, but a little lighter. It was loose, too big for him almost, and on his head, he wore a cap that sat back a little so I could see his whole face, even though the brim was wide.

Oh, and he was barefoot. I couldn't imagine any man walking up the road barefoot.

Plus – and this is the real clue, I realize now - I could almost see through him, not really, but . . . it's hard to explain. It's like I knew what was behind him even if I couldn't really see it. But I really couldn't see behind him, you know?

My fear quickly slipped into fascination because I knew, almost right away, that he was a ghost. I'd seen enough *Ghost Hunters* and *Ghost Adventures* with that obnoxious dude and his crazy hair to kind of figure out what was up. My heart was still racing, and I could feel the tingle in my clamped jaw. Now, though, the adrenaline rush was kind of like that impulse I had in class sometimes to raise my hand every time I knew an answer. Ooh, ooh, I knew what I was seeing – a real, live (okay, not live) ghost.

Here, I was stumped though. I wasn't sure what the etiquette was. Did I step forward and introduce myself? Did I pretend I couldn't see him? My mom taught me to mind my manners and respect my elders - and this man was definitely older than I was - so I wanted to be mannerly. But somehow I couldn't find the words to introduce myself or the will to push my feet toward him and say hello. I just stared, and staring is definitely rude.

My brain raced from ghost story to ghost movie to ghost TV show. I wondered if I'd need one of those EVP things the Ghost Hunters used, or maybe it would be more like that movie *Ghost*, where I could feel him near and see him but not really communicate with him. Or maybe I was the Ghost Whisperer. I started imagining myself in all those great clothes Jennifer Love Hewitt wore.

"Evening, Ma'am." His voice was deep, a little gravelly, quiet.

I finally pulled myself together, stood, and extended my hand. He just looked at it a long while, and then I tucked it into my pocket. Maybe he was a germaphobic ghost?

"Evening," I said, my voice high with excitement. I had never once in my life greeted someone with the word "evening," but then, I had never greeted a ghost.

He kept his head tilted down, as if I was still sitting on the ground, and continued strolling around the graveyard. "Mighty pretty night."

"Yes, sir. It is." I looked up at the sky just turning that silver of dusk. I took a deep breath. This was my favorite time of day.

"Looks like we could get frost." *What?! Frost? Mary, you can't come up with something better than that to say to a ghost.*

"Could be. Could be."

By this time, he had stopped walking and was in front of me and a little to my right. He didn't meet my eye. In fact, he didn't really look me in the face at all. Most polite people, I now realized, looked into your eyes and then looked away when they spoke to you. This man had never even glanced at my face. But somehow, I didn't get the sense that he was being dismissive, just maybe shy?

I turned to face him. "I'm Mary Steele. Nice to meet you."

"I'm Moses, ma'am. Nice to meet you, too." He kept his eyes away from mine, over my left shoulder. I resisted the urge to sidle into his line of vision.

"Nice to meet you, Moses. If you don't mind, could you tell me your last name?" I could feel my face flush with the question. "My mom always taught me to call adults by their last names."

At this, his gaze turned to my face, and he squinted. I could see that his eyes were flecked with silver behind the dark irises, and wrinkles were tucked into the corners of his warm, brown skin. "Perkins, Ma'am. I'm Moses Perkins."

"I'm so glad to meet you, Mr. Perkins."

We stood in silence for a few minutes, the silver of the dusk dropping into the purple of a fall sunset. Somehow, the moment felt right, settled, like I was with a friend. I plopped back down onto the ground and looked up at the man in front of me. "Mr. Perkins, I'm wondering if you might know why I'm here."

I saw a flash pass across the corners of his mouth, but just as quick, his cheeks settled back down. "Well, ma'am. I figure you came here because you needed something."

I thought about that for a second, and then without really knowing why, I told Moses about the green beans and my appearance here in the graveyard. "Then, I sat down by this stone and saw you."

He smiled in sort of a crooked way. "That's my gravestone there." He pointed at the rock behind me.

I jumped up and turned to look at the rock I had been leaning on. "This, this is your grave. Oh, Mr. Perkins, I'm so sorry. I meant no disrespect."

I spun toward him just in time to see him throw back his head and laugh. I thought he might fall over he was laughing so hard. I put my hands back in the pockets of my overalls.

Then, he looked at me dead in the eye and said with a smile, "No, ma'am. No disrespect here."

"What's so funny?" I tried not to sound defensive, but I don't think I did so well.

"Miss Steele, you are the first white lady I've known who thought enough of me to apologize for anything. And what you apologize for is sitting on the ground where my bones lie. Now, if that ain't funny. . ."

I wanted to object, to say that certainly some other white woman had been kind to him, that not all white people were bad, but I held my tongue. It wasn't respectful to challenge someone's experience when it differed from your own. I'd learned that from Mom.

"Well, Mr. Perkins, I like you, and I try to be kind to people I like."

I reached out my hand again, and this time, he shook it.

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