

## One

### Prologue

It looked like she had been sitting on the park bench we had bought for her birthday last summer. Perhaps the papers were on her lap. She must have stood up and let them fall. She left them lay like wasted time, just there. No breeze to stir them, march them away, dance them off to some happier place. Three steps, maybe four, was all she took. She lay there like those papers, just there. No breeze to stir her, or wind to pick her up and dance her to heaven's door. No. The sheets of paper, the years of her life lie on the ground and speak no words for us to hear on rustled breeze. We wept standing there connected by heart strings, pearls from her womb tarnished a bit by life, but never tarnished in her eyes. We were like bleached out paper lying in the sun on the ground. We made no sound, nor did she or they, those papers of no importance.

Daringer J. Smith fell to his knees beside her, hoping against all hope that he had somehow fallen asleep and this was all a bad dream, a lie that never could have happened. *Why do we think that by not believing something it will automatically make it false*, he thought. A heavy weight inside his chest crushed his heart and soul, *it couldn't be*. He felt a breath then, so shallow, but breath, none-the-less. "Quickly," he said to his sisters, "call an ambulance she is still alive."

~ \* ~

The ambulance arrived lights flashing siren blaring, hurried movements that shoved him back away. "Precious mother, live," he prayed aloud. Oxygen mask obscured her never faltering smile. Her hair floated in gray wisps, a halo to her near white, ashen face. Isana jumped aboard the van. Always the first to do the action that must be done, oldest sister style, "I'll call you later unless you drive over," she said.

"I'll be there," Trudchen younger sister said.

"I'm on my way soon." Daringer Smith heard his middle child self murmur. Shock froze his leaden legs where they stood. *Mothers don't die, not Story Lady Mothers* as though the thought would make it so. "Live mother," he said as they shut her in the orange and white van that smelled of disinfectant. *Had the last patient they transported died*, he wondered at the smell.

"I'm driving over to the hospital; do you want to ride along?" Trudchen said somewhere outside his fog. He nodded then, but couldn't move. She took his arm and led him to her car.

~ \* ~

The cold, bright corridors of the hospital where shoes squeaked on the too polished, disinfected floors and made you wince, shhhhhh the silence hissed like a librarian in his mind.

"Coma," the doctor said. The rest of his words mumbled and obscured by grief Daringer felt he need not have just yet. "She lives," he heard those words both loud and clear and shook his head out of that dense and horrid fog of death and despair.

"Can we see her now?" Daringer asked. They turned to stare at him as if he hadn't been there until now. As though the words had made him visible where before he was an empty space.

"Of course, it would probably be good for you all. We will run tests but, I can't give you any idea of what happened to her at this point."

"She is stabilized though, you said?" Isana asked.

“Yes, for now. We have her on oxygen and an IV that will keep her comfortable.”

“I read somewhere that people in a coma can hear and it is the voices that eventually bring them back.” Trudchen said.

“It can’t hurt, but I don’t know if there is any fact to that tale or not,” the doctor said as he led the way to their mother’s room. “Leave a number where we can reach one of you at the nurse’s station before you leave,” he said.

We nodded. Joined at the womb we thought each other’s thoughts, triplets as we were. We shared more than just space we discovered early on. Daringer saw himself the middle child in terms of birth order. *Five minutes separated us*, he thought. Isana always first and petite little Trudchen always followed our lead.

~ \* ~

Since he was staying at his mother’s while he visited, his sisters dropped him off on their way home. “A long day, shower, rest,” they said. “We’ll call you in the morning,” he seemed to remember they said.

His mother had asked him to come and see the beads in the unusual necklace she had acquired. She wanted him to try to tell her where they came from. *We never got to them. Where would she have them hidden? She said she would hide them because of their power.* Daringer searched her jewelry box. Unable to sleep, he searched her room and found the travel diaries lined up neatly according to the years on her shelf above her computer, *my modern story lady mother.*

Daringer wondered, when he found them tucked in her lingerie drawer, what the significance--*what was it about the beads that worried her so?* The gold gilded box with a reclining angel on top held the beads. The beads seemed ordinary, if not a bit garish in their setting. Something about them as he touched them though, struck him with unanticipated grief. When he lifted the black stone, it was as though some invisible electric impulse traveled from his finger tips up his arm and to his heart. His heart ached with sorrow. Years worth of sadness flooded over him, washing him in blackest despair creating nearly unbearable heart wrenching sorrow. He dropped the black stone he held back into the red velvet lined coffin it had come from as though it burned his fingers instead of his heart.

Dare he touch another--*White--white is peace, purity--safe*, he reasoned unsure of anything at this point. Warily, he picked up the white stone between thumb and forefinger ready to release it if he felt any ominous presence there. As he lifted it ever so cautiously, an anguished cry accompanied by a rush of wind sent icy howls around the room. He quickly dropped the stone. *If even white was not purity, was not peace, what then of the other stones?* Neither the blue, the green, the yellow stones--the rest--he dared not touch, nor the purple for surely something is in those stones, some spell some mystic presence powered them. His hands trembled as he replaced the lid on the box. Perhaps another time, a braver soul could test each bead against the day. Not him, not this time, not now.

*::What is in your heart emanates from each stone. Only the purest heart can hold these stones.::* The sound echoed from somewhere not audible, and registered only in his mind it seemed. He didn’t hear a sound in his ears, of that he was very sure. With that the small box whisked out of his hand and deposited itself back in the lingerie drawer under layers of her personal silk under garments. Daringer stood long, looking at what had happened and wondering if he had imagined it. Perhaps the grief he held, the fear for his

mother's life, clouded what he thought he saw, what he thought he heard--*did it really occur?*

*Where would she have ever come up with such trinkets? Her trips took her to worlds she knew intimately and we never knew at all. We were too busy to be interested in what we called her eccentricities.* Her travel journals on the book shelf beckoned him; at least he thought they did. What magic force did she encounter to come away with these stones? He toyed with the idea of removing the box and putting it in his pocket to ponder their significance later. *Do I dare leave them behind and never know what became of them?*

Guardedly, he slipped his hand back into the drawer, withdrew the box, and tucked it into his pocket. He felt warmth where it touched against him. He noticed no sound, no further wind with garish cries to chill his soul or slights of hand depositing the box where it chose--merely warmth, penetrating warmth radiating into his skin. He felt it safe to take the necklace with him then. He gathered the travel journals in his arms. *Perhaps she recorded the source of these stones;* he left the room with them.

He dared to glance one time around the room. It's emptiness without her presence was more than he could bear. He wanted to run away, to be gone from here and not look back. If she was to be buried; there was little else he wanted of her left behind life. Let the rest of them deal with her possessions, he had the memories and that was enough for now. The box moved slightly in his pocket. He patted it, "and you, of course," he murmured to the emptiness.

~ \* ~

In the days that followed the house was flooded with well-wishers, condolence-spouters--as though there were already a wake. Never noticing her before, they did now. Daringer could not sit through a torturous semi--or pre--wake. She isn't dead yet, he wanted to shout, but held his tongue.

Instead, he walked until he couldn't walk anymore and found himself at the outdoor market. He watched the colorful streams of marketers. He walked hopelessly in the crowded streets of the market. The serapes and parasols bumped and prodded him. The sights and sounds blurred past him. The haggling drone of the vendors soothed his grief more than all the well-wishers with their pasty gray faces, false, sad furrowed brows and crocodile tears.

People squeezed, smelled, pinched, and prodded the colorful array of fresh produce. They held the bright fruit up to the sun as though they offered it in prayer to Ra or the deity of fruit, before they dropped it into bags, boxes, and sacks or snuck them into pockets while they thought no one watched. The market was alive and vibrant with everydayness. A wake was not awake, why call it that? It was dead and still, silent and sad, painful and pointless. *Even the spirits of the dead do not visit at the wake. There is too much sadness for them to bear. So why should we? Listen to people's lies, "she looks so peaceful lying there," they say. I want to shout, "Did you ever see her sleep?"*

Isana and Trudchen were already preparing her wake--when she lingers still this side of heaven's gate.

"Prepare for the inevitable," Isana said. Always so practical and organized with her hand out for whatever she could grab and pocket.

"Isn't it enough," he said. "This steady stream of condolences and well wishers hovering at the door like vultures waiting for scraps of her life to be tossed to them to

savor after her death? What if she lives?” He wanted to shout, to no one in particular, but to shut out the sound of Isana’s drone about what we must do when.

*“Out damn spot,” so like Macbeth, I wanted to purge that woman from my life that shared one third of our mother. She didn’t deserve her share, she was like the blood red stain that wouldn’t wipe clean.*

“She looks good. Her hair is very nicely done,” they say. He want to shout, “Did you know the skin melts when a curling iron touches the scalp of a dead person?” He drew his attention back to the joyous hubbub of the market square.

Green, yellow, and every shade in between, bananas hung in huge clumps hacked from the trees that very morning. “Too much,” one yelled over the din of bartering hordes. *Not to a starving child.* They’d gladly pay any price, if they only had it, for the spoils that littered the ground and beckoned the insects and rodents and robber birds. Children starve, not allowed to enter the market square. They wouldn’t let the children in to clean up the dropped fruit. The starving hordes of brown little faces with eyes as big as moons and arms as gaunt as scarecrows standing at the periphery of all that luscious fruit rotting in the sun... Weren’t they as good as the insects, rodents and birds? They lined the streets outside the market begging like so many little brown beads strung on a string of starvation within inches of salvation. No one noticed, or so it seemed. Daringer was sure God must have, was He waiting for a tender heart to care, to step in and save these street urchins? Daringer cared and did. One large bunch of bananas found its way to excited outstretched hands.

*Why do we not see, feel or hear until it’s too late like the string of beads, or the sheaf of papers that was so like life--it life stops?* Littering the ground and hiding in drawers, rotting in the sun all the sum total of a life lived while no one noticed, Daringer felt despondent, growing weary with even the noisy bright marketplace.

~ \* ~

There were things he could do while he waited for word that his mother had crossed one way to life or the other way to eternal life. He could do some of the repair and maintenance that needed doing around her home. Before the old place could be sold, it would need to be restored, not for a better market price but for them, the spirits. If the souls or spirits stay behind to wait, they need a good place to do that, he reasoned. Daringer wanted to repair the railing on the seldom used back stairway. He could incorporate the box with the necklace of strange stones; He could hide it below the spindles. Why he had the urge to bury them where they couldn’t be found again he didn’t know. It was there though, the urge strong and insistent. These beads seemed to possess a power he wasn’t sure he was man enough to tamper with.

When he began to remove the damaged stair railing to replace it, the stringers toppled like dominos clanking heavily to the bare wood floor. They looked like so many dead soldiers lying exposed after the war. Bodies helter-skelter having fallen where they stood--shattered lives, beads in a box, beads on a rosary, dots on the planet earth. *What was their reason for being? Where did they go and why? Who traversed these steps? How many hands have held this railing? Were some of them those dead soldiers, and what war were they--Civil, WWI or WWII? Or were they none of these? Perhaps deserters, perhaps charlatans and rogues who hid beneath the cellar and let their wives be liars instead while they fathered children who would have been better off dead then become fodder for another war. A time when their bodies, boxed, returned fallen heroes*

*from another time. Where did these thoughts originate? Why are they my concern?* His mind whirled with confusion. Daringer began to wonder about his sanity and if the stones were powerful enough to cause him to become delusional. He shuddered and pulled himself back to what he was doing.

He couldn't plant the necklace beneath the stringers on that stair knowing what he knew. That thought, too, was foreign. What was it he supposed he knew? He did not know. Daringer kept them in his pocket, and the heat along his thigh grew. It seemed they were content to know that he would keep them longer.

He mended the broken railing. *Would that it were so easy to mend my grieving heart. She isn't gone yet.* The phrase cried in his mind and he prayed again for life.

"When will you give me grandchildren, my son?" she'd asked.

He was too busy with his career to be tied down yet. He had said, "Soon, Mother, soon." There is plenty of time, Mom," he'd said. *Oh is there?* Now he wondered at his flippant attitude.

~ \* ~

He decided to leave town, back to the academic life he'd chosen, because he couldn't stay and wait and wait. "Keep me posted," he'd said. Trudchen and Isana said they would. He passed by the new massive shopping mall that would bring the sleepy little town out of its complacent pleasantness and into the new century. He wanted to shout, "Don't, Please don't! You can never go back once you touch the future."

Beams hung suspended high above the ground tethered to a crane with chains. Yellow and blue helmeted workers dangled feet from steel girder roosts where they sat, jovial and animated, with coffee and lunches. Steel men they call them, they mean their occupation, but it fits the men--nerves of steel and bodies of iron. These bronzed, sure footed mountain goats on narrow girder pathways sit and eat while steel I-beams sit and wait, while lunch and camaraderie are served--yellow, blue, white beads perched on steel girder threads.

~ \* ~

Daringer approached the three lane bridge that spanned the river. It was as though the universe was suddenly exiting through a birth canal once large enough, but barely so, for but one child--not a universe.

A string of garnet jewels with cubic zirconium accents lined the bridge single file in triple rows. Angry red jewels flashed impatiently on and off from dim to bright as vehicle occupants depressed and released brake pedals.

Pouring rain splotted the windows creating mosaic stained glass patterns on the windshield and side windows. Entombed in metal caskets, waiting to snake through the bottleneck the tall bridge created. Short bursts from impatient horns snarled at immobile red eyes ahead.

Trapped. The radio announced traffic conditions on the bridge as stand still, jammed. Find an alternate route. The anger Daringer felt leapt to the man that stepped out of his car and stood on the hood. *Oh no! He has a gun. He's firing.* First at the traffic reporter's helicopter. Now he sprayed the cars around him. Screams, zinging bullets--screaming, crack, crack, crack, the Uzi spends its power. Out of shells, he pitches the weapon and jumps from vehicle to vehicle shouting angry curses. Before anyone can think to stop him he hurdles to the pavement and races across the bridge and down the road. Daringer sat mesmerized not believing what his eyes were telling him. Now strings

of flashing red and blue lights squeezing through no-drive lanes, stretcher bearers-stringing life saving paramedics to the bead of lives that threaten to fade away. Blue uniforms race from car to car, the stranded traffic is destined to be a vault for hours while the massacre is cleaned up and dispensed with like so many colored beads on an ordinary necklace day.

Daringer rested his hand on his hip pocket with the box holding the necklace, the box trembled and the warmth turned hot. He got out of his car to go see if he could help in any way. He couldn't bear to be confined in that metal coffin with the box of beads, they frightened him and he had forgotten about them until this.

~ \* ~

Daringer was a nervous glad to be boarded on a plane. He wondered if it would hold together as it started its jolting train like sway on the slow path down one runway, around a corner with a bounce, groan, creak, cough and down another.

It made him feel like they should all stick their feet down through the floor boards and push, like a top heavy blue footed booby it struggled to gain speed enough. He could see the grass growing in clumps in the cracks in the runway. He could smell the pungent aroma of new mowed hay. "Shut the window," he wanted to shout. "Turn on the fan to help the propellers pull,"--something--anything to get us safely off the ground. Away from the dark, depression he felt here in this place that at once held her jovial story telling heart and his angst over her fate.

The plane launched itself from the runway--wings rattling--trembling against the torque--machine defying gravity. A mechanical bumble bee that maybe, just maybe, didn't have the right DNA to fool Mother Nature and fly after all. The beads trembled in heated agitation in his pocket. He reached for them and held his breath as clouds strung like pearls on blue sky threads and the plane soared between them in its small single engine way. *::It's safe to miss her now,::* the beads seem to say in his mind. A tear that had waited so long faltered on his lower lid and then slipped down his cheek. Only one, but it's enough, this close she would understand. "I hope it's not Good-bye," he whispered above the clouds in the setting sun. *But, what of the beads, what mystery unsolved, what message do they hold? Where will I find that answer?* and the beads glowed warm again inside his pocket to let him know they heard the questions or so he supposed they did.

## *Two*

Daringer Smith hung up the phone from checking in with the hospital in Friendship to see how his mother was doing. He picked up the box with the beaded necklace from the table next to the phone. Then he sat down on the couch and opened the box, "If only you could talk," he said. "Somehow I think you are connected to Mom's condition. I only wish I knew how."

He removed the necklace from the box, still wrapped in its silk scarf and laid it next to him on the couch. The box appeared to be old he thought as he examined it, but was it as old as the beads. It seemed in very good condition. There was no opportunity to check it out earlier, now he turned it over and over feeling the texture of it in his hands, examining the velvet cushion that the beads had lain in. The gilding was merely gold colored paint, it seemed cheaply made. Still it was very old. The encyclopedia of anthropological discoveries may be of some help he thought as he started toward it, but then changed his mind.

Throwing a needle at a haystack, hoping to chase mice from under it would be more productive. He needed to find what area the necklace came from, even what part of the world would help. *Mother's travel journals*, he thought, *but which one?* Daringer unpacked them from his suitcase. They were dated, but that meant nothing to him. If he had saved all her postcards she sent him during her travels he may have known where she was at what time.

The phone rang and jarred him from his thought train. He answered it expecting news of his mother or one of his sisters to be calling. He breathed in a huge sigh of relief when he recognized Abigail Stonehenge's voice on the other end of the line. "I was about to call you," he said. Knowing it was a lie. He hadn't decided if he should call her because he didn't know if he could keep from telling her about the beads or the necklace and he wasn't sure he was ready to divulge their existence to anyone just yet.

"I drove by and saw your car in the driveway," she said. "I was anxious to tell you about a new dig we will be starting in the summer."

Relieved that she didn't start with questions right away, he relaxed. "How excellent for you. It's what you have been waiting for. Where is it?"

"Would you believe Mathare, Africa?"

"What in the world?" he didn't get to finish his questions as someone barged in and she needed to hang up.

"Lunch tomorrow at Trader's?" she asked.

He agreed, they settled on a time before she hung up. Abigail was the most energetic ambitious person he had known in a long, long time. When he introduced her to his mother she was very excited about her. They seemed to hit it off right away. This pleased him. He enjoyed her company immensely and couldn't wait to get her input on the beads, yet he was afraid to mention them for some reason he couldn't explain to himself let alone anyone else.

As Dean of and Senior Instructor in the Archeological Department their careers seemed to run parallel and they often collaborated on papers that they published in various scientific journals, so why was he leery of mentioning the beads to her. He couldn't put his finger on his apprehension. A pang of something near trepidation enveloped him as he picked the beads up and placed them back in their box. As he went to close the lid his chest became heavy, his breathing labored as though he was

smothering. Quickly, he opened the box and the sensation went away. Fear replaced the trepidation as it gripped him. A shudder cascaded down the full length of his torso leaving a damp coldness that stood the hairs on the nape of his neck on end. What was this necklace? He placed the open box on the desk in his den, walked out and shut the door. The heavy oak door seemed to stop the intense heavy air that surrounds the presence of the beads. The unnaturalness of the whole incident drained his energy. He sat down to read his mother's journals to see if he could discover where she had acquired the beads.

The stress of the days of his mother's coma and his travels quickly put him in a deep sleep. The word Catomanor formed somewhere in his subconscious. He could feel it. He could hear it as the journal slipped from his hands and sleep claimed his conscious mind.

### **Three**

*Daringer seemed distant*, Abigail thought as she prepared a dish for Sparky, her Boston terrier, and the delight of her life. He bounced like a ping pong ball. Waiting was never one of his virtues whether for food, a walk, or being let out side--he would bounce straight up nearly eye to eye with her his round black eyes lighted with mischief and energy.

“Daringer needs a tonic like you,” she said placing the food on the dog’s place mat. She knew Daringer’s mother’s strange and sudden illness had him frightened and angered him. “Modern medicine should be able to come up with a cause, a reason a diagnosis and a cure,” he said when he called her from Beatrice Olenmurphy’s home the day after he found her lying on the ground. His description of her lying on the ground was like an ode to death. Somehow he lost his faith in the healing powers of belief.

*Anthropology teaches you about people’s base values*, she thought. You would think because every culture had some sort of religion one would assume prayer, belief in a higher power was a universal necessity. Perhaps not, perhaps faith is weakened by tragedy rather than strengthened. She wondered if that was what was wrong with Daringer.

Abigail needed to see him to try to figure out what his real problem was. He was good at covering up his feelings over the phone. But in person, she could read him. If something was disturbing him, something larger than his mother’s condition, she would know when they met tomorrow for lunch.

She had hoped it was nothing that affected their relationship. Now, she wasn’t so sure. Daringer had told her he was having some problems with his sisters. You would think family would pull together at times like these, especially seeing as how they were triplets. Being an only child, she would never know the intense camaraderie of sisters or a brother. In her heart she envied the triplets.

Abigail pulled the map of Africa from the slip case and searched the legend for Mathare. The dig area was deep in the jungle several miles from there. She was excited about the prospect of an actual dig finally. Now if only she could come up with the student power and grants necessary to fund it.

Her thoughts drifted back to Daringer. *Would he still be interested in going with her like he said he was last year?* Their careers fed each other. She felt his knowledge added depth to her own. His standoffishness frightened her. Losing him was not something she wanted to have to deal with.

She toyed with the idea of calling him again and then thought better of it. Coming off like some over anxious co-ed was another vision that made her change her mind, she shuddered. Waiting for lunch with him tomorrow was the only option she saw at the moment; at least she still had options with him. That was better than nothing. She would get him to open up somehow.

“Okay, okay, let me get my shoes and jacket on,” she said patting the bouncing black and white head as she snapped his leash in place. “Daringer Smith’s problems would have to wait until Sparky’s energetic begging was satisfied,” she said as she closed and locked the door behind her.

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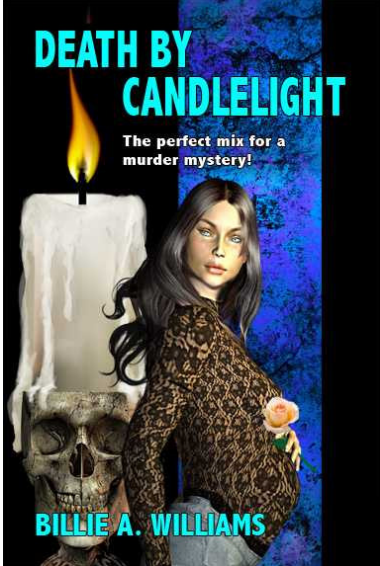
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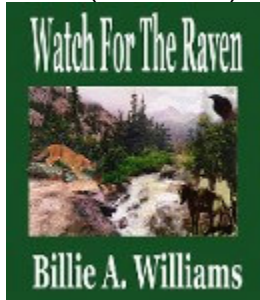
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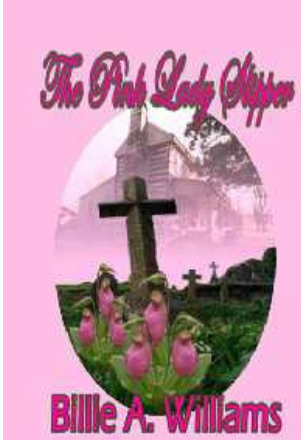
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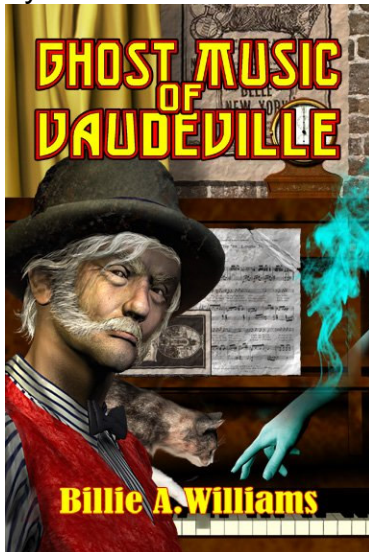


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by Billie A Williams



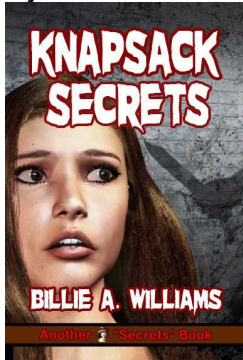
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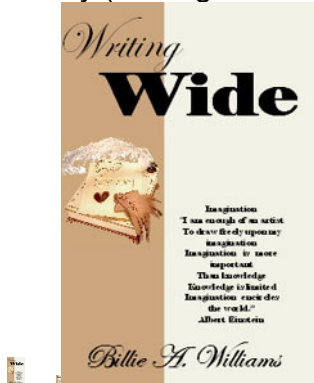
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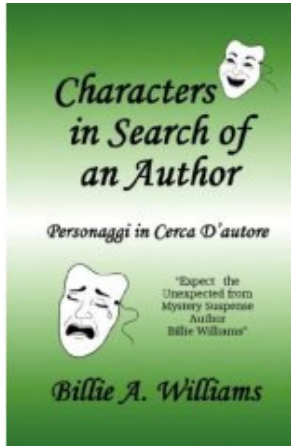
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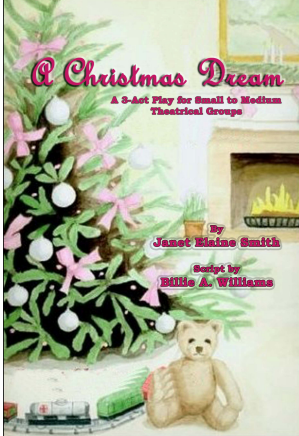
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