Praise for Molly Ringle

Lava Red Feather Blue

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"Come for the Sleeping Beauty allusion, but stay for the incredible world-building! Fans of fantasy, especially anything fae-related, will find this a very rich, satisfying read." — Brent Hartinger, author of *Geography Club* and *Three Truths and a Lie*

"Lush and imaginative—an epic fantasy for a new generation, full of love, vengeance, redemption, and forgiveness." — Pam Stucky, author of *The Universes Inside the Lighthouse*

"Absolutely enchanting! Ringle's writing is as dreamy and lush as her vividly-imagined island of Eidolonia, making this a perfect escape. Lovely and evocative — sure to delight lovers of fae, fairytales, and fantasy." — Allie Therin, author of *Spellbound*

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* Top Romance Title for Fall 2019 — *Publishers Weekly*

* 16 Romance Novels to Read This Fall — *BuzzFeed*

* Finalist — Romance, Bisexual Book Awards

"Entertaining, nuanced . . . Ringle navigates her twisty revelations and dramatic conclusion with just enough weight to avoid mawkishness, and her characters earn their happy ending. Readers looking for introspective romances with winding plots will enjoy this heartfelt novel." — *Publishers Weekly*

"This honest coming-of-age romance will resonate with those who are discovering their own sexual identity, while Sinter and Andy's flirtatious, tentative romance should please all lovers of the genre." — *Library Journal*

The Goblins of Bellwater

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— *Foreword Reviews*

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"Ringle employs familiar fairy tale tropes but turns them on their heads to deliver something wholly unexpected and fresh."

— *Publishers Weekly*

the ghost downstairs

molly ringle

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Chapter One

2003

Lina Zuendel blamed the loss of her job on Stephen King. If she hadn't been reading *Salem's Lot* that night in the nurses' lounge, she wouldn't have been so spooked and jumpy, and she wouldn't have screamed when she turned a hallway corner at two o'clock in the morning and collided with Sara, another nurse. Sara carried a half-full dinner tray and wheeled an empty IV device, and when Lina smashed into her the result was spectacular. Sara fell, knocking over both the IV and Lina. As Lina sprawled on the hall tiles she saw the dinner tray go airborne.

A crescent of burger bounced off her forehead while an apple core hit Sara in the eye. Jabbering apologies, Lina rose to help Sara, planted her foot on a pudding cup, and slipped again, whacking her forehead on Sara's chin. At that point Sara started to hit Lina to keep her away. Lina crawled aside, wiping ketchup off her ear and still apologizing, while two grinning orderlies helped Sara up and led her to the lounge.

Lina admitted in her heart that the moment had been a perfectly executed piece of slapstick. She understood why people laughed. None of them knew at the time that Lina would kill a patient because of it.

"I went to get sodium chloride for Mr. Ambaum, to flush his catheter," she explained to the doctors and the hospital administrator who called her in after Mr. Ambaum's death. It was five in the morning. Lina still had a chocolate pudding stain on her white sneaker. "I was rattled after, um, running into Sara. I took what I thought was the sodium chloride, and went to his room and injected it, but…" Her hands still trembled. "It turned out to be potassium chloride. I somehow grabbed that instead, I don't know how…"

"You injected potassium chloride into his central venous line?" The administrator took notes as he spoke. He hid his emotions well, but his voice was gruff. He couldn't have been pleased to learn a nurse had accidentally

given a patient a lethal injection.

Mr. Ambaum had been receiving chemotherapy for liver cancer. He had a wife and two grown sons.

"Yes." Professionalism had to be upheld. Lina would not cry in front of everyone. She blinked against the tears and controlled her voice. "I thought I checked. I saw the word 'chloride.' I should have…" She stopped. She should have checked better. End of weak defense.

The hospital had already explained to Mr. Ambaum's family that he had died of cardiac arrest after a medication error. Though the family members were merely in shock right now, the administrator told Lina to expect anger and press coverage—though probably not legal action, as the hospital would do everything it could to settle with the Ambaums out of court. In the meantime, the administrator sent Lina home and told her to take tomorrow off. Lina nodded, gathered her shreds of pudding-splashed dignity, and left the hospital.

A fresh September dawn bathed the eastern sky. Lina stumbled along the sidewalk, blinking at buildings and citizens and seagulls. Salmon-colored sunlight gleamed on the cars. Roasting coffee filled the salty air with its scent. A beeping bread truck backed into an alley.

Seattle's First Hill bore the nickname "Pill Hill" for the numerous hospitals dotting it, and Lina's apartment sat in the middle of them. When she had moved into it as a fresh young nurse with a bright white lab coat, she had counted herself lucky to live among so many potential workplaces. Now, five years and three lab coats later, she doubted she would stay at Everglade Hospital even if they did forgive her. They had been too kind. She had killed a man. In her own mind she had committed manslaughter. She did not want to give up nursing, nor go to jail, but she felt she deserved both those fates, and suspected she would never touch a syringe again without shuddering. But this was only the first morning, she thought in desperation. It would improve with time and sleep. Wouldn't it?

Lina unlocked the iron security gate of her building, trudged up the stone steps, and shuffled inside. She needed someone to talk to, someone close, but she had no one. The other nurses were friendly, but not the sort of people whose blouses she would cry on. Her brother was probably stoned.

Her mom never paid attention to nursing concerns unless they concerned herself. Her dad might actually be dismayed with her for her mistake. Really, Lina had no one.

Except maybe Brent.

In the stairwell she paused at the landing between the second and third floor, where a window faced Elliott Bay. Deep blue water and evergreen-bristled shores cozied up to the metropolis. A white ferry trundled toward Bainbridge Island. Desperate love for the city swelled beneath her ribs. Seattle had seemed the promised land when she had been growing up in her drab Tacoma neighborhood, and since she had moved here not a day had gone by when she didn't love it still. Brent had invited her to come with him to Atlanta. Because of her ties to Seattle she had refused, and they broke up and said all those cruel things to each other. But would he be kind to her now if she called him and spilled the whole awful story? He knew her better than anyone else did. He was her strongest hope for sanity this morning.

In her apartment she thumped *Salem's Lot* onto her desk, pushed newspapers off her chair, and plopped down to check her email. Like magic, one from Brent appeared. But it wasn't addressed just to Lina. In fact, it appeared to be addressed to everyone Brent knew. The cc list went on for about fifty names.

Hi friends and folks! it read. *Atlanta is treating me great. In fact, you're never going to believe this, but I'm getting married! Her name's Joanne and we met at a biomed research conference, and well, it had to be fate. I'm too slammed right now to give the whole story, but I'm really happy and wanted to let everyone know, and I'm sure some of you will be calling me anyway for details when you get this. Have a wonderful day!*

That was all. Lina checked again, but he had sent no separate email for her alone, no kind words for the woman he had left behind in Seattle just five months ago. She checked the voicemail on her cell phone. Nothing there either.

She rose on shaking legs and looked at the answering machine on her landline. The blinking light signaled a message. She dove forward, knocking a dictionary off the desk, and pressed the button.

"Hey Lina, it's your mom," drawled the recording. Lina sank back into

the chair and put her head in her hands. “I’ve got these cramps again. They’re making me miserable, honey, and I wanted to ask you what that tea was you told me about. ’Cause I swear, sugar, the Midol ain’t cutting it anymore. When the hell is menopause going to get here already? Well, at least I got a nurse for a daughter who I can call and complain to. Call me back. Also, Lina, your brother has a thing on his face again. Talk to him about it, okay? Bye, honey.”

With dried ketchup in her hair, pudding on her shoe, and shackles of love and cowardice chaining her to an unforgiving Seattle, Lina sat at her desk and wept.

* * *

Lina quit a week later. The doctors, nurses, and administrators all pleaded with her to stay, but she declined. Every patient visit tormented her, and not just the ones involving IV medications. Every hospital room reminded her of the thousand things she could do to endanger or destroy the trusting folk who had come here to be healed. The newspapers and local TV stations had run the story of Mr. Ambaum’s demise. Though Lina had been shielded from having to talk to reporters, and her name hadn’t even been printed, she felt her coworkers watching her wherever she went. Even if it was pity and not reproach, she wanted none of it.

There would be no court trial. For Lina’s mistake the Ambaums were willing to take a $500,000 settlement from Everglade Hospital—which, a hospital lawyer confided to Lina, was nothing. Families had been awarded millions for similar incidents. Mr. Ambaum, though only fifty-seven, had been an alcoholic his entire adult life, leading to the liver cancer, and Lina got the impression his wife and sons were weary of dealing with him. They wanted to close the case, pay the medical bills, and move on.

That thought depressed her. A person’s spouse and children should be the ones who cared the most and fought the hardest. How many mistakes did you have to make before the world washed its hands of you? How far down that path was Lina herself, with such a colossal mistake on her record already at merely thirty-two years old?

She didn't tell her family what had happened. She didn't even plan to tell them she had quit until she got a new job, and then she would only tell them she wanted a change of scene. That at least was true. Paradoxically, she felt herself unqualified for anything but nursing, while unable to go on being a nurse at Everglade. Her plan, her final hope, was to try being a nurse somewhere else, somewhere with fewer opportunities for lethal error.

On a windy morning in late September, Lina put on mascara and her lab coat, gave up the valuable street parking space she'd held down with her Impala for a week, and drove to the University District for an interview. The ad in the *Seattle Times* sought a live-in nurse for "Drake House, elegant retirement home." Lina's current apartment now oppressed her—in addition to its hospital-central location, it bore too many memories of Brent—so she had emailed her résumé to the address given. Marla Drake, the landlady, had called her the same day and set up an interview. All Lina had to do was not screw it up, assuming she could stand the place.

No problem there. She fell in love with the house on sight: a red-brick, three-story mansion with a spiky iron fence and a steep black roof. Marla, a short middle-aged woman with a seemingly permanent grin, let her in, pumped her hand, and beckoned her to follow. Lina crossed the thick white carpets, gaping at the furnishings: a grand piano, wavy old windowpanes, hardwood floors in the dining room. The ground floor smelled of lemon cake and freshly vacuumed rugs. Her spirits wobbled upward. In such a place, she thought, she might stand a chance at practicing qualm-free nursing again.

Marla brought Lina to a parlor where a thin man in his fifties with bushy gray hair hopped up from the sofa and smiled. "My husband, Alan," Marla said.

"Welcome, Lina." He shook her hand.

"These are our quarters." Marla settled herself into a polished wooden chair with green cushions. "Couple hundred square feet to hide away in. Have a seat."

Lina sat in the indicated chair, which matched Marla's, and Alan relaxed onto the sofa again, twiddling a pencil between thumb and finger.

"I'm an RN myself," Marla said, "but God knows I need helpers. Best case would be someone who can move in. Makes the shifts more flexible.

Room and board come with salary, and the rent is real cheap. Especially for this town."

Lina smiled. "Sounds fine to me. I'm happy to move."

Alan scratched his nose with the pencil. "Don't mind leaving that commute behind, huh?"

"Not a bit."

The interview flowed as smooth as small talk. Then came that inevitable question: "Why did you leave your last job?"

Lina had undergone two other interviews in the last ten days, in facilities like this one—though nowhere near as beautiful—and at this question she had launched into an account of her collision with Sara and the subsequent medication mix-up. No matter how she tried to downplay it, the story could only end with, "The man died." After that, both interviews had turned chillier, and Lina went home knowing she wouldn't be called back.

Everglade Hospital had agreed not to mention the incident if anyone called for references. Disclosing the truth—or not—was Lina's choice.

The lemon cake smelled so good. The carpets were so clean.

Lina cleared her throat. "Hospitals can get very depressing. Very hectic, impersonal."

Marla and Alan nodded in commiseration.

"I love nursing," Lina said, "but I really wanted a more homelike environment, with patients I could get to know and stay with longer."

The very next day, Marla called to tell her she got the job.

On the first of October, during a rainstorm, she moved into Drake House as the new resident nurse. After unpacking her boxes in her third-floor room, Lina took a notebook and went to see each of the eleven senior citizens. She wore her white lab coat to look professional, and her hair loose to look friendly. She hoped the result wasn't mere contradiction.

The residents' quarters comforted her, with their potted plants and wallpaper and large-print book collections. In such an environment she felt relaxed, or at least more relaxed than she had been since her involuntary manslaughter. Encouraged by her mood improvement, she talked half an hour with each resident, learning and writing down their habits and ailments, and what they liked and disliked about Drake House.

"The meals are wonderful," at least half of them said.

Cook very good, Lina jotted down in her notebook.

"Marla and Alan set up such lovely activities for us," some added.

Fun times, Lina wrote.

"We're all such good friends. We're like a big family," nearly all said.

Happy place, Lina recorded.

The dislikes were minor. The radiators needed replacing—they clanked and took a while to heat up. "But Alan or Ren lights a fire for us in the living room, and we sit down there and have a grand time," said Dolly Tidd, her third patient. "Have you met Ren? Our houseboy? Oh, you will! He's just darling. Do you have a boyfriend? No? Then you will *love* Ren."

Cute coworkers, Lina wrote, then crossed it out. She was too much of a wreck for romance right now. Besides, with a title like "houseboy," this Ren was probably still in high school.

The residents' other dislikes included the lack of an elevator, though there was a wheelchair lift on the front staircase; the difficulty visitors had in finding parking; and, oh yes, the ghost.

Lina's pencil paused the first time someone mentioned it. "The ghost?"

"Yes," said Betty Carter, cutting an article out of a newspaper at a pace of about five snips per minute. "But it doesn't really hurt anyone, and we're all used to it."

"Then I hope to hear some good stories around that fireplace."

And Lina wrote *Haunted house believer* on Mrs. Carter's page.

Then George Lambert, who was hard of hearing but didn't let that stop him from flirting with every woman he met, shouted at her, "Did they tell you about the ghost?"

"Not much. What does this ghost do?"

"Don't worry!" He winked. "I'll protect you."

She dropped the topic and moved on to his medical history. But her last patient brought up the ghost yet again.

Augusta Beltrayne, whom everyone called "Mrs. B," had the room next door to Lina's. Mrs. B, a tiny, brown-skinned lady, eighty-nine years old, had advanced macular degeneration, arthritis, and a stunning number of magazine subscriptions. They overflowed her shelves, filled four crates, and lurked

in piles under the lavender armchairs.

"Not much point, the way my eyesight's going," Mrs. B said. "But I love the smell of them. Especially these." She lifted an issue of *Vogue*, and flashed a smile full of teeth so straight they had to be dentures.

"I'd be happy to read to you once in a while, or find you some audio material."

"That would be marvelous. Then I could just turn up the volume if that poltergeist starts knocking on walls." Mrs. B laughed.

Lina lowered her notebook. "Okay, you're the third person to mention a ghost. Is there anything I should know?"

"Don't you worry. All it does is rearrange things and walk up and down the stairs."

The clouds darkened outside. Lina told herself the chill up her spine was really still Stephen King's fault. "People see it?"

"With my eyes I'm hardly the one to ask! But no, I gather nobody sees it. They just hear it—footsteps and so forth."

"Have you heard it?"

"My door swung open one day and tapped against the wall, three times, like someone was standing there playing with it. Only there wasn't anyone."

Stupid to get goose bumps from a dubious anecdote, Lina scolded herself. "Was that the only time?"

"Not exactly. I could swear things end up in different places than where I laid them down. But then, I'm not exactly young anymore!"

A burst of static and a loud voice from the open door made Lina jump almost out of her chair. "Good evening, everyone," said the voice—Alan Drake's. "Dinner is served! Please come on down." The intercom clicked off.

Lina let out her breath.

"Oh, good!" Mrs. B flung aside the *Vogue* and reached for Lina's hand. "Let's go down."

Mrs. B squeezed her arm as they walked down the corridor. "I'm so glad you're my new neighbor. That last nurse hardly stayed a month. She was such a jumpy thing."

"Why did she leave?"

Mrs. B gestured as if sweeping cobwebs out of her face. "Oh, she said

her computer keys kept tapping by themselves in the middle of the night. Honestly, can't some people get earplugs?"

While Lina digested that remark, Marla Drake bounded into view at the staircase's second-floor landing. "Hey, Lina!" Perhaps because she lived with the elderly, Marla seemed to be in the habit of shouting. "How's your room?"

"Fine. I haven't spent much time in it yet, though. I've been talking to my new housemates."

"Well, you got one more. Our twelfth room just got filled. Jackie Clairmont. You can meet her at dinner."

"My!" said Mrs. B. "What a busy day. Two new people."

"First of the month." Marla led the way down the stairs to the main floor. "I reckon people's leases are up." She laughed, a single-note bray.

They stepped into the dining room, onto the shining hardwood floors Lina had admired. Four tables, with six chairs each, gave residents and visitors plenty of seating choice at mealtimes. Lina helped Mrs. B into a chair and sat beside her. The Drakes, George Lambert, and Gertrude Brown (age eighty-six, high blood pressure, bluebird motif in room) rounded out their table.

Two young women burst out of the swinging doors to the kitchen, pushing carts of food. In their wake appeared a young man, probably a student at the nearby University of Washington, his white sleeves rolled up, a pitcher in each hand. His dark eyes took her in as he glanced across the room. Realizing this must be the "Ren" she had heard about, Lina averted her gaze. The kid had to be ten years younger than she was. Wouldn't that be a lovely way to get back at Brent when she finally answered him? *Nice to hear from you*, she could write. *I've taken a new lover too. He just turned twenty-one and does dishes in a retirement home.*

Lina turned to Alan. "So, when was the house built?"

"Nineteen oh-five. It was actually a sorority until the sixties."

"My grandma was the housemother," Marla said. "She bought the place when the chapter closed."

"The ghosts are old college kids," hollered George Lambert, "trying to party with us." He winked a milky blue eye at Lina. "Kids your age!"

Lina spread her napkin across her lap. "Hardly my age."

A shadow fell over their table. She looked up to find the young man standing beside her.

"Hello, Ren!" Mrs. B said. She turned to Lina. "Now, Ren's the best part of living here."

"Ren Schultz is our houseboy," Marla said. "This is Lina, our new nurse."

"Aren't you lucky!" George boomed to Ren. "New girl moved in for you!"

A dimple formed in Ren's cheek and he glanced at Lina, who was squashing her toes together under the table and wishing to dissolve. "Welcome," he said. "How about some coffee tonight?"

God save her, now he was asking her out in front of everyone. Lina fussed with the cloth napkin on her lap. "Um, I'm too busy. But thanks."

Marla burst into her raucous laugh. Alan and the residents grinned.

"Well…" Ren lifted one of the pitchers he held. "We've got tea, too, if you prefer. No strings attached, I promise."

"Oh." Lina was blushing so hard she felt likely to get an aneurysm. "Sorry, I—yes, coffee, please." She pulled her hands out of the way to allow Ren to pour coffee into her mug.

Marla wiped her eyes. "Oh, Lina. We need to eat with you every night. You're a hoot!"

"Be nice to her." Mrs. B held up her mug. "I'd take Ren out for coffee myself if I were sixty years younger. But I'll have tea tonight, please, Ren dear."

Ren reached across, still wearing that dimple, and poured it for her. Before he withdrew he nodded at Lina in a manner she would have labeled "formal" with a splash of "impish."

She considered asking if they had any arsenic handy to stir into her coffee. Instead she addressed the Drakes again. "So, 'houseboy.' That seems like an old-fashioned job title."

"In the sororities they're still called houseboys," Mrs. B said. "My granddaughter is an Alpha Phi. She talks about them all the time."

"What do they do? Dishwashing and serving?"

George guffawed. "That's not all they do! Lock up your daughters!"

Lina glanced at the next table to see if Ren had heard. If he had, he was

pretending he hadn't. He went on pouring water for someone without so much as a smirk.

"Oh, George!" said Marla. "Well, I don't know about the sorority houseboys, but ours does practically anything in the house, and the yard too. He's a godsend."

"U-Dub student, I imagine," Lina said, calling UW by its familiar abbreviated form.

"No, just working," Marla said. "Oh, Gertrude, here, let me get that salt for you."

While the topic of dinner conversation turned to the role of salt in one's diet, Lina glanced again at the houseboy. He stood in profile to her: a sharp, slender nose; dark hair trimmed short and tending to curl; firm lips that didn't part except to speak. She easily imagined Ren featuring in some daughter's daydreams, especially those who liked the pale poet type—and those who didn't find him too young. If she had to choose a man to succeed Brent today, she would have chosen a bookish fellow in his thirties or forties, unaffiliated with medicine, maybe British, definitely fond of wool sweaters—cardigan or pullover; Lina wasn't choosy, as long as the colors weren't obnoxious.

She twirled beef stroganoff around her fork. She didn't have to choose anyone today, though, and a good thing too. Witness the mess she already made of an innocent remark about coffee.

"Who are the people over there?" asked Mrs. B.

Marla blotted her mouth with her cloth napkin. "The new resident, Jackie Clairmont, and her family. Widowed lady."

"Well, aren't we all."

Lina looked over her shoulder to see the one senior she hadn't met yet. Mrs. Clairmont had a mass of curly white hair and wore an emerald-green pantsuit. A wooden walking stick leaned against the wall beside her. A man and woman in their fifties, presumably her children or children-in-law, sat with her.

"Said she was a sorority girl here," said Alan, "back in the thirties."

"She remembers my grandma," said Marla. "How about that?"

"Oh, a fellow university woman!" said Mrs. B. "I shall have to make

friends with her."

"What did you study, Mrs. B?" Lina asked.

But Mrs. B did not get to answer, for at that moment someone shouted in a hoarse voice straight out of a horror movie, "You! What are you doing here? Where's Julia?"

Lina and all the other diners turned and stared. Jackie Clairmont rose to her feet, gaping at Ren, who had just arrived at her table. He, understandably, seemed taken aback. Mrs. Clairmont pointed at him and repeated, "What are you doing here? What did you do with Julia?"

Ren stepped backward, cheeks pale, clutching the carafe of tea against his ribs. He didn't take his eyes from Mrs. Clairmont except to dart occasional glances at Marla Drake.

Marla looked scandalized. Her short red hair, which always stood on end, now appeared to be doing so out of shock. She jumped out of her chair and rushed to Mrs. Clairmont, whose relatives were trying to get her to sit down. "Now, Jackie," said Marla, "you don't know this boy. This is Ren Schultz. This is our houseboy."

But apparently Mrs. Clairmont possessed more strength than the average nonagenarian, for she threw off Marla's hand, seized the walking stick, and raised it in the air. "Where's Julia? Why are you here? Where is she?"

The walking stick whipped down and struck Ren on the arm. Everyone gasped. The carafe clattered to the floor. Tea splashed on the hardwood. Ren ducked and retreated into the kitchen. The door swung shut behind him. People murmured and exclaimed; Marla and the Clairmont relatives tried to calm and scold Mrs. Clairmont at the same time.

"Did she hit him?" Mrs. B squinted at the place where Ren had been standing.

"Right on the arm!" George Lambert answered with relish, as if he was watching a boxing match.

"Well, for goodness' sake, I don't care who she is, that's just unwarranted!"

Lina rose from the table, activated into motion by her nurse instincts. "Maybe I should—"

"You should go make sure Ren is all right." Mrs. B winked.

Lina tried not to look flustered. She nodded and set off toward the kitchen.

She found Ren pacing alone in the pantry. He rubbed his forearm, which bore a dark pink mark.

Lina thought this was one of those rare moments when the phrase "He didn't know what hit him" was especially apt, and she had to clench her jaw muscles to keep down a smile. "Is your arm all right? Can I get you some ice or anything?"

He kept pacing. "It's okay. I'm a quick healer. It probably won't even bruise."

He didn't seem okay. Lina stood in the doorway, watching him take three steps toward her and three steps away, over and over. "Kind of scary when people lash out like that," she said. "I once had a woman get so upset with me for trying to take her temperature, she stomped on my foot."

"Hm." It was a quick sound, exhaled through his nose. "So that's the other new woman. What's her name?"

"Jackie Clairmont, I think. I haven't met her yet."

"Jackie Clairmont…her married name, I suppose?"

"Probably. They said she was a widow. Do you think you know her?"

His eyebrows lifted. "Doesn't seem likely."

"I wouldn't worry about it. Old folks sometimes, you know how they are. Supposedly she lived in this house when she was in college. She's probably just getting her memories confused."

"Did she?" Ren still paced. "Interesting."

Marla Drake rushed in. "Oh, Ren, there you are! I'm sorry, so, so sorry! Lina, dear, could you go help Alan with Mrs. Clairmont?"

"Of course." Lina turned back to the dining room.

Behind her, she heard Ren ask something in quiet tones, and heard Marla answer, "Yes, but I didn't think it would be any trouble."

She heard no more of their exchange once she pushed through the swinging door. She went to the table where Alan and the family members were soothing Mrs. Clairmont.

"I know," Jackie Clairmont said, in her loud, creaky voice. "I know and I'm sorry. It just rattled me to see him, a houseboy, there."

Lina poured her a glass of water, not sure what else she was supposed to do. After a few more minutes of Mrs. Clairmont insisting she was all right and that it wouldn't happen again, everyone returned to their seats, and dinner resumed.

"Is Ren all right?" Mrs. B asked her.

Lina nodded. "Just startled, I think."

"Goodness, I am too." Mrs. B set down her fork. "I tell you, Lina, I'm going to get to the bottom of this."

She sounded like someone in a formulaic mystery novel. Lina had to smile. "Bottom of what, Mrs. B?"

"Who's Julia, for one thing? And why does it warrant smacking our poor Ren with a cane?"

"Good questions." Lina glanced at Mrs. Clairmont. Alan Drake was escorting her and her two family members out of the room, all of them balancing their dinner plates. Jackie Clairmont wanted to eat the rest of the meal in her room tonight. Small wonder.

Ren did not come out for the rest of the meal either, not even to clear the dishes. Lina didn't see him until she went down to the kitchen later, to get a mug of herbal tea for her neighbor Mrs. B.

Ren stood at the sink, washing the larger dishes, the ones that wouldn't fit in the dishwasher. He did not turn around or say anything.

She wanted to apologize for being an idiot when they had been introduced. She wanted to sympathize with him for the way Jackie Clairmont had humiliated him. Somehow her mind associated her own slapstick disaster with Mrs. Clairmont's attack. And on her first night in a new house she wanted someone to talk to, someone who was neither her patient nor her employer, someone to replace the other nurses or interns who had always been around in the staff lounge and who could be counted on for a friendly word.

But, faced with his silent back, and feeling drained from such a weird first day of work, she said nothing and went upstairs again.

She brought the tea to Mrs. B's room. "What with me and Mrs. Clairmont, I imagine poor Ren is thinking about a change of job right now."

Mrs. B smiled at her over the mug, her brown eyes crinkling. "I doubt

he'd leave, with a pretty new girl like you in the house."

"Pretty—well—no, I'm sure he doesn't think…" Lina stopped spluttering, aware it was only making things worse. "He seems nice, but he's too young for me."

"He couldn't be that young. He was here when I got here, and that was five years ago."

"Maybe he started as a teenager."

"I suppose. Anyway, you probably have a man already."

Lina's smile wilted. She turned to brush dust off the edge of a shelf. "I'm…between relationships."

"Oh, I'm sorry. What happened to the last one?"

"Moved to Atlanta for a fancy hospital job. I didn't want to go."

"Careers these days." Mrs. B shook her head. "It's for the best. I love Seattle too much to leave it, too."

Lina straightened a row of large-print *Reader's Digest*s. "I told him how I felt. Lots of times."

"Then it wasn't meant to be. You'll find someone else." Mrs. B sounded perfectly certain.

"Maybe someday." Lina moved to the door. "Goodnight, Mrs. B. You can leave the mug beside your bed. I'll take it down for you in the morning. Ring if you need anything."

Back in her own room, Lina unzipped her jeans and wriggled out of them in preparation for bed. She grimaced at the stubble on her legs—gone too long without shaving again. She fell behind on her beauty treatments when she didn't have a boyfriend, although maybe now with this Ren in the house…

She rolled her eyes at herself and tossed her jeans into the laundry hamper. *Pretty*, Mrs. B had said, but you had to remember this was from a woman with failing eyesight. At five-foot-nine Lina was taller than she wanted to be, and felt awkward for it. Her hair lay flat and straight no matter what heating and curling implements she tortured it with. Her mouth, nose, and chin, all taken together, had a ducklike look in her opinion—though one past boyfriend had been sweet enough to call her mouth "sensual." She thought her light amber-brown eyes were her best feature, and therefore accentuated

them with mascara. But beautiful? Hardly.

Still…she stepped over to the mirror above the vanity, holding her nightgown against herself for warmth and cover. Under these gentle incandescent lights instead of the hospital fluorescents, her skin already glowed a healthier hue. She'd get more sleep in this job than she used to; that would help as well. And maybe with some lip gloss…yes, perhaps then "pretty" wouldn't be out of the question.

The lamp snapped off. The room went dark, except for the filtered city light through her blinds. She thought the power had gone out, then noticed the red glowing numbers of her alarm clock: it was still functioning. A faint glow seeped under her door from the lights in the corridor too. Nothing else had gone off, only her lamp. And it had sounded like the click of the switch, not the tiny contained explosion of a bulb burning out.

Her heart pounded. She saw well enough in these bluish night-hues to know nobody was standing in the room with her. Everything was where she had left it, nothing moved.

She advanced to the lamp and turned the switch. The light came back, regular as you please. She tried this a few times, turning the lamp on and off, and left it alone a few seconds each time to see if it changed state by itself. Finally she decided she was being ridiculous. Once in a while switches did that. You pushed them farther than you realized, or not far enough, and they gradually slipped back into the "off" mode. It happened. It didn't have anything to do with ghosts.

She tugged her flannel nightgown on at last, and sat down at her computer.

I made it through my first day, she typed in an email to her mom, dad, and brother. She paused to add the addresses of a few people back at Everglade who had left "Hang in there" messages on her machine after she had quit.

Definitely a change, she wrote, *but I think I can manage. Still, it's quiet here and they say the place is haunted—yeah, sure—so for those in the Seattle area, let me know if anything fun is going on this weekend, and I'll try to come.*

She included Brent's email address. Just one of the group. It was the first thing she had sent him since his engagement announcement.

But as she shut down her computer, she knew she was unlikely to drive across town to do anything fun if invited, and doubted anyone would invite her. She was forgettable. Brent had demonstrated that.

"Just me and the old folks and the college ghosts," she said aloud, then wished she hadn't, despite not believing in ghosts.

But to be on the safe side, she left the lamp on when she climbed into bed.

Chapter Two

Lina had read that it took at least two months to feel at home in a new job—and besides, where else would she go?—so she stuck it out at Drake House even though it often felt like a foreign culture. They called things by pet names or ones she wasn't accustomed to. The room adjoining the dining room was a "parlor," a term she never encountered except in Victorian novels. The "living room," in contrast, was the large room at the front with the grand piano. "Firesides" were the casual gatherings at the fireplace in the living room on cold evenings.

"Having a fireside tonight!" Marla or Alan would tell her. "Come on down!"

The iron fire escape on the house's back exterior wall was the "smoking lounge," since no smoking was allowed in the building and therefore smokers had to step outside. As far as Lina could tell, though, none of the residents or employees did smoke, so the term must have been a holdover from the sorority days, like Ren Schultz's job title of "houseboy."

Lina didn't talk to Ren much during the first two weeks. She figured he was avoiding Jackie Clairmont and her vicious walking stick, and he was always busy cleaning or fixing something when Lina did stumble upon him. Though he kept to himself, he seemed to be around a great deal, and Lina wondered if he ever went home. When she remarked on this to Mrs. B one day, she learned he already *was* home.

"Comes with his job," Mrs. B said. "Tiny room in the basement. I've seen it when I'm down there for laundry. I don't know how he can stand it. That basement's eerie if you ask me."

Lina eased Mrs. B's bare foot out of the basin of warm water and toweled it dry. "Considering Seattle rent prices these days, he probably thinks it's a bargain. By the way, have you made friends with Mrs. Clairmont? She doesn't say much when I visit her."

"Dolly and Gertrude and I have gotten her to play gin rummy with us.

Haven't asked her yet why she whacked poor Ren, though. Those ugly warts looking any better?"

"I think so. Just going to apply a little more of this stuff." Lina dabbed wart-remover ointment onto Mrs. B's heel with a gloved pinky. "She probably has some interesting sorority stories about this place."

"I expect so. All we've talked about in regards to U-Dub was what we studied and what we wore. And how hard it was to get a decent drink during the Depression!" Mrs. B laughed.

Lina smiled and taped a small bandage over the warts. "I wonder if the U Library has any history on the house. Might give us theories on our ghosts."

"You should go look! And I'll see if I can't sweet-talk some clues out of Jackie."

Sounded like a good hobby, and Lord knew Lina needed one. She still got nervous thrills in her stomach when she checked her email, thinking Brent might write to her, though she had no good reason to be nervous. What could he say?

A spell of self-analysis during an afternoon walk in the cool October sunshine showed her the pathetic truth. She hoped he might write, *I was wrong to leave. I love you and only you. I'm dumping Joanne and coming back*, or at the very least, *I'll never love her the way I loved you, but if you and I can't be together I suppose I have to take the second-best option*. She thwacked a mailbox post with her rolled-up umbrella on her way past. He was never going to write that. She was acting like a fatuous young girl. A mature woman would forget the jerk and embark on a spicy new relationship. Say, with a twenty-something coworker.

Unworkable idea, but at least it made her smile.

Anyway, until she answered Brent in a personal email and actually addressed the subject of his engagement, she wouldn't know what he'd say.

At the end of her second week at Drake House, Lina typed out a message that underwent several drafts before she considered it acceptable.

Dear Brent,

I've been so busy with my new job, I haven't had the chance yet to congratulate you. I didn't want you to think I was sulking. Of course it was a surprise, but I wish you and Joanne all the best. I hope to meet her someday. Please stay

in touch.

Take care,

Lina.

His answer, the next day, was:

Thanks L. Glad you're doing good. Never thought I'd get engaged so fast but this thing with Joanne knocked me off my feet! You'd like her, she's really great. Thanks for writing. Makes me feel better about the bitter goodbyes. You take care too.

- B.

She reread his email four times, feeling offended and breathless, like he had casually grabbed her head and stuffed it into a pile of wet leaves. She turned off her computer and staggered down to the kitchen. Ren and the cook were preparing the house's lunch, but she ignored them and steadied her hands by making a cup of coffee.

Knocked him off his feet. How very nice for him. Nothing at all like his tame, ho-hum relationship with Lina, she supposed he meant to say. She edged past the cook and put two slices of bread in the toaster, tapping her fingers on the counter as she waited. Bitter goodbyes—right, did he mean the part where he had accused her of having no spine, no sense of adventure? Or the part where she had accused him of having no regard for what she valued? Or the way he had answered that she must not really love him, and her retort that maybe he was right?

Her toast popped up. She slapped it onto a plate, attacked it with peanut butter, and thumped the plate onto the breakfast bar beside her black coffee. The *Seattle Times* lay in a heap on the bar. She pulled it over and flipped through it. She could go to her room and cry, but that would be continuing to act like a fatuous young girl. She could write him a nasty email and never send it, but that would be feeding the fire.

Most infuriating of all, she realized she didn't even want him back, and was upset over him anyway. What she wanted was that whole year and a half of her life back, since it had come to nothing. She had failed at a relationship, as usual, and hated the fact. She knew she had to get on with life, jump back into the saddle and so forth, but how did people do that?

The crossword puzzle in the newspaper was about one-quarter filled in

by someone with a tentative pencil. Lina found the pencil in a cup on top of the microwave and sat down to finish their work. She didn't have to be on call until after lunch. Might as well burn off some steam by throwing herself against the mighty wall of the *New York Times* crossword.

It didn't help. After twenty minutes she still got no satisfaction from filling in the easy clues, and the hard ones just made her want to stab the puzzle creator with a number two pencil.

For instance, what was she supposed to do with "Munchies, his 'n hers," six letters, beginning with C-R and ending with E? Her mind stalled on "crepes," but that didn't end with E, and while crepes might have been considered "munchies," there was nothing particularly his-'n-hers about them. Adding words and crossword puzzles to the list of things hell-bent on vanquishing her, Lina reached for her toast without looking.

Someone took a sharp breath. A hand caught her wrist. She lifted her head. Inches from her fingers, a hairy brown spider skulked on her plate, two probing feet right there in her peanut butter. She yelped. Counting leg-span, the thing must have been three full inches across.

Ren, after stopping her from putting her hand straight on it, let her go and clapped a dishtowel around the spider. Spindly legs emerged from the cloth, and the creature skittered toward her edge of the counter.

"Look out," Ren said.

"It got out," Lina said at the same moment. She leaped off her stool.

When the spider crawled over the edge, lost its footing on the smooth Formica surface, and fell to the floor, Lina was ready: she smacked one sneaker-clad foot down on top of it, and felt a crunch through the rubber.

She retracted her foot to view the crushed brown shape on the floor. "Got it." She took a napkin from the dispenser on the counter and bent to collect the dead spider. After dropping it in the trash, she allowed a moment for a deep breath. The adrenaline was the first thing to dispel her gloom today.

"Thank you," she said to Ren.

"No problem. I'd hate to see anyone get bitten. Hobo spiders are venomous."

"I know." Lina shuddered. "I saw a case once at the hospital."

"Nurse. That's right. You would already know."

"Maybe Alan and Marla should call an exterminator."

Ren shook his head. He sorted out the newspaper, peeking under each section. "We have some traps in the basement. I'll replace them. Best way, really, is to encourage other spiders to live here. They prey on the hobos."

"You study entomology or something?" Lina picked up her cup of coffee, glancing around for anything small and moving.

"No. Hobo spiders show up in the news now and then." Ren smiled. "Anyway, entomology is about insects. Does it cover arachnids too?"

"I'm not sure. Good question."

Ren picked up her plate. "I assume you don't want this anymore."

"You're right. I don't."

"Can I get you another one?"

"No, I think I'm off toast for a while. Maybe forever."

"All right." Ren glanced at the one section of the paper he had left undisturbed. "Going to finish the crossword?"

"No. It's giving me a headache. I can't work out the last few clues."

Ren turned the paper around toward himself. Three seconds later, he picked up her pencil and filled in "C-R-O-Q-U-E" for the "Munchies, his 'n hers" word.

Lina leaned over the counter to read it. "Croque? Oh. Croque monsieur…"

"Croque madame," Ren finished, saying it with her. "Types of sandwiches. Croque, meaning munch."

As he spoke, she caught the unmistakable scent of grape gum. Ordinarily the snaps and chomps of gum-chewing irritated her, but he was so subtle with it she hadn't even noticed until now. She found the smell comforting. It took her back to her childhood when she and her brother would buy gum and candy at the AM/PM and climb up to the cul-de-sac to watch cars zooming by on I-5 below.

"Wow," she said. "You know about French *and* arachnids."

Ren bowed his head, as if he thought he had been too boastful. "Well. Leave it to the kitchen help to come up with the food ones."

"Would have taken me all day." Lina stepped back. "Thank you again.

See you at lunch."

"See you." Ren didn't glance up; he was immersed in another clue.

He had dark brown eyes, and dark brown eyelashes to match. From that angle, when he was bent forward over the breakfast bar, they appeared to be sweeping his cheekbones. Which was a stupid thing to think, because everyone's eyelashes were situated close to their cheekbones. Lina marched away.

She had enough time before lunch to start some laundry, so she carried a basket of clothes down to the basement, using the back stairs, which happened to pass the kitchen. Before she reached the ground-level landing, she made sure her underwear and dirty socks were tucked out of sight beneath a towel. On the landing she met Ren coming up from the basement, his apron dusty with flour, his arms laden with institutional-sized cans of peaches.

"Finished your crossword," he said.

"Already? What was the river in Estonia?"

"Narva. N-A-R-V-A."

"Don't tell me you just *knew* that."

He shifted the cans. "I think I'd seen it in another crossword before."

"Too modest." She started down the stairs to the basement. "You're good. I'm coming to you next time I'm stuck."

His voice floated after her. "I'll do my best."

His footsteps moved into the pantry over her head as she reached the basement. Her limbs felt lightweight. She switched on the water in a washing machine and scattered powdered soap into it.

What was that, then? Flirting, that's what. She hadn't tried that for over a year, since getting together with Brent. As she remembered him, the gloom resettled itself around her. Irrational, really. She would have to get over Brent, yes, and flirting with Ren might be good practice, but it could hardly be anything else. She knew nothing of Ren except his name, his aptitude with vocabulary, the fact that he wasn't in college, and the way his hair narrowed to a curling point at the nape of his neck.

And she hadn't even realized she knew that last thing until now.

The laundry room door slammed shut, startling her. She was alone in the room and hadn't seen anyone in the basement. Drafts and strangely-weighted doors were common enough in old houses, but she still felt uneasy. The

basement had no pet name, and Lina saw why. Low ceilings, inadequate light from bare bulbs, half a dozen small rooms with solid doors, and jumbled storage boxes stretching into far dark corners would only have inspired nicknames like "the crypt" or "the mortuary." Time to go back upstairs.

She turned and almost tripped over her laundry basket, which was lying upside-down behind her. She may have put it there—unlikely a place though it was—but she was pretty sure she did not turn it upside-down.

A chill shimmied up her spine as she remembered the lamp turning itself off her first night.

You were supposed to talk to ghosts, she had heard. Let them know you were friendly. She had been known to murmur hello to dead patients' bodies in the hospital when alone with them, telling herself it was a courtesy to the deceased person, but also because secretly she hoped it might keep them from turning into vampires and attacking her. She had worked long, late hours and her mind, with Stephen King's help, devised some bizarre horrors. But nothing in the hospital had ever moved by itself, corpses or otherwise.

"I don't have anything against you," she said aloud to the laundry room. "Please don't try to scare me."

Nothing answered, of course.

Lina flung her clothes into the machine, picked up her basket, and escaped from the laundry room. She considered stopping on the way up to ask Ren if he had ever noticed anything uncanny around here, but then vetoed the idea. She may have selected him as her latest flirtation practice, but running up and saying, "Something just shut the door and turned my laundry basket upside-down!" won the prize for pathetic conversation openers. Even the names of Estonian rivers beat that.

All the same, she was determined you couldn't pay her to stay in that basement overnight. No, sir.

* * *

She wanted to forget her wrecked love life and her potassium chloride nightmare, start up new flirtations, and focus on her new job and surroundings. Really, she tried to. But her brain stayed stuck in its pessimistic groove.

That afternoon, as she visited her elderly housemates and checked blood pressures and answered medication questions, she found herself thinking that this was it. This was where she would live out her days. She'd be a nurse here for the next fifty years, then break her hip and get transferred into a room and become a resident, and die in her sleep not long afterward. It was hard to see how she would ever meet a decent person and fall in love. Her choices here were practically nonexistent, unless some resident's great-nephew was visiting. The only eligible bachelor in the house—aside from George Lambert—was Ren, and she could do better than a boy in his early twenties who tidied up an old folks' home for a living. Even if he did happen to be a crossword genius, magnificently well-mannered, and delectable as a dish of coffee ice cream.

That night, brushing her teeth in the bathroom down the hall from her room, she stared into the mirror and observed her eyelids succumbing to gravity, and was that another gray hair over her ear? She plucked it out, flicked it into the trash can, and let the toothbrush go slack as she gazed at her reflection. Fine. She knew the truth. She didn't think of herself as too good for Ren. Rather, she feared he wouldn't be interested. Not that she was interested in *him*, but it would have been comforting to think herself desirable. He certainly didn't go out of his way to talk to her. She had passed him on the way up tonight while he mopped the kitchen floor; she remembered glancing in approval at his strong shoulders and lean waist. Now, with a frown, she thought, *I can't even get the houseboy. I've become old and boring.*

She spat out the toothpaste. Enough of this. Brent may have gotten knocked off his feet and engaged before his last box was unpacked in Atlanta, but that didn't mean she had to follow suit. Her only task right now was to make the best of her situation and build a new track record to be proud of.

However, forgetting her love life was difficult when the elderly ladies, who made up eleven of the twelve residents, considered it their favorite discussion topic. For instance, at lunch the next day, Betty Carter produced a photo of her youngest son, who was forty-two and divorced and wore a handlebar mustache. "Coming to see me next month!" she said. "He's a hit with the single ladies. You ought to drop by."

"I'll see if I have time," Lina said.

"Marla's nephew Gary is closer to her age," said Ethel Barker. "He's a sweetie."

"But he lives way out of town, doesn't he?" said Dolly Tidd. "I think she should hook up with Ren here."

Lina shot a look around, but Ren was at a distant table arranging food on a tray.

"That would be my vote too," said Mrs. B.

"I'm not sure I'm in the market right now," Lina said.

The way Ren's hands moved displayed a grace that reminded her of a heart surgeon she'd had a crush on a few years ago. The surgeon had been twice Lina's age and married, of course, but there was no harm in admiring people.

Ren turned, caught her eye, and smiled. Lina twitched and dropped a forkful of cornbread into her lap. Ren walked over with a plate of orange-and-black-frosted cookies. "Would you ladies be interested in tasting these for me before I do the big batch?"

Mrs. B leaned to squint at the plate. "Ren, that's lovely of you!"

Lina folded her napkin around the fallen cornbread, took a crescent-moon-shaped cookie, and peeked up at Ren. "Thanks."

"I want a cat." Dolly took a cookie that, to Lina's eyes, was actually shaped like an owl.

"Hand me one," said Ethel. "I don't care about shape, just make it a big one."

Lina bit into the moon while Ren handed cookies around. Orange-flavored frosting melted with buttery shortbread in her mouth, and she nearly melted as well. "Very good," she mumbled to Ren as she chewed, one hand covering her mouth.

"Delicious," said Mrs. B, and smiled at Ren. "You're such a sweet boy. You must have a girlfriend. Are you seeing anyone?"

The other old ladies tittered. Lina felt blood rush to her cheeks. She carefully took another bite.

Ren smiled. "No, Mrs. B, I'm not."

"Oh, what a shame! Well, I promise you I won't set you up with my granddaughter, though I'm tempted to."

"Thank you for the thought, anyway." He picked up the plate. "I'll get to work on these cookies." He returned to the kitchen.

The old ladies broke into laughter. Lina glanced at Mrs. B and shook her head.

"Well, now you know!" Dolly said.

"I didn't need to know."

"He never used to offer us special cookies before you arrived," said Mrs. B. "You just think about that."

The trouble was, she did think about it. Ren didn't have a girlfriend—what was the story there? Could he be a comrade in bad breakups? Might they commiserate with each other some late night in the kitchen? His reticence made him interesting. She suspected he was bright, and obviously he was kind, so what else was under the quiet surface? He was still undoubtedly too young, but Lina considered it good that she was even thinking about another man. It showed she was moving on with life.

On the other hand, she didn't want to be like her mother, who went rather overboard when it came to moving on to the next guy and being devil-may-care about his age. Lina's parents had been divorced for fourteen years, and her mom had gone through at least ten boyfriends, and possibly as many hair colors, in that time. Most of the men were either much younger or much older than her—not that Lina actually discussed it with her mother.

But Ren wasn't like those men. He was clearly more appealing. It wouldn't hurt to get to know him, would it? She needed a friend. Her former colleagues at Everglade Hospital had already trailed off in their communications with her, as she had predicted. Though she missed feeling part of a group, she didn't miss the people themselves. They seemed part of another life already, as if Drake House had swallowed her up into its strange self-contained world.

And it was indeed a strange world, as she learned a few days after tasting Ren's "special cookies."

While on her rounds, Lina ate an English muffin as an afternoon snack. As she passed Mrs. B's open door, the old lady called out to her.

"Come in for a moment!" Mrs. B leaned forward from one of her lavender armchairs. "Do I have a Halloween story for you!"

"About what?" Lina sat down in the opposite armchair, careful not to scatter crumbs on it.

"I had a long talk with Jackie this morning. That woman has some interesting stories, all right."

"Oh, you got something out of her?" Lina took another bite of her muffin.

"I certainly did. It seems in the 1930s, when Jackie was a sorority girl here, there was something of a murder-suicide in this house."

Lina was startled enough to stop chewing. "A…murder?"

"Manslaughter-suicide, actually. The first death was accidental."

At the word "manslaughter," Lina's stomach went into a tailspin. She forced down her bite of muffin and nodded for Mrs. B to continue.

"You see," said Mrs. B, "Jackie's best friend Julia was seeing one of the houseboys. His name was Sean. The girls had a formal dance coming up, with a fairy-tale theme. It was on campus somewhere. Julia wanted Sean to go with her, but he wasn't comfortable with the idea, because in those days the girls weren't supposed to date the houseboys. He was afraid he'd lose his job. But Julia just couldn't live without him taking her to this dance, so she and Jackie cooked up a scheme.

"She got Sean to agree to a private evening at the house while the other girls were at the dance. But what she *really* planned was to slip him some sleeping pills in brandy, and then while he was asleep she was going to call a taxi, have the driver help haul him into the car, and take him to the dance. Then she was going to revive him there—like Sleeping Beauty, you know, only he would be Sleeping Beauty and she would be Princess Charming."

"Oh, no," Lina breathed. She winced at the mention of mixing sleeping pills with alcohol. The manslaughter was even medication-related. She felt sick.

"That's right. I guess whatever she and Jackie studied at U-Dub, it wasn't medicine."

"So he died."

"Here at the house. They never did make it to the dance."

"Oh. Oh, gosh." Lina's gaze traveled up to the ceiling as she wondered which of these rooms had been Julia's—and whether she ought to put her

head between her knees until the dizziness passed.

"After the funeral," Mrs. B said, "Sean's family brought charges against Julia. She didn't say a word. That night, when everyone was asleep, she went into the garage and started the housemother's car with the garage doors closed, and killed herself with the exhaust."

"So she knew about carbon monoxide." Lina's medical background provided an automatic answer, which was good, since otherwise it would have been hard to answer coherently during her panic attack.

"Isn't it funny, the little gaps in people's knowledge?"

A new thought darted across Lina's mind, and she clutched at it for support. "Then Jackie saw Ren, and thought he was the houseboy?"

"I guess so. She said he looks just like him. But really now, it's been seventy years. I imagine being back in this house made her think so. In any case, it gave her a shock."

A deep breath in and out helped steady Lina's heart rate. She rotated the last bite of English muffin in her fingers. "Why would she want to live here again, after going through something so awful? I wouldn't want to move back into the house where my best friend died." Nor would Lina want to go back to Everglade now, and she hadn't even been friends with Mr. Ambaum.

"She said she had fond memories after that—she and the other girls bonded and had some good times. Anyway, it's a lovely house."

"True." Lina tucked the muffin piece into the pocket of her lab coat, thinking about the dark, small garage where Marla and Alan's car now sat. She had been there just the other day, setting out on drugstore errands with Marla. Now she doubted she would ever enter the garage again without remembering what had taken place there. No wonder the basement gave her the creeps. No wonder people said there was a—

She looked at Mrs. B. "So that's the ghost?"

"Who? The houseboy, or the girl?"

"Either. Maybe both. Do you think it—oh, what am I saying?" Lina wiped her hands on her lab coat. "I don't know if I believe in that stuff. It's just things sometimes…never mind."

"Move around by themselves?"

"Well…yes. Like you said the first day."

"Yes, I said so, but it sounds to me like *you've* seen something."

Lina tried not to picture the ghost of a slain youth turning off the lamp in her bedroom, or slamming the laundry room door. "I can't prove it wasn't a living person. Or me being forgetful. Or faulty wiring, or a draft."

Mrs. B chuckled. "Always a rational explanation. You're probably right."

Lina's dizziness receded, but her mind remained a muddle. She rose. "I better go. I need to see Gertrude about a prescription. But I'm glad you told me."

"I'll see you at dinner, Lina dear. If you see that ghost, just jump into Ren's arms. He'll protect you!"

Lina smiled weakly and left the room with Mrs. B's laughter bubbling behind her. Not a half-bad idea, really. Sheltering in Ren's arms sounded lovely. Too bad it would require seeing a ghost.

* * *

An hour before dinner, Lina encountered Ren in the kitchen mixing dough—cookie dough, to judge from the bag of chocolate chips beside him. Mrs. B's comment returned to her mind and brought a much-needed smile to her face, finally allowing her to set aside thoughts of manslaughter and tormented spirits.

Ren glanced up and smiled back. "Lina Zuendel," he said, with perfect pronunciation. Must have heard her surname from Marla. "How's your day going?"

Lina rested her forearms on the bar. "Not bad. By the way, I think Mrs. B solved the mystery of why Jackie attacked you."

"Oh?" Ren's shiny red spatula worked the dough off the edges of the bowl.

"A houseboy was killed here in the thirties. By one of Jackie's friends."

"Accident, wasn't it?"

"Yes." Lina faltered, a bit deflated. "I guess Marla told you."

"Marla's grandma was the housemother here when it happened. I heard about it a long time ago."

"Everyone knows two kids died here, and no one said anything?"

Ren shrugged. His jaw muscles flexed; apparently he was chewing gum again. "Well, it *was* seventy years ago."

"But what about the…the ghost?" Though the question struck her as absurd, curiosity did nag at her. For one thing, the tale resonated with her own demons. And for another—well, everyone liked a good ghost story.

One side of Ren's mouth quirked, in what could have been amusement or thoughtfulness. He went on working the spatula. "People been telling you stories?"

"Kind of. A couple of the residents said the house was haunted, but I didn't really believe them. Then one night my lamp switched off by itself, and another time the laundry room door slammed shut…" She pulled herself upright. "But that doesn't mean anything."

He scraped the spatula on the rim of the bowl. "Haven't been bitten by one of those spiders, have you? Remember, they can cause hallucinations."

Lina smiled. She watched him seal the lid onto a plastic tub of baking powder. "You've worked here a few years, right?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever seen anything? I feel stupid just for asking. I don't believe in these things. Or at least I didn't before."

He plopped the dough onto a sheet of waxed paper, then set the bowl aside and wiped his hands on his apron. "If you mean, have objects moved by themselves, then—maybe. I swear sometimes I set something down, look the other way, and then turn back to find it flipped over or arranged differently. If you mean, have I seen transparent figures roaming the house, or met any headless horsemen in the alley, then no."

"Hm." Lina dragged a paper napkin around on the countertop with one finger, unsure whether his words were reassuring or disquieting. "Still, don't you think it's odd that you look like this dead houseboy? To someone who knew him?"

"Like I said, it's been seventy years. Memories get fuzzy." He began forming the dough into long rolls.

"A tragedy like that must have been in the newspapers. Maybe I'll look it up at the U-Dub library."

Ren pulled the waxed paper to the edge of the butcher's block and tore

it off. He folded it over one of the dough rolls and twisted the ends. "If you think it would help," he said, but he sounded dubious.

* * *

Lina took her research idea only as far as a half-hour internet search that evening. She didn't know enough about the incident to be able to seek specific names—for instance, Julia's or Sean's surnames—and thus had to resort to strings like "Seattle Julia manslaughter suicide Gamma Eta Omicron." Gamma Eta Omicron had been the letters of the sorority. Lina had spotted them on a dusty set of awards in the file room in the basement. Her web search didn't turn up anything relevant, which was understandable considering how long ago the deaths had taken place.

She then tried the UW library homepage, since Julia and Sean had been university students, and if anyone had carried the story it would have been the school newspaper. But she needed a university log-in and password to access most of the materials, and as she was no longer a student she had no such thing.

She gave up for the night and blinked at the dark window past her screen to ease her eyestrain. She figured when she had a free afternoon she would walk over to the library and do the research in person. As Ren had pointed out, there was no rush. It was difficult to make an urgent case out of the fact that seventy years ago two people had died.

"But now I've got some idea what you're all about," she said to her empty room, "and believe me, I understand." She stretched her arms over her head. "And thanks for giving me an excuse to talk to my own cute houseboy."

She smiled and got up to prepare for her night shift. Tonight was one of the three nights per week when she was on call. In a house with only twelve patients, all of whom were in fair or good health for their age, the graveyard shift was usually quiet, and she could sleep between calls. A pager, handed off to whoever was on duty, would wake her up. Lina had never received more than two calls per night so far, and they were never medical emergencies—just discomforts like leg cramps, insomnia, or gas. Marla covered two of the remaining nights each week; and Consuela, a nursing school student

currently working in the kitchen, covered the other two, dozing on the sofa-bed in the Drakes' quarters while waiting for calls.

Lina changed into a long-sleeved T-shirt and a soft pair of yoga pants with a drawstring waist, and set her lab coat and slip-on leather shoes beside her bed. She put the pager in her shoe and fell asleep within ten minutes.

The beep woke her. She squinted at the clock—half past midnight—knuckled her eyes to clear her vision, and picked up the pager. The electronic display read *Ethel B*. Slipping her feet into her shoes, she reviewed in her mind where Ethel's room was: second floor, toward the end of the L-shaped house. The back staircase would be the best route.

Lina put on her lab coat and shuffled out into the hall. Only half the corridor lights were on, leaving shadowed patches in between. The back staircase, which only had lights on every other landing, was especially dim. Cold, too, she thought, folding her arms and shivering as she padded down the carpeted steps. She paused at the window between the third and second floor, but spied only a black, drizzly night and the bare arm of a tree raking at the glass. The window must have been badly insulated, because the cold was pouring into the stairwell at refrigeration strength. In fact—she puffed out a breath to test—she could actually see her breath.

She turned to the stairs again. She didn't know why she felt afraid—only a tree tapping the glass, only an autumn storm making it cold—but as she stepped forward to descend to the second floor, her heart started pounding. She took hold of the handrail but couldn't make herself take the next step. She hadn't even been reading Stephen King lately. Why was she scared?

As she stood gripping the rail, the end of an orange crepe-paper streamer, stuck to the wall as Halloween decoration, untaped itself from the paneling and lifted into the air. It swung and rippled as if someone was standing there playing with it, just as Mrs. B had said about her door. Lina watched, paralyzed. The streamer swung once more and then dropped. Light footsteps thudded on the stairs in front of her, where no one was standing; she felt the floor vibrate.

"Why didn't you get to your patient in time?" she imagined some lawyer asking. "Why did you let poor Ethel Barker die?"

"I'm sorry. I couldn't get down there," she would say. "I thought there

was a ghost on the stairs."

She had to go forward. But she could not.

The footsteps approached, faster now, and closer, until with a rush of air they passed her, rustling the streamers. Cold breath blew down the nape of her neck. Lina shrieked and jumped back against the window. She held the pager raised in one fist, ready to strike anyone who appeared.

All went still. The other residents were playing tricks on her, she thought, throwing her gaze around the stairwell. They cooked up the story about the houseboy and the sorority girl, then paged her at midnight to catch her here, and then somehow made a streamer dance by itself in the air, and made the stairs shake…

New footsteps padded up from below.

She was not going to stand around and wait for that to happen again, no way. She bolted forward, thundering down the last flight to the second floor landing, and ran smack into someone.

She screamed. The person said something, startled. They untangled their arms and stepped apart.

"You okay?" Ren asked. He still wore his houseboy uniform: white button-up shirt, black trousers, and shiny black shoes. His breath smelled of wintergreen gum.

"Oh. Hello," she said. "Was that you? No, I guess…I don't see how you would have…"

"What happened?"

"Hah. I understand. This is what you do to new people, right? Good job. Had me scared. How did you do the cold air? Got a window open up there?"

He frowned up the stairs. "None of these windows open."

"But it's cold, it's really cold. Isn't it cold?" Her shivers had turned into full-on shakes.

"It's cold." He put his hand on her arm and brought her into the second-floor corridor. "Did something happen?"

"Only, um, footsteps—other than mine—and decorations coming unhinged, and I, I'm supposed to be seeing…"

"Where were you going?"

"Answering a call. Ethel."

"I'll come with you."

"Thank you," she said, grateful he offered without her needing to ask.

Ethel, in a voluminous purple nightgown, blinked at her from her lilac-scented pillow. "I'm so sorry to bother you, honey. My electric blanket isn't working, and it's positively freezing tonight."

"You're right about that." Lina folded up the faulty blanket and found a new one in the closet.

"Was that you thumping down the stairs and shouting?"

"Yes. Just me. I…tripped."

When she had gotten Ethel reheated and tucked in, she said goodnight and closed her door.

Ren leaned on the wall in the corridor. "All okay?"

Lina nodded. "Thanks for coming with me. I'm a little spooked. I don't know what happened." She turned toward the main staircase, avoiding the back stairs for now.

He walked with her, gazing at the light fixtures.

After a few seconds, she added, "I notice you're not saying, 'It was just your imagination.'"

"People don't like to be told that. I could say it anyway. Want me to?"

"I guess not. Hallucinating isn't much better."

"Still, after hearing the old stories today…"

"It could have been my imagination," she finished. "I hope. Kind of."

They climbed to the third floor. "These night shifts are never popular," he said. "Even with Marla. But don't tell her I said that."

"It was the same at the hospital. It got spooky. Only there was always someone around. Someone visible, I mean." She glanced at him. "How come you were up, anyway?"

"I don't sleep much. Just one of those people."

They reached her door. "So next time I have a night shift, if I scream again, you might come running?"

"I will if I hear you."

She opened her door and flicked on her overhead light, bright though it was in the middle of the night. "Well, I doubt I'll sleep any more now."

"You should try. I think it's over."

She looked at him. "What's over?"

He hovered outside the door frame, gazing down, lips pressed together as if he regretted opening them. "Just…these things, they tend not to last. It should be quiet now."

"So you don't even believe it was my imagination."

"I'd put it out of your mind. Try to relax and sleep."

"Are you in on this? Really. I won't be mad, just tell me. Is this a trick for the new nurse?"

He sighed and folded his hands behind his back. "No. We like you and want you to stay. It's an unusual house, that's all." He sounded as if he was choosing his words carefully.

"Cold air breathing down your neck, things moving by themselves, that's unusual, for sure."

He smiled at his feet. "Well, call if you need anything. Don't worry about waking me up. My room has an extension, it's on the list on your wall."

"Fine, but—"

"The rest of the night should be quiet. I really think so. Try to sleep." He bowed his head to her like an Edwardian English butler and walked away.