MERCY WILLOW BOOK TWO

THE SPIRIT ON SIDLE STREET

AMY CROSS

AUTHOR OF ASYLUM & THE FARM

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Now that she's established herself as an estate agent, Mercy Willow finds that she has an unusual ability. Whenever she goes to see a house, she doesn't just meet the living owners. She's also able to see, and talk to, the ghosts that still linger decades and sometimes centuries after their deaths. She's managed to get used to this strange gift, but a house on Sidle Street is about to put her to the ultimate test.

Mercy immediately realizes that the house is haunted. But after meeting the ghost in one of the upstairs rooms, she starts to hear hints of a second presence. For many years, neighbors have reported hearing the cries of a child, and now Mercy finds herself wondering whether this house is hiding a dark secret. When she digs into the street's past, she soon discovers that something awful happened there years ago. Someone – or something – is still waiting for justice.

And revenge.

The Spirit on Sidle Street is the second book in the *Mercy Willow* series, about an estate agent in deepest Cornwall who develops the unusual ability to communicate with ghosts.

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The Spirit on Sidle Street
(Mercy Willow book 2)

Prologue

30 years ago...

"Sweetheart? What are you doing out here?"

As soon as I hear Daddy's voice, I freeze. I thought he was still talking to someone on the phone, and that he wouldn't be paying any attention to me; I think maybe I didn't notice how long I'd been out here, because now I can hear his footsteps coming out from the back door and into the garden. I immediately feel flustered, and annoyed at myself for letting my guard down. All I can do is push the blood and fur under a nearby bush and hope that Daddy didn't see too much. Not like last time.

"Are you okay?" he asks as he comes up behind me.

I take a deep breath, and then I turn and look up at him. He looks puzzled, but not angry – not yet – so I think I still have a chance to turn this around. I force a big smile.

"I'm fine, Daddy," I say, trying to make myself sound as carefree and innocent as possible. I'm sure he's suspicious, but I still have a chance. "I was just... having fun by myself for a while."

"There's nothing wrong with that," he replies, putting his hands on his hips. "In fact, I might even go so far as to say that it's healthy."

I wait for him to continue, but he says nothing so I simply keep the smile plastered on my face. I feel kind of silly like this, but I don't really know what else to do. What I really want is for him to just turn around and go back into the house, so I can finish cleaning up my mess.

"You've been out here for a while, huh?" he continues.

"It's okay, I don't mind. I was just playing."

He pauses, and then he looks around.

"You don't have any toys with you," he points out.

"I don't always need toys," I tell him, while making a mental note to always have a few props with me from now on. "I was using my imagination."

"You've certainly got a lot of that," he chuckles. He still seems a little cautious, as if he senses that something's wrong, but after a moment he simply shrugs. "Okay, well I've got some more phone calls to make, so I'll

be inside. I guess there's no rest for the wicked. Can I leave you out here on your own?"

I nod.

He turns to walk away, and then he stops as he glances at my hands.

Looking down, I'm immediately irritated by the sight of blood on my left thumb. How did I leave that there?

"It's just strawberry jam," I lie, but when I turn to him again I see that he looks a little concerned. I try to think of what I can do to put him off the scent, and a moment later I reach up and put my thumb in my mouth.

I suck hard, and when I pull my thumb out it's clean again. I was able to taste the blood, just a little, but I don't mind; I've tasted blood before.

"See?" I say with a grin.

"No more snacks in the middle of the day," he says, rolling his eyes and turning to walk back into the house. "I swear, you move so quietly sometimes. I didn't even hear you come into the kitchen."

I open my mouth to reply.

"Skittles?" a voice calls out from the other side of the fence. "Skittles, where are you? Here, pussy!"

Dad stops in the doorway, and I'm left cursing my bad luck. Why did Mr. Lucas have to come out into his garden at that exact moment and start calling for his stupid cat? I swear, our neighbors on *both* sides know exactly when to cause trouble, and sometimes I actually wonder whether they do things to deliberately make Daddy mad at me. I swear, I have the worst luck in all the world.

"Skittles?" Mr. Lucas continues, as if he just wants to make things worse and worse. "Skittles, boy, what are you up to? It's not like you to miss breakfast."

"What's under there?" Daddy asks, stepping back toward me and peering at the bush.

"Nothing!" I say quickly. Too quickly, I immediately realize.

"Let me see."

"There's nothing there, Daddy!" I hiss, getting to my feet and stepping in his way, trying to block him. "Can we go and do something inside? It's getting cold out here and -"

"I want to see first."

He moves me aside, and then he crouches down and peers under the bush. As soon as that happens, I know exactly what he's going to see, and I know he's going to assume the worst. It no longer matters what I say or do; he's going to assume that I did something really bad, and there's no way he'll even listen to me when I try to explain.

"Skittles?" Mr. Lucas says, just a few feet away on the other side of the fence. "I've got your scrambled eggs all ready, just the way you like it!"

Daddy pulls the bushes back, revealing the cat's bloodied corpse.

"I didn't do it!" I blurt out, clenching both fists at once. "I found him like that, I think he'd been killed by another cat or by a fox! I didn't do anything to hurt him, he was like that when I got here! Daddy, you have to believe me!"

He hesitates, before turning and looking up at me, and in that moment I can already see from the look in his eyes that he doesn't believe me at all. He thinks the absolute worst, and no explanation in the world will ever convince him otherwise. Why do people always think that I've done something bad? Just because I've done a few bad things in the past, that doesn't mean I'm *always* to blame. And I genuinely found Skittles like this, I just came out here and he was already dead and...

Wasn't he?

I feel a faint headache on the right side of my brain as I furrow my brow. Sometimes my head gets a little foggy, and that's when I don't quite know what I've just done.

"Have either of you seen Skittles?" Mr. Lucas asks, and I turn to see him peering over the top of the fence. "That cat *never* misses his breakfast. I've got some lovely smoked salmon for him as well."

I look at him, and then I turn to Daddy.

"Go inside," he says to me firmly.

"But -"

"Go inside!" he snaps, and this time he seems angry. "I need to talk to Mr. Lucas! Go inside and wait for me there!"

"I -"

"Go!" he shouts.

Grabbing my arm, he shoves me toward the house. I'm already starting to cry as I run, and by the time I reach the back door I know that he's telling Mr. Lucas about Skittles. I stop at the door and turn to look

back, but now my head is pounding so hard that my vision's starting to blur, and the whole world seems to be pulsing to the beat of my heart. I grip the door's side and clench my teeth; I want to run back and scream that I didn't hurt Skittles, but at the back of my mind I'm not sure I quite remember everything that happened this morning.

“It's not fair,” I sob, as fresh tears run down my face. “Why do we always get the blame for everything?”

Chapter One

Today...

Today is a beautiful day for a house viewing.

As I drive through the center of the village, I can't help thinking that Candleward is just about the most beautiful place anyone could ever hope to live. There are lots of small, independent shops, and everyone just seems to be going about their business so happily. The sun's beating down, and my first proper summer here in the depths of the Cornish Riviera is already set up to be a scorcher. In fact, this place is so stunning and so perfect in every way, it's almost like something from a picture postcard.

And... then there are the ghosts.

Glancing at the village store, I see two people talking in the doorway; I *also* see a pale face staring out at me from one of the upstairs windows. I drive carefully around the corner, and I see four people waiting at the bus stop by the war memorial; three of the people look like normal village inhabitants, but the fourth is a woman with a deathly countenance. I try to focus on the road ahead, but as I drive past the playground I spot some children having fun on the swings; nearby, two other children – dressed in old-fashioned clothes – are watching them forlornly. In Candleward, there are easily as many ghosts as there are living people. More, I'm sure.

As I turn onto the next street, I spot Old Nigel. I don't know that his name's actually Nigel, of course, but that's what I call him. He's a ghost who just walks along this street all day and all night. I'm not even sure whether anyone else has ever spotted him, but I see him whenever I come along here. And he always looks at me, making eye contact right as I drive past.

"Good morning, Nigel," I say as I drive past, even though I know I shouldn't be talking to these ghosts. "Have another great day."

Ever since I almost died a few months ago at Hurst House, I've been able to see ghosts all around the village. When I say that I *almost* died, I'm fudging the facts a little there; I'm pretty sure that technically I definitely died, if only for a minute or two, and that seems to have left me with some kind of 'insight' into the world of the hereafter. I'm alive, but I

can see the dead as clearly as I see the living, and sometimes when they look back at me I realize that the dead seem to be very much aware of my ability. And as an estate agent – as a very *busy* estate agent – this 'seeing the dead' thing can be both a blessing and a curse.

A curse, because I get insights into all the sorrow and sadness in each property. And a blessing because...

Wait, why is it a blessing again?

I steer onto another street, heading toward the cliff-side estate, and this time I really have to force myself to just watch the road. There are houses on either side, and I know that if I look at those houses, I'll see the faces of plenty of ghosts staring out at me. If the past few months have taught me anything, it's that most ghosts should just be ignored. The vast majority aren't out for revenge, or desperate to be recognized, or searching for some long-lost relative. They're just... I don't know, they're just hanging about. I guess they want something, but whatever that something might be, they don't seem too pushy. I'm not even sure that they *want* to be disturbed, and in return I certainly would rather let them get on with whatever they're getting on with.

I've got enough on my plate, dealing with live people. I don't need to add the dead to that list as well.

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“Welcome to my humble abode,” Cathy Morgan says as she steps aside and gestures for me to enter the hallway of 9 Sidle Street. “Now, I don't want to seem like I'm bragging, but I'm sure you'll agree that I have the most stunning house on all of Sidle Street.”

“It's absolutely beautiful,” I tell her as I look around, and I'm not lying.

The hallway is huge, with a large curved staircase winding down from an upper floor that I'm sure is just as opulent. A big chandelier hangs above us, and several doorways lead off into the various other rooms on the downstairs level. Cathy Morgan has obviously fluffed the place up for my visit, hoping to add a little to my valuation, but the house itself is most certainly quite wonderful. And with each passing second, my estate agent brain is already racking up the little features that I need to emphasize when I put the place on the market.

Original fireplace.
Marble floor.
Sweeping staircase.
Large windows.
A bright interior.
The perfect place to raise a family.

"Of course, you haven't even seen the best part!" Cathy says, putting a hand on my arm and starting to steer me through to the front room. "This is what gets us the real gasps."

I follow her easily, preferring to let her guide me around, at least initially. She seems very keen, almost over-eager, which in itself is strange since this is the kind of house that'll almost sell itself. Sure, the price tag is going to be hefty, but I've come to learn that plenty of people harbor a desire to move down to the rugged Cornish coast, and Londoners in particular are often more than happy to swap a cramped two or three bedroom place in the suburbs for somewhere down in this part of the country.

And then, as I follow Cathy across the front room toward the large windows at the far end, I see exactly what she means.

"Isn't this the most wonderful view you've ever seen?"

As I stop at the windows, I have to admit that she's right. The windows themselves run from the floor to the ceiling, and all the way along this side of the room, affording a magnificent view of the sea. There's a small garden, but beyond that there's a fence and then a huge drop from the edge of the cliff all the way down to the sandy beach below, where waves are happily lapping at the shore. The shining sun glitters on the sea's surface, and a couple of surfers are making their way across the beach already, contributing to an almost idyllic view. To cap that off, the sea stretches off toward the horizon, and a few seagulls are arcing and wheeling above, letting the wind carry them here and there.

A few seconds later, I realize that I don't think I've replied to Cathy for almost a minute. I turn to her, and I can see that she's chuffed to bits by my reaction.

"I know," she says, nodding sagely. "There's nothing quite like it anywhere else."

"It's amazing," I tell her, although I'm pretty sure that she already knows that. "All the houses along Sidle Street are beautiful, but I'm not sure

that the rest have such a great view."

"They don't," she replies quickly. "Sandra Ward three doors down *thinks* that her view is as good as mine, but it's not. She also thinks she lost ten kilograms since she started using those ridiculous rollers skis, but... Well, let's just say that she's completely deluded."

"It sounds like you know your neighbors well," I suggest, using my well-honed estate agent's ability to put a positive spin on pretty much any feature. "That's good. Sidle Street seems to have a really strong community vibe. Like a... great local spirit."

"The spirit of Sidle Street is all about caring for one another," she says, before leaning a little closer. "That," she adds, lowering her voice, "and competing to have the best-looking house. Which isn't too difficult for me, since this place just has good bones. That's important for a house, don't you think? You can dress a place up as much as you want, you can try to put lipstick on a pig, but at the end of the day you need a house to have good bones. And this place has the best bones anyone could ever want."

"It's unique," I tell her. "Are you sure you want to sell?"

"The house belonged to my husband, at least until the divorce," she replies. "Unfortunately Gary turned out to have a wandering eye. So now the house is mine, but there are a few too many bad memories here, and I'm ready to get out of Cornwall and go live somewhere with just a little more life. We were going to have kids here, until he turned out to be as sterile as a rock, but the good news is that I'm still just about young enough to make a go of things with a new guy. Provided I can find him, of course. And provided the doctors can do their thing with pipettes and needles and eggs and all that stuff."

She pauses, and for the first time I think I sense a hint of sadness about her.

"I just want to sell up and move on," she continues, forcing a smile even though she seems to be on the verge of tears, "and that's where you come in. I've known Horace Cockcroft for years, and he personally recommended your services. And like I said, this place has good bones. Strong, solid bones that'll last. Forget about the décor, that's just frippery. What matters is the bone, because it's the bones that we're selling here. Don't you think?"

"I'm sure it has *great* bones," I reply, hoping to make her feel a little more confident. "And those bones are -"

Before I can finish, I hear a faint creaking sound coming from above. I look up at the ceiling, and I'm already pretty sure that someone's in one of the upstairs rooms.

“Oh, the house just does that sometimes,” Cathy says dismissively. “It's a big empty place that's pretty much a century old. You're bound to get the odd groan now and again, right?”

“Absolutely,” I say, still watching the ceiling for a moment before finally turning to her again. “Would you mind if I take a quick look around by myself?”

Chapter Two

“Hello?” I whisper, as I creep across the plushly-carpeted landing and stop to look into the master bedroom. “Anyone here?”

I wait, and I don't hear a response, but I'm pretty sure that I'm not wrong about this. I've developed a kind of sixth sense when it comes to picking up on the presence – or not – of ghostly figures. I can't explain how that works, exactly, except to say that somehow I can tell when there's an invisible entity waiting to make an appearance.

“It's okay,” I continue, keeping my voice low so that there's no chance of Cathy overhearing me from downstairs. The last thing I want to do is make her think that I'm crazy. “I know you're here. I just want to meet you, that's all.”

Again I wait, but the silence is deafening. I have to admit, I'm starting to wonder whether maybe – just maybe – I've made a mistake, but at the same time the signs are unmistakable. I don't quite know how to start explaining how it feels when there's a ghost around; I just get this sense of a presence, of something that's somehow still part of the very fabric of the building. Some of the houses around here are a good few hundred years old, and that's more than enough time for a ghostly entity to really make itself at home. I guess the best way to describe it would be this: there's the kind of silence you hear when no-one's about, and then there's another kind of silence you hear when someone's trying to stay quiet.

Spotting some cracks on one of the walls, I wander over. I run a fingertip against the largest crack, and I make a mental note to get Cathy to paint over this spot. Still, a few cracks shouldn't be a problem, and hopefully they're merely cosmetic.

“I'm going to be selling the house,” I say as I step over toward the middle of the room. “There'll be people looking around, and I think it'll go quite quickly, so I thought it'd only be polite to... keep you in the loop.”

I wait.

“After all,” I add, “I guess you live here too.”

As those words leave my lips, I find myself wondering whether that's quite the best way to explain this situation. Then again, I've been trying to find the perfect way to talk to ghosts for a while now, and I haven't really come up with anything. Ever since the 'incident' at Hurst House, all

the ghosts in all the houses I've actually visited have kept well away from me. I know they're around, but I guess most of the time they just don't feel very chatty.

"If -"

"Ms. Willow?" Cathy calls out suddenly from downstairs. "I'm going out into the garden. You can find me there when you're ready!"

"Thank you!" I reply. "I won't be long!"

I listen to the sound of her heading outside, and then I go to the window. Sure enough, a moment later I spot her striding out across the lawn, and I'm once again struck by the awe-inspiring beauty of the view from this house. Someone's going to be buying themselves an absolutely stunning new home, although they'll need to have a good seven figures in the bank if they want to afford the place. In fact, if -

"There you are!"

Startled, I turn and watch as a woman storms into the room. She's wearing a rather old-fashioned black dress, with a very noticeable pearl necklace finishing off a look that overall screams at least early twentieth century. I might be kidding myself, but I *think* I've become quite adept at judging these ghosts and figuring out roughly when they died.

"You're late," she continues, hurrying to the bed and straightening the quilt. "That's something I absolutely cannot abide, so you'd better be punctual from now on or we won't get along at all."

She casts a dubious eye at me, complete with an arched eyebrow.

"And what in the name of all that's holy," she adds, "are you wearing?"

"Hi," I reply, somewhat taken aback by her forwardness. "My name -"

"I don't need to know your name, my dear," she replies with a roll of the eyes. "If you're the new help, then you're really going to have to get better at inferring my needs. It's so tiring when one has to keep explaining these things and spelling everything out. You do have *some* common sense about you, don't you?"

"I hope so," I stammer. "Listen, as I was saying, I -"

"I don't want to be your friend," she says firmly.

I hesitate.

"I know that's fashionable these days," she sighs. "We're supposed to see the hired help as people, just like ourselves. We're supposed to

become familiar with them. Well, that won't wash here in my home. I'm the mistress and you're the servant, and I want to maintain a strict dividing line." She smiles, but it's a very false smile that's clearly just for show. "Some people seem to think that now the war's over, we're in for a new age of relaxed manners. I think quite the opposite is true, however. I think we need to remember how things used to be before all that dreadful fighting broke out."

"The war?" I say cautiously, trying to work out exactly which war she might mean. "The... second one?"

"What?"

"Never mind," I continue, telling myself that I'll figure that out later. "I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch your name."

"What do you mean?"

"Your name," I say again. "I'm sorry, but -"

"You've come here to work for me, and you don't even know my name?" she asks incredulously. "Are you a complete fool, girl? What's wrong with you?"

"I'm so sorry."

"I'm Mrs. Jacobs," she continues. "Caroline Jacobs, but you will call me Mrs. Jacobs at all times. I don't even know why I told you my first name." She sighs again, and I've got a feeling that she's the kind of woman who sighs a lot. "The late Mrs. Matthew Jacobs, I suppose," she mutters. "Matthew was my husband, in case it's beyond your wit to comprehend that fact. He died in the war, poor thing. He hadn't really had much of a chance to get involved, and then apparently he stepped on something he shouldn't have and..."

She pauses, with a trace of genuine sadness in her eyes.

"There wasn't much to bury," she says softly. "I hear parts of him were found all over the place. The blast must have been huge."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I tell her, while making a mental note to find out a little more about this Matthew Jacobs guy. "I suppose you must find it rather strange that I'm up here in your bedroom, but I was hoping to -"

"You haven't heard anything odd, have you?" she asks, interrupting me.

"I'm sorry?"

“There's no need to lie to me,” she continues. “I know what you people are like, you're all the same, but I really don't need you to start rattling on about this sort of thing. If you're going to be living and working in my house, we might as well get the most obvious matter out of the way first. No, my home is not haunted. I can't even begin to tell you how many maids I've had to let go, simply because they wouldn't stop prattling on about spooks and things that go bump in the night. You're not easily frightened, are you?”

“I wouldn't say so,” I reply. “Not particularly. Not... these days.”

“That's all very well and good,” she mutters, and she's starting to seem increasingly frustrated. “This is an old house, on a cliff with the wind blasting against it all day. There are bound to be some odd noises, some little creaks and groans and whistles, but that doesn't mean some poor undead soul is haunting the place. I must tell you right now, I find any talk of ghosts to be in exceedingly poor taste, and I simply won't have it. If you so much as utter the 'g' word, or anything related, I shall terminate your employment with me on the spot. Is that understood?”

“Well...”

As I try to work out exactly how to respond to her rather forceful instructions, I can't help but notice the irony of the situation. After all, I'm standing here being lectured by a ghost about the fact that ghosts don't exist, and I get the distinct impression that she wouldn't take kindly to any attempt to point out the problem with this set-up. Of all the ghosts I've encountered during my time here in the Candleward area, Mrs. Caroline Jacobs is by far the most... pushy.

“I'm glad that's settled,” she says, before turning and hurrying through to the next room. “Now, will you please get some drinks ready? I have friends coming over this afternoon and I must make a good impression.” She disappears around the corner. “I don't want you embarrassing me, is that understood?”

I open my mouth to reply, but a moment later I realize that there's now no sign of her at all. I head to the doorway and look through into the dressing room, but the woman has completely vanished, and there's certainly nowhere else she could have gone. I don't quite know why ghosts appear and disappear like this, but Mrs. Jacobs is certainly not here right now, and I have to admit that I'm a little relieved.

“Okay, then,” I say finally, figuring that I simply need to get on with my job and hope that I don't cross paths with her too often. “I guess I'll... be off.”

Chapter Three

“And how long do you think it'll take before the place snags a buyer?” Cathy asks as we sit in the dining room downstairs.

“I think this house will really appeal to buyers both from the local area and from further afield,” I tell her. “That's why I've recommended pricing it just a little on the high side, because there's no harm in seeing whether we find someone who really adores the property. I've got a good feeling about it, I think that if the right person walks through the door, they'll absolutely offer this price.”

“I'm not in a terrible rush to sell,” she tells me, “but obviously I'd like to get a move on. Living in this place brings back a few unhappy memories.”

“Do you know much about its history?” I ask.

“Not a bloody thing,” she chuckles, before taking a sip of wine. “Are you *sure* I can't offer you a glass?”

“I'm really fine, thank you.”

“It's an old house, that's all I know,” she continues as she glances around. “Personally, I hate new-builds anyway. At least when a house has been around for a while, you know that it must be sturdy. In fact, in all the time I've been living here, I don't think I've ever known anything to go wrong.”

“What about... strange noises?” I suggest.

“What kind of noises?”

“Oh, it's just something that prospective buyers ask about sometimes,” I continue, trying to make light of the situation. “You'd be surprised how many people ask me about ghosts and things like that.”

“There are no ghosts here,” she says firmly. “Believe me, I'd know if there were. I wouldn't even mind, it'd be a bit of company, but the place is more or less empty. Sometimes I feel like I'm rattling around in here. To be perfectly honest with you, I wouldn't mind a ghost or two. At least that'd mean a little excitement now and again.”

She raises her glass toward the ceiling.

“Anyone there?” she calls out merrily. “Feel free to pop down and socialize!”

She rolls her eyes.

“The only thing that might possibly be haunting this house,” she continues, “is the ghost of my husband's cheap suits, which I cut up after I met his pregnant mistress.”

I can't help but smile as I make some final notes on the property forms. Cathy Morgan has clearly never run into the disapproving ghostly figure of Caroline Jacobs, and I'm sure that's a good thing for her. I doubt they'd get along very well, anyway, since they both seem to be somewhat fiery women and I can't for one moment imagine them sharing the same space. Not knowingly, at least.

“I just don't want to become some pathetic old lush,” Cathy says after a moment, as she lowers her glass and stares down at the wine, “drinking herself into oblivion every afternoon like some kind of rotten cliché. This is a good house and it deserves to be owned by someone who really treasures the place and brings it back to life.” She smiles sadly at me. “I can't fill such a big house. Not even me, with all my lust for life.” She holds her glass out. “Cheers! Here's to new starts, for me and for this big old pile of bricks!”

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Half an hour later, once I've nailed down the final details with Cathy Morgan, I sit in my car and take a quick look through the paperwork. I'm convinced that this house, which is undoubtedly the finest property on Sidle Street, will sell in a flash, and I'm not even too troubled by the ghostly Mrs. Jacobs.

After all, if she hasn't bothered Cathy Morgan all this time, then I don't see why she'd suddenly start appearing when we're trying to sell the place.

Hearing my phone buzz, I pull it from my pocket and see that Horace is trying to get through. He mostly trusts me these days to just get on with things, but from time to time – especially with the more expensive properties – he likes to check up on me. That's fine; after all, now that it's just the two of us, I've become Horace's second-in-command. He's mentioned hiring someone to join the team, but I don't think he's ever going to actually follow through with that idea. Not that I really want to think too much about *why* we're now a two-man operation.

“Hey,” I say as I answer, “I just left the house on Sidle Street and it's all looking good. I'm pretty confident about this one.”

“Nice and boring,” he replies. “That's what we like.”

“I'm going to put it up at a higher price,” I continue, as I glance back toward the house. “Give it a week or two, seeing as the vendor's in no rush. You never know, we might get a bite.”

As those words leave my mouth, I notice Cathy heading out to the garden to work on the rose bushes. A moment later, spotting movement, I look up at the house's upper windows and see to my surprise that Caroline Jacobs is staring out at me from one of the bedrooms. I tell myself that there's no need to be concerned, but after just a fraction of a second I realize that there's something strangely mournful about her expression; I know I'm probably wrong, at least I hope that I am, but I swear it's almost as if – at this exact moment – she knows that she's dead.

“Did you hear what I said?”

“Sorry?” I reply, startled as I realize that I wasn't paying attention to Horace at all.

“I said, that's a good idea but don't push it too long,” he continues with a sigh. “You know my feelings about this market, it's not all as rosy as people make it out to be. Sentiment is souring.”

“But there's no harm in trying, right?”

“You've got a good instinct,” he tells me, as I watch Caroline Jacobs for a moment longer. “I'm going to trust you on this one, Mercy, because you've come through for me a bunch of times before. Just don't get too ambitious, okay? There's nothing wrong with going for a firm but fair price.”

“I know,” I reply, “it's just -”

Before I can finish, I realize that there's someone else in that room upstairs, stepping up behind Caroline. I squint, trying to work out exactly who I'm seeing, but I'm unable to make out any features; I tell myself that this must be a trick of the light, that there can't possibly be anyone else in the house, but I swear the light on Caroline's face has somehow become darker, and after just a fraction of a second she half turns, as if she realizes that she's not alone.

“Who's that?” I whisper.

“What?” Horace barks.

Unable to answer him, I simply continue to watch Caroline for a moment. She still hasn't quite turned fully to look at the figure behind her, and I really don't understand why I can't properly make out the other ghost's face. At the same time, I'm starting to wonder whether this supposed figure is a figure at all, or whether some trick of the light is making me imagine things.

And then, in an instant, Caroline turns and walks out of view, and I'm left staring at an empty window.

"Are you still there?" Horace asks.

"Yes!" I splutter, still watching the window for any sign of another presence. "Of course!"

"This is the biggest property you've handled since you started working for me," he continues, "but I have absolutely no doubt that you're going to seal the deal. Just don't get altitude sickness, okay? It's just another house, and all you have to do is run the paperwork and show people around. Don't be tempted to try anything flashy."

"I wouldn't dream of being flashy."

"I've got a lot of faith in you," he reminds me. "I was worried at first, but you're showing the same zeal that Heidi showed when she first showed up, and I reckon that's a very good sign."

I open my mouth to reply, but at that moment I'm struck by the mention of Heidi's name. I've been trying to think about her as little as possible; she comes to me in nightmares sometimes, but for the most part I've managed to forget about that awful moment when Jessica stabbed her in Hurst House. At the same time, I feel a shudder pass through my bones, and I know that eventually I'm going to have to face up to what really happened. For now, however, I guess I just need to stay focused on the task at hand.

"Are you still listening to me?" Horace asks.

"Yes!"

"Sometimes I think your head's in the clouds," he grumbles. "Remember to keep your eye on the details, and I'll see you back at the office."

"Absolutely," I reply, before cutting the call.

Staring at the house, I try to distract myself from all thoughts of Heidi. Instead of thinking about what happened to her, I watch the window for a moment longer, and I'm already starting to realize that I probably

imagined that extra figure up there. I've become so accustomed to seeing ghosts over the past few months, I think I actually forgot what it's like to get spooked by something. Still, the fact that this house is haunted is neither here nor there; I've already sold plenty of haunted houses, ghosts and all, and I see no reason why this one should be any different.

Chapter Four

“Sidle Street? Now *that's* one of the posher areas round these parts.”

As Deidre sets my cup of tea on the table, she's already craning her neck to get a look at the paperwork I've brought to the cafe. I know this stuff is supposed to be confidential, but I'm pretty sure that Deidre's not going to do anything bad with the information. Besides, even if she learned something interesting, she'd have forgotten it again by the time she got back to the counter.

“I'm selling a house up there,” I tell her.

“I bet it'll be priced high,” she replies, “and it'll *still* sell fast. There's no shortage of people wanting to move down to Cornwall for a quieter life.”

“That's what I'm banking on.”

She peers more closely at the paperwork.

“Extensive landscaped garden,” she reads out loud from my notes. “Space for a pool. Six bedrooms. Converted basement *and* attic. Conservatory. It sounds like absolute luxury. If I could -”

She stops suddenly, and I glance up to see that she seems troubled by something.

“Number nine?” she says cautiously.

“It's the big house on the -”

“Yes, dear, I know which one it is,” she continues, and I can tell that she's more than a little flustered. “I remember riding my bike past that place when I was just a little girl. It was so sad, seeing the place empty after poor Mrs. Jacobs died.”

“Do you mean Caroline Jacobs?” I ask, thinking back to the ghostly figure I encountered earlier.

“She was a very sad woman, by all accounts, after her husband died in the war,” she tells me. “Lonely, too. I remember hearing that she could never keep a maid for more than a month or two. They all quit because they found her too difficult to work with. Apparently, in the end, her body lay undiscovered for almost a year before. I think I must have cycled past when she was dead, and I looked at that beautiful house and I never realized that the poor woman was...”

Her voice trails off for a moment.

“Well, you know what I mean,” she adds cautiously. “It's so sad to think that someone could die, and no-one would even notice for all that time.”

“Did she have no family at all?”

“I suppose not. Either that, or she'd alienated them all.”

“How horrible,” I say, and I can't help feeling that Caroline Jacobs must have been very isolated in her final years. She certainly seemed rather high and mighty when I encountered her earlier, but that kind of attitude can hide a multitude of sadness.

“Still,” she continues, “it's thanks to Mrs. Jacobs and her husband that there's a house there at all. After the old one burned down, I mean.”

“There was a previous house there?”

“Oh yes, up until the early twentieth century. It was rather grand, by all accounts, but after the fire it was left derelict for years. Until Mr. and Mrs. Jacobs bought the place that is. By all accounts, they had to flatten the old house and start all over again. I don't think there was really very much left of the original structure. Maybe a room or two at most.”

“That explains why it's so much newer than the other houses on the street,” I tell her.

“But that's not all,” she says, and after a moment she surprises me by taking the seat opposite. I guess she's warming to the story now. “At first, everyone thought that the rebuilt house was a wonderful addition to the neighborhood. Until the rumors started.”

“What rumors?” I ask cautiously.

“About that house,” she replies, before leaning toward me. Her short-term memory might be shot, but her long-term memory is still pretty great. “Everyone said it was cursed!”

Chapter Five

On the day of the grand reopening, 9 Sidle Street was considered to be one of the smartest and most desirable houses in the local area. The ruins of the original building, blackened and charred, had been something of an eyesore. Everyone was happy that they'd been torn down and replaced by something new, and Matthew and Caroline Jacobs seemed like such a lovely young couple. What could go wrong?

The problems started soon after they moved in.

The year was 1935, and the Jacobs were an affluent couple. Storm clouds were gathering over Europe, but Matthew Jacobs was a successful businessman who earned more than enough to keep himself and his wife living a life of luxury. They had no children, and although Caroline occasionally mentioned that they were trying, for the most part the new young couple seemed happy with their lot in life. There were rumors that Caroline had miscarried a few times, but back in those days people tended to keep their private lives very much to themselves. And then, finally, the truth could be hidden no longer.

Caroline was seen out and about with a bulging belly, and soon baby equipment was being delivered to the house. Matthew was willing to splash out on everything that his wife wanted, and the neighbors gossiped about how the new arrival was going to be the most spoiled child in the entire street. Eventually some local nannies were interviewed, with a view to them starting work shortly before the child was due, but for one reason or another no-one was hired until just a couple of weeks before the pregnancy was due to end.

This nanny, a local girl named Olive Atkins, lasted precisely one day before quitting on the spot. When she was questioned by her family, she's said to have told them that she would never – even on pain of death – tell them what she'd seen during her time at the house.

Soon, fresh rumors started to spread. Caroline wasn't seen out and about at all, and most people speculated that she was simply getting plenty of bed-rest ahead of the big day. Eventually, however, horrified neighbors saw that all the baby equipment was being taken away, and as the months rolled past they realized that no-one had heard anything to suggest that a baby had been born. A pall seemed to have fallen over the house.

When Caroline Jacobs was finally seen in public, she seemed like a different woman. She appeared to have aged about a decade, and her eyes were filled with a sense of pain. She was much less talkative before, and she was heard barking orders and complaints at her husband in the street. No-one dared to ask her exactly what had happened, but everyone understood that one way or another she'd lost the baby. The general assumption was that, once a suitable period of time had elapsed, they could always try again.

Then the war came.

Matthew Jacobs was one of the first men from the county to go off and fight. His wife was left at home alone, with no husband and no child, and by all accounts she became reserved and withdrawn. Matthew's money allowed her to keep trying to hire maids, and some of these young women even managed to last a few months; eventually, however, they all left, until Caroline had exhausted the local supply. That was when she started bringing in maids from further afield, but these too were never long-lasting appointments. According to the neighbors, the record was nine weeks, which was the longest that any maid remained at the house.

And yet, there were some who claimed that – from time to time – they *did* hear the sound of a baby crying in the house.

Caroline Jacobs was never seen pushing a pram, and she never spoke about a child, even on the rare occasions when she was forced to converse with her neighbors. Nobody seriously believed that a baby had been born, and most people insisted that the house was entirely still and quiet, but a few of the locals insisted that, if one were to walk past at just the right moment in the middle of the night, a baby could be heard crying somewhere inside 9 Sidle Street. As impossible as the idea seemed, gossip spread and soon some of the locals began to believe that Caroline Jacobs had indeed given birth, and that the child was simply being hidden from public view.

Of course, even more bizarre claims soon spread. Some insisted that the child was so hideous, it couldn't possibly be shown to anyone. Others suggested that the child had been bought in from outside, and that Caroline was terrified of the truth being revealed. Every possible crazy theory was bandied about, while for the most part the consensus was that there was no child at all and that those who'd heard otherwise were merely mistaken.

Matthew Jacobs died in 1941. His body was supposedly returned to the country and he was given a proper burial, although the rumor-mill suggested that there was little – if any – of his corpse actually in the coffin. His widow wore black for an entire year following his death.

Meanwhile, maids continued to come and go. Every so often another local girl, having reached the age of maturity, would be tempted by the high wages on offer. Not one of these maids reported having ever seen or heard a baby at the house, and not one maid had a kind word to say about their – temporary – employer. Their accounts of their brief time in the house were always the same: they described Caroline Jacobs as a harsh and very unfair woman who was prone to fits of rage, and they all claimed that they were never able to perform their duties to her satisfaction. Many of them believed that no-one in the entire world could have lived up to Caroline's high standards, or could have guessed the details of her idiosyncratic demands.

"Impossible."

"Cruel."

"Angry."

Those were the most commonly used words when these former maids were asked to describe Caroline Jacobs. And although fresh maids were occasionally hired, Caroline eventually began to run out of options. For the most part, she spent her final years living alone. Some of the last girls who briefly worked at the house used particularly uncharitable terms to describe the woman.

"Bitch."

Yet still some locals claimed to hear a child crying at night.

As the years passed, Caroline Jacobs was barely seen out and about at all. Supplies were delivered to her home, and even the rumor-mill began to calm down as local gossip-mongers moved on to more tantalizing, more modern topics. The house at 9 Sidle Street rarely – if ever – received visitors, and although a few people insisted that they still heard the sound of a baby crying at night, such claims were usually just met with a shrug. The mystery of Caroline Jacobs and her home was no longer a matter of much concern.

Eventually, on a summer's day in 1964, the local council sent Caroline Jacobs a letter, requesting permission to access her property in order to inspect some fencing near the cliff. When they received no reply,

the council dispatched a man to knock on the front door, and when he received no reply he made his way around to try the rear. While knocking on the back door, he glanced through a window and saw a dead body on the floor. The police were called, and a coroner determined that the poor woman had been dead for approximately twelve months.

For the next few years, the house stood empty while the legal system dealt with Caroline's estate. Even now, however, passersby occasionally reported that they'd heard what sounded like a baby crying. By this point, however, everyone was utterly sick of such claims, and the house was mostly ignored until the early 2000s, at which point new owners arrived and the property was given a fresh lease of life. After that, no further cries were heard at night, and any questions of a 'curse' were quickly forgotten. As far as the people of the local area were concerned, 9 Sidle Street was now just another normal house.

And then, in 2011, Olive Atkins died in a retirement home near the village.

After Olive's death, her family discovered a handwritten letter among her possessions, and it's said that in this letter Olive finally described the events that had taken place during her one day working for Caroline Jacobs. Those who read the letter are said to have become very pale, and a decision was soon taken to destroy Olive's testimony. The letter was incinerated at the retirement home and Olive was buried, and no-one ever talked about the letter's contents ever again. The mystery of Caroline Jacobs and the crying baby briefly reared its head again, but only for a few months before dying away once more. This time, the general consensus was that there was no need to disturb the situation, and that some matters were best left to fade into history.

The only other remarkable part of the story came a few years later. Olive's grave had been repeatedly vandalized, until finally her family chose to have her stone removed entirely. The perpetrator of this vandalism was never identified.

Chapter Six

“Okay,” I say cautiously, once I'm sure that Deidre has finally finished telling the story. “That sounds... creepy. But I'm not entirely surprised that people round these parts have so much time to spread gossip and rumors.”

“Oh, I know you're probably right,” she says with a heavy sigh. “Like I told you, I think the only reason I remembered it all was that I know I cycled past the house so many times as a girl. It's horrible to think that poor Caroline Jacobs was dead on her kitchen floor that whole time.”

“I was at the house earlier,” I continue, “and I spoke to the current owner quite extensively. She never mentioned anything about ghosts or mysterious crying babies.”

“That's good.”

“And I had a good look around,” I add. I think back to the sight of Caroline's ghost, but I figure that I should leave that part out. “I didn't hear any baby, either.”

“We should all be thankful for that,” Deidre says, getting to her feet as two new customers enter the cafe. “I'm sure you're right to dismiss the whole idea, it's exactly the sort of local nonsense that gets passed around all the time. I shouldn't even have told you all that rubbish, but I just thought you might be interested.” She starts making her way over to the counter. “If you're going to be dealing in houses round these parts, you should at least know something about their history, and about the people who lived in them.”

“Oh, I definitely know a fair bit about the people,” I say under my breath, as I look back at the paperwork. “You'd be surprised just how well I get to know some of the people. Even the ones who are supposedly no longer around.”

Chapter Seven

“These are some great photos,” Horace says, as his office chair creaks and groans beneath his weight. “You've got an eye for this sort of thing, Mercy.”

“I try my best,” I tell him, pulling open the filing cabinet and rifling through the alphabetically-sorted sections. With a little work, I've just about managed to get this system into working order. “The house is stunning. It doesn't take much work to make it look good.”

To my surprise, I find that there's already a file for 9 Sidle Street. Pulling it out, I see Heidi's distinctively neat handwriting on the front.

“Did this agency sell the house before?” I ask cautiously.

“We valued it a while back,” Horace explains. “It was one of Heidi's first really big solo jobs. Of course, she was always an eager little beaver, even when she started with me. I know you might think I'm completely crazy, but sometimes you remind me of her. Not the way you look, obviously, but the way you grab hold of a lead and refuse to let go. You and her both have, or had, that kind of terrier-like tenacity.” He lets out another of his regular long sighs. “In some ways, I still miss that woman.”

Not really knowing how to respond, I open the file and take a look through. Heidi made quite a few notes about the property on Sidle Street, although I quickly find that most of her observations tally with my own; adjusted for inflation, her suggested selling price fits with mine too, and I take a degree of satisfaction from that fact. After all, Heidi was the gold standard when I arrived here and started working as an estate agent, and I still try to measure myself against everything she achieved.

I can't help thinking that if we'd had longer together, we might actually have become friends. If only Jessica hadn't brutally killed her. Then again, I suppose there's no real point thinking about that too much.

“It's an interesting property,” I continue, carrying the file over to my desk. “It looks like the owners were interested in selling, but Heidi was never quite able to get them to pull the trigger. She clearly tried pretty hard, though. She emailed them extensively.” I ponder that idea for a moment, before setting the file on the desk and turning to Horace. “Doesn't that strike you as a little odd? Heidi was always sniffing out the next sale, and her commission on that house would have been pretty high. I'd have thought she'd be pushing them like crazy to list the place, especially so early in her

career. I never knew her to fail at anything. What stopped her with this particular house?”

“I have absolutely no idea.”

“Yes, but -”

Before I can finish, the file slides off the table and lands at my feet, spilling its various sheets of paper all over the floor.

“Damn it,” I mutter, kneeling down to gather them all back up. “Sorry, I'm not normally this clumsy. I don't know what's up with me today.”

“It'll be good to finally have that property on the market,” Horace remarks, having apparently barely even noticed that the papers are everywhere. “I like these prestigious listings. They make the whole company look good. At times like this, I feel like I might actually be starting to move up in the world.”

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Several hours later, as I sit at home and pore over the paperwork for various property listings, I feel strangely calm. For the first time in years, I'm in control of my life, and Jessica hasn't so much as stirred once since she last 'lashed out'. And as I pull my take-out box of Chinese food closer, I realize that I'm feeling something that I haven't felt for ages.

Optimism.

I've been resisting admitting this fact, but I actually feel as if I have a future. Even just thinking like that makes me feel bad, as if I'm in danger of jinxing the progress I've made. I know my entire new life, my entire identity, could come crashing down at any second. Living like that isn't easy; there's this constant nagging fear in my chest, warning me that I might have to drop everything and run. At the same time, I actually feel as if I might have some stability for once.

Just so long as Jessica says fast asleep.

A moment later, hearing someone knock on the front door, I look up. In that instant, all my old fears come flooding back and I immediately start thinking about the various people who might have finally tracked me down. I tell myself that I'm imagining things, and that most likely someone's just lost and asking for directions, but I can't shake a sense of genuine dread as I wait and hope that the knocking sound won't return.

I'm actually holding my breath.

Suddenly I hear the knock again, and now I know I have to prove to myself that there's no reason to worry. Getting to my feet, I make my way across the room and stop at the door, and then I peer at the peephole and see that there's no sign of anyone outside. All I see is the empty street.

Am I being pranked?

I wait, and then – figuring that whoever was there has gone now – I turn and head back over to the kitchen table.

After just a couple of steps, however, I hear the knock on the door again. I freeze, and then I slowly turn and make my way back to the peephole. Looking out again, I still don't see anyone, but a few seconds later I realize I can hear a faint scratching sound coming from the other side of the door. I swallow hard, I tell myself to just relax, and then finally I release the chain and pull the door open.

"Why are you ignoring us?" Lily asks.

Looking down, I see that she's standing right on the step, staring up at me with a determinedly furrowed brow. She looks angry, although she's holding a small rag doll.

"What are you doing here?" I stammer. "It's late. Does your dad know where you are?"

"Daddy's out with a friend so Charlotte's babysitting me tonight," she replies, "but she's on her phone talking to a boy called Dominic all the time, so she has no idea that I've come out. But that's okay, because I can sneak in just as easily as I can sneak out, so what Charlotte and Daddy don't know won't hurt them."

"But -"

"Answer the question," she continues, interrupting me. "Why are you ignoring us?"

"I'm not," I reply, although I know that technically she has a point. "I've just been really busy lately."

"Did you notice what I just told you?" she asks. "I said that Daddy's out with a friend. The friend is a lady, and her name's Mandy and I don't like her but Daddy likes her and I think they're having a date. This might be your last chance. It might be a real crossroads in your life. Daddy's giving up on you, and I think he shouldn't do that, so I came here to warn you."

"Warn me?"

“That you're running out of time.”

She reaches out and takes hold of my hand.

“You should come over. Soon. Before things go too far with Mandy.”

“I really think I should get you home,” I reply, as I grab my coat and slip into my shoes. “Did you walk all the way over here?”

“Are you coming to our house right now?” she says, and her eyes light up with excitement. “That's perfect! When Daddy gets home, you can be waiting for him!”

“That's not a good idea,” I tell her, as I check for my car keys and then step outside. Once I've pulled the door shut, I start leading Lily away from the flat. “I'm going to take you home, and I'm going to gently and politely remind Charlotte what a slippery little customer you are.”

“Are you going to wait for Daddy to get back?”

“I don't think that would be appropriate.”

“Why not?”

“Because of a million little reasons that you're far too young to understand,” I reply, hoping to avoid getting into too many details. After all, I can't really tell her that I'm avoiding her and Nathan because I'm scared of the monster that lives in my body. “But, hey, if your dad likes this Mandy woman, she can't be all that bad.”

Reaching my car, I press the button on the fob to unlock the doors, and then I turn to Lily.

“It's really sweet of you to come all this way,” I continue, “but I think you need to let your dad stay in control of his own dating choices. Sometimes things are a bit more complicated than they might seem and -”

“*How* are they complicated?”

Feeling a buzzing sensation in my pocket, I realize that I've got a message.

“Give Mandy a chance, okay?” I suggest, hoping that I might be able to get through to her. “Trust me, you might find out that you really like her.”

“I won't.”

“You don't know that.”

“I do, because I like you more. And if I like you more, then I can't like her.” She pauses. “And I think Daddy feels the same way. He likes you, even though he won't admit it, and that means he can't *really* be having fun

with Mandy. He seems so distracted lately, and I can tell that something's really bothering him. Can't you just at least go on one date with him and see if it works? I'm sure he's got really good manners! He's not perfect, but there's nothing too wrong with him. Nothing you can't sort out, at least."

"Get in the car," I reply with a faint smile.

"Don't you like him?"

"I think he's great," I tell her, "but things are -"

"Complicated, I know," she says, before turning and stomping around to the passenger-side door. "That's exactly what he always tells me as well."

"Well, it's true," I say under my breath, as I slip my phone out and check the message. To my surprise, I see that it's from Cathy Morgan. "Need your help with something ASAP," I read out loud. "Can you drop by in the morning?"

I hesitate, wondering what's wrong, but at that moment I realize that I need to focus on one problem at a time. And as I head around to the other side of the car and pull the door open, all I can think is that hopefully I'll be able to drop Lily off and get away before there's any risk that I might bump into Nathan.

Chapter Eight

“There you are!” Cathy says the following morning, startling me with her excitement as she pulls the door open. “Thank you so much for agreeing to help out! Please, come on!”

She steps aside, and as I walk into the hallway of the house on Sidle Street I can't help but think that something has changed. For one thing, there's a big – very big – bunch of flowers on a vase next to the staircase, and for another the whole place now has a very distinctive smell of lavender. In fact, the lavendery smell is overwhelming, to the extent that I catch myself wondering whether lavender poisoning might actually be a thing.

“You said that you need help with something,” I remind her, turning around just as she shuts the door. “What -”

“I've been looking into those people who come and make your house more attractive,” she replies as she hurries past me, heading toward the kitchen, “but do you know how much they charge? It's absolutely obscene, and I started thinking that anyone with an eye for interior design would be able to do just as good a job. And *then* I thought that, since you're invested in this sale as well because you want your commission, we could maybe knock something together ourselves!”

I look up toward the landing, momentarily watching out for any sign of Caroline Jacobs, and then I turn to Cathy.

“I'm sorry,” I say cautiously, “did you just say -”

“I'm not imposing, am I?” she continues. “I do hope not. It's just that I've never been too good at this sort of thing, whereas I can tell that you're very smartly turned out, and I'm sure you know how to make a house appeal to prospective buyers.”

“Sure, but -”

“And as you pointed out before,” she adds breathlessly, clearly unable to let me get a reply in at all, “this house has such good bones! So we're not talking about anything major, we're looking purely at some cosmetic flourishes here and there. The problem is, if I'm left to my own devices, I might very well end up making the place look worse. We're two smart women. We should be able to rustle something up between us.”

“This isn't really the sort of service we usually provide,” I tell her cautiously, “and...”

My voice trails off as I see the desperation in her eyes. I really don't think that I can be very useful at something like this, but after a moment I look at the flowers again and I realize that not only are they too big, they're also really clashing color-wise with the wall. I can already think of a few improvements, and by the time I turn to Cathy again I think I might have already decided to help.

“I'm really not an interior decorator,” I say cautiously, even as I feel myself acquiescing, “but... I guess I've seen a lot of examples of what works. And what doesn't. So how about we start by moving these flowers to some other part of the house?”

“The flowers?” She furrows her brow. “Don't they look okay right where they are?”

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A couple of hours later, once the flowers have been relegated to the office so that they won't be seen so often, I stand in the front room and look around at the fruits of my labor. I still don't think I've got an exciting new career in interior design to look forward to, but I've at least managed to make some small improvements. And the whole job has actually left me feeling strangely satisfied.

“I'm moving the flowers back into the hallway!” Cathy calls out from somewhere far off in the house.

“I don't think that's a good idea!” I tell her.

“But it looks so bare in there!”

“Yes, but those flowers are...”

Hideous?

Distracting?

Just plain foul?

“More suited to the office,” I continue, electing to be diplomatic. “Let's just leave them in there for now. But I was going to ask, do you have any other vases? Maybe something a little smaller?”

“I'm not sure, but you could try the cupboard under the stairs!”

“Great,” I mutter as I head to the hallway and open the cupboard door.

Reaching inside, I start searching for a vase, but I have to admit that this cramped little space is absolutely rammed with all sorts of leftovers. There are half-broken chairs, and bits of old lampshades, and damp boxes filled with yellowing magazines. I finally spot a vase near the back, but I have to really lean over all the accumulated debris before I'm able to pick the vase up, and at that moment I spot something unusual that's been pushed right to the back of the cupboard.

"Did you find anything?" Cathy asks as I hear her making her way up behind me.

"Yeah," I reply, but I can't quite take my eyes off the old pram that's been left here. "I hope this isn't too personal, but... did you say that you and your husband never had any children?"

"That's right. Why?"

"I just saw this pram in here," I tell her, before peering into the pram and spotting an old porcelain doll. I pick the doll up, and then I clamber out of the cupboard and turn to Cathy. "And some other things."

"Oh," she replies, clearly a little taken aback at the sight of the old, cracked and rather dusty doll, "well that... I..."

I wait for her to continue, and I can't quite read her expression. She looks concerned by the sight of the doll, as if something's bothering her beyond the damn thing's natural freakiness.

"I don't know where that could have come from," she says finally. "I suppose it must have been left behind by the previous owners."

"There's a pram in there too."

"Is there?" she replies, and now she adjusts her collar. I swear, she seems to be almost visibly squirming. "Beats me how any of that stuff got in there. I suppose I'll have to dig it all out once the place is sold. God knows what else I'll uncover."

"I'm sure you're right," I tell her, as I turn the doll around so that I can look at its face.

I don't really know why, but I've always found dolls creepy. And as I stare down at this particular specimen, I can't help but think that this is the creepiest of them all. With thousands of tiny cracks running all over its features, and its glassy dead eyes fixedly watching me, and its slightly curled fingers reaching out, I swear I half expect this thing to suddenly come to life. It's old, that's for sure, and it's also very dusty; I'm no expert, but I figure this doll has to be at least fifty years old, probably much more,

and it's dressed in what appears to be a very delicate, and probably quite fragile, white shawl.

“Well, we don't need to keep that thing out, do we?” Cathy says suddenly, grabbing the doll from my hands. “Let's put it back where we found it.”

She starts to lean past me, but at the last second she seems to change her mind. Pulling back, she looks around the hallway as if she's feeling increasingly nervous.

“Or I could just throw it away,” she adds, forcing an unconvincing smile. “That'd work. Yes, seeing as it's just rubbish, I should throw it away, shouldn't I?”

“You could always check its value,” I point out as she turns and hurries toward the kitchen. “It might be worth something, and someone out there might really like -”

Before I can finish, she trips on the foot of the table. She manages to steady herself, but the doll falls from her hands and hits the floor, and I immediately hear a shattering sound. I wait, but now Cathy seems absolutely frozen in place, staring down at the broken doll with an expression of growing fear. I wait a moment longer, wondering why she's acting so strangely, and then I make my way over.

Crouching down, I gather the doll back up and set it on the table. Its face is broken, revealing the empty cavity within, and I start picking up the various broken pieces from the floor.

“I guess that's solved that problem, then,” I suggest. “I don't suppose anyone would want to buy a broken doll, would they?”

I was hoping to lighten the mood, but if anything Cathy looks even more aghast as she stares at the pieces on the table.

“Or you could try to glue it back together,” I continue. “Think of it like a... jigsaw puzzle.”

“I'm sorry,” she replies, as all the color seems to drain from her face, “but I feel a bit light-headed. Would you mind finishing up while I have a little sit-down somewhere?”

Chapter Nine

“Sorry, little fellow,” I say as I tap the dustpan on the side of the bin, sending the last pieces of porcelain sliding down to join all the other rubbish. “I don't think there's anything more than can be done for you.”

As I'm about to close the bin's lid, I see that part of the doll's broken face has landed on some plastic wrap, with one eye staring up at me. For a few seconds I'm genuinely creeped out by that little blue orb, and by the eyelashes that must have once been so lovingly put in place, and I feel slightly relieved as I finally tap the bin shut. I know it's crazy to let a doll make me feel this way, but part of me's quite relieved that the damn thing's gone.

After wiping the dustpan clean, I set it back under the sink before turning to make my way across the kitchen. I figure I've done more than enough here this morning, and I've already spent far more time at the house than I'd planned. I really need to get to the office and follow up on some phone calls about other properties, but as I reach the doorway I suddenly stop as I hear a faint sound coming from one of the other rooms.

A baby.

A child's gurgles.

The sound continues for a few seconds, and a shiver runs down my spine as I realize that there can't be any mistake here. I've had a child of my own, I know what they sound like, and I can hear one right now. And as I step through into the front room, I see that the television is off; sure, the sound could be coming from a laptop or some other device, but I swear it sounds so real and so close, almost as if...

Almost as if it's in this room with me.

“Cathy?” I say cautiously, as I start to realize that I haven't seen or heard her for a while. I don't even know where she is in the house right now. “Cathy, where are you?”

As I wait, the gurgling sound continues, and now I'm certain that it's coming from the far end of this room. I start making my way past the sofa, treading carefully so that I don't make too much noise. I'm pretty certain that there shouldn't be a baby in this house, that Cathy would have mentioned that fact at some point over the past few hours, and also that a child's not particularly easy to hide. Once I reach the other end of the room,

however, the gurgling sound seems to have shifted slightly and now it's coming from out in the hallway.

I make my way out and stop at the foot of the stairs, and now I swear the child seems to be somewhere up on the top floor.

“Cathy?” I call out. “If -”

“I'm fine!” she replies, her voice sounding strangely choked. She must be in one of the bedrooms. “I'm just having a little rest. Would you mind seeing yourself out?”

“Sure, but -”

“There's nothing to worry about,” she adds, interrupting me. “Thank you so much for all your help today. I'll be in touch.”

I open my mouth to reply, and then I hesitate as I listen to the sound of the baby. I want to ask Cathy what's going on, but I'm not quite sure how to do that without seeming rude. This whole situation feels really strange, yet I really don't want to be too pushy.

“I know this is going to sound weird,” I say finally, still looking up toward the empty landing, “but do you hear a... baby?”

“I'm sorry,” she replies, “but I'm really very tired. Would you mind showing yourself out? Thank you again for everything you've done.”

She's starting to repeat herself, and I figure that I'm not going to get very far if I keep asking questions. I guess Cathy's life is really none of my business, and a moment later – just as I'm wondering whether I should go up and check that she's really okay – the gurgling sound abruptly stops. I stand in silence for a few more seconds, wondering whether I might actually have just imagined the whole thing, and then I tell myself that I should just get out of here.

“I'll be off, then,” I tell her, figuring that there's not much left for me to do. “I hope you feel better soon!”

I wait for a reply. Hearing nothing now, I turn and head to the door.

***

Waves crash against the rocks as I sit at the edge of the beach. I often come down here to eat my lunch, and as I look out across the sand I feel strangely energized by the sight of the natural world. Seagulls are soaring on the wind, and the sea is just a little rougher than usual.

I take a bite out of my sandwich, and then I have to move some stray strands of hair from across my face.

Suddenly a dog races out across the sand, running toward the shore. I watch as the dog changes direction and heads over to the rocks, and a moment later a ball flies through the air. The dog – which I'm increasingly sure that I recognize – darts off in that direction, crashing through the spray at the edge of the water. A moment later, hearing footsteps, I turn and see a familiar figure making his way down the path that leads from the village.

"We've met before," Douglas Ross says, reaching up to keep his hat on as the wind tries to lift it away. "You're the estate agent, aren't you?"

"Guilty as charged," I reply.

Before he has a chance to say anything more, I hear a panting sound getting closer. I turn just as Dustin drops his ball at my feet, and then he leans toward me and starts sniffing my sandwich.

"Dustin, leave her alone," Douglas says firmly, before grabbing the ball and throwing it again. He takes a moment to wipe saliva from his hand as Dustin races off. "Sorry about that, he doesn't have many manners. Well, to be perfectly honest with you, he doesn't have *any*. I try and I try, but if there's even the slightest chance of food he's unstoppable."

"It's fine," I tell him. "I like dogs."

"And we're interrupting your moment of solitude down here on the beach," he continues. "I'm sure you were lost in some deep and very meaningful thoughts."

"Actually, I was looking at those rocks over there," I reply, nodding toward the rocks at the far end of the beach, "and thinking that they look very pointy. That's really the full extent of my deep and meaningful thoughts."

"It's nice to hear someone else admit something like that," he says, as Dustin returns with the ball. "Sometimes I think I'm barely any smarter than my dog."

He throws the ball again. Dustin tears off across the sand once more, his enthusiasm undimmed.

"With that, I think I'll leave you to your profound thoughts," Douglas continues, "and I'll wander off with my hound and contemplate what I'm going to have for lunch."

He starts making his way past me.

"Nice running into you again, Jessica."

“You too,” I reply, “and -”

Stopping suddenly, I realize that he used the wrong name.

“What did you just say?” I stammer.

He turns to me.

“What did you just call me?” I ask, and now my heart is racing.

“I've got it wrong, haven't I?” he says with a sigh. “Sorry, I'm terrible with names. Is it not Jessica?” He pauses. “It's Marjorie,” he continues, “or Miriam or... something unusual.”

Staring at him, I try to remind myself that there's absolutely no reason to panic. At the same time, the odds of someone 'accidentally' plucking that name out of thin air seem extremely low. Too low to be real.

“Mercy,” he says finally, and his relief is evident. “How could I have forgotten such an unusual name? It's Mercy, I'm quite sure of that. I'm right, right?”

“Yes,” I reply, but I'm still panicking about such a close call.

“Willow,” he adds, and at that moment he clicks his fingers. “That's it! I've got it! Mercy Willow. I'm so sorry I got your name wrong. I have no excuses, so I suppose I can only blame my advancing years. Not that I consider myself to be old, of course, but I'm no spring chicken either and...”

His voice trails off, as Dustin returns with the ball.

“I'm talking myself into a deeper hole,” Douglas says, taking the ball and wiping away all the sand and saliva. He's working slowly, really taking his time to get the ball as clean as possible. “You really mustn't pay too much attention to me, Mercy. My little mistakes don't actually mean anything, you understand. They're just little brain farts that happen to everyone from time to time.”

He polishes the ball on his sleeve, and then suddenly he holds it up and takes a big bite. Shocked, I watch as he tears some of the ball away and starts chewing. He swallows, and at that moment – just as I'm about to ask him what he's doing – he turns the ball around and I see that it's actually an apple.

Looking down at Dustin, I see that he's got a big wet stick in his mouth.

“Come on,” Douglas says, taking the stick and throwing it, then smiling at me, “let's leave Mercy alone to finish her lunch in peace. I think we've disturbed her enough for one day.”

I can only sit in shocked silence and watch as he walks away. Did I imagine him throwing that ball for his dog? Did he perform some sleight of hand trick to replace it with an apple, or am I simply losing my mind? I look down at my sandwich, but my head's spinning and I feel like I'm about to scream. I came down here to get a few minutes of rest and relaxation before going back to the office, and now I'm worried that I'm completely losing the plot.

Douglas and Dustin have almost disappeared into the distance now. I watch them for a few more seconds, before turning to the sea again. The waves seem a little calmer now, and a seagull has started pulling on something he's found half-buried in the sand. I think I really just need to stay focused.

Chapter Ten

“I think you're really going to like it,” I say to Michael and his wife Pamela as I lead them toward the front door of 9 Sidle Street. “It's such a beautiful house.”

I check my phone, but there's still no reply from Cathy. Four days have passed since I last saw her, and I've tried a couple of times to get in touch so that I can arrange for the first viewing. She hasn't replied to any of my messages, and ordinarily I'd never dream of just showing up like this, but she specifically told me that she didn't mind 'drop-ins' and she even gave me a key specifically for that purpose. I just hope she was being serious.

As I reach the front door, however, I still feel a little nervous. Then again, Michael and Pamela Horsefoot are heading back to London this afternoon, and this really might be my only chance to show them around.

“As I explained,” I say cautiously, “I just need to check to see whether or not anyone's home.”

“It's fine,” Michael replies, although he conspicuously checks his watch. I get the impression that he and his wife are both very wealthy, very busy individuals who can't abide nonsense. “We appreciate that this is all a little last-minute.”

Smiling, I turn and ring the doorbell. Cathy told me that coming by like this would be fine, that she'd keep the place looking spick and span at all times, and I absolutely believe her. I just don't like the idea of walking into someone else's house, which is why – a moment later – I'm hugely relieved to hear footsteps approaching the door from the other side.

“Sounds like she's in,” I say, turning to the Horsefoots. “That's good, it means you'll be able to get a guided tour from the expert.”

I hear the door opening behind me. Before I have a chance to turn, however, I can't help but notice a shocked expression on the Horsefoots' faces. I hesitate, and then I look at the door and I'm shocked to see Cathy staring out at us.

She looks absolutely terrible.

Not only is there dirt on her face, but her hair is a complete mess and her clothes are totally disheveled. The interior of the house looks gloomy, and I can just about see that one of the chairs in the hallway has

been left on its side. My first thought is that Cathy looks like she's just finished fighting off a brace of burglars.

"What -"

"What do you want?" she asks, her voice sounding clipped and agitated. "What are you doing here?"

"I tried to call you several times," I whisper to her, as my inner voice screams with embarrassment. "I have two potential purchasers with me and -"

"Now's not a good time," she says firmly.

"Right," I say cautiously, "so if -"

"I'm sorry, but I can't talk," she continues, before glancing over her shoulder as if she's watching out for someone else who might be in the house. She hesitates, and then she turns to me again. "You shouldn't be here," she tells me. "You shouldn't be bringing people to my door, not when I'm busy with other things. In fact, I don't want you coming back here at all. You pressured me into selling my home, and I'm just not going to let that happen. I won't be bullied, do you hear me?"

"That's not what happened!" I reply, shocked by the accusation. "You can't seriously mean that!"

"I'm not selling!" she snaps angrily. "I've told you already, so if you come back here again, I'll have no choice but to call the police!"

With that, she slams the door shut, leaving me struggling to work out what just happened. I blink a couple of times, and then slowly I turn to the Horsefoots and try to think of something – anything – I can tell them.

***

"People are weird," Horace grumbles as he sits typing at his desk. "People are crazy. To be honest with you, if I didn't have to deal with people, my life would be much more enjoyable."

"She just seemed to change completely," I reply, still a little shocked by what happened a couple of hours ago. "The last time I saw her was four days ago, and she was so keen to get the house sold. She even got me to help her spruce it up. I just don't see how I could possibly have misinterpreted anything!"

"The woman's obviously a fruitcake," Horace says. "If I were you, I'd just ignore her if she gets back in touch. Let some other poor bastard

handle the sale."

"Do you think she was drunk?"

"Did you smell booze on her?"

"No, but -"

"Sometimes people hide it well."

"Do you think she might have been on drugs?"

"Who knows?"

"Or she's having some kind of breakdown," I continue. "Do you think I should go back and try to talk to her again? I don't think she has any family. I'd really like to make sure that she's okay."

"Absolutely not. You've wasted more than enough time on that woman, and now you have to learn to let it go. Did you print up any brochures for the house yet?"

"I managed to cancel the order just now."

"Then at least that's one good thing," he points out. "Apart from your valuable time, we haven't really lost anything. I'll add her to the blackball list."

"What blackball list?"

Sighing again, he opens a drawer and pulls out a large folder.

"If someone really pisses me off," he explains as he opens the folder and grabs a pen, "then they go in here, and that means I won't do business with them. In fact, I also look dubiously at any friends or family that I identify. In my experience, this kind of stupidity tends to be contagious, especially within small groups."

"How many people have you blackballed already?" I ask cautiously.

"Well over five hundred."

"Seriously?" I think about that number for a moment. "In an area like this, that must be a significant percentage."

"I'm not wasting my time," he says as he scribbles Cathy Morgan's name onto the list, "and I won't have my associates wasting their time either." With a satisfied grunt, he closes the folder and puts it away again. "Heidi was always telling me to digitize the damn thing, but I much prefer to do it the old-fashioned way. And when I die, that list has to be looked after. It's a valuable catalog containing the details of every idiot, moron and asshole in the county. It's worth thousands of pounds!"

"But -"

“Your problem, Mercy, is that you're too nice.”

“Are you sure about that?” I ask, although obviously I can't tell him about the whole situation with Jessica.

“I can read you like a book,” he says firmly, and he seems very confident. “Don't be offended, it's just another natural talent that I was born with. I can see that you're a good, honest person, and the problem is that we all assume everyone else is basically like us. So because you're good, you assume that others – deep down – are basically good. Whereas I'm an asshole, so I assume that others are...”

He pauses for a moment.

“Well, you get my drift,” he adds finally. “The ideal state is probably somewhere in the middle of those two extremes. But there's nothing wrong with a little bias, just so long as you're aware of it.”

“I see” I reply, still a little puzzled by his reaction. “I guess I just have to accept that 9 Sidle Street is off the market.”

“You'll make up for the commission loss in no time.”

“It's not just that,” I tell him. “I genuinely worry that something's wrong with Cathy, but at the same time she threatened to call the police if I go back.” As those words leave my lips, I realize that I have to be really careful. After all, the last thing I need to do is draw more police attention to myself. “You're right,” I continue, “I just have to let it go.”

“I'm always right,” he says firmly. “Always have been, always will be. It's a gift.”

Heading back to the filing cabinet, I grab the folder for the house on Sidle Street and slide it into place. I was genuinely excited by the prospect of selling that place, and I have to admit that I'm still puzzled by what happened. I keep wondering whether there's something else I could have done, something I might have said that could have resolved the problem, but I guess Horace has a point. People *are* weird, and I just have to accept that fact. And whatever's going on with Cathy Morgan, I don't think I can swoop in and magically make things better for her.

With that thought firmly in mind, I slide the filing cabinet shut.

Chapter Eleven

“And that's another sale,” I say three weeks later, as I set the phone down. “That place on Carstairs Grove just went through completion.”

“Magnificent,” Horace says, getting to his feet and shuffling across the room, heading for the leaderboard.

“You really don't have to keep doing that,” I tell him, feeling more than a little embarrassed. “I think it was more... Heidi's kind of thing.”

“All the more reason to keep the tradition alive,” he replies, as he moves the little laminated photo of my face up a notch. “Besides, I like to motivate my staff. I read somewhere that it's healthy to do shit like this.” He slams his fist against the image of my face, trying to get it to stay in place. “This isn't sticking properly.”

He hits the picture of my face again and again, still trying to make it stick.

“I feel very motivated,” I tell him after a moment. “Thank you.”

“I'll have to try something else.”

I watch as he takes a large pin and sticks it into my picture, piercing me straight through the eye.

“There,” he continues with a sense of satisfaction, as he takes a step back. “You're doing well now, Mercy. You're soaring to fresh heights.”

I manage a flat, slightly fake smile, and at that moment I'm hugely relieved by the sound of my phone ringing. I sometimes find these conversations with Horace to be a little strained, and I'm often glad of any chance to change the subject. As I grab my phone, however, I hesitate as I see that Cathy Morgan's name is flashing on the screen.

“Are you gonna answer that?” Horace grumbles, already heading back to his desk. “It might be someone important.”

“Sure,” I murmur, before tapping to accept the call. I raise the phone to the side of my face. “Mercy Willow speaking, how can I -”

“I'm so glad you picked up,” Cathy says, interrupting me. She sounds enthusiastic and full of life, almost back to her old self. “I was worried that after the last time, you might have blanked me. And I certainly wouldn't have blamed you.”

“How are you doing?” I ask, deliberately not mentioning her name. I look over at Horace, and so far he doesn't seem remotely

suspicious. In fact, he's more focused on trying to squeeze back onto his office chair. “I was wondering whether I'd hear from you again.”

“I feel like I owe you a huge apology,” she continues. “I know that I was very rude the other week, but is there any way you could find a way to forgive me? I was dealing with some things, and I'm afraid I let them get on top of me. I'd still very much like to sell the house, and I know that you're by far the best agency in the area. If you'd be willing to reconsider, I swear I'll be on my best behavior from now on.”

“I... don't know,” I say cautiously, worried that I might just end up wasting more time. “You might prefer to -”

“Just come over,” she says, cutting me off yet again. “How does this afternoon sound? Come over and -”

She stops suddenly, just as I hear a faint bumping sound in the background. I wait, wondering exactly what's going on in that house.

“Please?” she says, and now I think I detect just a hint of fear in her voice. “Can you come over? I'm at home all the time at the moment. Can you *please* just find time to drop by?”

I really want to turn her down, but something about her tone is making me worry.

“I can come by this evening,” I say finally, “after I've finished with a few viewings.”

“Can't you make it sooner than that?”

“This evening is really my best offer,” I tell her, and it feels good to be a little forceful. “You could always try -”

“No, that'll be fine,” she continues, and now that sense of fear seems to be getting stronger. “I'll see you later. And please hurry, get here as soon as you can. I really would appreciate that so very much and -”

Before she can finish, the line cuts out. I furrow my brow, and for a moment I consider trying to call her back, but finally I set my phone down.

“New client?” Horace murmurs, not even looking up from his paperwork.

“Yes,” I say, although I feel bad for lying. “Well, a possible lead, at least. I just thought I'd swing by and meet them after I've finished work.”

“That's the kind of dedication I like to hear all about,” he replies, and now he's completely focused on his paperwork. “That's why you're

going to go far in this business, Ms. Willow. Dedication and common sense!”

***

A short while later, having made up some excuse about doing some research, I find myself in our new archive and records room. This used to be Heidi's office, but after she died Horace decided to turn it into a kind of puffed-up storage area instead. He made the plan sound very fancy, but it basically amounted to him dumping all sorts of boxes in here in a kind of haphazard order.

Fortunately, there's a scrap of method to the madness of his catalog system, and I've just about worked out how to find whatever I need.

Sort of.

Sometimes.

Kneeling down, I move several boxes aside, and I have to wave away a cloud of dust. I finally find the box that I'm after, and when I remove the lid I see Heid's original notes all neatly filed away. Whereas the main files are kept in the cabinets in the office, Horace insisted that the underlying notes and all the old folders should be sorted and put in these boxes. I know that Heidi at least took a look at the house on Sidle Street, but I'm curious about the fact that the situation never really progressed.

For a go-getter, Heidi sure didn't go and get much from that place.

Hearing a bumping sound, I look over my shoulder. For a moment I'm worried that Horace might have come through, and I really don't know how I'd explain my continued interest in the Sidle Street property. The door remains closed, however, and I quickly remind myself that Horace is certainly not the kind of person who could creep up on anybody. Between his labored breathing and his clicking knee, the man is hardly stealthy.

What's the opposite of a ninja?

I look back down at the box, and I pull out some of Heidi's old black leather-bound notebooks. The woman certainly had style, I'll give her that, and it doesn't take me too long to locate the section covering her visit to Sidle Street. And to my surprise, I see that one word has been written at the top and underlined in big red letters.

“Lunatic,” I read out loud.

I look down at the rest of her notes.

“I guess Heidi didn't exactly mince her words,” I add.

I quickly find that Heidi's initial excitement over the house on Sidle Street gave way to a sense of exasperation.

“Fourth missed appointment,” I read. “C. Morgan starting to feel like a time-waster.”

Obviously Heidi had some run-ins with Cathy, and her experience seems to be much the same as mine. I can totally see why even the driven, determined Heidi Carter would have eventually given up, although as I turn to the next page in the notebook I find that she seems to have tried to arrange a few more meetings. Until, finally, she wrote three more words in big letters.

“I give up,” I read.

Smiling, I can just imagine Heidi rolling her eyes theatrically. Then, as I look at the next page, I see that this wasn't the end of the story.

“C. Morgan won't stop calling,” I read. “Seems determined to get me to give her another chance. Absolutely not. Refused. She can go...”

Reading on a little more, I'm surprised by the forcefulness of Heidi's language. She seems to have finally given up on the property, however, and the following pages detail other appointments at different locations. As far as I can tell, eventually Cathy simply stopped calling.

Until, evidently, she must have heard about Heidi's death and decided to try again.

I hear a clicking sound, and I glance over my shoulder. There's no sign of Horace coming through, and the only movement comes from more and more dust hanging in the air. I look up at some of the highly-stacked boxes, and for a moment I worry that some of them might be about to tumble down on top of me. I'm not sure anyone could survive such a heavy avalanche of ring-binders and hard cardboard edges.

Once I'm sure that there's no imminent danger, I turn back to Heidi's notebook.

“So you got messed about by Cathy Morgan as well,” I whisper, as I realize that this back-and-forth game over the fate of the house on Sidle Street seems to have been going on for quite a while. “What's really happening in that place?”

Chapter Twelve

“Ms. Willow,” Cathy says as she opens the door, and she's all-smiles now as she gestures for me to step inside. “Won't you come through?”

“You're looking well,” I reply, although I immediately worry that I might seem rude. After all, am I inadvertently drawing attention to just how awful she looked the last time I was here?

“As are you,” she says as she swings the door shut with a heavy thud. “Welcome back to my humble abode. As you can see, I've had to do a little redecorating, but I've endeavored to adhere to most of the design choices you made last time! I really tried to listen!”

Looking round, I realize that for the most part she seems to have genuinely stuck to my plans. At the same time, the house seems a little fustier than before, and a little more gloomy.

“Why don't you come through to the drawing room?” she calls out, raising her voice a little more. “Come on, we can talk through here!”

I can't help feeling as if she's endeavoring to be heard by someone else further off in the house. As she heads toward the door at the far end of the hallway, I look up toward the landing. I don't see anyone, but at the back of my mind I still feel as if something strange is going on here. I watch the landing for a moment longer, before turning to follow Cathy.

At that moment, I spot the doll sitting propped up nearby on the large table. My first thought is that this is another doll that Cathy must have found somewhere in the house, but as I step closer I see that it's actually the same doll that I saw last time I was here. The broken pieces have been glued back together, and although she's done a fairly good job of that, there are still a few spots where the joins are very visible.

Reaching out, I pick the doll up and examine it a little more closely. The eyes are intact, and I feel a shudder pass through my bones as I find that the doll is staring back up at me. I tell myself that I'm just imagining things, but I swear this is the creepiest thing I ever saw in my life. I almost expect it to suddenly spring to life and start screaming at me.

After a few seconds, feeling as if I shouldn't even be touching the damn thing, I set it back down.

“I've got to admit,” I say cautiously, as I set off after Cathy, “I was surprised to get your call.” I step into the front room. “I thought you were -”

“Over here!” she hisses, grabbing my arm and pulling me around the corner. She leans closer, and now I can see genuine terror in her eyes. “You have to help me! Ms. Willow, I think you're my only hope!”

***

“Okay, calm down,” I say a couple of minutes later, as we stand at the back door and I try to make sense of the torrent of words and strange claims I just heard. “I think we need to back up a bit here.”

“I can't leave the house,” she whispers hurriedly, almost tripping over her own words. “If I try to leave, it gets angry.”

“And you're talking about a ghost, right?”

“It's furious at me,” she continues. “It started right after you left the first time. Or maybe even slightly before, my memory's rather hazy. I couldn't believe what was happening, for the first day or so I was in denial, but then the pieces of that awful doll started turning up all around the house. And at night, I heard a child crying!”

“Are you sure you weren't just... *happy* after drinking some wine?”

“I know what I heard!” she hisses angrily.

“Okay, let's just try to figure this out.”

“Eventually I tried to make a deal,” she tells me. “I could tell that whatever's in the house, it was angry at me for breaking the doll, so I dug out some glue and I tried to put it back together. As soon as I did that, the ghost started leaving me alone, at least a little. I could feel it watching me, I could sense the dread and anger hanging in the air, but at least it was no longer throwing things at me.”

“It was throwing things at you?”

“I'm not saying that I did a wonderful job on the doll,” she continues breathlessly, “but I did my best. And then I carried it around the house so that the ghost would see. I don't really know whether or not that worked. Eventually I decided to put the doll out on display. You must have seen it just now when you came through.”

“I did.”

“Things calmed down for a while after that,” she says, “but then I got your messages about those Horseface people.”

“The Horsefoots.”

“Whatever. Something about your impending visit set the ghost off again, and I quickly realized that my only choice was to stop you coming inside. When I opened the door to you that day, Ms. Willow, I was terrified for my life. I was also terrified, frankly, that the ghost might hurt *you* as well. I'm sorry that I was so rude, but I panicked and all I knew was that I had to get rid of you.”

She leans even closer.

“I don't think the ghost wants me to sell.”

“I believe you spoke to one of my colleagues a few years ago,” I reply cautiously. “Heidi Carter came and -”

“It wasn't as bad before,” she says, interrupting me again. “I was able to ignore it, to convince myself that I was wrong. For long stretches of time, I pooh-poohed the idea of ghosts, and I went out of my way to make fun of anyone who raised the idea. I probably even went too far. But the truth is, Ms. Willow, I think there really *is* something here, and I think...”

She hesitates, before slowly looking up toward the ceiling. I wait, half expecting to hear a well-timed creaking sound, but there's nothing.

“I think it doesn't want me to leave,” she whispers. “I also think it has a way of... getting me to do things, things that I don't remember later.”

“Like what?” I ask.

“That's the problem, I don't know. But I think at night, when I'm supposed to be asleep, sometimes I'm up and about. And of course, the next morning I don't remember any of it. But I'm exhausted, and I'm left with this sort of... echo of the fear.” She sighs. “I'm desperate, Ms. Willow. That's why I'm taking this risk right now. After I called you earlier, I could tell that the ghost was disturbed. Now it seems to have settled again, but it won't stay like that for long. I'm begging you, you have to help me.”

“Cathy -”

“I'm a prisoner in my own home!” she continues. “I can't leave! I can't even go outside anymore, because this *thing* makes its anger very clear. It was bad before, but ever since I broke the doll, its fury has increased a thousandfold. I don't know what to do, and I'm terrified.”

She puts her hands over her face.

“You don't believe me,” she sobs. “Of course you don't, and why would you? Everything I've just told you sounds like the ravings of a complete idiot.”

“I believe you,” I tell her.

“There's no need to patronize me.”

“I *really* believe you,” I say firmly, before taking hold of her wrists and forcing her hands down. “I've got... some experience when it comes to these things. I don't know exactly what's happening here, but we're going to get to the bottom of it, and we're going to find a way to let you live your life again. There are a lot of ghosts in this area, but this is the first time I've ever heard of one forcing someone to stay put in their home. She obviously wants something, and we just have to find out what.”

“She?”

“I have an idea what's going on here,” I continue. “An inkling, at least. And please don't ask me to explain it right now, because I honestly don't think you'd believe me but...”

My voice trails off, but in truth I already know exactly what I have to do next. This time, it's my turn to look up ominously toward the ceiling. I don't hear any suggestion of a presence at this exact moment, but that doesn't change anything; I know she's here, and I know she must have a very good reason for what she's doing to Cathy.

“Wait down here,” I say finally. “I need you to promise me that you won't come up and try to interfere. I need to go and talk to someone.”

Chapter Thirteen

“Caroline?” I say cautiously as I step into the master bedroom. “Caroline Jacobs, where are you?”

I look around the room. Everything's neat and tidy, and to be honest I'm starting to wonder whether Caroline's here at all. At the same time, I saw the fear in Cathy's eyes and I heard the terror in her voice, and I know that I have to figure out what's happening in this house. After all, how can I sell the place if I don't know about its major features?

I'd definitely count a vengeful ghost as a major feature.

“Caroline Jacobs, I need to talk to you,” I continue, as I make my way across the room. “There's obviously a situation here, but I'm sure it can be resolved. Can we please have a discussion, like two grown adults?”

Grown adults?

Is that quite the right way to refer to a ghost?

“Mrs. Jacobs,” I say, “if -”

“There you are!”

Suddenly she hurries into the room, as if she's in the most terrible rush. She heads straight over to the table by the window and peers out at the garden.

“I've been looking for you everywhere,” she tells me, still watching the scene outside. “This really isn't the time for you to be wandering off, you know. I'm expecting visitors at any moment, and I'm not at all ready! I have a million and one things to do, and instead of getting on with them, I've been spending my time trying to find you. This situation is quiet intolerable, and after we're done today, you and I are going to have to sit down and have a long talk!”

“I need to know why you're haunting Cathy Morgan.”

“Cathy who?” She turns to me, and I can't miss the disgust in her expression. “Young lady, what are you talking about? Are you going to give me another headache? You've been absolutely nothing but trouble since the moment you first came to work for me. I can't remember who recommended you, but I shall certainly be having a stern word with them!”

“I'm not your maid or servant,” I remind her. “I need you to be honest with me here. You know what's going on, right? You know that you're...”

I wait, hoping that she might finish that sentence for me.

"What?" she barks, although she seems a little uncomfortable and I'm pretty sure that I'm getting closer to the truth. "What are you blathering on about now?"

"You're dead," I point out. "Come on, let's get that out in the open. You're dead, and you've been dead for quite a long time. You're a ghost."

Again I wait, and I can't help but worry that she might just deny the whole thing.

"Do you know what *you* are?" she asks after a moment, before taking a few seconds to adjust the front of her dress. "You're a very rude young woman. There are certain things that, even if one sees them, one shouldn't mention. Age is one of those things, as is politics. Religion too. And sex. And most importantly of all, one's status as a living member of the human race or a..."

She hesitates. I know now that she's aware of her own condition, which should at least make the rest of the conversation slightly easier.

"Cathy Morgan is the woman who owns this house now," I tell her. "She's downstairs, and she's scared out of her wits. She says you've been basically holding her here as a prisoner, and that you're trying to stop her selling the place. I'm here to talk to you about that, and to figure out where we go from here, because you have to realize that things can't keep on like this. It's just not fair."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" she snaps.

"Why are you haunting Cathy Morgan?"

"*Haunting* her?" she replies, as if the very idea is utterly horrifying. "Do you mean to accuse me of haunting someone?"

"I'm not accusing you of anything," I tell her, which isn't technically true. Still, I know I need to be diplomatic. "I'm just trying to see if I can broker some kind of understanding."

"I've never been spoken to in this way in all my life!" she stammers. "You walk into my home -"

"It's not your home anymore," I point out.

"You walk into *my* home," she says firmly, "and accuse me of something so... degrading? Seriously? What makes you think you have any right to come in here and start throwing around accusations?"

"Is this about the doll?" I ask. "That seems like a very specific hang-up, but I know ghosts can get like that sometimes."

I wait.

“It's the doll, isn't it?” I add.

She opens her mouth to reply, but then she hesitates and I can immediately tell that I've struck a raw nerve. She glances around, and I'm actually starting to feel very sorry for her.

“What really happened here?” I continue, taking a step toward her. “If we can work that out, we might be able to work out how to fix it. I'm sure you don't mean to torment Cathy Morgan. You seem like a nice person, so it's possible that there's simply been some kind of misunderstanding and -”

“Oh, you do talk a lot, don't you?” she replies, cutting me off. “Is this some modern thing? I've observed that as the years go by, the house's occupants seem to speak more and more about things that should remain private. Not every thought or feeling deserves to be discussed in public.”

“Cathy just wants to move on with her life,” I tell her. “She wants to move away and do new things. You can understand that, can't you?”

“I have very little interest in what *any* of the house's occupants do with themselves,” she says airily, and she's certainly doing a good impression of someone whose thoughts are elsewhere. “If she wants to sell, let her sell. I'm certainly not going to stand in her way!”

“Tell me about the doll.”

“What doll?” She sighs. “Do you mean the ugly little thing she's put on display downstairs? The one she broke? I have no idea, I never saw it before in my life.”

“I'm not sure that I believe you. What -”

“Liar!”

Suddenly Caroline turns and grabs me by the throat. Before I have a chance to fight back, she slams me against the wall with such force that a painting jumps off its hook and slides down to the floor just a few feet away.

“Don't presume to come into my home,” Caroline snarls, leaning closer until her dead face is just inches away, “and tell me what I can and cannot do! I don't care how many people come and go from this place, it will always belong to me and there's nothing I'll ever allow you to do about that!”

“I was only -”

“And stop making excuses,” she continues. “I've tolerated you up until this point, and I've tolerated that simpering idiot downstairs, but if you make me angry...”

She hesitates, and then she pulls back.

“Don't interfere,” she adds, and now she seems a little shaken by the forcefulness of her own reaction. “The doll's already broken. He loved that doll so much, it was one of the few things that ever calmed him down. Now with it gone, he'll be so upset. You've already caused enough trouble.”

She starts fading away, disappearing into thin air.

“Don't cause any more,” she says firmly as she slips out of sight. “I'm warning you. I will defend him with the last of my strength. If that's what it takes...”

Before she can finish, her voice fades away to nothing and I'm left standing all alone in the room.

***

“How did it go?” Cathy asks as soon as I step back into the front room. “I heard you talking to someone, but I followed your instructions and didn't -”

Stopping suddenly, she seems shocked by my appearance.

“Are you trembling?” she asks cautiously.

“Sorry,” I reply, reaching out and supporting myself against the side of a dresser. “Let's just say that you've got one very angry ghost in the house.”

“Oh, I knew it,” she says, sinking down onto the edge of the sofa. “I'm trapped, aren't I? There's no way out. I'm going to spend the rest of my life trapped here in this house, at the whim of some long-dead monster.”

I want to tell her that everything's going to be okay, but for a few seconds I can't help replaying that encounter upstairs over and over again. Caroline Jacobs' anger seemed to burst out of nowhere, and although she wasn't too clear about what was going on, I'm starting to realize that there's definitely a baby involved. And whereas before I wondered whether an illegitimate child – born out of wedlock, while her husband was away – might have lived at the house many years ago, now I find myself contemplating a much more awful possibility.

“A ghost,” Cathy continues, with the desperate tone of someone who's lost all hope. “That's just my luck. I'm living here with a ghost!”

“Actually,” I reply cautiously, “I don't think that's quite accurate.”

She turns to me.

“Two ghosts,” I add, attempting a reassuring smile before giving up. “I think you have at least two ghosts in this house with you. And I'm really not quite sure what we can do about it.”

Chapter Fourteen

“I wish I could be there with you,” Cathy mutters, her voice coming over loud and clear as I adjust my headphones. “I just don't think this Caroline Jacobs woman would take kindly to me trying to leave the house again.”

“It's okay,” I whisper, keeping my voice down as I make my way past the desk at the local library. I really don't want to attract any attention, and I certainly don't want anyone to offer to help me; I know exactly where I'm going, and I just want to get the job done and then get out of here.

“Why are you talking so quietly?” she asks.

“I'm in a library!” I hiss.

“Oh, right.” She pauses. “I'm sorry, I should let you get on with your research, but I just really need to know what's going on.”

“I told you, if we're going to find a way to deal with this ghost, then we need knowledge. And since most of the local files have never been digitized, I'm going to have to look at the records the hard way.”

A woman casts a disapproving glance at me as I head along one of the aisles.

“Thank you for letting me listen in,” Cathy continues. “I know you didn't have to agree to that. I just felt so unnerved when you said you'd have to leave me all alone.”

“We need to know everything there is to know about that house,” I tell her, and now I can see the door to the records room up ahead. “Once we know more about the people who've lived there, we should be able to come up with a solution. And this place is the one-stop shop for all information about the area. Their records go way beyond just the census stuff you can get online.”

Reaching the door, I knock for a moment before gently pushing it open. To my slight annoyance, I see that there's a man working on one of the desks, but I quickly remind myself that he has every right to be here. Plus, there's still one desk free, so at least I can get on with my research.

“Radio silence,” I whisper, so that Cathy will know not to pepper me with questions. “This might take a while.”

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For about the thousandth time in the past five minutes, the office chair squeaks loudly as I shift my weight by just a few milligrams. The sound seems so loud in this otherwise quiet room, and I can't help glancing at the man who's working on the other desk.

“Sorry,” I mouth silently.

He glances at me briefly, before returning his attention to the papers he's been studying.

I look back at my own papers, and at that moment the chair creaks again.

“I didn't even move!” I gasp, before freezing as I realize that I was too loud. I turn to the man again. “Sorry,” I say, out loud this time. “I think something must be really wrong with this chair.”

He offers a faint smile.

“In fact,” I continue, trying to seem relaxed, “that's a thing I've noticed a lot since I moved down here. Is it something to do with the Cornish air? Is that why all the chairs seem to be so loud?”

He stares at me, and then – instead of replying – he simply looks back down at his work. I guess he doesn't have anything meaningful to add to my thoughts about the chair situation.

I turn to the desk again, and this time I resolve to ignore the creaking sound. And to maybe cut out some carbs.

“You don't have to be completely silent, you know,” the man tells me. “I moved off that chair. It was annoying me too much.”

He peers at my papers.

“You've got some family on Sidle Street?”

“I'm looking it up for a friend,” I tell him.

“I'm something of an expert when it comes to these things,” he boasts. “If you run into any trouble, just let me know.”

“Actually, there is one thing,” I reply, relieved that he seems quite laid back. I point at one of the pages. “I've managed to pull up all the census and other records for every decade, but I can't find anything for 1931.”

“All the 1931 census records for this area were lost,” he explains. “There was a fire at the building that was storing them, and everything turned to ash. I'm afraid there's no way around that problem. It's a lost decade as far as this area's concerned, from the 1921 census all the way up to the 1939 register.”

“So there's no way at all to tell who was living at the house between those dates?”

“Not unless you get lucky with newspaper clippings. I only worked mine out because some family members happened to leave records of their move away from the area in 1925. They went to live in some little town on the south-east coast called Crowford. By all accounts, they had rather a tricky time when they got there. Apparently there's a lot of ghostly activity in that part of the country. I kept meaning to take a trip there to check it all out, but now the town has been bought up by the military so no-one can get in to nose about.”

“What's that man bumbling on about?” Cathy asks over my earpiece.

“Nothing,” I reply.

“I'm sorry?” the man says.

“Nothing,” I tell him, trying to think of a way to cover my tracks. “Sorry, I just talk to myself sometimes.”

“I don't blame you for that,” he replies, rolling his eyes. “I quite often find that I'm the most interesting person to talk to, in any room.”

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“That man was nearly boring me to death,” Cathy says over the earpiece as – half an hour later – I finally step back out of the library. “From the tone of his voice, I imagined him being short, bald and fat. Am I right?”

“Actually, no,” I reply, bemused by that suggestion. “He was a surprisingly attractive man. And quite muscular, I think, under that tweed jacket. Sorry, I should have described him to you at the start.”

“He sounded -”

“I found all the records concerning Caroline Jacobs,” I continue. “We know that her husband bought the place in 1933. Before that, the 1921 census shows a woman named Eugenia Withers living there.”

“Eugenie Withers? I've never heard that name before.”

“She was a widow,” I explain. “Her husband had died some years before. It's a shame that the 1931 census wasn't available, that would have been really useful in terms of piecing the whole puzzle together. There's no record of Caroline Jacobs having ever given birth to a child, but based on

everything else I've dug up about the house, I'm starting to think that she must have had a baby that for some reason was never registered."

"Why would she do that?"

"Shame?" I suggest. "She was a married woman, so if she had an affair and fell pregnant, she might have wanted to keep it a secret. And then, if she fell pregnant once she was a widow instead, that'd be another reason to cover it up." I pause for a moment as I try once again to come up with a theory. "I've met her ghost, and I can tell that she's hiding something. She acts all prim and proper, but there's real anger burning in her soul. I actually thought she was going to try to hurt me at one point."

"But why would she trap me in the house?" Cathy asks.

Again, I take a few seconds to ponder the question.

"She wants something from you," I say finally. "I don't think she can admit it to anyone, maybe not even to herself, but she's definitely after something. I think she had a child, and for whatever reason it died, and even then there's no death certificate on file. Which means that she might have..."

My voice trails off, and now a few of the pieces are starting to come together.

"She might have had to get rid of the body herself," I continue, "and now she's haunted by the tragedy of her child's death. What if the guilt has kept her trapped at the house, and now it's driven her so mad that she can't imagine anyone else ever leaving?"

"That doesn't seem very nice."

"If we can free her of the guilt somehow," I theorize out loud, "then we might be able to satisfy her. It's only an idea, but it's the best one I've got right now. But we still don't know what happened to that child, and this would be a lot easier if there were some records or..."

I pause for a few seconds, and now an idea is starting to form in my mind. A crazy idea, maybe, but one that I figure might just work.

"Or an eyewitness," I whisper.

"What was that?" Cathy asks.

"Caroline Jacobs is the only ghost I've met in that house so far," I continue, "but there's no reason why there can't be others." I pull my notes out and take a look. "I said I thought there were two. What if there are actually three? Eugenia Withers died there many years before Caroline move in, so it stands to reason that Eugenia's ghost might have been around

to witness the entire sorry story. If that's the case, all we have to do is find a way to contact her, and hopefully she can tell us exactly what happened."

"My head's starting to hurt."

"I think I know what to do," I tell her. "I'll meet you back at the house, but first I need to swing by my place and pick something up." I pause for a moment. "Or rather," I add, "*knock* something up. I just wish I'd paid more attention in art class at school."

Chapter Fifteen

“Is that a -”

“It's a spirit board,” I say a few hours later, as I set my very much homemade board on the kitchen table. “And yes, I made it myself. I looked some stuff up online and apparently there's no reason why it shouldn't work. It's our best bet if we're going to contact the dead.”

“But...”

Cathy hesitates, staring at the board, before looking up at the ceiling.

“What if she gets angry?” she asks, and I can hear the fear in her voice.

“Caroline's not the one we're trying to contact here,” I remind her. “We're trying to get in touch with the ghost of Eugenia Withers. If she's here, hopefully we can draw her out, and then she might be able to tell us all about Caroline's dead baby.”

“Exactly how many ghosts *are* there in my house?”

“This is our best bet. Right now it's our only bet.”

“And you really think...”

Her voice trails off for a moment.

“Do you really think that a dead baby cries in this house at night?” she asks cautiously. “I have such bad dreams, and I think sometimes at night I get up and... walk from room to room. I just don't remember what I do in those rooms.”

“The guilt must have been eating away at Caroline for years,” I suggest, as I look down at the board and try to work out whether there's anything else we need. “If Eugenia Withers is still here, her ghost might have faded into the background. She'd be much older, so it's possible that her ghost has... degraded somehow. Like the patterns on a record, over time she might have become less clear, but she might still be here.”

I pause for a moment, feeling a little worried, and then I take a seat.

“We might be able to contact her.”

Cathy hesitates, and then she sits opposite me. She looks terrified, and to be honest I'm not entirely comfortable with this course of action either, but it's still the best plan I've been able to come up with. At the same

time, I'm worried about potentially unleashing something that I might not be able to control. Even at this late stage, I'm still trying to think of some other idea that might work just as well, but I guess we're rapidly running out of time.

"Are we really doing this?" Cathy asks.

"I guess so."

I take another deep breath, and then I reach out and put a finger on the eggcup we're using as a planchette. Cathy does the same, and I know that I have to begin.

"Eugenia Withers," I say, as I hear the terror in my own voice, "can... can you hear us?"

"Of course I can hear you," a woman replies suddenly. "I'm right here!"

Startled, I turn and see an elderly woman sitting in a chair over by the window. She's staring out at the garden, and the light from outside is catching her white dress in a way that makes it seem to almost glow.

"Are you..."

"My name is Eugenia Withers," she says archly, sounding distinctly unimpressed, "and I've been listening to the pair of you blather on for quite some time now." She glances at the table. "I don't know what concoction you've got there, but it's quite unnecessary. If you wish to speak to me, you have only to let me know, although I doubt I shall be of much assistance. Then again, one never knows. My memory is as sharp as a pin."

I look over at Cathy, and then I get to my feet and step toward Eugenia's ghost.

"Have you been here all this time?" I ask. "Have you seen everything that's happened in this house?"

"Absolutely nothing gets past me," she replies, as she looks out the window again. "I prefer to keep to myself most of the time. As the years go by and the ghosts mount up, a place like this can become somewhat crowded. That Caroline Jacobs woman is most unpleasant, and I certainly go out of my way to avoid her. I am quite happy observing Papa's garden."

"So the ghosts here don't... get together and talk?"

"It's not a social club," she says, her voice positively dripping with disdain now. "I lived a good and long life, young lady, and I'm quite content sitting here and thinking back over my happier days. I've never minded my own company."

“Is she for real?” Cathy whispers. “I mean... is this really happening?”

“We need to know about the baby,” I tell Eugenia, as I step closer to her. “I'm really sorry, I know this might be a sensitive subject, but I've heard rumors of a baby in the house, and people have claimed to have heard a child crying. I think finding that child now might be key to dealing with Caroline Jacobs.”

I wait for an answer, but after a moment – to my shock – Eugenia Withers simply fades away to nothing. I stare at the empty chair for a few seconds, and then I look around the room, hoping to spot some sign of her.

“Where did she go?” Cathy asks.

“I have no idea,” I reply, and now I can feel my heart pounding in my chest. “Eugenia Withers, can you hear me?”

As the silence continues, I realize that somehow we lost her. I head back to the table and look at the board again, but I really don't understand what's happening right now.

“Eugenia Withers?” Cathy says, putting a finger back onto the eggcup. “Mercy, I think you have to do it too!”

I hesitate, and then I too put my finger on the eggcup.

“Eugenia Withers,” Cathy says again, “are you -”

“What do you want?” Eugenia snaps angrily, and I watch as she reappears in the chair by the window. She seems even more tetchy than before. “I'm trying to look at the flowers.”

“Hello again,” I say, getting back to my feet and stepping toward her. “Sorry, I think we were cut off before.”

“Before?” She turns to me. “Who are you?”

“We were just talking,” I remind her. “Just a few seconds ago.”

“I've never seen you before in my life,” she barks. “Or my existence, or whatever you want to call it. And believe me, if I'd seen you, I'd remember that fact. I have a very sharp mind.”

“Right,” I say cautiously.

“I prefer to keep to myself,” she announces, not for the first time. “Are you something to do with that horrid Caroline Jacobs woman? I can't stand her, she irked me from the moment she first set foot in this house. She was alive then, and she's only gone downhill ever since.”

“I was asking you about the baby.”

“When?”

“I guess that doesn't matter,” I continue. “Eugenia Withers, we need to know about the baby Caroline Jacobs had while she was alive. We really don't know anything except that it existed, and I think it's key to unlocking this situation and helping Cathy Morgan get out of the house. I think something very bad happened here a long time ago, and I think someone has to try to... fix that.”

“What are you going on about?” she mutters, shifting slightly in the chair, causing it to creak and groan beneath her weight. “You're starting to irritate me.”

“You've obviously been here for a very long time,” I point out, while noting that yet another chair round these parts seems to be somewhat fragile. “I bet you've seen most of the history of the house over the years.”

“Not entirely by choice,” she complains. “There isn't really much to do, though, once you're a ghost and you're trapped inside the property where you died.” She adjusts her position in the chair a little, as if she's feeling slightly uncomfortable. “I must say, I've never found other people to be terribly interesting and...”

Her voice trails off.

“I'm sorry,” she adds, “but... what was I talking about just now?”

I turn to Cathy, and I can see that she understands the problem here; for all her insistence that she has a sharp mind, the ghost of Eugenia Withers is clearly struggling to remember very much at all. I'm starting to worry that we're on a hiding to nothing here, but I know I have to at least keep trying, so finally I kneel next to the chair and look up into the old woman's ghostly eyes.

“I need you to tell me anything you know about a baby,” I say firmly. “Does that ring any bells for you at all?”

She opens her mouth to reply, but at that moment I think I spot at least the faintest flicker of recognition on her face. She glances around, as if she expects to see someone else, and then she turns to me.

“A baby,” I continue, hoping to jog her memory a little more. “Please, just try to -”

“Yes,” she says suddenly, her eyes opening wide with shock. “I remember now! There *was* a child here!”

Chapter Sixteen

When Augustus Bland finally finished building his dream Cornish home on a cliff-side patch of land, back in the year 1850, he hoped very much that his family would inhabit the property for the rest of time. As he stood outside the house and surveyed his achievements for the first time, he was filled with a sense of promise. The house had come to him in a vision, appearing in a dream fully-finished, and he'd spent many years trying to recreate that vision. Now the work was over, and Augustus felt as if his life's work was complete.

"It's truly wonderful," his wife Victoria said, smiling with pride, before turning to the couple's young daughter Eugenia. "Don't you think so, darling?"

"It's scary," Eugenia, then only ten years old, said with a scrunched nose. "Do we *have* to come and live here?"

"You'll start to adore it soon enough," Victoria replied, putting a hand on the girl's shoulder. "I promise."

"What if the house falls off and crashes down onto the beach?" Eugenia asked.

"You might be surprised to learn that I considered that possibility," Augusts replied. "Don't worry, it's a pretty sturdy building, and these cliffs aren't going anywhere."

"I'm still worried about the cliffs," Eugenia muttered, glaring at the house with thinly-disguised malice. "It doesn't look like it should stay up at all."

Over the next few years, however, Eugenia's fears proved to have been misguided. The house certainly stayed up, and Augustus and his wife focused their efforts on the task of developing the garden. This was the second part of the grand vision: a magnificent garden filled with exotic plants. Other houses were starting to pop up nearby, and eventually the street was named after a local businessman named Charles Sidle, who'd made an absolute fortune in the world of international banking. Augustus Bland was a little annoyed that his own name wasn't used for the street, but he knew he couldn't really kick up much of a fuss. After all, he was an outsider and he knew that he had no right to meddle in local Cornish affairs.

In the year 1860, Augustus was suddenly struck down by a malady, as his heart gave out on him. The doctors tried to save him, but there was nothing they could do and soon Victoria was a widow and Eugenia was fatherless and the house's garden was not quite complete.

Aged twenty now, Eugenia knew that – in order to support her mother and keep the family home – she needed to be married. She has no suitors in mind, but several swiftly young men came out of the local woodwork and soon Eugenia was engaged to a perfectly pleasant chap named Charles Withers. The wedding was modest, but Charles had just enough money of his own to keep the house ticking over, and Eugenia promised to be a respectful and doting wife so long as he maintained the property and allowed her mother to live with them. Charles was happy enough with this arrangement; the couple weren't exactly in love, but over the years they became very fond of one another. And as Victoria often reminded her daughter, “there are many different types of love.”

By the turn of the century, Victoria had joined her late husband in the family grave, and Eugenia was a happily-married but childless woman aged sixty. She'd wanted a child of her own, of course, but the Lord had not seen fit to grant her this wish; in those days, no-one could really be sure who was to blame for such a barren situation, and Eugenia and Charles privately believed each other to be the root cause of their inability to start a family. Still, they got along happily enough, and any bitterness was kept beneath the surface. Charles only once mentioned his regret at not becoming a father, and this was in the year 1902, as he breathed his last.

Left all alone, Eugenia realized that the house was in danger of falling out of the family. She resolved to stay in the property at all costs, even though – as she got older – she was unable to keep the place clean. She had insufficient money to pay for help, and gradually she shuttered various parts of the house so that she could concentrate on merely maintaining a few select rooms. She worked on the garden, as best she could, but here too her efforts were faltering.

One day, in the summer of 1921, a man knocked at the door and told her that he was conducting the latest census.

“It should have been taken earlier in the year,” he explained, “but what with all the trouble and such, it's been delayed by a month or two. Now, if I could just have your name and the names of anyone else who lives here...”

Eugenia hadn't really wanted to cooperate with the man, but she'd eventually given him the barest details. He'd wanted to know a frightful number of things about her, and she'd answered only because she had an innate respect for authority and for the government. The whole thing had been very stressful for her, however, and she'd been mightily relieved when the man had announced that he was done.

"It looks like a big place for just you," he'd observed with a cheery smile. "I hope you don't get too lonely in there."

"I am perfectly happy, thank you," she'd told him, as she began to shut the front door. "I wish you luck in your further endeavors."

Three days later, having perhaps not quite recovered from the ordeal of talking to this gentleman, Eugenia Withers suffered a fatal heart attack while pruning the roses in the front garden. She'd been spotted quickly enough, but nothing could be done for her and she followed her parents into the family plot.

And now Eugenia Withers became *really* confused.

Having begun to suffer a little from dementia in her final months, Eugenia fared no better once she realized she was dead. Trapped in the house, she at first tried to convince herself that she was wrong, and that in fact she was somehow alive after all. When that approach had failed, she'd begun to search in vain for her parents, reasoning that she couldn't be the *only* ghost in the house. Eventually, however, she discovered that – for whatever reason – her parents had both moved on to whatever came next, while she remained very much in the house.

Trapped in the house.

At this point, Eugenia had suffered what can only be described as some kind of post-death breakdown. She became reclusive and withdrawn, preferring to spend her days in a kind of daze. For the most part, she ignored any voices that drifted her way. She paid absolutely no attention to the world around her at all, until one night when suddenly flames had consumed the house. At this point, she ran around from room to room, shouting for help even as her father's labor of love had begun to collapse. By the time the blaze was under control, 9 Sidle Street had been destroyed. Eugenia was nothing more than a ghost in the smoldering ruins, and she felt as if much of her mind had been taken away along with the house.

But the house was rebuilt.

Something about this process changed something deep inside Eugenia, and she began to pay more attention to the world of the living. As Caroline and Matthew Jacobs moved in and made the new house their own, Eugenia found herself caught in a strange half-world; she saw the new house, with its modern stylings, but she also somehow saw the old house as well, as if both buildings co-existed in the same space and time. Sometimes she liked to pass directly through solid walls, so that she could remember where doors had been in the old layout. In the basement, she even found that some of the old bricks had been reused, so she took to spending a lot of time down in the lower part of the house.

Sometimes she spent a few days intently following Caroline Jacobs and watching her every move; then she'd drift away for a month or two at a time, barely even noticing the world around her.

But she noticed the baby.

Sometimes, at night, she heard a child crying in the house. She hadn't noticed Caroline becoming a mother, not at first, but now her fractured view of the house allowed her to become increasingly aware that Caroline had become a very busy woman.

Finally, one night, Eugenia stepped into one of the upstairs doorways and saw Caroline standing in the master bedroom, cradling a child. The sight had been so shocking that Eugenia had half wondered whether she was imagining things. She'd seen the pure delight on Caroline's face, and she felt pleased that finally – after so very long – a child had been born at 9 Sidle Street. This, she felt, somehow completed the house and made it a proper home.

Content, she began to spend more time looking out at the garden. She began to sit in one of her favorite chairs, and she found that she could watch the lawn for days and days at a time. She liked the sound of the crying child, and she barely paid any attention at all to Caroline's daily routine. In fact, she was quite surprised when one day she walked through into the kitchen and found Caroline dead on the floor.

“Where...”

She looked around, wondering what had happened to the child. With the mother dead, someone had to look after the poor thing.

“Where are you?” she called out, hurrying from room to room. “Oh dear... where have you gone?”

She heard the crying sound, but somehow the baby seemed to be constantly moving around the house, as if its cries were echoing through every room. The more she tried to find the source of those cries, the more Eugenia found herself starting to panic, until the cries began to fill her ears and she screamed. Dropping to her knees, she put her hands over her ears and tried to block the sound out, but the crying overwhelmed her until she had no choice. She realized that she had to simply pretend that she could hear no child at all.

Eventually she realized that the crying had stopped. Either that, or she'd become too good at blocking the sound out, to the extent that now she couldn't even *force* herself to hear anything.

Soon a new family move in. Eugenia mostly kept out of their way, although occasionally she spotted the ghost of Caroline Jacobs in other rooms. Part of her wanted to speak to the other dead woman, but she eventually decided to just leave her alone. She also decided to stay away from one of the bedrooms in particular, since every time she approached that door she was stuck by an immense sense of dread and fear. The master bedroom, she decided, was not for her.

She returned to her chair by the window, and she spent her days staring out once more at the garden that her father had so lovingly created. She told herself that she could do this forever, that she was finally happy. And this had come to pass, until one day when she became aware of two rather strange women who had begun to call out her name.

Chapter Seventeen

“So where's Caroline's baby now?” I ask, once Eugenia has finally finished explaining the story of her life and death. “It can't have just disappeared.”

“Was it perhaps rescued?” Eugenia asked. “I don't remember anyone coming into the house and removing it, but... I rather think that I *have* missed one or two events.”

“This still doesn't make a lot of sense,” I point out. “Sorry, I'm not doubting what you told me for one second, but there has to be a part missing. If Caroline had a baby, then someone must have taken it after she died. It must have been rescued and adopted, or taken by some distant relative. Either that, or...”

My voice trails off as I try to imagine other possibilities. There are some potential outcomes that I really don't want to think about at all.

“Or it died,” Cathy suggests.

I turn to her.

“That'd be the logical conclusion,” she continues, with half a shrug. “Caroline Jacobs died, and if she wasn't found fast enough then her baby would have starved or died from lack of water or... just died. I mean, how long can a baby survive all on its own, anyway?”

“I didn't hear anything about a baby being found with her body,” I point out. “Alive *or* dead.”

“Its death might have been covered up,” she suggests. “People are pretty precious when it comes to babies. Someone might have decided that it was just too horrific for anyone to know.”

“Why would they do that?”

“Property prices,” she replies. “If word got out that a baby met such a nasty end here on Sidle Street, that might have put people off buying. Sorry, I know that sounds crazy, but I'm being serious. And then Caroline got angry and she's after revenge.”

I think about that possibility for a moment, and then I turn to Eugenia's ghost.

“I have absolutely no idea,” she tells me.

I believe her.

“So we have to find the baby,” Cathy says, getting to her feet. “That's it! That's the key to her letting me leave this house! We have to find

the baby and give it a good Christian burial, or whatever crap Caroline thinks is important. I don't care what she wants, I'm willing to do it for her. What's the alternative? I can't just sit around here for the rest of my life."

"And death," Eugenia interjects.

"The mad old bird has a point," Cathy continues. "If I die here, I might end up like her."

"I don't really recommend it," Eugenia says. "Not one bit. Although Papa's garden is looking so beautiful today..."

With that, she fades out of sight.

"So is that the theory we're running with?" Cathy asks, turning to me. "Is there a dead baby somewhere here in the house?"

"It's the only idea I've got right now," I reply, as I sit back down at the table. My mind is racing, and I can't quite believe that anyone would hide a dead child in such a strange way, but I guess the theory sort of makes sense. To some degree. "But where? If it's in the garden, then the ghost of Caroline Jacobs wouldn't be so precious about the house. And if it's inside somewhere, I still don't quite understand why Caroline's determined to keep you here."

"I broke the doll," Cathy points out. "She must be angry about that."

I consider the various option for a moment, and then I turn to her.

"In lieu of any better ideas," I say finally, "I think we really only have one choice. We have to find that child."

***

"Anything yet?" I call out, as I stop in a doorway upstairs and look around at the bedroom.

"Nothing!" Cathy replies from the master bedroom. "From what Eugenia said, I thought this might be the right room, but there's no sign of a dead kid. Are we going to have to start ripping up floorboards soon?"

"I'm sure it won't come to that," I tell her, but in truth I'm worried that that's exactly what we'll have to do.

So far, we've been checking each room methodically, but there's still no sign of a hidden child. I assume we're looking for nothing more than a little bundle of bones, perhaps wrapped in a blanket or a little coffin, but that's not exactly something that would be difficult to hide. The bones could

be anywhere in the entire house, and the odds of us just stumbling upon them seem low. Unfortunately, finding the child – assuming that there's even a child to find – might require taking the entire house apart brick by brick.

Unless there's an easier way...

“Caroline?” I say cautiously. “Come on, you have to be nearby. I'm sure you can hear me. Can't we try to be reasonable about this?”

I step further into the room, hoping desperately that she'll appear at any moment.

“I get that you're upset,” I continue, “but I'm sure we can have an honest discussion about the situation. I know people frowned upon women who had babies out of wedlock in the past, but if you had an affair after your husband died or something like that...”

I turn and look the other way.

“This is the twenty-first century,” I tell her. “Trust me, people are *way* more accepting of that sort of thing these days. No-one's going to judge you.”

I wait, hoping that she'll appear.

“I'm a mother,” I add, and I feel an immediate flicker of dread in my chest. I hadn't been planning to try to use that fact. “I *am*,” I continue. “I don't see my son, he's a long way away, and I miss him every day. Sometimes I try to stop myself thinking about him, I try to pretend that he doesn't exist, but that never works for long. The point is, I can't be in his life right now, and I probably won't ever be able to see him again. The situation's complicated but...”

I try to work out how exactly to explain my predicament.

“The point is,” I say, stepping over to the middle of the room, “I know a little about how you must be feeling. You're a mother, and you want to look after your child. We're basically trying to help you do that, we're all working toward the same thing, so why don't we put aside our differences and work together instead? As a mother, I -”

Suddenly I hear a rustling sound, and I turn just as Caroline storms into the room. As usual, she seems to be in a terrible hurry; she walks briskly to the table by the window, and she starts muttering to herself as she looks outside.

“I'm glad you decided to show up,” I tell her.

“What are you wittering on about now?” she snaps, not even turning to me. “Sometimes you can be the most tiresome young woman.”

“Did you hear what I said a moment ago?” I ask. “About being a mother?”

“I vaguely recall something.”

“We're on the same side,” I remind her. “As a mother -”

“You really don't know what you're talking about.”

“Maybe I do,” I suggest, watching the back of her head, waiting for her to at least look at me. “Whatever's going on here, we can help you to heal. For that, though, we need you to help us first. We need to know where you've hidden your child's body.”

She turns to me, and I can see the shocked expression on her face.

“We talked to Eugenia. She told us a little more about the house's history. Caroline, I know you don't really want to keep Cathy trapped here forever. She's not a ghost, not like you and Eugenia. She's alive, and she deserves to get out and live her life and -”

“*I* didn't get to leave!” Caroline says angrily.

“It's different for her,” I point out. “She doesn't have a child here, whereas you -”

“You really are the most insufferable fool,” Caroline snarls, and now I'm worried that she might lunge at me again. “You enjoy the sound of your own voice, don't you? Even though you clearly have no grasp whatsoever on the subject at hand.”

“Why not try to help me?”

“And why should I do that?” she sighs. “There's no point. No-one's going to help me! You wouldn't know the truth if it was standing right in front of you!”

“Mercy?” Cathy calls out from one of the other rooms. “Who are you talking to? Did you find something?”

“Not yet!” I shout, turning to look at the open doorway for a moment. “Just give me a moment!”

I turn back to Caroline, but to my dismay there's no sign of her.

“Seriously?” I mutter, as I look around. “I need to find some way of forcing you guys to stay with me. Come on, let's talk some -”

Before I can finish, all the lights flicker off. With evening having fallen outside, there's now very little natural light inside the house, but I can just about see that I'm still alone in this room.

“Caroline,” I say firmly, hoping against hope to draw her back, “I'm serious, we can only deal with this by talking, not by -”

Suddenly I hear a horrified scream, ringing out from one of the other upstairs rooms.

Chapter Eighteen

“Cathy?”

Hurrying through to the master bedroom, I immediately find Cathy shivering with fear on her knees. The room is dark; I instinctively reach out to switch on the light, but of course there's still no power. Heading over to Cathy, I kneel in front of her and see that she's holding her hands over her face.

“Hey,” I say, taking hold of her wrists and trying to lower her hands, while glancing around the room and seeing that there's no sign of anyone else. “Talk to me. What happened?”

“She... she...”

“Did you see her?” I ask. “Cathy, did you see Caroline?”

“I don't know what she wants from me,” she sobs. “She was so angry!”

“She gets like that sometimes,” I tell her. “I think it only happens when we're close to the truth, though. When we really hit a nerve. I know it's scary, but I think it's a sign that we need to keep pushing. We need to force the truth out of her, we need to make her face what really happened here. I think she's trying to hide from something that she thinks is shameful.”

Cathy slowly lowers her hands; I can see the terror in her eyes.

“Running away isn't an option,” I continue. “We have to face the truth.”

“I can't,” she stammers. “She's too... I can't look at her again.”

“We'll do it together,” I reply, “and -”

Suddenly we both hear a loud, heavy bump coming from nearby. Cathy flinches as I turn and look at the open doorway that leads into the dressing room. There's definitely something here, but I still don't quite understand why Caroline has to be so cryptic. Or are Cathy and I just being obtuse?

“Make her go away!” Cathy sobs, before getting to her feet. “I can't take this anymore! I'm leaving! She can do what she wants to me, but I'm not spending another second inside this house!”

She turns to run, but in that moment the door slams shut, sealing us both in the room. She grabs the handle and tries to pull it open, but

something's holding the door shut and a fraction of a second later I hear another loud bump coming from the dressing room.

"She's in there," I say, slowly standing up. I'm try to play things cool, but my heart is racing and I keep reminding myself that unlike Cathy *I'm* not trapped in the house. I can leave at any time. I'm not going anywhere, though; not until I've found a way to free Cathy. "We have to stay strong."

"Open this door!" she screams, pulling harder and harder on the handle. "Let me out of here!"

As she continues to struggle, I make my way past her and head into the dressing room. My eyes have more or less adjusted to the gloom now, and as I look around I still don't see any hint of Caroline. The room is very neat and spacious, and I can't shake the feeling that the loud bumping sound was designed to lure me in here. A moment later, I spot a crack on the wall, and I realize that I've seen these cracks in various other rooms. I'm sure there wasn't one in this particular spot before, however, so I quickly hurry over and reach down to touch the damaged section.

"When did these cracks start?" I call out to Cathy.

"Let me out!" she sobs.

"Cathy, when -"

"Just let me out!" she screams. "Help me!"

Realizing that she's not going to be much use, I run my fingers over the largest part of the crack. Something almost seems to be bulging out from inside the wall, and a moment later I look over at the bag of golf clubs in the corner. I hesitate for a few seconds, and then I hurry over and grab one of the clubs.

"Sorry, Cathy," I say, even though I doubt she's listening, "I know estate agents don't usually use their clients' clubs to smash a hole in the wall, but I think this might be important."

Heading back to the crack, I take a moment to adjust my grip on the club.

"Are you trying to show me something?" I whisper, wondering whether Caroline might be listening nearby. "Either way, let's find out."

I smash the wall, and to my surprise the club simply bounces off. I strike again, and this time I chip away some paint, but I'm clearly not managing to cause any damage to the wall itself. I change my stance a little, and then I start hitting the wall over and over again, until finally a section of

plasterboard falls away and I see nothing but a brick wall underneath. Hardly the revelation of the century.

Tossing the club aside, I use my bare hands to rip away more of the board, but there's really nothing under here except more brickwork.

“I don't understand,” I whisper. “There's obviously nothing here.”

Before I have a chance to call out to Cathy again, I hear a rumbling sound. I look over my shoulder, just in time to see another crack forming on the far wall.

“There?” I ask, grabbing the club again and heading over to take a closer look. “Is this where you want me to search?”

I set to work on this section, and I'm at least able to quickly knock a hole through into the next room. Dropping to my knees, I peer into the gap and then I reach inside, but there's no sign of any dead child. I'm starting to feel increasingly frustrated, but a moment later I see that several more cracks have now appeared in the bedroom. I get to my feet and head through, and I raise the club again, but at the last second I stop.

Nearby, Cathy's sobbing in the floor.

“This makes zero sense,” I say out loud, as I try to figure out what's happening. “The cracks seem like targets, but there's nothing beneath them and...”

Above me, a crack ripples across the ceiling. I briefly consider rushing up into the attic, but now I'm starting to feel as if I'd being led about the place.

I pause, and then I step past Cathy. When I try the door, it opens easily enough, and I make my way out onto the landing. I hurry from door to door, looking into the rooms, and I see that they each have cracks on their walls now. In fact, some new cracks are still breaking through the plaster.

“I just want to leave,” Cathy sobs as she crawls out after me. “Why can't I leave?”

I head back to the landing. Hearing another ripping sound, I look up and watch as another crack breaks across the ceiling. This is obviously deliberate, but I really don't understand why Caroline would be doing something like this. As the ripping sound continues all around, I realize that the cracks seem to be spreading throughout the house. My first thought is that something like this will really undermine the property value and deter potential purchasers; my second thought is that for some reason Caroline

Jacobs seems to be trying to show me where to find the child, except she seems to have gone a little over-the-top.

"Just pick one damn spot," I say out loud, reasoning that I can't be expected to just smash every wall. "The dead child can't be everywhere at once. Why are you doing this, it's almost like -"

Stopping suddenly, I realize that I might have stumbled onto the answer.

"It's almost like you're trying to distract me," I add, before hurrying to one of the other bedrooms and seeing more cracks on the walls.

"What are you doing?" Cathy whimpers.

"I'm looking to see where the cracks are."

"They're everywhere!"

"No, they can't be. That's the point. I guess I'm not looking to see where they are, I'm looking to see where they *aren't*."

I run from room to room, and then I head downstairs, still carrying the golf club.

"It's no use!" Cathy shouts. "I'm never going to be able to leave this house! She's going to make me stay forever!"

"Not if I have anything to say about it," I reply, going from room to room downstairs until finally I stop in the pantry and see that this is the one room where there are no cracks. This is the one part of the house that I'm not being drawn toward.

I look around, and finally I see that while most of the room has exposed brickwork, the far wall contains a section that appears to have been plastered over.

"You were trying to draw my attention to every part of the house *except* here," I whisper, and then I swallow hard. "Okay, if you're listening, I hope you realize that I'm only doing this because I want to help, okay? I know it might seem scary now, but by the end I think you'll thank me. Just..."

I take a deep breath.

"Just don't go all ghosty on me, okay?" I add. "Let me try to help you."

I step over to the wall, and I quickly start smashing the plasterboard away. At first I tell myself that this might just be another wild goose chase, that I'm unlikely to find anything, but chunks of plasterboard quickly fall to the floor and I start to realize that there's a space hidden in

the wall. Dropping the club, I kneel down and start using my hands to rip away as much of the board as possible. When that's done, I look into the darkness of the cavity, and then I take out my phone and switch on the flashlight. Holding it up, I finally see what's hidden in the wall.

“Mercy?” Cathy calls out. “Did you find anything?”

“Oh yeah,” I reply, as I feel my chest tightening with fear. “I found something.”

Chapter Nineteen

“What... what is it?” Cathy asks, her voice filled with fear as I set the box on the dining room table. “What's in it?”

“I'm not sure,” I tell her. “Just let me try to get it open.”

The box is clearly very old. It's painted dark red, with gold patterns on the sides. Most importantly, it's about a foot square, which I figure is large enough to contain the body of a very young child. I fiddle with the clasp, but I quickly find that it's locked. Peering more closely, I see that the hole appears to have rusted over.

“You haven't found any odd keys around the place, have you?” I say to Cathy.

She shakes her head.

“There was nothing else in the cavity.”

“I'll get a knife,” she says, before hurrying through to the kitchen.

“Is this what you were protecting, Caroline?” I call out, hoping that she might appear and give me a handy explanation of precisely what's been going on here. “Is this what it's all been about?”

“I found a hammer!” Cathy says enthusiastically as she races back through. “Out of the way. I'm going to smash this thing open.”

“No!”

I reach out and grab her arm just in time.

“What's wrong?” she asks.

“Didn't you learn *anything* when you smashed the doll?” I ask, as I force the hammer out of her hand. “If we're right, this is the last resting place of Caroline's missing child. It must have died somehow, and she buried it inside the house rather than facing the shame of revealing its existence.” I set the hammer aside. “There's a dead baby in this box,” I continue, “so we need to treat it with maximum respect.”

“How do we get it open, then?”

I take a moment to examine the lock. It's pretty badly rusted, so even if we found the right key, I'm not sure we'd be able to get inside. I try to think of some other way to get the thing open, but I'm already starting to realize that we'll need some outside help.

“I know someone who can do it,” I tell Cathy. “I'll take it to him, and I'll make sure that he opens it properly, without damaging the box or the

contents in any way."

I look up at the ceiling, and I can't help imagining that Caroline might be listening to us.

"Is that acceptable?" I call out. "Will you let me do that, if I promise that he'll be respectful? And of course I'll bring it straight back after. Do you agree to that course of action?"

I wait, and after a moment the lights flicker back to life.

"Is that her way of agreeing?" Cathy asks cautiously.

"I won't be long," I reply, turning to her. "Are you going to be okay sticking around here by yourself for a few hours?"

"I guess I've got no choice," she admits, although I can see the fear in her eyes. "Just... don't take too long, okay?"

***

"Mercy?" Nathan says half an hour later as he opens his front door. I can hear the TV running in the background. "What are you doing here?"

"Asking for your help," I reply, holding the box in my hands. "It's a long story, but I think there's a dead baby in here. And we need to be kind of delicate."

***

"The lock's ruined," he says, as he continues to examine the box. "I don't think there's any way to get it back into action. The best bet will be to just break the whole box open and -"

"No," I say firmly.

"No?"

He turns to me.

"This has to be opened with the utmost respect," I tell him. "We can't damage the box or its contents in any way."

"Because of the angry ghost mother?"

"I didn't explain that part very well," I reply. "To be honest, I still don't really understand it myself, but the point is, there's a dead child in here. When I take the box back to the house, it's really important that I can demonstrate it wasn't damaged. Can you get it open without so much as dislodging a loose chip of paint?"

He hesitates, and then he starts examining the box again.

“It's pretty flaky in places,” he points out. “I could try removing the hinges and -”

“I think it should be opened properly,” I tell him. “I'm sorry to keep throwing up problems, but this is one ghost I really don't want to piss off.”

He takes another look at the lock for a moment. I trust Nathan, and I know he can do this; at the same time, I check my watch and I can't help but worry about Cathy back at the house.

“I'll need some time,” Nathan says. “Mercy, this isn't going to be easy or -”

Before he can finish, the door to his workshop swings open and Lily comes through. She's carrying a steaming cup of tea and a plate of biscuits, and I can't help but notice that she's walking very straight, with excellent posture.

“Here you go, Daddy,” she says, setting the cup and the plate next to him. She's conspicuously not looking at me at all, as if I'm not here. “I thought you'd like these, seeing as how you're working so late.”

“Thanks,” he replies, “but -”

“There are three biscuits there,” she points out, “and they're all for you. You're not allowed to share them with anyone. Do you understand?”

“Lily -”

“Not with *anyone*,” she continues, pointedly still refusing to even acknowledge that I'm in the room. “I picked those particular biscuits with great care, Daddy, and I'd be forever heartbroken if you just gave them away to any random person who might show up.”

“Okay,” he says cautiously, “but -”

“I'll be watching TV again,” she adds, already turning and marching out of the room. She has a rag doll in one hand. “I put one sugar in your tea, Daddy, just how you like it. Although you really should try to cut down on sugar. And you shouldn't stay up too late, either. You know it's bad for your acid reflux.”

As the door swings shut, Nathan and I are left standing in silence. For a moment, the situation feels somewhat awkward.

“Did she... completely ignore me?” I ask cautiously.

“She's just mad at you for not coming to visit,” he tells me. “To be honest, it was kind of noticeable how you just stopped contacting us after

all that business at Hurst House."

"I've been really busy."

"Sure, and that's completely understandable. I think Lily just thought we'd... I mean, that *she'd* see more of you. I think she really started to like you."

"I should have explained that better."

"Well, she'll come around eventually," he replies. He hesitates, and then he slides the plate of biscuits toward me. "People usually do."

"Right now," I tell him, "I need to get this box open. Cathy's trapped in that house on Sidle Street, for some reason the ghost of Caroline Jacobs won't let her leave. I've got various half-assed theories about what's going on, but none of them fully explain the situation. But Cathy's going stir crazy, and I have to get her out of there sooner rather than later. How long do you think it'll take you to get this box open?"

"At least an hour. Unless you're willing to accept *some* damage."

"No damage at all," I say firmly, before we both look down at the box. "I really think it's vital that we can prove to Caroline Jacbos that we treated this box with respect. Sorry, I'm sure you think I'm a complete maniac, turning up here so late in the day and rambling on about ghosts and dead children and -"

"Not at all," he replies, interrupting me. "After Hurst House, I kind of changed the way I see things. Actually, I even..."

His voice trails off for a moment.

"Let me get to work," he adds finally, clearly making a very deliberate attempt to change the subject. "I need to find a few old tools that I haven't used for a while. The lock's going to have to be taken apart piece by piece, and that's not an easy job if you really want me to avoid leaving any scratches. I can do it, that's not the issue. It's just going to take a while."

"I'll let Cathy know roughly what time she can expect me," I reply. "I think she should just about be able to hold on."

He slides the cup of tea over to me.

"You can have that, if you like," he says. "I remember you like one sugar. I'll make my own, and other than that, just sit tight and I'll get the box open. Sorry, this isn't likely to be very exciting, but I'll do my absolute best."

"I know you will," I tell him. "As soon as I realized that the box was going to be a problem, I knew there was only one person I could come

to for help.”

Chapter Twenty

As I stand in the kitchen doorway, having just made myself a cup of tea, I look through to the front room and see that Lily's fast asleep. The TV is still running, showing some cartoon show, but it's already 9pm and Lily has finally dropped off while holding her little rag doll. She looks very calm and peaceful, so after a moment I turn and start making my way back toward Nathan's workshop.

I completely understand why Lily's angry at me. I just wish I could explain to her *why* I'm having to steer clear of her family.

"This is turning out to be harder than I expected," Nathan tells me as I reach the workshop. "The lock itself has some cracks on the inside. One wrong move and it could break." He looks up at me. "Are you really sure that I can't -"

"Please try not to damage it in any way," I reply, before he can finish. "Sorry, I know how frustrating that must be, but I need to demonstrate to Caroline Jacobs that we're doing this properly. She's quite... picky, even by the usual standards of the dead."

"You've got a lot of experience, huh?"

"I'm starting to pick some up."

"You know, we never properly talked about that night at Hurst House. We talked about what happened to *me*, but I could tell that you -"

"Is that a spirit board?" I ask, suddenly spotting one poking out from under a pile of papers.

He looks over at the board, and I can immediately tell that he's a little uncomfortable. He opens his mouth to try to explain, but I don't think he quite has an answer.

"It's not how it seems," he says cautiously.

"It's none of my business," I tell him, before wandering over and looking down at the board. I pull it out and see that it's obviously some mass-produced version, the kind you can pick up online. "You know you need to be careful with stuff like this, right?"

"Sure, but..."

He hesitates again.

"It's for my wife."

I turn to him.

“After Hurst House, I realized that she might not be gone. Not *truly* gone, at least.”

“I remember you saying something about that. Have you had any luck contacting her?”

“I'm still learning the ropes,” he replies, before stepping over to the desk and moving some papers aside, revealing a pile of books at the back. “I try to hide this stuff from Lily, because I don't want to get her hopes up, but if Anastasia's ghost is somewhere around then it'll be like we never really lost her at all. I mean, sure, she died, but if I can bring her back as a ghost, then what's the difference?”

“I'm not sure that -”

“If she's walking around and talking to us, then it'll be like she's not dead,” he adds with a hint of desperation in his voice. “She'd basically be as good as new. She can be a mother to Lily again. I'll get my wife back.”

“I don't know that it quite works like that,” I tell him, even though I really don't want to be the bearer of bad news. “The ghosts I've encountered have all been changed by their deaths. Sometimes quite a lot, sometimes just in subtle ways, but it's not as if they're exactly the way they were when they were alive.”

“But it's still them,” he points out. “It's still their soul.”

“Yes, but -”

“So if I can just get in touch with Anastasia, then we have a chance to put our family back together.” He grabs one of the books and starts flipping through it, and I can't help but notice that there are a lot of sticky notes on the various pages. He's clearly taking this idea very seriously. “I found some particularly interesting things in this one, about how the souls of the dead can be preserved so that they don't degrade.”

“Nathan -”

“Apparently, over time, most ghosts start to lose their cohesiveness.”

He turns the book around so that I can see a grainy black-and-white photo of what appears to be a plume of smoke in a room.

“It's like how old images fade,” he continues enthusiastically. “They decline over time, and some ghosts eventually end up not really having their old personalities anymore. But there are things that can be done to stop that happening, or at least to slow it down. Do you realize what that

means, Mercy? It means that my entire family can be saved! Lily and I can get back everything that we lost. It'll be like she never had the cancer at all."

I open my mouth to tell him that I'm really sure it's not that simple, but I can't quite bring myself to break his mood. He's clearly so desperate to get his wife back, and while I'm sure he's storing up more pain for himself in the future, I can't be the one to dash his hopes. I just wish he understood that – despite the fact that ghosts exist – death really *does* mean death.

Then again, what do I know? He might be right after all.

"Daddy?" Lily says suddenly, and I turn to see that she's come through.

"Hey, you shouldn't be up this late," Nathan tells her.

"I want to go to bed now," she replies, rubbing her eyes. She glances very briefly at me, before forcing herself to ignore me again. "Can you tuck me in?"

"Sure thing," he says, before turning to me. "I'll be back down in a few minutes."

"You have to read to me first," Lily says, taking his hand as he makes his way over and starts leading her to the stairs. "Daddy, you *always* read to me."

I can hear them still talking as they go up. Looking back down at the various books, and at the spirit board, I feel very sorry for Nathan. He thinks he can get his wife back using some combination of magic and witchcraft, yet I can't help thinking that such a prospect is always going to end badly. Most likely, he'll simply be disappointed, and at worst he might feel like he's losing her all over again.

Spotting a framed photo on the shelf, I reach out and pick it up. The smiling woman in the image must be Anastasia. She was certainly beautiful, and from what I've heard she and Nathan were very happy together. I wish they'd never been torn apart, but certain things can't be undone. As cruel as it might sound, I can only hope that Nathan's attempts come to nothing and that he quickly realizes that he needs to move on with his life. Despite my experience with the dead, I really don't think anyone should be meddling with the afterlife. After all, you never know what kind of unintended consequences might arise.

***

Opening my eyes, I see that morning light is streaming through the window. I blink a couple of times, trying to work out exactly where I am, and then – hearing a creaking floorboard nearby – I turn to find that Lily's watching me from the doorway that leads into the kitchen.

She immediately turns and hurries out of sight.

"What the..."

Sitting up, I realize that I must have fallen asleep. I check my watch and see that it's almost 7am, and now I remember coming through to just sit down and rest my eyes. I only intended to be here for a few minutes, but I must have slept for eight or nine hours.

"Good morning," Nathan says, making his way through while wiping his hands on a tea towel. "Sorry, I probably should have woken you earlier, but you seemed so exhausted."

"I really didn't plan on nodding off," I say, getting to my feet and discovering – in the process – that someone placed a blanket over me in the night. "I didn't realize that I was so tired."

"So there's good news and bad news about that box," he tells me. "The bad news is that I haven't managed to open it yet. The good news is that I finally know how to do it. I just need to drive to an out-of-town place and pick up a certain type of cleanser that should get rid of the worst of the rust. Then I can fashion a makeshift key and open it properly, the way nature intended. I hope that'll satisfy your requirement for this all to be done with respect."

"Thank you," I tell him, still feeling a little surprised that I slept for so many hours.

"So it'll take me an hour or so to get there," he explains, "and then once I'm back, I shouldn't have too much more trouble. By lunchtime, I think I'll have that little box open for you."

"I'm sorry to take up so much of your time," I reply.

"I can always find time to help out a friend."

Before I have a chance to reply, I feel a brief buzzing sensation in my pocket. Pulling my phone out, I'm shocked to see that I must have inadvertently set the damn thing onto silent; once I've unlocked the screen, I find that I have twenty-three missed calls, all from Cathy at different times during the night.

I immediately tap to call her back, while telling myself that everything's probably fine. After just a couple of seconds, however, I'm put

straight through to her voicemail.

“Is everything okay?” Nathan asks, as Lily peers at me from around the corner.

“I don't know,” I tell him, as I find myself wondering exactly what might have happened back at the house on Sidle Street. “I have to go and check on Cathy. I never meant to leave her alone for so long!”

Chapter Twenty-One

“No, it's fine, thank you,” I tell Nathan as I slam the door shut and turn to him. “Thanks for the lift, but I really need you to get into that box.”

“I'll call you as soon as I know anything,” he replies, and then I step back as he drives away in his truck.

Looking over at the house, I'm immediately relieved that there's no obvious sign of damage. I was worried that something really bad might have happened here, but at the same time I know that Cathy must have had a good reason to try calling me more than twenty times. I still feel a little unkempt after sleeping all night on Nathan's sofa, but as I start making my way toward the front door I tell myself that my priority has to be checking on Cathy.

I knock, and a moment later I hear footsteps inside the house. I think she's hurrying down the stairs, and after a few seconds the door swings open.

“Cathy, I -”

“Mercy!” she beams, and she looks so happy. “I was wondering when you'd show up!”

“I'm so sorry,” I reply, taking a step forward, only to find that she's blocking my way. “I know this is going to sound really bad, but I fell asleep on my friend's sofa. He's been working on the box, he should have it open in an hour or two.”

“Oh, I really wouldn't worry about that,” she tells me. “I think that when you took the box out of the house, it somehow undid everything.”

“*Undid* everything?”

“It solved the curse. It fixed the ghost's anger. However you want to look at things, it did the job. The house feels so much better now.”

She pauses, before pulling the door all the way open and gesturing for me to go inside.

“See?” she continues. “Everything's completely fine. I guess we'll never know exactly what was going on, but by getting rid of the box and the dead child inside, you seem to have made the house safe again. I didn't see or hear one odd thing all night. In fact, I feel like the atmosphere of the house has completely changed. Can't you feel how relaxed and free it is now?”

I step past her and look around. The interior of the house certainly looks okay, and I also have to admit that there seems to have been a real change in the atmosphere.

"You called me twenty-three times," I remind her.

"Did I?"

I turn to her.

"I suppose I was just excited," she tells me. "Yes, I suppose I *did* call a lot, didn't I? I just wanted to reassure you that there's absolutely no reason to worry. And do you want more proof?"

"I -"

Before I can get another word out, she steps beyond the front door and out onto the path. She makes her way to the gate, and then she turns to me with a huge grin as she holds her arms out at her sides.

"See?" she continues. "I'm not trapped anymore. I can come and go as I please."

"That's... amazing," I say cautiously, although I have to admit that I'm still confused. How *exactly* did removing the box make everything okay again? I guess I just don't understand ghost logic. "When I saw all those missed calls, I worried that something bad might have happened."

"I can't thank you enough," she says as she comes back inside the house. "I don't know what I would have done without you. However, I have to admit that all of this has made me reconsider my plans. I still want to get out of Cornwall eventually, but just for now I want to relax and reflect on what's happened. Discovering that ghosts are real is... Well, it's not something that happens every day, is it? I need to take stock and reevaluate certain aspects of my life."

"Are you sure?" I ask. "You seemed so keen to sell before."

"A lot has changed since then," she points out, and I have to admit that she's right about that. "I'm sure I'll put the house back on the market eventually, and of course you'll be my first choice when that day comes. It's just that, for a little while, I want to sit back and reflect. You can understand that, can't you?"

"I... guess I can," I reply, and to be honest I'm starting to understand where she's coming from. She's been through so much, and everyone needs to take a break now and again. "Are you sure there's nothing else I can help you with?"

“You can keep that box well away from this house,” she says firmly. “If I were you, I'd leave it shut and just bury it somewhere. Anywhere. I for one don't really need to know *why* getting rid of it helped. I'm just happy that it did!”

***

“This is a first,” Horace says as he scribbles in his folder. “No-one has ever previously been entered twice on my blackball list.”

“I'm not sure that she deserves to be blackballed, exactly,” I tell him, standing in his office and watching as he works. “I think she'll be in touch again eventually.”

“I can't force you to ignore her,” he mutters, before taking a moment to underline Cathy's name in the list, “but I'm pretty sure that you already know my opinion on this matter. That woman is no good!”

He closes the folder.

“She's been through a lot,” I reply. I haven't explained the whole story to him, because I'm really not sure that Horace is the kind of person who appreciates too many ghost stories. He seems like more of a matter-of-fact kind of guy. “The whole thing is really complicated, but I think she really deserves to rest and -”

Before I can finish, the door to the storeroom slams shut with such force that the glass pane rattles in its frame. I turn and look over at the door, and it's already slowly creaking back open.

“That's the second time that's happened today,” Horace complains, getting to his feet and making his way over. “I swear, there must be some wind getting in somewhere.” He grabs a rubber doorstop and kicks it into place, before using his foot to wedge it even more firmly. “From now on, we're keeping this door open at all times, okay? I don't want to die of a heart attack just because some stupid door can't keep itself shut!”

“Has the door always been like that?” I ask cautiously.

“Only since I turned the room into a storage place,” he grumbles, and now he sounds a little breathless. “Back when it was Heidi's office, there was never a problem.” He heads back to his desk and eases himself down onto his office chair with a heavy, slightly pained sigh. “This place is falling apart. Just like me.”

As he grunts and groans a little more, I cautiously step through into the storage room. I look at the spot where Heidi used to sit, but her old desk is now buried under piles of boxes. I have to admit, now that I'm in the room again, I can't help but notice a great sense of stillness. When I turn and look back out at Horace, I feel as if he might as well be a million miles away. Somehow the light in this room is different, as if I've stepped into another world entirely, as if something in here is causing everything to take a deep pause. A moment later I turn to the desk again, and I'm suddenly struck by the fear that behind all those boxes, Heidi might be sitting in her old position.

I approach the desk cautiously, and I feel a rush of relief as I look over the boxes and see that Heidi's old chair is empty.

Of *course* it's empty. If Heidi had come back to haunt the place, I'm pretty sure she'd have made herself known by now. Sure, there are plenty of ghosts around, but that doesn't mean that they're everywhere. And as I continue to look at Heidi's chair, I feel hugely relieved that there's no sign of her. If she was haunting the place, I'd have seen her by now, right?

"Are you okay?"

Startled, I turn to see that Horace is watching me from the other room.

"Did you see a rat?" he asks. "Is it another rat? If it's another rat, I'm going to have to seriously consider putting down some traps."

"It's not a rat," I tell him.

"I saw one the other day. Or it might have been a mouse. I don't even know how to tell the difference. Is it just size? And what if it's a stoat? I don't want to put traps down, I hate the sound when their little necks get broken, or when they don't quite die and they just keep on squeaking. But if that's what I have to do, then that's what I have to do."

"No, it's fine," I reply, stepping out of the room and pulling the door shut. I still feel a little unnerved, but I guess I just have to stop worrying. "Honestly, there's nothing in there at all."

Chapter Twenty-Two

“I don't want to put traps down,” Horace's voice says, echoing in my mind as I drive home from work a few hours later. “I hate the sound when their little necks get broken, or when they don't quite die and they just keep on squeaking. But if that's what I have to do, then that's what I have to do.”

As I pull up near the local store, I realize that something about Cathy Morgan's phone call earlier still doesn't sit quite right with me. She sounded so happy and relieved, and I guess I just can't quite believe that everything's been solved so easily. Sure, I guess it's good news if the house on Sidle Street is no longer haunted, but I'd really like to know *why* it's no longer haunted. How did taking that box away from the house cause all the weird things to just... stop?

Spotting movement out on the village green, I see a figure waving frantically. My first thought is that someone's trying to get my attention, but after a moment I allow myself to relax.

It's just Ashley.

Ever since he was fired from the agency, Horace's nephew Ashley has been trying to reinvent himself as some kind of cage-fighter or wrestler or... I don't quite remember the terminology, but I've bumped into him once or twice and he's discussed his plans in great detail. He was a thin, gangly kid when I first met him, and to be honest I doubted his ability to really pull off such an extreme change. To his credit, however, he's been out on the green most evenings, training in the dying light, and he's starting to look a little tougher and bulkier. At this rate, I wouldn't be surprised if he manages to grow some serious muscles, although it's still hard to imagine him actually climbing into a ring.

Or a cage.

Or wherever he wants to fight.

Looking over toward the village hall, I see that a woman is unlocking the door. A couple of people seem to have been waiting for her, and they all talk as they disappear inside together. I see a poster next to the door, advertising some kind of support group that meets once a week. For a moment, I actually consider going to take a closer look, although I'm really not sure that a support group would be much use for me. Then again, I guess it couldn't hurt to give it a try one night.

Hearing my phone ring, I check the screen and see that Nathan's trying to get through. I intentionally didn't bother him earlier, but now – as I answer – I figure that he might have news about the box.

"Hey," I say, trying to sound untroubled. "How are things going?"

"Sorry I'm late calling," he replies. "Long day. And work kind of got in the way."

"It's no problem," I tell him. "I know you must be busy. I'm just grateful to you for helping out at all."

"So I finally got that box open," he explains. "Don't worry, there's not so much as an atom of damage to it anywhere."

"What's inside?" I ask, and in my mind's eye I'm already imagining a set of bones.

"Nothing much," he says. "Some papers. A locket. That's all."

"What about the baby?"

"There's no baby in here. Which is a relief, because I really wasn't looking forward to seeing that."

"Are you sure?"

"That there's not a dead baby in this box?" I hear a rustling sound, as if he's going through some papers right now. "There's nothing like that in here, Mercy. It's really just a letter, some papers, a couple of photos and this locket thing on a chain. Do you want me to -"

"Then why was the box so important?" I ask.

"Beats me. Do you want to come and collect it? Or I could, you know, bring it over to your place. I'm pretty free right now, actually, so -"

"I've got to go," I reply, and I know I'm being a little rude. "Sorry, but I really want to check one thing."

"Keep me in the loop," he says. "If you need any more help, just let me know."

Once I've cut the call, I sit alone in the car for a moment, still trying to figure out exactly what has happened. I was so sure that we'd find the remains of a child in that box, and now I'm completely flummoxed. A moment later, looking out across the green again, I see that Ashley is practicing what looks like some kind of kick-boxing. Not that I'm an expert, but he's kicking out hard into thin air, and a few seconds later his uncle's words come back to me once more.

"I don't want to put traps down," Horace told me earlier. "But if that's what I have to do, then that's what I have to do."

What if that's what's happening at the house on Sidle Street? What if everything that has happened so far is a giant trap, and Cathy is still right in the middle of it all?

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Ten minutes later, once I've reached Sidle Street, I pull up and switch the engine off. I can already see Cathy's house over on the other side of the road, and I'm relieved that a few lights are on. So far, the place looks fairly normal, and I tell myself that most likely I'm overreacting.

I'm sure nothing's wrong.

Getting out of the car, I figure that I don't actually have to knock on Cathy's door. After all, I don't want to seem like some kind of stalker. Instead, I simply cross the road and then stop to get a better look at the house. I don't see Cathy at any of the windows, but that in itself isn't particularly strange either. I'm sure she's just getting on with her life, relieved that the strange events at the house have – for some reason that we might never fully understand – come to an abrupt halt. I need to learn when to stop poking.

I watch the house for a few more seconds, and then I turn to go back to my car.

Stopping suddenly, I realize I can hear a child crying. I look at some of the other houses on the road, and I know full well that the sound could be coming from any of them. As I slowly turn and look over at number nine, however, I feel a chill in my bones as I realize that there definitely seems to be a baby crying inside Cathy's house. I wait, hoping that the sound will stop or that some other explanation might become apparent, but if anything the crying becomes more persistent.

Glancing around, I realize that all the other houses have their curtains drawn. Is it possible that everyone else on the street is trying to ignore the sound? Isn't that what happened back when Caroline Jacobs was living here?

I start making my way toward the front door of Cathy's house, but I slow my pace as I start to realize that there might be no point simply knocking and asking if everything's okay. She'll just come to the door, lie to me, and leave me no better off than I am now. Whereas if I'm just a little

deceptive, I might learn a lot more. I stop a few paces from the door, and then I step over to the nearest window.

Peering into the house, I see that all the lights are on in the hallway. There's no sign of Cathy so far, but now I'm absolutely certain that the crying child is somewhere upstairs in this property. Again, I tell myself that this really is none of my business, but a moment later I spot a shadow briefly moving across one of the far walls. At that moment, realizing that someone's round the back of the house, I instinctively hurry around past several other windows, trying to get a view of Cathy.

If I can be sure that she's okay, that'll be enough for me to turn around and leave. It'll *have* to be; I can't keep chasing shadows forever.

Reaching the back door, I look into the kitchen. The lights are a little lower here, but nothing seems to be wrong. I don't see anyone, but after a moment I reach for the door handle before stopping myself.

Seriously?

Am I seriously considering letting myself into this woman's home?

I hesitate, weighing up the pros and cons, before stepping back. I know there's a risk that I'm taking things too far, and I can't afford to get myself into any more trouble. I desperately need to check that Cathy's okay, but I tell myself that I'll just have to knock at the front of the house. After all, the crying sound could be coming from some show she's watching on the TV. I turn to walk back the way I just came, and then I stop as I hear a creaking sound over my shoulder.

Turning, I see that the back door has swung open.

“Seriously?” I whisper, feeling as if I'm almost being *invited* to go inside and snoop around.

I head back to the door and look through into the kitchen, and now I realize that above the sound of the crying child, I can just about hear Cathy's voice drifting down from upstairs. I can't make out exactly what she's saying, however, so finally – against my better judgment – I creep into the kitchen. Telling myself that I'll stop as soon as I'm sure that Cathy's okay, I reach the doorway that leads into the hall, and now her words are just about rising above the child's continued cries.

“Please,” Cathy sobs, “I don't know what you want.”

Is she talking to the infant?

“Is he your baby?” she continues. “Just tell me what you want me to do, and I'll do it. Please, I'm begging you, just tell me what I have to do

and then let me go! Either that or just kill me now!”

Chapter Twenty-Three

“Cathy?” I call out as I race up the stairs. “Cathy, it's me! Where are you?”

Reaching the door that leads into the master bedroom, I come to a halt just as the crying sound stops. Cathy's sitting on a chair near the bed, looking down into the old crib that she must have carried up here from the cupboard downstairs. She turns to me, and I can already see tears running down her horrified face. I don't think she's going to be able to hide what's really happening, not this time.

“Mercy?” she stammers. “You have to go.”

“Cathy -”

“You have to leave!” she shouts, stumbling to her feet and rushing toward me, then shoving me toward the top of the stairs. “It's not safe for you to be here! She might decide to take you too!”

“What are you talking about?” I ask, bumping against the railing. “Cathy, I heard a baby crying. Do you have a child?”

“No!” she blurts out.

“Then what -”

“It's in there!” she yells, turning and looking back toward the crib. “I don't know what's happening, but I think she wants me to look after it. I think she wants me to care for it, but she won't go near it herself.”

“Calm down and try to explain what's happening,” I reply. “Is it Caroline Jacobs? Is she the one who's trying to make you make you look after it?”

“I don't know,” she whimpers. “I don't think it's her.”

“Is it Eugenia?”

She shakes her head.

“My friend got the box open,” I tell her. “There was no baby in it.”

“I know,” she says, and now her voice is trembling with fear. “The baby...”

She pauses, and then she points toward the crib.

“The baby's in there,” she adds, barely able to get any words out at all.

I hesitate, and then I start making my way into the master bedroom.

“Don't do it!” Cathy calls after me. “You mustn't get involved! This is my problem now!”

Ignoring her for a moment, I approach the side of the crib. I can already see that there are some blankets crumpled at the bottom, and when I stop and look down into the crib I feel a tightening sense of fear in my chest. I swallow hard, and then I reach down, moving the blankets aside until I finally spot what appears to be a little collection of old, slightly discolored bones.

Tiny bones.

“They were hidden in the crib,” Cathy sobs. “I only found them when I pulled it out and looked properly.”

Although I'm horrified by what I've seen so far, I pull the blankets back a little further. As soon as I see the little skull, I flinch. I'm no expert, but this child must have been barely a month or two old when it died.

“Mercy!” Cathy screams suddenly. “She's right behind you!”

I spin round, and – for a fraction of a second – I think I see a shape hanging in the air. That shape quickly fades, and to be honest I'm not even sure that it was human, but I can feel the air getting colder all around me.

“Caroline?” I whisper. “Come on, it's me, you've appeared to me before. Let's talk and try to work this out and...”

As my voice fades away, I realize I can hear another sobbing sound coming from the dressing room. I look over at Cathy, who's still watching from the landing, and then I head to the doorway. As soon as I look into the dressing room, which has been left with all its lights off, I see that the ghost of Caroline Jacobs is standing in the corner with her back to me. I wait, but she doesn't move at all.

“Caroline?” I call out, before starting to make my way over to her.

The longer she keeps her back turned to me, the more I start to worry about what I'll see when she eventually looks at me. I stop just a few feet away, and that's when I realize that she's holding her hands up in front of her face.

“Caroline,” I say firmly, “this can't go on for much longer. We need to talk.”

“Go away!” she gasps.

“Caroline -”

“She'll hear you!”

I open my mouth to reply, but at that moment I'm really not quite sure what she means.

“Who'll hear me?” I ask cautiously, before spotting movement nearby.

Turning, I see another figure standing in one of the other corners. I immediately recognize Eugenia Withers; her hunched back is covered by a white dress, and she seems to be having some trouble staying on her feet. Like Caroline, she too has her back turned to me, and her hands are covering her eyes and mouth.

“Eugenia?” I say as I step over to her. “What's going on here? Is that *your* baby out there or -”

“Hush!” she hisses, almost – but not quite – turning to look at me. “You must be quiet, or she'll remember that we're here.”

“I don't know who you're talking about,” I reply.

“When she's around, we all have to stay quiet,” Eugenia explains, and she too sounds panicked. “You must realize that! When she's around we -”

Suddenly a floorboard creaks loudly. I look over my shoulder, but there's no sign of anyone else in the room.

“That's her!” Eugenia cries, before slowly kneeling on the floor as if she's trying to make herself as small and hard to spot as possible. “She must have heard you!”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” I reply, looking first at Caroline and then at Eugenia. “Will one of you please tell me what's going on? There's a baby out there, crying for its mother! Which one of you is its mother?”

“She is!” they both reply, their voices trembling with terror.

“Who are you talking about?” I ask, as I start to feel increasingly exasperated.

I turn again and look back across the room.

“There's no -”

At that moment I freeze as I see a figure standing right in front of me. I blink, but the figure doesn't quite come into focus. Instead she – and I'm not even sure that it *is* a she – seems to be somehow indistinct, hanging in the air with such a vague form that I can't even be entirely certain that I'm looking at an actual person. I know I should say something, but the vision in front of me doesn't look like any ghost I've ever seen before; she's

constantly shifting, with different parts of her body coming in and out of focus at different times, and finally I hear a faint, growling groan coming from roughly where her face should be.

Behind her, the baby starts crying again.

Before I have a chance to react, the ghostly figure reaches out and puts a hand on my shoulder. I immediately feel a burst of pain and drop to my knees, at which point she touches my other shoulder and the pain intensifies.

“Stop!” I gasp, trying but failing to wriggle free. “You're not -”

“It's okay!” Cathy shouts, stumbling over to the crib and reaching down to the blankets, then lifting them carefully into her arms. “I've got her! She's okay!”

The crying starts to fade already, and the figure in front of me fades to nothing.

As the pain stops, I lean back against the wall and take a moment to get my breath back. I'd perhaps naively come to assume that I knew how ghosts worked, but now I realize that they can definitely still throw a few surprises.

“Don't cry,” Cathy says, gently rocking the bundled blankets in her arms as a faint gurgling sound emerges. “I'm here now, see? You really don't need to cry and upset Mummy.”

“What *was* that thing?” I stammer.

She turns and holds a finger against her lips, and then she looks down once more at the bundle.

“That's right,” she continues. “You're all better now. There's really no need to cry.”

The crying briefly starts again, but Cathy rocks the bundle a little more and the sound fades.

“That's a good boy,” she purrs, forcing a somewhat terrified smile. “Well done. You're such a big, good boy. I'm so proud of you. We're *all* proud of you. Isn't that right, Mercy? We're all so very proud of him.”

I watch with a growing sense of incredulity as she gently settles the bundle of bones back in the crib. She's being so careful, as if she's dealing with a real baby, and she takes a few seconds to adjust the blankets before finally taking a couple of steps back. She seems terrified of making even the slightest noise, until slowly she turns and gestures for me to join her.

“This way,” she whispers. “Hurry. If you wake him again, his mother'll come back.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

“What the hell was that?” I ask, keeping my voice low once we're out on the landing and Cathy has bumped the door shut. “Why did you -”

“Not here,” she says, grabbing my arm and leading me over to the top of the stairs. “What are you doing here, Mercy? You never should have come back! I told you to stay away!”

“You told me that everything was okay again!”

“It is!” she hisses, but I can tell that she's lying. She glances back toward the door, as if she's still worried about waking the baby, and then she turns to me. “It's... manageable. I understand what the ghost's after now. It just wants someone to look after its little boy.”

“The ghost baby?”

“As long as the baby's cared for, and tended to when it cries, and kept happy, then the ghost mostly leaves me alone. I can't leave the house, but the ghost doesn't seem to mind when I get things delivered. So long as I don't try to get away again, I think it won't hurt me.”

“How did it hurt you?”

She hesitates, before rolling up one sleeve to reveal heavy, nasty-looking bruises.

“It's a mother,” she continues. “I think so, anyway. I've never actually seen its face, or really made out much about the shape of its body. Whatever it is, it's pretty big, and when it's angry... I just know that I mustn't make it angry again, and that in return it won't keep lashing out at me. It was partly my fault, anyway. I panicked, but now I've started to make sense of it all.”

“So the baby doesn't belong to Caroline?”

She shakes her head.

“I still don't understand all of this,” I admit, “but there's no way you can just stay here forever as some kind of prisoner in your own home.”

“Maybe it's for the best,” she suggests. I can see the doubt in her eyes, but also a great deal of fear. “After a while, I'll get used to it. I might even start to enjoy it, and I really can't risk the alternative. Mercy, this thing hurt me so much, I thought I was going to die. It gets so angry whenever the baby cries. It doesn't go near the crib itself, but it watches from a distance to

make sure that I tend to the child's every need. And to be honest, I've turned out to be not too bad at that."

"I'm not leaving you here like this," I tell her.

"I don't know what -"

Suddenly she lets out a shocked gasp as she sees something behind me. I turn, and for a moment I spot the same strange ghostly figure as before; something hovers in the air, flickering and constantly changing, before disappearing once again from view.

"I don't think she likes you being here," Cathy says.

I turn to her again.

"It's best to leave her alone," another voice adds, and I turn to see that Caroline and Eugenia are standing nearby. Caroline steps forward. "Most of the time, we're able to convince ourselves that she's not here. We're sort of able to forget about her and get on with our existence. It's only when the baby cries that she appears, and then she gets angry, and then..."

Her voice trails off.

"Trust me," she continues, "it's best to keep her happy. I made her angry once, and that didn't end well for me. She can be quite benevolent, really, just so long as she's not disturbed."

"If we give her what she wants," Eugenia says, "then she doesn't hurt any of us. Most of the time, especially now that young Cathy is looking after the child, I manage to entirely forget about the whole horrid situation. I just look out at Papa's garden and forget that anything's wrong."

"As do I," Caroline continues. "I'm sorry, that might not be the brave or the right thing to do, but it works for us."

"But who *is* this ghost?" I ask, still struggling to understand the situation. "I checked the census results and there were no other families ever living here!"

"There was one other," Eugenia tells me. "In the 1930s, I believe. Back when I was newly dead. I was getting used to my existence as a ghost."

"The census records for 1931 in this part of the county were lost," I say, as I think back to everything I discovered at the library. "Are you seriously telling me that a family lived here during that brief period when there's a gap in the records, that another family lived at this house? And they left no trace at all?"

“I wish I could remember more about them,” Eugenia says, furrowing her brow. “It's all so difficult to keep track of. I must be around two hundred years old by this point. You really can't expect me to remember everything that's gone on here, but I think I remember a young couple who lived here in the 1930s and...”

Her voice trails off for a moment, as if she's struck by some other memory.

“The flames,” she whispers.

“What flames?” I ask, before remembering stories about the house having once burned to the ground. “Are you talking about the fire that destroyed this place?”

“We rebuilt the house from scratch,” Caroline says proudly. “My husband and I put a lot of money into the project, you know. There's barely any of the original building left, it had been utterly wrecked.”

“That was such a horrible night,” Eugenia says, as she takes a seat on a chair near the top of the stairs. “I remember the screams, and the panic. There was nothing I could do to help anyone, of course. I tried, but I was powerless to save them as the flames ripped through the entire building. I couldn't feel the heat, and the flames didn't hurt me, but I ran from room to room, trying to raise the alarm.” She has tears in her eyes now. “I remember that part,” she adds, “but I'd rather I didn't. No-one from the street raised the alarm until... until it was too late.”

“They died?” I ask.

She pauses, and then she nods sadly.

“I don't know what caused the fire,” she says after a moment. “I don't suppose it really matters all that much, does it? Just some foolish accident. I suppose the smoke killed them all first, before the flames got to them. That, at least, is a small mercy. And then a few days later, once the ruins were cool enough, people came to inspect the damage. The husband and wife were found quickly, their bodies were removed from the rubble. As for the baby, I think his bones got lost in all the mess.”

“Or someone took them,” I suggest. “And protected them.”

“One part of the house was still standing,” Eugenia replies. “More or less. One of the downstairs rooms, I think it was used mostly as a little office. Oh, I wish I could remember their names, and I wish I recalled what they did for a living. Curse my mind, it really is so utterly useless

sometimes. You've got no idea what it's like, being such an old ghost. Everything just... becomes so tattered in my mind."

Before I have a chance to reply, I remember something Nathan told me recently.

"Over time," he said, "most ghosts start to lose their cohesiveness. It's like how old images fade. They decline over time, and some ghosts eventually end up not really having their old personalities anymore."

A moment later, spotting movement, I look across the landing and see the flickering, distorted figure once again. It certainly seems to match Nathan's description, and I'm starting to realize that – for one reason or another – this particular ghost has degraded to the point that it's almost unrecognizable as having ever been human. I take a step forward, hoping to get a closer look, but Cathy reaches out and grabs my arm. Still, I can just about tell that this ghost must once have been someone who lived in the house, most likely the mother of that ghostly baby. And in her rage, she seems to have forgotten almost everything about her old life except for one key factor.

Her son.

She remembers her son, and she'll do anything to make sure that someone looks after him. I just don't understand why she can't look after him herself.

A moment later I hear the child starting to cry again. Clearly panicking, Cathy mutters something under her breath and rushes back into the master bedroom, quickly lifting the bundle of bones out of the crib and trying to rock them back to sleep.

"Why doesn't she just do it?" I whisper, before looking at the third ghost again, only to find that she's nowhere to be seen.

"She never has," Caroline says mournfully. "I think she's always been looking for someone else to take care of the poor boy. For a kind of proxy. I have no idea why."

"These people don't show up at all in the records," I point out, as Cathy still struggles to get the child to stop crying. "I did plenty of research, and I didn't find even one hint that they existed. How is that even possible? How can three people have lived at this house, but their lives simply slipped through the cracks?"

"It probably happens more often that we'd like to think," Caroline suggests. "How many of us truly leave a mark in this world?"

Before I can reply, I hear Cathy's panicked voice shouting in the master bedroom.

“I'm trying!” she yells, cradling the blanket of bones tighter and tighter as the blurred ghost lingers in the doorway. “He won't stop crying! I think it's because there are so many people in the house!”

“This can't continue,” I say, hurrying to the door. “What if -”

Suddenly the blurry ghost turns and grabs me, slamming me against the wall. This time, before I have a chance to cry out, I see an angry face snarling at me from somewhere in the heart of the disturbance, and I'm horrified by the sight of the ghost's charred and badly burned features.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Many years ago, a man and a woman moved into 9 Sidle Street. They were young, newly-married, and the woman had recently become pregnant. The man had secured a good job in the local area, earning enough money to not only buy the house but also enough to support his new family. As they stepped into the house for the very first time, this young couple felt as if they had their whole future mapped out. They felt safe and secure. They felt that they were blessed, and that nothing could go wrong.

Eight months later, the woman gave birth. Soon, she and a healthy baby boy were able to leave the hospital and return to the house on Sidle Street.

"This is our little family," she said, rocking the child gently in her arms as tears ran from her eyes. "I won't ever let anyone happen to him."

"And I'm going to look after you both," the father told her. "We're going to be happy, I promise you."

The father took care of them. Although they were by no means poor, the family couldn't afford to hire anyone to help out, but the father worked tirelessly to both keep his job running and look after his wife and son at home. He was constantly exhausted, yet he never complained and never allowed his wife to see that he was so tired. The pair had no family left of their own, no parents or grandparents, so this little trio formed a very tight and complete unit. The father had no complaints; he merely wanted to look after his wife and son, and this was more than enough for him.

Until the night when, so tired that he could hardly think straight, he left a candle burning downstairs.

As flames began to spread through the house, all three members of this little family slept soundly. Soon thick black smoke was filling every room, rising up into the bedrooms, killing the family as they slept. All three were dead long before the flames began to blacken the door to their bedroom, and now even the efforts of panicked neighbors were of no use. A ghostly figure rushed from room to room, trying to raise the alarm, but the house burned down and almost the entire structure was completely destroyed.

The father and mother were found dead in the rubble, their bodies horrifically burned. The child's body wasn't located, and his bones were left

in the rubble as the house smoldered and awaited demolition.

By this point, something else was beginning to stir.

At night, strange whispers could be heard in the ruins. One small part of the house remained standing for now, and in the wreck of the old office a small red box had been left half-buried beneath all the ash and debris. This box had been brought to the house by the woman, who'd filled it with a few mementos and trinkets. She'd told her husband that one day she hoped to pass the box to their son, so that he'd know a little more about their family life. Now the box glinted each night in the moonlight, until eventually it was gone. No-one was seen removing the box, yet it had been lifted from the ruins by a pair of unseen hands.

Nearby, beneath an even larger pile of ash, the child's bones remained. Sometimes a weeping sound could be heard coming from the darkness near the bones, and this weeping sound was occasionally carried along the street by strong coastal winds. None of the neighbors ever noticed the weeping, or – if they did – they certainly never discussed the matter with one another. Yet the sound continued, almost every night, until finally some men arrived one day and started examining the ruins.

Plans were being drawn up, and voices loudly discussed the prospect of building a brand new house on the site.

At night, the weeping continued. Sometimes, a few words could even be heard whispering in the cold dark air.

“I won't ever let anyone happen to him,” a woman's voice said.

“And I'm going to look after you both,” a man sometimes replied.

Soon workers moved in and began to tear down what was left of the house. By this point the wooden red box had been missing for a few years, but the child's bones remained in the wreckage. And any time one of the workers got too close to the bones, a faint weeping sound could be heard hanging in the air, as if a woman was sobbing nearby.

Soon the workers began to argue about who should work on the site. No-one wanted to be left there alone, especially after dark, but the rubble had to be cleared. The weeping sound came and went from time to time, and occasionally a child could also be heard crying. The workers started swapping stories about spooky encounters, and soon they began to compete with one another to see who could tell the scariest tale. Before long, these workers had between them conspired to invent increasingly ludicrous accounts of their encounters at the site.

“I saw a ghostly woman staring at me,” one man told his colleagues while pulling charred timber away from the ruins. “She was as pale as death, and she was just glaring at me with this angry look in her eyes.”

This hadn't actually happened.

“I've seen her too,” another man interjected. “At night. I went back to fetch some tools I'd left behind, and I heard someone moving nearby. Suddenly this pale woman lunged at me, screaming. I was so shocked, I fell over. Then I scrambled to my feet and ran away, and I'm not sure I ever want to go near the place again.”

This, too, was an invention.

“It was worse for me,” a third man suggested. “There's a ghost woman there, that's for sure. But I also heard the sound of a dead child, crying out in the night. I don't mind telling you, I've already let the boss know that I refuse to work on that house alone. I don't think anyone should agree to that.”

This story came closest to the truth.

In fact, there were perhaps *elements* of truth to each of these tales, and to the hundreds of others that the men shared as they worked on preparing the building site, but for the most part they failed to notice the truly unexplained events that were quietly taking place.

For one thing, the little red box was never in the same place on two consecutive days. Some hidden force moved it around, so that it was always out of sight and away from any workers. And for another, the same thing happened to the bones of the child.

Eventually the new house was built, but the stories didn't stop. Other workers took over, moving in to finish the interior of the building. They too started to notice strange noises when they were alone, and one or two even heard the sound of either a woman or a child crying. These incidents were related by the men in whispered tones, since no-one wanted to come right out and say that they thought the place was haunted.

One evening, a tired laborer decided to go home early and finish plastering a wall the next day. He dutifully returned twelve hours later, and he failed to notice that at some point overnight the little red box had been placed inside the wall. He simply completed his task and then got on with the next job.

“We're working on that new house on Sidle Street,” one of the other men told an old regular at one of the local pubs. “Getting it all ready for its owners.”

“You want to be careful out there,” the regular replied. “I was one of the ones who worked on digging out the old foundations of the house that burned down. There's something not right there.”

“Like what?”

“Like something that's none of our business. Something that ordinary men like us should keep away from. Mark my words, that place isn't natural, and it never will be.”

“Got some ghost stories, have you?”

“Laugh if you want, I don't particularly expect you to listen to me. But I'm telling you, there's not enough money in the world that'd get me anywhere near that house again, even if it *has* been completely rebuilt. I know when something's not right, and that house... it's not right at all.”

The other man chuckled. He pretended to have listened to the warning, but deep down he felt that the old guy was just pulling his leg. He'd heard so many exaggerated ghost stories over the years, and now he was almost immune to the truth. He went back to his friends, and although they'd all noticed something unusual about the new house on Sidle Street, none of them really wanted to believe that the place was *truly* haunted. Besides, they were just a week or two away from being finished, and most of them were already more focused on finding their next jobs. A supposedly spooky house held little interest for any of them.

Soon the house was ready. Once the final worker had finished, the front door was locked and the place was left ready for its new owners to arrive.

Over the next few weeks, the house stood entirely empty. No cries rang out, no weeping or sobbing; the red box remained hidden away in the wall, and the little pile of bones had somehow been deposited in the corner of one of the new rooms. 9 Sidle Street stood as bare and quiet as a tomb.

Chapter Twenty-Six

"It's so wonderful," Caroline Jacobs said as she and her husband Matthew stood on the street and looked at their new home. "Is it ours? I mean, is it *really* ours?"

"If it isn't," Matthew replied, "then I really shouldn't have this, should I?"

He held up the key, and at that moment he couldn't stifle a faint smile.

"Everything's ready for us," he told her. "Now, Mrs. Jacobs, would you like to be carried across the threshold? I believe that's the traditional way for a man to escort his wife into a new home."

For the first year of their life on Sidle Street, Caroline and Matthew Jacobs were extremely happy. They were trying to start a family of their own, and sure enough Caroline soon fell pregnant. After a few failed pregnancies in the past, they knew that nothing was guaranteed. They chose to keep the news to themselves, but soon enough Caroline's belly began to bulge and the parents-to-be started buying all the things they'd need for when the baby arrived.

Clothing.

Bedding.

A nice new crib.

Caroline and Matthew began to interview nannies, although the process was fraught from the beginning. Caroline was starting to seem more than a little unhappy; she fussed about the tiniest things, and Matthew found that he was no longer able to calm her down. She often claimed that they weren't alone in the house, that she sensed some kind of presence, but Matthew insisted that she was simply letting her emotions run out of control. Privately, when talking to colleagues at work, he suggested that his wife wasn't handling the pregnancy very well.

Besides, the house was brand new. Even if ghosts were real – which they weren't, he insisted – how could a new house be haunted?

Eventually a young local girl named Olive Atkins was hired to help out. On her first day in the house, however, she walked into one of the rooms and found Caroline cradling a small collection of bones. Olive approached her new employer and asked what was wrong, but she'd been

horrified to see that the bones included a small human skull. Unable to believe what was happening, she turned and run from the house, swearing to never return.

The next day, Matthew Jacobs visited Olive and begged her to keep quiet about what had happened. He insisted that his wife was merely struggling a little with her pregnancy, and he offered the girl a handsome sum of money in exchange for her discretion. Not wanting to ever think about the awful scene again, Olive took the money and promised that she would keep quiet for the rest of her life. This was a promise that she kept to her dying day, although she never forgot those awful events and eventually she wrote them down in a letter.

Matthew worried about his wife, but he told himself that everything would be okay just so long as the baby was born happy and healthy. He took the bones and threw them out of the house. And then, returning from work one day, he found Caroline covered in blood in the bathroom.

Their child did not survive.

For months, Caroline refused to leave the house. She acted as if she was still pregnant, and she refused to let her husband get rid of the crib or any of the other items they'd purchased. Matthew told himself – yet again – that his wife was simply struggling with her emotions, and that eventually she had to get better. He tried every trick he could think of, but he was unable to get her to go outside at all. She became a recluse.

When the war came, Matthew knew that he had to go and fight. Patriotic fervor stirred in his breast. He tried to hire someone to look after the house for Caroline, but a succession of young girls came and went. No-one, it seemed, could handle being around Caroline for very long. Once Matthew had been shipped away, Caroline had no choice but to at least try to look after herself. Shaken somewhat from her terrible state, she started trying to keep the house clean, although she frequently fell into arguments with the new hired help. Apart from one girl who lasted for a full nine weeks, Caroline was unable to keep anyone around for long.

And then the crying started.

Late at night, Caroline began to hear a child crying, as if calling out for its mother. At first, she told herself that there was no reason to be concerned, but as the nights wore on she became more and more terrified. She took to locking herself into the master bedroom, hoping that this would

at least keep her safe, yet she could still hear a child crying louder and louder in the next room along. Eventually, one night, she forced herself to go and look, and she found to her horror that a small collection of bones had been left in the crib.

She vaguely remembered having seen the bones before, but she was sure that Matthew had thrown them away. Now they were back, and the sound of a crying child broke her heart.

Reaching down, she picked the bones up and cradled them. The crying immediately began to fade, and she felt – for the first time – like a mother.

When she looked over at the window, however, she saw that she was not alone. A figure – no more than a vague shape, really – was standing right behind her. She spun around, but now the figure was gone. The child in her arms gurgled happily, and Caroline quickly told herself that she mustn't overreact. Looking back down at the bones she was cradling, she finally understood what had happened.

Her dead child had returned.

Now she was focused on one thing, and one thing only: she knew that she had to look after her baby, even if she understood that it was already dead.

She pulled out all the old items that she and Matthew had bought when she was pregnant. She gave pride of place to a beautiful antique doll that she hoped would become her son's most cherished possession.

When news arrived in 1941 that her husband had been killed in the war, Caroline barely even noticed. She wore black for a year, but this was her only concession to reality. By this point she was completely focused on her ghostly child, even if she never actually saw him properly; she saw only the little collection of bones, but deep in her heart she felt certain that she was at last getting a chance to become a mother. She continued to try hiring maids and nannies, but she kept them out of the locked bedroom where the bones lay in the crib; the young girls never seemed to hear the child's cries, but they all swiftly fell foul of Caroline's temper.

Eventually the last maid left, and Caroline was no longer able – or willing – to hire more.

Now, left alone with nothing to do all day except look after the child, Caroline believed that she'd achieved her true calling in life. She felt a nagging sense of doubt in the back of her mind, a sensation that perhaps

all was not quite well, but for the most part she focused on looking after her child and making sure that he was never too upset.

Until one day, many years later, she made a fatal mistake.

Sitting in the kitchen, cradling the bones in a blanket, Caroline realized something odd. In all her time looking after her dead child, she'd never actually given him a name. The idea seemed a little foolish, but as she looked down at the bones she found herself wondering whether she should name her dead son after her dead husband. She considered the idea for a few minutes, and finally she decided that this would be a good idea.

“Matthew,” she said out loud, grinning at the bones. “You shall be named Matthew Jacobs, after your father. As your mother, I -”

At that moment, the lights had flickered and Caroline had felt a cold chill pass through her body. She looked around as the lights flickered some more, and a few seconds later the house fell completely dark. Getting to her feet, she tried the switch on the wall, but there was no power at all.

“Let's get you upstairs,” she muttered to the bones, before carrying them up and settling them in the crib. “I'm sure the power will soon -”

Suddenly she realized the truth. Staring down at the bones, she was filled with a sense of utter revulsion. Somehow the veil had lifted from her mind, and she knew now that this was not her child at all, that these bones belonged to someone else's child entirely. Feeling utterly sick and horrified, she stumbled back from the crib and bumped against the wall; she told herself that she must be wrong, that the child had to belong to her, but deep down she knew with absolute certainty that she'd made a terrible mistake when she'd first lifted the bones and held them in her arms. As a sense of nausea filled her belly, she turned and began to make her way downstairs.

At that moment, she heard a scream. She turned just as something slammed into her from behind, knocking her off her feet and sending her crashing down the stairs. Landing hard at the bottom, she let out a pained gasp before forcing herself up and limping to the front door.

Finding that the door refused to open, she limped through to the kitchen. She could already see the back door, but after just a couple more paces she stopped as a strange figure appeared in front of her. Staring in horror, she tried to focus on the figure and make out its face, but instead she was only able to see a blur.

Before she had a chance to try to run again, hands grabbed her head from behind and twisted her head, snapping her neck. A moment later her dead body slumped down against the cold kitchen floor.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“It's okay, I suppose,” Cathy Morgan said many years later as she stepped into the hallway and looked around, “but that's really not the issue. The issue is that we're living down here in the absolute arse-end of nowhere!”

She turned to her husband.

“There's nothing to do in Cornwall! People don't come to Cornwall because they want to do loads of stuff! They come to Cornwall because they've done stuff in the past and now they want to vegetate and retire and... rot!”

“There's plenty to do here,” he replied, stepping over to join her. “You know, people have often made fun of us because we have this... slight age gap in our relationship. But one of the benefits of me being twenty years older than you is that I have a little more experience when it comes to life.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Hear me out,” he said firmly, putting his hands on her shoulders.

She twisted free and stepped back.

“You know I always hate it when you do that,” she told him. “Like, I *really* hate being patronized.”

“This house has been empty for years,” he reminded her. “It's a chance for us to make a fresh start and unwind. After everything we've been through over the years, don't you think we deserve that?”

“But do we have to do it in Cornwall?” she asked. “Of all the places in all the world... There's nothing here!”

“Nothing here?”

He took her hand and led her through to the front room, and they stopped in front of the main window. Beyond the house, beyond even the garden, the cliff-edge dropped off precipitously and the sea could be seen glittering in the distance, spreading off to the horizon.

“Does that look like nothing to you?” Gary asked.

“It's empty.”

“What do you -”

“It's just the sea, and some grass, and I suppose there's a beach down there somewhere.” She let out a long, laborious and somewhat

theatrical sigh. “I get it, you're old, you don't mind retiring from excitement a bit.”

“I'm forty-three,” he reminded her. “I'm not sure that counts as *old*.”

“Sure, but you've lived your life. You've partied and traveled and done all that fun stuff, whereas I'm twenty-three and I feel like I haven't really done anything at all yet. I know you want to settle down and start having children, and I guess this would be a good place to raise a bunch of kids, but I just don't feel like I'm at that point in my life yet! And I've told you this so many times, but you never listen, and now look at us! We're living in the countryside! You've turned us rural!”

“Try to focus on the positives,” he told her. “You know, I got the place for a great price. There was some old furniture in here, I got rid of most of it, a few bits and pieces are tucked away under the stairs and -”

“Do you really think I care?” Cathy asked, before turning and putting her arms around him. “I'm sorry, I know I sound like an ungrateful bitch. It's just that this isn't quite how I saw my life going. I don't want to spend the rest of my days rotting down here in a place that's more suited to old retired people.” She paused. “Sorry, I didn't mean to call you old again.”

Over time, Cathy tried to get used to the new pace of her life, but she couldn't help pining for her old days of partying in London. She gradually managed to adjust, however, to the extent that ten years later she'd almost begun to forget her younger days. She'd spent most of the intervening time trying and failing to get pregnant, with Gary having shelled out for a series of increasingly expensive fertility treatments that had completely failed. Although she'd almost begun to accept that she'd never have a child of her own, Cathy still found herself occasionally daydreaming about raising a little boy or girl of her own.

And then one day she met her husband's pregnant mistress.

“If he thinks he can just ignore me,” the woman – Valerie, she'd apparently been called – had yelled as she stood on the front step, “then he's got another thing coming!”

She put a hand on her prominently swollen belly.

“I'm taking him for every penny he's got!”

“You won't be the only one,” Cathy said through gritted teeth. “By the time I'm done with him, he won't have two bits to rub together. After he's provided for you and your kid, obviously.”

She stuck to her guns, and soon a very expensive lawyer managed to get her a very good divorce deal. Unfortunately, this had resulted in her getting stuck with the house in Cornwall as her main asset, and she'd actually begun to consider the possibility of staying there. With her wild days just a distant memory, she'd come to enjoy the slower pace of Cornish life and – to her shock – she found herself contemplating the idea of just sinking into a quiet life. At the very least, she resolved to not make any immediate decisions.

So she waited.

And she waited.

And she waited for a few years, until eventually she arranged for an estate agent to take a look around and provide a valuation. A woman named Heidi Carter duly showed up and tried very hard to get Cathy to put the house on the market; despite this hard sell attempt, Cathy had insisted that she was going to take her time considering the various possibilities, and she'd very deliberately begun to ignore Heidi's repeated phone calls. Eventually Heidi had given up, and Cathy had found herself once again contemplating her future.

Finally, realizing that it was now or never, a few years later Cathy had contacted the same estate agent. By this point, Heidi Carter was out of the picture, so a woman named Mercy Willow turned up and took a look around the house. Cathy had found Mercy to be much easier to deal with, and she'd initially decided to go ahead with the sale.

Until the day she broke the doll.

As soon as Mercy left, Cathy realized that something in the house had changed. Something had been stirred, or had... woken up. She'd begun to notice a certain presence that seemed to follow her from room to room, and although she initially dismissed the idea, she soon found herself listening out for even the tiniest noise during the night. She became increasingly convinced that something was in the house with her, and she began to notice little periods during which she blacked out and woke up with no idea what she'd been doing.

Sometimes, however, she found little hints of these forgotten activities. One day, for example, she'd pulled out the old crib; another day, she'd discovered a small collection of human bones hidden in the crib, and she'd settled these carefully into a blanket.

Finally, terrified that she was being watched, she started putting the doll back together. She knew that she was probably being paranoid, but she worried that by breaking the doll, she might have inadvertently angered some kind of spirit that lingered in the house. She did her best with the doll, although it was still very much looking worse for wear as she set it on the table.

"It's fixed!" she called out, just in case a ghostly presence might be able to hear her. "Is that enough now? You're not angry anymore, are you?"

For a brief moment, she'd actually hoped that the problem was solved. That naivety had soon been shattered, however, when the ghostly figure had returned with a vengeance. Cathy had begun to notice a crying sound in the house at night, and she soon realized that the presence wanted her to look after the ghost of a child. At first she tried to think of some way to escape, but all her attempts ended in failure and pain. Finally she understood that so long as she cared for the child, she'd be left alone. She told herself that one day there'd be a chance to escape, but that for now at least her best hope was simply to play along.

She also knew that she couldn't let anyone else suffer the same fate.

When Mercy arrived at the door again, Cathy managed to talk her out of staying. She knew that Mercy perhaps hadn't believed every word of her claims, but she hoped against hope that at least she'd done enough. Trapped in her own home, she told herself that eventually she'd find a way to escape, but that for now she simply had to calm the ghost's anger. So she sat with the child every night, while fully aware of something on the periphery of her vision, some kind of monstrous shape that constantly watched from afar.

"There you go," she said as she rocked the bones gently in her arms. "It's all going to be okay."

She cast a sideways glance at the distant figure, and somehow in her heart she knew that she was making the ghost happy. And that, she figured, was the best short-term plan she could come up with.

Until, one night, the child cried a little louder than usual, and she suddenly heard Mercy's voice calling out to her from the stairs.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Leave her alone!” Cathy shouts, grabbing my arm and pulling me away from the wall. “Let her go! I'm the one you want to look after your baby!”

The ghostly figure turns and screams at us both. I can't see its burned face right now, but I can somehow almost feel the rage and fury hanging in the air. A moment later, Cathy pulls me through into the master bedroom and slams the door shut.

“I'm pretty sure ghosts can get through locked doors,” I tell her, and a moment later Caroline proves my point by stepping straight through the door and into the room. “See?”

Seconds after that, Eugenia walks straight through the wall.

“Sorry,” she murmurs, “but there *used* to be a door there.”

“Sure, but that thing won't come in,” Cathy says breathlessly, backing away from the door. “I'm pretty sure it's the child's mother. Mothers are always so protective of their children, aren't they? She wants someone to look after her baby, but she never comes close to the crib. She barely even ventures into the room.”

She turns to me.

“She wants someone else to care for the kid. For some reason, she won't do it herself.”

“I saw her face just now,” I reply. “Just for a second, but she was so horribly burned.”

“You should have seen the flames that night,” Eugenia says mournfully. “My beautiful old home went up so fast.”

“There was so much damage,” Caroline adds. “Matthew and I worked so hard and spent so much money. People were quite jealous, but it was hardly our fault that we were affluent. Those green-eyed types should have tried working a little harder and earning some money of their own.”

Before I can answer, we all hear another scream coming from out on the landing. The door shudders, and while I don't doubt Cathy's logic, I'm starting to think that eventually that creature's going to force its way through. After all, mother bears will kill to defend their cubs, and I'm pretty sure that this ghost – in all her desperation and anger and fear – is like a mother bear. The door shudders again, and after a moment I reach into my pocket for my phone, only to find that it's gone.

“It must have fallen out on the landing,” I whisper.

“You shouldn't have come back,” Cathy tells me, with tears in her eyes. “I had her under control.”

Behind us, the child is once again crying in its crib. I hurry over and look down at the blanket, and I feel my heart almost break as I spot the little collection of bones.

“I was going to find a way out eventually,” Cathy continues. “I just didn't want anyone else to get dragged into this. I was going to figure out how to escape later.”

“You can't escape,” Caroline tells her. “Believe me, I know. Her rage knows no bounds, and eventually she *will* lash out at you.”

“And we don't even know her name,” I say, still looking down at the bones. “Her face was so scarred, it was absolutely terrifying. What if that's why she needs someone else to look after her baby? It's dead and it's crying out for its mother, but she's worried that it'll be horrified by the sight of her.” I turn to the others. “What if that's all we need to do? We need to reunite them.”

“It can't be that easy,” Cathy replies. “The baby's right there. Nothing's stopping her.”

“Except her own fear,” I continue. “She doesn't want her child to see her face now that she's so badly hurt. But the child's crying and crying, and I don't think it'll mind too much. It wants its mother. Cathy, Caroline, you've both done a great job with the ghost baby, but at the end of the day it knows you're not its mother and I think that's why you're never quite able to make it happy.”

“So what are you suggesting?” Cathy asks, her voice trembling with fear. “Do you want to go out there and try to talk that ghost into some kind of breakthrough?”

“Maybe,” I reply, before looking around at the floor, hoping that I might spot my phone. I'm pretty sure, however, that it must have fallen out before I came into this room. “First, though, I need my phone. I need to make a call.”

“Can't that wait?” Cathy says, raising a skeptical eyebrow. “We're kind of in the middle of something here.”

“And we can't fix it until I know one thing,” I tell her, as I turn and look at the door. At that moment, as if to remind me of the rage that's waiting out on the landing, the door shudders again. “This family doesn't

exist. They *did* exist, of course, but all the records were lost. As far as the history books are concerned, they might as well never have lived, but we know that they were here. You've seen that ghost out there, she's almost not even a human shape anymore. I think she's mostly forgotten her own soul, but she still loves her baby so some part of her must still be in there. We have a chance."

"Typical," Caroline mutters. "It's always the mother who has to look after the baby, isn't it? Never the father."

I hesitate, before making my way slowly toward the door.

"I can't let you do this," Cathy says firmly.

"You can't stop me," I tell her, as the door shakes again. "If I can just get to my phone and call Nathan, I think we have a chance of ending this nightmare tonight."

"I'll be fine," Cathy replies. "I can live like this."

"I'm not just talking about you," I point out, before taking a deep breath. "I don't think *anyone's* happy with this situation. Especially not that little boy."

As soon as I pull the door open, I see the distorted, blurry shape on the landing. I quickly spot my phone on the floor near the top of the stairs, so I race over and pick it up, and then I scramble into one of the other bedrooms and drop down onto the carpet. The ghostly figure doesn't come after me, so – as the child continues to cry in the other room – I unlock my phone with trembling fingers and bring up Nathan's number.

"Come on," I whisper as I wait for him to answer, "I know it's late but -"

"Mercy?" he says suddenly, sounding a little groggy. I can instantly tell that he was asleep. "What's wrong? Do you know what time it is?"

"The box," I reply breathlessly. "I need to know if there were any names in there."

"What are you talking about?"

"You said there were letters," I remind him, "and cards, and things like that. Please, just tell me if there were any names."

"I don't remember." He still sounds a little worse for wear. "Hang on, I need to go down to my workshop."

I can hear him climbing out of bed, and a moment later I realize he's heading downstairs.

“What's going on, Mercy?” he asks. “Do you need help?”

“I just need a name,” I tell him. “Any name. For her, or for the baby. Just something that might remind her of her old life. I need some kind of trigger that might turn her around.”

Now I hear Nathan hurrying into his workshop. My heart's racing and I know the ghost out there is getting angrier and angrier. A moment later I look out onto the landing, and I see that the blurry figure has moved closer to the door to the master bedroom. I remind myself of the burned face I briefly saw emerging from that huge mass, and I try to focus on the fact that she might still retain a trace of her humanity.

“Look, I've put him back down!” Cathy calls out, her voice filled with panic. “See? I'm not hurting him!”

The ghost lets out an angry snarl and steps through into the room.

“Nathan, what's taking so long?” I ask as I get to my feet. “Nathan, what -”

“Madeleine,” he says suddenly.

“What?”

“Madeleine,” he continues. “The letter's signed by someone named Madeleine. I think... I think it's a love letter, it's addressed to a guy named George. I'm reading it now and...”

He pauses.

“Edward,” he says finally. “I think the baby's named Edward. In the latter, this Madeleine woman tells George that she and Edward will love him forever and -”

“That should be enough,” I reply as I hurry back out onto the landing and see that the blurred figure is now in the master bedroom.

I take a deep breath, fully aware that this is possibly my last chance to end the madness in this house. That creature is a mass of anger and pain, but I have to believe that – somewhere deep inside – there's a mother who simply wants to look after her son. And the best way to get through to her, to someone whose entire life has been forgotten about for so long, might be to simply say her name.

“Madeleine!” I call out. “You have to stop!”

I wait, but she hasn't even reacted. I guess I'm going to have to try again.

“Stop!” I shout. “Madeleine!”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The creature finally hesitates, flickering and twisting in mid-air, but I think it's slowly turning toward me.

"That's your name, isn't it?" I continue, as Cathy watches from over by the crib and the child continues to cry. "Madeleine. I'm sorry, I don't know your last name, but your first name..."

I hesitate, watching the blurry ghost and waiting for some hint of recognition. After a few seconds, I take a step forward.

"Your name's Madeleine, right?"

I hear a faint growling sound, but also – from somewhere deep inside the mass – I also hear what sounds like a woman's gasp.

"And your husband was named George," I add.

I wait for a few more seconds, and then I force myself to take another step closer.

"Mercy, be careful!" Cathy hisses.

"I think it's okay," I tell her, keeping my eyes fixed on the ghostly figure. "I think this is Madeleine, and I think all she wants is for someone to look after her son. His name was Edward, that's him in the crib, and he's been crying out for his mother for so long. For pretty much a century."

Still watching the mass of blurred light, I wait for Madeleine to appear. She has to be in there somewhere.

"It's your face, isn't it?" I continue. "When you came back as a ghost, your face was still burned. You're scared that little Edward won't recognize you, or that he'll be horrified by the sight of you, but you need to be brave. He's your son, and that's the only thing that matters. Can't you tell from the way he cries so much? You've tried to force so many other people to look after him, and maybe that's worked occasionally, but it's not going to work forever. At some point, you have to go to him yourself. You've tried hiring nannies and none of them have really worked out."

"It *can* be hard to find the staff," Caroline murmurs.

Before I can say another word, I realize that the figure is starting to resolve and become more human, although something still seems a little wrong. It's far too big to be a person, and I'm worried that I might have made a huge mistake.

“That *is* you, Madeleine, isn't it?” I ask cautiously. “Please, tell me that -”

Suddenly I see a face. A burned, charred, terrified face staring back at me. But to my surprise, I also see a second face, equally scarred and damaged. This mass of twisting light wasn't hiding one ghost; it was hiding two of them, and now I see them clearly enough. They're a man and a woman, both hunched and horrifically injured from the fire, and they're standing close together as they hold hands with one another. For a few seconds I'm not quite sure what's happening, until finally I start to understand.

“What is that thing?” Cathy asks. “Is it Madeleine?”

“Not just Madeleine,” I tell her. “It's both of them. It's Madeleine and her husband George. They've *both* been here this whole time, trying to protect their son.”

At that moment, George's ghostly figure lets out a faint groan.

“It's okay,” I tell him, as I hold my hands up. A crying sound is still ringing out from the crib. “You just have to go to him. He's your son. He wants his parents. He wants both of you.”

The two figures hesitate, and then they turn and look over at the crib, as if they're still scared to go too close.

“It's going to be okay,” I continue, “and -”

Before I can finish, Madeleine turns and screams at me. I pull back, but I know I'm close to fixing this. After a moment, realizing that there are no other options, I hurry across the room and reach into the crib, lifting up the bundle of bones and turning to hold them out toward the two ghostly parents. Almost immediately, the crying sound starts to fade.

“Do you hear that?” I continue, as I look at the sad little collection of bones nestled in the blanket. “He wants the two of you. He's only *ever* wanted the two of you.”

I wait, and then I hold him out a little further. I can see the fear in the ghosts' eyes now, but after a moment Madeleine takes a step forward. She hesitates, and then she reaches up and I let her hold the blanket. After a few seconds I pull away and watch as George steps closer, and in that moment I see a ghostly child wriggling in the blanket.

“See?” I tell Madeleine and George. “He's not terrified of you. He just wants his parents.”

The child giggles and reaches up toward their burned faces, and I realize that this is actually working. The three of them are a family, and they deserve to be together after spending so much time apart. And it's quite clear that little Edward isn't scared of his parents; quite the reverse is true, in fact, as he continues to rest contentedly in their arms.

Looking back down at the crib, I see that Cathy put the doll in there for the little boy. Reaching down, I pick it up and then take it over to give back to Edward.

"Hey," I say as I hold the doll out, "I thought maybe -"

Suddenly the two parents turn and scream at me, pushing me back until I fall and land against the crib's side. As the doll thuds down next to me, I look back up at the ghosts and realize that I perhaps went a little too far.

"Okay, that's cool," I tell them. "I get it, you don't want anyone interfering now. It was a pretty ugly doll, anyway."

Madeleine and George look back down at their son. A moment later, right in front of my eyes, the three of them fade away to nothing, leaving the blanket to fall down onto the carpet. As it lands, the blanket tips out the collection of bones, depositing them next to my feet.

"Is... is that it?" Cathy asks, as if she still can't quite believe what just happened. "Are they gone? Is it over?"

I wait for a few seconds, just in case the ghostly figures come back, and then – supporting myself against the side of the crib – I get to my feet.

"Yeah," I say softly. "Yeah, I think it is."

Stepping closer, Cathy hesitates for a moment before crouching down and gathering up the bones. She puts them safely back in the blanket before standing up.

"What do we do with these?" she asks.

"We give them a proper burial," I reply, "just in case any ghostly parents get mad again and come back. Let's do everything by the book, and hopefully that way they'll stay... wherever they are now."

"Are they still here?" Cathy asks, looking all around. "Are they just going to be normal ghosts now, like..."

Her voice trails off, and after a moment we both turn and look at Caroline and Eugenia.

“I've been here for a very long time now,” Caroline says hesitantly, “but do you know something? I suddenly feel less... tied to the place. Now that the little boy's gone, I'm starting to wonder whether my Matthew might be out there somewhere. Do you think... if I left this house, would I just cease to exist, or would I end up in some other place?”

“I honestly don't know,” I tell her.

“Matthew might be there,” she continues, and I can hear the fear in her voice now. “He might not, but he might. And I suppose that's a risk worth taking.” She pauses, and then she fades from view. “Oh,” she adds, “I think I see a -”

Once she's gone, I turn to Eugenia.

“Never let it be said that I'm a coward,” she says firmly. “I too have been here for quite a long time, and I think perhaps I've spent enough time staring out the window. I hardly remember most things these days anyway, so it's not much of a life. Or a death, I suppose.” She hesitates, as if she's still making her decision, and then she nods gently. “Well, here goes nothing,” she adds. “Suddenly it feels very easy to let go and drift off. I do hope that there's *something* coming next. One wouldn't want to simply dissolve into a patch of nothingness, would one? Then again, if -”

With that, she disappears as well, leaving me standing in the master bedroom with just Cathy for company. We stay completely silent for a few seconds, until finally I take a deep breath.

“So my house isn't haunted anymore?” Cathy asks cautiously.

“I think it might be one of the few in this whole area that isn't,” I reply. “We can certify it ghost-free.”

“Okay,” she says, clearly still shocked. She pauses again. “So... does that mean we could try for a slightly higher asking price?”

Chapter Thirty

Sometimes, no matter how messy and chaotic life might seem, it can suddenly snap back to being quite neat and tidy. And I think the house on Sidle Street might be a perfect example of that fact.

Once Cathy finally put the house properly on the market, it was snapped up by a buyer within days. We only had time for a couple of viewings, but both couples said that the atmosphere of the place was markedly relaxed and they soon entered into a nice little bidding war. Cathy and I debated whether or not we had a duty to inform prospective buyers about the... problems that had occurred in the house, but eventually we reasoned that there was no need, since all the ghosts were now gone. I insisted that if we spotted even the slightest hint of supernatural activity, we'd have to lay everything out on the table, but there was truly not even a smidgen of a whisper of a ghost. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that 9 Sidle Street might actually be the least haunted building in the entire village.

Perhaps even in all of Cornwall.

After a very rapid twelve weeks, Cathy and the new buyers finally exchanged contracts. The final price was way over my estimate. I went to the train station to wave Cathy off, and I have to admit that I'm slightly jealous; after everything that's happened, she's off to start a new life in the south of France, where she's going to run a little bed and breakfast in Villefrance-sur-Mer, nestled on the coast between Nice and Monaco. She made me promise to go and visit her, and I agreed, although deep down I know that I probably won't follow through. Still, we exchanged contact details, and we're going to try to keep in touch. I made her swear to send me a message if she notices anything spooky in her new home.

Horace was, of course, very happy that the sale went through. He still insists on using that ridiculous chart to measure sales, and with Heidi sadly gone I'm actually in the lead. I've begged him to just get rid of the chart once and for all, but he says it's “a vital tool in the ongoing battle to increase morale” in the office. I might be wrong, but I think I detected just a trace of a smile beneath his bushy mustache, and I've started to wonder whether he's focusing on the chart because he knows it drives me crazy. I've decided to not mention it for a while, in the hope that he'll lost interest and I can shove the damn thing in the bin.

I finally put the papers regarding 9 Sidle Street into one of the archive boxes. I have to admit, I try to avoid the storage room at the office as much as possible. There's a strange tension hanging in the air, and although I keep telling myself that I'm imagining things, I still can't get over the feeling that I'm always being watched whenever I go through to find a box or a file. Things got so bad, one afternoon I glanced at one of the glass cupboard doors and – just for a fraction of a second – I thought I saw not only my own reflection, but also Heidi's ghostly face, as if she was standing right behind me. I spun around and there was no sign of her, and I've told myself that I need to get a grip.

But, yeah, I avoid that room as much as I can now.

Nathan and I seem to have established a more cordial relationship. I dropped by to collect the red box, so that I could bury it with the bones of little Edward. I think Nathan understands that I need to keep a slight distance from him; he might not understand *why*, but he seems to respect that choice. Besides, now that I know he's trying to contact his wife's ghost, I figure his mind isn't really fixed on romance. He said he went on a few more dates, but I can tell his heart isn't in it. Even Lily seems to have forgiven me, at least to some extent. She hasn't actually talked to met yet, but she brought some tea and biscuits through to the workshop while I was there and this time she'd prepared enough for both of us. She even glanced at me, very briefly, as she left.

I think she'll forgive me eventually.

After a lot of research, I tracked down the grave where Madeleine and George Duckworth had been buried. Yes, I even discovered their surname: through a lot of trial and error, I found the only married couple named Madeleine and George who died in the right time-frame, so I think I've finally managed to square that particular circle. I arranged to have little Edward Duckworth buried right next to them, and I paid to have his name added to their stone. I don't know how much the Duckworths really cared about all of that; as far as I can tell, they've left their earthly concerns far behind. Still, I think it was the right thing to do, even if Cathy and I were the only people at the modest burial ceremony.

"Where do you think they are?" Cathy asked.

"I don't think there's any way for us to know," I told her.

"I still can't believe that ghosts are real. What exactly *is* a ghost? Who decides whether someone comes back or not?"

“Maybe there's someone sitting there with a checklist, and they tell dead people if they have to stick around.” I think about that idea for a moment. “Or maybe it's an instinctive thing. In your heart of hearts, when you're dead, you just know one way or the other.”

While I was at the cemetery, I realized that there was still one loose end left after everything that happened. I found the spot where Olive Atkins was buried. Her stone had been removed some years previously, due to persistent vandalism, and I realized that I never worked out why someone seemed so angry at her. Sure, she briefly worked for Caroline Jacobs, and I guess she had some idea that the situation at 9 Sidle Street was very wrong. But why did someone keep attacking her grave? Who would have hated her so much? I have to confess that, as I stood and looked down at the spot where her stone once stood, I was pretty bothered by that hanging thread. I guess I'll never find out what Olive did wrong.

Then again, in a place like this, you never know what facts you might stumble upon eventually. Olive's ghost might be waiting behind the door of the next house I go to value.

So now, as I sit at my desk, working on some papers with Horace having gone home, I lean back and take a deep breath. I like staying late and having the place to myself. So long as I stay out of the storage room, I feel as if I'm completely alone, and that's not a particularly bad sensation. I've come to actually enjoy my job here, even if Horace can be a cantankerous boss; I've worked out how to just ignore some of his more obvious idiosyncrasies, and I can't deny that I'm learning a lot from him. I don't know how long my life here in Cornwall will last, but I'm starting to feel really settled.

Even if I know that loose ends have a habit of getting picked up.

After all, what is a ghost, if not the trailing loose end of a life? Some lives are neatly summed up at the end, and I guess those souls move on to whatever's next. Some lives, however, leave tattered and frayed edges, and I suspect that these are the cases where spirits tend to linger. Madeleine and George Duckworth are a perfect example of this fact: they stuck around to look after their son Edward, even when they barely even remembered who they were. They must have had some kind of innate understanding of the situation, a kind of instinctive knowledge that their work wasn't done. And when we finally reunited them with their child, the loose end was tied up neatly and they all headed off to whatever awaits us all. I think that's

something the living and the dead have in common: sometimes we have parts of our lives that aren't quite folded up as neatly as we'd like, and those loose ends have a habit of causing trouble when we least expect it. We might think that we've got our lives in order, but something from the past is usually lurking around the corner, ready to strike when we're at our least prepared. Just when we think we've got everything sorted... that's when something bad's about to happen.

Sitting contentedly in the silent office, I find myself humming as I finish up my latest paperwork. For the first time since I arrived in Cornwall, I truly feel as if I've got everything under control.

Epilogue

30 years ago...

“Okay,” Doctor Connor says, beaming at me as he opens his notebook, “why don't we get to know each other a little better first? Don't you think that's a good idea?”

I stare at him for a moment, and then I turn and look up at Daddy.

“I don't want to be here,” I whisper, hoping that the doctor won't be able to hear me. “Can we go home?”

“Let's just give it a try,” he replies.

“But I don't want to be here,” I whine, struggling to stay calm. “I promise I won't ever hurt another cat, or anything else, and I won't ever be bad again if we can just go home!”

I glance at Doctor Connor again. He's still smiling at me, but I know he's only doing that because he wants to trick me. He wants me to think that he's my friend, that he's on my side, when really he's being paid to get inside my head and work out what's wrong with me. Everything he's said and done so far has been totally calculated, like he went to school and got taught some special way of talking to little girls who've got problems. I know I'm probably being mean, but I feel like he doesn't have a single genuine bone in his entire body.

I hate him.

“Why don't we talk alone?” he asks finally, before looking at Daddy. “Would you mind leaving us for a little while?”

“I'll be out in the waiting room,” Daddy says as he gets to his feet. He walks past me, heading to the door. “Take your time.”

“No!”

Clambering off my chair, I run after him, only for him to turn and put his hands on my shoulders. I try to slip past, but he's holding me too tight. He's usually so gentle, but right now he's being really rough.

“This isn't negotiable,” he says firmly, before pushing me back toward the empty chairs. “I've tried everything to get you to behave, but nothing works. You make promise after promise about your behavior, sometimes you even manage to keep one of those promises for a little while, but eventually you always go back on your word. And it's getting

worse. Killing a cat is bad enough, but I'm worried that you're going to move on to killing something else one day."

"I won't," I whimper, with tears in my eyes. "I promise."

"Talk to Doctor Connor," he continues, before opening the door and stepping out into the waiting room. "Prove to him that you can be trusted."

With that, he shuts the door, leaving me standing with my back turned to the stupid doctor and his stupid notebook. I want to scream, I want to run out of here and keep running forever, but I know that Daddy will just find me and drag me back here. He just has this way of always getting in my way, and although I'm starting to learn how to outsmart him some of the time, I know I have to be smart and patient.

Behind me, Doctor Connor clears his throat. I bet *that* was deliberate too.

"So," he says, "why -"

"Fine!"

I storm back over and sit down, and then I lean back and fold my arms across my chest. These idiots might be able to make me sit here, but that doesn't mean I have to cooperate. I'm so done with the idea that I have to be all nice and friendly when I'm mad.

And right now, I'm *really* mad. I don't think I've ever been this angry in my life, not ever.

"That's a start," Doctor Connor says, as he makes a few notes.

"What are you writing?" I ask.

"Just some reminders for myself."

"About me?"

"Why don't we start by talking about your emotions?" He adjusts his position in the chair. "From what your father has told me, I get the feeling that you sometimes struggle to compartmentalize your different thoughts and feelings. They seem to all flood together, and that seems to cause you real problems." He pauses, while keeping his beady little eyes fixed on me. "I want to work with you to overcome this situation," he continues. "It'll take a while, but over a series of sessions we can dig into exactly what's making things so difficult for you."

"I just want to go home," I tell him.

"I can see that you're clenching your fists."

I immediately stop doing that; I hate giving him the satisfaction of seeing that I'm angry.

“That's better,” he tells me, and again he adjusts his position in the chair, which squeaks and creaks beneath him. I already hate the way he sits. How can a chair be so noisy? “Now, why don't we start thinking about the things that make you angry. Your father has told me a little bit about all of that, but I'd much prefer to hear it in your own words. One thing that particularly interests me is something your father told me about the way you handle stress.”

I start clenching my fists again, but I just about manage to stop myself in time. I don't think he noticed anything.

“Everyone handles stress differently,” he says, which is something completely obvious. Even a moron could say that. “You seem to have developed a little knack that I'd like to learn more about. From what your father says, it's almost as if you've independently developed a kind of valve that lets you blow off steam in a rather novel way. Is that right?”

“I don't know what you mean,” I reply, although deep down I'm pretty sure that I know exactly what he wants to talk about.

Or rather, *who* he wants to talk about.

“There are lots of different ways to describe this phenomenon,” he tells me, “but I think we'll go with the way that most people use.” He adjusts his position again. “Okay. Why don't you tell me all about your imaginary friend?”

Books in this series

1. The Haunting of Hurst House
2. The Spirit on Sidle Street
3. The Ghost of Gower Grange (coming soon)

Also available

THE GHOST IN ROOM 119

Something dangerous is lurking in room 119 of a Barcelona hotel. Something vicious. Something evil. Something that wants revenge.

Arriving in the city for a short break, Penny and Steve are looking forward to a week of sun, sea and sand. Those plans are ruined, however, when Steve thinks he recognizes a woman at the hotel bar. Ten years ago, he dated a girl named Annabelle, but the relationship ended badly. The woman at the bar looks a little like Annabelle, not enough for him to be certain that it's her, but enough for him to worry.

Soon, Steve finds himself drawn into a nightmare. He's starting to see the strange woman everywhere, and now he's worried that he's being followed. Has Annabelle returned to his life? If so, has she turned up in Barcelona by accident or by design? And how is her apparent appearance connected to the strange noises and flickering lights that can be heard every night, coming from room 119?

Also available

THE GHOSTS OF MARSH HOUSE

Marsh House stands abandoned in the heart of an English seaside town. A local ghost tour guide regularly stops in front of the house to tell its grim tale, but no-one has actually set foot in the building for more than forty years. Until now.

Desperate to get away from his troubles in London, Andrew heads to Marsh House and sets about trying to fix it up. Between rotten floorboards and bug infestations, he's got his work cut out for him. And that's before he even notices the strange noises in the night, and the fact that a strange presence is watching his every move.

When he invites a new friend to move in with him, everything changes. Andrew might not have paid attention to the darker side of Marsh House, but his new guest quickly realizes that something's very wrong. Does the ghost of a long-dead woman still haunt the house, cursing anyone who dares to fall in love? And is this malevolent entity somehow also responsible for the death of a local woman whose body was found on the beach?

And by the time he uncovers the shocking truth, will it be too late for Andrew to ever return to his old life?

The Ghosts of Marsh House is a horror story about a man who's trying to run from his own mistakes, and about a woman who'll stop at nothing to make others pay for her misery.