

The
Ghost
downstairs

Molly
Ringle

“Ranging from the poignantly romantic to the spine-chillingly supernatural, this is a truly compelling debut. I feel certain we’ll be seeing a lot more from Ringle in the future.” -Jessica Chambers, author of *Voices on the Waves*

The Ghost Downstairs

by

Molly Ringle

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

The Ghost Downstairs

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Dedication

For my son, who often slept on my lap while I wrote; and for the houseboys I have known.

I owe thanks to a multitude of people for help in revising this story. I thank my family members, notably Kate, Greg, and Steve, for pinpointing the strengths and weaknesses in the first draft; and Bonny and Rob for letting me bounce medical related plot ideas off them (even though I probably still got some of those details wrong).

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Chapter One

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

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

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

"I went to get sodium chloride for Mr. Ambaum, to flush his catheter," she explained to the doctors and the hospital administrator who called her in after Mr. Ambaum's death. It was five in the morning; Lina still had a chocolate

pudding stain on her white sneaker. “I was rattled after, um, running into Sara. I took what I thought was the sodium chloride, and went to his room and injected it, but...” Her hands still trembled. “It turned out to be potassium chloride. I somehow grabbed that instead; I don’t know how.”

“You injected potassium chloride into his central venous line?” The administrator took notes as he spoke. He hid his emotions well, but his voice was gruff. He couldn’t have been pleased to learn that a nurse had accidentally given a patient a lethal injection.

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

“Yes.” Professionalism had to be upheld; Lina would not cry in front of everyone. She blinked against the tears and controlled her voice. “I thought I checked. I saw the word ‘chloride.’ I should have...” She stopped. She should have checked better; end of weak defense.

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

A fresh September dawn bathed the eastern sky. Lina stumbled along the sidewalk, blinking at buildings and citizens and seagulls. Salmon-colored sunlight gleamed on the cars; roasting

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coffee filled the salty air with its scent; a beeping bread truck backed into an alley.

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

Lina unlocked the iron security gate of her building, trudged up the stone steps, and shuffled inside. She needed someone to talk to, someone close, but she had no one. The other nurses were friendly, but not the sort of people whose blouses she would cry upon. Her brother was probably stoned. Her mom never paid attention to nursing concerns unless they concerned herself. Her dad might actually be dismayed with her for her mistake. Really, Lina had no one.

Except maybe Brent.

In the stairwell, she paused at the landing between the second and third floor, where a window faced Elliott Bay. Deep blue water and evergreen-bristled shores cozied up to the metropolis; a white ferry trundled toward Bainbridge Island. Desperate love for the city swelled beneath her ribs. Seattle had seemed the

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promised land when she had been growing up in her ugly Tacoma neighborhood, and since she had moved here not a day had gone by when she didn't love it still. Brent had invited her to come with him to Atlanta. Because of her ties to Seattle she refused, and they broke up and said all those cruel things to each other. But would he be kind to her now if she called him and spilled the whole awful story? He knew her better than anyone else did. He was her strongest hope for sanity this morning.

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

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

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

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

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the button.

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

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

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

There would be no court trial. For Lina’s mistake the Ambaums were willing to take a \$500,000 settlement from Everglade Hospital, which, a hospital lawyer confided to Lina, was nothing. Families had been awarded millions for similar incidents. Mr. Ambaum, though only fifty-

seven, had been an alcoholic his entire adult life, leading to the liver cancer, and Lina got the impression his wife and sons were weary of dealing with him. They wanted to close the case, pay the medical bills, and move on.

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

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

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

No problem there. She fell in love with the

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house upon sight: a red-brick, three-story mansion with a spiky iron fence and a steep black roof. Marla, a short middle-aged woman with a seemingly permanent grin, let her in, pumped her hand, and beckoned her to follow. Lina crossed the thick white carpets, gazing at the furnishings: a grand piano, wavy old windowpanes, hardwood floors in the dining room. The ground floor smelled of lemon cake and freshly vacuumed rugs. Her spirits wobbled upward. In such a place, she might stand a chance at practicing qualm-free nursing again.

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

“Welcome, Lina.” He shook her hand.

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

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

“I’m an RN myself,” Marla said, “but God knows I need helpers. Best case would be someone who can move in. Makes the shifts more flexible. Room and board come with salary, and the rent is real cheap. Especially for this town.”

Lina smiled. “Sounds fine to me. I’m happy to move.”

Alan scratched his nose with the pencil. “Don’t mind leaving that commute behind, huh?”

“Not a bit.”

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

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

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

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

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

Marla and Alan Drake nodded in commiseration.

“I love nursing,” Lina said, “but I really wanted a more home-like environment, with patients I could get to know and stay with longer.”

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

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

The residents’ quarters comforted her, with their potted plants and wallpaper and large-print book collections. In such an environment she felt relaxed, or at least more relaxed than she had been since her involuntary manslaughter.

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Encouraged by her mood improvement, she talked half an hour with each resident, learning and writing down their habits and ailments, and what they liked and disliked about Drake House.

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

Cook very good, Lina jotted down in her notebook.

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

Fun times, Lina wrote.

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

Happy place, Lina recorded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Not much. What does this ghost do?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"With my eyes I'm hardly the one to ask! But

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no, I gather nobody sees it. They just hear it—footsteps and so forth.”

“Have you heard it?”

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

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

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

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

Lina let out her breath.

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

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

“Why did she leave?”

Mrs. B gestured as if sweeping cobwebs out of her face. “Oh, she said her computer keys kept tapping by themselves in the middle of the night. Honestly, can’t some people get earplugs?”

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

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

“Well, you got one more. Our twelfth room

just got filled. Jackie Clairmont. You can meet her at dinner.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The ghosts are old college kids,” hollered George Lambert, “trying to party with us.” He

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winked a milky blue eye at Lina. "Kids your age!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ren reached across, still wearing that dimple, and poured it for her. Before he withdrew he nodded at Lina in a manner she would have

labeled 'formal' with a splash of 'impish.'

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

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

"What do they do? Dishwashing and serving?"

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

Lina glanced at the next table to see if Ren heard. If he had, he was pretending he hadn't. He went on pouring water for someone without so much as a smirk.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well, aren't we all."

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

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

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

"Oh, a fellow University woman!" said Mrs. B. "I shall have to make friends with her."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lina thought this was one of those rare moments when the phrase "He didn't know what hit him" was especially apt, and she had to

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clench her jaw muscles to keep down a smile. “Is your arm all right? Can I get you some ice or anything?”

He kept pacing. “It’s okay. I’m a quick healer. It probably won’t even bruise.”

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

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

“Jackie Clairmont, I think. I haven’t met her yet.”

“Jackie Clairmont...her married name, I suppose?”

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

His eyebrows lifted. “Doesn’t seem likely.”

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

“Did she?” Ren still paced. “Interesting.”

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

“Of course.” Lina turned back to the dining room.

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

She heard no more of their exchange once she pushed through the swinging door. She went

to the table where Alan and the family members were soothing Mrs. Clairmont.

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

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

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

Lina nodded. "Just startled, I think."

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

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

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

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

Ren did not come out for the rest of the meal either, not even to clear the dishes. Lina didn't see him until she went down to the kitchen later to get a mug of herbal tea for her neighbor, Mrs. B. Ren stood at the sink, washing the larger dishes, the ones that wouldn't fit in the dishwasher. He did not turn around or say anything.

She wanted to apologize for being an idiot when they had been introduced. She wanted to sympathize with him for the way Jackie

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

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

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

Mrs. B smiled at her over the mug, her brown eyes crinkling. "I doubt he'd leave, with a pretty new girl like you in the house."

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

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

"Maybe he started as a teenager."

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

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

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

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

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

Lina straightened a row of large-print

Reader's Digests. "I told him how I felt. Lots of times."

"Then it wasn't meant to be. You'll find someone else." Mrs. B sounded perfectly certain, the way old ladies could.

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

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

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

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

The Ghost Downstairs

be out of the question.

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

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

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

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

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

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

She included Brent’s email address. Just one

Molly Ringle

of the group. It was the first thing she sent him since his engagement announcement.

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

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

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