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Lightning Falls

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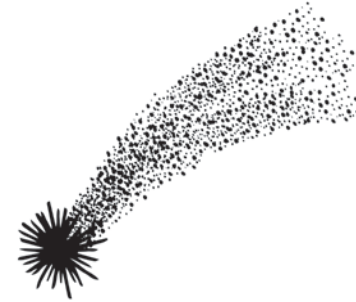
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For Amber Caraveo

Chapter 1



The Ghost House sits upon the shore of the river, beneath a great hulking viaduct, next to a graveyard. It is built of dark, damp stone bricks that wink in the moonlight. Its windows are small, its ragged rooftops swoop down low, and lights flicker within. The edge of the river reaches out and grabs at the gardens with greedy silver fingers; the waterfall thunders and echoes throughout the valley. A battered sign swings at the entrance to the car park, metal fixings creaking with every push of the wind. *LIGHTNING FALLS*, it reads, and anybody who stumbles upon it realizes this is not the place to come for a restful night.

Of course, that doesn't matter, because nobody *does* come for a restful night. The guests of Lightning Falls come for the creaks and the squeaks, and the odd

vibrating undulations of the floorboards. The rooms clatter and howl, the dining room fills with mist, and the silverware never stays still. There are dripping, echoing cellars, and dust-filled attics, and whispers all through the gardens. Many tourists used to flock to Lightning Falls in its glory days.

Now it's only a trickle, and those who do visit are either hardy ghost-hunters or here for a bargain break. We hammer and yammer about the place, and Meg does a very good shuffling whimper; and the guests enjoy our ghostly antics while drinking tea from Lord Rory's precious antique china.

Lord Rory is an acclaimed adventurer and the owner of Lightning Falls, and day to day the Ghost House is run by Mrs Peters, neither of whom is a ghost. Mrs Peters is the manager; Lightning Falls has been looked after by the people in her family for generations, ever since old Cecil.

Mrs Peters wears swishing dresses and pins her brown hair up in an endlessly unravelling bun. She divides her time between looking after the guests and looking after Lord Rory's concerns. He rarely makes an appearance, but Mrs Peters makes up for that. She watches everything we do, catching plates if they fall,

pushing cups away from the edges of the lace-covered tables.

The guests love it. They love all our tricks, because that's really all they are. There's nothing dangerous about Lightning Falls – except for the cellar. Even the bravest ghost tourists do not venture down to the cellar, because there's something ancient and unknown down there that makes even *my* skin tingle.

Meg and I share a room at the top of the house where the old servants' quarters used to be, behind a huge old sign that says *PRIATE* (nobody knows what happened to the *V*). Meg has been here a long time and knows most of the ghost tricks. She can appear – or disappear – before guests at will, but mostly she's a pale wraith-like figure who pulls her hair and moans when guests are at afternoon tea. I used to go with her sometimes, but we made each other giggle, so Mrs Peters has banned us from doing a double act. It isn't *in character*, she says.

All the ghosts are related either to the ancestors who first built the house, or to those who worked here. Or they had an accident in the river that rushes and tumbles down from the waterfall that gives Lightning Falls its name. There was a railway line on top of the

viaduct once, but now it's just a twist of rusted metal; the last train to Upper Slaughter fell off twenty-five years ago, bringing more ghosts to join our ranks and an end to the viaduct as a working rail route.

I was the latest arrival, ten years ago, and toddler-me caused a bit of a stir, by all accounts. It took them a while to work out what I was. Not quite a ghost, and not living either. A Hallowed Ghost, old Cecil says: stuck in between, and still a bit of a mystery.

Nobody has any idea where I came from, and that includes me.

The river swells now as I tromp away from the Ghost House and down through the gardens. I sit down heavily on the cold, muddy bank and stare into its depths with a sigh. The moon casts its reflection on ripples of water, and the trees on the other side whisper constantly. They have pale, cracked bark and long strands of small arrow-shaped leaves that fall like tangled hair to the river.

It's a magical place, I think. Rainbows break through the soft early mist of the mornings and, if you look in just the right way, at just the right time, there are diamonds sparkling in the deep. I love it here. When I'm feeling out of sorts, and my strangeness – my lack of

known history – is bothering me, it matches my mood.

A strange, hollow sensation rushes through me as I watch the river churn, and I put my fingers to my old gold pendant.

'Valerie!'

I turn and smile as Meg comes towards me, silvery as the river. She struggles around water – most ghosts do. But not me. There's a saying that ghosts cannot cross running water. I haven't actually tried, because everybody else says it feels like having your spine ripped out, and I don't fancy that. But I can be *around* it, better than most.

'I don't know why you come down here,' Meg says, tucking herself up next to me with a shudder. She's always cold. 'It makes you moody.'

'You don't have to come out here,' I say.

'Well, I do if I want to find you,' she says.

'Maybe we should find a bell, and you can ring it.'

'And you'll come?' Her grey eyes spark.

'I might.'

I look at her for a moment. This is where she died, eighty years ago, when she was just thirteen. On the surface, if you could see us both, you'd think we were the same age. But she stopped ageing when she became

a ghost, which is normal – and I didn't, which is not. She doesn't talk much about what happened on the day she died, but I know it's never that far from her thoughts. I shouldn't have her come out here for me.

'Time to go in?' I ask.

She nods. 'Mrs Peters wants us all on duty. She's fed up about the star storms, she says they've already put the *good* guests off coming, and if we're ever going to get back to full house we need to up our game.'

Meg stands and pulls me to my feet. With a groan, I follow her up the steep hill to the Ghost House. Every window flickers with light from the heavy chandeliers, and the stone on the front is darker than ever, damp with the spray of the river.

Star storms have been happening ever since I can remember. They are very beautiful – like little localized weather events, only instead of rain and clouds, stars fall instead, in clusters of bright, popping fireworks. They're not a problem if you're a ghost, but they can be off-putting for our paying human visitors. The worst was a few years ago, when an influential ghost-hunter got dazzled. He did *not* like the way he'd been caught running around the gardens screaming and terrified, and it did terrible damage to our reputation, much

to Lord Rory's fury. The fact that they're getting ever more frequent doesn't help, at all.

The last one was just over a month ago. Two of our guests assumed it was a fireworks display, so they watched it, and ended up temporarily blinded by the brightness. They stayed on an extra week until it was safe for them to drive again, and Mrs Peters had to offer compensation. A ghost house is meant to be a little bit creepy, a little bit mysterious; charming, but not actually dangerous.

The cemetery looms into view as we walk up through the wild garden. Yew trees are dark shadows under the stars, and the gravestones look like giant teeth breaking through the ground. A little shudder winds up my spine and I look back to the river. From here it's a thrashing monster, rushing from the waterfall down to the ash-brown valleys, overlooked by the loops of the abandoned viaduct. The sight of the river never fails to make my chest thunder; it's awesome, and powerful, and it really doesn't care whether we like it or not. It's been here forever, always the same. Except *tonight* there's a boy sitting at the very centre of the viaduct, legs swinging, head tilted in our direction.

I blink and stare harder – there’s *never* anybody on the viaduct. He’s dressed all in black, like a mourner at a funeral, with glasses and longish white hair that blows away from his face in a sudden gust of wind. As I watch, a flash of silver wire breaks from his fingers and cracks through the viaduct. I stumble into Meg, who spools away like a puff of air.

‘Val?’

‘Sorry,’ I say, when she’s re-formed next to me, her mouth a wide *O* of surprise. Physical contact is tricky among ghosts; I’m quite good at it, because I’m a bit different from the others, but Meg isn’t.

‘Don’t be using your Hallowed Ghostness on me!’ she says.

‘I didn’t mean to! I saw a boy!’

‘A boy?’

‘Up there!’ I point back at the viaduct.

Naturally, the boy has gone.

Meg sighs and shakes her head. I do have a bit of a reputation for making up tall tales. Mrs Peters calls them lies; my friends call them stories. I think of them as just a little extra. Facts, with a little swish of pizzazz.

But I didn’t make this one up.

I stare at the place where the boy was for a long

moment, until my eyes go funny, but nothing emerges. Fog starts to curl up the loops of the viaduct, and Meg looms over me impatiently, so I turn away. I don’t actually need any more drama in my life right now. Anything that sets me apart from the others more than I already am.

They always knew I was different. It was a puzzle, old Cecil says – before he worked out that I must have died at the stroke of midnight, Halloween, and that made me a Hallowed Ghost, caught between life and death. People can see me more easily than they can the other ghosts, and they can hear me. And though I was a toddler when they found me, I didn’t *stay* a toddler. I’ve been ageing and growing, which none of the others do – they’re all stuck at the ages they were when they died. And I need to eat and drink, and use the loo – Meg and I have the only en suite in the ghost quarters – and sleep. But I can float if I need to, and I can pass through walls, just like the rest of my ghost family.

Being Hallowed is not always comfortable. Sometimes it gets to me. And it gets to Meg too. She helped raise me, when I was smaller. Now I’m catching up to the age she was when she died. She says it means nothing, because in fact she’s now ninety-three, but

she's still a teenager really, and when I turn thirteen in a couple of weeks we will officially be the same age, in appearance, at least. Lord Rory will throw a party for my birthday – he does every year – and there will be cake, and once it's dark and all the guests are in their rooms we'll put a creepy old film on and all the ghosts will moan about how inaccurate it is, but they'll watch anyway. And I'll wonder, again, how I came to be here, and what it all really means. I'll wonder – even as I blow out candles before their smiling faces, even as Lord Rory sings louder than anyone else – who left me here as a small child.

Once we get to the house, Meg flees inside and heads to the breakfast room. She likes it in there; it's quiet and dark, and the guests are usually huddled in corners, making notes on paranormal activity.

According to the ghost rota that Mrs Peters draws up every week, which accounts for our days in neat sections of *Dawn/Morning*, *Afternoon*, *Dusk/Evening* and *Overnight*, I'm due in the ballroom now. It used to be the most glamorous room in the house, but over the generations it has faded and the carpet is threadbare, and the only thing in there that gleams is the brass on the old picture frames.

I make my way past the little wooden desk at reception, with a little nod at the (very human) receptionist, Leon. He has a pen stuck in a bun at the top of his head. He arrived two years ago as a guest looking for adventure, and never left. I guess he needed a new family too. I think he likes it here – he sticks around, so he must do – though right now he's looking a bit despairingly at Great-Aunt Flo, an ancient ancestor of Lord Rory's, who died hundreds of years ago. She is tormenting him, launching herself up into the air over and over again and floating past him, landing every time to stamp on the little brass bell. She looks at me as I pass, and winks.

Leon has his head in his hands, but straightens and puts on a bright smile when a couple come in behind me, gripping their fifty-per-cent-off promotional vouchers from the *Ghostwatcher's Express*. New guests. Leon does his best to look delighted, but I think it's hard sometimes, to be one of the few normal humans working here. Mrs Peters and Ted the chef are the only other employees who aren't ghosts. They're used to us all, but it must get draining, when you can't always see your colleagues and they don't care about things like hygiene and timescales.

‘Good evening,’ I hear him say, as I trail along the carpeted corridor to the ballroom. ‘Excuse the bell. Welcome to Lightning Falls. As you can see, we have plenty of activity to keep you on your toes!’

The ballroom windows look out on to the grand sweep of the viaduct. The curtains here are never drawn. They’re gathered on each side in great sweeps of threadbare blue velvet, tied with old ivory lace that trails to the floor. Nine silver chandeliers with dripping wax candles hang from the high ceiling, above there are several small round tables covered in ivory lace tablecloths that shift in the flickering light.

There’s a bar on the right-hand side of the room, where old Cecil usually perches, up on a leather bar stool that no human has sat on for a generation. I’ve seen people try. They slide on, not seeing him, and then they fly off again as if electrocuted, while Cecil growls and shakes his head. He has the most amazing grey moustache that’s wider than his face, and he wears an old seafaring hat that is dented at the front.

Cecil is the chief ghost, one of the original caretakers of the house, Mrs Peters’ great-uncle times about a billion, and our top poltergeist. He can move just about

anything, open and shut doors, *and* turn lights on and off. There’s a constant shiver in the air around him, and it’s cold wherever he is. He was a sea captain before he came to work here, and he says he nearly died of a shark bite; but we’ve never seen the scar.

‘Valerie,’ he says now, with a gappy smile. ‘Out moongazing, were you?’

‘Ah, maybe,’ I say. ‘I saw a boy . . .’

‘Did you now?’ Cecil says. ‘And what did this boy have to say for himself?’

‘Nothing! He was too far away. He was on the viaduct.’

Cecil goes very still.

‘On the viaduct, you say?’ Underneath his usual bluster, there’s a sharp bite in his voice.

‘Yes, which I thought was strange because nothing crosses it any more.’ Not since the train came off and a whole load of ghosts showed up, including one of my favourites, Iris. ‘Meg didn’t believe me.’

‘Ah.’ His eyes brighten. ‘It was your imagination.’

‘Yes, my imagination does like to make up boys with white hair.’

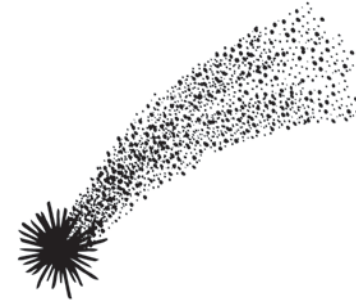
‘White hair?’ asks Cecil. ‘How old was this boy of yours?’

'Boy aged!' I say. 'And there were little flecks of lightning around him.'

'That is curious,' he says, turning away from me. 'What an imagination you have, Valerie.' He whizzes the water decanter towards us from the other end of the honey-gold bar, and grins when I catch it at the last minute. 'Have a drink, my dear. And I'll tell you all about the time I nearly got eaten by a giant squid!'

I have heard the squid story before. Approximately two hundred and thirteen times. I sit and pour myself some water, and watch his face grow animated with the rhythms of the story, and I wonder: Who *was* that boy?

Chapter 2



At dinner-time I'm in the dining hall, making the curtains swish and billow, with a little bit of whispering. It's a prime position, and not one I'm normally trusted with. Great -Aunt Flo normally does it, but she's having one of her fits of melancholy, where she keeps to the upper floors and moans and stomps about, making all the ceilings rattle, so Mrs Peters did some last-minute reshuffling with very bad grace, and here I am, twisted into the gold brocade.

I shuffle my feet against the old wooden floor, and whisper in a non-specific sort of way. Then I give a low, gibbering howl. There's a draught coming in through the patio doors, so it's not too hard to make the heavy curtains sway. Iris is floating about over the top of the tables, making the lights flicker.

There are ten tables in here, but only four are occupied: two by single ghost-hunters, who are furiously scribbling as they eat; one by a couple whose eyes dart anxiously about, as if they might be regretting their booking and would rather be somewhere nice and quiet with a hot tub; and another by a pair of older women who are watching all our tricks avidly, wild-eyed and talking excitedly.

Iris drifts up closer to the curtains and winks down at me. Sometimes her head is on backwards - a creepy reminder of the way she died in the train accident. Today, thankfully, it's pointing in the right direction - just because I'm at least part-ghost doesn't mean I don't get creeped out.

'They all look very excited,' I whisper, gesturing to the guests.

'Didn't you hear, Val?' Iris says. 'There was another star storm! Over in the cemetery. One of our ladies can see nothing but bright sparks now. Mrs Peters is just glad it didn't happen on the grounds . . .'

My chest lurches. *Bright sparks*. There were sparks all around that boy up on the viaduct. And a star storm, on the same day. Can a *person* cause a storm of bright stars out of thin air? The storms started about ten years

ago apparently, around the time I arrived. Sometimes the others say that I brought them with me - but it's only a joke.

'She'll get better,' I say, rushing along the windows, running my hands over the folds of the curtains. 'They always do . . .'

'No comfort in the moment, is it?' Iris retorts, flicking up and swimming along the ceiling, red hair trailing out behind her. 'Not when there might be another star storm any night now. And all the guests will leave and the Ghost House will fall to dust, and we'll wander like lost spectres for evermore . . .'

She shakes her curls mournfully. Iris is very melodramatic. She always sees things in the worst possible light. She was twenty-five when she died, and sometimes when I look at her - and she's got her head on straight - I feel a sharp pang of sadness deep in my chest. She doesn't talk a lot about her life; not many of the ghosts do. I guess it's easier to keep busy, scaring living people who have paid for the privilege.

If I was alive, I don't think I'd pay to come to a ghost house to be spooked while I ate my dinner. I'd be off at school and running in green fields, with a little dog all of my own called Bert.

I was very small when I was found by Lord Rory, sitting on the top step of the old family crypt, and they obviously figured out that I was a Hallowed Ghost, but apart from that my background is a complete mystery. Which means that, aside from not knowing how I died, I don't remember ever really living.

Not that I'm *not* living now, exactly. Here I am, living. Even breathing. The others at Lightning Falls say that's just a mechanical function – I'm not *alive*. We know this for various demonstrable reasons. First, people can't see me, not unless I'm really trying. Second, people can walk right through me. It is not pleasant. And last, I can float. Not very high, certainly not to the ceiling, but *any* floating is *not* human.

It does make me feel strange, sometimes. Like I'm not part of the family, when in fact I'm one of the core members. All the ghosts are especially intrigued that I can eat food. Normal ghosts cannot eat. It makes Iris grumpy, so I mostly eat in the kitchen, and not in front of them.

I keep shuffling the curtains for a while, but my heart's not in it – I can't hear any of the guests' conversations, and playing with dusty old fabric isn't *that* much fun. Iris is going for it, swooshing and groaning – when

she starts howling I decide it's about time for a hot chocolate, and drift off to the kitchen.

Cecil is there with Ted, the head chef. They're having a row about something called bouillabaisse, which I've no idea about, so I put the kettle on, pull up a chair and watch as things start flying through the air. It's quite a lot of fun, until I get caught on the ear by a spatula, just as I'm stirring my hot chocolate.

'Hey!' I shout, putting a hand to my throbbing ear. 'That hurt!'

They both whip around and stare at me; clearly neither of them had even noticed I was here. Then they start blaming each other. Not a word of sorry. Eventually Cecil decides to do some emergency haunting in the main foyer – one of his favourite regular guests is here and Cecil does love to flirt. That means I can sit in peace and watch Ted work while I have my hot chocolate. Ted is not a ghost, but he's very accustomed to all of us, and he likes testing recipes out on me.

'*You* try it,' he says, marching towards me with a spoon in his hand. He's very tall and thin, and regularly walks into the copper pans that hang from the ceiling. 'How dare he talk to me about flavours! It's been a hundred years since he had a working taste bud!'

I take a cautious sip and try not to grimace. Ted's a nice guy, but he does have some strange ideas when it comes to posh food. Bouillabaisse seems to be one of them. It tastes like tinned pilchards to me. Maybe it's supposed to.

'Mm, lovely,' I say, swallowing. 'What is it?'

'Fish soup!' he says. 'Can't you tell?'

'I did taste fish,' I say. 'Very nice.'

He glares at me as if I've just insulted him terribly, but fortunately Meg saves me by rushing in, making the air cold as ice. She passes through Ted, who shudders and goes back to his pot. He and Meg have a bit of a love-hate relationship; I think they enjoy winding each other up.

'Lord Rory's arrived!' she whispers. 'Let's go and see what he's brought with him this time . . .'

Lord Rory is a descendant of Henry and Isabel Falcon, the original owners of the house. He has spent years travelling the world, collecting strange things that he's very secretive about, and we never used to see him from one year to the next. He's squeamish about ghosts, which is odd for someone whose entire family is made up of ghosts, and who has essentially made a business out of them.

He's here more often now, though – and he always makes a point of being here for my birthday, which is just a few days away. Meg and I whirl away to see if we can spot him, carefully avoiding Mrs Peters, who will no doubt be in a flap; Lord Rory is very fussy about the state of the house and it's never quite to his liking, no matter how spick and span she's kept it. More than once I've overheard him telling her off for not having more *renowned* guests. He usually does his inspection with a lot of gusty sighing before shutting himself away in his private quarters in the west wing, and Meg and I hang about trying to find out where he's been on his adventure this time. His rooms are the best dressed in the whole place, and sometimes he used to let us in for tea and cake, which he ordered from Mrs Peters with a bellow through the corridors.

It's been a while since that happened last, though, and tonight we can't even get through the door to his quarters – he's reinforced it with something, and it's a no-go. Even for Meg, who prides herself on being able to walk through anything.

'What is going on?' she whispers, as we trail back down the corridor that leads to the west wing.

Great-Aunt Flo is gibbering on the landing, there's

a draught that makes the cobwebs spin against the ceiling, and I feel a bit unnerved. Meg does too – I can sense it. Something feels strange tonight. I mean, everything is always strange here, but this time it feels *different*, and not in a good way.

‘Do you think he’s had the door lined with iron?’ Meg demands, heading helter-skelter down the stairs, blonde hair spindling out around her head, and straight through one of our regular guests, Fiona, whose faded blue eyes light up. She doesn’t see us – very few of the guests actually *see* us – but she definitely felt that.

I follow after, skirting around Fiona and the elderly man who is her new companion. I don’t really like going through people; it makes my heart swoop.

‘Iron is *terrible* poisonous stuff for ghosts – everyone knows that,’ says Meg. ‘Why would he use it?’

‘Because he’s got secrets,’ I say.

‘He’s always had secrets! That’s part of the fun of him.’

‘Maybe they’re getting more serious,’ I say. ‘He’s spent years collecting all his treasures and now he means to get rid of all the ghosts and set up as a museum.’

‘You shouldn’t joke,’ Meg says, flinging herself up to the chandelier that hangs over the main lobby and

making it swing. ‘What if that’s *exactly* what he’s doing?’

‘Of course it isn’t!’ I say.

‘I don’t like it,’ she says. ‘What is he doing in there, Valerie, that needs hiding with iron? I mean to find out!’

She bares her teeth as she swings, making shadows dance. The candles gutter, and the front door slams shut. A young couple who are checking in at the desk huddle close to each other, grinning as Cecil rushes right at them and straight through the door. *More* new guests – Mrs Peters will be delighted, even if Lord Rory dismisses them as riff-raff.

I say goodnight to Meg and head up to our bedroom in the attic. It’s draughty as usual, and spiders skibble into the corners as I push open the trapdoor and climb in. The wooden floorboards are dark with age, and polished by years of scuffing feet. There’s a large bed under the gable window in our room. I climb on to it and stare out.

The sky is clear and pricked with stars, the moon a lopsided smile over the dark rise of the viaduct. Meg will join me later. Ghosts always get an extra burst of energy in the evening. Great-Aunt Flo usually plays the piano at some point, Iris dances, and even Cecil gets a

bit rowdy, telling his stories to anyone who will listen. They all love the night. They say it was made for ghosts.

For me, the night is for dreaming – strange, glittering dreams of wild rivers and towers that reach like silver spears into a star-speckled sky. But I don't want to sleep yet. I keep thinking about that boy, and the sparks that crackled around him on the viaduct.

I light the candle that's stuck into a pile of wax in an old, chipped saucer and stare at the place where he was. Of course he's not there now. I turn my gaze left, towards the cemetery. Among the giant's teeth tombstones are ancient leaning crosses and stone angels with weeping faces. Their shapes are just about discernible in the night-time gloom beneath the trees.

It's not a bad place to visit, during the day. The air is lazy, and the grass a soft green carpet. I like to take my book and read out loud, for anyone who might be listening. I've only ever seen a couple of ghosts there, and they're shy, and faded with age, so it's quiet. Which the Ghost House never is. Even now, as I take the candle and brush my teeth over the old porcelain sink, I can hear the moans of Cecil and Great-Aunt Flo down far below.

The drain gurgles, and I peer at myself in the cracked,

age-speckled oval mirror. It takes a moment, and I have to concentrate, but finally I can see myself. Dark eyes, dark hair; round, distinctly not-scary face: me, Valerie.

Cecil named me after the inscription on my pendant, which also has my date of birth engraved on it. I sigh and fog the mirror with my breath, and pull it out from under my shirt, where I keep it hidden most of the time. The gold is smooth and warm, and its face is smoky quartz. It has *Valerie* engraved on the back in ornate letters that catch the light and shine. I stare at it, wondering at the little dazzles in the quartz that seem to constantly change.

Sparks. Star storms.

Meg filters through the door. 'You spend so long peering into that thing,' she says. 'Has it told you your fortune yet?'

'Ha ha,' I say, rolling my eyes and scrambling up on to the high bed. 'It's not magic!'

The quartz shimmers in the low candlelight, and tiny gold speckles glow like stars. It's just the same as ever, I tell myself; but I know that's not true. Somehow, today – ever since I saw that boy – things have *shifted*.

I grip the warming metal in my fingers. It feels solid and comforting. I'm not always so good at holding on

to things: I drop cups, if I'm not concentrating, and sometimes my hand goes straight through things like banisters and tables. For some reason, though, the pendant is always solid.

Cecil says that because it belongs to me, it's bonded to me in some special way, and I should be careful never to lose it. I'm not sure, but I do know that Meg's never been able to get a grip on it, and she's pretty good at holding things, at least for long enough to throw them at people.

'What are you thinking?' she asks.

She settles down next to me and I hide the shiver that creeps over my skin. She's always cold, and I wish my body wouldn't react in the way it does – I'd hate for her to notice.

'It feels like things changed today. I just don't know what.'

'Maybe you grew an inch,' she says. 'In time for your birthday!'

I snort. 'I do know it doesn't work like that.'

'*Now* you know,' she says with a wicked grin. She stares at the pendant. 'Do you ever wonder where it came from?'

'Where *I* came from, you mean,' I say. 'Not that it

really matters – we're all a bit of a mystery here, aren't we?' I bunch the quilt on to my lap, tucking my hands into its soft folds.

'But I know *my* history. I remember my family.' Meg is silent for a moment, her gaze distant as though she sees her mother and father, and the older sisters who used to pull her hair and sneak her sweets. She blinks them away. 'And you don't. All you have is this pendant.'

'And Cecil's stories.'

'But we all know Cecil can't be trusted!'

I frown at her. We've had variations on this conversation before but never quite like this. I feel like Meg's pulling at something, and I don't want her to. Especially not today, when everything already feels strange.

'You don't think he's been honest about how I came to be here?'

'Valerie, you know what he's like. What do I think? I think it's a mystery. You're a mystery. Now that you're nearly thirteen, I thought you might like to start . . . investigating.' She draws out the word slowly, and it sounds silvery on her tongue.

'Meg!'

‘It’s fine if you don’t want to,’ she says. ‘But when you’re ready, I’m ready too. We can work it out together.’

‘Work what out, exactly?’

‘What being a Hallowed Ghost really means! Where you came from, who your parents are.’

Every word hits like a hammer, right where all my doubts are sitting. I don’t like it.

‘*This* is my family, Meg. You’re my family. It doesn’t matter what came before!’

There is a small silence.

‘It does, you know,’ she says at last. ‘It does matter where you came from, even if you’re happy with where you are now.’

I sigh. I do want to know where I come from. But I also want to be happy here, with the people who brought me up, and the two things don’t necessarily go together. Lightning Falls is all I know, and I’ve been happy with that for a long time.

I curl into the cold sheets, and tuck my hands under the pillow, and Meg curls up next to me, ready for our evening read of Agatha Christie. But tonight my eyes won’t stay open. I dream, and my dreams are strange, magical adventures through strange, magical streets,

and though she doesn’t know it, Meg is with me the whole time. My strange, ghost sister, flitting like an ice fairy by my side.

Chapter 3



Meg isn't with me when I wake. She often isn't – she gets restless, and she doesn't really need to sleep, like I do. I shake off my dreams and the lingering warmth of streets paved in smooth, coppery gold, and head down for breakfast.

I find Ted in the kitchen, listening to jazz while he whizzes around clattering pans. The sun filters through old wood shutters, half open. I stay out of his way, hooking my feet through the rungs of the bar stool and blinking away the rainbow shards of light that always follow those most vivid nights.

When I was small, Ted had a team of sous-chefs, dishwashers and even a waiter. He loved to bustle around, watching them with a hawk eye and shouting when they got things wrong. But his staff were let go as

the Ghost House got quieter, and now it's all on him, so he moves like a tornado.

After a while, he slides a bowl down the counter towards me. It's porridge with brown sugar and winter berries, and a lick of cream from the blue-and-white-striped jug.

'Thank you,' I say, stirring it all together to cool it down.

He flashes me a quick grin before ringing a brass bell and barking out that table five is ready. Mrs Peters bustles in, says good morning with a ruffle of my hair and sweeps out again with the tray, and Iris filters through the door to smell the coffee – even though she can't drink it, she still appreciates the aroma. It's all very ordinary.

All very ordinary, except it's not. The strangeness of yesterday is still with me – the bright stars in my pendant, Meg's ever-growing insistence on solving the mystery that brought me here – and the boy on the bridge . . .

I eat my porridge as quick as I can, and, thanking Ted, I hurry out of the kitchen and escape outside into the quiet, and the cold fog of an autumn morning. The roar of the waterfall as it smashes down the rocks is like

the roar inside me. I walk towards the river as though drawn by a magnet, down the rough old stone steps at the bottom of the garden. My pendant snags in my hair, and I pull it free – and that’s when I see him. The strange boy from the viaduct, walking, head down, straight towards me. Tiny black and silver sparks make the air around him seethe, so bright that my vision swims and he seems to vanish entirely.

I stop. He raises his head and notices me. Dark eyes flash, then he rushes past me up the steps, straight up to the Ghost House. I run after him, but by the time I’ve made it through the old revolving doors – they’re very hard to walk *through* when they’re still rotating – the lobby is empty. Black-and-white floor tiles shine under the already-lit chandeliers. I scan the stairs and the doorways, but there’s no sign of the mystery boy.

‘Morning, Valerie,’ says Leon. ‘You came through there in a rush! What’s wrong?’

‘I thought I saw someone come in,’ I say.

‘Not for the last few minutes. We did have a check-in earlier, quite an interesting one – a lady who saw one of the star storms on her way here. Mrs Peters took her straight off to her room – she could hardly see the hands in front of her face!’

‘Did she come with someone?’ I ask.

‘Oh! Yes, she was with her mother.’

‘Not a boy?’

‘No, Valerie. No boy – just the one star-struck, with accompanying mother.’ He frowns. ‘Unless I missed somebody. Though that’s not likely.’

I sigh. ‘No. Never mind.’

Leon nods, taking a sip from a bone-china cup, and goes back to examining the massive bookings ledger. We tried using a computer a couple of years ago, but most technology doesn’t work well around ghosts, and it ended up being mayhem.

I look around. Where did the boy go? He definitely came in, and it is strange that Leon didn’t see him. Then again, even *I* could hardly see this particular boy.

He must be here somewhere.

The Ghost House is a vast place to try and search. There’s the ground floor, with the reception, dining room, kitchen, library, ballroom, breakfast/sitting room and Mrs Peters’ office; then four floors of bedrooms, along winding corridors; and the attic, which has several further bedrooms and a couple of old, clanking bathrooms. And finally the cellar, where

Meg and I never go; we got locked in by mistake once with whatever lives down there, and though nothing bad happened, it definitely didn't feel good. We were very glad when Great-Aunt Flo unlocked the door and hauled us out.

I start out on the ground floor (as good a place as any), treading endless reams of red carpet covered with little white diamonds. The walls are papered and there are lanterns lighting the way, flickering whenever a ghost is nearby – which is always.

'Morning, Val,' says Meg, floating around a corner just as I reach the first floor.

'I saw that boy again!' I say. 'The one from the viaduct yesterday. He's in the Ghost House!'

'Where?'

'I don't know. I saw him come in, and then I lost him.'

'Is he staying here? A few new guests arrived . . . one of them star-struck!'

'Leon said.' I think back to the boy, running up the steps in a haze of sparks. 'I don't think he's a guest though – Leon said he hadn't seen him. He had little flecks of lightning around him, Meg, I swear it – and he just charged in! What if *he's* causing the star storms?'

Meg's eyes light up. 'Oo! Now that would be exciting – imagine if we find him, and he *is* responsible, and we can put a stop to it all! You look on the upper floors and I'll search downstairs. We can present him to Mrs Peters at our morning meeting!'

'Meg . . .'

But she's gone, rushing down the passageway towards the dining room, sweeping clean though an older couple, who stop and shiver, grinning to each other.

I shake my head. I don't want to find the boy only to drag him before the whole family. He didn't look exactly dangerous. More like lost, and lonely. Meg needs to stop reading so many Agatha Christie stories. To her, everything is a mystery to be solved right now – including me.