

Worldwide #1 Amazon Bestseller  
and TikTok Famous with Millions of Views

Shawn M. Warner



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and the  
**Ghosts** of  
Simmons-Pierce Manor

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## For Lizette

who gave me the freedom to dream,  
the courage to try,  
and the inspiration to always strive  
for the best possible version of myself.

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# Chapter One

Leigh felt like a pound-rescued mutt being paraded in front of new owners. Minutes ago, the limousine she rode in passed through what she could only describe as being a medieval castle's sentry gate. Riding beneath its arches, she glanced into the guard tower and caught sight of rifles lining the walls. Twisting around in the backseat, she stared out the window at the guards sealing the iron gates behind her. Instead of chain mail and swords, these men wore designer suits with concealed guns bulging beneath their jackets.

She jerked back around and faced forward. Her dad had been a cop and he taught her more about firearms than most adults know. He had taken her to the gun range on several occasions and she knew herself to be a pretty darned good shot. That abundance of weaponry stockpiled in one place still made her breath come in thin, panicked pants. Looking up, she watched her reflection in the limo's rear-view mirror nibble on a thumbnail. She balled her fingers into fists and dropped them into her lap.

It had taken five minutes for the big black machine to make it from the gate to the mansion, traveling at a steady thirty miles per hour. She'd checked the speedometer. Did the math. Thirty miles every sixty minutes made for half a mile a minute. Five minutes meant two and a half miles. The driveway, if that was what people like the Simmons-Pierces called it, was over two miles long.

Now, standing in front of her new family, she waited for them to pass judgment. She could see the doubt and hesitation in their eyes as they looked her over. They stared at her long black bangs dangling well over her eyes in a messy tussle, spiking in front of her exposed ears and tapering down to the nape of her neck. It didn't help that she wore neither make-up nor fingernail polish. In fact, she had no nails to speak of. She'd bitten them down to the quick.

With holes in her jeans and wearing a baggy tie-died hoodie, she imagined her cousin, Tristin Simmons, his wife Peg, and their daughter, Myra, silently asking themselves, "Will she chew on the furniture or pee on the rugs?"

Leigh couldn't bear to look them in the eye. Cheeks burning with embarrassment, she focused on the blue-ink doodles she had drawn on the toes of her red canvas high-tops. "I can't thank you enough for taking me in, Mrs. Simmons," she mumbled, trying to get their silent attention off

her.

“Please,” the lady of the manor cooed, “call me Aunt Peggy. Or just Peg, if you like.”

Leigh turned her eyes to the castle in front of her. As far as she was concerned, that’s what the house was. Enormous. Old. Built out of huge gray boulders with tiny flakes embedded in them that sparkled like shattered glass in the gutter. For two centuries, maybe more, green ivy had been storming those walls but still hadn’t made it halfway across their face.

Tristin sauntered up beside her to share the view. “Impressive, isn’t it? The ancestral home of the Simmons-Pierce family.”

He made a sweeping gesture of pride. “For most of America’s history, this house has stood at the center of it all. Presidents have signed treaties here. Generals came up with battle plans. Spies plotted. Philanthropists danced. This house isn’t a monument to history. It *is* history.”

“Dad, now isn’t the time for all that. I’m sure Leigh is far more interested in *her* future than she is in our *home’s* past.”

Leigh turned and smiled at Myra Simmons. Cousin Myra.

They were all cousins. Myra. Peg. Tristin. Very distant cousins. Leigh’s cynical side -- her only side -- told her that Peg and Tristin adopted the titles of “aunt” and “uncle” to make a statement. They were in charge. They’d be calling the shots.

Leigh held her smile steady. She didn’t care. Not about them. Not about anything.

To come here she had to convince the psychiatrists she wasn’t an immediate threat to herself. It was true enough; a fragile truth the weight of a falling eyelash would shatter. Tonight. Tomorrow. Sometime next week. Eventually, she’d try to kill herself again.

*For now? Just keep smiling,* Leigh told herself.

She turned that phony smile on Myra.

At nineteen, Myra was three years older than herself. She wore denim pants too expensive to be called jeans and a sweater whose battered look belied its lofty price tag. Her hair and nails were styled with meticulous care to make her look like everybody else. Leigh estimated that a thousand dollars, easily, went into making Myra Simmons look breathtakingly ordinary.

“You see that window?” Myra asked, pointing to the tower Leigh and Tristin were admiring. “Third one up? It’s the only room on that floor. It’s yours.”

She leaned in as if to share a secret but spoke loud enough for all to hear. “Best room in the place, if you ask me.”

“Why’s that?” Leigh asked with halfhearted interest.

“Because of the ghosts!”

Leigh’s heart revved up to three-quarters interest. “Ghosts? Cool!”

Myra laughed.

“Myra,” Peg scolded, “don’t fill Leigh’s head with that nonsense.”

“I’m sorry, Leigh,” Peg went on. “She spends too much time in front of the TV.”

“And too little time in front of her school books,” Tristin added. “That’s not going to cut it when you start college in the fall.”

Peg groaned. “Myra, why don’t you take Leigh up to her room before we end up having *that* conversation again. Dinner will be ready in twenty minutes.”

“Sure,” Myra said.

Looking over her mother’s shoulder, Myra raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips playfully. “Love you, Daddy.”

Tristin smiled, sighed, and shook his head in defeat. “Love you, too.”

Myra hoisted Leigh’s suitcase off the ground and led the way inside. Fulfilling her role as the loyal hound, Leigh jerked her duffel bag into her arms and obediently followed.

Inside, the manor was sealed with dark wood paneling. Leigh’s eyes widened to see so many portraits hanging on the walls. Landscapes filled in what few gaps remained between portraits.

Leaning sideways she peered into the adjacent sitting room. Imitating the foyer, it too was full of paintings.

Gasping, Leigh dropped her duffel bag to the floor. Her heart pounded with irrational hope as she darted inside the room. Ignoring all other portraits, she went to stand in front of a woman’s picture hanging on the wall closest to the window.

Sunlight shimmered off the gold leaf frame that surrounded the painting like a halo. The woman in the portrait wore a puffy blue cupcake dress from a long-gone era. She had curly auburn hair and a kind smiling face.

Myra moved to stand beside her. “Leigh? What’s the matter?”

“This woman,” Leigh said, pointing at the painting. “Who is she?”

“That’s Rebecca Florence Pierce. She died in the early eighteenth-hundreds. Why?”

Leigh fumbled inside her tie-dyed jacket, slipping her hand into a hidden pocket. She pulled out a photograph and gave it to Myra. “This



is...was...my mother.”

Myra took a moment to study the photo and compare it to the painting.

“Thanks,” Myra said, handing it back. “I didn’t want to ask. At least not straight away. About how you were related to us? That answer involves your parents, which makes the details yours to give when you’re ready, not mine to try and take.”

Leigh studied Myra, trying to see the person beneath the expensive exterior.

Myra was respecting her privacy, though she didn’t know Leigh any better than some beggar panhandling on the street. Leigh decided this meant Myra respected everyone by default.

Leigh wasn’t sure how long she’d stay at Simmons-Pierce Manor -- didn’t know how long she’d stay alive. She wasn’t looking to make friends, but that didn’t mean she had to make enemies.

“It’s okay,” Leigh said. “At least you cared enough not to ask. Most don’t. They seem to think that their being curious means I owe them an explanation.”

Leigh blushed and looked at her shoes. Without thinking, she tugged the sleeves of her hoodie over the scars on her wrists, balling her fingertips around the cuffs making fists so tight her knuckles turned white. “About everything.”

Myra’s eyes fluttered as a tear rolled out of each corner.

Leigh’s jaw clenched. She hated it when people felt sorry for her. Even more, she despised it when they tried to comfort her. All that meant was that her pain was making them uncomfortable and what they were really trying to do was make themselves feel better.

Myra was different. She wasn’t doing any of that. She was letting her be, sharing in her sadness as best she could without denying it was there as if it were some kind of ugly carpet stain, or worse, trying to fix it. To fix *her*. Suffering was part of who she was and Myra wasn’t trying to change that.

“Come on,” Myra said as if sensing Leigh’s gloomy thoughts. “You might like this.”

“Doubtful,” Leigh muttered to herself as she followed her cousin out of the room.

They went back across the foyer and into the library lay straight across from the sitting room where Rebecca Pierce’s portrait hung.

The library wasn’t adorned with near as many paintings as the sitting room. In their place, massive bookshelves claimed the wall space. What

few portraits did cling to the paneling were clustered around a giant portrait over the fireplace mantle.

The painting was of a dour looking old man with a mustache-less beard. He was sitting in a chair and an Asian servant stood behind him and to the far left, almost out of the painting entirely. The seated man's face lacked any suggestion of warmth and his piercing eyes, glaring out into the room from beneath eyebrows that looked like gray hedges, made Leigh feel he was watching her every movement.

"These two," Myra said gesturing to a much smaller and happier painting, "are the twins Christian and Corinne Pierce. They were Rebecca's children."

Leigh blinked to shake off the effect of the old man's painted glare. In stunned amazement, she studied the pair Myra pointed out. Corinne looked more like her mother than Rebecca. Leigh's shoulders tightened as a shiver ran up her spine. Seeing so much of her mother, and of herself, in these long dead faces was a morbid kind of eerie she wasn't ready to embrace.

"So," Myra said pointing to the man in the painting, "our cousin Christian was due to inherit the family's business. Until that happened, he determined to spend at least one year in every port where our firm had offices. Corinne decided to go with Christian for the year he planned to spend in the British West Indies. Being a young woman of that era, she had even less to occupy her time than her brother did."

Myra snickered at her own joke. Leigh forced a smile onto her face.

"While she was there, she met Monroe." Myra paused, waiting for Leigh to ask the obligatory question.

Leigh dutifully played her part. "Who's Monroe?"

"He was a sugar cane farmer! Not even wealthy enough to claim he was a plantation owner. Just a meager farmer."

"Bet that went over well with the folks back home," Leigh said.

"It did not," Myra said emphatically. "What's more, Monroe was a native. He was black. Nowadays, no big deal. But in the early eighteenth-hundreds? Scandalous!"

"Well you can imagine what happened when Corinne announced their engagement. It was 'call off the wedding or be disowned.'"

"So, what'd she do?" Leigh asked feeling the unfamiliar twinge of interest pricking her. These were, after all, her ancestors.

"She told the entire Simmons-Pierce clan, along with all their money, to go to Hell and married Monroe anyway."

Leigh flashed a genuine smile at the portrait. "You go, girl!"

"I know!" Myra beamed a broad smile at the image of Corinne, notes

of pride ringing in her voice. “I like her, too.”

“What happened after that?” Leigh asked.

Myra turned to look at her, eyebrows knotted. “What do you mean?”

“To Corinne? What was her life like? Did she have any kids?”

“She must have,” Myra said. “You’re here.”

Leigh stared at her, silently demanding a better answer.

Myra explained. “Today, we struggle to imagine any parent turning their back on their child. In those days, ‘disowned’ meant *disowned*. Corinne’s marriage to Monroe was the last the family ever heard from her.”

Growing quiet, Myra looked at the painting and, speaking as if she were miles away, said, “It’s kind of weird. Growing up in this house, I naturally wondered about Corinne’s family. Where her descendants might be.”

She turned and smiled at Leigh. “I thought about you without knowing it was you I was thinking about. And now, here you are.”

Leigh shrugged and grimaced. “Here I am. Hope I’m not too much of a disappointment.”

Myra bounced her eyebrows and pursed her lips like she did at her father when they were still outside. “Not too much, no. At least not yet.”

Suddenly Myra erupted with carefree laughter. Leigh was jealous of Myra’s joy and her face flushed with shame.

Leigh needed to get her mind away from such dangerous territory. She pointed at the large portrait and asked, “And who is that?”

Myra threw her arms wide, as if embracing the huge painting of the scowling old man over the fireplace. “Bodie Pierce!”

Leigh sneered. “Bodie?”

“Well, that’s what I call him. His real name was Ichabod.”

Myra shook her head in dismay and pity. Speaking to the portrait, she asked, “What were your parents thinking?”

Both girls chuckled. Leigh startled at the unaccustomed sound of her own cheerfulness. “What’s so special about Bodie?” she asked to put a stop to it.

Myra looked at her with delight gleaming in her eyes. “He’s the ghost that haunts Simmons-Pierce Manor.”

“Have you ever seen him?”

“No. And neither has anybody else in the family. Mom and Dad think it’s a lot of nonsense. But there have been stories over the years. According to legend, the ghost of Big Bodie only comes out when the family is in serious trouble. Little Bodie is another matter, but I’ve never

seen him, either.”

Leigh cocked her head to the side like a puzzled pup. “Little Bodie?”

“Myra,” Peg called from another part of the house, “are you planning to take Leigh up to her room? It’s almost time for dinner.”

Myra rolled her eyes. “I’ll explain upstairs,” she whispered.

Leigh followed Myra up the grand staircase. When they reached the second floor, Myra said, “Mom and Dad’s room is over there.”

She gestured to somewhere on the far side of the stairs, giving Leigh no real clue which of the many doors she was pointing to.

Myra turned and walked to the end of the hall. Leigh had no choice but to follow. The more she saw of the house, the more she felt like she had been transported to the set of some British television show, not anything she’d expect to see standing in a remote corner of Maryland. Every instinct she had told her she didn’t belong here, but she had nowhere else to go.

Myra’s image blurred as tears welled in Leigh’s eyes. Using a rough corner of the duffel bag she hugged in her arms, Leigh dabbed them dry before Myra could notice.

“That’s mine,” Myra chirruped, pointing to a door that looked as old and boring as all the others.

Directly across the hall from Myra’s room was a small domed landing. Inside the little cave was a very steep and narrow spiral staircase. Myra crossed over to it and started up.

Reaching the top, Leigh stood two steps down from Myra, who was standing on a small platform barely large enough to accommodate one person. In front of Myra was a peculiar wooden door, smaller than normal and shaped like a circle.

With a teasing lilt in her voice Myra asked, “Quite a climb, isn’t it?”

“It is carrying this bag. Not sure how I feel about coming all this way every time I want to take something heavy to my room.”

Myra’s lips curled as she treated Leigh to a slow teasing smile. “Oh, there’s an elevator that runs to the second floor, but I thought you might like a bit of exercise, being cooped up in a car all day.”

Leigh’s mouth dropped open. “A practical joke? Really?”

“Just a small one,” Myra grinned. “Hope you aren’t mad.”

“Not mad, no. But I will get even,” Leigh said.

Smiling even broader, Myra opened the little round door and went inside. Leigh crouched and followed. The moment she saw the layout, she fell in love.

The room was much bigger than she imagined it could be. The first

thing Leigh noticed was that it, like the door, was circular. The second thing was that the sleeping, sitting, and dressing areas were all on different levels.

The twin bed, directly across from the door, was atop the thickest window ledge Leigh had ever seen. Technically, the sleeping area was a loft, but instead of empty space below, a solid foundation of rough-hewn rock, matching the outside of the castle, lay beneath.

Leigh dropped her duffel in the middle of the room and scrambled up the wooden stairs. The steps were so steep they seemed almost a ladder. Running parallel to the wall, they matched its curve and sounded hollow beneath her feet.

Reaching the top, Leigh found the little balcony provided plenty of room for the bed, a nightstand, and for her to move around without fear of falling off. Even so, the edge of the sill was fitted with a highly polished wooden railing. On the other side of the bed was a beautiful bay window running from floor to ceiling. The heavy curtains were pulled back, leaving only a thin gauze to cut the evening's glare. Looking out, Leigh could see for miles over the wooded countryside.

Descending the stairs to the main floor, Leigh crossed over to the sunken sitting area. This time no barrier stood in place to prevent her walking over the edge. She could either jump down into the three-foot depression or use the small flight of stairs. She chose the more dignified mode knowing full well that, whenever alone in the room, she'd take the direct route of jumping off the ledge.

Sunlight flooded through a rectangular window situated high up the wall at the far end of the sitting area. Making a small hop, she hooked her fingertips over the sill and pulled herself up. Looking out, she could see the driveway disappear into the wood line. She now had her bearings as to the orientation of the room in relation to the rest of the house. This was the same window Myra pointed out to her when they were still outside.

"Wow!" Myra said, still standing in the dressing area. "You did that pull-up like it was nothing."

Ignoring her, Leigh dropped from the window.

To Leigh's right were three stone steps leading into another room. Climbing them, she found herself standing in the bathroom. Another circular room, this one added an inner curved wall, making a circle within a circle, which functioned as a shower stall.

"Cozy, but not cramped," Myra said, having followed her down into the sitting area.

Leigh rushed out of the bathroom and leapt over the three stone stairs,

landing on her toes and making a soft hop. She felt a warmth rush through her body that she hadn't felt in over a month. When she was told her parents were murdered, she iced over like the arctic sea. After spending a week locked in that prison of frigid loneliness, she slit her wrists. This was the greatest thaw of her depression since that horrific night.

"I think it's wonderful," she said. "Is this another joke or is this really mine?"

"All yours," Myra answered sweetly.

Over Myra's shoulder, Leigh noticed a solitary portrait hanging on the furthest wall. When she'd first come, she hadn't noticed it because her back had been to the painting. Leigh climbed out of the sitting area and moved to stand in front of it, studying it.

In the picture was the figure of a young boy who looked to be a few years younger than she was. His blond hair dangled in bangs over big, beautiful, blue eyes. The bulk of his tawny locks caressed his shoulders in what, Leigh knew, even for those times, would have been considered unfashionably long. His appearance wasn't disheveled, his clothes were clean and his ivory skin wasn't grubby, but his looks weren't crisp and neat, either.

His features were fine and thin. Delicate, even. Splashed across his cheeks and the bridge of his nose was a light dusting of freckles. Posed as he was, with his lips parted ever so slightly, Leigh could see the youthful hallmark of two adult front teeth bordered by baby teeth on either side. It appeared as if he had been trying to smile for the painter but fell a little short of the mark. The lips were a pale pink and curved up at their edges in a way that denied innocence but didn't quite suggest delinquency.

*All boy*, Leigh decided.

The longer she looked at the painting, a very different sense for who the boy might have been crept over Leigh. Taken individually, the boy's features were strikingly cute. Collectively, they worked together to make him appear sad. His melancholy mingled with her own and in the deepest corner of her soul Leigh sensed he was a kindred spirit -- someone who knew sorrow.

"That," Myra said, pulling Leigh out of her trance, "is Little Bodie."

"The second ghost in the house?"

"Not at all," Myra chuckled. "Big Bodie and Little Bodie are the same ghost."

Leigh blinked at Myra as she tried to work it out. "Little Bodie is actually Big Bodie? Just in younger form?"

"Exactly," Myra said.

“So how do you know they are the same ghost?”

Myra chuckled. With a voice dripping with mock disdain, she said, “Your ancestors and mine, dear cousin, hired Madam Some-Spooky-Witch to prove we had a ghost living with us. No one was surprised to learn it was Old Man Bodie skulking about the manor.

“It was what the medium had to say about Little Bodie that threw the family for a loop. She announced that in certain places, the ones where he was happiest in life, the soul of Ichabod Pierce manifested itself in his childlike form.

“Well, you can imagine what happened next. The medium wasted no time leaking the story to the press, who milked it for all it was worth. She manipulated the tale in order to launch herself into being one of the most famous mediums in the world. No one had ever heard of such a thing before and she made sure nobody ever forgot she was the one who discovered it. Her memoir is downstairs in the library somewhere. You should read it sometime.”

Leigh had no intention of doing that. “So no one has ever seen either of these ghosts?” she asked.

“Not true,” Myra objected. “I said *none of us* have seen them. There have been sightings in the past. Big Bodie was seen quite often during World War II and the Cold War. There was even a general who claimed to have had an all-night discussion with him about what could be expected should the U. S. decide to invade Japan. This general attributed his decision to campaign against that plan to Bodie’s insights.”

“You’re making that up,” Leigh accused.

Before she could answer, Peg’s voice trickled up from below. “Myra? What are you two doing up there? Dinner’s getting cold.”

“We’d better go down,” Myra said. “And no,” she grinned at Leigh, “I’m not making any of it up.”

## Chapter Two

Leigh's mind was spinning with the idea of ghosts as she followed Myra downstairs. If she'd been asked a year ago whether or not she believed in ghosts she'd have said no. If asked if she could picture herself living in a mansion with one of the richest families in the world, she would have laughed. Yet, here she was, feeling confused and uncertain about everything, including ghosts.

The dining room Myra led her to was as ornate and elegant as the rest of the house. White curtains covered the windows and matched the snowy tablecloth too perfectly to be coincidence. The oak table was long enough to seat twelve, but they all sat clustered at one end with Tristin at the head. Leigh eyed the fancy platter of chicken. It looked like it came out of a five-star kitchen, showing no indication of being home cooked. The meal was beautiful to look at, delicious to taste but, to Leigh, it was sterile and unsatisfying.

The cook had prepared the meal with the goal of serving her employer something delicious. That was, after all, her job, but it clashed with Leigh's memories of the meals her parents churned out. They were often over cooked, too salty when Dad made them, but were created as love offerings. Flawed though they were, they tasted so much better. Leigh sat in her offered seat at the Simmons's table and picked at her food out of politeness.

"Not hungry, dear?" asked Peg.

"Sorry, no" Leigh mumbled to her plate. "It's really good, though."

Tristin's knife and fork made delicate tinkling sounds as they scraped across the delicate China. "If there are any dishes you'd like to have, just talk to Jenny. I'm sure she'd be happy to whip up anything you want."

"Jenny's our chef," Myra explained, "and she can cook anything. You name it!"

Leigh tried to picture her mother's meatloaf, smothered in a spicy sauce made out of canned tomato soup, frozen french-fries from a bag, with microwaved peas on the side, sitting on these fancy dishes. She imagined knock-off Coke fizzing in the crystal glasses. If not for the longing pain in her heart, she would have burst out laughing at the absurdity of it all.

"I told Leigh all about the ghosts of Big and Little Bodie," Myra said.

"Myra," Tristin snapped as he set his cutlery on his plate with a



clatter. “For the last time, forget about that nonsense. You’ve wasted enough of your time chasing those phony phantoms and I won’t stand for you wasting Leigh’s time with it as well.”

“But Dad!”

Tristin shot a scathing look at his daughter. His stare was so cold it frightened Leigh to her core.

She thought about her own dad and how he was so strict with his rules and his high expectations; everything anyone would expect from a former Marine turned cop. But he never scared her. Even when he raised his voice, which was seldom, he never came across as threatening. At least not to her.

Myra stared straight back at her father.

Leigh stretched her leg under the table and nudged Myra’s foot. Flashing the same proud smile of respect that she’d given to the painting of Cousin Corinne, Leigh let Myra know she’d pushed Tristin far enough on her account.

Myra’s lips quivered. Her body began to shake as she fought against it, but her giggles refused to be suppressed. Myra gave up trying and erupted in laughter.

Caught off guard, Tristin’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Well, I never,” Peg said, scandalized.

Leigh heard herself let out a soft laugh. The suddenness of it frightened her and she clamped her teeth down on it. “It’s been a long day for me,” she said. “If it’s all the same to everyone, I think I’ll turn in.”

“This early?” Myra asked before adding, “Guess it has been a different kind of day for you. If it’s all right with you, can I come up later to check on how you are doing?”

A few hours ago Leigh would have suspected Myra of being afraid she’d do something stupid during the night. The thought occurred to her now but, despite having just met Myra, that notion didn’t seem to fit. Myra wasn’t worried about anything Leigh might do, but about anything she might want or need.

Leigh’s gloom buoyed slightly. “I’d like that.”

Leigh excused herself from the table and made her way to the kitchen where Myra had told her the elevator was located. The lift had been installed, according to Myra, when one of the family members in the nineteen-teens could no longer navigate the stairs. Leigh didn’t pay much attention to which ancestor Myra said needed the device nor to why they could no longer manage the stairs.

Like everything else, the elevator was an antique, complete with a

folding screen to be pulled closed behind her. She pressed the brass button embossed with the number two and flinched as the rickety contraption jerked into motion.

As it rose, so too did Leigh's feelings of loneliness. Opening the elevator's manual door, she raced to her room and up the stairs to the loft. Throwing herself onto the bed, she sobbed until she fell into a fitful sleep.

Sadness and feelings of abandonment bubbled like a stew in Leigh's subconscious. The worst part was how alone she felt. Completely alone. Like no-one-else-existed-in-the-entire-universe alone.

Reaching her room, Leigh left a trail of clothes behind her as she shuffled up the stairs to her bed and huddled beneath her blankets. Despair wracked her sleeping mind, forcing it to churn out ugly nightmares. Trapped in a frightening dream of blackness, she felt as if she was swimming in pancake syrup in an enormous void. All around her lurked looming dark shapes she couldn't keep from bumping into. Some were hard as granite while others were sticky, like singed marshmallow. Some crashed over her like poorly stacked tires, threatening to crush her.

Terrified, she whimpered, tossed, and turned.

In her dream, a soft blue light shone off to one side. Struggling to turn and look at it, the light vanished as soon as she made it around and reappeared in her peripheral vision on the other side.

Timid and shy, a thin voice whispered, "Are you okay?"

Leigh was suddenly freezing. Both in her dream and in her bed, she curled into a ball and shivered to keep warm.

"Are you okay?" the small voice repeated.

Leigh felt as if she were drowning and moaned in horror.

The blue light turned a sickening burnt acid-purple. Like thunder, a deep and angry voice roared, "Are you okay?"

Leigh shot upright into a sitting position. Heart pounding, lungs churning, her skin was covered in goosebumps.

"Leigh?"

Myra was sitting on the edge her bed. "Leigh, are you okay?"

"I...I'm fine. I was dreaming."

"That was a nightmare, not just some dream," Myra said. "Do you want to tell me about it, before you forget it? I always forget my dreams if I don't write them down as soon as I wake up."

"You write down your dreams?"

"I do. Well, I used to. When I was twelve I kept a special dream diary for them. Night after night, I hoped Bodie would talk to me in my dreams. He never did, so I quit writing in the diary. Your dream must have been a

doozy!”

“It was! And in it, I kept hearing someone asking if I was okay.”

Myra’s face looked guilty. “That might have been me. I came up to check on how you were doing. I did knock. I swear I did! I also called through the door, asking if you were okay. I must have asked two or three times before I came in, saw you were having a bad dream and came up here. It had to be my voice you were hearing in your dream. Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Leigh said. “I was having rotten dreams long before I came here. If anything, you rescued me from a whole night of them.”

Myra let out a playful chuckle. “Glad I could help.”

Leigh could tell Myra was genuinely glad to offer any help she could. Cousin Myra, she decided, was one of the kindest people she’d ever met.

Cautiously, feeling as if she were taking a huge risk, Leigh asked, “Aren’t you ever, I don’t know, unhappy?”

“Sure I am,” Myra said. “But why would anyone want to stay that way?”

A guilty look spread over Myra’s face. “Oh! That was a thoughtless thing to say, wasn’t it?”

“No,” Leigh said. “It wasn’t.”

“You might as well know,” Myra said, “I have a bad habit of saying what’s on my mind before thinking about whose feelings I might hurt. I don’t do it to be cruel. It’s just that I can’t hear how mean I sound until the words are already out.”

“I’ll be honest with you, too, Myra. Ever since my parents were killed, people have been so careful not to upset me. Treating me like I’m a fragile Christmas ornament. I know they’re trying to be nice, but it feels so phony. You have been one of the few to just be themselves. Please don’t stop. And I promise I’ll always be honest with you.”

For the first time since they met, Leigh witnessed Myra at a loss for words.

“So, are you? Okay?” Myra asked.

In keeping with their newly formed pact of honesty Leigh told her, “We both know I’m not,” but said it in a tone of teasing irony.

“Gallows humor!” Myra nodded in approval. “I like it.”

Leigh laughed. It felt good to have someone with whom she could share a morbid laugh without them getting all sourpussed and telling her that feeling so low wasn’t a laughing matter.

“Listen,” Leigh said, “I haven’t unpacked or anything yet. Want to stick around and help me find places to put my stuff? I mean, after that

dream, I'm not going to sleep anytime soon."

"Sure," Myra agreed.

Leigh crossed the room and entered the closet beneath the stairs.

"Ew! It's musty in here!" she groaned.

"Is it? I know Mom ordered the whole place scrubbed top to bottom," Myra said. "I'll tell her to have someone take a look at it tomorrow.

"As long as you're in there, crawl all the way to the front. You'll have to get down on your hands and knees."

"What for?"

"Just do it. Lay on your back and look up at the bottom of the second step."

Despite the odor, the floor in the closet looked clean enough. Leigh stooped and walked as far forward as she could. She turned and laid down with her head under the lower parts of the stairs. Using her shoulder blades to shuttle herself along, she inched under the stairs until her head tapped the first step and she could go no further.

Using the light on her phone, she found what she had been sent to see. Under the second step, inches away from her nose, the name Ichabod was carved into the wood with immaculate letters.

"You've got to be kidding me," Leigh yelled to Myra. "Even in this awkward position his handwriting is better than mine when I'm sitting at a desk!"

"Mine, too," Myra said. "The little brat."

Leigh began inching her way out again. The floorboards rattled beneath her.

"Did you know the floor is loose in there?" Leigh asked once she was back outside the closet.

"No, but the last time I was in there I was, like, thirteen. I may have noticed and forgotten."

"You've been ghost crazy for a long time, haven't you?"

"Ever since I found out about them. Now it's all fun and games, but when I was little, I was obsessed. It drove my parents nuts. Like you saw at dinner, it still makes them goofy. I think that's why I like to go on about it. It's so much fun to pull their chains."

"Especially our dads! I used to tell mine I was dating..."

The memory hurt and Leigh fell silent.

"It's okay, Leigh. You don't have to talk about your family if you don't want to."

"I *do* want to. And I don't. It's just that, when I do, I feel a weird unhappy kind of happy."