



# One

## Ghosts 'n' Stuff

To the ghosts that haunted the nearby cemetery, Izzy's pale face peering through her dark bedroom window must have looked like an oddly shaped pupil in the mansion's only open eye. To Izzy looking out, it was barely light enough to see as far as the back fence let alone what lay beyond. But that hardly mattered. She knew.

Ghosts tend to linger.

The early morning sun peeped shyly over the trees of Slaughter Wood as if it too feared what the coming day would bring. Wisps of curling fog, tinted sinister shades of red and purple, rose from the damp ground and softened the appearance of everything. Izzy shivered though she was anything but cold. Some of the reaching tendrils had the in-and-out look of partly formed people. One floated up to Izzy's second-floor window and seemed to look in at her. Its body stretched grotesquely and its mouth opened and closed as if speaking in some strange language Izzy didn't understand.

Undeterred, Izzy turned away and snatched up her sketchbook and pen with her already ink-stained hands. She considered washing up a bit but then laughed the idea away.

Washing up was a crazy thing to do. There was no need to worry about being clean when in the graveyard. The dead hardly cared about dirt.

She shoved herself into her tattered old trousers and her favorite wool sweater, not bothering to remove her nightdress first. Then, as quietly as she could, Izzy stepped through her bedroom door and into the hallway. She listened to be sure no one else was awake, but all she heard were the raspy sounds of the house as it snored and the voices of the stairs that grumbled when, a moment later, she went down them.

Like a mouse that had just caught wind of a hungry cat, Izzy skittered across the enormous foyer. She made for the shadows, of which there were many, just to be safe.

The footing got trickier as the carpet gave way to a slippery, black-and-white tiled floor that was always polished to a high sheen, reflecting everything upside-down. It made Izzy feel as though she were walking on the cold hard feet of another girl who looked just like her and had been trapped in a strange topsy-turvy world. The girl below looked up as Izzy looked down, their eyes meeting in the middle. Izzy grinned and the other Izzy grinned back. This was not the first time they'd snuck out together.

A green upholstered chair that looked comfortable but wasn't—Izzy knew this from experience—sat near the door. There was a strange, permanent indent in its center, as if squashed under the bum of an invisible observer. A tall lamp with a fancy beaded shade stood on a skinny wooden table nearby. Izzy saw her face reflected a thousand times in its beads as she hurried past.

Aunt Slaughter's butler, Albert, snoozed while standing at his post next to the door. He appeared to be hung on one of the numerous coat hooks like a noisy and particularly strange





Albert

looking article of clothing. His hair and skin were the color of dust, his face deeply wrinkled and somehow smudged. Izzy thought he looked like a poorly cut tree stump or a sleeping troll that hadn't moved in years.

Izzy edged past him in utter silence, not even allowing herself to breathe. Albert snorted once and muttered something that sounded like “rutabaga,” but he did not rouse further. Izzy reached into the lightless depths of the hallway closet and took out her raincoat and boots. After contorting herself into them, she tucked her sketchbook inside the coat, doing her best to cover it completely. As soon as she went through the door, she would be getting wet in the never-ending autumn drizzle. This she knew from experience as well.

Izzy twisted the heavy black key that stuck out of the front door's lock. The grinding mechanisms inside clicked in a strange, insect-like language as invisible pieces fell into place. She lifted the latch and pulled the door open just far enough to squeeze through. She stepped onto the front landing, narrowly avoiding the puddle that was always there. The hem of her coat followed behind like the retreating tail of a magician's cape—a magician that had just performed the disappearing act. The warm air from inside Slaughter House puffed out in a final parting belch as the door wafted shut.

Izzy sprang down all four of the front steps in one giant leap and burst into the yard beyond. The cool fog swirled and parted as she moved across the grass of the back garden, the mist-men too slow and thin to bother her now. All around her, the overgrown topiaries appeared to come alive as their shaggy leaf-fur fluttered in the cool breeze.

The forest that surrounded Slaughter House was haunted, though no one seemed to know that but Izzy. As she moved along the rough footpath, she saw the first real ghost of the



day. A gopher rummaged through the wet, half-rotted leaves on the forest floor, its severed backend trailing behind its front by a few inches. Next came a squirrel with constantly smoking fur that searched for something it seemed unable to find. Izzy passed several mice with body parts on strange angle or missing altogether, a snake with great flattened sections on its back, and something that may have at one time been a toad, judging by the sounds it made as it flopped from front to back.

Izzy had been afraid of these ghosts when she'd first arrived at Slaughter House, as any sensible person would be, but she wasn't anymore. At least, she wasn't afraid of the ghosts...