

THE  
PRINCE  
OF  
MOURNING

ALSO BY JENN BENNETT

*Alex, Approximately*

*Serious Moonlight*

*Starry Eyes*

*The Lady Rogue*

*Chasing Lucky*

*Always Jane*

*Grumbones*

*The Knight Thieves*

# THE PRINCE OF MOURNING



JENN BENNETT

SIMON & SCHUSTER **BFYR**

NEW YORK AMSTERDAM/ANTWERP LONDON  
TORONTO SYDNEY/MELBOURNE NEW DELHI



SIMON & SCHUSTER BFR

An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division

1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020

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Interior design by Hilary Zarycky

The text for this book was set in IvyOra.

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Edition

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

CIP data for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 9781665971553

ISBN 9781665971577 (ebook)

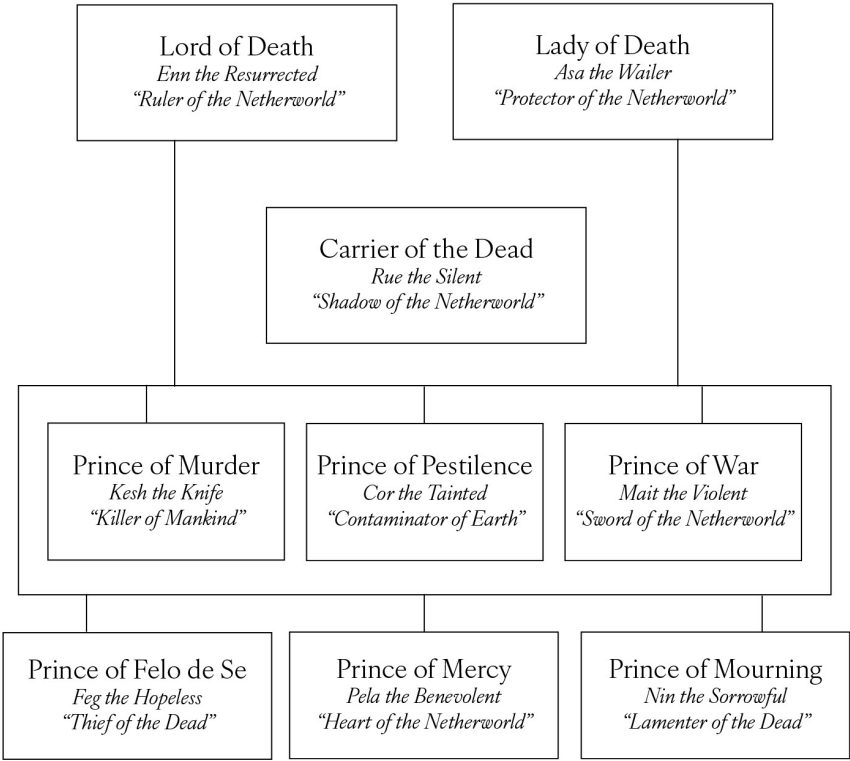
*For C. D. and P. M.*



# HOUSE OF DEATH

## GODS OF THE NIGHTLANDS

NETHERWORLD REALM WHERE THE DEAD TRAVEL ON THEIR WAY TO THE AFTERLIFE





*O Death! O Death!*

*Have mercy on this sinner, be not severe.  
Please spare me over for another year.*

*I'm not ready, so won't you give  
A little while longer to laugh and live?*

*Grateful I would be, if my life thou would spare,  
For I have a daughter, beautiful and fair.*

*I'd live to see her wed, to one she will adore.  
Grant me but this, and I will ask no more.*

—AMERICAN FOLK BALLAD



## PROLOGUE



They all looked the same to me before her.

Every interaction I had with them was simply part of my duty, an unending series of repetitions that rarely held any variation, day in, day out. An uncrossable line existed between us, and the only thing I could do was perform the function I was born into.

Look, but do not touch.

Help, but do not feel.

Listen, but do not answer.

These rules I've followed without question or hesitation. After all, rules exist for a reason, and I believed that the ones I obeyed were put in place by those I trusted. That the very nature of life and death and all existence was under threat if I deviated from my destined path.

Then I saw her, just a tiny thing. A slip of a girl, cursed to live in squalor and surrounded by others who didn't see her true nature.

But I saw.

To be precise, she saw *me*.

That was what caught my attention—the palest blue eyes looking straight at me. A deviation in my routine. She shouldn't have been able to see me. *No one* should.

Thousands upon thousands I'd known since I'd begun performing my duties, and not one of them had known me back.

Until her.

*Look, but do not touch. Help, but do not feel. Listen, but do not answer.*

I broke all these rules and more.

And if I had to do it all over again, I wouldn't hesitate.

For her, I would break any rule . . .

## CHAPTER 1



*August 1873 — New York City*

**T**he hospital's administration corridor was always deserted after midnight. I glanced over my shoulder to double-check that I was alone, then peered through the first-floor pharmacy's iron bars. Apothecary bottles, powder tins, and medicinal jars sat in shadowed cubby holes, locked up tight and out of my reach. They looked even sweeter than the fondant jars down at the chocolate shop on Maiden Lane. Definitely more forbidden.

Bellevue Hospital allowed its male orderlies to carry keys to the pharmacy door. The male doctors as well. The male druggists. Even the male janitors.

But not us nurses, *oh no*. Too young, too female.

My breasts were probably getting in the way of my brain comprehending why.

I wasn't allowed to know the chemical names of most of the hospital drugs, even though I'd been enrolled for three whole months in Bellevue's new nursing training program. Half my job was spooning out mystery medicines that came from these very jars.

I'd teach myself what was in them if it was the last thing I did.

*"Carum . . . carvi?"* I read aloud from the painted words

marking the nearest ceramic jar. A band of flowers circled the Latin script. “What do you think that could be?” I whispered to my companion. “Or the one next to it—chloral hydrate? Are they related? Hmm...”

The ginger-haired nursing student at my side briefly twirled near a ticking grandfather clock in the dark hallway, watching her cornflower-blue nursing skirts billow. “Molly O’Rinn, you are the most stubborn girl I’ve ever known.”

Was that an insult? I couldn’t tell. “Wish they’d taught us Latin back in school.”

Bethany stopped twirling and stifled a yawn. “If I knew Latin, my father sure wouldn’t have sent me here. Really don’t understand why you’re so obsessed.”

I gripped the handle of my nursing lantern and lifted it higher, squinting into the dark pharmacy. “I’ve told you a hundred times, I won’t stop until I can prove the doctor made a mistake when he gave you those two bottles.”

“What bottles?”

Poor Bethany. She really didn’t remember her own death.

Then again, most ghosts couldn’t. At least not the ones I could see. And in all my eighteen years, I’d never known anyone else who could see the dead like I could, something that had worried and frightened me as a child. But as I’d grown older, seeing random ghosts had just become part of my life. A secret that I kept close to my heart.

Most people didn’t even want to believe someone else could see something they couldn’t.

Hard to blame them, really.

With her pink cheeks, Junior Nurse Bethany Cross still looked as alive as any other mortal walking around this hospital. At least, she did to me. Until I studied her eyes. Or tried to find her shadow.

Poor Bethany had died early this summer, only a month into our training. She'd gotten sick during our rounds, and one of the doctors had given her what he still claimed to this day was run-of-the-mill cough medicine. Whatever it *actually* was, it killed her within an hour. My theory was that the doctor made a mistake and gave Bethany something intended for another patient. But neither he nor the hospital would admit to negligence, not when their shiny new nursing program was on the line. The hospital's official report of Bethany's unexpected demise used words like "tragic" and "accidental," and because Bethany had been just a nobody from a poor family, her death was easily swept away.

And that just wasn't right.

"Knowing what's inside these jars and bottles doesn't concern us. You're too curious," Bethany murmured, shaking her head as she gazed into the dark pharmacy. "Always the first to put your hand up in class and ask 'why.' Always questioning the doctors when they ask you to do something. It's not rational!"

Rational? A bloody ghost was lecturing *me* about being rational? Bethany shouldn't even have existed. "Look, I know you don't remember what happened to you..."

She pouted. "Nothing happened to me. What are you talking about..."?

It was no use. We'd had this conversation a dozen times over the last few weeks. Most of the ghosts I encountered were merely caught in a loop of their daily lives, uninterested in talking about their deaths or much of anything else, really. I could see them, and I could speak to them. But if I tried to touch them, my hand would just pass through the air.

I sighed and tried a different tactic. "Think of it this way. Nurses can do more than just empty bedpans and take temperatures if they have the right information. I want to learn—I want to help people, yeah?" I whispered passionately. "Why is gaining knowledge so . . . forbidden?"

"Because they're smarter than us. Ugh, will this shift ever end?" Bethany yawned again and said dazedly, "Can you dream while you're awake? I think my brain has decided it's had enough of being tired and has gone to sleep without me."

Just looking at her, you'd think that she'd spent the entire night working her fingers to the bone. She pushed a messy ginger braid off her shoulder, then frowned at the nurse's fob watch pinned upside down to the top of her bodice, allowing its wearer to see the dial while their hands were occupied. Well. A nurse's watch *used* to be pinned to Bethany's bodice, back when she was alive. In reality, that very watch was pinned to my own bodice at the moment; because Bethany had been my assigned partner for training, I'd been given some of her nursing tools when she'd died.

And unlike Bethany's ghost, I was both spiritually *and* physically exhausted, but I was nearly at the finish line.

In minutes, my shift would be over, and I could leave the hospital to sleep like . . . well, the dead. Had it really been twenty-four hours since I'd been to our living quarters?

*Must stay awake, must concentrate . . .*

I'd just finished the last of my predawn rounds, walking the wards, and this was my last chance tonight to study drug names while the hall was empty. So I ignored Bethany and carried on with my secret mission, face pressed against the iron bars of the pharmacy window.

*"Balsam styrax benzoin, hmm . . ."* I scribbled with the pencil attached to one of several chains dangling from a frilly silver chatelaine clipped to my apron's waist. My chatelaine held other tools that clinked together against my skirts: a small pair of scissors, the miniature notebook I was using to take notes, a spoon for (unknown) medicines, and a case with safety pins to use with bandages. "Do you think this one's for digestion . . .?"

Bethany sighed. "Don't care. I'm only here because my father says my face is boring and I'm built like a starving rat, which makes me unmarriageable."

My mouth fell open. "Bollocks. Who in God's name says that to their own daughter?" To be fair, none of us were classic beauties, as our nursing program required its initial six students to possess both intelligence and iron constitutions, yet to be "plain of face." Male doctors feared pretty girls might pose a "distraction" to the male patients, and pretty girls, they said, would end up leaving work for marriage.

Self-conscious, I fidgeted with wisps of my dark brown hair that had fallen loose from its pins over the course of

my shift. I vaguely wondered what Bethany thought of *my* face, which was rounder than hers but no less plain. The only thing vaguely remarkable about me was a pair of pale blue eyes I'd inherited from my mother.

I frowned at Bethany. "Listen. If my father had told *me* that, I'd—"

"Lily said your mother never married, so you didn't have a real father."

When did any of my other sister-nurses have time to gossip? But she wasn't wrong. My father had been a morgue attendant who'd once worked in the basement of this very hospital. Never married my mother. He even refused to accept me as his own child until I was three. I only knew him in bits and pieces, a story here, a coin for sweets there . . . before he disappeared from the hospital and our lives when I was eight.

I saw him again, roaming the street near the mortuary entrance where he used to work, almost a year later. He was mumbling to himself and didn't recognize me. But what stood out the most was something so subtle, anyone could miss it: his body didn't cast a shadow, and his eyes didn't reflect light. That little fleck of light in people's eyes? It wasn't there. Light couldn't reflect because there was no body, only the illusion of one that was stuck, restless, and alone.

My father was the first ghost I ever saw.

Bethany was number thirty-one.

"And *your* father is an expert on marriage?" I challenged. "What, is he a matchmaker? Or maybe he's a clairvoyant

who can see the future, can he?” I waved my fingers dramatically and made spooky noises.

Bethany rolled her eyes. “He’s just been promoted at the factory and says I must earn. I can’t speak in front of a group of people without wanting to vomit, so being a teacher wasn’t possible. That left secretarial work, washing clothes, or . . . this. I had no idea it would be so hard.”

That’s where we differed, because I loved a challenge. Granted, I didn’t *particularly* like these marathon shifts. They were brutal. But I didn’t care. I’d wanted to be a nurse ever since I could remember.

Being here in this nursing program at Bellevue was the biggest opportunity of my lifetime. There had been hundreds of applicants, but only six girls in the entire city had been chosen. For a second-generation Irish immigrant like me, eighteen, and with both parents gone, being here was a dream come true.

“To be honest,” she continued, “I’d do just about anything to get out of this dumb nursing program and be married. I don’t think I care one way or another whether any of these patients live or die. Most of them are trash-picking muckers anyway. If they were fine-bred people, they wouldn’t be here—the doctors would make house calls for them. Why do we bother saving them?”

“I’m one of those muckers, you know,” I told my fellow sister-nurse. “If I got hurt or sick, this is where I’d come. To a public hospital!”

Bethany merely shrugged. “I’d rather be married and nursing babies than nursing the poor.”

Ridiculous. Our training program was the first of its kind in the States. It was based on Florence Nightingale's revolutionary work in England. Miss Nightingale said a new generation of nurses should be trained. Organized. Knowledgeable and ready to care for patients.

They should be more than the male physicians' personal servants.

They should be independent.

Unlike Bethany, marriage was the absolute *last* thing I wanted.

I glanced at my Irish mother's gold claddagh ring: a crowned heart held by two hands. The only jewelry I owned and my most precious possession. It had once belonged to Mammy's childhood friend back in Kilkenny, Ireland, who bequeathed it to her when Mammy came to America with my grandfather. I could almost hear Mammy's lilting voice when I touched it. *You're a born nurse, Molly-o. Don't let a boy steal your heart. He will take your freedom with it, he will.*

Because of what my mother had endured, treated as an outcast for having me out of wedlock, I made a promise on her deathbed that I would pursue a career—never marriage. Never love.

No boy would take nursing from me. Bethany was a fool.

She shrugged. "Why do *you* need to know Latin medicine names?"

I wasn't going to bring up her death to her again. What was the point? Instead I dramatized my answer with a mocking tone. "Here, Mrs. Johnson, take a spoonful of this unknown elixir, please and thank you. What is it, you ask?"

No clue. But, hey, if my doctor has made a mistake, it could even kill ya. Open wide!”

Bethany rolled her eyes again, which only frustrated me more.

When we first started the program, we were each given a lantern, our chatelaine tools, and a uniform—a cornflower-blue dress with a white apron. We were also required to recite a five-point pledge:

*I solemnly pledge before my Sisters of the Lamp to:*

- 1. Dedicate myself to the welfare of souls committed to my care*
- 2. Not take or knowingly administer any harmful drug*
- 3. Keep in confidence all personal matters of every patient*
- 4. Live chastely*
- 5. Hold all life dearly*

“Point two of our pledge says we’re not to knowingly administer any harmful drug,” I reminded Bethany. “Now, tell me, go on, how am I supposed to do that if I don’t know what I’m giving people?”

“The knowing is the problem! If you don’t know what medicine you’re giving, how can you be to blame? It’s not your responsibility. Just do what the physicians tell you. Wash out the bedpans and change dressing when it’s bloodied. Stop playing doctor, Molly.”

“I don’t *want* to be a doctor. I want to be a nurse—a

good one! I need this information to do my job properly. Why should I be denied it because of my gender and age? The lack of this very knowledge killed you!”

“What in the world are you talking about?”

Ugh. It was frustrating. No other ghost had talked to me as much as Bethany did. Sometimes she disappeared on her own. Sometimes I could tell her to go away. She appeared randomly but would generally show up when I called for her. And she was the first ghost to follow me any distance. Usually they stayed in one place. I guess Bethany was the literal definition of a “restless spirit.”

The thing was, we hadn’t even been that close when she was alive. I was eager to learn, and she . . . wasn’t. Then again, most ghosts I encountered weren’t interested in anything but their own lost lives, and after I talked to them a few times, they disappeared. I’d never known a ghost to stick around longer than a few weeks.

Except for one.

One anomaly. One I didn’t understand.

It was someone I’d seen multiple times over the years. I wasn’t sure what kind of ghost he was, exactly. But he was different from the others.

The Black Groom.

That’s what I called him when he appeared to me as a child. A young pale-faced man, perhaps my age now, maybe even a couple years older, with a head full of loose, dark curls and a most serious expression.

He was always dressed in black from head to foot. A boutonniere was pinned to the lapel of his fine suit, one

with a white lily and a red feather, as if he were attending a fancy wedding.

The first time I saw him, I was eight years old, and Mammy had taken me along to the funeral for her best friend—the one who'd given my mother the claddagh ring back in Kilkenny. Her friend had made the trip over to America on a steamer ship to live with relatives in New York, but had gotten sick on board and didn't survive. They didn't have the money to send her body back to Ireland, so she was buried here. After the graveside service, Mammy returned to the coffin to leave a rose. I'd never seen her fall apart like that, weeping uncontrollably, and it hurt my heart something fierce because I didn't know how to help her, and that scared me.

That's when I first saw him, the Black Groom.

He appeared out of nowhere, between blinks of my eyes. Call it instinct, but I instantly knew there was something different about him. Tingles ran down my spine, and I froze in fear. He stepped behind my mother and put a hand on her shoulder, but she didn't look up—not when he touched her, and not when a frightened gasp escaped my lips. She just sighed deeply and choked back tears. But the Black Groom? Oh, he heard my gasp. And when his serious face turned toward mine, his eyes widened in confusion.

I had startled him. How or why, I didn't know, but he promptly disappeared.

There one moment, gone the next.

I even saw him one time in our tenement apartment, when my mother was rereading my father's obituary, clipped from the newspaper. The Black Groom appeared

out of nowhere in the middle of the living room to put a hand on my mother's shoulder, just as he'd done the first time, and she immediately stopped crying. Once again he was surprised when our gazes met, and he quickly disappeared, leaving me stunned.

And curious.

When my mother died, I half expected to see him, since he'd shown up when my mother was grieving. It was the only thought that distracted me from my own pain as I waited to see his cool expression, or perhaps feel his hand touch my shoulder. But no. He didn't appear. And after that, I spent a lot of time thinking about him, what kind of ghost he could be. And why he only came to my mother when she was grieving. Was he her guardian angel? Now that she was gone, would I never see him again? It felt like an extra layer of loss, but I couldn't explain why.

Just when I thought the Groom was a mystery I'd never solve, buried with my mother, he appeared again.

It was a year ago, on Canal Street, near a carriage that had turned over just after dusk. As a cool rain fell, and when I stopped to survey the gruesome scene, the Black Groom suddenly appeared behind a woman who was screaming for her dead husband. He put his hand on her shoulder, just as he had with Mammy, and the woman's screams quieted. When he took his hand off her shoulder, he glanced in my direction, and it felt like the ground disappeared from under my feet.

Like I was suspended in time.

The chaotic accident scene around us seemed to suddenly go quiet as the Groom's serious gaze locked on mine.

But just when I expected him to disappear as he'd always done, I was surprised to hear him whispering to me in the night air.

"You . . . see me?" His words had a strange cadence, and there was a sharp wariness behind his eyes.

He was wary of *me*?

Shock gripped my chest. I tried to speak, but it got stuck in my throat, so I merely nodded in answer. And when I did, panic covered his grim face. Before I could ask him who he was, and why I kept seeing him like this, he did what he always did and vanished.

Disappeared between the falling raindrops, leaving me confused and a little frightened.

But that was a year ago, and I hadn't seen him since. I had thought of him now and then, though. And wondered why he'd been so fearful of me.

A loud disturbance inside the hospital drew me out of my thoughts.

*Back entrance.*

Orderlies must have been bringing in a patient through the alley.

Thundering footfalls made Bethany and me scatter in a panic. As we scurried away from the barred pharmacy, my lantern swung a golden pattern around the hallway. An orderly named Lynch rounded a corner and spotted me. "Ho! Is that Nurse Molly? Where are all the docs, girl? Empty as a tomb in here! I need someone with Smithie's new key to open the basement mortuary."

Smithie was the graveyard-shift morgue attendant, but

he was off tonight. “Check surgery,” I called back, a little breathless as I walked toward him. “Haywood’s finishing up Mr. Brown’s leg. Sayre’s resting after a double shift. One intern is out on house calls. But Doc Dalton hasn’t left yet. He should be free.”

“Unless he’s busy drinking scotch in his office,” Bethany mumbled under her breath.

She wasn’t wrong. Doc Dalton was a drunk and a tyrant . . . and he was the reason that no one but me could see Bethany anymore.

Orderly Lynch swore under his breath. “Nay, they’ve got Dalton stitching up a finger.”

“Is that the screamer?” I asked, hearing a male cry in a distant hospital hall.

The orderly nodded and spoke breathlessly. “Ambulance driver brought him in from an alley outside a hotel on Canal Street, some valet to a fancy fella and his sister—some very important people from upstate. They ran into a street gang after coming home from the opera. Valet took a razor to the hand, but he was lucky, actually. The gentleman’s sister was struck down. It’s her body we need to wheel into the mortuary.”

*“Ar dheis Dé go raibh a hanam,”* I mumbled in Irish. Rest in peace.

“Betcha it was the Bowery Boys gang,” Bethany mused. “My father says they are a plague on our city.”

Another distant cry within the hospital made me wince. Orderly Lynch beckoned. “You, come with me and help the doc keep this screamer quiet.”

Bethany groaned. “I just want to go to bed,” she said as

her body began fading in front of me. A second more, and she was gone. Typical. She'd always made me do the work when she was alive, so why would it be any different now?

I hurried after the orderly, skirts swishing around my low-heel, button-up black boots. We wound through the administrative corridor, with the *clink-clink* of my chatelaine chains beating a rhythm against my skirts. Moonlight shone through tall windows as we cut through the maternity ward, where several pairs of white eyes peered back at us, patients woken by the screams. One of the new mothers asked what was going on. I patted patients' feet over tightly tucked blankets as I hurried between rows of beds. "It's all right, Mrs. Chambers, go back to sleep. We're on our way right now to help the patient."

Orderly Lynch led me to a row of examination rooms in a dark corridor outside the men's ward. As we passed an open door, I spied our night ambulance driver talking to one of the hospital guards. "... something just feels off about the whole thing. Weren't no gangs in sight when my carriage was rolling past their alley, and the gentleman was too calm for someone who'd just watched their family member die ..."

Before I could think about that too much, Orderly Lynch directed me into an exam room that held the source of all the screaming. I stepped inside, a little wary.

The air stank of sweat and blood. A single oil lamp burned on a wooden table near a pedestal sink, illuminating a diagram of the human heart. In the center of the room, Doc Dalton stood over one of the smallest men I'd ever encountered in the hospital. He was somewhere between middle-aged and

elderly, sporting a very thick, broomlike mustache that curled at the ends, and he sat on the edge of the exam table while a missing pinky finger on his left hand was being stitched. The front of his clothing was soaked crimson.

*The rich man's valet.*

On the right side of the room, a policeman was questioning a young blond gentleman dressed in a fancy tailcoat with a muddy greatcoat atop it. The gentleman was very pale and thin, perhaps in his mid- to late twenties. And despite the disheveled state of his coat, his fine clothing oozed money and prestige.

The gentleman gripped an elaborately decorated silver hourglass. Curiously, it had no glass or sand, more resembling a cast-metal sculpture of an hourglass than the real thing. Whatever its purpose, it looked very old, possibly European, and it must've been important because the gentleman's knuckles had turned white as he clutched it.

The gentleman was so tall, the policeman had to lift his head to speak up to him. They both glanced at me when I entered the exam room.

“. . . and I never got a proper look at their faces,” the gentleman was saying. “Sorry I can't be of more help.” The way he shifted his feet, he looked as if he were bursting with energy, on the verge of rushing out of the room. I supposed grief affected everyone differently.

“Ah, here we are,” Doc Dalton said, glancing in my direction while holding a bloody curved suture and trailing thread. “Help has arrived, Mr. Hoffmann, just in time.”

“Lost the missing pinky, huh? You want me to stitch

him up?” I asked the doctor. I was pretty good at that, and the only one of the nurses who knew how to do it.

“No, Junior Nurse Molly, I’ve got it. Do you happen to have a bottle of Mother’s Little Helper on you?”

Laudanum, he meant, milk of the poppy. One of the few medicine names I actually knew, due to the fact that we gave it out so often. I often wondered if it was what had killed Bethany.

However, nurses weren’t allowed to carry extra doses of *anything*, and he knew that. What was even more alarming was that the doctor was stitching this man up without numbing him or offering pain medication first. Was the doc *that* drunk already?

“Sorry, sir,” I said, glancing at the bloodied face of the valet, whose eyes met mine with fear and pain. “All the medicine I administered during my rounds tonight is already locked up fierce in the pharmacy.”

“Useless,” the doc muttered. Typical. He was always in a sour mood and took it out on us. He shouted a command to Orderly Lynch. “You, go fetch us a bottle from the pharmacy.”

“Sir, they’ve still got the girl sitting in the ambulance carriage. I need the mortuary opened,” Lynch countered, giving the gentleman a quick apologetic look.

But the gentleman was unbothered that people were discussing where to put his sister’s corpse. “She’ll keep,” he said in a low voice, the hint of a smile behind his eyes.

*Wow*. I couldn’t tell if he was joking inappropriately or trying to keep things light to avoid grief. Maybe he hadn’t been close with his sister? I really didn’t understand rich

people. They seemed to operate on an entirely different level.

“Ask someone else. I don’t have mortuary keys on me,” the doctor snapped at Orderly Lynch. “Medicine, now!”

Lynch raced out of the room. I started to ask if I should go with him, but the tall gentleman began coughing violently.

And I do mean *violently*. The policeman moved away from him and shielded his face.

My gaze flicked over the gentleman’s sharp cheekbones, and eyes that were bloodshot and weary. As he coughed into his hand, I noticed rounded, raised nails on his fingers. Clubbing, it was called. Alarm bells went off inside my head. I peered more closely at the man’s face. He was unusually handsome; yet beneath his beauty, gravity seemed to be tugging on his skin, pulling all his features down. That was a look I knew all too well.

My mother had worn it during her final months on this Earth.

The gentleman had tuberculosis, a.k.a. the “white death,” most commonly known nowadays as consumption. It was a terrible condition that affected the lungs and other organs, a slow-moving, wasting disease that drained the very life out of people, until their lungs filled with so much fluid that they could no longer breathe.

Sometimes it took years and years for the disease to . . . “consume” a person.

And nobody knew what caused it, how to prevent it, or how to cure it.

My heart clenched. *Don’t you dare think of Mammy during her final days . . .*

I pushed away old grief and asked, “How long have you had consumption, Mr. . . .”

“Mr. Voss,” the doctor said gruffly while the gentleman continued to cough.

The air stirred behind my back, and I sensed Bethany materializing. “Oh! I *knew* I recognized his face. That’s Charles Voss!” she whispered behind me. I tried to shoo her away discreetly, but as usual, she didn’t take the hint and continued whispering like a buzzing mosquito. Not that anyone else could hear her, but old habits die hard. “You know, the famous son of that Wall Street magnate. He has a twin sister, Agnes. Their photographs were on the front page of the newspaper. They were standing in front of their upstate mansion on the Hudson, after their parents died on a trip to Europe, remember?”

I had no idea what she was talking about. Then again, I didn’t spend my spare time living for local gossip like Bethany once had. “Mr. Voss,” I said as his coughing attack continued, raising my voice. “I’ve only heard brief details about your ordeal tonight, but I’m thinking that event might’ve triggered an attack of your consumption. How long have you had it?”

The coughing infuriated him. I understood that. My mother would get angry about her condition too. “This is no better than the last one! Curse it all!” In a fit of anger, he took the metallic hourglass sculpture he’d been holding and threw it to the floor, where it bounced and clanged across the tile, then landed under the exam table near the valet’s dangling feet.

I squinted at the discarded hourglass, then at Mr. Voss's face, trying to understand. "What is no better, sir?"

Another coughing fit overrode any answer he was considering, and instead I heard Bethany in my ear. "The gossip rags said his twin sister had consumption too. It must run in their family."

Interesting. No one really knew what caused the disease. The older doctors at Bellevue thought it was hereditary, and the younger ones believed it was caused by bad bacteria. But I was more concerned about fixing the current state of the gentleman's health rather than figuring out the cause of it.

Mr. Voss's coughing settled. He locked eyes with me and asked, "How old are you, girl?"

I didn't see why that should concern him, but I answered honestly. "Eighteen."

"Hmm, that brogue . . . Irish."

He was asking if I was? I nodded, but now I was wary. I'd had too many encounters with patients who hated the Irish and didn't even want me touching them. And I supposed this gentleman was no different, because a look of disappointment crossed his eyes. "No matter," he murmured.

Lucky for him, I didn't make a habit of looking down my nose at folk for silly reasons. "I've been in the training program for months, and I'm the most capable nurse here when it comes to tuberculosis," I told him, half proud, half defensive.

"Don't brag, Nurse Molly," the doctor chided as he pulled catgut thread through the valet's hand, causing the poor man to whimper. "It's not becoming for a young lady."

The gentleman didn't seem to mind. "Knowledgeable, are you? I didn't know they were training nurses so young these days, how"—he coughed again—"fascinating."

I wanted to brag a little more about our new nursing program, but I didn't feel like getting chewed out by Doc Dalton, so I kept my mouth shut.

"Sick or not, he's so beautiful," Bethany said, moving from behind me to get a better look at Mr. Voss. "I'd bet a golden-haired man like this would treat his bride like a princess."

I hated to break it to Bethany, but he probably preferred his women to have a pulse. Yet as she moved closer to him, standing on tiptoes to study his face, something unexpected happened.

He turned his head to look down at her.

And his eyes tracked her movements.

*He can see her?!*

My heart raced inside my chest. Never, not even once, had I been around another person who acknowledged a ghost's presence. Was he truly able to see Bethany, or did he just sense her presence? I wasn't sure. Bethany shot me a surprised expression—one that said, *Are you seeing this, too?*—and his eyes flicked to mine.

His head tilted, as if he, too, were surprised. Just for a moment. And in that short space of time, a little hope rose inside me. Someone else could see Bethany. I wasn't alone—I wasn't imagining all my ghosts, or having a nervous breakdown, and it wasn't my mind playing tricks on me. But my rising hope faltered when an unsettling smile crept over Mr. Voss's face.

He winked at me. *Shh, our little secret*, his eyes seemed to say.

Then he lifted his face to the ceiling and flat out laughed, as if all of this was the funniest notion in the world. The man's sister had just been killed, and he was . . . *laughing*. My stomach clenched at the disturbing sound of his echoing voice.

Bethany disappeared. She often did that when she got overwhelmed. And she wasn't the only one alarmed by Voss's strange behavior, as both the police officer and Doc Dalton stepped back nervously. "Lynch!" the doctor called. "Get me that laudanum now! The gentleman is grieved and needs calming!"

*Was* this grief? I'd seen many forms of it in these hospital wards—had even seen a husband laugh when a doctor informed him that his wife had died in surgery, as if the shock was too great for his mind to handle.

My gaze connected with the valet's. He was in pain, yes. But he was also . . .

Horried by his master.

There was something going on here that I didn't understand. And I didn't like it. Mr. Voss's laughter stopped as his cough took over. I glanced at him briefly, but the valet's silent, sad expression drew me back. It sent a chill down my spine.

I wished he wouldn't stare at me so intently.

As if he could peer all the way into my soul.

As if his very soul was warning mine.

## CHAPTER 2



Black iron squealed as I closed the big gates in front of the hospital and stepped onto cobbled stones. Dawn rose over the city. My never-ending shift was finally over. Now I could return to the nurses' quarters to sleep. Though, sleep might be difficult as long as Mr. Voss's laughing face was still embedded in my brain.

Outside the gates, a grand black landau carriage sat empty, with four matching Frisians waiting in front, one pair in front of the other, snorting in the early-morning air as whorls of summer fog shifted around their thick hooves. They made the carriage seem more like a chariot than a coach, and I'd rarely seen such fine horses. Had rarely seen glass windows in a carriage—only when the president visited New York.

As I passed, a golden crest on the sleek door flashed in the gaslight: an elegant *V* pierced by two golden arrows.

*V* for Voss.

*That's his coach*, I thought as my insides knotted with dread. He was still inside the hospital somewhere, perhaps in the mortuary with his sister's body.

After Voss's strange laughter, I didn't have any further conversation with him nor his wounded valet, and I

regretted this. The only person I'd come across who could see ghosts like me . . . I should have tried to ask him about it. Now I wished I had. But the image of him winking at me gnawed at my stomach, so I hurried away from his carriage and headed toward our nurses' quarters, a couple blocks away.

And while I hustled down First Avenue, wondering how many more warm summer nights like this remained, Bethany appeared by my side, startling me for a moment while she matched my pace.

"Worst shift ever," she said, wrapping her arms around her middle. "Did you see what happened back there? Charles Voss looked at me! *Me!* Plain ol' Bethany Cross!" She danced a few steps, grinning like a fool. "Maybe he'll have to stay overnight with that cough. Then we can see him tomorrow."

"Men like him don't stay in public hospitals," I reminded her.

And I was right. When I returned for my next shift the following evening, Voss and his valet were long gone, leaving nothing but a stray bit of gossip about their bizarre visit. Even the gentleman's sister had been removed and sent to a private morgue.

Like most patients, they came, they got treated, and they left, never to be seen again.

Except, I'd eventually learn, that wasn't what happened with Voss . . .

A month later, at the very end of September, when the air held a chill and the leaves were beginning to change

color, I was walking the same path down First Avenue after a graveyard shift. Bethany accompanied me. Surprisingly, she had not faded permanently like all the other ghosts I'd known, but maybe she was just stubborn enough to stick around. I didn't know. I still hadn't been assigned a new nursing partner, so I was grateful for Bethany's company, even if it was occasionally irritating.

"Why is it so cold?"

"It's autumn," I told her as we strode over the moonlit cobbles.

"What happened to the summer?" she asked, genuinely surprised.

"Time flies, even when you're dead, I suppose."

"Who's dead?"

I sighed deeply and continued walking.

The nursing program had stashed us away from the hospital, on the second floor of Mott Mews on East Twenty-Sixth Street. The mews were a three-story building tucked behind a taller one with a courtyard between; the ground floor housed stables, and above them were rented warehouse space and tenements.

My fellow nursing students and I had been crammed into a room on the highest floor.

Dueling scents of manure and ammonia assaulted me as I walked past a line of horses and nodded at the stable hand, Benjamin. He sleepily tipped his hat. Some of the stable workers often harassed us with crude come-ons and belittling comments, and between them and all the rough street gangs that warred around these parts, I was always relieved

to get inside as quickly as possible. My boots crunched dirty straw as we ascended narrow stairs to the top floor. Bethany paused to yawn. Sounds of a couple arguing and a baby's colicky cries permeated the thin pine walls. In some ways, I felt that living here was no different from my grandfather's Ragpickers Row tenement on Mulberry Bend.

The nursing students' room was at the end of the hall. When I took out my key, I paused to listen to voices I heard in the neighboring room.

"... and you may find that she occasionally talks to herself, which I found strange when I was getting to know her. But you don't have to worry about her mental capacity. She's merely very ... intense about her work."

I knew that voice. Was this conversation about me talking to ghosts? A little panic rose up and tightened my chest, and I accidentally dropped my key. It bounced on the floorboards and dinged against the bottom of the neighboring door.

I froze in place, praying no one had heard the key fall. But the neighboring door swung open, and I found myself staring into the face of my supervisor, Sister Helen Bowden.

"Ah, Molly, there you are, back from your shift. Just the junior nurse I wanted to see."

Sister Helen ran the nursing program. She'd journeyed to England last year to learn directly from Florence Nightingale herself. I admired Sister Helen and would have admired her even more if she'd only been willing to tell us the names of the medicines. Sometimes I wondered if Sister Helen even knew them.

The nun beckoned from the doorway of her own private quarters. "I'd like to speak with you if you don't mind. Please come through."

Fresh panic bubbled up inside me. *What is this about?* I'd set a man's arm tonight by myself, but it . . . had been difficult. Had I botched the job? I worried I was in trouble. After all, I'd only been inside Sister Helen's private room once before.

"Oooh, you're in trouble," Bethany teased.

I swatted behind me to shoo her away, and for once, she took the hint and disappeared.

With trepidation, I stepped into the good nun's room, lit by candle and furnished spartanly. There was a single bed, a desk, and a small table with two chairs beneath a window that gave a glimpse of the purpling early-morning sky.

Sitting in front of that window was something I'd never seen in Sister Helen's room.

A middle-aged man.

When he stood up to greet me, I noticed his short stature. Then I did a double take at the man's missing pinky finger.

The man looked a lot less miserable than the last time I'd seen him . . . a lot less covered in his own blood. Pale and petite, the valet wore a tweed brown suit and gripped a bowler hat. His silver muttonchops were neatly trimmed, and they matched his broomlike mustache.

He pushed up a pair of wire-rimmed gold glasses and murmured, "Yes, this is the one."

Who was the one? *Me?* Anxiety clawed at my chest. *What is he doing here?*

“Mr. Hoffmann,” Sister Helen said, “this is my brightest pupil, Molly O’Rinn. She’s the girl we’ve been discussing, who lost her mother to consumption a few years past. I believe she is the junior nurse who was training when you and Mr. Voss were brought in last month, yes?”

“Indeed, indeed.” The gentleman canted his head politely. “It’s a pleasure to formally meet you, Nurse Molly, especially under better circumstances,” he said in a thick German accent.

I nodded. “Likewise, sir.”

“Nurse Molly . . . In my tongue, it is Schwester Molly.”

“Oh?” I gave him a quick smile, flicking a questioning gaze to Sister Helen, and then said to the man, “Your pinky finger seems to be healing up nicely. I’m glad to see you’ve had the stitches removed.” For the first time, I noticed a band of black fabric encircling his upper arm. *Formal mourning for the Voss sister*, I thought. “Is there, uh, anything I can do for you, sir?”

He chuckled softly and cleared his throat, pressing a fist to his mouth. “Why, yes, indeed. Quite a big task. That is what I was explaining to the good sister here.”

I must have stood there silently for too long because Sister Helen gently removed my nursing lantern from my grip and set it on the table. She encouraged me to remove my wool cloak and steered me to the empty chair next to the man. “A great and honorable task has been set before you, and I know you are the right girl to answer its call.” I could hear the eagerness in her voice as she whispered into my ear.

Curious, I carefully perched on the chair, allowing the bustle that puffed out the back of my blue nursing skirts to collapse into a neat pile behind me.

“My dear girl,” Mr. Hoffmann said, “I was sent here by my employer for a most urgent and important assignment.”

“The gentleman who lost his sister?”

“You remember,” Mr. Hoffmann said, and it sounded almost like a question.

I gave him a polite smile. “I remember. Voss, I think his name was?”

“Charles Voss,” Sister Helen said. “His father was Parker Voss, the financier known as the Hammer of Wall Street.”

I didn’t know anything about Wall Street bigwigs, which must have been apparent on my face, because Mr. Hoffmann said, “Well, that’s all right. You are young. Mr. Voss’s father made his fortune on Wall Street, and the Voss name carries weight in this city. More weight than the mayor. He and his wife were struck down last year in a tragic event, so the fortune went to Charles. That included a quite lavish estate on the Hudson—upstate New York, in Tarrytown, near Sleepy Hollow.”

“A couple hours by train,” Sister Helen informed me as she hung up my coat on the back of the door.

The man nodded, shuffling his bowler hat. “He sent me into the city with a rather large check to procure a live-in nurse.”

*A live-in nurse?* “Oh,” I said, realizing. “For his tuberculosis?”

“Yes, that’s right. His condition is worsening. Earlier this

month, he was bedbound for several days, and our local doctor hasn't been much help. His sister had a more advanced form of the illness before she died, and my master fears the same thing is happening to him. He needs professional care."

My heart raced wildly. What was he asking of me? I wasn't a professional. Not yet. My certification wouldn't come until I completed my training.

"When Mr. Hoffmann was trying to figure out the name of the nurse who'd spoken to his master that night in the hospital, he inquired if any of the nurses had experience caring for a family member with consumption," Sister Helen explained. "Your face came to mind immediately. You are the only one of my girls with that knowledge and experience."

A bitter knowledge. I twisted the claddagh ring on my middle finger and felt a familiar prick of grief as dark memories resurfaced.

"You'd be an honored guest at Riverbend Manor, with every need provided for during your stay," Mr. Hoffmann said. "There's a cook and a housekeeper—the usual servants. And the Hudson is quite extraordinary in winter, I must say." He sniffled and adjusted his glasses higher on the bridge of his nose, beaming proudly. "The estate is magnificent."

"What an opportunity for a young girl," Sister Helen murmured, unable to keep the joy out of her voice.

I could not say the same for me. This was all so sudden, and I felt as if I were being traded like meat, a prized dairy cow that was being sold to a farm up north with a good

grazing field to produce better butter. “Sorry, sir, but I’m afraid there’s been a mistake. I’m awfully sad to hear about your employer’s worsening condition, but I’m no live-in nurse, not professionally. Not until I get my training certificate. I’m enrolled in a program here. I can’t abandon it nor my duties to my fellow sisters. I’ve taken a serious pledge.”

The man’s head tilted toward Sister Helen, who chuckled kindly.

“My dear headstrong girl,” she said, “your loyalty toward your work at the hospital is commendable. I told you that she was the best, Mr. Hoffmann, did I not?”

“You did, Sister,” he agreed with a smile. He appeared eager. Perhaps a little anxious.

The nun grasped her hands against her black skirts and turned to me. “This on-site assignment is a training opportunity that is too good to pass up, child. Your skills will be put to the test. You will have to think on your feet and use good judgement. It will require someone who is willing to use good sense and act independently. If anyone here is responsible and serious enough to take on this challenge, it is you.”

To be honest, I *did* like the sound of that. But caring for one individual was much different from the hospital environment. Here I was able to learn about a wide variety of ailments and glean knowledge directly from physicians. In someone’s private home, I’d be alone. With one patient. Not a remarkable learning opportunity.

And then there was the memory of Voss in the exam room, throwing that fancy hourglass sculpture in a tantrum,

laughing like a hyena when his sister had just died. The wink . . .

"I'm not so sure . . .," I admitted. "I appreciate it so very much, I really do. But can I give you an answer in the morning? I'd like to think about it carefully."

The man gave me a tight smile, and though not unkind, it felt . . . tense. *Is he under some strain? In pain?* Maybe that was just my nurse's instinct, jumping to conclusions.

"I apologize," he said, "but I'm afraid I must return to the Hudson River Valley on the first train this morning. In two hours."

Two hours? "Sir, I'm begging you, I haven't slept since yesterday—"

"Mr. Voss is kindly donating a large sum of money to the hospital," Sister Helen said firmly. "A *very* large sum."

"But—"

"In exchange for your services, he will fund the entire nursing program next year. We can expand it—double it, even, and bring in more girls. By doing this, you'll be helping all of us. We can help so many . . ."

I felt cornered and put on the spot. I again thought of Voss when he'd spotted Bethany. Part of me wondered if being close to him would finally give me answers about this "gift" that we seemed to share. *But how could I?* Ask him straight? Did he know more than I did?

No. That could never happen. A girl like me shouldn't even talk to a man like that. Panic gathered in my chest. I swallowed and asked anxiously, "How long would this assignment be going on for, then?"

The gentleman threaded the edge of his bowler hat along his fingertips. "I don't know. A few months? When the master's sister got to this state, her decline was rapid. I have my doubts that he'll make it through the winter. But no matter their status, every man should be afforded the grace to die in peace, with someone kind caring for them . . . would you not say, Nurse Molly? Is not all life dear?"

"Remember your pledge," Sister Helen murmured encouragingly.

Of course I remembered. Point number five: *Hold all life dearly*. I'd argued this fact to doctors who wanted to give up on poor immigrants like me. Being forced to use the same logic on a wealthy Wall Street mogul, who could afford to basically buy off the hospital just to get what he wanted, did not feel right.

And yet, I could not find fault in it. Nor could I wriggle my shoulder away from Sister Helen's steady hand. The sister brooked no argument.

"Did I just hear that right?" Bethany's voice suddenly whispered near my ear as she appeared without warning. "We're going to Charles Voss's mansion? Tell me it's true, Molly! You must say yes. This is the chance I've been waiting for! We're going to live like princesses!"

I didn't want to tell her that I doubted she could follow me all the way upstate. No spirit had followed me that far. The Black Groom had appeared to me in various parts of the city, but I hadn't seen him in a year.

If I went upstate, I'd probably lose Bethany.

And as irritating as she was—as thick in the head,

as shallow, as lazy—she was the only companion I'd had in a long time. I never felt alone with Bethany, and that was a luxury I hadn't felt since Mammy had left. I didn't want to let it go. And I didn't want to give up on finding the cause of her death. But then I remembered how Voss seemed to be able to see Bethany, remembered his terrible laugh . . . Maybe it was good that Bethany couldn't follow me there.

Sadness weighed down my chest.

"It's settled then, yes?" the old man asked.

My gaze swung between the nun and Mr. Hoffmann. I couldn't think of a good excuse. The weight in my chest was a trapped animal. I looked at Bethany's joy-filled face, and my heart broke a little more.

"My girl would never let me down," Sister Helen said, patting my shoulder firmly.

I felt myself nodding. What else could I do? I was a good girl, and I did what I was told, even if it wasn't what I wanted. That was how I made my life normal when it was anything but.

"Wonderful! We'll be eating Miss Filomena's soulful soup by lunch," Mr. Hoffmann told me with strained cheer, a look of desperate joy in his eyes. Was there something he wasn't saying, or was I misreading him? My eyes were having trouble focusing. It was hard to know anything for certain in this wretched state of mind, with so little sleep and my panicked heart still galloping inside my chest.

Mr. Hoffmann could not wait to exit the room, that much I understood. And the way Sister Helen was beam-