

THE  
LONELY GHOST

Mike Ford

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# 1

“Ouch!”

Ava peered at her fingertip, where a bead of blood was forming. She stuck her finger in her mouth and glared at the rosebush she had been hacking away at with a pair of clippers. Her blood tasted coppery on her tongue and made her feel sick. She took her finger out and pressed her thumb against the spot where the thorn had pricked her. There was a little sliver of black visible beneath the pale pink skin.

“You need to get that out,” Cassie said. “You could get sporotrichosis.”

“Sporowhat?” Ava asked.

Her sister swept her long, dark hair out of her face and tucked it behind her ear. She, of course, was wearing gloves. “An infection caused by *Sporothrix schenckii*,” she said. “It’s a fungus that grows on rose thorns, among other places,” she added when Ava stared at her with one eyebrow cocked. “Named after Benjamin Schenck, the medical student who first discovered it, in 1896.”

“Oh, right,” Ava said. “Benjamin Schenck.” She pointed at Cassie with the clippers. “Why do you know these things?”

“I was reading up about roses,” Cassie said. “Because of the garden and the Blackthorn roses. It just came up.”

“Most girls our age read about pop stars,” Ava teased.

“Most girls our age are boring,” said Cassie. “Now, go wash your hands and use tweezers to get the splinter out. Don’t forget to put some ointment on it. Just in case.”

“Just in case,” Ava repeated as she turned and walked toward the house. “Got it.”

“You’ll be sorry when your hand falls off and you can’t be a catcher anymore!” Cassie called after her.

“Goalie!” Ava called back, laughing.

Sometimes, she couldn’t believe she and Cassie were twins. She had short blonde hair cut in a modern style. Cassie, with her long curls, looked like something out of an old-fashioned photograph. Where Cassie loved reading books and playing video games alone, Ava was all about soccer and hanging out with her friends. In many ways, they were total opposites. But they also got along really well. Usually.

This was a particularly good thing at the moment, because their parents had uprooted them from their home in the city and moved them to the little town of Ebenezer two weeks ago. Right now they were the only friends each other had. At least until school started in a few days. Ava was excited about that. Cassie was less thrilled. But it would be fine. It always was. Ava would make new friends easily, and she would make sure her

sister was included in things, the way she always did.

She clomped up the wide stairs to the front porch, pushed open the door, and went into the house. She still wasn't used to living there, and to her it felt like they were staying at a hotel. A very old, very big, very run-down hotel. *You need to start thinking of it as home*, she told herself as she went into the kitchen.

"How are things going in the garden?" her mother asked, unwrapping newspaper from around a glass she'd taken out of the cardboard moving box on the counter and setting the glass in a cabinet.

"It's fighting back," Ava said as she turned on the water in the sink. There was a loud rumbling, followed by what sounded like a belch, and the faucet spat out a glob of brownish water. Ava let the water run for a minute, until it was clear. Then she soaped up her hands and rinsed them.

"I know you girls have been working hard on it for a couple of days, but it still looks like a forest out there," Ava's

mother said. “You haven’t even gotten close to the summerhouse.”

The summerhouse was what her mother called the small building in the center of the garden. It did resemble a house—actually a much smaller version of the big one. It was called the summerhouse because in the days before the big house had air-conditioning, people would sit or sometimes sleep in there when the weather was hot.

“Good thing summer is pretty much over, then,” Ava said. She picked up the knife that her mother was using to cut the tape on the moving boxes and started poking at the splinter in her finger.

“It’s still a feature,” her mother said. “We can decorate it for holidays, and when there are weddings here, guests can take pictures in it.”

“Once Dad rebuilds it, that is,” said Ava. “What’s that, item number 3,798 on his list?”

“It will all get done,” her mother said. She sighed. “I hope.”

Buying Blackthorn House had mostly been Ava's father's idea. Tired of the long hours he spent at his job as an accountant for a carpet store, he'd decided he—meaning all of them—needed to make a big change. He'd found Blackthorn House on a website that featured old houses for sale and decided it would make the perfect bed-and-breakfast. So now they were fixing up the run-down place and starting their new lives as innkeepers.

“I promise we'll be open by Christmas!” Ava's father announced, walking into the kitchen. He waved a pad of paper at them. “In fact, I just booked the first rooms.”

“You're taking reservations?” Ava's mother said.

“Who would book this place with it looking the way it does?” Ava asked. Her finger was bleeding again from all the prodding with the knife, but at least she had gotten the splinter out. She washed it down the drain and rinsed her finger again.

“A couple who remembers what it looked like when the rose garden was still beautiful,” her father said. “They heard



the house had been bought and that it was being restored to its original glory.”

Ava had seen photographs of the Blackthorn House garden. It *had* been spectacular. She had serious doubts that they would ever be able to get it looking like that again. The rosebushes hadn’t been attended to since the death of the house’s last owner, Lily Blackthorn, nearly twenty years ago. Even before that, Lily had let them become overgrown and wild. They had completely surrounded the summerhouse and looked like they were trying to strangle it. Every time she went out there, Ava pictured the castle where Sleeping Beauty lay enchanted, waiting for Prince Phillip to cut through the forest of thorns and wake her up. “He’d need a flamethrower to get through this one,” Ava had joked to Cassie.

She opened one of the drawers to look for the ointment and a bandage. Lying on top of the assorted odds and ends that had already accumulated there since their arrival was a sheet of paper. Ava picked it up. “Dad,” she said, realizing

what it was. “Did you forget to mail in my application for the soccer team?”

“No,” her father said. “I put it in the envelope that was on the counter and . . .” He looked at the application that Ava was waving in his face. “And I think I must have mailed the school my application for a business license instead. Sorry, honey.”

“Dad, the application deadline was yesterday,” Ava said.

“Let’s drive over to the school right now,” her father suggested. “We’ll take your application. I’m sure one day won’t matter. I mean, how many kids are going to sign up for soccer in a town this size?”

The woman behind the counter in the Patience Prufrock Central School office shook her head. “I’m sorry,” she said, “but there’s nothing I can do. The team is full. Soccer is our most popular activity.”

“What about alternates?” Ava asked.

“Full,” the woman said firmly. “But we have a number of other activities you can sign up for.”

“I want to play soccer,” Ava said glumly as the woman opened a folder of sign-up sheets and riffled through them.

“Here’s a good one,” the woman said, taking out a sheet. “Drama Club. That would be oh-so-much fun.”

Ava groaned.

“What did you say your last name was?” the woman asked, ignoring her obvious lack of interest.

“Chapel,” Ava said. “Ava Chapel.”

“Are you related to a Cassandra Chapel?”

“Cassie,” said Ava. “She’s my sister. We’re twins.”

“Well, your sister is already signed up for Drama Club,” the woman informed her. “You’d be in it together.”

Ava turned to her father. “You mailed Cassie’s form in, but not mine?”

Her father shook his head. “She never gave me one. She must have mailed it in herself.”