

JAIME JO WRIGHT

Author of *The House on Foster Hill*

The

BOOKSHOP

of

99 DOORS

“Wright is in a class by herself.” —*Library Journal*

Praise for *The Bookshop of 99 Doors*

“I couldn’t put this book down. Wright’s storytelling held me captive, weaving the supernatural and the sacred into an atmospheric, twisty tale of Gothic mystery and faith-filled hope. Readers will find themselves creeping down shadowed hallways in search of long-lost secrets—and reluctant to leave once they’re found.”

Elizabeth Goddard, bestselling author of the
H B series

“Strap in tight for this one! *The Bookshop of 99 Doors* has it all—a haunting atmosphere, dual timelines that snap together with shocking precision, and characters you feel in your bones. It’s part ghost story, part historical mystery, and all heart. Jaime Jo Wright delivers another knockout, this time daring to ask the question: Should every door with a secret be explored . . . or are some better left unopened? The past doesn’t rest in this one, and neither will you until you turn the final page.”

Ryan Steck, “The Real Book Spy” and author of *Gone Dark*

“Spook-tacular. Wright weaves together past and present in this haunting story, creating a mystery readers will stay up late into the night to unravel.”

C.C. Warrens, author of *Criss-Cross: A Holiday Novel*

“A twisty, suspense-filled dual timeline mystery that imaginatively offers a doorway to the myriad ways a family’s dark past can haunt those in the future.”

Kris Waldherr, bestselling author of *The Lost History of Dreams*

The
BOOKSHOP
of
99 DOORS

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To Tracie Peterson

For creating stories that captured my teenaged
imagination and inspired my future, who, in a
very special God-twist, became my friend.

*To cats, Montana, history, and life—
here's to you, Tracie.*

1



MINNIE TIPTON

A person hopes they can lead a quiet and simple life, one that isn't shrouded in secrets and surrounded by lies. This is what I had hoped for. It was not to be.

Minnie Tipton, aged 91

AMBROSE FIELDS, PENNSYLVANIA

MAY 1888

25 YEARS AFTER THE BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG

If fear took human form, it would be a ghoulish creature. It would have talons for fingernails with serrated edges that ripped your soul if you tried to extricate yourself from those books. It would have eyes of black. Deep, soulless eyes that sucked you into them and swallowed you whole until trembling was all you knew, and gasping for air would be futile but necessary nonetheless.

Minnie shut the book, clutching it in her hands, the bedcovers pooling around her waist as she sat on her bed in the semidarkness. Gaslights illuminated her bedroom, but the light was soft,

the shadows deep, and the book she was reading engulfing with its imagery.

She eyed the name of the author printed on the front cover: Victor Barringsworth, Esq. He was an obscure English author who had penned these words around the same time that Edgar Allan Poe was creating his own poetry of ravens and prose of dead men trapped beneath floorboards. Few remembered Victor Barringsworth's writings. A person had to be a dedicated patron of books to discover his one 581-page tome. As it was, Minnie had been pleasantly surprised to find the book in the library of Ambrose Fields. Her new home. It was the one familiar object in an environment she knew little about.

Minnie laid the book on the pillow next to her on the bed and questioned her choices once again. The gruesome and the dark held a haunting mystery over mankind, this Minnie knew. But at half past midnight, she questioned her reasoning for reading it before burrowing into her bed to sleep. There wasn't much of anything restful about Barringsworth's story, and Minnie sought peace. Yet life had carried her down a shadowy lane that seemed to herald questions more than it brought predictability.

She was twenty-five and a spinster who cared for her ailing father, and she had the stamina of someone half her age when it came to horror. Victor Barringsworth, Esq. had done more than write horror. He had emoted it. He'd penned words that saturated Minnie's spirit and begged her to be afraid along with him as he explored the long sleep of death. So his book didn't bring her peace. No. And yet she found his words to be intoxicating.

But wasn't that the way with books and the written word, with stories that enveloped your senses in a way that convinced you of danger and simultaneously reminded you they were all just pretend? If she allowed her romantic side to awaken, Minnie imagined she would have traveled to London in 1859 and engaged in conversation with the then-alive Victor Barringsworth.

Instead, it was almost thirty years later, and she was a husbandless female falling for a dead man and his writing.

Minnie was a romantic at heart, a pragmatist by necessity.

She slipped from beneath the linens and padded barefoot across the velvety carpet that covered the scuffed wood floor. She paused at her bureau and poured water from a pitcher into a washbasin, then splashed some on her face to awaken her senses.

There were no ghouls waiting outside her bedroom door. Her new home had been built in the late 1700s as part of a Colonial plantation. A large addition had been designed and built by others in the 1840s, which included a second floor and attic. But while the sprawling, century-old homestead might hold secrets and lore, it didn't house any ghosts. She hoped.

Minnie dried her face with a towel, lowering it to stare at her image in the mirror. Large brown eyes. Dark blond hair that hung well past her shoulders. White nightgown with a ribbon of blue at the scooped neckline.

No. Ambrose Fields didn't house ghosts, at least not the spirits that some of Minnie's acquaintances had attempted to call upon as they sought the services of spiritualists. Or the spirits they claimed visited them around a circular table they used in their parlors to summon those in the afterlife. Despite her inexplicable fondness for a thrilling read, Minnie avoided that practice, her unease telling her there was more to it than met the eye, and she could not dismiss it as pretend as she did with the books she read.

Minnie reached for her reflection, extending the fingers of her right hand toward the mirror. There wasn't anyone else at Ambrose Fields to confide in. Just Papa, who was not of sound mind, and Mrs. Pickston the housekeeper, who'd come with the place as if she were an inherited piece of furniture.

Minnie lowered her hand and moved to turn off the gaslights. She returned to her bed in somber silence. Victor Barringsworth, Esq. was correct, Minnie determined as the remaining light

dimmed at her touch and night's darkness conquered the room. Fear was an all-encompassing emotion. But it was an emotion, after all, and if Minnie had learned anything, it was that emotions could be wicked and unreliable. They doomed a person to shame, to assumptions larger than life, and to grief that overtook you. Emotions were not something to be followed or even believed. Emotions led one astray from the truth, from what was right and what was real. They betrayed you. They betrayed others. Just like Mama had betrayed Papa.

Minnie slipped beneath the covers again and stared at the ceiling. "Don't be like your mother," she whispered, repeating the words she'd been taught by her father.

In the darkness, a soft laugh brushed over Minnie like a distant, cold wind. Her mother's laugh. The one she heard every night in response to Minnie's whispered admonition.

And the vaporous words that followed were: *And yet you are. You're a dreamer just like me.*

TRISS BELLAMY

**AMBROSE FIELDS, PENNSYLVANIA
MAY, PRESENT DAY**

"And through here . . ."

More doors opened, this time a set of French doors, with panes of sparkling glass framed by dark mahogany. The doors were also wood, and Triss Bellamy's footsteps echoed on them, making her wish she'd worn her leather mules instead of heels. But she'd wanted to make a good impression. She *needed* to make a good impression.

The woman in front of her was shorter, rounder, and matronly. A warm air surrounded her and matched the smile on her face and the soft middle-aged wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. She spread her arms wide as if announcing the *pièce de résistance* of the entire estate.

And Triss couldn't argue with that.

"Welcome to my personal favorite and the best-kept rooms of all of Ambrose Fields!" Mrs. Nickles, the managing director of the historical property, spun in a half circle.

The bookshop at Ambrose Fields Manor was magnificent indeed.

Triss took a moment to drink it all in. To her right, large paned windows overlooked the south-facing lawn. Two of them boasted a window seat covered in yellow cushions and patchwork pillows of yellow, aqua, and beige hues. Two cats lay curled in the sun, claiming the window seat as their own. A black cat barely six months old and a smaller kitten, a silver tiger with white-rimmed yellow eyes.

"Emmy and ZoZo." Mrs. Nickles introduced the cats to Triss. "They are strays who showed up one day and never left. They come with the bookshop now," she added with a laugh.

Aside from the felines who'd already claimed Triss's heart with one lazy blink of their eyes, it was the floor-to-ceiling wooden bookshelves that drew her attention. They were painted a brilliant teal that had chipped and marred and faded over time. There wasn't one inch to spare between the hundreds of volumes to squeeze in another title, and what little of the plaster wall that could be seen was also the same color of teal. The paint appealed to Triss, and she hadn't expected that. She'd anticipated rich mahogany, but somehow this was nicer. It was rural and yet sophisticated and altogether the most welcoming aesthetic for a bookshop.

Two smaller double-sided shelves stood in the middle of the

oor, with framed photographs of prior occupants of Ambrose Fields displayed on their tops. Strategically placed piles of vintage books were stacked in a far corner to the left of a Victorian desk. On the desk was a laptop, and on the wall behind it hung an impressive portrait of a pretty lady with large dark eyes and pale skin, her hair swept into an updo reminiscent of the turn of the century.

Triss didn't inquire as to who the woman was. She would find out soon enough. If she got the job, that is.

An arched doorway at the north side of the room gave just enough of a view to hint at another large room that had similar tall bookshelves, and Triss glimpsed a rolling ladder.

God was smiling on her today.

"And that brings my tour of the main house here at Ambrose Fields to completion. This, of course, is where you'd spend most of your time. The front room of the bookshop is where we sell the bulk of the books as a service to our guests who tour the facilities," Mrs. Nickles said, concluding the tour of the sprawling estate home with its many rooms and doors, so many that Triss had lost count. "That room"—Mrs. Nickles pointed to the arched doorway—"is the original library of the estate, which includes the collection of the historic residence. We've left it much the same as it was."

"It's lovely," Triss murmured politely.

"Yes. It is. As bookshop manager, you would also be responsible for cataloguing the collection. We tried to begin that project a year ago but didn't get very far. The Ambrose family had a haphazard way of shelving their books. No rhyme or reason to it. But to maintain authenticity, we've left the books just the way we found them. Recently, however, we decided it's time to bring the collection into the modern cataloguing system."

Triss's fingers itched to pull the old volumes from their shelves and discover the lost treasures within them.

“As I mentioned before,” Mrs. Nickles went on, “the east wing was built in 1790 when Rutherford Ambrose erected it. The rest of the place was added in 1847 before the war broke out.”

Triss nodded. Civil War history was much talked about in this part of Pennsylvania with Gettysburg less than an hour’s drive away.

Mrs. Nickles leaned against the desk and crossed her arms over her ample chest. “It’s been said that Rutherford Ambrose was a superstitious man who dabbled in the healing methods brought over here from the Old Country. The area is rich in folklore, and you may find that intriguing. The estate was passed on to his nephew and was eventually sold to someone outside the Ambrose family in the late 1800s after the war disrupted everything.” Mrs. Nickles craned her neck to look over her shoulder at the lady in the portrait. “That’s Minnie Tipton, daughter of Bertram Tipton, who purchased the estate. It stayed in their family for several decades until it was willed to the village of Whipple Creek and turned into a historic site and a museum.”

That was it in a nutshell. Triss met Minnie Tipton’s luminous eyes, which held something in their depths that would never be revealed now that she had passed away.

“I do love history,” Triss said, “and I *adore* books.” That was an understatement, yet she didn’t want to terrify Mrs. Nickles with her passionate love for old bindings, inked sketches, and the like.

“Wonderful!” Mrs. Nickles, managing director of the estate, seemed just a little desperate to find a manager for the museum’s bookshop. “My previous bookshop manager left rather abruptly. With tourist season already in full swing and with the Memorial Day holiday fast approaching, I must say you’re a gift in heels.” She shot a glance at Triss’s navy heels. “Feel free to be a tad more casual when working here. We try to offer a relaxed and warm atmosphere for our guests.”

With that, Mrs. Nickles pushed off the desk and held her

hand out to Triss. “The job is yours. You’ve plenty of literary experience, what with your having worked as a librarian. And your aptitude for history will come in handy. The job won’t make you wealthy, but we offer a basic health benefits package. No dental, though.” She shot Triss a worried look.

“That’s okay.” Triss would figure out how to pay for any dental work she needed when the time came for it. She only hoped Mrs. Nickles didn’t decide to investigate her résumé as an afterthought and discover that Triss had zero experience as a librarian. She had lied. Many people did on their applications, but Triss had been justified in fudging a little regarding her past work experience—or so she tried to convince herself.

“Good!” Relief was expressed as a quickly expelled breath.

As they concluded their meeting with a handshake, Mrs. Nickles eyed the two adolescent cats in the window seat. “You will need to care for them as well. Their litter box is in the side room there.” She pointed to a door that was mostly hidden to the left of the desk. It was built into the bookshelves with shelves in the door itself, and the only way a person would know about the door was if it was cracked open—which it was, probably to allow the kittens access to their bathroom facilities.

Mrs. Nickles clucked her tongue. “I do like cats, but I’ve no idea why I told the previous manager she could allow them to hang out in the bookshop. If I’d known she would up and disappear a month later . . .” She let her sentence hang as a shadow crossed her face. Waving it off, Mrs. Nickles met Triss’s gaze. “Sometimes people vanish. Lazy, no-good people who want to make twenty dollars an hour to sit around and do nothing.”

Triss had a feeling that the prior bookshop manager hadn’t been all *that* lazy. Not with the bookshop so tidy and in order. But the word *vanish* captured her attention. It was a word Triss had despised for years and had come to Ambrose Fields to get away from.

Vanish.

Apparition.

Ghost.

Specter.

She came from a family of superstitious ghost hunters, and she wanted to put as much distance between herself and them as she could. Triss neither liked nor believed in ghosts. She was more pragmatic than all that. She believed in history. In truth. Not in fiction and fanciful ideas. In fact, she'd always wondered why she'd never been that good at mathematics because the calculation of numbers aligned with Triss's desire for order, predictability, and logic.

But, she supposed, sometimes a person inherited things from their family they'd rather they hadn't. And so, in the true form of someone who'd grown up with bohemian parents and a brother who saturated his life with apparatuses to capture evidence of the spirit world, Triss had made herself vanish.

She'd left her family.

For more reasons than even she was willing to investigate at the moment. Memories she preferred to leave behind, as they had no place in the new life she was building for herself.

Triss would reinvent herself here. At Ambrose Fields. In a bookshop inside a historic home that boasted ninety-nine doors. With two cats who now sized her up from their window seat, yellow eyes unblinking and furry faces begging to be nuzzled.

Yes. *Vanish* was now a word that Triss had left behind.

The bookshop, with all its doors and history and cats, was far more preferable. A dream really. Triss's dream. And she dared anyone, or anything, to haunt it.

2



MINNIE

I learned to be afraid. That was the way of it really. Since the war—since the rebellion—it seemed broken hearts and unspoken truths were more commonplace. I thought Papa and I would create a new life with new memories. Instead, we entered a nightmare.

Minnie Tipton, aged 91

AMBROSE FIELDS, PENNSYLVANIA MAY 1888

There were three things that Minnie was afraid of. One was no real surprise to anyone who asked—which one rarely did. She feared death, which, Minnie supposed, wasn't all that unusual. The great beyond. The unknown. It was a part of everyone's journey, and yet no one had recorded any events that occurred when one passed over to the other side. A postcard would have been nice, or a telegraph.

Hello STOP Heaven is real STOP Faring well STOP

Instead, it was only silence. A chilling aftermath that echoed so loud but so wordlessly that it was unnerving.

The second thing Minnie feared was being alone. Or rather being without Papa. She never minded hours of solitude, a book in hand, held captive by her own thoughts. She had made friends with herself almost a decade ago when her sixteenth year came and went without a suitor, setting the course for the next several years. But without a husband, and with Mama passed on from consumption, Minnie had only Papa left. When it was his turn to face death, Minnie would be alone. Grandparents had long left the earth, aunts and uncles had either died or simply did not exist, and aside from one cousin she had never met, Minnie couldn't boast what so many her age could. Family.

The Tipton line depended on her, and unfortunately and for whatever reason, Minnie had done a poor job of acquiring the necessary partner to bring forth the next generation. She didn't believe she was physically unappealing, and though she was timid, she could hold a pleasant conversation. Secretly, Minnie wondered—and hardly dared to consider it for long—if her father was the reason she had ended up without a beau and a future of marriage. Papa differed from many others who'd returned home from the war in the months before she entered the world. He suffered bouts of melancholy, was prone to outbursts of anger, and the unpredictability of his person left many uncomfortable at best, young men included.

Which led Minnie to reconsidering the third thing that gave her the deepest anxiety. While death was frightening because of its unpredictability, losing one's mind had to be the epitome of fears. It was as if one stood at the doorway to a house where the windows were broken, the doors hung askew on their hinges, and the hallways led nowhere and everywhere at the same time. A part of the mind knew that entering such a place would cause an immediate sense of loss of direction, with no map to navigate

oneself to the exit to escape. The other part of the mind knew there was no resistance to the pull, to the decisive grip insanity held over one's mind. It was a shadowy black doorway that one didn't want to enter, knew it was dangerous to enter, and yet had no power endowed on them but to enter.

Minnie was afraid because this was Papa's fate. Only he didn't appear to notice it. He didn't realize that the stories he repeated from childhood stayed the same, while the retelling of yesterday's events was skewed and incorrect. She had confronted Papa shortly after their move to Ambrose Fields. Within a week of their arrival, his mind seemed to worsen. He had inquired about the signing of papers to complete the bill of sale.

When Minnie had reminded him that the rather significant event had occurred the week before in Whipple Creek, Papa had shifted into his patriarchal sternness she was accustomed to when she had been a wayward child. She was corrected. The papers had *not* been signed, Papa claimed, and she was wrong. She must send a message to Mr. Hebbers to make sure a meeting was set up to do so, and promptly. Papa wanted there to be no question as to the property of Ambrose Fields being under the ownership of his name, Bertram Porter Tipton. Minnie had delayed in setting up the needless appointment, and within hours, Papa seemed to forget his request.

"Tea, miss?"

Minnie leapt in her seat, twisting simultaneously away from her place at the writing desk and the front window overlooking Ambrose Fields's front lawn. "Oh! Mrs. Pickston!" Minnie clutched the column of her neck as she willed away her disconcerting thoughts.

Mrs. Pickston might as well have been ripped from the pages of a novel by Victor Barringsworth, Esq., Minnie observed. Mrs. Pickston's pinched lips, narrow cheekbones, and squinting eyes undeniably judged anyone in her purview. Minnie found Mrs.

Pickston—in her black bombazine—depressive and sour. She wondered if Mrs. Pickston sucked on onion bulbs before bedtime. It might explain her expression. But then it didn't explain her personality—unless, of course, she ate them too.

“Tea?” Mrs. Pickston inquired with a sharp snip to the end of the word.

“Oh. Uh . . . y-yes,” Minnie stammered. She wished she wasn't intimidated by Mrs. Pickston, but she was. In spite of the fact Mrs. Pickston was her hired staff, Minnie had the distinct feeling that *she* was the interloper here and Mrs. Pickston the unwilling hostess.

Mrs. Pickston's dress rustled as she moved toward a side table, depositing a tray with a porcelain teapot that boasted hand-painted violets on it.

“Shall I pour?” The older woman, who had to be in her early sixties, smiled.

Is it beneath you to serve me? Minnie wanted to ask, but she didn't dare. She wasn't that brave, and while her mind might engage in quippy responses, she rarely gave herself license to voice them. Mama had raised her to be polite and respectful, even to the help, and not allow her tongue the freedom to speak her mind. Mama was careful that way. She was proper. She was put-together. And yet Papa had told Minnie, “*Don't be like your mother.*” The conundrum then was which parts to adopt and which to decline?

Minnie opted for the positive etiquette. One couldn't go wrong if she emulated her mother in that regard. At least she didn't think so.

“Yes. Please,” Minnie answered. She could have poured the tea herself, but she had a feeling that if she declined today, Mrs. Pickston would never order and therefore never pour another cup of tea again.

The sound of tea pouring into a cup was the only sound

to disturb the small room Minnie had taken refuge in for the afternoon. Papa had retired for a nap. The house, their belongings, her clothes and personal items had all been moved in ahead of them to make their arrival at Ambrose Fields as simple as possible. They had also adopted most of the property's prior furnishings, left there after the death of Hetty Ambrose, the last of the family to whom the property belonged.

Mrs. Pickston set the teapot back on the tray and folded her arms in front of her, lifting her chin and looking down her nose at Minnie. "Will there be anything else?"

Minnie hesitated. She had so many questions. Ambrose Fields was not exactly as Papa had described to her. Now that she had time to explore it, she was tempted to ask Mrs. Pickston to clarify a few things.

Mrs. Pickston's eyes narrowed at Minnie's delayed response.

Minnie swallowed back her reticence that she might offend the housekeeper and made herself address the woman with authority. "How large is Ambrose Fields?"

"I've no idea the number of acres," Mrs. Pickston replied.

"What about the house?" Minnie asked. "How many rooms are there?"

Mrs. Pickston eyed her, and for a long moment, she said nothing. Minnie refused to squirm, but she felt the housekeeper's censure.

"There are over fifty rooms, Miss Tipton."

"I did understand correctly, then," Minnie breathed. Having felt like an intruder this past week, Minnie had kept mostly to her room, the front sitting room, and Papa's suite, where he convalesced and slept far more than a man his age should.

"And the house boasts one hundred doors," Mrs. Pickston added. Her lips were set in a firm but proud line.

"How fascinating," Minnie responded, even as she noticed how Mrs. Pickston turned her back to her and exited the room without

another word. It was a definitive lack of respect to Minnie's place as the woman of the house. It was a silent message and one that Minnie was struggling not only to interpret but to understand why she deserved such treatment. It wasn't as if she were at fault for the death of Hetty Ambrose only months prior. The woman had been old—ancient really. Death could not be stopped, especially not by Minnie.

A rustle in the doorway alerted Minnie, and she noticed that Mrs. Pickston gave a wide berth to a young woman who hovered just outside. Dressed in a maid's uniform, the woman ducked her head and avoided Mrs. Pickston's cool regard.

She poked her head into the room once the housekeeper had taken her leave. "Actually, miss, there are ninety-nine doors, not one hundred."

The maid had been eavesdropping, but Minnie could hardly reprimand her because she was curious about the exorbitant number. "Is that even possible?"

The maid took a hesitant step farther into the room. She had to be around sixteen or seventeen years of age. Her blue eyes were large in her face, and there was an air of suppressed excitement in her words. "Oh, but it is." There was a distinct lilt to the maid's voice. Irish most likely. "Slidin' doors. Closet doors. Secret doors. It's a whole thing here at Ambrose Fields, but none has ever found a one-hundredth door."

"Then why does Mrs. Pickston claim it?" Minnie took a sip of her tea.

"Cause she believes it, miss. With her whole bein'. Says that when it's left open, the spirits of the dead pass in and out. It's why no one wants to find the door. No one wants to accidentally open it."

Minnie issued a look of doubt at the maid. "A doorway to the dead? That is fascinating as a legend, but silly in reality."

The maid took another step into the room, tilting her chin

up in a soft argument. A strand of red hair tickled her nose, and she brushed it away. “Hardly, miss. There are times you can even hear the dead, walkin’ about and such. Sometimes a breeze blows where there’s no open windows too. An’ one time I heard the piano play in the middle of the night when no one was around.”

“Which would mean the elusive one-hundredth door is already opened then, wouldn’t it?” Minnie responded.

The maid’s brows rose as she considered the logic of Minnie’s observation. “Why, I’m afraid you’re right. Ack. There’s a thought if there ever was one.”

“I’ve not met you before,” Minnie observed.

The maid gave a slight curtsy. “Call me Nessa, miss. I’m the housemaid. There’s only me and them what works in the stable. Mrs. Pickston doesn’t believe in stannin’ the house with too many pairs of eyes. Says it brings bad luck to privacy an’ all that.”

Minnie hung her arm over the wooden back of her desk chair, holding her teacup and well aware it was cooling faster than she was drinking it. “And is there a need to be so private?”

Nessa’s brows rose in surprise. “Nay. No need so much as it just is. What with the history o’ this place, Mrs. Pickston prefers it that way.”

“What history is that?” Curiosity piqued, and though she’d already heard the rumors, Minnie wanted to hear Nessa’s version of the story. It didn’t seem like Nessa was averse to chatting, and Minnie was relieved at the friendly face in a house dimmed by Papa’s brooding illness and Mrs. Pickston’s osh ways.

“Surely, you’ve heard of it!” Nessa retorted. “Eleven soldiers murdered in their sickbeds! Right here at Ambrose Fields, by a ragin’ captain who’d lost his mind!” When Minnie didn’t comment, Nessa shook her finger at the door. “Right below this room in the sittin’ room. Not long after the Battle of Gettysburg when all the men were convalessin’. Hetty Ambrose was a healer like her father, an’ she opened this place to help the Union soldiers.

But she had no idea their captain would go berserk. Some said it was the pain that did 'im in, while others say the war stole his mind. Does it matter? Everyone knows Cap'n Vickers was the one who slit the men's throats and then his own. They say he's never left neither. Moves to-and-fro in the night, lookin' for someone other than himself to blame."

Minnie had heard the horri c rumor—at least a version of the story, not unlike the one Nessa told now. But as someone who didn't believe in superstitions like ghosts, Minnie wasn't sure why, nearly thirty years later, anyone would hold the estate at arm's length because of a tragic story. The war had left thousands of sad tales behind, and it would be decades more before anyone was rid of them.

"And you say people avoid Ambrose Fields merely because of a sad story?" Minnie sipped her now tepid tea. A renegade tea leaf floated on top.

Nessa shrugged. "If you believe it's just a story, then there's no reason to steer clear of Ambrose Fields. But if you believe there's a door numbered one hundred with dead folks goin' to-and-fro, and there's a murderous captain still roamin' about, well, then it stands to reason to avoid it, dontcha think?"

Minnie nodded. She didn't know what else to say to the superstitious young maid, who seemed as delighted by the stories as she was frightened by them. Not unlike Minnie and her quiet obsession with Victor Barringsworth's novel.

Nessa nished with a tip of her head. "Truth be told, Mrs. Pickston prefers it that way. Since Miss Ambrose passed on an' this place was put up for sale, she's been in a tizzy. 'Interlopers,' she calls ya, and I can't say she's happy you're here. I think she hoped Miss Ambrose would leave the place to her. But that's a lofty dream for a housekeeper, dontcha agree?"

The maid was too forthcoming with her opinion, and she recognized it. Nessa blustered for a moment under Minnie's

wordless stare and then reached for the dustcloth that was draped over her shoulder. "I'd best be gettin' back to work, miss."

"Yes," Minnie said. Her dismissal wasn't because Nessa offended her; rather, she found the young maid and all her chatter refreshing after the last dull week since their arrival. But she was concerned by the tale the girl spun. Mostly she was bothered by Mrs. Pickston's unabashed possessiveness of the place.

It was hard enough to grasp why Papa had sold their own family property and moved here so suddenly. There were no ties to this area or to this house. Papa's rash behavior was another chalk mark of concern for Minnie. And with the tale that hovered over Ambrose Fields like a bad omen, it didn't bode well for their future. Even if it was all just legend, that those in the community believed even a piece of it meant Minnie was doomed to many more days of solitude.

She knew enough about the area to know the people's roots here ran deep into the past. There were the humble Quakers, yes, but there were those who held strongly to the mystical beliefs that had been brought to these parts over a century ago. Beliefs of healing powers, casting curses, and the like. And now, with even the late President Lincoln's wife having been entranced by the supernatural world, the supposed spirits among them were ever growing in popularity and plausibility.

It unnerved Minnie because she was afraid of death, and she was afraid of being without Papa. But the fear of losing one's grip on what was real? She pondered where the line was and when a person crossed it willingly, and when their minds failed them and they crossed it unwillingly. Perhaps, after all, the unseen was more real than Minnie had believed. Perhaps she was truly afraid of *four* things. The unknown, the unseen, the unexplainable, and the uncontrollable. Taken all together, they left a soul feeling desperate. And if there was one thing Minnie knew she

needed, it was some sense of peace. Because at this point in her life, she was quite at a loss for security. Her world at Ambrose Fields felt anything but safe.



She avoided Mrs. Pickston like one might avoid a ghoul that hid in the dark places. Minnie trailed her fingers along the wall that was covered in taupe wallpaper with deep green rose vines trailing down from the ceiling to the wainscoting. Her footsteps echoed in the empty hall. Her shoes stepped in the invisible footprints of the Ambrose family who had lived here since the cornerstone of the house had been laid.

Minnie felt like a wayward child, nosing around Ambrose Fields Manor as she was, dodging the housekeeper and counting doors. She had passed Nessa once while familiarizing herself with the place, and Nessa's smile had been so knowing that Minnie couldn't help but return it while lifting a finger to her lips to shush the maid.

"How many have ya found?" Nessa whispered, as if the walls had ears and reported directly to Mrs. Pickston.

"Seventy-seven so far," Minnie answered.

"So you've a bit to go then. Twenty-two more doors."

"With an extra added on, if the tale is true," Minnie said playfully.

Nessa's expression shadowed. The maid shivered and said, "Let's hope you don't find it. We don't need a spirit door in this house." She ducked into a room, dustcloth in hand, and Minnie continued on her way.

Really she had better things to do, but at the moment, Minnie couldn't think of what they were, and Papa was still napping. She had checked on him, and his snore reassured her that for the moment, at least one of them was at peace.

The house and its secrets beckoned her, even as it was awash

in sunlight that streamed through the windows in every room. Sparkling and clean, the rooms were impeccable.

She paused as the hallway ended at yet another door. It was logical that this door opened to a set of stairs leading to the attic nursery and children's quarters. Minnie turned the glass knob. It wobbled beneath her grip, and the heavy door groaned as if awakening from a long sleep.

The distinct smell of stale air brushed over her face, and the stairs that rose in front of her were not well lit like the rest of the house. Minnie hesitated, peering up the stairs and imagining a crazed man at the top, hiding just around the corner. Dressed in a wool uniform, wielding a saber, hollow eyes emoting a vengeance that would curl her innards.

Minnie ignored her imagination and its foolish trepidations, chiding herself for being so influenced by rumors and stories. She lifted the hemline of her dress and climbed the stairs.

Again, Minnie begrudgingly congratulated Mrs. Pickston for making sure the unused attic was clean. At the top of the stairs, the attic's slanted ceiling was void of cobwebs or collected dust. A small sitting area made up of two stuffed chairs covered in bloodred velvet and a table between them was as tidy as if someone had tea there. There were doors to rooms on both sides of the landing. All of them were closed, and all of them tempted her with their secrets beyond.

Minnie explored them one by one. Two small bedrooms, what appeared to be a storage room with a bureau, a trunk, and shelves stocked with linens and other items, and a larger room that was barren of any furniture.

It was the fifth door Minnie opened that revealed the nursery, which spanned much of the upper floor from east to west. It had a slanted ceiling as well, windows on the south wall with eight panes in each. On the far end where the roof peaked was a round stained-glass window. The slatted floor was scuffed from

years of children playing on it, and the walls had built-in shelves that included a few long-forgotten toys.

Minnie skirted the two beds that abutted the wall between the south-facing windows and moved to the toy shelves. A cast-iron soldier lay on his back, gripping his rifle that pointed toward the wall, his painted face so worn that the eyes looked gouged from its head. Minnie shuddered and shifted her attention to another toy beside it. This one was a faceless doll made of quilted cloth. When Minnie reached for it, the stuffed doll squished beneath her grasp, making a crunching sound. It was stuffed with straw.

Minnie turned the doll over, but there was nothing on its back except the frayed strings of the apron tied around its waist. She put the doll back on its shelf, laying it facedown. Then, sensing a strange compulsion, Minnie righted the doll into a sitting position. She snatched her hand back from the toy, staring at it. For a brief second, Minnie had felt guilty when she'd disposed of it. That she had hurt the doll's feelings, and along with that, the feelings of a small girl who watched her from the corner of the nursery.

Minnie spun, sweeping the nursery behind her with the wary gaze of someone who was being observed and suddenly knew they were no longer alone.

But no one was there. No little girl stood alone in the corner, staring at Minnie. Yet, strangely, Minnie could envision the child in her mind. As though in the short time she had been here, she'd seen the child before. Dark curls falling over thin shoulders. A drop-waisted dress, black boots, a large bow holding her hair back from her face.

There was no girl. Minnie reassured herself that, regardless of her feeling, the ghostly child did not exist. And in the days she'd been at Ambrose Fields, she had certainly not seen a wraith roaming the halls.

Still . . .

Minnie cleared her throat, and it echoed in the nursery's stillness. She wasn't alone.

She spun in a circle where she stood. The air had changed. Something in the room had shifted. A presence was here. Unseen, but it *was* here.

"I set your doll to rights," Minnie said to the invisible child. "I'm sorry I touched it," she added in case the presence was irritated at her intrusion.

There was no answer.

No vision appeared, and yet Minnie could see the girl in her mind's eye.

Stop it!

Minnie chided herself. She didn't believe in such superstitions. This was a nursery, yes, but there was no child. Still, she hurried to the nursery's door, but not without a final cursory glance toward an empty corner. Her body stopped in its forward trajectory, so suddenly that Minnie reached to steady herself against the wall. There, in the corner where she'd imagined a little girl, the sun beamed a ray as if illuminating it solely for Minnie to see. Unlike in the other rooms, this corner had a floor dulled by a thin veneer of dust. And in the dust, as clear as the windowpanes that reflected the sunshine, was a set of small footprints.