

Maids

By Katherine Nabity

"It's perfect!" Bruce smiled broadly, over-enthusiastically. He was excited about the house, a rambling three-story antebellum monstrosity. His demeanor was pure hyperactive exhaustion since it had taken us three hours to drive from Ferris, our small hometown, to the suburb just outside Atlanta where we were hoping to find a suitable place to live. This had been the third house that day, and Bruce had exclaimed "It's perfect" after the grand tour of each one of them. He kept packing his hands in his pockets and walking, practically bounding, from room to room. It was annoying the hell out of me. "Don't you think it's perfect, honey?"

"I think it's awfully big," I remarked. I tried to keep my voice level, neutral. It would do neither of us any good if I started disliking a house because my husband was annoying me. We were not the only ones involved in living here. I had Ginny to think about as well. Just from what I knew of Bruce, and we had been married nearly nine years at that time, was that Bruce cared about one aspect of the house. It needed to be close to Atlanta. In his eyes, just the fact that he was getting a new job, a better paying,

more prestigious job, filled the ledger in his "taking care of his family" credit/debit book. Other small details were merely details.

"Just think about it, Jess. Living in a house this old. All the history involved. I bet you could go to the local library and look up its entire history." I raised my eyebrows. I didn't consider it a selling point. From the look that passed like a shadow over our realtor, Steve Whitman's face, neither did he.

"I don't think such an old house would be good for Ginny's allergies." I walk over to one of the large windows in the kitchen where we had ended the tour and expected to prove my point by running my finger along the sill and coming back with a finger full of dust, cobwebs and maybe a bit of mold that was found in nearly in any house. My finger came up clean. I shrugged and turned to Mr. Whitman. "Do you have any mold or mildew problems?"

At very least, I expected Mr. Whitman to squirm just a little. Every house had a mildew problem to some extent since the humidity rarely reached below seventy percent. The only buildings I had ever encountered that had none were shiny new office buildings that were always air-conditioned. And even then you eventually had a problem with stale air. But Mr. Whitman gave me a smile broader than Bruce did.

"No, ma'am. I must say that it's the darndest thing but there aren't any damp problems. I mean, just smell," he inhaled deeply to demonstrate. "I honestly have never smelt clearer air in an old house."

I didn't give him or Bruce the satisfaction of taking a deep breath within their sight, but before we left I did and I had to admit, the air didn't have that deserted old house smell. It didn't have that covered up deserted old house smell either. The other

two houses we had visited earlier reeked not of mold and damp, but of Lysol and bleach. In the end, it was the fact that the house on Oak Wheel Drive had no sign of anything that might cause Ginny to have an allergy attack that made me agree to live there. That should have been my first clue to what was...special about the house.

"Mom! Mom! Have you seen the size of my bedroom?" Ginny came running down the stairs with Mr. Ears, her stuffed rabbit, in tow.

"Yes honey, I have." Ginny had enthusiastically picked the large room on the third floor to be her bedroom at her dad's urging. She disappeared back up stairs at a full-tilt sprint. "Don't run in the house," I called after her. I wasn't totally comfortable with the idea of my seven-year-old sleeping on an entirely different floor than me, but I had to give Bruce a little credit for the effort. Ginny felt it was a special privilege to have that room. And if that was going to make her smile and be a little happier with the move, it was all right with me.

"I can't believe we ran out of gas trying to get here," I muttered rehashing the day's events out loud. "And then that moving company loses a huge box marked china." I don't think Bruce heard me. He didn't say anything along the lines of "It'll turn up" like I would expect him to say. "I'm never going to be able to clean this place myself," I sniffed as I started unpacking bed linens for the night. Bruce must have passed close enough to hear my lament as he rushed from box to box to find some briefs he was going to need for work tomorrow.

"I told you, Jess, I'll be making enough to afford a maid to come in and help out; two or three of them if you so desire." Bruce didn't do that reassuring tone very well. It

came out more condescending. I tried to let it go. "This looks like a box of Ginny's things," I said to Bruce. "I'm going to take it up to her."

"Okay, hun." Bruce's voice was muffled because half of him was inside a box. It almost sounded like he was down a mineshaft or something. I just shook my head and started up the stairs.

I got a rather nasty surprise when I got up to Ginny's third floor room. The room was still furnished with over-sized furniture painted in shades of olive green. I still wince every time I look at it, just as I did when the illustrious Mr. Whitman showed us the house the first time. Nasty looking stuff, all chipped up and dented besides. Ginny had firmly planted herself and Mr. Ears in an oversized chair of matching Nogahyde.

"Ginny, get up off that chair. It's probably been collecting dust in its cushions since the mid-fifties."

"Aw mom, I like it. It's comfy." She bounced a little in her seat, the rabbit's ears flopped up and down with each jump.

"Yes, I know," I said with a sigh, "but it might not even be ours. Mr. Whitman told us it wouldn't be here when we moved in." I set down the box of things and got an unwilling Ginny ready for bed. After searching all the boxes upstairs for the Snoopy nightlight, I came back down stairs to find Bruce still rifling through boxes.

"Bruce, that hideous furniture is still here."

"Huh? Oh, Whitman said it was going to be removed."

"Yeah, that's what he said, but it's still there. Have you seen Ginny's Snoopy light?"

He didn't answer.

"Bruce?" I went over to where he was half sitting on one set of boxes and looking through another and tapped him on the shoulder. "Have you seen Ginny's night light?"

Bruce shot me a rather cross look and silently went to a duffel bag on the table and retrieved Snoopy sleeping on top of his dog house. "I'm sure whoever Mr. Whitman hired to remove that furniture hasn't gotten to it yet. If they don't come and get it by Friday I'll give them a call." His voice was low and flat. He turned back to his briefs. "Is that okay?"

"Yes." I blinked at his back. "I think I'll get to bed myself. I'm tired. Are you coming?" Bruce murmured something noncommittal. Half way up the stair I peered back down stairs, Bruce was hard to see among the mess of boxes and furniture even with the overhead light on. I certainly had my work cut out for me tomorrow.

In the late morning light, the boxes didn't look half as bad as they had the night before. I couldn't believe that Bruce had cleaned up before he left for work. It wasn't like him and on a morning like today when he didn't know how long the commute would take him... I shrugged it off. Maybe he realized what a task it would be. Unlikely, but maybe...

"Mom, what are we going to have for breakfast?"

I had slept late, nearly until noon. It hadn't been by design, but I figured if my body needed to sleep until noon, who was I to argue?

"I think we're going to go to McDonald's because your mom doesn't know where her kitchen stuff is." I smiled at Ginny. She had already dressed herself and had been

through every crevice of the house by the time I had pulled myself together in a likewise fashion. She was a good girl.

"There's a box in the kitchen," Ginny offered helpfully. She took off to the kitchen while I was still trying to remember just which way the kitchen was.

"Just because it's in the kitchen doesn't mean—"

"Yeah, but look Mom. It even says 'Kitchen' on it," she was pointing to magic marker writing on the side of an old apple box. It was spidery, elegant cursive writing. Definitely not my handwriting and it didn't look like Bruce's either. Ginny frowned when I didn't say anything immediately. "Isn't that what this spells?"

"Yep, it says kitchen. Funny, I don't remember labeling any boxes besides the one with your great-grandma's china in it."

"That one's over here." Ginny dashed around the 'L' shaped counter and pointed to another box. And there it was. A large box with a bit of packing sticking up through the top seam, marked 'CHINA' in my own handwriting. We had looked for it about three times the day before and hadn't found it. We were sure it had fallen off the moving truck or been stolen or simply lost by the movers but now there it was. "I could have sworn I had looked behind that counter. Maybe your dad found it this morning and put it here."

Ginny shrugged as though she didn't quite believe it. I had to agree, but there really wasn't any other explanation. "Well, we still have to go to McDonald's," I said. "We haven't got any food here yet."

Ginny peeked inside the refrigerator just to be sure her dottering old mother was correct. For half a second, I was sure she was going to say the fridge was full and I had better get to cooking. I think I might have fainted at the possibility that Bruce had gone

shopping before work as well. It was surprising enough that the refrigerator was already plugged in and cooled down.

"Aw Mom, I like your cooking better."

I smiled. "I know. That's why after we go to McDonald's, we're going to the grocery store."

Ginny made a noise of disapproval at that suggestion. She went off to get Mr. Ears, grumbling that he was hungry too.

I looked at the two boxes in the kitchen where they needed to be and shrugged again. I hoped the rest of the day would go as well.

Bruce shocked me that night by bringing Chinese take-out home with him. He was in a much better mood than I had seen him in weeks so I didn't believe him when he swore that he hadn't moved anything around and certainly didn't go around marking boxes in girly handwriting. I laughed and teased him about it for weeks despite his protests.

I didn't get around to putting away the china until a day or so later. The house had a beautiful sideboard built in to the dining room wall. I had a full set minus two teacups of fine, delicate bone china inherited from my grandmother. I set each pansy-painted teacup in front of its corresponding silver-rimmed dish, a creamer and sugar bowl in front of the extra dishes. On the second shelf, I set the crystal given to me by Bruce's parents for our wedding. It was amazingly expensive stuff and frankly made my china look like something that could have been used by Ginny and Mr. Ears for an imaginary tea parties. But it looked pretty on the table whenever we had Mr. and Mrs. Williams over for dinner.

As I was putting the last crystal glass down, I saw movement behind me reflected in it. I could have sworn someone in a bright flowered shirt walked behind me.

"Ginny?" I turned to find the dining room empty except for the chairs and table that had been pushed just inside the room and a few boxes scattered about. "Ginny? Are you hiding in the boxes?" I didn't get an answer.

"Ginny?" This time I called loudly from the bottom of the stairs. Last I knew, she had been upstairs unpacking a Hefty bag full of stuffed animals. "Ginny?" I called again. I had to admit I was a bit freaked out and it was good to hear my own voice.

"Yeah, Mom?" Ginny came half way down the last set of stairs and stopped. Her eyes were focused behind me on the dining room I had just come out of. I turned to see what she was looking at, but again there was nothing there. "What did you want, Mom?"

"Nothing, kiddo." I paused. "Were you just downstairs?"

"Nope. I was unpacking everybody. " She wore a concerned expression.

"Well," I said with a smile that was meant to be reassuring and not nervous, "you'd better find everyone new places to sleep, huh?"

"Yeah." She started back up the stairs but stopped before she reached the landing. "Hey, Mom? Can we keep that green chair? Ellie and Bugs likes it a lot."

"Like," I corrected absently. The thought of the olive drab furniture made me grimace even if it was inhabited by a furry elephant and one of Mr. Ears's cousins. It still hadn't been removed. "I don't think so, Ginny. That furniture might actually belong to someone else."

"Can we get a bean bag chair then? Ellie and Bugs would really like one of those."

I had to smile. Ginny had been after us to get her a bean bag since she first saw her teacher sit on one in preschool. "That might just be do-able."

Ginny continued up the stairs smiling once again. I returned to the dining room but not before tracking down a radio and turning the volume way up.

After the little incident with the glasses, I often got a creepy feeling when I was alone in any room of the house. You know the type of feeling I'm talking about? It's a sort of tension, like the air has suddenly solidified into something brittle. When you move, you make just a little too much noise, something whispers through the air just behind you. And when you try to find the sound, nothing is there. I figured at first that I was nervous about being in a big house all alone. But then there was Debbie.

Debbie was the girl Bruce and I hired to clean the house. I had originally figured that we would need a maid right away. I can remember thinking especially during the first week after we moved in that there was no way that I would ever be able to finish cleaning one part of the house before the some other part was too dirty to inhabit. Our little shack in Ferris had been bad enough. I had liked to clean twice a week. Once on Tuesday which was my day off from my job at the library and once on Saturday after I got home. Usually on Saturdays I would come home to grilled hamburgers on the table, the dishes done, and the house maybe a little picked up all courtesy Bruce. I had been counting on some of the same when we moved, but Bruce spent most of his Saturdays at the firm and his Sundays too tired out to hardly make it out of bed to go to church. But honestly, the house never seemed to get that messy. I mean things would get left laying around, but never in the way. The dishes might go undone for a few days, but the sink

never started smelling terrible. The showers never got that soapy film caused by the wrong brand of soap, and the furniture never got dusty even though I never used Pledge.

I was at the point where I figured I could handle the house on my own when Bruce surprised me with news. He had hired a young woman who was part of a maid service that came highly recommended from some of his co-workers.

Debbie usually left just as I came home after picking Ginny up from school. She was a nice looking girl, tall and willowy with a pleasant face. She was always dressed neatly in the service's maroon polo shirt and navy slacks. She looked to be about seventeen and through passing comments I found she had just graduated high school and was making money to go to college eventually. If her boyfriend didn't propose marriage first. I advised her to go to college anyway.

One day though, she took me aside as she was getting ready to leave.

"Ma'am?" She looked a little embarrassed. "I don't want you to think I'm being too forward." I frowned and she went on before she noticed. "At the service, we come across this kind of thing all the time. You're paying me to do a job so you really should let me do it."

"I'm not sure I know what you're talking about," I said. My frown had turned to a puzzled smile.

"Well, it's just..." Debbie looked sheepish. She had been hoping I would have picked up on her very subtle hints, I realized. They were so subtle, they were nonexistent to me. "I was hired to clean house for you. You don't need to clean it before I do. There's nothing to be ashamed of..."

I had to laugh. This girl was being absurd.

"Really," I began, "I don't do anything..."

"Oh, ma'am. You don't need to deny it. You don't have to even pick up after yourselves, much less dust everything!"

"But I don't..."

My insistence must have made her somewhat bold because she turned away from me with a little laugh and a dismissive hand gesture. "I need to be going, ma'am. My ride's here."

I watched, still puzzled, as she got into a black sports car driven by a nice looking young man. I still didn't quite know what she was talking about, but didn't give it much more thought.

* * * * *

Debbie left abruptly about a month after she had started. I came home to find her sitting underneath the mailbox on the corner of the parking strip in front of our house. She had her purse and jacket, obviously waiting for her boyfriend to pick her up. It wasn't until I got closer that I noticed her hair was messed up like she had gotten in a tussle with someone and her eyes were red. After I parked the car, I sprinted back down the driveway to see what was the matter. Ginny tagged along instead of going into the house like I told her to.

Debbie stood up as I came over to her. The ground was still damp from a late morning rain and left a wet mark on her back end and a few blades of grass stuck to her. She didn't bother brushing them off. I had the distinct impression that she had been sitting under that mailbox for a good long while.

"I'm not going back in there," she said before I could ask anything. She pointed an accusing finger towards the house. There was a large black stain on her untucked shirt, and I could see some black specks in her hair as well as though something had been splashed at her.

"What happened?" I finally asked.

"I'm not going back," she repeated. Her voice was high, nearly hysterical.

"I know, I know," I reassured her. "But why not?"

"I'm sorry about the black stain in Ginny's room—I hope it didn't get on Mr. Ears, Ginny—but it really wasn't my fault." The little black sports car drove up just then and Debbie continued talking without a pause as she got in the car. "And I don't care if you take the cost of getting it cleaned out of my wages. I'm not going back in there." She was nearly on the verge of tears at this point.

"What's wrong, hun?" I heard the nice looking boy ask.

"Nothing," Debbie sniffled. "Please, let's just go."

The nice looking boy shot me a venomous look before peeling away from the curb.

"It's not my fault," I said to the retreating car.

"*Mom!*" I hadn't realized Ginny had been tugging on my hand ever since Debbie had mentioned Mr. Ears. She was duly concerned something terrible had happened to her rabbit and I was curious, but not overly concerned. Of course a stain of Mr. Ears would be the worst of it. The carpet in Ginny's room was just about as bad as the God-awful olive drab furniture. The furniture still hadn't been taken away. Bruce had called Mr. Whitman several times and he would assure Bruce that someone would be out to get the

furniture by the end of the next week. And every time Bruce would call again, Whitman would have some new excuse for the furniture movers and give Bruce the same assurance. Personally, I had given up on getting rid of the eyesores. Ginny and Mr. Ears were happy with the unsightly furniture so I decided to let a sleeping dog lie. I think for Bruce the weekly call to Mr. Whitman had become as much a part of life at Oak Wheel Drive as the over stuffed green chair that Ginny's stuffed animals sat on.

There was no stain on the carpet of Ginny's room, no black spots on Mr. Ears, or anywhere else in the house. In fact everything was in order. Perfectly in order like Debbie had worked the entire day even though I had the feeling that she hadn't.

Bruce actually came home at about five o'clock that day while Ginny and I were still trying to puzzle put what had gone on with Debbie. He came upstairs to find the both of us gathered in Ginny's room tentatively shifting pieces of furniture looking for a stain that might have been covered up. The idea had come from Ginny's child mind. I could remember at least one instance from her earlier child hood when she had used the same tactic to cover a Kool-Aid stain. I went along with it because I could think of no better.

"What are you two doing?" Bruce stood in the doorway with his hands on his hips. "Don't tell me you love this furniture so much you decided to put everything back after I asked that girl to clear everything out of it."

"No—"

"Debbie spilt something," Ginny said in her awed tattletale voice. "Mom and I are looking for the stain."

"She left in a hurry today Bruce, saying that she'd pay for cleaning up the stain," I said trying to be helpful and fill in more of the story. Bruce was about to lose all patience, I could tell.

"Doesn't Ginny keep her paints in the top drawer of the thing?" Bruce pointed to the oversized bureau. "Maybe she just spilt something from there."

Ginny opened the drawer and let out a whoop of discovery. "Yep!" she said producing an empty jar of black finger paint. "It's all gone," she said. She was as solemn as a judge passing sentence.

"Are you sure you didn't put that back empty yourself?" I asked.

"Nope. This is the new pack Daddy bought me on Sunday." She brought out jars of red, blue and yellow that were like new.

"Yeah, but where's the stain?" I figured I had trumped my sleuth daughter. She shrugged uncertainly at the question.

"Well," Bruce pronounced, "I think it's about time we got rid of this junk." He gave the dresser a good couple of raps. We didn't talk again of the mysterious, missing stain that day or any other day.

We both took that Saturday off from work and spent a good part of the day clearing out all the stuff Ginny had put into various drawers and on various shelves. By the time we had lugged the furniture down to the main hallway, it was late. Too late to call someone to take it all to the dump. Bruce said he had contacted Whitman, who okayed trashing it. I wasn't totally convinced this conversation took place and made the mistake of voicing as much. On top of that, Ginny pitched quite a fit. She had grown attached to the horrid furniture and insisted neither she nor Mr. Ears would be happy

without it. She cried more heart broken over the scuffed up gross-green dresser than she had about leaving the house and all her friends in Ferris. Needless to say by the time we turned in for the night no one was in particularly good humor.

It took me a long while to get to sleep that night. Bruce laid with his back to me. I swear I could just feel cold radiating from him. Half because I had suggested that maybe we were acting against our realtor, half because he had smashed his finger while carrying the bureau and somehow that was my fault. I tried not to move around too much hoping he'd drop off to sleep before me so I could relax. I'm not sure when I finally fell asleep, but I know exactly when I woke up.

WHAM!

I don't think the first or the second one woke me up. They were incorporated into a dream about the screen door of the house in Ferris slamming shut repeatedly.

WHAM!

I startled awake. There was no sound for a moment and I thought maybe the dream had wakened me.

WHAM! WHAM! WHAM! WHAM!

No, that was definitely a noise. A loud noise. I glanced at the clock and it informed me that it was almost a quarter past two in the morning. "What the hell--?" I wondered out loud.

WHAM! WHAM! WHAM!

"Bruce!" I shouted. Bruce was fast asleep back still towards me like he hadn't moved all night. "Bruce!" I shook his shoulder and he wouldn't stir at all. I even punched him on the shoulder blade hard enough to leave a bruise the next day and he still

didn't wake up. For a moment there was empty silence again before the noise started again.

WHAM! WHAM! WHAM!

For a moment I was paralyzed with fear. I know that sounds corny and cliché, but it actually happens. I realized the sound was moving up the stairway and that called to mind a book I had once read in high school where an unseen ghost banged on walls and doors up and down a hallway. The teacher had tried to tell us that the novel was a psychological allegory or something. All I knew was that it scared the hell out of me!

WHAM! WHAM! WHAM! WHAM!

Then I heard another sound that forced me to move. "Mommy?"

It was Ginny's voice, small and full of sleep. "Bruce?" I said again. But there was still no response. "Fine." I grumbled suddenly angry. Men were the ones who were supposed to investigate the noises! And what HAD woke me up at this time of night?

I stepped into the hall near the stairs just in time to see the oversized, olive-drab chest of drawers move up the next half flight of stairs—WHAM! WHAM! WHAM!—totally unaided. For a good ten seconds all I could do was stand there and blink. The chest of drawers took up nearly the entire width of the stairway. It had been quite difficult to move and caused a good long argument between Bruce and I as we had wrestled the thing down the stairs. Now it floated with near grace slightly higher than one step up and landed with a WHAM! that made me jump. At the landing it slid with a slight scrapping sound until it reached the next step. Then it started its noisy ascent again. I thought about following it but decided I should probably wait until it was all the

way up the stairs. I didn't need a chest of drawers dropped on me to finish off an already delightful night.

When the sounds had finally stopped and I was sure that the chest of drawers had reached its destination, I started up the stairs.

"Maaa-om! What's going on?" The fright in Ginny's voice quickened my pace. A new surge of anger towards Bruce crept up the back of my throat along with the taste of bile. Why had I ever agreed to let Ginny sleep anywhere but the room right next door to ours? Because if I would have reneged on a promise he had made Ginny, I would have been the bad guy. That's why.

I stopped short in the hall a few feet from Ginny's door. There was a bright, yet pallid glow coming from the open door. Paralysis returned in an annoying fashion. What was in there besides my daughter? What unspeakable, gruesome, God-forsaken...

"Mom?" I took a deep breath. I had to. It was now or never. Damn Bruce anyway.

The sight in Ginny's room was incorrigible. My daughter was sitting up in bed, the covers pulled up to her chin, eyes as big as pansy-painted tea cups. The room was filled with a light so oddly intense that it made all the colors overly vivid like one of those black light posters. All the furniture Bruce and I had worked so hard to move to the first floor were back in Ginny's room, their olive and avocado greens blazing. But what particularly caught my attention were the two maids. One was a short, steel-gray haired woman with small wire rimmed glasses. She wore a shirt similar to the one Debbie always wore to work only navy in color instead of maroon. She stood with her hands on her hips and her head cocked to one side watching the other maid. The other was even

shorter than the gray haired one and nearly as round as short. She had black hair with the blue-purple cast of an old woman who gets her hair dyed. Her features were somewhat Hispanic or South American. She wore a loud flower print uniform and carried a bright orange feather duster. She was dusting while replacing Ginny's stuffed animals to their rightful places. She seemed to be ignoring the gray haired one.

"Rosa? I thought I told you to stop using that thing. It leaves more feathers than it's worth." The gray headed one said in a thick German accent. To prove her point, she followed the dark-haired one around picking at imaginary feathers. Rosa shrugged and muttered something in what sounded like Spanish.

"And bringing all this furniture back up here! You could have woke the dead with all that noise."

Rosa chuckled. "Ek, the little girl wanted it back." She bustled around the room, not doing much good. "And besides, Doris, it *belongs* here."

"Still you could have waited for me to help you." Doris straightened Mr. Ears on the over-sized chair.

"Mom!" Ginny finally caught sight of me in the doorway. I had been standing there not quite sure what to do. Ginny's exclamation drew the attention of the two maids as well.

"Ah!" Rosa was shocked to be seen and even more shocked when Doris grabbed the feather duster from her hand and whapped her over the head with it. Orange feathers scattered everywhere.

"I told you so!" Doris snapped.

"Look what you've done to my duster!" Both figures faded out slightly.

"I don't care about the duster. What about the woman?" Doris pointed a finger in my direction, but they were rather translucent by that point.

"What about the woman?" I could barely make out Rosa snatching her duster back from Doris. Maybe they weren't fading as much as the light was becoming brighter. With the abruptness of a bolt of lightning, the light flashed away. I was left standing in the dark doorway of Ginny's room. Through the blackness I could make out the shapes of all the furniture in the same places we had found them when moving in. Ginny was down under her covers.

"Ginny?" I whispered. Quietly, I crept into the room. I realized I had lacked the courage before. "Ginny?"

She was sound asleep. She would probably remember the odd couple maids as a dream, good or bad—I don't know. If she even remembered anything at all. I would have been as likely to chalk it all up to some unconscious fantasy, but the furniture I had sore muscles from moving the day before was in the same spots as before.

I tried to wake Bruce, but all I got out of him was a muffled grunt. I imagine he said he wanted to be left alone because he was sleeping, but it could have been numerous things. I decided not to attempt to wake him fully. I hardly got back to sleep that night. It was nearly dawn when the excitement of the night's events finally wore off. I was glad it was Sunday and didn't have to work.

"What the hell?" I opened my eyes groggily. Certainly not more than four hours had passed since I had fallen asleep. Bruce wasn't in the room but I knew his question was directed at me. That's what woke me this time.

"Jess, what the hell is this?"

I pulled on my bathrobe, the fluffy white one I bought at Walmart, not the sexy, slinky one he had bought for our anniversary, and trudged up to the third floor.

"Bruce," I said from the doorway of Ginny's room, "kindly don't use that kind of language in front of our daughter." He wheeled around and gave me a hard stare.

"Did you do this?" He squeaked with the effort to keep calm. Ginny was in bed clutching Mr. Ears. She didn't look as frightened as she had the night before, but she was definitely distressed.

"Of course I did, Bruce." I turned back into the hallway. I was not going to argue in front of my daughter. "The moment you fell asleep, I lugged every last piece back upstairs." Bruce was following me, but I could hear Ginny weakly say, "No, you didn't, Mommy." I hoped she would keep out of what would ensue though the butterflies in my stomach told me that I wasn't sure how I was going to handle the situation anyway. Maybe it would be just as well to laugh it off as a little girl's story.

It wasn't until we were in our bedroom that either of us spoke. "Before you even start," I stopped the words in Bruce's mouth, "I don't have any explanation for what went on last night."

"What did go on, Jess? Huh? I'd really like to know who moved the furniture back into Ginny's room."

"I don't know!" I couldn't tell him the truth. He'd have me locked up! Certainly he didn't believe that I—"Do you think *I* moved all that furniture back up to her room while you were asleep? Furniture that took both of us all of yesterday to move?"

"I don't know what to think, Jess."

"Do you want to know what happened?" Anger was welling up in my stomach, creeping up on my heart. "I woke up to some terrifying noise. I didn't know what it was. And you know what?" It was in my throat now and it would soon spill from my mouth. "*You* were asleep. It could have been a serial rapist going up to molest our daughter for all *you* knew. *You* don't know what to think? Well, I certainly don't because *I* watched the damned chest of drawers walk up the stairs! Then I saw two little maids—for all I know *you* hired them—dust the furniture and disappear." My throat became hoarse and I was out of breath but my anger was purged.

Bruce stood staring at me for what was only a minute, a minute and a half, but seemed like hours. I had never realized his dark eyes could look so foreign, and his hair was still flattened and standing up from sleep. "I hope you remembered that Mr. and Mrs. Davidson are coming for dinner tonight" was all he said to me.

Bruce didn't seem to believe my story and I had no other explanation.

That's why Mistress Ellen caught me totally by surprise.

I came home from work one afternoon, Ginny in tow from preschool, to find Bruce already home. When Ginny and I walked in the house, Bruce was in the living room with a very flamboyantly dressed black woman. The woman reminded me of one of the teachers at Ginny's old school during African-American heritage week. Miss Wilkes had traded in her usually conservative dress slacks and blouse for breezy dresses of orange and gold and green. Oddly the colors went well together. This woman was dressed similarly with her head wrapped in a material of a totally differing pattern from

her dress. Unlike Miss Wilkes though, she wore enough jewelry to choke a horse and high platform sandals. When she walked it sounded like small brass wind chimes.

"You must be the lady of the house," she said to me reaching out both hands to welcome me into my own living room. I had expected her to have an accent. Maybe like a fortune telling gypsy, maybe like a Jamaican refugee. Surprisingly her voice lacked any sort of accent making it sound nearly as odd. It was deep and rich and friendly.

"Yes," I said. "And this is our daughter, Ginny." Ginny was hiding behind my legs and peeked around with a shy smile. "You are?"

"This is Mistress Ellen," Bruce said. He had been standing with a tight smile on his face. He looked happy to have some reason to move, to say something. "She's here to take care of our problem."

I frowned. I had no idea what Bruce was talking about.

"You know, honey," Bruce glanced at Ginny and back to me.

"What Mr. Williams is trying to say is that I am here, whether he believes or not, to get rid of the ghosts in this house," Mistress Ellen said with the graciousness one would use when apologizing for a child falling asleep in church. Ginny shifted against my legs. I couldn't blame her.

I didn't look over at Bruce. "Well, I've seen..."

"I know, child," Mistress Ellen interrupted. "I felt two spirits here the moment I walked in. Two house cleaners, yes?" She waited for my head nod before she went on. "Yes. I think they were killed when one of them accidentally mixed some cleaning chemicals together and got a bad reaction, yes?" This time she looked over at Bruce.

"I called Mr. Whitman today," Bruce said addressing me rather than Mistress Ellen, "and threatened to file a suit for selling us this house without telling us about the alleged haunting. There actually a legal clause that requires..." Bruce had gotten better recently about slipping into legalese when at home. "Anyway, she's right. Two maids were asphyxiated when apparently one mixed an ammonia cleaner with Clorox."

"Yes," Mistress Ellen said with smile that contrasted a small white ribbon of teeth with her dark skin. "Unfortunately, it will be much more difficult to put these spirits to rest." I must have looked a bit confused because she went on with a wider smile that was meant for me. "Usually, my aim is to lead the spirit on to a better place by putting right what the spirit felt was wrong. With these, I don't know who was at fault for their deaths. I've been trying to communicate with them all afternoon."

A shiver went down my spine. It hit me at that moment that the house had "spirits." The term seemed so much stronger than "ghosts." Spirits were much more serious, like a lingering cold that was suddenly diagnosed as pneumonia. More than that, the black woman standing in the middle of my living room was suddenly as alien as "spirits." She had been trying to communicate with them! What was she that she could do this?

"I'm afraid all I will be able to do is drive the spirits out of the house not show them the way to the next plane," she was saying now. I felt slightly faint, Mistress Ellen's voice sounded like it was coming from the end of a long tunnel and I was dreadfully cold though the day was warm. The only thing I was really aware of was Ginny still clinging to my leg. "Whatever..." I muttered taking my daughter's hand. I led her out of the room. She didn't need to be a witness this. I wasn't sure I *needed* to witness it. Behind

me I could hear Bruce, "I don't care what you do as long as they're gone, but I assume your fee..."

Ginny was strangely quiet on her way up to her room. "You okay, kiddo?" I asked, wishing someone would ask me the same.

She had the most serious face I had ever seen on my child. I don't know what had struck her as so terrible, but it nearly broke my heart to see the look on her face. I wanted to apologize to her for it, but I figure that would just worry her more. I forced a smile in hopes of making her feel better.

"I'm alright, Mom." She took a seat on her bed, not the green chair with Mr. Ears. I had the feeling she would sit there until Mistress Ellen was gone.

"I'll be right back then, okay?"

She nodded.

Back down stairs, Mistress Ellen had opened the front door and she placed candles in each room at the farthest edges of the rooms. When I came into the front room, she was digging through a large wicker basket. She righted herself when she had found what she had been looking for: two mahogany rattles in the shape of anguished saints.

"Are you all right, child?" she asked. "Your eyes had a look of sickness around them." Even coming from her, the partial cause of my sick eyes, it was comforting. I nodded imitating my daughter's braveness. "Good. I will need the both of you to stand in the room you each consider the heart of this house. They don't need to be the same room."

I expected Bruce and I to go to opposite ends of the house but we both left the living room for the dining room. Mistress Ellen followed us in.

"Okay. You will have to be quiet," she threw a pointed glance at Bruce, "and stay right here." We silently nodded and stood back near the china cabinet. Mistress Ellen stood facing the candle with her eyes closed. I felt odd standing there. I couldn't just watch her intently as Bruce was doing. It made me feel guilty. So instead of staring at Mistress Ellen in her bright costume, I focused on the carpet, on a brightly polished leg of one of the chairs. I couldn't remember when the table had been polished last. It had to have been before Debbie's departure. I hadn't done it since. But the table was waxed to a nearly mirrored shine with not a dust particle on it.

My eyes briefly rested on Mistress Ellen again. She was swaying slightly now. For a second I thought it was merely my imagination, but as I forced myself to continue watching, she swayed more and more in a slow circle. And as she swayed in larger faster circles she began humming. It was a strange, low melody I had never heard the likes of before. With a sharp shake of the rattles, the candle sitting on the floor lit by itself. I was so dumbfounded by the little action that I didn't see Mistress Ellen run from the room, now shooting her melody at the top of her lungs in the clumsy way a child sings a song they don't know.

"Did you see the candle?" I whispered to Bruce.

"No," he hissed back. His eyes had been on the retreating Mistress Ellen. "Now be quiet."

I was about to say some other harsh not-so-quiet words to Bruce but Mistress Ellen came back into the room after making a quick, noisy round through the main floor of the house. She was still bellowing and stopped only after she had waved her rattles in front of me and Bruce. The action gave me the vague and disturbing impression of being

a personal purification ritual. As Mistress Ellen stopped her singing, a stiff breeze blew through the room and blew the candles out.

"It is done," she said simply and went back to the living room to pack up her rattles. Neither Bruce nor I moved. "You can keep the candles," we heard her say. "And I will wait thirty days before I send you a bill in case you need me to come again." Bruce moved at that and I followed not wanting to be left alone.

"Where did you find her?" Mistress Ellen had refused Bruce's offer of a ride home—I was relieved, I still didn't particularly want to be alone even if my house was emptied of "spirits"—and left on foot for the bus stop.

"Mr. Whitman sent her when I suggested he do something about the house. What a con! I'll be forwarding that bill straight to him. There is no way in hell I'm going to pay for such mumbo-jumbo."

I was uneasy about the whole thing, but as the week wore on, the house remained quiet. Bruce and I moved the green furniture back downstairs piece by piece and it remained there. Ginny was satisfied with a beanbag chair and a new toy box to replace it. But other things started to happen, slowly, hardly noticeable at first. A bit of mildew appeared. Nothing much just a little streak. I took some bleach to it and thought I had gotten rid of it. It reappeared two days later although nothing was against the wall and the room was dry. I tried to keep on top of it for Ginny's sake, but every time I washed it the streak came back worse than before.

Ginny's allergies started acting up and by that time, the whole house seemed to have started decaying. Mold appeared in corners, pipes let out clouds of noxious fumes,

cracks zigzagged the ceiling where there were none before. And in two weeks time there was no way I could keep up with the cleaning. I'd dust in the morning before I left for the library to come home at night to dust that looked like snow on everything including what was inside the china cabinet.

Between my going through a can of Pledge and a vacuum bag a week and Ginny's terrible sneezing, Bruce was the last to really notice any of the changes in the house.

"This place is a mess," he declared one day when he came home from work. The moment he made the comment I was in the second floor bathroom in the tub on my hands and knees sweating over an odd brown stain had appeared over night.

"Well, why don't you hire another maid?" I spat out.

"Why don't you quit your job at the library?"

I frowned. Bruce occasionally brought up my working. He didn't think it was necessary with the money he was making, but I had never been a full-time housewife and never intended to be. "Just look at this place, Jess," he continued, "it's a mess. You've really let this place go too long. If you had been working at it all along..."

"What are you talking about, Bruce?"

"I'm saying I think you sat on your haunches," I had always, always hated that expression, "and let the house get out of hand. You've been working at the library when you should have been cleaning house."

"Bruce," I said getting up from the bathtub, I almost slipped and he offered me no help, "I told you when we first got this house that there would be no way I was going to be able to clean the whole damned thing. And I am not giving up my job to—"

"Well, I hired a maid, Jess, and you let her go."

"I did not!"

Ginny sneezed at the bathroom door and alerted both Bruce and I to her presence. She had an empty Kleenex box in one hand and Mr. Ears under her arm. Her eyes were puffy and wet. I thought maybe she had been crying then remembered her allergies when she began sneezing violently. I hated fighting in front of her. I had had enough of that during my childhood. "I need some more Kleenex," she said in an uncertain, small voice. Ever since Mistress Ellen's visit, Ginny has taken on a nerve-wracking seriousness. She hardly ever smiled, she had been too busy sneezing and wiping her nose and eyes for that.

"This house was just fine until you brought Mistress Ellen in here." I knew the comment would take Bruce by surprise. I usually avoided making statements that would take Bruce by surprise. He would roll his eyes when I did and mutter something about women and ex-girlfriends. But this thought had taken me by surprise too, pieces of a puzzle jarred into a whole by the appearance of my pitiful daughter.

The eye roll came and went, but it didn't feel like a knife blade stabbing me in the chest as it usually did. Bruce said something and walked out of the bathroom. I didn't hear him because Ginny had started sneezing again and couldn't stop.

I couldn't believe the thoughts that ran around my head that night.

Ginny had reached a peak so terrible that when she wasn't sneezing, she was hyperventilating. The only thing I could think of to do was take her to her grandma's. Of course this led to a retelling of what had gone on to my mother who gave me such a withering look, you'd have thought I blew mold spores up Ginny's nose. At home, Bruce had made himself a frozen pizza. He didn't complain about it, but his silence spoke cold

volumes. I stood there watching him dig around in one of the kitchen drawers for a pizza cutter and then stab at the pizza with entirely too much aggression.

"I want the maids back." I figured, why waste time with a preamble?

"You fired her."

"No, not Debbie. The *maids*."

"What are you talking about?"

"The..." I couldn't quite make my mouth form the word. The whole concept was so silly, so illogical. I didn't even want to own up to such a stupid idea. But it had formed out of Ginny's sneezing. She hadn't sneezed at all in this house until after Mistress Ellen had been here... "The maids had been keeping the house clean. Not Debbie." How could I make him understand without *telling* him? "The ghosts, Bruce. The spirits," the word came hard to say, "they were..."

"Oh, *come on!* I can't believe this." I almost started apologizing for my theory as I had done so many times before with Bruce. I had done it when we were buying this house and I had suggested borrowing my cousin's van. I stopped myself and was quiet until he stopped his rant.

"It's the only thing that makes sense."

"You keep saying that Jess, but I don't think you realize that there is no such thing as ghosts."

"I want the maids back," I said simply. I never watched Bruce blow up until that moment. I feared for his heart. His face turned three shades of red before actually deciding on a maroon with a tinge of purple. His eyes bugged and the knuckles of the

hand still clutching the pizza cutter turned white. That can not be good for your blood pressure. I braced myself for a tempest, but it never hit.

"I'm leaving." The words were so quiet I wasn't sure I heard them. He set down the pizza cutter and grabbed his keys from the hook by the kitchen door. I heard the Pontiac pull away a minute later.

A wave of panic hit me and I rode it like I had been surfing all my life. Where had Bruce gone? When would he be back? Would he be back? In the back of my mind was the thought that maybe he wouldn't be back, that I had suddenly become something my mother would give me more than a hard look for. I might have, in an instant, become a single mom. It was a frightening possibility.

The next morning, I looked up Mistress Ellen in the phone book. I was tired and haggard and with an upset stomach. The night had been restless, a swirl of thoughts concerning trading in my husband for two dead maids. I was sincerely questioning my sanity by the time Bruce's alarm went off. I hadn't even thought of shutting it off the night before. My fingers seemed to have a will of their own when they dialed Mistress Ellen's number. *I'm seriously going through with this?* I thought to myself. The polished wood end table the phone sat on had enough dust on it to write my name in it. I had dusted just yesterday morning before Ginny's attack. Yes, I was really going through with it. The phone buzzed in my ear three times before the rich, though plain, voice answered.

"Hello?"

"Mistress Ellen?"

"Oh! Mrs. Williams, I was expecting you might be calling."

That took me aback. She was expecting me? "Oh?" was about all I could manage to say in response.

"Yes, I realized after it was done that the two were an anti-chaotic force in your house. I didn't think too much of it because they are rather minor spirits. Besides your husband was very adamant about their removal."

"Yes. Yes, I imagine he was." I paused. She was talking too fast. My brain was having a hard time keeping up. "I need to know if I..."

"Can get them back? Yes, you can."

I nodded, mutely.

"I'm so sorry. Forgive me, removing them was negligent of me. I shouldn't have done anything with out talking to them first."

"That's alright. What time will you be back to..." I looked for a word other than the one I ended up choosing, "summon them?"

"I am even more sorry to say that I can't do that."

"But I thought you said..."

"I said you can get them back. You can, I cannot."

I blinked thinking about the candles that lit themselves and mahogany rattles. I didn't even have a set of maracas from our honeymoon in Mexico. "I don't understand..."

"You will have to ask them back in." Mistress Ellen must have made some kind of gesture because a twinkling, crackling sound exploded in my ear.

"I don't even—"

"They are outside the house, most likely. Look out a window. Your lawn is perfectly quaffed, not a leaf, not a weed to blemish it, yes?"

I peered out the white lace curtains of the window closet to the phone. The grass looked as though it had been recently cut, but there were no clumps of grass shaving. It was impossibly green in comparison to our neighbor's lawn. No weeds, no litter. I looked as though Bruce has spent all day on it. I couldn't remember when Bruce had last been out of the house other than to go to work. He certainly hadn't come by last night to do this.

"Yes," I said into the phone. "So what do I do?"

"It's very easy..."

A small path of brilliant white cobblestones leads from the back patio to the white washed gazebo that sits a ways from the house. It was on that path about halfway from the house that I heard a slight, musical laughing. Maybe I was just imagining it at that point. I still really didn't believe what I was doing. With my first vision of the ghosts in the past, I was beginning to doubt that I had ever seen them. *But the furniture, Jess!* I nodded to myself and continued on to the gazebo. Some of my muscles were still sore from moving all the ugly green furniture the second time.

I climbed the steps and took a deep breath. "Doris and Rosa?" I called out as clearly as I could and tried to keep my voice from wavering. Mistress Ellen assured me that knowing their names would help me, but I needed to use them and try not to be intimidated. The air had grown thick. It was a different type of thickness than just what

the heat and humidity give. It had more substance, like half set Jell-o. I waited a moment.

"Doris and Rosa?" I didn't shout as loud this time. They were close to me now. I can't explain how I knew, I still couldn't see them, but they were near. Paralysis was starting to set in again. "My I please talk to you?"

"Hrumph." Doris, the steel gray-haired one, was the first to appear. Her navy blue uniform faded in from the wavering shadows of the trees around the yard.

"Oh, Doris!" Rosa appeared out of the corner of my eye, her blue-black hair curled up extra high and, of course, brandishing her feather duster. "Let's go back!" It really wasn't a pleading question made toward Doris, it was more wheedling than that.

"Why should we?" Doris said. "She threw us out. It would serve her right." The little, old maid folded her arms across her chest.

Rosa squinted her eyes, pursed her lips, and fiercely pointed the feather duster at Doris. "Working out here is very bad for my back, Dor-ris," she said accenting the others name in thick Spanish.

Doris raised an eyebrow. "*I* was not the one that got me into this mess in the first place."

I had the oddest feeling that Doris didn't mean just moving the furniture, being seen by me, or even being removed from the house.

Suddenly a smile washed over Rosa's face. She stood up a little straighter and brought her duster down to her side. "You'll do it, Doris," she said finally.

Doris' brows shot higher. "What do you mean?"

"You'll do it because of the little girl. She needs us." Rosa gave a sharp, decisive nod.

Doris' face softened. Her stubborn stance changed just slightly.

"Yes," I jumped in. "Please! Ginny can't live in the house if you don't come back."

They both turned to me, unearthly eyes chilled me straight through. Rosa frowned and let out another disapproving noise. Doris' face returned to stone. I wished right then and there that I was explaining the whole, bizarre thing to my mother again. She was far less disapproving.

"And what happens when we do return?" Doris asked. "Is your husband just going to throw us out again?"

"I--," I didn't know what to say. I didn't even know if Bruce was coming back, though I could hardly think of life without him. True, we hadn't been on the best of terms lately, but he was Bruce! He had been a part of my life for too long. "I'm not sure if..." In fact, our relationship had never been worse. But...he was Bruce!

"The little girl," said Rosa, "she needs her daddy. More than you need this house or need us."

I nodded and somehow felt chastened. I started to ponder just what had happened to the happy family that used play Monopoly on weeknights (Ginny and Bruce would always team up and trounce me!) and barbecue on the weekends. Had we grown apart so much that only a house was keeping us together? I asked myself that question and was more afraid of that answer than I ever would be of any ghost.

"Now," Doris' sharp word brought me out of my reverie, "you go talk to your husband. I think you and he need to be having any kind of conversation, not you and us."

The maids started fading out a bit.

"What do you mean, Doris? She needs to..."

"Oh, shut up, Rosa," Doris said sharply. "It'll be okay."

"What do you mean?" Rosa demanded again, though their voices were fading, as the light around them grew brighter. "The husband has to..."

"Oh, be quiet. I know people..." Doris' Germanic accent was drowned out by the rustling of the wind in the tree tops, and they were gone.

I frowned at the exchange, but didn't know what to make of it. The thing foremost in my mind was what I was going to say to Bruce. I needed to apologize, though I wasn't quite sure for what. He was the one that needed to apologize! No, I didn't need him to say he was sorry. I just needed to talk to him. My mind swam.

Halfway back to the house, I heard the phone ringing. I hurried to answer it at the kitchen extension.

"Jessie?" It was Bruce on the other end. I was surprised. I had just been thinking about him and he never called from work. My pulsed sped up a notch.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Jess, can you look in my study? I'm missing some stuff."

"Yeah, sure. Hold on." I laid the receiver on the counter and pick up the phone in the study when I got there. Bruce's desk was covered with folders and papers. I had never known Bruce to be this messy. He was overly fastidious when it came to anything to do with his work and especially his files. "Okay, what am I looking for?"

"Jackson file. It should be right on top."

I pick up the file on the top and carefully opened it. It wasn't the Jackson file so I carefully laid it on the office chair and tried the next. After about a minute and a dozen files, I said, "I don't see it, hun. Are you sure you don't have it?" I tried to keep my voice neutral and helpful.

An exasperated sigh came from the other end of the phone line. "What do you mean you don't see it? Are you looking?"

"Don't snap at me, Bruce," I said quietly. "I'm looking and I haven't found it."

"Fine, I'll keep looking here until you *do* find it."

I was half an instant from hanging up the phone. My eyes were welling up with tears. Bruce's words stung. I had just been thinking how much I would miss him in my life, and here he was on the phone being an ass. As I said, I was half an instant from hanging up when I heard a tremendous crash over the phone.

"Bruce?" I yelled. "Bruce, are you okay?"

He must have dropped the phone because after some scratchy-clunky noises, he was back. And then I heard something I had not heard in a very long time. I heard Bruce laughing. It was like clouds parting after a storm. Not only did the sun shine, but the pressure of the stormy sky lifted.

"Oh Jessie," he said, "you would not believe the day I've had. I didn't hardly sleep without you and, god, this morning hasn't been much better..."

That was the only night Bruce and I ever spent apart voluntarily. I went that afternoon to help him repack the stuff he had taken with him the night before. He asked

me to and, though I didn't understand why he asked, I went. When I got to his hotel room, I understood. The place was a terrible mess. There were papers strewn across the floor and bed, an over-turned room service cart, one of Bruce's good shirts with a large iron-shaped scorch-mark. Bruce himself was in slacks and an undershirt. He hadn't shaved yet, though it was nearly noon. I took it that he hadn't been in to the office either.

"I was getting ready to leave for work and the wind blew open the window and..." Bruce stopped explaining when he saw my eyebrows go up. The room had sliding glass windows in heavy weatherproof, metal frames.

"Yeah, I know it sounds weird," he said. "And I found my shirt all crumpled up in a ball in my suitcase this morning and then the iron...malfunctioned? I still haven't found my razors."

I started giggling. Bruce looked so bewildered standing there. "And the cart? Was that the crash I heard?" I asked. The egg sandwich and hash browns were growing cold on the floor, I hoped they wouldn't stain.

Bruce shot an accusing look at the cart before giggling himself. "I ordered it hours ago. The busboy must have pushed it in when I was talking to you." He sighed again, gently this time. "Jess, are we okay?"

I didn't have to answer him. I just started helping him cleanup. We'd be okay, if we weren't already. We went home to find the house as fresh as the day we moved in and the Jackson file on the top of neat stack on the desk.

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.daneprairie.com>.
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.