

The Mystery of Ainsley Castle

by Holly-Jane Rahlens

Chapter One

Stepmother

A sound in the deep night awakens me.

Alarmed, I lie in bed, as still as can be, holding my breath, listening, straining to see in the dark.

Faint moonlight spills into the room. Icy fog, ghost-like, drifts in through the open bay window. It mutates into vultures. They hover above me, waiting, waiting for me to fall back asleep.

A floorboard creaks.

Someone's in the room.

Run!, I think. *Now! Go!*

But I'm too slow. Long, bony fingers, ten razor-sharp manicured nails, fine steel blades dipped in oxblood polish, reach out and clutch my throat.

It's Stepmother.

I fling open my eyes.

My room is floating in the pale pink of morning.

I hear breathing. Fast. And shallow.

I realize it's me.

I raise my head and look out at my room. It's spinning. I think I may be sick. I grab the bed frame and hold on tight.

I wait a moment, and then sink back into the pillow.

But she's still here. Somewhere. Stepmother. I know it. Feel it. She's lingering in the shadows behind my eyes. I squeeze them tight and make her vanish into the night.

Her red fingernails are the last thing I see. They flicker like ten flames. And then die out. One by one.

She's gone now.

I'm awake.

And safe. I think.

This has happened before: the dream.

And then, afterwards: the room, spinning.

The first time it happened, weeks ago, I complained to Dad about the dizziness. We were still in the city. He made an appointment for me at the pediatrician's.

"Dad," I said. "I'm almost fourteen. I'm too old for a pediatrician."

He made me go anyway. I understand. He loves me.

And because I love him, I go.

The pediatrician couldn't find anything wrong with me, so she transferred me over to an ear specialist. He said it may be a balance issue. He vacuumed out the earwax, which tickled. Then he recommended a neurologist who showed me some exercises that help combat dizziness.

I did the exercises a few times. But they're tedious.

So I stopped.

The dizziness returned.

I don't tell Dad anymore.

The room is still spinning. I want to go back to sleep, but the dream has put me on edge.

It's after nine. I usually hear Dad humming some morning tune by now, or whistling. I picture him in his office, a few steps away, on the other side of the small bathroom that connects our rooms. I see the lacquered pinewood floors. The sleek desk. His flatscreen computer. A baby photograph of me floats between two slabs of Plexiglas like a prehistoric bee trapped in amber.

Dad gets up early, takes a run, has breakfast, and is working at his computer by the time I'm awake. He usually joins me downstairs for a second breakfast. With Stepmother. She likes to think we're a family. He wishes we were. I can't imagine what it even is.

Technically, Stepmother is not my stepmother – yet. “Let's see how things work out for you,” Dad said to me. “A six-month trial.”

Right! As if Dad is going to leave to *me* the decision whether to marry or not. What sane man would do that? I was doomed the moment he met her, the second I was uprooted from the city, the instant I stepped into this house.

I should tell him how I feel.

But I don't.

I have no memories of Mother. Just a feeling. Something faintly warm. Like the color peach. Something sweet. Yet tart. Like cranberries and cream.

If only I had been older when she died. At least then I would have had memories, an image, someone real to cling to.

But I was only three.

“She loved you dearly,” Dad always says. “But she was driven by demons.”

He seems to like that turn of phrase, for he always repeats it. “She was an anguished woman,” he says. “Driven by demons.”

Demons. What exactly does he mean by that? *Driven by demons.*

I throw off my blanket, swing my legs over the edge of the bed, and get up. But I feel dizzy again and grab on to the bed post. I inch my way over to the window.

Our move changed me. It threw me off balance. Is that why I’m always so dizzy?

I miss my old life. My old bedroom, my classmates. My girlfriend Maisie. I even miss my therapist, Dr. Goodwin.

I stand at the open window and take in deep breaths of fresh air.

I despise this island. It’s too small. And this house. It’s too large. And drafty. There are so many doors. Too many people. Personnel and guests everywhere.

We live in a hotel at the edge of the sea, all the way up north, far north, where the darkest of dark skies meets the end of the world.

Hotel Ainsley Castle has been my home these past

few weeks. It's a huge four-story stone building, a manor to be exact, with turrets and spiral staircases. Stepmother rules over it like a queen over a kingdom.

The hotel caters to rich recluses seeking quiet; prosperous families with growing children in the need of salt air; and a smattering of artistic types looking for inspiration. According to the hotel brochure they can choose from 102 rooms – singles, doubles and suites in prime, luxury, and supreme quality. I don't really understand the difference. As far as I'm concerned, all three words are synonyms. And all the rooms have the same large, fluffy towels too.

Some people come to Hotel Ainsley Castle for the golf. Others for the spa. There are guests who love the food. Most love the sea. No one comes for the rain. But that is usually what they get.

Not far from the hotel is the crumbling, ancient fortress Ainsley Castle. Legend has it that it's haunted by the ghostly specter of a young woman, a girl, falsely accused of witchcraft and burned at the stake hundreds of years ago.

Dad says the island is magical. When I ask him how so, he puts on a serious face, mysterious even, and says, "You'll see."

"What do you mean?" I insist. "Are there fairies here? Unicorns? Wizards? Witches?"

"It wouldn't be any fun if I told you why it's magical, would it now, Lizzy?" he says. "You have to discover the magic for yourself. Go out and look for it."

When I look, all I see are the dock; some shops,

rather ordinary and largely tiny branch stores of big chains; lots of sheep; an occasional pony; rocks and boulders; hills everywhere – steep hills, rolling hills, and hills that are actually mountains. Last not least: luxury bed and breakfasts dot a damp, windswept, and gray landscape.

Nothing magical about any of that.

Stepmother inherited the hotel from her first husband who died many years ago. So she runs the show now, although twice a month she moonlights as a nurse. That's what she was, way back when, before she got married – the first time. Dad is proud of her. "Three times a year she even goes to special training to maintain her skills," he raves. He wants to tell me all about it, but I don't care to listen. For all I know, she was responsible for her own husband's death. Maybe she wanted the hotel for herself and gave him a shot of–

Oops. I'd better not go *there*. Dad says I have an overactive imagination.

Maybe I do.

Dad's a financial manager. He number-crunches for big companies. And they pay him big money to do it. Sometimes I think that's why Stepmother wants to marry him. For his fortune. As if her beds and breakfasts and her 100% Egyptian cotton, 1000-thread-count sheets and pillowcases weren't enough.

In any case, the hotel is the reason for our move. Dad can work anywhere. But she needs those beds and breakfasts and her Bikini Beach, the stretch of shore at the bottom of the winding stone steps that lead down from

the hotel to the sea.

I'm the only one who calls it Bikini Beach. Sarcastically, of course. No one in their right mind would hang out there, let alone in a bikini. No one except the chambermaids on their one day off. If it's not raining. Which – you guessed it – it usually is.

Our apartment has its own entrance in the back of the hotel, opposite the parking lot which I see now from the window. Stepmother says she was never pleased with the view. But from here, on the third floor (no elevator in the back, thank you very much), if I stretch my neck outside the window, I can see the bathhouse, the spa, and beyond it, in the east, the ruins of Ainsley Castle and the dense woods that surround it. In the distance, at the horizon, I also have a view of the island's northeast coast where the blue of the sky and the green of the sea become one. On a sunny day, that is. On a normal day, the gray of the sky and the gray of the sea are exactly that: gray. Colorless. Uninviting.

I wonder what Mother would think of this place, or of Stepmother's oxblood-polished nails.

I've been thinking about Mother lately. A lot. Had she ever been this far north? Had she ever stood at the top of a high cliff, like I did last week while walking with Dad, the wind in her face, wondering what it would be like to fly, to escape with the seagulls to the mainland?

I wonder what her demons were.

I wonder where her demons drove her.

Did *they* kill her?

And I wonder what she looked like.

“You look a lot like her,” Dad said once.

“Did she also have a birthmark right under her nose?” I’d asked.

Dad smiled. But shook his head.

So no. She didn’t. That’s *my* specialty.

I’m cold, standing at the window. I should get dressed.

I go to my mirror.

My bangs are in my face. I push them away, but the springy curls bounce right back and fall into my eyes. I need to have my hair cut.

I see that I have a pimple on my forehead. It must have sprouted overnight. “Puberty,” I say to my reflection.

It’s a joke between me and my therapist, Dr. Goodwin. We blame puberty for everything.

I snatch the headband that Stepmother gave me from the top drawer of my chest. She says I should pull my bangs back and let my forehead breathe, that the pores in my skin clog when I cover them with hair.

Does working as a nurse once every two weeks make her such an expert on pimples?

I push my bangs back with the headband. It has rhinestones. They sparkle in the mirror like diamonds on a tiara.

I don’t like how it looks. I look like a silly Disney princess.

I throw the tiara back in the drawer and pick up my

sweats. But where's the matching hoodie? I thought I saw it yesterday, crumpled up next to my night table. My eyes scan the bedroom floor. It's a mess, strewn with moving boxes yet to be unpacked, assorted dirty socks, piles of books, underwear, a mass of knotted necklaces, and mounds of soiled clothes.

I don't see the hoodie.

I open a drawer in my dresser where I remember putting a stack of laundered T-shirts. Maybe I'm neater than I think and put the hoodie in the drawer with—

I'm shocked to see Mother's kerchief right on top of everything. How on earth did it get here? It was in the unpacked box marked *Personal – Don't Touch!* My old report cards are in that box. Some stories I wrote in school. Some of my drawings. My first passport, now expired. Photos with my girlfriends from school. My favorite board books from when I was a toddler. They're books Mother may have read to me. And the kerchief. The kerchief was in there.

I go to the unpacked box.

I see that it is still sealed tight.

The hair on my arm bristles.

Chapter Two

Mother

I go back into bed with the kerchief. I lie down on my

back and think it through.

Packing up house was chaotic. I must have put the kerchief somewhere other than the carton marked *Personal*. I probably unpacked it without thinking and put it in the drawer.

At least that's what I hope. Because if not, then ... ?

I sit up in bed and let the silky-soft, pastel-peach fabric cascade down in a caress of folds into my left hand, then my right.

I spread it out on the bed in front of me.

Cranberry-colored Paris-themed motifs in a vintage 1950s style are printed on the pale, orangey background. An Eiffel Tower. A wisp of a woman with a small Chanel waistline, long, slender legs and a large sunhat. A poodle on a leash. A café with a striped awning. A flower stand. A kiosk on the banks of the Seine.

Dad says Mother bought the kerchief on their honeymoon. A tiny label still clings to it by a few threads: *100% Soie. Made in France*. She must have worn it like a bandana, a strip of peach and cranberry silk tied loosely around her neck like a piece of jewelry.

When I think of Mother, I always see the woman on the kerchief. A tall woman wearing a large sunhat and walking a fancy poodle on a leash along the Seine in Paris.

Sadly, we don't have any photos of my early years. Dad says they were all lost when our house was robbed soon after Mother died. The looters took all the cash that was lying around, the silver, the rotisserie, and Dad's personal laptop. That's where all the photos were. They'd never printed them out. Or made copies. Or so he said.

But I wonder: if all the photos were lost, why is there a baby picture of me on his desk between two slabs of Plexiglas?

“Are you sure you didn’t have any backups?” I asked Dad just the other day – out of the blue.

He was sitting at his desk thinking about the numbers on his screen. He had no idea what I was talking about. “Backups?”

“Of Mother,” I said. “Of us. All of us. Together. Photos.”

Dad shook his head. “We don’t have any.” He stroked my cheek. “Don’t worry. You’ll find friends,” he said.

Then he went back to studying his computer screen.

At first I wasn’t sure why he’d said that. That bit about making friends. It had come so out of context.

So I returned to my room to stare at the parking lot. While staring, it struck me that maybe Dad thought that I’m thinking about Mother so much lately, because I’m lonely. Because I’m worried that the kids here won’t like me. Because I’m afraid to start a new school. Afraid that I won’t make friends.

He might have been right.

I go back under the covers and bury my nose in Mother’s kerchief. I take in its musty scent.

I’ve never worn the kerchief. I don’t know what I’m waiting for. But I’m waiting.

Oddly, it’s the only thing of Mother’s I own. I found

it soon after she died. My ball had rolled under my bed.
When I bent down to get it, I saw the kerchief, spread out
like a magic carpet, under the bed.

For years I went to sleep with it under my pillow,
and then—

A knock.

Something is knocking at the window. A branch
from the tree? I whip around. But it makes me dizzy. The
room spins with me and I feel a wave of nausea.

Another knock. This time it's coming from ... the
mirror? From *inside* the mirror? The glass rattles with each
knock. As if a genie, a spirit, someone, were imprisoned
within the mirror and wanted out.

I'm terrified.

But then I realize that the knocks are coming from
the door to the hall which is next to the mirror.

"Elizabeth," says Stepmother behind the door. "Are
you awake?"

Her voice is haughty. And strained. Her nails tap
impatiently on the closed door, waiting for me to respond.
Ten red-hot daggers poised to pierce my heart.

I don't reply.

Tap-tap-tap go Stepmother's nails, restless, annoyed.

Finally, the door creaks open.

And she's standing there, a smile frozen on her face.

"You're still in bed," Stepmother says.

"I'm sorry. Did I say you can come in?" Oh, boy.

There I go again. Little Miss Disrespectful.

Stepmother lets out an exasperated sigh.

I can see in her eyes that I'm a big disappointment to

her. I am destroying her happiness. She's thinking, *What the hell did I get into here?*

Hopefully she can see that she's a big disappointment to me too.

"Is my father downstairs?" I say. "I haven't heard him."

Stepmother just stares back.

"Hello?" I say. "My father?"

Stepmother looks at me as if I were crazy. As if I had invented a father. As if he'd never existed. As if—

"It's late," she says, measured, taking a few steps toward me and my bed. "You don't want to sleep the whole day away, do you?" She looks around the room. "I really do wish you'd unpack those moving boxes. It's such a lovely room. And you'd feel so much more comfortable."

"I'd feel more comfortable? Or *you* would? Personally, I like clutter."

"At least make your bed!" she says. "And hang up your clothes." Her eyes dart past the open bathroom door. "And the bathroom. It's a mess!"

She stands there, staring at me. Challenging me. "Suit yourself!" she finally says and then heads out the door.

The stairs creak as she descends.

Angry, I jump up. She treats me as if I were her personal servant!

I hate my life.

I want to yell at her, tell her that I—

But dizzy, I fall against my dresser.

I shut my eyes and wait for the room to stop

spinning.

It does.

I go to the door, am about to slam it shut, but then decide it may be wiser to close it gently and complain to Dad privately before going down. Maybe he even heard us, next door, in his office.

I find my hoodie under the bed.

I dress quickly and step into the hall. I knock at the door to my father's office.

"Dad," I say, "Breakfast?"

No answer. Is he already downstairs?

I open up.

This is not my father's room. It's a door to my bathroom.

No desk. No baby picture. No computer. No father. Just a second door to my bathroom.

My bathroom has two doors?

It's as if Dad had never existed. Ever.

Am I going mad?

I rush downstairs.

Chapter Three

The Boy

I push open the door to the kitchen. Dad isn't there.

"Where's my father?" I say to Stepmother, trying not to let her hear my anxiety. "What's going on?"

Stepmother, at the counter with her back to me, turns around. Her movements are slow. And deliberate. “Lower your voice, please,” she says, evenly. “And please close the door. It’s drafty.”

Her voice may be calm, but her eyes flash anger.

I close the door as loud as possible without actually slamming it.

Stepmother bares her sharp teeth. Her red, spiked nails are poised to slash me open and cut out my heart for lunch. She gestures with her pointy chin to the door to my left. It leads into the mudroom.

God forbid anyone taking off his muck-encrusted shoes in the mudroom should hear us arguing. Heaven forbid anyone delivering groceries should know we’re not a happy family.

There are four doors in the mudroom, one on each wall. There’s the one that leads to our home kitchen. There’s one that goes outside. Opposite it, another door, opens into a foyer that eventually leads into the hotel’s lobby. And the fourth door in the mudroom takes you into the scullery where the kitchen help does the dirty work. It’s where they chop off the heads of chickens, pluck out their feathers, and gut them. Or at least they did in the olden days.

“You have quite an imagination,” Dad said recently, stroking my cheek tenderly.

That’s what he always says when he doesn’t like what I think or say – in this case, chopping off the heads of chickens.

The scullery adjoins to the hotel’s kitchen, high-tech

stainless steel, scrubbed clean and polished to a T.

Behind the hotel kitchen is the dining hall which serves everyday buffet grub, which, mind you, is better than many starred Michelins – at least that’s what Dad says. It also has a show kitchen in there, where you can watch the apprentice cooks frying eggs in the morning and throwing T-bone steaks on a grill in the evening.

“Please be more specific,” says Stepmother at our kitchen counter, jolting me out of my thoughts. “What do you mean by ‘what’s going on?’”

“I mean, where’s my father?!” I ask again, loud.

“Shh.”

The kitchen window is open and a guest is passing by, probably on her way to the parking lot. She turns toward us. She has longish, messy hair. She sees Stepmother, waves, and then continues on, minding her own business.

“The artist-in-residence,” says Stepmother.

Artist-in-residence. For a moment I wonder what it would be like to be an artist-in-residence. It sounds so grand, dignified, regal almost, like the perfect job, something I’d like to be some day: an artist. And in residence somewhere.

Anywhere but here.

But the thought only lasts a moment, because then Stepmother says, “She doesn’t need to hear you complaining.”

“Who cares if the guests hear me?” I reply.

Or, for that matter, who cares if the waitpersons hear me? (Or the cook. The kitchen help. The chickens.)

“Where’s my father?” I ask again.

“He’s in Port Wicken. He’s picking up some things we needed. And your new bookcase. It came on the early ferry.”

So I’m not going mad. My father’s alive!

But now something else worries me. “My new bookcase?” I say, hesitantly.

Stepmother’s lips part in surprise. They’re painted the same color red as her nails: succulent oxblood. With a double coat of lip gloss.

But then it comes to me: “Oh, right. My new bookcase.”

She nods. “You promised your father you would unpack your book boxes. Today. Remember?”

To buy time while I think, I grab a croissant from a bread basket on the table and bite into it. I chew slowly, thinking on my feet, while I eat.

I seem to recall promising Dad to unpack my books. I did it to keep the peace.

And I remember now, too, that Dad’s office is behind the reception area in the lobby, up front, next to Stepmother’s office. Why did I think it was upstairs? My nightmare seems to have messed with my memory. Fogged it up.

I turn to Stepmother and everything starts spinning again. I reach out for the table to steady myself.

The oddest feeling overcomes me. As if I were ... lost. As if I’d landed on the wrong stage and didn’t know what role I was playing or what my lines were.

“Are you okay?” Stepmother asks, taking a step

toward me.

“I’m fine,” I reply, annoyed that she sees my anxiety.

She sighs and shakes her head. “Why are you so sullen, dear? Most girls would switch places with you in a heartbeat. You live like royalty here.”

I don’t answer. Instead, I pour myself a glass of fresh-squeezed orange juice from a pitcher on the counter. Another royal perk. Like the croissants.

There’s a knock on the mudroom door. Probably personnel. The door’s always locked from the other side with an electronic device. You have to punch in a passcode.

I’m closer to the door than Stepmother so I open up.

It’s a boy. I recognize him immediately. He’s my age, maybe a little older. I’ve seen him around – from afar – waiting on tables in the dining hall, and at Carrick’s: the sheep farm, a couple of miles up the road, that belongs to his family. I was there with Dad one afternoon recently to pick up cheese. I’d noticed someone beyond the barn playing fetch with one of the dogs. It was him, the boy, from the dining hall. I’d watched him for a moment or two. He had fine, golden-reddish hair that shone in the sun like a crown. And the other day, on my walk with Dad, I happened to see him fly off the rocks.

There he was. At the tip of the rocks. I saw him raise his arms, push off with his feet, and then leap into the sea.

So, yes, I’ve seen him around, but never right in front of me. Like now. At the mudroom door.

For a moment the close proximity of the boy takes my breath away. There’s something surreal yet thrilling

about seeing him just a foot away. As if he were a famous actor in a movie who had suddenly walked off the screen into my life.

“You asked to see me?” the boy says to Stepmother and I note a slightly crooked eye tooth.

“Yes, Mack,” says Stepmother. “Come in, please.”

I step aside and he comes into our kitchen.

Mack. So that’s his name. Maybe short for something like Macaulay. Or Macbeth. Awful names.

He looks around, self-consciously.

“Mack, have you met Elizabeth?” Stepmother says to him.

“Lizzy,” I say, quick to correct her.

Her nose twitches slightly. She doesn’t like being corrected. And for some reason she doesn’t like my nickname either.

The boy turns to me.

And my stomach shudders. But in a good way. Like when you’re in a fast elevator and you land on the ground floor but your stomach is still up on the 25th. And then *whoosh* – it catches up with the rest of your body with a thud just as the door opens into the lobby.

Mack nods at me – but indifferently.

I smile back. I can’t help myself. It’s a reflex. But then I wonder if I have croissant crumbs on my teeth.

I shut my mouth.

Mack mumbles something in my direction. And then turns back to Stepmother.

“I wanted to thank you personally for helping us out with that computer problem yesterday,” she says to him.

“You’re a lifesaver. Really. Elizabeth’s father told me all about it.”

“*Lizzy*’s father,” I say.

The boy looks at me, startled, but then he returns his gaze to Stepmother.

“He said you’re brilliant,” says Stepmother.

“It was nothing,” the boy says, shrugging.

“You’re being modest.” Stepmother turns to me.

“Mack is quite the computer whiz.”

His cheeks stain red.

There’s a moment of pained silence. Does Stepmother expect me to say something?

“Cool!” I say to Mack. “I was thinking of infecting the hotel computer with some malware. Wanna help?”

Mack’s eyes widen, and I’m aware of their startling green color.

“Elizabeth!” Stepmother reprimands. “For goodness’ sakes!”

I’m so surprised Stepmother even knows the word *malware*, I forget to correct her not using my nickname.

Mack senses trouble. He looks at Stepmother. Then at me. And then back at Stepmother. “Will that be all?” he says, diplomatically. Obviously he wants to get out of the kitchen before all hell lets loose.

“Yes. Thank you, Mack,” says Stepmother, somewhat flustered. “Send my regards to your parents.”

He nods, turns his back to Stepmother, and heads for the door. I’m about to say something cute like *Adiós, amigo, see you on the Darknet*. But he surprises me first – with a smile. I may be reading too much into it, but there’s

something playful about it, the turn of his lips, something furtive, as if we were accomplices. As if we shared a great secret.

I wish.