

The air outside was crisp; leaves blew down the street as the rain bounced off the pavement.

It wasn't a hot summer storm, nor was it a harsh winter blizzard. Instead, a mist of rain fell peacefully, making it the perfect day to cuddle up with a book and a good cup of tea by a large window.

This was precisely what Laura Swenson had in mind as pages slipped by her fingertips as she caressed the black cat curled up on her lap. She felt it purring away happily, enjoying the lazy afternoon away from work.

Though she was hardly a professional detective, Laura's sleuthing had earned the 25-year-old woman somewhat of a reputation in her hometown. It was spreading quickly, and now, bit by bit, customers from other cities were starting to call. Just like the rain outside. Not quite pouring to request her services, but enough to ensure her a constant supply of cases.

She couldn't deny she had lucked out on a few of them. Being in the right place at the right time certainly helped her, but not everyone would have been capable of solving mysteries that just happened to land on their lap.

The peace at her cozy Pacific Northwest home was interrupted by the buzzing of her cellphone. Putting her BOOK down, Laura checked the incoming call, noticing she didn't recognize the number.

"Hi?" She answered, combing a rebellious strand of auburn hair away from her face.

"Hello, Laura? I got your number from an old friend of mine. Perhaps you know him? James Miller, he's from your hometown. He's told me wonderful things about your detective skills" The voice on the other side of the phone was pleasant if rushed. Before she even said anything else, it was clear to the young sleuth that this woman was concerned about something. "My name is Linda Patterson; I hoped you had a minute to speak about a case?"

"Oh, hello, yes, of course, I know him," Laura replied, sitting up excitedly. She loved the idea of getting jobs from out of town! "Please tell me what I can do for you, Mrs. Patterson."

"Call me Linda, please. Well, you see, I'm the owner of the Misty Rose inn. You might have heard about it. Well, you most likely haven't, but that's hardly the point. You see, I'm encountering a problem with a former guest."

"The Misty Rose's visited by people interested in the paranormal from time to time, we have a reputation for being hunted, but that's not our regular clientele. Most of our customers enjoy longer stays. You know, semi-permanent residents. We don't often have any problems with them, but a few days ago, Larry Garret had somewhat of an... Well, let's call it an accident."

"What happened to him?" Laura asked, taking notes on her soft-cover leather journal.

"He claims to have seen a ghost, which... happens from time to time, you know. People staying in room 206 or in the adjacent spaces claim to smell this strange scent, and there are banging noises late at night. I've had the pipes checked, but it's clearly not the source of the problem. Anyhow, like many people before, Mr. Garret claimed to have seen a ghost. The issue is he has a heart condition unbeknown to us all, and he's unfortunately spent some time at the hospital. Now that he's out, recovering from his heart attack, he wants to shut us down, and I don't know what to do!"

"I'm sorry to hear all of this." Laura replied, scribbling down a few keywords before asking: "So this ghost thing... you think it's real?"

"Well, some of my employees and guests claimed to have seen people vanishing into thin air, but I've never seen anything of the sort myself."

"And is this the only issue this guest has encountered in your inn?"

There was a pause on the other side of the line, followed by a long sigh before Linda answered.

"No, unfortunately not. He's claiming my inn is unsafe. I'll admit it's seen better years, but it's not as bad as he's claiming it to be! He wants to sue me for all I have and tore my inn to the ground! I truly do need your help."

"I'd love to take on your case," Laura replied at once, closing her journal and smiling down at her black cat excitedly.

During the following minutes, they discussed her fees, and arranged for Laura to stay at the inn during the course of her investigation. By the end of their conversation, Laura was already making a mental note of everything she'd need for her trip, wondering if she'd be done with it in under or over a week.

"It's only a three-hour drive from home; if I need anything more, I can return later." She thought to herself.

"I'll see you tomorrow, then, Mrs. Patterson,"

It was early the following morning then Laura hit the roads, turning up the music, excited about her new case.

She wanted to speak with Mr. Garret, but she figured it would be a good idea to check out the place first.

Though the journey was longer than her usual drives around town, Laura didn't mind at all. She loved being able to just unwind and listen to music.

Rain was still pouring lazily on the winding, slippery road. This led Laura to pay more attention than usual to the path ahead. The scenery was genuinely breathtaking, orange and red all around her, making it all too clear autumn was there.

The forest was thick but not uninviting, and the soft sounds of the cascade were noticeable from the road, making Laura want to go out and explore the wide outdoors.

Arriving at the Misty Rose was like stepping into the past. A beautiful, if run-down historic building, sitting in a valley of lush greenery that was visible from its doorstep.

Once upon a time, it must have been a wonderful location, with its tall walls and astonishing surroundings. Now, though, the wooden porch's boards were showing signs of wet rot; cracks were noticeable here and there, and Laura's keen eye even discerned some of the downstairs buildings didn't seem to close all the way.

As she walked up the stairs and into the main entrance, Laura paused to gaze at the unique flora pattern tiling rushing up one of the walls by the door.

She didn't pause to observe it, though the young sleuth made a mental note of checking it out later. It might not have anything to do with the case, but one never knew. Whenever something caught her eye, it usually meant something, even if she didn't immediately know how the pieces went together.

Inside, the inn looked much like it did on the outside. It was welcoming, if quaint, yet it certainly lacked the luster it had once impressed its guests with. The furniture was antique and not exceptionally well-maintained, and the painting on the walls was starting to fade.

Behind the counter, a prim, middle-aged woman was taking notes on the ledger.

"Hi? Linda?" Laura asked, and the woman looked up from behind her thick-framed glasses, nodding as she regarded the young brunette standing before her.

Laura was a gorgeous 25-year-old who didn't entirely flaunt her looks to all those around her. She was wearing a comfortable pair of jeans, boots that didn't leave behind too many prints in case she needed to check for them, and a simple, blue blouse that matched her eyes. She was petite, and though undoubtedly pretty, it was her bright eyes that genuinely captured people's attention.

"Oh, goodness, Laura! So glad you've arrived. Please, let me take you up to your room so you can settle down. We truly need you to get into this case asap!"

It wasn't ten minutes later when Laura found herself alone in the room she'd be calling home for the next few days. It looked just the same as the rest of the inn, yet the bed was comfortable and clean, so that was good enough for her.

She pulled out her laptop, jumping into her research in earnest.

"Huh, this inn truly has a whole lot of history, doesn't it?" She talked to herself as she read different articles and information she found online. "Built around 1971... Oh, the original owners wanted the whole building to be made out of wood... it was only later that the brick sections were added. It's requested dozens of construction permits. I'll have to make a list of all the rooms added and torn down through the years, but I doubt it will do much good: the outlay of the building's clearly completely different from what it was back in the late 1800s."

She kept on reading through the information she managed to recover, though most of it was hearsay and gossip. Web Pages dedicated to ghosts and paranormal activity seemed to love this spot.

Just as she was about ready to head back outside, a soft humming caught Laura's attention.

It was a melodious, pleasant sound, and the young sleuth wondered who the owner of this voice could be. If she was half as friendly as its voice, then she'd most likely be open to answering a few questions.

She stepped out onto the corridor and right next door, knocking softly and waiting for someone to answer.

Moments later, the door opened without hesitation. It was clear that whoever lived in the room had no qualms about being interrupted.

The woman standing before Laura was short and almost wiry, with wrinkly, pale skin and the biggest brown eyes the sleuth ever did see. Her hair was long and blonde, tied back in a long braid, and her clothes could have been ripped right out of a 70s music festival.

A long, flowing violet skirt and white, flower-embroidered blouse hung loosely from the guest's lithe figure. Her smile was warm and welcoming, and Laura felt immediately comfortable by the older woman's side.

"Hello, deary!" The stranger exclaimed merrily, her smile growing ever-sweeter. "I wasn't bothering you with my songs, was I? I just love singing to my plants while I feed them."

"Oh, no, not at all. My name's Laura, and I was hoping to ask you a few questions about this place? I was asked by the owner to do some research on an incident that happened on the premises."

"Oh, that nasty business with the heart attack? It was such a relief that the poor man didn't die! Of course, I'd be more than happy to help you! Come inside, come inside! The name's Lucy, by the way, lovely to meet you."

Laura walked into the bedroom, looking around with keen eyes. She noticed Lucy wasn't the kind of tenant to stay around for a day or two. She had settled in the bedroom, giving it her own style with the limited possessions allowed inside.

Carnivorous plants rested on the window bay, absorbing the limited sunshine that could flood the room whenever autumn's rains took a break or two.

"That poor fellow, he simply couldn't handle living alongside a ghost. It's a shame; not everyone can deal with the supernatural." Lily mentioned almost casually, and Laura grabbed her journal, scribbling down as she nodded silently.

"Oh, so you believe there are ghosts in the inn?"

"Ghosts? Oh, goodness, yes. There's something or someone in here, trying to exist among the living. One of them is lovely, quite friendly. The other... well, the other I'd rather avoid as well. Have you visited room 206 already? It's where the perfume lady lives. Or at least I think she's a lady. I've never quite seen her body, but the way she smells... Trust me, it's a girl."

"What kind of smell have you experienced?"

"Oh, roses! Like when I was a little girl, and I ran in my auntie's garden. She had two huge, beautiful rosebeds back there, and it smelled of them all summer long. But here? Summer, autumn, winter, it doesn't matter. It still smells of roses around room 206."

"I'll have to head there soon, but for now, I wanted to talk with some of the guests. So, what is your take on this ghost?"

"Well... I think she probably was much like me. A woman who didn't fit the norms, you know. Someone who wanted to find a safe space, living on her own terms. But something went wrong, and she never got to sign out."

Laura looked up from her journal, noticing how Lily's gaze was now out the window. She seemed to be longingly staring at the soft rain rattling against her window's glass.

"It's a sad theory."

"Well, life's not always pretty and pink, but sure do hope that our ghost lady will soon find the closure she's looking for. I'll miss the rose scent, but I can deal without it."

Laura smiled, nodding as she stood up and headed over toward the door.

"Is it ok if I speak to you again soon? I'll be sure to have more questions."

"Not at all, deary. Stop by anytime you want."

As she stepped outside, Laura decided it was high time she talked with the customer in question: Mr. Garret.

Perhaps this whole case could be solved without needing to take any extra steps. Could she possibly calm him down and convince the scared man not to take legal actions?

Well, from the moment she introduced herself and let Mr. Garret know why she was calling, Laura knew that simply wasn't going to happen!

"That place is a menace! I won't allow any more people to be hurt, so I'm taking them to court, and my decision is final!" He snapped at Laura, clearly close to losing what was left of his temper.

"It's ok, Mr. Garret, I understand. Could I please ask a few questions, if you don't mind, though?"

"Ok, as long as you don't try to make me change my mind!"

"Of course. Could you describe what you saw that night?"

"I already told the owner, the hospital staff, and the police my story, but alright. But you won't get the long story. I opened the door to head out to dinner, and there he was. A dark, tall figure, menacingly staring at me! It had no eyes, no mouth, no nose. It was like a... shadow. Yes, a shadow, standing there. I know I said it had no eyes, but believe me, I know it was staring at me somehow!"

Laura felt tempted to ask if it couldn't have been his shadow, knowing it would have only angered the man even further. Thanking him for his patience, she attempted to continue with her questions, but Mr. Garret wasn't having it.

"If you want to know anything else, you can speak to my lawyer!"

And that was it. He hung up on her. Laura sighed, knowing that it was not worth it to try and call him again. That door was closed for now.

"I guess it's as good a time as any to visit room 206." She told herself and climbed up the stairs, determined to get to the bottom of things.

As she was walking down the corridor, though, a tall, gaunt man sporting a fastidiously well-trimmed blond beard stepped out of room 208. He was wearing a pair of capri jeans and a tight blue shirt, carrying his laptop bag over one shoulder.

"Hi!" Laura stopped midtrack, prompting the man to pause and stare her way.

"Hello there,"

"I'm Laura, and I'm in the inn investigating an incident involving another resident, Mr. Garret. I've heard rumors regarding supernatural activity surrounding the room just down the corridor from you. I was wondering if you've heard anything?"

"Ghosts? God, have you been speaking to that old crazy lady downstairs? There are no ghosts here or anywhere else, for that matter. I'm just renting the room to enjoy some sightseeing while working remotely, you know. Didn't choose this place because it's haunted or any silliness like that." He paused and stretched out his hand, finally introducing himself. "I'm Ivan, by the way."

"Pleased meeting you, Ivan," She replied, shaking his hand and returning his wide grin. "Oh, I see. So you've never heard any strange noises or smelled any sweet scents coming from room 206?"

Ivan shrugged, clearly not interested in discussing anything of the sort.

"Look, I don't notice things like that. All I know is that for such an old place, this inn has an incredible wifi signal. I get to walk out in the forest, jump into the streams, and then come back here and do my job. Sorry I can't be of more help."

"Don't worry, any piece of information helps," She replied, her wide smile charming enough to have Ivan smiling as well.

"Well, if you need anything else... you know where I am," He replied, motioning toward his door with his head, before heading down the stairs.

Laura headed over to room 206. She stood before the door, noticing the bronze numbers were a bit discolored. She inhaled deeply but didn't notice the scent of roses or any other flowers, for that matter. Well, perhaps it wasn't there all the time. After all, even Ivan would have noticed if it were.

She took out the key Linda headed her while helping her check-in, having to apply just a tiny bit of pressure to open it fully. It wasn't quite stuck, but it clearly needed some lubricant to make sure the hinges didn't get stuck.

Laura stepped inside. As expected, this room didn't look any different from her own: a bed, a desk, a chair, and a closet, nothing out of the ordinary. The window curtains were shut, and Laura walked toward them, pulling them aside and taking a look at the scenery. The forest was noticeable from up there, and she wondered when the last time someone had rented this room and stared out that same window.

"Note to self: Ask Linda about the room's previous tenants," She whispered to herself, making a note in her journal before heading out the door. There was nothing of interest in room 206, at

least not for now. Perhaps she should go back to visit it late at night or look at it with fresh eyes the following day.