

GHOST CAT OF OCEAN COVE

by Mollie Hunt

EXCERPT

Chapter 1: Arrival and a Surprise

Camelia Collins hesitated, the key halfway into the lock. What on Earth have I done? she wondered to herself. How many people my age pick up and move house, leaving their old life behind to try something completely different and new?

Not many, she imagined, again pondering her sanity, but they probably should. After all, if one doesn't follow one's lifelong dreams by the age of seventy, when does one?

Turning, she surveyed the modest neighborhood with its rustic homes perched on the bluff overlooking the sea. A rim of stunted pines clung to the edge of the cliff, and beyond that, Ocean Cove, where the surf beat upon the shore as it had done for millennia before and would do for millennia to come. Tiny and sheltered, its pebbled strip of shoreline curved in a flawless crescent.

Yes, this had always been Camelia's dream. Now there she was, the dream come true. So why did she feel like she'd fallen into Alice's rabbit hole?

Camelia returned her gaze to her new home. A rough driftwood plank hung by the front door, the words, "Love Cottage," spelled upon it with seashells. Presumably the sign had been made by the Loves, the folks who had built the little cottage back in the fifties. There was already a house on the property when they purchased, so the story goes, but it had fallen into decay as places were prone to do in the wet coastal weather. Instead of sinking their nest egg into the old derelict, the Loves had opted for something fresh. They constructed the new house from scratch and zealously maintained it ever after. No one would guess by looking that it had stood its ground for over half a century.

Camelia shook off her wisp of apprehension and finished unlocking the door. Stepping inside, she gazed around the cheerful room with approval. She had bought the house furnished, and with a few minor adjustments, it would suffice until she had a chance to add her own personal touch. The bulk of her possessions would be arriving in a movers' truck the next morning—then it would be perfect!

Again she marveled at her luck. Property on the Oregon coast was expensive, yet this one had been quite affordable. The inspection had turned up no surprises—the pipes weren't broken nor was the roof falling in. The realtor had explained that the man who bought it from the Loves had died, and his beneficiary was looking for a fast cash sale. After a long and convoluted probate, the elderly European uncle wanted nothing to do with the place. Camelia figured his loss was her gain.

A folded sheet of paper sat propped upon the coffee table, “Mrs.” scrawled in bold cursive across the front. Camelia could guess what it was: a note from the cleaners she had hired to get things spick and span for her move-in. She glanced at it, read that all was in order and would she please pay the enclosed invoice in a timely manner. The charge seemed a bit high, but it was worth it to know the sheets were newly washed and any spiders that had moved in during the house's three-year vacancy had been evicted from the eaves.

Camelia set the note aside and went back to the car to retrieve her overnight bag. Rolling it through to the bedroom, she smiled as she took in the bright, cozy space. A big window facing northwest would get the afternoon sun. A dresser, a wooden chair, and a single bed draped in a yellow chenille spread left her lots of potential to add her own special touch.

“Yes, this will do nicely,” she said out loud, her habit of talking to herself so well-established that half the time she didn't know she was doing it. “Very nicely!” she added with glee.

Making a second trip to the car, she hefted a large cat carrier from the back seat. Its sulking inhabitant, her big tuxedo boy Blaze, gave a raww of displeasure at the joggle.

“Can't be helped,” Camelia told him. “I know how much you kitties hate change, but you'll like this one, I promise.”

Camelia lugged the carrier, along with a tote full of cat things, directly into the little bedroom. Once inside, she closed the door and opened the carrier gate. Blaze inched his way out, first a pink nose, then a white paw, then finally the whole black and white cat. He looked up at his cohabitor with eyes green as an old-fashioned 7Up bottle as if to say, “What in the world have you done?”

“You'll be fine,” said Camelia. “I'll get your box and food station up directly. Be a good boy and hold it for just a few minutes longer.”

Blaze shot her a dirty look, then hopped onto the bed and proceeded to scrutinize his new digs. Camelia pulled a small, pre-filled litter pan from the tote, pulled off the cling wrap covering, and placed it on a towel on the floor. Going into the bathroom, she filled a travel bowl with water.

“Food's coming.” She gave the cat a pet and left him to it.

As she headed back to the car for a third time, she dawdled along the pathway to take in the warm June day. The weather couldn't have been nicer, and the air smelled of sea salt and roses.

Someone must have loved roses, she thought to herself. They grew everywhere in the patch of garden. Old-fashioned climbers twined in blooming profusion up the columns of the front porch, and bushes of cabbage roses lined the walkway, each of their pink, yellow, and white blossoms as huge as an entire bouquet. Though in need of pruning, they seemed healthy and thriving. Whoever had owned this place had taken good care, and it showed.

Besides the roses, other perennials were crowded together in the English cottage style—delphiniums and hollyhocks, alstroemeria and canyon poppies. Any empty spots had been filled by nasturtiums gone wild, their gray-green pads and rust-red blossoms dotting the scape like a Monet painting.

“Just lovely!” Camelia said out loud, wondering offhandedly how she was ever going to keep it up.

Startled from her reverie by a squeaking sound, she turned to see a woman shambling up the drive with the aid of a four-wheeled walker, the source of the noise. Aging and frail, the woman appeared to be in her sixties. Her hair was done in the classic gray curls that might have been popular in her mother's day. Her large and loudly patterned housedress made no attempt to hide her spare figure. She wore little or no makeup, but her smile painted a blush on the pale face, or perhaps it was the exertion of climbing the slight hill.

“Are you the new tenant?” the woman asked between breaths. “I'm Vera, Vera Whitcomb, from next door.” She gestured to a small house surrounded by a classic white picket fence.

Camelia held out a hand, trying to keep from looming over the bent woman—at five-foot-eight, that was no easy feat. “Camelia Collins. Nice to meet you.” Vera let loose of her walker and took the hand in a warm shake. “But I'm not a tenant,” Camelia corrected. “I bought Love Cottage.”

Vera frowned. “Is that so? Well, um, welcome to the neighborhood, dear. Goodbye.”

She swung her walker around and started to shuffle away as fast as the contraption would carry her. Camelia found herself as much stunned by her departure as she had been by her original appearance. Was it something she'd said?

“Yes, and I'm very excited,” Camelia aimed at the receding figure. “We're here for the duration. At least that's the plan.”

Vera paused. “We? Your husband as well then?”

“No, I’m a widow. I was referring to my cat. So Vera,” Camelia quickly continued, “maybe you could tell me a little about the area—if you have the time.”

That seemed to spark Vera’s interest. “Well, yes, alright.” The smile returned as she hobbled back to the other woman. Spinning her walker so the chair faced Camelia, she put on the brake and sat down with a grunt. “Certainly, I’ve got the time. I’ve got nothing but time. What would you like to know?”

Camelia thought about it. What did she want to know? Why Vera had reacted so strangely at the news she’d bought Love Cottage? Why, since her arrival, had a shadow of foreboding permeated Camelia’s mood like a San Francisco fog?

She settled on something more neutral. “Have you lived here long?”

“Ed and I bought the place, oh…” Vera gathered her thoughts. “Some twenty years ago, when we got back from New Zealand. The only ones here longer are the Linders.” She pointed to the stately home at the top of the hill. “By boundary, we’re both in the Cliffmont district, though you’d never get them to admit it, they tend to be a bit squirrely when it comes to their heritage.”

Camelia wasn’t sure what Vera meant by squirrely, but the woman didn’t elaborate. At least not about that.

“Lydia’s nice enough, but she enjoys playing the lady of the manor. Of course we know differently, don’t we? Her folks were farmers, poor as dirt. If Mr. Linder hadn’t come along and fallen for her, she’d be slinging hash in a drive-through, I bet you.” Vera gave a little wink for emphasis.

“Now Larry Linder’s another matter. He comes straight from old money. The official version is the railroad, but no one mentions the stuff his great granddaddy shipped on those trains.”

Vera’s gaze slipped from the Linders’ to Camelia’s neighbor on the other side. “That’s the Smiths then,” she said, fluttering a hand at the yellow house. “Aiden and Nao. He’s a plumber, and she’s a housewife—homemaker, family manager, chief cook and bottle washer—whatever you call it these days. Nao helps me out from time to time since she’s home a lot. She likes to bake, and she’s good at it. Wins prizes at the county fair for her marionberry cheesecake. They have a teenage kid, Yui. She’s a good girl, smart, though she plays it down. Yui’s a whiz with animals—she never met an animal she didn’t like.” Vera chuckled. “She’s all about horses at the moment—you know the type.”

Vera indicated the building across the street. With its stucco façade and square lines, it looked more like a business than a beach cabin. “That one’s a rental, mostly for the summer folk. You never know who’s going to be there. The host is picky though. His guests have always been well-behaved… so far.”

“Good to know,” Camelia remarked.

“The general store is over the rise on the other side of town,” Vera said, continuing her virtual tour. “There’s a path between your place and mine that runs straight to Linder Square so you don’t have to drive all the way around. If you need gifts or books, we have a little mall just up the road. The big grocery is in the mall and so is the print shop and the library. Do you read, Amelia?”

“It’s Camelia,” Camelia corrected. “Yes, and I love libraries. I’ll need to get a card.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem, since you’re going to live here.” Again the hint of a frown shaded Vera’s face.

“You seem to know a lot about the community.”

“Why shouldn’t I?” The fragile woman defended. “A little osteoporosis doesn’t stop me from getting around.”

“I didn’t mean…”

“Don’t worry about it. It happens all the time. People think when the body is feeble, then so is the mind. My feeling is, it’s just the opposite.”

“I would never consider you feeble, in mind or body,” Camelia blurted, realizing she had done just that.

“Ha-ha,” Vera spluttered. “You’re a good egg, Camelia. How’d you ever decide on Ocean Cove, if you don’t mind my asking? This isn’t exactly your trendy retirement destination. It’s not even a blip on most maps. Ed and I, we came across it totally by accident. We’d been looking for somewhere else entirely.”

“I’d never noticed it either,” Camelia agreed, “and I’ve been all up and down this coast. It was a friend of mine, a real estate agent, who discovered it. She knew I was looking for a beach place at a reasonable price, so when this one came along, she jumped on it.”

Camelia glanced at her new home. Only a single story, and the rooms were small, but it was cozy—just right for an older lady and her cat. “I couldn’t believe my luck finding something so nice within my price range. And with such a view of the cove, too!” She cast her gaze along the shore and far out into the never-ending blue. Wow! Camelia said under her breath, not for the first—or last—time.

Her eye rolled around to Vera, who was staring, mouth open as if she had just seen a ghost.

Camelia started. “What? What is it?”

“Then you don’t know?”

Camelia frowned uneasily. Was there something wrong with her place after all? Of course there was! She should have known that an ocean-view house at the price she paid was too good to be true. Possibilities deluged her mind. Was there a lien? An old meth lab? But those things would have shown up in the sale. Plans for a future freeway cutting through? Not flood-prone at this elevation, though it might have been built on a fault line. Was the cliff about to crumble?

“What?” she gasped. “What don’t I know?”

“You should probably ask your realtor,” Vera hemmed. “I can’t believe they didn’t tell you straight out.”

“No, you tell me,” Camelia demanded, her concern overtaking her good manners. “What’s the matter with my house?”

Vera turned an even lighter pale and rung her hands, a gesture rarely seen outside of films.

“It’s not the house, dear. Mr. Chamber kept it up properly. The house is fine. It’s what happened outside the house. Right there, in fact.”

She nodded to the front stoop, newly painted a lovely color of blue that shone and sparkled in the summer sun. Camelia waited, but Vera had stalled.

“What, Vera? Please,” she insisted. “I need to know.”

After a further pause, the woman gave in. “Yes, sure you do.” She spoke slowly, as if pulling the words from a faraway place. “I’d want to know if it was me.”

A robin chirped in a nearby fig tree. A car crawled past, backed out again, the driver realizing the road was a dead end. Finally Vera took a deep breath and turned her dark eyes on Camelia.

“He was killed, dear,” she said in a near whisper. “Jonathan Chamber was murdered.”