

Prologue

The horrors gain strength when things in our world are broken.

A bone. A promise. A heart.

So much of what happened took place on the page, in words typed, or scrawled, or carefully composed. I've gathered up all the remnants I have, and it seems only right that I finally document everything that happened in between, even if my heart aches to write it. The record must be kept. There is a gap in the archive where this story belongs.

I could start with the horrors. But I won't.

For me, this story starts . . .

With him.



The evening was creeping in. Mother, weary and drawn, leant against the counter, her eyes fluttering shut. She had just collected the keys and payment from an elderly couple who were taking their leave of our guest house.

‘Turn the sign, will you, Alice?’ she asked, her voice fragile.

I nodded and went to turn the sign in the window so that it read *Vacancies – enquire within* and made a note to myself of a thin crack in the windowsill corner. It didn’t matter how hard I worked to keep the Honest Opal clean and welcoming, there was always more to do. Everything inside was getting tired, and it was full of furniture that complained of its aches and pains in spite of how hard we tried to take care of it. We were doctors of our belongings, using ointments made of glue and bandages made of thread. Mother hated it when anything broke, and believed deeply in fixing things with haste, but I didn’t understand the real reason why; I’d always assumed her motive was financial. Mother’s preoccupation with mending and preventing breakages made me feel as though

there were something wrong with me, because I was the heavy-handed one, the unlucky one, the one who always seemed to be breaking things, even when I didn't mean to.

Returning to Mother's side, I noticed that she was breathing heavily, standing with a slight sway.

'Do you need to rest?' I asked. She blinked her eyes open as though she were surprised to see me. I put my hand on her arm. 'I can take care of things if you need to go to bed early.'

Mother looked at the desk, and I could see her responsibilities tugging at her. Originally opened by her father, the Honest Opal had a reputation for clean rooms, good food and reasonable rates, but we were mostly known for our service being second to none. Mother was always ready to meet the whims of any of our customers, no matter the hour – even if her health was beginning to make that harder and harder.

Her decline had been gradual, the sickness that was engulfing her strange and not responding to any treatments. It sometimes seemed as though she was decaying, a strange smell on her breath and skin, her joints creaking and her hands wrinkled like those of a much older woman.