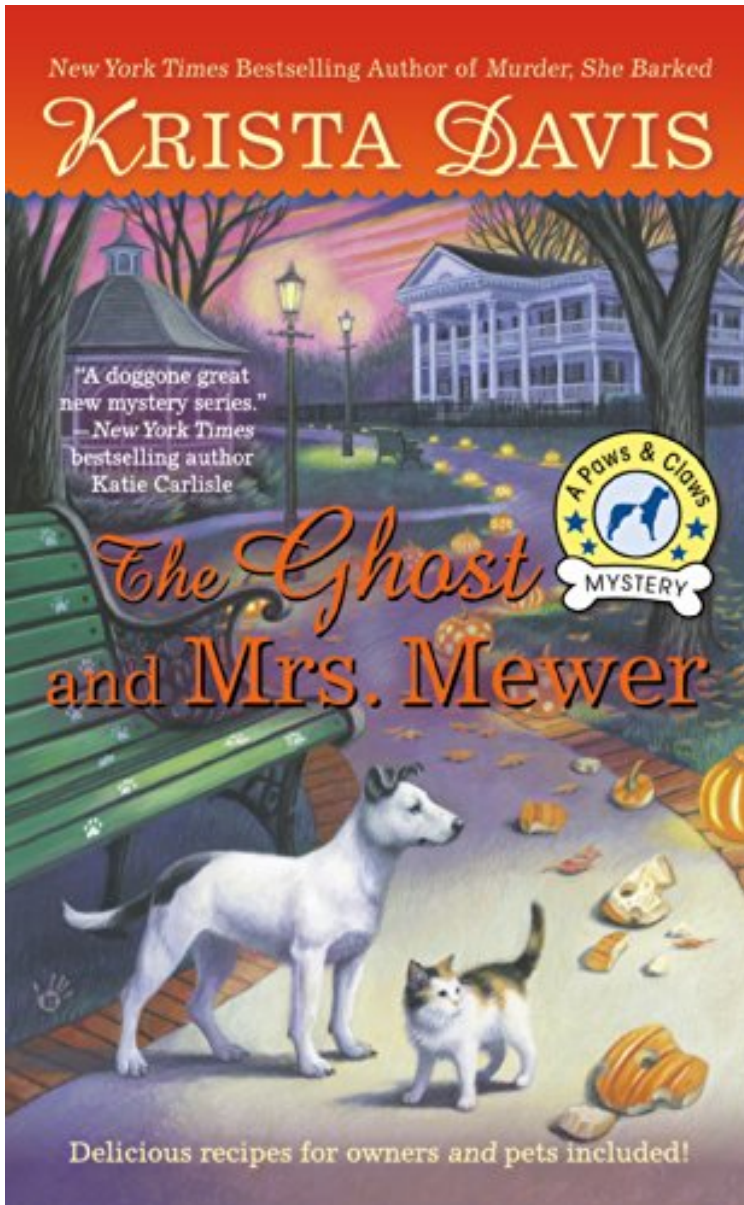


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The Ghost and Mrs. Mewer: A Paws Claws Mystery



Par Krista Davis
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe second spirited mystery in theNew York Timesbestselling Paws Claws series.Wagtail, Virginia, the top pet-friendly getaway in the United States, is gearing up for a howling good Halloweenuntil a spooky murder shakes the town to its core..Holly Miller doesnt believe in spirits, but the Sugar Maple Inn is filled with guests who do. The TV series in development,Apparition Apprehenders, has descended on Wagtails annual Halloween festivities to investigate supernatural local legends, and Holly has

her hands full showing the ghost hunters a scary-fun time. But the frights turn real when Hollys Jack Russell, Trixie, and kitten, Twinkletoes, find a young woman drowned in the Wagtail Springs Hotels bathhouse the spot of the towns most infamous haunting. The crime scene is eerily similar to the creepy legend, convincing Holly that the death wasnt just accidental. Now shell have to race to catch a flesh-and-blood killer before someone else in town gives up the ghost...Delicious recipes for owners and pets included!

Extrait Acknowledgments People often ask if I do any research for my books. I learned a lot about ghosts for this book. It was fascinating to hear about ghosts that people have encountered. Thanks to all of the lovely people who shared their ghost stories with me. It was equally interesting to learn how some people have manipulated situations to make us believe in ghosts. The Apparition Apprehenders took me into the believers side of the paranormal, and Evas position led me to examine the scientific position. I have learned a great deal, mostly that there is no grand conclusion. Special thanks to Shawny Darby for answering my questions about ghost hunting. And also to Kathleen Joyce, who suggested the name Apparition Apprehenders. As always, I couldnt do this without my editor, Sandra Harding, and my agent, Jessica Faust. I thank Susan and PJ Erba for taste-testing the recipes for me. And my dear friends Betsy Strickland and Amy Wheeler for always being so supportive. I cant forget my mother, my first reader and biggest fan. As always, any errors are my own.

APPARITION APPREHENDER GHOST TEAM Felix Fischbein and Casper (Weimaraner) Brian Anderson Mr. Luciano and Gina (bulldog) Eva Chevalier and Mrs. Mewer (Siamese cat) Grayson Gatewood Mark Belinski Mallory Gooley

OTHER SUGAR MAPLE INN GUESTS Lillian Elsner Parker Colby SUGAR MAPLE INN STAFF Liesel Miller Holly Miller Zelda York Casey Collins Shelley Dixon Mr. Huckle Marisol Rodrigues Gingersnap canine ambassador (golden retriever) Trixie (Jack Russell) Twinkletoes feline ambassador (calico kitten)

RESIDENTS OF WAGTAIL Doc Kilgore and Siggie (black Labrador) Officer Dave Quinlan Clementine Wiggins Rose Richardson Holmes Richardson Aunt Birdie Dupuy Val Kowalchuk

GHOSTS Elmer Dupuy Dr. Ira Wraith Becca Wraith Dr. Hiram Montague Obadiah Bagley

One There is no such thing as a ghost. Eva Chevalier turned her pointy nose up in the air and chortled. Its preposterous. Nonsense, folderol, fiddle-faddle. No sooner had she spoken than the automatic sliding glass doors to the parking lot whooshed open. A gust of wind blew in, bringing dried leaves with it. A grey Weimaraner with startling blue eyes stepped away from the doors and growled. Gingersnap, the Sugar Maple Inns canine ambassador, simply wagged her tail. In typical golden retriever fashion, she continued kissing the guests gathered in the reception area. The doors closed again as if a person had passed through. I felt the chill of a late October wind pass by. I bet theres a ghost in here now, Casey Collins whispered, gazing up at the ceiling and shoving his glasses to the bridge of his nose with his index finger. Casey worked at the inn as a desk clerk but seemed more like a little brother than an employee. At twenty, he still looked boyish and reminded me of the young Harry Potter, with similar glasses, a shock of dark hair that always fell over his forehead, and sweet, innocent eyes. Five guests who were part of the Apparition Apprehender ghost hunting team had arrived a few minutes ago and were waiting to check in. They had come to town to shoot what they hoped would be a pilot episode for a potential TV show about ghosts. Wagtail had plenty of them, but the most well-known allegedly haunted the creepy old Wagtail Springs Hotel. At the mention of a ghost, the guys dived into their luggage and pulled out assorted handheld machines. The chatter behind Eva stopped as they concentrated on their gizmos, apparently trying to prove the ghosts existence through technological devices. I raised my voice a little to get their attention. Welcome to the Sugar Maple Inn. Im Holly Miller. If you need anything during your stay, please let me know. I smiled broadly, but they were intent on their machines. Oh well. Eva turned her eyes toward the ceiling and shook her head in amused disbelief. The doors were automatic, but I had to admit that opening on their own had been odd. Probably the result of that gust of wind. Only the day before, I had moved to Wagtail Mountain permanently to join my grandmother, Liesel Miller, as her partner in running the Sugar Maple Inn. Halloween was nearly upon us and the first thing I had seen at the outskirts of town was a huge orange banner over the road that proclaimed Welcome to Howloween in Wagtail, where spooky things are afoot! A cat with an arched back adorned one side and a howling dog decorated the other. The inns Halloween decorations only added to the fun. Pumpkins clustered at the base of the doors on both sides. Spiderwebs clung to the walls with a parade of faux spiders marching along them. The sinister figure of a grinning vampire hanging upside down in a black cape was enough to give anyone a chill. Two skulls lay at rakish angles on top of the registration counter, and vultures peered at us from the large antler chandelier overhead. My grandmother, whom I called Oma, German for grandma, had flitted off to a meeting of some sort, leaving me to keep an eye on the Apparition Apprehenders when they checked in. Not that I minded. I welcomed any excuse to leave my apartment on the

top floor. Boxes upon boxes cluttered my quarters. My entire life was still packed, except, of course, for my calico kitten, Twinkletoes, and my Jack Russell terrier, Trixie, who sniffed around the back of the reception desk in search of the treat jar. Zelda, another desk clerk, had called me when the ghost hunting crew arrived. I hadn't expected any major problems, but here I was, already thinking that I would have to have a little talk with Casey about arguing with guests. After all, Eva was paying to stay with us, and if she didn't believe in ghosts, that was her business. That was not a ghost. Eva took a deep breath and watched the antics of the guys behind her. She turned back to Zelda and me. I'm a university professor and have students like them. What frightens me is not ghosts, but the fact that my students and people like these ghost hunters believe ridiculous claims of spirit sightings. If these gentlemen would think it through, they would understand the absurdity of believing in ghosts. Eva wore thick glasses in pink cat-eye frames that accentuated the odd paleness of her skin. Clearly vintage, a boxy coat of drab green wool hung on her, at least two sizes too large. A wide pink hairband pulled her dark hair back very 1960s. She was thirtyish, like me, I guessed. A Siamese cat on a leash jumped onto the registration counter, startling Trixie. She yipped at the cat and danced around to the lobby side. When she saw the open bags, she lost interest in the cat and buried her nose in a duffel bag. I glanced at Eva's reservation. She'd been booked as part of the Apparition Apprehenders group. Obviously an error on our part. She should be in the cat wing. An easy fix. I'm sorry. It appears we've made a little mistake. I have you down as one of the ghost hunters. But no matter, we can. Your confusion is understandable. My reservation was made by Mr. Luciano, the producer who is in charge of the ghost hunting expedition. I'm the ghost debunker whom he hired. Ghost debunker? She definitely shouldn't be staying near the ghost hunters. Her cat would be happier in the Cats Pajamas, our cats-only wing, anyway. I made a quick room assessment based on her apparent love of vintage clothing. Zelda, let's put Ms. Chevalier in Pounce. Unless I missed my guess, she would love the pink cabbage drapes and the old-fashioned feel of the room. Ms. Chevalier, what is your cat's name? Mrs. Mewer. Like The Ghost Mrs. Muir? That's cute. Eva smiled. Thank you. It's M-E-W-E-R, of course. I have a fondness for both 1960s TV shows and puns. The name came from Mrs. Mewer's tendency to talk. Mrs. Mewer will enjoy Pounce, I'm sure. Zelda nudged me.

Where should I put Mr. Fischbein? Move him to Hike. What peculiar names for rooms. Do you have an aversion to numbers? inquired Eva. Like the town of Wagtail, the Sugar Maple Inn is pet-friendly, so we've changed all the room names to reflect pet-related activities, I explained. A small man whom I'd barely noticed separated himself from the other ghost hunters, stepped closer, held up his forefinger, and murmured softly, I... I'm Felix Fischbein. I... I brought my dog? I was told that was okay? Eva turned to him with a devilish expression. Mr. Fischbein, we meet at last. Fischbein's Adams apple bobbed. He stuck out a stiff hand to shake hers, his shoulders pulling tight as though he was cringing inside. He forced a smile, one corner of his mouth twitching with doubt. I've heard a lot about you. Fischbein shot a glance at one of his friends, a pudgy man who glared at Eva. Fischbein shoved hair out of his forehead with his palm in a nervous gesture. Your reputation precedes you. Even his Weimaraner backed away from Eva. Eva cast a critical eye at the pudgy guy. I imagine it does. She turned to us again. I love it when ghost hunters quiver in my presence. Uh-oh. Did I sense tension? Hike is a terrific room, Mr. Fischbein, and we're very happy that you brought your dog. That worked out well. He must not have informed us that he was bringing a dog. No matter. Problem solved. Plus we had moved away from the argument about ghosts. And then Casey returned and had to go and say, It was definitely a ghost. Zelda, who fancied herself a pet psychic, whispered, Bet she doesn't believe in psychics, either. Oh no. Not what we needed right now. There's nothing wrong with my hearing, Eva announced. But you are quite right. Psychics prey on those who haven't the intelligence to know better. They're nothing more than modern-day snake oil salesmen. Eva gathered her cat into her arms. Zelda stiffened. Mrs. Mewer wants you to know that she's afraid of the vultures. Eva glanced up at the antler chandelier before frowning at Zelda. Which way is my room, please? Mrs. Mewer hunched her back and dug her claws into Eva's unfortunate wool coat, ducking and twisting her head so she could keep an eye on the vulture decorations overhead. I hoped Zelda and Casey wouldn't high-five in front of Eva. I hurried to change the subject. Would you like a GPS locating collar for Mrs. Mewer's use during her stay? Eva pondered for a moment. No. She's very good at walking on a leash. I didn't dare trust Zelda or Casey to show Eva to her room. They were bound to argue with her about ghosts and psychics. Would you keep an eye on Trixie? I asked them. I handed Eva her welcome packet. This way, please. I picked up her bags and led the way into the main part of the inn, past the large sitting room and the grand staircase. Someone had gone overboard with the decorations. A mummy stood guard on each side of the staircase. Candles flickered on assorted black iron stands, and a trio of faux, oversized black cats hissed at us. I pointed at the busy tables in the dining area. We serve breakfast, lunch,

and afternoon tea, as well as light dishes by room service on request. There's a menu in your room, and a cat menu for Mrs. Mewer. I believe Mr. Luciano has made special arrangements for most of your meals. Breakfast is here at the inn at your convenience, and there's a welcome reception for you at five o'clock this afternoon in the Dogwood Room. We walked through the library and into the newly built cat wing. I unlocked the door and switched on the overhead light, gesturing for Eva to enter. If she was distressed by the conversation regarding her disbeliefs, she showed no sign of it, but I still debated apologizing for the staff. I probably should. She lowered Mrs. Mewer to the bed and turned around in the center of the spacious guest room, taking it in with a dreamy expression. This is lovely. Thank you for changing my room. I have no idea what the other room looks like, of course, but it couldn't be any more perfect than this. Pink and red cabbage roses on a soft blue background graced the drapes and the goose-down comforter. The walls had been painted the palest blue and the wood floors had been whitewashed, a nice match with the white headboard, white tufted bench at the foot of the bed, and cozy white armchair near the fireplace. Over the top of the bed, in between paintings of cabbage roses, hung a framed quote in an artful gold script: If man could be crossed with the cat it would improve the man, but it would deteriorate the cat. ~Mark Twain. An antique mahogany dressing table with a huge mirror and the delicate crystal chandelier that hung from the ceiling offered additional feminine touches. Mrs. Mewer wasted no time in leaping to the catwalk that ran along the walls near the ceiling. She viewed us from above with haughty pleasure. I strode over to the sliding glass doors and demonstrated how to lock the cat door to the porch. When I opened it, Mrs. Mewer zoomed through, evoking a cry of distress from Eva. She's fine. I unlatched the sliding glass door and walked out to the porch with Eva on my heels. It's securely enclosed with cat-proof screening. Mrs. Mewer had already climbed to the highest point of the tree that had been installed inside the porch just for feline guests. She rested on a branch like a panther, purring so loud that we couldn't mistake her contentment. A gentle wind blew, no doubt carrying the scents of squirrels and other woodland creatures. This is amazing. Luciano told me that the Sugar Maple Inn offered special quarters for cats, but I never imagined anything like this. Is there a litter box? In the bathroom. And I must apologize for Casey and Zelda. I'm terribly sorry about their behavior. Eva shrugged. I'm used to it. Three out of four Americans believe in ghosts or some sort of supernatural activity. To do otherwise would destroy their hope in an afterlife. It's understandable that they wouldn't want to give up that dream, hence the continuing search for evidence which does not exist. She sighed. I can't complain. I'm augmenting my teaching income by proving it's all nonsense. The believers keep me employed. Thank you for being so understanding. Give me a call if there's anything you need. As I left the room, Eva was examining the contents of her gift basket. Mrs. Mewer would be thrilled with the locally made toys and treats, and after her less-than-welcome reception, Eva would probably enjoy the bottle of Fat Cat wine. I hurried back to help Zelda and Casey, but when I rushed into the registration lobby I stopped short. A perfectly round, white orb was traveling slowly across the wall. Two Trixie broke the hush by barking and chasing the orb, while Gingersnap and the Weimaraner pranced after her. Someone whispered, I've got it on my camera! Then it vanished. Too bad Miss Chevalier wasn't here for that, breathed Casey. Amazing! What happened? I asked. Zelda held up her plump hands and shook them nervously. I never would have believed it if I hadn't seen it myself. That thing entered the room and floated around. That thing was a spirit. Probably the ghost of someone who died here at the inn. The speaker hadn't been there earlier. Straight coppery hair swung across her back when she scanned the ceiling as if she expected to see more ghosts. Pale skin peppered with freckles pulled tight across her high cheekbones. A lavender dress skimmed her boyish figure, ending in an asymmetrical hemline, cut high in the front but mid-calf in the back. Felix Fischbein appeared skeptical. I don't know about that one. It could have been a reflection of something. The sun might have beamed on a shiny surface of some sort that bounced the light. The woman swung around and glowered at him. A fashionable necklace of teardrop-shaped lavender stones set in silver draped around her neck. Matching earrings dangled near her jaw. Anger edged her tone. I don't believe we've met. Mallory Gooley. Perhaps you've heard of me? I wrote Haunting Horrors of Wagtail. Felix blinked at her. I thought Mark Belinski wrote that. It seemed he caught Mallory by surprise. We worked on it together. I'm his girlfriend. Felix reached out his hand to her. I... I'm Felix. When she showed no sign of recognition, he added, Mark's college roommate? Oh, she said, clearly unimpressed and disappointed. He's here somewhere looking for you. Too bad he missed the orb. The orb appeared suddenly and then vanished? And my grandmother was absent? Hmm, I smelled a rat. A silver-haired one with a German accent. I couldn't help wondering if my grandmother and Mr. Luciano had cooked up the ghostly welcome. Mallory kept her eyes trained on the walls. In their rush to find their ghost hunting cameras and paraphernalia, the Apparition Apprehenders had

strewn the contents of duffel bags, backpacks, and suitcases all over the floor. Trixie and the Weimaraner sniffed everything, their wagging tails showing how thrilled they were. To my horror, Gingersnap had snagged something. She lay near the love seat and methodically nibbled the seam of a stuffed dinosaur. No, Gingersnap! I rushed toward her intending to take it away, but that drew Trixie's attention. When Gingersnap dropped the dinosaur, Trixie grabbed it and wildly shook her head left to right. Wads of white stuffing flew out like soft snowballs. Gingersnap grabbed a part of the dinosaur that extruded from Trixie's mouth and pulled, starting a game of tug-of-war. I dared to grab the small exposed section of the dinosaur between their mouths. Drop it! I jerked it upward while they tugged sideways. They paid no attention. I tried again. Drop it! Gingersnap reluctantly released her end, and I had a better grip on it than Trixie so I finally prevailed. I held up the dinosaur and said, I'm so sorry! Whose is this? Felix flicked his hand as though it didn't matter. Mine. I, uh, brought it along for my dog. We'll replace it, of course. My apologies. What a way to start their visit. That's okay. I'm just glad my dog didn't grab anybody's shoes and chew on them. He's forced me to be tidier at home. If my shoes aren't in a closet, he thinks they're fair game. Too late. The Weimaraner trotted by carrying a black sneaker in his mouth. I pointed at him. Is that your dog? Aww, Casper! Felix snatched the shoe and held it up one of the other guys claimed it. Smiling brightly, I said, Well, let's get you all checked in, shall we? Felix? What is your dog's name? He concentrated on Mallory while his buddies stuffed their belongings back into bags. Hmm? Oh, Casper. I handed him a Sugar Maple Inn collar. This is for Casper's use during your stay. It has GPS in it so we can track Casper down if he should get loose. Cool! He snapped it onto Casper and removed the leash. This way, please. Felix looked at me for a moment, his eyebrows creating a deep furrow over his nose. Holly... why does your name sound familiar? Oh! He pulled a wrinkled letter from a pocket in his jacket. Holly Miller? Yes? I felt apprehensive. There wasn't a single good reason for him to have anything in his pocket with my name on it. A woman in Wagtail said you could show us the way to her house. A Birdie Dupuy? Zelda snickered. My Aunt Birdie was a pill. My mother's sister, she disapproved of everything. It was a good thing my grandmother had trained me from childhood to be nice to the guests. I might have had some choice words about Aunt Birdie. How could she have known I would be here when Felix arrived? I smiled sweetly. Of course. I'll give her a call and set something up. Great. Just tell me when. I started up the stairs to his room. Why are you going to see Birdie? She wrote to me when she heard we were coming. She thinks she has ghosts in her house. Most of the people in Wagtail think they've seen ghosts. We find that a lot in old communities. I showed Felix and Casper to their room on the second floor of the main building. Each room had been furnished differently, and Hike was one of the most masculine, in browns and blues. It wasn't as large as the newer rooms in the cat wing, but it ranked right up there for coziness. I swung open the door. The stone fireplace dates back to the 1800s, when the inn was built as a country home. Felix nodded. You must encounter a lot of ghosts here in the inn. Actually, I haven't. I wasn't going to insult him by saying I didn't believe in ghosts. I quickly added, But others have. Or thought they had. Frankly, I agreed with Eva. But I had learned long ago not to spoil everyone else's fun. Besides, it was Howloween, the time of year when it was fun to suspend disbelief and imagine ghosts and goblins prowled the world. Nice room. I like the plaids. They make me feel like I'm way out in the mountains on vacation, not working. His expression soured. The lights made from deer antlers are a little creepy, though. I got his meaning right away. No deer were harmed. They shed them every year. Oh! Good to know. He tilted his head and considered them. Now I kind of like them. Sort of a rustic elegance, and when you think about it, they're recycled and good for the environment. It's not as though I'm a vegetarian or anything, so I guess that makes me an awful hypocrite, but I'd hate to think they were killed for their antlers. Felix brushed back his thick, wavy hair with his hand. An eager man poked his head inside the open door. Is that you, Felix? He startled me, not by showing up, but by his appearance. Intensely serious blue eyes dominated his face. Over each eye, the eyebrow ran straight across, barely hooking downward at the outer edges. Neatly cropped, dark blond hair framed his forehead, giving him a serious appearance. He hugged Felix in a fond, masculine manner, pounding softly on his back. Nearly a foot taller than Felix, he towered over him. Felix grinned at his friend. Mark, you old dog, I thought I'd have to find your house. Or are you staying at the inn with the rest of us? Mark laughed. I was tempted. At my house there's no maid service, and I have to do the cooking. A second man swung into the room. Average height with brown eyes, he wore a dark brown mustache. He might not have been tall or built like a Greek god but his square chin with a dimple in it was guaranteed to make women swoon. Vaguely reminiscent of a young James Garner, he lit up the room with an easy charm. Let's get this party started! Mark nodded. Grayson, this is Felix, the guy I was telling you about. Grayson is our star. You probably know him from the reality TV show he was on. He eyed me as though he had just

noticed me. Im sorry. I dont think weve met. Mark Belinski.Holly Miller.This must be Casper, he said, bending to pet Casper and Trixie.Grayson reached a hand toward me. Your grandmother told me you were coming here to work with her. I think thats so cool.Thanks. Youve been here a few days? I asked.I came up early to help Mark get ready and take a little time to relax. I did some hiking. Its a beautiful area.Felix gushed, I cant believe were here together.Mark opened his arms wide as if he were proud of himself. You didnt think Luciano put this group together by accident, did you? He came to me and asked for the best of the best. He gestured toward the man with the mustache. Grayson is our headliner. Brian and Eva should be good for some fireworks, and you and I are the brains.I wouldnt tell Brian that you set him up, said Felix.

Hes still licking his wounds from his last encounter with Eva.I interrupted briefly to disengage myself. Excuse me. Mr. Luciano has arranged for a welcome reception in the Dogwood Room at five oclock. Its down the grand staircase and to the left. Let me know if you need anything, Felix.Mark held out his hand to stop me. Wont you join us for a drink at the reception?Thank you for the kind invitation. I might be there, but Ill be working.Stop coming on to her, you old wolf. Felix laughed. I just met Mallory downstairs. New girlfriend?Mark rolled his eyes. Hey, Im looking out for you, buddy. Otherwise the welcome reception will be borrr-ing.Trixie and I left, passing Casey, who was showing the remaining ghost hunters and crew to their rooms. We trotted down the back stairs into the newly built addition that housed the reception area.Zelda grabbed my arm as soon as she saw me. Is he cute or what?Do you mean Mark or his buddy, Grayson?Neither one. Mark is taken, and I remember all the scuttlebutt about Grayson from the TV show he was on.What scuttlebutt?Oh, Holly. Dont you read the gossip magazines? One of the girls on the show accused Grayson of getting rough with her. It was a big scandal. Im surprised that Mark invited him to join the Apparition Apprehenders.You do know that those reality shows are fake, right? They probably did it for ratings.I wouldnt be so sure. But its Felix Im after! Hes so adorable. I just want to cuddle up with him, like a puppy! Besides, Mark has a girlfriend. You saw Mallory. Hes a local celebrity of sorts because he wrote a book about Wagtail.I thought you swore off men.Felix isnt like my good-for-nothing ex. Casey says hes some kind of genius. Zelda let out a squeal. Im so glad youre back. She hugged me and did a little dance, seemingly unable to stop grinning. Welcome home, Holly.Thanks. I peered into my grandmothers office behind the reception deskour office now, I supposed. Where is my grandmother?Big session to replace the mayor, said Zelda. The village elders are meeting to appoint an interim mayor until they can hold an election. She should be back anytime now.Did you get everyone else checked in okay?No problems, but I was a little spooked by that ghost. Im glad Caseys working here tonight, and not me.Youre a psychic and ghosts scare you? I couldnt help giggling.She tossed back her long blonde hair and pumped her fist on a well-rounded hip. Im not a people psychic. Its just that I can communicate with animals. Thats a lot different than being able to connect with ghosts. And animals are always nice.I had serious doubts about her abilities, but Zelda was a wonderful person, full of life and kindness. I would never want to hurt her feelings. She did get a few things right, like Mrs. Mewers fear of the vultures. Of course, any observant person might have noticed that. Still, I asked, Youve never encountered a growling dog or an angry cat?Well, sure. But those are their defense mechanisms. Most of the time theyre the ones who are afraid. Either people have treated them badly in the past or something has upset them. Animals dont usually want to harm anyone. Its people who will hurt you.The sliding doors opened again, but this time my lovely grandmother marched through them. Her cheeks were flushed from the cold like red apples. She raised her arms for a hug. Holly! I apologize for leaving you alone so soon. She hugged me and patted Trixie. It could not be helped. Oma hated that she still spoke with a German accent after fifty years in America. She tossed her short sassy hair in an exaggerated manner. You are looking at the interim mayor of Wagtail!More hugs ensued, from Zelda, and Trixie and Gingersnap, too. Casey returned just in time to hear the good news.Congratulations, Oma! I said. I had no idea you were interested in being mayor. I thought you intended to take a long cruise.A mayor can take a vacation, no? While I am gone, you will handle anything that comes up.I was pretty sure that there were no rules of familial succession when it came to governing, but I figured wed take that up when the time came. After all, she was only an interim mayor, and I had a hunch that while she liked the idea of a cruise, it might be difficult to talk her into actually leaving Wagtail, even for a few weeks. The woman was as stubborn as I was.You are settled in, Holly? she asked.I wouldnt exactly call it settled. But now that Im here, I can take my time unpacking. I think a few pieces of furniture will have to go across the hall into the storage attic. Is that okay?Yes, of course. She gazed at Trixie. I cannot get over the change in Trixie.You mean her fur? I asked.It is so soft now. And almost white!I knew just what she meant. When Trixie adopted me, she had been abandoned and living outdoors, eating what she could scavenge. Her fur had been yellowish and

harsh to the touch. I thought her fur was becoming silky, but it was hard to tell because I was with her every day. Her sweet, dark eyes reminded me of a seal. Trixie often wore an earnest look, like she was worried. I assumed that was the result of being homeless and fending for herself so long. Her black ears flipped over in a very sweet way. Other than her ears and cute little nose, a black spot on her rump that went halfway up her tail was the only other bit that wasn't white. No one had docked her tail. About ten inches long, it usually curled upward. Zelda knelt to pet her. Its amazing what a difference decent food can make. She says she feels better, too. I tried hard to hide my grin of amusement when Zelda relayed Trixie's thoughts. I imagined she did feel spunkier though. If her fur had improved, it only stood to reason that her general health had, too. Should I help Shelley with the welcome reception? I asked Oma. That would be good of you. She is a pro and probably needs no help, but check with her, yes? And I would appreciate your assistance tonight at the bonfire. Were having a bonfire? Not the Sugar Maple Inn, the whole town. Its one of our Howloween events, along with a hayride through the haunted woods. You've arrived at just the right time, liebchen. There are events planned every day to draw visitors to our Howloween celebration. Rose is in charge of it. That explained a lot. Rose Richardson was Oma's best friend and like another grandmother to me. If she had planned the Howloween events, Oma and I would be right there by her side, helping out. It gets bigger and bigger each year, Oma continued. All the rooms and rental cottages are sold out this week. Isn't that wonderful? Do you have a costume? You mean like a Halloween costume? Of course. She smiled at Trixie. I have just the thing for you, my little one. Oma led the way into her office, pulled a costume out of a bag, and held it up. It took me a moment to figure it out. Longish white ruffles flared from both ends. The center was a deep brown with white lettering. A Tootsie Roll? Oma laughed. Isn't it cute? It would never work for Gingersnap, but it is perfect for Trixie's body shape. Do you have a costume, or should I help you put something together? Until my move to Wagtail, I had worked in fund-raising and had attended more than one costume gala. I have some things. Its just a matter of finding them in all the boxes. I left to help Shelley, pleased to see that Trixie and Twinkletoes alternately followed and raced ahead of me, feeling quite at home. But when I neared the grand staircase, Mallory of the coppery hair, coauthor of the ghost book, intercepted me. This would be such a perfect place for a wedding! We host quite a few of them. She gazed at the grand staircase, her face lighting up with bridal euphoria. He would love a Halloween wedding. No lights, just candles. At midnight! The witching hour, when spirits are the closest. I could walk down these stairs in a long ivory gown. Oh! A pumpkin wedding cake with cream cheese frosting, and martinis with olive eyeballs in them. Wouldn't that be fantastic? Would you like to book the inn for next Halloween? Hmm? She swung toward me. I'd like to do it this Halloween. Thats not much time. Its only days away. She gazed past my ear at the stairs. Blotches of red flashed up on her face, and I thought she stopped breathing. The corner of her mouth twitched. Well, maybe next Halloween would be more realistic, but I'd rather not wait that long. Felix, Mark, and Grayson ambled down the stairs with Casper in the lead. Mark headed for us with a distinctly unhappy look. Excuse us, Holly. He gently touched Mallory's elbow and ushered her a few feet away. Sweetie, she cooed in a tone that even I knew was saccharin-fake, where have you been? There was no sweetness in his tone. Knock it off, Mallory. He lowered his voice to a whisper. I thought I made it very clear that you are not involved in this project. She batted her eyelashes at him. I almost laughed. Who did that? Had she watched too many old movies? Mallory's eyes strayed like she sought an escape hatch. They landed on Grayson and floated to Felix. Felix! She skittered over to him. You don't mind if I come along for dinner, do you? Felix blinked in surprise. Uh, sure. Its okay by me, but I... Im not in charge. She flashed a pleased look at Mark. Eva arrived from the other direction with Mrs. Mewer on a leash. Her mouth open, she stopped dead. Mark lowered his head, but I could see his jaw twitching with anger. Clearly annoyed, Mark hustled after Mallory. Its not fair to put Felix on the spot. Im sorry, but this is a private reception and dinner afterward. Im not footing the bill. We have reservations, and I can't just start adding people. I was very clear about this with you, Mallory. You're such a doofus sometimes. She pecked Felix on the cheek. Ill see you later, Mark. Mallory started for the front door. She stopped mid-step at the sight of Eva. Well, isn't this interesting? Mark barked, Mallory! Im going, she sang. With a wicked smile and a twist of her shoulder at Eva, she finally left the inn. Eva appeared paler than when she checked in. I rushed to her side. Are you all right? Can I get you anything? Im fine, thanks. Just a little shock at seeing a ghost from my past. She flicked an angry look in Mark's direction. Excuse me. I'd better hurry over there to meet Mr. Luciano. She picked up Mrs. Mewer and made her way to the sitting room, her head held high. I kept wineglasses filled while Shelley circulated with miniature salty Virginia ham biscuits, herbed goat cheese crostada topped with caramelized red and yellow peppers, and cheese-straw witches fingers with almond-slice fingernails at the

tips. Most of the conversation revolved around ghost hunting. They swapped stories, and I heard them exclaim as they discovered they had mutual acquaintances. When the ghost hunters left for dinner, I helped clean up and finally trotted upstairs to my apartment. An hour later, it looked like it had been ransacked. I thought I'd been careful about marking all the boxes when I packed them, but evidently not. We developed a ritual. I sliced a box open with Trixie sniffing it. As soon as I determined that it wasn't the correct box, Twinkletoes jumped inside it to investigate. I had never seen such a snoopy cat. She was adorable, hiding in boxes and raising her head just high enough to peer out. Inquisitive green eyes dominated her white face. Just above them, it looked like she had shoved sunglasses up on her head with one lens of dark chocolate and the other of caramel. Her body had the typical calico pattern of dark chocolate and caramel patches on white. Even though she was still just a kitten, her tail bushed out in a fancy dark plume. I did manage to place a few items on the bookshelves and fireplace mantel, but I didn't have time to unpack each box. Maybe when the Apparition Apprehenders had left, and I had become accustomed to a daily routine at the inn, I could focus on unpacking in an orderly manner. A shriek of glee escaped me when I located my flapper outfit: a heavily beaded red dress with a black feather boa and a red headband adorned with more black feathers. Hah! I had even packed the bead necklace with it. Perfect. Twinkletoes grabbed the boa with determined claws, as if she thought it the best toy ever. It wasn't easy to remove it from her clutches. In the end, she escaped with a black feather, and I tucked the boa neatly in a drawer for safekeeping until I dressed.***At seven thirty, I followed Omas instructions to prepare for the bonfire. I loaded one of the inns electric golf carts with lanterns, urns of hot cider, chocolate bars, marshmallows, graham crackers, three carved pumpkins with candles, and a flashlight. Dressed as a flapper, I took my wagging Tootsie Roll companion and drove through the quiet streets of Wagtail to the opposite end of the pedestrian zone. The golf cart barely hummed, but dried leaves crackled under the wheels as I drove up to the creepy Wagtail Springs Hotel: the perfect backdrop for a Howloween bonfire. Many of the leaves had fallen, and as though it had been ordered, a not-quite-full moon shone through gnarled tree branches. No one else had arrived yet. I was a little spooked just looking at the two-story hotel. Moonlight gleamed on the white building. Front porches ran across both levels. I could imagine people rocking on them in the hotels heyday, much as they did at our inn. Chimneys shot up the side on each end. Dark and forbidding, the windows of the old place almost begged for stories of ghosts. No wonder the Apparition Apprehenders would be investigating it. A large white gazebo off to the side and set back on the lawn seemed eerie alone in the dark. It housed one of the original mineral baths from the days when Wagtail had been a spa resort. In the 1800s, Wagtail had thrived on visitors who came for the waters. I tried to shake off the dismal feeling and hopped out of the golf cart, but Trixie wouldn't come. She sat on the golf cart seat, fixated on the old hotel. And then she barked like crazy. Three I had only heard her bark with such intensity once before. That time, someone appeared out of nowhere. I scanned the hotel but didn't see anything unusual. She kept up the wild barking. I seized the flashlight, turned it on, and aimed it at the hotel. On the second-floor porch, the beam caught a movement. I held the light steady. An older man with silvery hair rose slowly and disappeared into the building. I double-checked my cell phone. Did it work here? Wagtail was notorious for poor signals. Only one carrier worked at all, and reception was sporadic at best. One bar. That was better than nothing. The man emerged from the front door. He walked toward us leisurely but with an able gait. I trained the flashlight on him. He wore jeans, a red plaid flannel shirt, and heavy boots. I put him in his seventies. As he approached, I realized that he was laughing and was actually fairly attractive. A black Labrador followed him, almost hidden in the dark. He patted Trixie. I've heard about you. Bet you're a great hunting dog. He reached a calloused hand toward me. Doc Kilgore. Sorry if I spooked you. I was waiting for my scout troop to arrive with wood. They're building the bonfire. My heart was still pounding, but I relaxed a little bit. Who is this? I asked, stroking his dog, who wagged his entire rear end as though I was his new best friend. Siggie. Named after Sigmund Freud because I think he calms my patients. So you're a people doctor, not a veterinarian. Exactly. Some folks round these parts think I should retire because my hair isn't black anymore, but I've still got my wits about me. Can I give you a hand here? That would be great! There's supposed to be a table set up somewhere. I gazed at Trixie. It wasn't going to be easy to unload everything with her on a leash. What's wrong? Trixie hasn't been to dog school yet, so I was debating whether to let her off her leash. She's got a GPS collar on her. I bet she'll be fine. Siggie will keep her around. He spoke with such confidence that I wanted to believe him. With some trepidation, I unlatched the leash. Stay close by. Do you understand? She wagged her tail, but I knew that was meaningless. Maybe Doc was right and playing with Siggie would keep her from roaming. Doc Kilgore and I set the lanterns on the table and lit the wicks so we could see better. The scouts arrived just as we finished

setting up the last urn. I thanked him for his help and watched as the young boys crowded around him, each one shouting for his attention. They obviously adored him. Trixie and Siggie danced among them, sniffing the wood they piled into a pyre and snatching particularly enticing pieces to drag away. I finished setting out the marshmallows, graham crackers, and chocolate bars. I placed pumpkins at intervals along the table and lighted the candles. Hey, Doc, I shouted. Did the scouts bring branches for the smores? He had them build a small campfire for cooking so no one would get too close to the bonfire. The scouts arranged a lovely heap of branches near the end of our table. Visitors to town drifted over to see what was going on. Before long the bonfire blazed. Oma and her best friend, Rose, joined me to hand out hot cider laced with cinnamon. Just behind us, a tractor pulling a hay wagon rolled away. People and their dogs sat on hay bales for a nighttime hayride by the cemetery and along a road through the woods. Will there be ghosts on the hayride? I asked Rose. She laughed. Of course. And maybe a vampire or two! Rose made a darling Miss Marple in a dowdy gray wool hat with a short brim. Her hair fluffed out beneath it. She wore a heavy tweed jacket over a fussy lace blouse with a large cameo brooch clasped at the throat. I felt as though Miss Marple had walked off the page and into Wagtail. I studied Oma for a moment. Tidy blue suit, white button-down shirt, sturdy shoes, a magnifying glass hanging around her neck. Had she cut her hair or was that a wig? I didn't want to offend her by asking what was going on. Her taste usually ran a little more to what she called country elegant. It wasn't until a man said, Thank you, Mrs. Fletcher, that I realized she was in costume. She had always loved mysteries. I should have known. I watched the bonfire and the happy people in costume, most of them with dogs or cats in costume, too. I recognized Mr. Luciano and his bulldog, Gina, and waved to them. Mr. Luciano always made me think of the movie The Godfather, no doubt due to his deep, gravelly voice and prizefighter build. Felix, Mark, and other ghost hunters milled around him. The glow from the fire reflected on Mallory's coppery hair. She tossed it back seductively and appeared to be flirting with Felix. Eva, on the other hand, stood apart, looking lonely. I excused myself and brought her a cup of cider. Where's Mrs. Mewer? Oh, thank you! How thoughtful of you. Eva sipped the cider. I took Mrs. Mewer back to our room. I loved taking her to the restaurant. They even had a feline menu. I thought she might be too nervous to eat but she snarfed their salmon. Still, she's never been anywhere except the veterinarian, and I thought the big fire might scare her, so she's taking a catnap to recover from all her new adventures today. A yellow lab with three heads dipped her middle nose toward Trixie, who pinned her ears back and edged away toward the safety of my legs. I did a double take myself. Eva and I exchanged a look and giggled. The lab's owner had attached an additional head made out of felt to each side of her collar. No wonder Trixie was confused. The three-headed dog appeared very real. I bent over to reassure Trixie. It's okay. Two of those heads are fake. Casper, the Weimaraner, buddied up with Trixie like they were old pals. Emboldened by the presence of Casper, Trixie joined him in sniffing the mysterious extra heads of the yellow lab, who waggled happily at all the attention. Flames from the bonfire licked up at the velvety night sky. In the mountains, the stars always seemed closer, and tonight was no exception. In the distance, a glow-in-the-dark skeleton walked a large dog wearing a glow-in-the-dark dog-skeleton outfit. Eva had turned her attention to Mallory, who clung to Felix, laughing and flirting. Everything okay? I asked. If I had known she was going to be here, I never would have come. If it's any comfort, I gather she's not part of the Apparition Apprehenders. Zelda joined us. If Mallory is with Mark, would someone please explain to me why she's flirting with my Felix? Eva gave a jolt, spilling her cider. With Mark? Didn't she say they were an item? asked Zelda. They wrote that book about Wagtail's ghosts together. Ughhhh. Eva closed her eyes and pressed a palm on the top of her head. I am so stupid. I don't get it, said Zelda. Eva adjusted her glasses. Once upon a time, Mark and I were a couple. When he invited me to join this group we exchanged e-mails and talked on the phone, and it seemed like old times again. He was charming at dinner, but now I see why he wanted to include me. That devil. I shot Zelda a questioning glance. She shrugged. Eva caught our moment of confusion. Sparks! Fireworks! If Mallory and I engage in a cat fight it will boost the ratings of the show. Now I saw where she was coming from. I would have been furious, too. How dare he dupe her that way? But wait, Mallory isn't part of the show. Eva peered at me over her glasses. Then what is she doing here? Why is she hanging around? No, no, Holly. It's the same reason Mark put Brian and me together. He knows we'll have some disagreements. What if you don't? asked Zelda. Eva snorted. Impossible. Brian always pulls childish tricks. I'm bound to catch some of them. She eyed Mark. But two can play this game. Eva smirked at us. Give me a few minutes, Zelda. I'll lure Mallory away from Felix so you can move in on him. Eva strode toward Mark and Grayson. I like her! Zelda fluffed her hair. Now all we have to do is fix you up with someone. No, thanks. I'll sit this one out. Aww, pining for Ben? It was my turn to snort. That relationship is dead in the water. How can

that be? He asked you to marry him. In a text, Zelda! That's not a real proposal. Besides, once I decided to move here, he was so miffed that he acted like I was already gone. I'd hardly call that love. Look, look, Zelda whispered. I couldn't tell what kind of magic Eva had worked, but sure enough, Mallory abandoned her grip on Felix to hurry toward Mark and Grayson. Zelda was already moving in on Felix. I chuckled to myself, happy for Zelda. I hoped Eva was wrong about Mark's motivation for including her, though. Inviting her so she and Mallory would spat seemed even worse than a texted proposal. I returned to my job of handing out cider. Wow! Great costume! Felix's friend was as animated as a kid who'd eaten too much candy on Halloween. A little on the tubby side, he held a half-eaten chocolate bar in his left hand. He straightened his baseball cap that said I'd rather be ghost hunting, leaned toward me, and reached out his beefy hand. Brian Anderson. Holly, right? Right. Are you enjoying Wagtail? Sure am. What a dinner! Luciano is pulling out all the stops for us. And everybody has been so nice. Like they're excited to have us here. I filled a cup of cider for him. They probably are. It's not every day that someone makes a TV show in Wagtail. What do you think of the ghastly old hotel? Brian accepted the cider. I can't wait to get inside that place. Does Casper go with you? Brian nodded vigorously. He's our ghost dog. Weimaraners are called ghost dogs because of the gray color of their fur. Sometimes in the dark, Casper looks kind of like a ghost. We even call him Ghost as a nickname. I laughed. That's an appropriate breed for a ghost hunter. Has he ever sniffed out a ghost? Revue de presse Praise for the New York Times Bestselling Paws Claws Mysteries Wagtail Mountain will appeal to animal lovers and mystery lovers, alike. Kate Carlisle, New York Times bestselling author of the Bibliophile Mysteries Davis has created another charming series. Sofie Kelly, New York Times bestselling author of the Magical Cats Mysteries Davis has created a town that any pet would love as much as their owners do. And they won't let a little thing like murder spoil their enjoyment. Sheila Connolly, New York Times bestselling author of the County Cork, Museum, and Orchard Mysteries Murder, mystery, a bit of romance and seriously PETS!! Who could ask for anything more? Open Book Society