

# gravity

Abigail Boyd



# **GRAVITY**

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## Chapter 1

Fifteen candles set the top of the cake on fire. Another year disappeared.

"Make a wish, Ariel." I sucked in all the breath my lungs could hold and blew the candles out. I wished for my year back.

My family was holding a small birthday party for me at the house I'd lived in my entire life. Just my parents, Claire and Hugh, and my Aunt Corinne. Corinne and Claire are twins, although vastly different in many ways. Claire is all business at work and at home, where she sees herself as the person missing in the pictures of a glossy design magazine. She is the invisible hand that fluffs embroidered pillowcases and sets the perfect table.

I'm her plain, too-ordinary daughter, who sometimes smudges makeup beneath my hazel eyes and doesn't realize it for hours. Once I walked around school all day with gum on the seat of my pants. No one told me until I got home.

I looked around at the hesitant faces that gathered in my honor. Atop each head was an ugly brown and yellow polka dot party hat, clearance from the birthday section. The strap on mine pinched my chin and I slid my finger beneath it. That was the extent of the decorating.

I woke up that morning feeling strange, as if a veil hung over the world. The happy jitters I normally had on my birthday were nonexistent. It could have been any other day on the calendar. But the nagging feeling that the world had changed, shifted ever so slightly, plagued me through the hours. Maybe the way I looked at it had changed. I put it down to being older, and tried not to think about it. I seemed to be the only one who noticed.

"Remember, I need to be getting home soon," Aunt Corinne said, shifting from foot to foot. The fifth reminder she had given us already. Life had to revolve around her time schedule. In that way, both she and my mother were the same.

Claire glared at her, the whites of her eyes reddened from fatigue, but Corinne was oblivious. Claire stepped in to cut the store-bought cake, making delicate little slivers with her engraved cake server. Always the hostess, even when nobody important stood by to grade her skill.

"There are four people here, honey. Who are you saving cake for?" Hugh asked gently.

Claire's smile was a red line. She scooped two small pieces on each of the china plates she only brought out for special occasions and handed them out.

Ever since I could remember, I called my parents by their first names, at their insistence. I think they thought it kept them young. Especially with Claire, "mom" was verboten, and would earn me a scolding.

We picked at our cake around the dining room table, none of sitting. I bit down on the white plastic fork with my teeth. Why the formality of a birthday party seemed necessary to Claire was beyond me. But I would do anything to make her happier for a day.

"Present time!" Corinne said after a minute, clapping her hands so the thin bangles on her wrists jingled. She seemed intent on running the show now. We shifted over as a unit to the brightly-wrapped objects on the kitchen counter. Although I held my hands poised to start unwrapping, inside I wished for the whole ordeal to be over. I wasn't in the celebrating mood. I drifted somewhere behind myself, like watching my life being acted out by someone else.

"Start with mine." Claire handed me a charming gift-wrapped box. I undid the shimmery lilac paper. The box contained an old-fashioned necklace on a silver chain, from which hung a rectangular, emerald-colored glass pendant. At least, I assumed it was glass. I held the pendant up to catch the light on the ceiling fan. A bit formal for school and not something I would wear often, but lovely nonetheless.

"That necklace belonged to Grandma Eleanor," Claire informed me. "I've been keeping it in my jewelry box until I felt the time was right."

"Thanks," I said, laying it carefully back on the strip of cotton inside the box. It meant a lot to have a token from my Grandma's life, not just something she'd given me; I had barely seen her in the final year before her death. "It's really beautiful. I'll keep it safe."

"I know how much you miss Grandma," Claire said. She pushed a stray strand of hair out of my eyes.

"We all miss Mom," Corinne interjected, as if it were a contest. Who's the best daughter? Even now that the mom could no longer receive handmade cards or runaway threats scribbled in crayon.

Hugh handed me a bag stuffed with tissue paper. "Here you go kiddo. Happy birthday. I hope you like it."

Inside was a fitted gray and black coat. Claire had probably picked it out, but I thanked him for his good taste. It seemed like something I would have picked out myself, as my wardrobe consisted entirely of muted colors.

"Hopefully it's the right size. You've grown so much taller since last year," he said, with a touch of nostalgia in his voice that made me wistful. He exaggerated. I'd gained maybe an inch, which barely put me over 5'5". But I knew that inch seemed like the year to him, coming too fast and changing me into a different person, one small aspect at a time.

Aunt Corinne's present would have obviously been hers, even in a pile. The paper was shiny purple, dotted with silver crescent moons. One would never tell from her uptight demeanor and plain clothing, but Corinne had an obsession with the occult. Tarot cards and scrying mirrors filled the spare room of her condo.

I pulled off the paper along the seam and laid it flat, revealing three chunky hardcovers. I lifted the books up one by one; they all had "ghost" in the title.

"Thanks, I needed something new to read," I told her. "These are perfect."

She beamed, the look on her face declaring she'd found me the best gift. I almost expected her to stick her tongue out at Claire.

I've always loved ghost stories, even when they scare me. Maybe especially then. Truthfully, all my life I've been a bit strange, with an interest in the macabre. When I was seven, I made a shoebox diorama about the Donner Party, complete with tiny clay body parts and half a bottle of red food coloring. The teacher safety-pinned a note to my backpack that day, asking Claire if we had any trouble at home. She pasted it in one of her scrapbooks.

Claire grimaced, the bridge of her upturned nose creasing.

"Really, when are you going to give this up?" she asked Corinne, picking up *The Truth about Real Ghosts*. My mother hated even the mention of anything supernatural. All scams, according to her, for gullible people. Her disapproval of Corinne was the footnote to that assessment.

"Never," Corinne retorted, looking insulted. She puffed her chest up a little. "How do you give up a sacred truth about the universe? Would I ask you to give up number crunching?" Claire set the book down as she pooh-poohed her under her breath.

Hugh looked as uncomfortable as I felt, a tight, unnatural smile tugging on his lips. Whenever the twins got together it was a draining situation for everyone else unlucky enough to be around. Aunt Corinne could suck all the energy out of a room into herself, like a tornado, fueling her bad moods. I didn't want to reach that point today. I didn't think I could take it.

I set the volumes aside, running my index finger over the silver lettering on the top selection. Even with the false cheery atmosphere, I could feel the creep of death in the room, between my Grandmother's necklace and the subject of the books.

"Ariel, I really do need to get going," Aunt Corinne said yet again, flipping her limp bangs. I resisted the urge to clench my jaw, telling myself that at least she would be gone. Pulling on her coat and mustard yellow scarf, she lifted her hefty leather purse off of the table. Three cake plates sat untouched beside it. Only Hugh had managed to eat his.

"Happy birthday. Enjoy them while you can," she advised me.

We exchanged a sterile hug, and she clomped across the carpeted living room in her boots. I could practically hear Claire's teeth on edge. Usually, no one was allowed to come in or go out the front door because of the pale living room carpeting. There was even a tidy print-out, complete with a little border of vacuums, taped on the back of the front door. Any time a mark appeared on the carpet, Claire got on her hands and knees with the spray bottle, scrubbing long after it became invisible to most human eyes.

My parents followed behind Corinne out to her minivan. I waved from the doorway. Occult bumper stickers decorated the back beneath the tinted windows. I shut the door, and headed back to the scene of the little party.

The remnants of the gathering looked discarded and sad now that everyone had deserted the room. I crumpled the leftover wrapping paper pile sitting on the counter and deposited it on top of the recycling bin. Gathering the books and the box with the necklace, I set them on the basement steps to take down to my room.

The sliding glass door opened as Hugh and Claire came back inside. True to form, Claire had insisted they walk all the way around the house and come in through the back door. Hugh walked past me, patting my shoulder as he continued to the hall and disappeared upstairs. Probably to work in his studio, I figured.

He owned an art gallery in town called Erasmus, and these days he was always so buried in paperwork and formalities he hardly had time to paint. He snuck in every opportunity he could find, even if it only happened to be a spare five minutes.

Claire stacked the dirty plates from the kitchen table on her arms like a waitress and carried them into the kitchen. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes distant. She looked as though she was watching a play inside her head. I wondered if it was a comedy or a tragedy.

"Do you want any help?" I asked. Dishes were usually one of my few chores. My voice sounded too loud as it rang out in the room.

"Of course not...it's your birthday," she said dismissively. She scraped leftovers into the trash. The tines on the fork she was using snapped, and she flicked it into the trash with an exasperated exhale. She grabbed a metal one from the silverware drawer and continued her cleaning. We stood silently for a minute; the only sounds those of metal against china, and the soft thudding as the cake hit the bag.

"Did you have a good birthday?" she asked finally, looking into my eyes for the answer. I knew she wanted me to say yes. I shrugged instead.

"I feel older," I admitted, managing an expression close to a smile. I wiped a smudge off of one of the cabinets with my finger.

She smiled back, but undisguised worry filled her eyes. "You are older," she said.

She never handled emotions well, preferring to pretend not to feel them at all.

I excused myself and went in the living room to lie down on the couch. I felt more tired than I had initially realized as I curled up on the puffy gray cushions. Heaviness settling over me and my thoughts slowed down as I drifted off.

A sharp sound jolted me awake in what seemed like the next moment. I sat up, hitting the coffee table with my shin as my legs swung out. The sound came from behind me, outside the picture window. My brain still half asleep, I turned and peered out of the curtains. A figure stood across the street. Fear instantly seized me, though I didn't know why. There was nothing obviously threatening about them, no weapon, but that didn't stop my pulse from speeding up.

I rubbed my eyes, trying to focus better. I realized that it wasn't my vision that was blurry; the person looked hazy and out of focus. I got up and opened the front door, walking out onto the porch.

The clothes were my first indication. She still wore the same yellow hoodie, jean shorts, and purple flip flops as the last time I saw her in June. I stopped on the grass, not realizing I had continued walking off of the relative safety of the porch. Jenna, who disappeared almost three months ago, now stood a few yards away from me. For a moment, I felt nothing. Not the shock I had imagined I would feel if I ever saw her again. Neither of us moved, nor said a word as we looked at each other. Her features were a flat mask.

And then she ran. Without a second thought, I started to run, too. My legs moved before my thoughts caught up. Something inside me screamed for me to stay where I was, but I paid no attention to the warning. No cars drove in the empty street. The dark sky above looked purple, the clouds racing each other across the horizon. I couldn't find the sun. I must have slept longer than I thought.

I pictured the collection of medals that decorated the wall of Jenna's room, declaring her the fastest girl on the track team. I didn't have that kind of stamina, so I struggled to keep up. My gaze remained locked on her as she sped away from me. The sound of my frantic footsteps hitting the pavement filled my ears, like drums.

"Wait!" I shouted, but she didn't hear me. Up ahead, the road dead-ended, but she didn't stop running. Past that were the trees that bordered the woods. I was sure she would stop, but again I was wrong. Like a colorful butterfly, she flew in between the giant trunks of the shaggy hickory trees. I didn't have a net, nothing to catch her. And so I followed her.

Unseen dangers threatened me in the dark of the woods. Sharp sticks scratched my bare arms below my t-shirt sleeves. Branches whipped my cheeks, snagging in my long hair. It was as if they were trying to stop me.

Jenna stood out as a bright spot, flickering in the trees ahead. I felt like if I lost sight of her for a moment, she would be gone forever. I was in the middle of my only chance. That thought kept me going, even as every breath burned, and my legs felt like they would give out. The sound of my lungs expanding and contracting took over the tattoo my feet were beating on the ground.

The only two people in the world at that moment were Jenna and I. She knew her destination, I could tell, as I crashed through the foliage that slowed me down. But whether she wanted me to follow her, or whether she was trying to get away, I didn't know. I wanted to shout again, but I knew the effort would be futile. I didn't have enough oxygen anyway.

Picking up speed with every step, she gracefully darted between trees and rocks. I stumbled over a low stump, crying out in pain as I nearly fell. But I got up again and kept moving, trying to ignore the throb in my shin. The woods seemed never-ending, even though I knew better. I'd been there many times, the dark green leaves hiding me like a secret. As little girls Jenna and I played in these same woods, our laughter echoing off the tree trunks. It seemed like a different world now.

A clearing appeared ahead, past an archway of bowed branches, grasping each other like a handshake. She ducked through them and disappeared. Panic seized me. I had lost her. I wasn't fast enough. Defeat threatened to swallow me alive, a fish in the mouth of a whale.

But as I came out on the other side, I caught sight of her again. In front of me wound a dirt road, the surface black as if wet with rain. The unnatural purple clouds rolled by, like a strong thunderstorm pushed them in. Trees made a wall on my side of the road, and I couldn't see the space I had just come through.

Jenna didn't stop like I did, I realized too late. A huge, wrought iron fence stood across the road, with a tall gate. To my surprise, she pulled open the gate and continued to run on the property beyond. The gate slammed shut behind her with a deafening clunk.

I ran across the street and slammed into the closed gate, harder than I intended to. The bars struck my chest, skin stinging beneath my shirt. Frustration rushed into my throat, wanting to roar out. The

gate rattled but didn't budge. Wrapping my fingers around the solid bars, I tried to pull the barrier open, but it seemed to be locked. A copper colored symbol sat in the center, like a bundle of sticks.

The fence wrapped all the way around the property as far as I could see. I stepped back and walked from side to side, like a caged animal. Instead of wanting to get out, I wanted inside. But there was no break in the endless duplication of iron bars. *No way in.*

*Jenna!* I tried to scream, but no sound came out of my mouth. My tongue stuck behind my teeth. But she finally stopped running, standing still. There was no slowing down; one moment she ran at full speed and the next she was at a dead stop. I wondered if she heard me, after all, when I didn't hear myself. Only then did I notice the tall building that stood before her. I recognized it after a moment as the Dexter Orphanage, one of our town's supposedly haunted sites. Haunted for tourism, since some long-ago fool decided to name it Hell. Why would she bring me here? Maybe she really was trying to escape me.

Jenna turned to look at me. Her curly hair hung lank around her shoulders, as if ready to fall out at the roots. She always took so much pride in her hair. Was she hurt? Nothing seemed right or logical. I'd known her for as long as my memory stretched back, yet she looked like a stranger to me.

I leaned my face into the bars, reaching my arm out so far it hurt, spreading my fingers. Her face remained stoic, not even the smallest flicker of emotion or acknowledgement that I could see. Standing as if rooted to the spot, I couldn't tell if she saw me or not. Or if it mattered.

For a second, it looked as though maybe she would come back. Walk towards me. Hope stirred inside my chest. But then she turned, walking behind the split staircase that led to the front door. I shook the gate again, pulling with every ounce of strength I had, but it still wouldn't move. As Jenna disappeared, I realized this was the moment I dreaded. The moment I would remember for the rest of my life with a pang of regret in my heart. The last time I would see her.

Thick smoke began to billow out of the top windows. It took me a moment in my distraction to realize what that meant. The building was on fire. My feelings of abandonment became feelings of horror. Orange flames jumped out and licked the sky. I opened my mouth to scream.



## Chapter 2

I woke up on the couch in my living room. My mouth still hung open. A dream. It was all a dream. The thought hit me immediately, but I couldn't believe it. I felt the familiar pressure rise in my chest that never made it to my eyes. I hadn't cried since the day Jenna disappeared. But I had seen her...hadn't I?

Claire leaned in from the kitchen.

"Are you okay?" she asked, her brow knit with concern, reading glasses parked on top of her blonde hair. "You were talking in your sleep."

I nodded, still dazed.

"I'm fine," I muttered. I was miles away from fine. The dream, if that's what it had been, felt so real. The way dreams are in movies that they never are in real life.

The clock on the entertainment center said 5:30 pm. That meant I'd only been asleep for a half hour. Sunlight still streamed in through the slit between the curtains. I pulled them back, but no one was there. I waited, watching the street with desperate eyes, but no one appeared. The perfectly ordinary blue sky mocked me, the sun hitting the grass across the street and making it glow.

Sitting back down, I tried to catch my breath. Jenna and the orphanage began to fade as my waking senses took hold. I urgently tried to cling to my thoughts, the effort fruitless. Even as I tried to analyze the details of the dream, they disappeared.

I stood up to get a drink of water, and my legs ached. Probably from being squashed on the couch. I stretched my toes through my socks. I padded across the room into the dining room.

Our house has a relatively open floor plan; the kitchen only separated by the wall of neat, glass-front cupboards, inside which Claire's good china was displayed. Claire herself sat at the now completely cleaned dining room table. One would never know cake had been smashed onto its glistening surface merely a short time ago. The dishwasher hummed with comforting familiarity. Everything felt too real to be right, like an elaborate ruse. I brushed off my mental paranoia.

"I'm sorry if I woke you," Claire said. She sounded distracted as she sipped coffee from her metal travel mug. She refused to use the chipped

ones that Hugh normally did — he was the big coffee drinker in our family and required over ten cups a day. Her laptop sat ready to be opened for business next to her.

"I'm sure your friends were just busy, Ariel," she said, unprompted. *What friends?* I automatically thought.

"I didn't have time to get organized beforehand, so I gave late notice," she continued. The details of the party had been the farthest worry from my mind, but her comment brought them back. To Claire, lack of organization felt like a mortal sin. If she didn't get things perfect, she might as well have completely failed.

"I'm not upset about it, Claire," I assured her. "It went fine. I didn't want a big revelry, I told you that."

In light of the situation the very idea had sounded disrespectful and more stressful than it was worth. Thankfully, it was only my fifteenth birthday and not my sixteenth, or she may have hired people to come as my guests. She didn't seem convinced. I changed the subject.

"I wondered if I could ride my bike for a little while," I said, testing out the waters of her approval. It was always safest to only dip a toe in.

"By yourself?" she asked, looking up at me. Her lips were frozen on the rim of her mug. I ignored the urge to roll my eyes. I wasn't defenseless. I wished she would stop treating me as though I were.

"It's still day time. Nothing is going to happen to me, and I'll stay on the street," I offered patiently, running my hands back and forth over the headrest of the dining room chair.

"I just want you to be safe," she said, leaning back and shutting her pale eyes. My parents barely let me go out to check the mail since Jenna disappeared, based on the idea that someone lurked behind the bushes, ready to snatch me if I took two steps out the door.

"I'm always safe. I will take my phone with me and be back within an hour, I promise." I was getting restless. I couldn't stand still, my feet shifting back and forth.

"Is your phone charged?" she grilled me.

"Oh, come on," I scoffed. "My phone is always charged. It lives on the charger." I gestured to where it sat plugged into the wall.

She still looked doubtful, so I played my only card.

"It's my birthday," I pleaded. I hated making her feel bad. But I just needed to get out for a while. And something important required my investigation.

After a moment, she said, "Fine. You can go. But you have to be back within the hour. Not a second later. Not a millisecond later." She looked down her nose at me to make sure I got the point. Her glasses started falling off her head and snagged in her hair.

I thanked her, and sped over to the door, snatching the phone. I escaped outside into the afternoon, breathing the fresh air in deeply. Pathetically, I couldn't remember the last time I set foot outside.

Summer had been blisteringly hot, but autumn was swiftly descending. Though the sun shone brightly, the dark blue of the sky interrupted only by a few errant, puffy clouds, the shadows were growing longer. They made everything look underlined. The faintest of cool breezes blew through, ruffling the trees.

I got my bike out of the shed where it had been vacationing, untouched for months. I rode the easier way, instead of through the woods, sticking to the street as I had promised. The dense traffic on the main road was due to the nice weather, since it could change so quickly in Michigan.

I've lived in Hell my whole life. Despite the unusual name, and the affinity of many of the residents to dress it up like Halloween Town all year, Hell is your typical suburban town. We were lucky so far to miss the brunt of the state's economic troubles. Many towns nearby were in danger of becoming ghost towns, but for Hell, ghosts were merely a bonus.

Cheerful rows of pastel houses and local business passed me by, thriving on nearly every street. I passed a jack-o-lantern painted on a mailbox and a plastic skull hanging out on the front porch of a grandmother gardening in her sun hat. Both typical sights. The town committee had succeeded in keeping away the big name stores, at least for the time being. We had no Walmart and only one lone fast food restaurant that was always busy at 3 AM, getting business from every truck driver and stoner for miles around.

My mind focused entirely on Jenna as I passed the familiar landmarks. We'd been best friends ever since we fought over a plastic pony ranch in kindergarten. Hardly a day went by that we didn't talk to each other since. Being without her was like being cut in half.

I hadn't heard a word from her since the night she left. Her parents were convinced she ran away. Everyone else seemed to believe that, too. Her mother apparently found "suspicious" emails that confirmed the hypothesis, though no amount of pleading with her allowed me to see them. With Jenna gone, her mother, Rachael, had a good reason to hate me, and she seized it. I don't think she'd ever liked me.

I didn't believe that Jenna would leave, but the other options were even worse. Even though I thought I knew her better than anyone, I wondered if I missed what seemed plain to everyone around me.

I turned onto the uphill dirt road I remembered led to the orphanage. The bike tires stuck in the dirt and pebbles, my legs straining to push the pedals. Unlike the main road, only a few cars were parked here, all on the opposite side of where the orphanage would be. As if everything tried to avoid the prison-like structure. The sky was nearly obscured by towering trees. I passed long driveways reaching back farther than I could see, and wondered if houses lay beyond them. I made the only movements in the still air.

I rounded the bend and the orphanage, imposing iron fence first, came into view. I had no idea why I would dream about a place I hadn't seen or even thought of in years. But I was checking every lead, no matter how obscure. I've watched enough TV to know that people's best breaththroughs appear to them in dreams.

Parking my bike against the fence, I stood up and assessed my obstacle. The bars were cool to the touch, despite the persistent sun, as I ran my fingers across them. Odd that I could imagine it in such detail, right down to the color of the bars. From what I could remember, I'd never been this close to the orphanage before in my life.

A large sign hooked to the fence with plastic zipties read COMING IN OCTOBER — HELL'S ORPHANAGE, HAUNTED HOUSE ATTRACTION. I vaguely remembered hearing about Hell's Orphanage years ago. But the sign looked brand new. So much Halloween popped up in Hell come October it would be a full-time job to keep track of it all.

One detail in my dream had been wrong, I realized as I trailed over to the gate. No funny copper symbol. I fully expected the place to be locked up tight, and prepared myself for a disappointing ride home. But when I pushed it, the gate swung open with a lonely squeak. There wasn't even a lock, only a latch that drooped down.

I stood in place, debating my options. Technically, I would be trespassing if I went on the property. But the house looked pretty much abandoned at the moment, future entertainment attraction or not. I didn't see any "no trespassing" signs, either. I looked back and forth down the barren road, reassuring myself that I was alone. The curiosity inside me won out. If I could find even a little sign that Jenna had been here...but something told me that was a highly unlikely possibility. Still...

A cool breeze whooshed through the fence, blowing my hair around my shoulders. I took the hair elastic I always wore from around my wrist and whirled my dark hair into a messy ponytail. Jenna helped me dye it black back in May. Claire was suitably horrified, her dreams of blonde pageant hair atop my naturally-brunette head destroyed. For a month I expected her to sneak in my bedroom during the night with a pair of scissors.

Beer cans, old cigarette packs and dud scratch-off tickets littered the lawn, among other trash. The grass had given up on growing, leaving dry brown patches, looking like they ached for rain. I walked across the ground speedily, not wanting to dwell any longer than absolutely necessary, and up to the building itself.

The orphanage loomed above me, taller than it appeared on the street. Mottled gray stone walls frames four rows high of thin, long windows. Broken glass hung in the frames like teeth. It reminded me of the old factories around Detroit, rotting skeletons of old steel, holding on while everything else around them had crumbled into dust.

Rusty bars guarded the top windows. Long ago they must have kept whoever lived inside imprisoned. The thought made me shudder. I tried to imagine the place ever looking nice at all, or grand, and I couldn't. It was a sorrowful building with miserable secrets. It had never been anything but creepy, probably giving a few turn of the century people the spooks as they passed by in their horse-drawn carriages.

I nudged something on the ground with my toe. I looked down to see a black cat-shaped mask with no string. The empty eye sockets stared back at me. I stepped on it and heard the plastic crack.

Then, I hit an invisible wall and I stopped walking. Nothing blocked my way, but I didn't want to go further. *I shouldn't be here.* The thought shouted in my head. I saw no sign that Jenna or anyone else had been here in a long time. The split staircase sagged towards the ground, as if trying to assure

me that all was well. Just a sad old house that I should leave alone. Nothing to see here.

Pushing through my fear, I made myself move and peered around the staircase, where in my dream I remembered seeing Jenna go inside. A set of padlocked doors sat there, to a basement or lower floor. Everything had the look of being forgotten. Still, I walked over and tugged on the padlock. It was locked fast.

I banged my fist on one of the metal doors anyway, and listened to the short echo, waiting for a response. The doors, I noted in passing without putting much thought into it, looked as though they were installed long after the house was built.

"Jenna?" I called out meekly. No answer. Even the insects had fallen silent.

Sighing, I walked back across the lawn and through the gate, closing myself off from the building. Shuffling over to my bike and trying to shrug off the disappointment that swiftly descended on me, I looked back up at the barred windows and wondered.

I couldn't sleep that night. The first day of school would arrive when I woke up. I knew it would be incredibly strange walking the halls alone. I had never been massively popular, never even been to a party, really, but our small circle of friends had been more than enough. Now I didn't even have that. When Jenna disappeared, many of them blamed me. I knew the reasons why without them telling me. Some of them thought I should have stopped her from leaving. Some of them thought I wasn't a good enough reason for her to stick around.

At the end of last year, we were so excited to no longer be freshman. Hawthorne High intimidated both of us, although Jenna never showed it as much as I did. Tomorrow, I would once again be at the mercy of the pack of popular girls that ran there. And now a fresh target would be painted on my back in my glumness.

I had to admit that I didn't want to move on. That's why I didn't want to celebrate my birthday. I wanted to rewind the days, the months, and freeze time on the night Jenna left. Even though she had been angry with me. Anything was better than being left behind, not knowing.

I lay on my bed with all of the lights off, save for the old green lava lamp I plugged in for company. The blue and green hue cast on the walls made my room look like an aquarium. I've never had a TV in my room, but I contemplated changing that as I drove myself crazy with questions in my head.

Eventually, I drifted to sleep, ears filled with silent thoughts.

### Chapter 3

Hugh drove me up to Hawthorne the next morning. He had to get to his gallery early, so I arrived an hour before school was due to start. Idling the car in front of the stone steps, we sat for a moment in silence. I knew he practically itched to give me a pep talk, and I braced myself to pretend to agree with everything he said.

"You'll do fine," he assured me simply, leaving it at that. I felt almost let down. He had more faith in me than I did. I stepped out of the car reluctantly, and watched his Mazda drive off, wondering if I should have begged him to let me ditch. Just one day, although I knew if I took the day, it would turn into a week. Maybe longer.

Three years ago, Hawthorne High had been ripped down and rebuilt on its old foundation. I remember riding past the construction site, watching the workers dangle precariously from support beams inside. Now Hawthorne was as an impressive structure, the jewel in the crown that showed the state that Hell took academics seriously. More than a few seniors were accepted into Ivy League schools every year.

Tugging at the hem of my shirt, I hoped my choice was all right. The shirt was black with capped sleeves. I wondered if I looked too depressed in the color, or rather lack of color. I hadn't dressed in anything but pajamas and sweat clothes for a while, and I had no idea about trends. Should I have worn the blue striped one I debated, that was now lying on my bed? I contemplated picking up a magazine when Claire and I went school supply shopping, but the grinning girl on the cover with her laser-white teeth put me off.

I knew I was just putting off the inevitable. I walked up the steps and opened the door, walking inside. A small vestibule stood between me and the interior. HAWTHORNE HELLCATS HAVE SPIRIT read a banner in the school colors of purple and gold.

*Last chance to run,* a voice in my head coaxed. *You can still get out of here.*

I wrenched the glass door open instead. The smell of school flew into my nostrils, familiar but not at all comforting. Like canned spaghetti, with an undertone of evil. I knew my way around now, so at least there was that. Hawthorne architecture could be a maze to the uninitiated, as I discovered

last year. All the freshman and sophomore classes were conducted on the bottom two levels, yet I found myself more than once wandering around on the top floor, beneath towering seniors as they giggled at my lack of direction.

I pulled out my schedule and walked around, finding my classes to kill time. Better that I know where to go than get lost or be late. Subjects were divided into hallways, and I soon recognized the orientation from memory. Being in school felt as strange as I anticipated it would, but in a different way. I felt like I was sleepwalking through the halls, like I wasn't really there.

The only other people around were a few of the office staff and a custodian. Most people spent their off time in the commons, which was not only a cafeteria and activity center but a hang out spot. But I didn't feel like going there right now. It felt like if I did, I would set in motion the actual start of the school year. I wanted to hold it off for the few minutes of freedom that remained.

Instead I went looking for the library. Disappointment hit me when I saw it was still housed in a tiny, pathetic corner room with no windows. Not that I had expected a change. Well, I had hoped for one, but I assumed the worst. One would think that with the seemingly bottomless wallets that funded the school's rebuilding, they could have afforded a decent library. But they had other concerns.

I peered in the window at the four rows of ancient paperbacks, all probably donations from people cleaning out their cluttered closets. Hugh told me that the town library was under renovation now that Hawthorne was finished, but I didn't want to get my hopes up about that, either. Considering how Hawthorne had fared, renovating could mean emptying the nonfiction section and installing a basketball court.

A local committee called the Thornhill Society held the responsibility for the renovation projects. They'd only sprung up last year, amidst a bunch of newspaper articles touting what a fresh change they would bring to the town. To my eyes, nothing needed to change, but apparently the adults thought differently. Thornhill provided all of the funding, through fundraising and their own benefaction, and no one was allowed to forget it. All of the wealthiest local families were members, the ones who lived in the



gated community at the edge of Hell with perfect lawns and obscenely huge houses. An inch at a time, Thornhill owned a little more of the rest of us.

I passed a door marked BASEMENT ACCESS. A chain ran between the handles, secured with a sturdy new steel lock. A lot of my classmates used to go down there to fool around and drink during class hours, so it didn't surprise me that the school finally took preventative measures.

I started to move on, but stopped when I thought I heard voices. Listening, I frowned. Whispering, and from close by. The hallway in front of me was empty, and there were no TVs or radios nearby that I knew of. Besides, it wasn't that kind of sound.

I turned to my left. The voices seemed to be coming from behind the basement access door. I crept towards it, part of me thinking the whole thing was ridiculous. The door was locked, how could anyone be behind it? The whispers grew louder as if in answer to my thoughts; I could almost make out what was being said, but the sounds seemed to be not quite words.

Pressing my ear flat against the surface of the door, I listened. The voices stopped immediately, so fast that I pulled back. After a second, my breath picking up speed, I pressed my ear against the door again, harder. Listening for anything at all. Nothing but silence greeted me.

Painting and Drawing was my last class, located in the electives hallway, across from woodshop. Every elective, whatever that meant, was jammed in the hall, like leftovers. I hate Art class, only because I'm terrible at it. My best artistic skill is gluing sequins on Popsicle sticks, and even those turn out crooked. But Hugh insisted I take it every year, because art is good for the soul. Or because he couldn't admit to himself that he hadn't passed on the painting gene.

In every hall I'd visited, the gaudy purple lockers stood open, airing out after sitting the summer closed. I walked past the little metal spaces and found my room. Cupping my hand, I peered into the window. I couldn't completely tell with the inside lights off, but it looked bigger than the room Intro to Art was held in last year.

A loud bang ricocheted off of the walls. I jumped back a foot, clutching my chest. My mind reeled at the possibilities. A shooter, a bomb... But the

sound had been distinctly metallic. I turned to look down the hall, fearful thoughts racing through my head.

All of the lockers were shut. Every single one.

I ran down and out of the hallway, heart hammering. At the same time, my mind reached desperately to contemplate logical reasons. No forced air. No breeze. Nothing to cause the doors to shut, especially all at the same time. Nothing rational.

I turned back over my shoulder and gasped. Every locker door stood open again, exactly as they had been when I first came down the hall. But my ears were still ringing from the sound.

Forcing my body to turn fully around, I walked cautiously down the hall, waiting for whatever trick was being played on me to happen again. But *nothing* happened. I pushed one door with the tip of my finger and it swung shut gently, sliding into the frame.

*How did I just imagine that?* I thought. *Am I losing my mind?*

I walked quickly out of the electives hall and down to the commons. It was very possible.

With polished, white tile flooring and a domed cathedral ceiling, the commons looked like something out of a high class college. Of course, that was probably the exact idea of whoever designed Hawthorne 2.0. The walls were already covered with school memorabilia and flyers, announcing football games and charity drives set in motion. The room was really the central hub of the school, long windows lining the far wall to let in filtered light. If a person were looking for someone when classes weren't in session, odds are they were hanging out in the commons.

I camped at one of the side tables, trying not to think about what had just happened. Avoidance was my way of dealing with everything these days. Whatever caused the sound had to have a logical explanation, even if I couldn't think of one at the moment. Maybe I only imagined the lockers being shut, because of disorientation from the sound. I clutched to the explanation to try to still my thoughts.

Putting in my earphones, I watched other people trickling in to the room. My music sounded strange in the school setting, almost off key, the lyrics too serious. I wondered idly why school couldn't be like in the movies,

where everyone, even the nerds, had perfect hair and interesting plotlines. Maybe it was that way for some people.

The bell rang faster than I had anticipated. I went to homeroom. We were assigned our lockers first out in the hallway. Hesitant due to my strange experience earlier, I put in my combination, and peered inside the locker. Other than the smell of industrial strength disinfectant, there was nothing remarkable about it. Our teacher called us back into class, and I didn't give it a second thought.

Out of place didn't begin to describe how I felt. I was like a thistle in a garden of roses and lilies. I shuffled behind everyone else and took a seat in one of the front desks. I had forgotten how uncomfortable school desks were.

A girl I had often talked to before sat next to me, her hair in a high ponytail. She was wearing a t-shirt with our school logo on it. I remembered her name was Amy. Or Ashley.

"Hi!" I said, trying to attempt a smile. It felt like a grimace. My voice sounded like I had been sucking on a helium balloon, far too enthusiastic this early in the morning. I caught the barely perceptible widening of her eyes.

"Hi," she muttered, looking at me like I was going to explode in front of her. She waited for me to say something else, so of course my mind went blank. Without another word, she turned in her seat to talk with the girl to her left.

I had been dreading this kind of reaction, but it still stung. I hadn't been in contact with anyone since July. I turned my phone off, deleted my email without reading it. It wasn't like I blamed them for their feelings; they were probably hurt by my bold insensitivity. But for a long time, I couldn't stand talking to anyone. The words felt wrong. But now I was lonely, even if it was by my own making.

Our principal, Mr. McPherson, came over the intercom and greeted us.

"Good morning, students," his voice boomed over the loudspeaker. "Welcome to a brand new school year. I hope you're all ready to begin. All it takes is a positive attitude and you can persevere."

I try to have respect for authority figures. But McPherson was an exception. He always favored the rich and athletic kids over the rest of us, to the point of absurdity. And he exuded insincerity. He wore ugly suits

straight out of the 1970s, with leather elbow patches. I wondered if he still had the large moustache he had grown to distract from the comb-over on his balding head.

"I also wanted to extend thanks to the Thornhill Society for the new additions to the gym," he said. "As well as the beautiful stone fountain out front."

I hadn't even noticed the fountain. Typical of the kind of things their money went to, sports-related trappings and aesthetics. I tuned out the rest of his ramblings.

I went to Geometry first period, the class I was least looking forward to. My math teacher, Mr. Vanderlip, was a twitchy little man with a paisley tie. He quickly revealed that he favored those good at the subject. On his classroom billboard, photos of his calculus classes and math competition teams over the years were perfectly aligned in straight rows, complete with labelmaker tags.

Math was number one on my list of things I dreaded. Probably because I am not the most logical person. I barely squeaked through Algebra last year, so the step up in difficulty worried me. My mother was a math genius, but she never had the time to teach me anymore. When I was younger, we used to sit at the dining room table after elementary school, carefully filling in worksheets. Rumor had it that Mr. Vanderlip could be really hard, and he didn't like to offer extra help. I assumed I would be royally screwed if I didn't pay the utmost attention.

He jumped right into the textbook with no introduction, covering the board with chalk. Then he berated the first student who raised his hand and had the answer slightly wrong.

"This is remedial stuff! I can't believe that you don't know the difference between a supplementary angle and a complementary one," he squawked, then visibly clucking his tongue.

As he turned his back, his striped shirt wrinkling, I watched everyone else debating whether they should ever raise their hands again. It could be a very quiet class if this kept up.

I could follow the basics, mostly lines and angles. Relief was slowly spreading through me; maybe it wouldn't be such a nightmare. That feeling only lasted until he assigned three lessons for the night's homework, when any hope I had deflated like a broken balloon.

"We need to blow through the easy stuff," he responded to our collective groan.

At Hawthorne, physical education was a required subject for two years. Not surprising for a school so concerned with athletics. I wasn't bad at sports, I just wasn't interested. I could generally hold my own when forced to engage in them, but I would much rather have been reading. Claire had tried enrolling me in volleyball and cheerleading classes, but to no avail.

I went to the girl's locker room to change. It reeked of raspberry body spray. A few girls were primping in front of the full length wall mirror on one side, one of them using a flat iron on her hair. The practicality of styling hair before we all got sweaty made no sense to me. I often wondered if I had been born too much of a tomboy, even though I thought I had the basics of primping down.

I found the locker with my name taped on it, misspelled as usual. I was not a font. As I changed, I overheard two girls gossiping on the bench by me. Great, and in the worst possible class they could be in.

Lainey Ford and Madison Taylor — the exact two people I didn't want to see ever again in my lifetime. The most popular girls in school. Actually, Lainey was the most popular, and Madison orbited her like a loyal planet around a sun, fully aware that anyone could replace her.

Between them, they had enough fake blonde hair to make a wig store. Lainey's family was obscenely rich, and could probably buy out every business in town. Her father already owned several of them, including the tanning salon, which was why Lainey's skin glowed like an orange creamsicle. I knew both of their parents were card-carrying members of Thornhill.

"I know Henry likes me already," Lainey bragged, fixing the concealer underneath her eyes as Madison held up a compact mirror. Gossiping about some boy, as usual.

"How do you know that?" Madison asked. The silence that followed indicated Madison's ignorance. Lainey apparently wanted her to stew in it.

"Because we're perfect for each other," Lainey said simply.

I looked over at her as she sat up a little straighter and tilted up the chin of her heart-shaped face.

"Have you ever seen such a hot guy?" she asked rhetorically. "There's no way I'm letting anyone else in this school touch him. The first girl that gets near him, I'll go ballistic."

He must be something, I thought, throwing my street clothes in the locker and spinning the combination lock. Lainey had been in love with Ambrose Slaughter, the aptly named school bully, for years. I figured I'd hate this Henry, if she was so keen on him. Another idiot more concerned with the label on his jeans than the brain in his head. Another addition the school didn't need.

I walked out of the locker room and into the brightly lit gym. The only changes I noticed were new basketball hoops, but I'm sure our wealthy benefactors had dumped a bunch of money into something. Oh well, it was theirs to spend. It didn't help me to keep internally complaining about it, no matter how unfair it seemed to me.

Coach Fletcher had also been my gym teacher last year. A more utterly humorless woman did not exist. Gym class was a battlefield, and we were the soldiers in training.

"Sit down below the bleachers," she instructed us. We complied, sitting cross-legged and waiting for instruction. When everyone was seated, she regaled us with the essentialness of gym to a well-rounded academic career.

"This isn't a goof off class," she barked. "I know some of you may think, 'Ha ha, it's phys ed, we can play around.'" Well, cut that idea right out. Physical education is incredibly important to your well being. It's essential you learn how to be part of a team, not to mention gain coordination and stamina."

I squinted up at the round fluorescent lights. They seemed to be a million miles away, and I felt microscopic. I was still half-asleep, and I rubbed my tired eyes.

"First up today is the fitness test," Coach said. "For any of you who weren't here last year, at the start of every year, each one of you performs a series of physical tests so I can determine what skill level you fall into."

The results of the test didn't seem to make much of a difference in the activities we ended up doing, but it was a Hawthorne formality. Just a check mark on a form.

Situps were first. I could make it up to thirty before I had any issue. My neck started to burn and I dropped back down. Lainey and Madison were blowing through what seemed like hundreds of them. When the time came for pushups, most of the girls opted to do them against the wall, giggling about their boobs.

Then we lined up and had to run several yards, from one masking tape line to another and back as the Coach timed it with her stopwatch. The serious look on her face was that of someone training contenders for the Olympics. I waited in line, vaguely aware that Lainey stood right behind me. She kept nudging me forward, a centimeter at a time.

"Why is everyone so slow today?" she huffed. I imagine she was rolling her eyes at the back of my head. "This is going to take forever."

Lainey was one of the stars of the female basketball team, just another reason that made her a darling in the eyes of McPherson and the rest of the school faculty, Coach included. Lainey was the only one Coach ever smiled at, no matter how polite anyone else was. Coach always regarded me as a troublemaker, probably because Jenna caused mischief in her class. Once she even stuck a post-it note with "woof" Sharpied on it to the back of Coach's jersey.

"Hurry up," Lainey squawked the second the kid in front of me was finished. Irritation bubbled up inside me. "Some of us have lives."

Since I could not for the life of me come up with a snappy comeback, I got into position. Crouching down, I sprinted to the end of the line and back in just under forty seconds.

"Not bad," Coach said, nodding at her stopwatch as if it had been in control of my movements.

"Not good either," Madison said under her breath, and Lainey giggled. Lainey's pointy shoulder made contact with my collarbone as I retreated to the bleachers. I rubbed the sore spot. This was not going to be fun.

## Chapter 4

The day dragged on, and I continued sleepwalking. I hated to admit it, even to myself, but I felt lost. It hadn't been so bad at home, where I could put myself on autopilot and coast through the weeks, but seeing other people carrying on with their lives made me feel hollow. I was missing out, but I had no right, as the one left behind, to have anything more.

I needed a quiet place to think, instead of being surrounded by the laughter and chatter of other people going about their carefree lives, planning parties or after school activities, or the bullying of Hell's finest.

Jenna and I always spent lunch together, gossiping about teachers and other kids, about the pathetic spooky lunch themes that ran year-round, like terrifying tacos and monster meatloaf, better suited to an elementary school than a bunch of teenagers.

Instead of even trying to find a table, I traded my crumpled dollars for a bag of chips and a bottle of pop (I needed the caffeine to stay awake), and headed out into the front hall. Technically we weren't supposed to eat out there, but I hoped no one would notice.

Certain I would be alone, I was in for a surprise as I stepped in the hall. Through the glass partition I saw a boy standing in the vestibule. A black hooded sweatshirt was pulled up over his head, and he seemed to be staring out of the window, slumping over. Frumpy that I wasn't alone as I had wanted, I sat down in one of the cubbies lining the sides of the room. My bag of chips opened with a pop, but I had absolutely no appetite.

*Your love is all I think about* read graffiti on the cubby seat. Predictably, someone had tried to scratch out "love" with a pen and drew a little arrow to "sex".

I opened my history book on my lap and flipped through it, black and white photos of women in long, impractical gowns, and crudely painted battle scenes on the pages. I wondered whether Jenna's fan page had been updated. I made a note to check it later on. Not that there would be any new information. Over the summer, I developed a junkie compulsion to refresh the page every ten seconds, and had to ban myself from the computer.

The front door opened with a blast of air and vestibule boy stepped in. My first thought was that I hoped he would walk on down the hall and leave



me be. My second thought was that he was extremely cute. I made myself busy with my very fascinating textbook.

"Why did I come here?" he groaned out loud. He had a deep voice compared to many of our male classmates, who were caught in the throes of puberty. I looked up, reacting as though he had spoken to me, although it had obviously been rhetorical.

"I should have stayed at home," he continued to himself.

He tinkered with his phone, oblivious to the fact that I was even there. I felt a little embarrassed for both of us. Him for possibly being mentally unbalanced, and me for thinking it had anything to do with me.

Stowing the phone away, he looked up, and our eyes met. The smile that appeared on his handsome face was so huge and bright it was almost goofy. His dark eyes lit up as though I were the most interesting person he'd ever seen. I wondered if I had ink smeared on my face or something, and rubbed my cheek.

"Sorry to inflict my inner monologue on you," he said, tilting his head in my direction. "I have a bad habit of having full conversations with myself."

"That's okay," I said softly, not knowing what else to say. I didn't do well with attractive boys. And I really had no interest in them now. I figured he'd go on his way, so I could get back to zoning out. But he didn't leave.

"Ridiculous that I'm this late for my first day, huh?" he asked, and then shrugged. "I can't think of an excuse, either."

To my surprise, he came and sat in the cubby to my left.

"The truth is, I slept in, but I don't think I can tell them that," he continued. "Do you have any ideas that could help me in my situation?"

"Nope, fresh out," I said matter-of-factly, keeping my eyes locked on the words in my textbook, even though it was impossible to read them with him talking to me.

"Okay, how about this..." He held his hands out as if framing the scene. "I was trying to save a possum caught in the middle of the road..."

"Make the animal cuter," I offered. I didn't know why I was helping him.

"Okay. I was trying to save a rabbit from being squashed. And once I saved him, I had to find his home. So I went trampling through the woods, and forgot about the time." He dropped his hands. "Do you think the ladies in the office will buy it?"

The tone of his appealing voice was low, like we were conspiratorial partners. His lips were full and moved interestingly as he talked. I scolded myself for noticing that.

"Actually, I think it's terrible," I admitted. "Your pants are spotless, which they wouldn't be if you had been running around the woods. Just tell the office people your parents had car trouble like a normal person."

"I'm not really a normal person," he divulged, and the silly smile was back. It made him look even more attractive, his eyes crinkling. It was the kind of smile that any other person would immediately return, but he got on my nerves with his perpetual good mood. It was mostly annoying because I couldn't reciprocate.

"Pretend to be. That's what I'm doing," I said.

"Interesting," he said, leaning closer, his brown eyes inquiring. "Mind telling me why?"

"Not really," I said. "Since I don't know you." I told myself I just wanted him to go away. Part of me didn't, however. I tried to ignore that part.

He stood up and started walking towards the central office, then turned around and said, "I'm Henry Rhodes. I'm the village idiot where I come from. There — now you know me."

I was silent for a second, studying him. He was possibly the strangest boy I'd ever met.

"I'm Ariel," I replied.

He nodded his head in my direction again with a smirk, and continued on his way to go spout some lame excuse to get out of a half day's worth of tardies. He practically had a strut to his step as I watched him disappear.

The name clicked two seconds after he walked away. Henry was the boy Lainey had claimed.

I walked into Honors American History later that day, and was surprised to see Henry sitting in the back row. Several jock guys sat in the desks surrounding him, football players and swimming team stars. It was almost as though we sat on two different sides of a chess board, with a bunch of pawns in between us.

Thinking he would finally ignore me, and not knowing exactly how I felt about that, I walked in. When he spotted me, however, he smiled again. I turned away from him, my face heating up. There was no way that our little

interaction was going to go anywhere. I wouldn't consider getting in the way of Lainey and lipgloss, let alone Lainey and a boy.

"Hi, Ariel," Mr. Warwick, the teacher, said brightly. He'd been Hugh's friend for years, and had been over to our house for dinner countless times. He made a mean corn relish at our barbeques. "So you finally made it to my side of the hallway?"

"Looks that way," I said.

"Seating chart is on the blackboard. I believe you're right in the front."

I took a peek, and saw that he was correct. I pulled out my thick History textbook and opened it up again. My heart thudded a little as I noticed it was the same page I'd been eyeballing when Henry spoke to me earlier.

"Welcome to Honors American History," Mr. Warwick said once the bell rang. He stood up from his roost on the desk and shut the door. "We're going to learn things about the civil war you never thought possible. We may even get past it by the end of the year!"

I had heard lots of positive things about his goofy teaching style and laid back attitude. From everything I knew about Mr. Warwick, it rang true. Most students called him Wick. It felt too weird to me, so I always just called him the Mr. Warwick. Probably odd considering my use of my parents' first names. But everybody has quirks.

"For instance, the battle of Bunker Hill? Not fought at Bunker Hill. It was actually fought on Breed's Hill. Now when you go home and your parents ask you what you learned, tell them that. I'm sure they'll be impressed, and you don't have to pay attention for the rest of the day."

He winked while the class snickered. I had a feeling this would be one of my favorite subjects now. There was hominess about the room everywhere else in school lacked. Warwick felt like a family member, but not one of the ever-watchful ones I had at home.

Henry ended up being in my English class, too, though I tried not to register it. Because both classes were Honors classes, a lot of the same students were in both. English remained my most anticipated subject, since it had always been my favorite. Two bookcases crammed full of every book I had ever owned filled the corner on my room at home.

But I was soon disappointed.

The silver-haired teacher, Ms. Fellows, parked herself next to the antique overhead projector in the front of the room. A student shut off the lights. The blinds were already pulled down, and shadow descended over our desks. Ms. Fellows looked incredibly bored, like she was ready to go to sleep. She droned on about grammar, scribbling her speech down with dry erase markers and smearing it with the side of her hand.

I couldn't stay present in the dark. My mind drifted, and my thoughts came to rest where they often did, on the last night I saw Jenna. I'd turned over every word I remembered in my head a thousand times like an old coin, but I still felt like I was missing something. The exact phrase or moment that Jenna decided to leave for good, if that was truly the case, always escaped me. It didn't help that for starters she was furious that night, a ball of sizzling anger.

"What do you mean, you're going out?" I'd asked, sitting on my checkered bedspread.

The day had been warm, holding steady in the low eighties. But after the sun went to sleep, the temperature quickly started to drop. Still wearing shorts, her tanned legs were bare. Not clothes that she typically wore out after dark.

"The words have one meaning, Ariel. Not difficult to understand," she said impatiently, spitting out her words like they had thorns.

"It's after ten," I protested, my voice sounding pitifully like a whine. I never would have worried about looking immature in front of her before. But now it was all I could think about.

She wouldn't look at me. She stared at her own eyes in her reflection; putting her curly hair up in a ponytail and taking it back down. She had on her dress-to-impress makeup, a double layer of mascara and champagne-colored eyeshadow. I wondered if she was meeting up with a boy.

"What is happening to you?" I asked finally. I couldn't stop myself. "I feel like I don't even know you anymore."

She glared at me, and her blue eyes were icy. I had never seen her look at me with so much contempt. I wondered what horrible thing I'd done, flickering quickly through the possibilities.

"I don't have time for this," she said, stomping out of my room. Then she headed for the outside door.

"Take your sweatshirt, it's getting cold," I said. Jenna always complained about being chilly.

She sighed at me, the dampener on her good time, grabbing her yellow sweatshirt off the back of a chair.

"Anything else you need, mom?" she asked, rolling her eyes at me as she stood impatiently by the open door.

A tear rolled down my cheek and I wiped it away.

"Stop acting like a baby," she commanded sharply, bracing her arms against the doorway. "I'll be back before midnight. You'll never even miss me." She swung outside into the night, but she made sure I heard her next words.

"I won't miss you."

And with that she was gone. Out of my life, possibly forever. Would I always wonder what I could have done to stop her from leaving that night? If I'd known she wouldn't be back, I would have chased her outside, but she would only have become angrier with me.

She hadn't always been cruel. In fact, for years we'd been thick as thieves, our personalities the exact right fit. I patiently listened to her stories, almost never pointing out how she embellished her dates to make her life sound more exciting. But in the months before she left, she changed. Sometimes I felt like whomever she had been vanished before my eyes, long before she stepped out into the night.

## Chapter 5

When the end of the day finally arrived, I found I was wary of going back to the electives hall. I still hadn't come up with a logical solution to what happened with the lockers, unless I had mad cow disease eating my brain, and to be honest I hadn't been trying to think about it. Once I actually got there, my irrational fear dissipated. The crowd was busy shouting and joking and scrambling to get to class. No room existed for my dread.

I went into the art room, and saw that my calculations through the window were correct. It was quite a bit roomier than our classroom from last year. But bright replications of famous paintings covered every wall, and carts of paper and paints crowded the side aisles. I looked to the board; no assigned seating. Those were the hardest classes now. Just finding someone to sit by became an awkward chore.

A girl sat alone in the back row, dressed in dark, creative clothing. Her dress looked like it was made out of torn sweater pieces stitched together. I wished I had the guts to dress like that, instead of my bland uniform of t-shirts and jeans. Behind her little tortoiseshell glasses, the girl's eyelids sparkled with thick silver glitter.

I walked towards her. She looked like a fascinating person to talk to, and I had never seen her before. But she spotted me, and picked up her brown messenger bag from the floor. Dropping the bag on the seat next to her with a clunk, she scowled at me. The bag was covered with little pins that had phrases on them I was too far away to read. I assumed they all had an antisocial theme.

"Okay..." I said under my breath, turning back around.

I took a seat in the second row next to a nerdy boy who ignored my presence. I had been getting a lot of that reaction today, so it didn't bother me. In front of me, I noticed with an internal groan, sat Lainey. Her cloying cloud of fruit punch scented perfume hit me in the face like a chemical warfare attack. But the only other empty seat in class was right next to her, and bumping elbows would be ten times worse.

Henry breezed in through the door the second before the bell rang.

"You have got to be kidding me," I said out loud, shocked at the coincidence. Both Lainey and the boy next to me looked at me as though I were insane. I began to conclude I probably was. But the situation was getting a little ridiculous, like the universe enjoyed rubbing absurd but gorgeous smile boy in my face. He swung into the seat next to Lainey agilely, depositing his books on the table.

To my surprise, Henry spun in his seat, looking at me. Gripping the chair back, he said, "I'm not following you, I swear. This is pure coincidence."

"Uh huh," I said, frowning. I had no idea how to react to his attention. I'd checked my face out discreetly earlier for stray ink or anything else that would have caused embarrassment, but found nothing.

"I have a question for you," he said, tipping the chair off the floor and looking at me down the bridge of his nose.

"Fire away."

"Why do I irritate you so much?" His face was open and patient, watching for my explanation.

Lainey had now turned towards us, her china doll face wrought with confusion, openly watching our conversation like she had stock in it. I remembered her words about going ballistic if anyone got near Henry, and I had no doubt that she meant it.

"What gave you that idea?" I asked, avoiding Henry's inquiring, curious eyes. Something about his stare seemed both intimate and knowing. I was mortified that he had caught on; I didn't think I acted that obvious. But judging my actions had become hard, now that I felt so removed from them.

"Just had that feeling," he continued, unfazed. "But I think you'll get used to me, now that we'll be spending our afternoons together." It seemed as if he enjoyed that idea. Or perhaps he was playing

with me like a toy on a string. I felt hopeless to tell the difference.

"Funny how that turned out," I said softly.

My eyes flicked to Lainey again, whose face was scrunched so much at the center she risked imploding. That would be interesting to witness. Henry swung back around before I could respond again.

With the moment broken, I felt a wave of guilt crash over me. How could I be worrying about boys when I had no idea where Jenna was? Or even if she was alive or...I felt seeped in selfishness. I stared at the shiny copy of Van Gogh's Arles bedroom on the wall, until the orange and cyan started running together. I blinked. I could practically hear Jenna whispering, "What about me?" in my ear. But then of course I really would be nuts.

I breathed in sharply through my nose, shutting my eyes and detaching myself from the feeling as much as possible. It was a talent I had discovered recently, and while I knew it probably didn't fall under the healthy coping category, it worked to keep me functioning.

The teacher, Ms. Vore, came down the aisle, passing out black sketchbooks. I had nearly forgotten I still had class to sit through. Ms. Vore had replaced the batty, purple Mumu wearing art teacher from last year. I always assumed dressing like a carnival fortune teller was part of the job requirements, but this lady looked normal. Stylish even, her hair pulled up in a smart bun, and wearing a well-fitted black vest over a white oxford shirt.

As soon as she began to speak, she won my approval.

"Your sketchbooks are the window to your creativity," she said, rubbing her hands together, her eyes excited as though she were a student herself. "I'm going to give you assignments to complete in them, but I also want you to feel free to doodle whatever you want when the urge strikes you. If you fill up one book, I'll give you another. Just let yourself loose on the pages."

She launched into a demonstration of different types of shading on the board, alternately putting down her chalk and picking up a dog-eared book that she held up and swooped around so everyone could see. I paid close attention, hoping that my art skill could magically improve.

While she had perfectly okay skill, it didn't seem like she was the best artist ever, either. Which I found endearing, compared to the effortless talent my father had. Ms. Vore seemed to have more appreciation than talent.

"All of these people spoke through their art," she said, admiring the colorful pictures from her book upside down. "There's no reason you can't do the same. It's very freeing to explore various techniques. You might be used to acrylics, for example, and find a whole new world can be created with oils."

The class breezed by, the only one other than History to seem faster than the hour allotted. Ms. Vore stood in front of her desk as we walked out, smiling and saying goodbye. She even knew some of the other students' names already.

I felt tired after school, but not as hopeless as I had expected at the beginning of the day. All of my teachers were fine, save for English and Geometry, and I would make it through, if I kept my head down and kept going. Time had become the thing that I lived through, instead of anticipating or keeping track of it.

"How was your first day back?" Hugh asked as we were driving home. He gave me the side eye. "You appear to be in one piece."

"Mostly. It went fine." I shoved my heavy backpack between my knees. In some convoluted logic, nearly all of my teachers had decided to assign homework. I thought we were supposed to be immune from that the first day.

"I'm glad," he said. "I worried all day about how it would go." This from the person who said I'd do fine.

I sat wordlessly for a moment, watching the blurry outline of trees and street signs through the car window, the shards of sunlight falling on the sidewalk.

"You know," I said, cautiously bringing up a touchy subject, "It's such a short drive, I could easily walk."

He paused for a second, eyes fixed on the road. "Claire wouldn't like that. I'm assuming that's why you're asking me, the pushover."

"You're not a pushover," I protested. "I'm asking you because she's hardly around, and you're here. And it's probably only a ten minute walk. The school is in the center of town, I wouldn't have to set foot on any back roads." I had laid out my whole case, and now I could only wait for him to deliberate on it.

Briefly, he took his right hand off of the steering wheel to pat me on the shoulder, managing a quick grin. "I'll talk to her about it."

He had finally shaved off the wiry beard he adopted when he opened the gallery last year. His face looked ten years younger, his childish, rounded cheeks making him boyish.

"When did you shave?" I asked.

"About two weeks ago," he said, looking perplexed. "Didn't you notice?"

"Of course I did," I said, trying to act as though I had been joking. But I hadn't noticed at all before now.

The Mazda pulled into our driveway, and Hugh parked in the garage behind the house. I went in through the back door as he fetched the mail, lobbing my backpack onto the table to await later attention.

I pulled out the makings for a sandwich from the fridge, taking the bag of bread off of the top. I was suddenly starving, as I hadn't eaten during my odd lunch break. I smeared mustard on bread, and I wondered again about Henry Rhodes, the odd newcomer who had caught the attention of Hawthorne.

It definitely seemed as though he had assimilated with the popular crowd quickly, but he seemed genuinely nice. And very hot, to be honest. Possibly the cutest boy in school. Which meant I never had a chance.

Not like I wanted a chance, I protested with myself. I had more important things to focus on. And every possibility remained that his friendliness could merely be an act, and beneath it lurked another carbon copy popular boy, who rated girls on websites online and took great pride in his gelled "just got out of bed this way" hair. It did look a little too perfectly tousled, now that I thought about it.

As I finished my sandwich, I went into the office, where the only computer I had access to in the house was located. Claire and Hugh both had laptops, but they wouldn't let me touch them. My potential for internet corruption was a great source of fear to Claire. Only last year did she get rid of the persnickety child filter, and only because her work website would no longer load.

I booted the computer out of sleep mode, and navigated to Jenna's fan page. It had become a wall of people posting monthly "I miss you's" and "Come back homes". But I noticed the posts had become much fewer in the last month. There was nothing new. I turned off the monitor, the sinking feeling only lasting for a moment. I was so used to it now I just brushed it off.

I went back in the kitchen and rinsed my sandwich plate off. A pile of dishes awaited me in the sink, so I began rinsing those off to pop in the dishwasher. I shook my head. A bowl with pools of running paint held Hugh's paintbrushes, a mess against the white porcelain. He used to scold me for the same thing when I did paint-by-number books.

I glanced out of the window above the sink as I washed. Startled, I nearly dropped the plate in my hands. Bright green eyes were watching me.

It was the weird girl from the back row in art class. She glared at me over the fence that separated our house from the neighbors'. Her glittery eyelids sparkled wildly in the low sun. It took her a

second to notice that she had been caught, but as soon as she did, she quickly turned around and ran back towards the house behind her.

Although whoever had moved there had only arrived a few months ago, this was the first time I paid any real attention. *Awesome*, I thought as I started rinsing out the sticky brushes, *another person that hates me*.

I fed a plate of spaghetti and round meatballs to the hungry carpet. I tipped the plate over and the long noodles cascaded down. The mess disappeared as the carpet absorbed it, nourishing itself. A smear of crimson was all that was left. My actions didn't seem strange to me at all. But the smear looked like something else. Like blood.

I bolted upright in my bed, heart hammering below my ribcage. I didn't think it was a nightmare, but I was scared. Terrified, in fact. I tried taking a few deep breaths, but I couldn't get the air down low enough.

My bedroom was one of three small rooms that came off of the main basement. Our basement ran the entire length of the house and was all finished, so it was very comfortable. The main space had seen its share of entertaining in the day, and couches and a fairly large TV were buried beneath boxes of junk and castoffs from Erasmus. I was grateful for the privacy, although I never did much to take advantage of it.

But now I realized how cut off I was from the rest of the house. Still groggy, I stood up out of bed, bare feet slowly touching the floor. The reason for my fear suddenly became obvious.

There was someone here. An animal instinct took charge. I was sure that someone was watching me. I could feel a change in the regularity of my surroundings, a foreign buzz of electricity. *One of these things just doesn't belong...*

Fearfully, my eyes darted to my closet first, the usual suspect in slasher films. Before I could think about it too much, I walked over and looked inside. The hair on my arms and neck prickled. Adrenaline made me brave as I pawed through my hanging clothes, but nothing awaited me there.

I turned, half expecting a serial killer in a hockey mask to be casually hanging out behind me, but for all I could see, I was alone. My room wasn't that big and there was really nowhere else for someone to hide. I peeked underneath the bed, but all I could see were shoeboxes.

I opened the creaking door, every second expecting the intruder to show him or herself and catch me off guard. Out in the hall, I peered in the laundry room. The washing machine and dryer stood alone opposite a freezer chest. I lifted the lid of that, not knowing why even as I did it, but the inside harbored only a frozen turkey and leftover freezer pops. Then onto the storage room, although it was so packed with junk no one could jam themselves inside no matter how skinny. The main room awaited me, the only place I hadn't checked.

I flicked on the overhead light, bathing everything in yellow fluorescence. The bric-a-brac and furniture in the room cast shadows on the floor and in the corners. Shadows anything could wait in, watching me as I unknowingly stepped out.

*Stop thinking like that*, I scolded myself.

I peered behind a few items: a tub of Halloween costumes, a broken box fan, a pile of outdated computer equipment Hugh always said he'd use but never did. But still, I found no sign of the invasion that I felt. The adrenaline ran out, and flight mode threatened to kick in. It took everything I had not to run, but stubbornness is a powerful characteristic, and I had inherited that in spades from Claire. I needed to know what had overrun my house.

There was a sliding glass door downstairs, as our house was built on a slope. Usually, I was proud my parents trusted me not to take advantage of it. Right now, it just made me feel exposed. I contemplated running either up the stairs or to the door. The motion detector lights outside hadn't been activated, and I was certain that I had locked the door before I went to bed.



For a split second, I envisioned Jenna walking to that same door and into the night. *I won't miss you*, her voice echoed in my head. I shook the completely inappropriate memory away.

I stood still for a moment, then decided it was ridiculous to keep playing this cat and mouse game with my own fear. I stomped over to the door, throwing the lock and sliding it open. If someone waited to ambush me, I might as well get it over with.

Stepping outside into the cold night, I looked from side to side. But I didn't see a soul. The sky lacked a moon, and the world slept peacefully beneath it, quiet and calm. Only the occasional rumble of a car on the street broke the silence. But the creepy feeling remained, as strong as ever.

My bare feet were beginning to freeze on the cement slab porch. I faced the strange girl's house, but she wasn't around, either. Of course she wouldn't be in the middle of the night. Normal people were sleeping in their ordinary beds, not chasing phantoms. I shivered, looking up at the windows of the house anyway. No sign of movement.

I shut the door, ready to go back to my room. Out of nowhere, the air against my skin turned to ice. My fear peaked, my heart racing as though I were in a race. As if I were face to face with something terrifying that I couldn't see, but my instincts knew endangered me. And then, as fast as it had swept upon me, the feeling disappeared.

I was left gasping for breath. I sunk down to my hands and knees, waiting for my heart to return to normal. When I could finally breathe, I stood, locking the door. A second of indecisiveness kept me still, and then I raced back to my bedroom.

"What the hell just happened?" I asked the empty air. But no answers came back to me.

I shut my door tightly, and jumped into bed. I tugged the blanket up around my chin, but it was a long time before I fully got back to sleep. Even though I now felt utterly alone.

## Chapter 6

By the morning, I'd convinced myself that I had imagined the whole thing. My lifelong love of horror movies could have easily contributed. My parents always told me I had an overactive imagination. They were right. I had enjoyed the company of imaginary friends until I met Jenna to replace them. The one thing that I *couldn't* reconcile was the fact that normally I didn't scare too easily. And last night I had been terrified.

Hugh joined me for breakfast.

"I had a talk with Claire last night," he said.

"About what?" I asked, completely forgetting our chat during the car ride home the day before. Unforgiveable, considering how important the ability to come and go on my own was to me.

"You know what," he said. "Your suggestion that you walk to school. I tried every bargaining technique I know." He buttered his toast with a steak knife. I almost told him it was an inappropriate use, but I let it drop considering he held my fate in his hands. "Believe me; I put up the good fight."

"And let me guess, she said no way in this lifetime," I said, sighing as I finished my soggy cereal. I swirled the little Os around with my spoon.

"Actually, she agreed to it. After intense deliberation. The only stipulation is that you have to send me a text message when you get to school and when you leave to come home."

I raised my eyebrows. "No joke?" I couldn't believe it.

"No joke."

I got up and gave him a hug around his neck. Hugh laughed softly.

"Thank you!" I said. "You don't know how much I appreciate that!"

"This is on a conditional basis, though," he warned, as I gathered up my books and shoved them in my backpack. "Don't get too excited. You have to follow the rules every time, or I reserve the right to personally revoke it."

"I will," I promised.

After cleaning out my bowl, I went downstairs to finish getting ready. I dressed quickly in my favorite shirt, dark violet with lace-trimmed sleeves, and rushed upstairs. Grabbing my backpack, I slipped outside and started off on my first walk.

Fog hung low to the ground, obscuring the landscape. The sky a flat, dull gray, preceding dawn. Despite the early morning chill, I felt happy to be breathing in the fresh air. I sucked in a lungful, until I couldn't inhale anymore. The walk, as I suspected, only took about fifteen minutes. I had opted not to use my bike; I didn't have a bike lock and it was clunky besides. Plus I'd feel like a dork on my bike, when in my not-so-distant future I would hopefully have a car.

I felt only a little out of breath when I arrived at school, and more energized and awake than I normally did. I'm not normally a morning person, but it felt as though I'd drunk an entire pop and caffeine rushed through me. I walked into the commons in a more uplifted mood than I hadn't expected. There were ten minutes until school started, so the commons was packed and loud as everyone carried on discussions. But it wasn't as jarring as it had been yesterday. I didn't have the immediate urge to run anymore.

Sitting together at one of the rectangular tables were a couple of girls I'd been friends with for years, Becky Long and Sarah Abbot. We had often occupied the same lunch table, although it seemed like a different life now.

"Ariel!" Becky called out. I didn't know what she wanted, but I wandered over to their table.

"Hey, do you want to sit with us?" Becky asked amiably, gesturing to the unfilled seat across from her. The offer surprised me, but I was more than willing to comply. I couldn't stand feeling singled out anymore.

Pulling out the chair I sat down. The only spot for my backpack was in my lap, as the entire table was filled with girls I couldn't remember if I knew, and there wasn't a lot of room. It felt awkward, but I didn't want to protest.

"How are you?" Becky asked, clasping her hands together on the tabletop and tucking her pointy chin on top.

"I'm fine," I replied lamely, for lack of a better adjective.

"That's good," she said, smiling tightly. "I'm glad to see you. I've been wondering how you were doing. We heard rumors that you weren't coming back. Someone said your dad was going to homeschool you this year."

"No, of course not," I said, trying to play it off lightly and attempt a smile. I hoped it didn't look like a grimace, as my smiles lately too often did.

Awkward silence followed, in which the other girls avoided my gaze. It seemed like they didn't know what to say to me. But I was glad to be sitting there, even as I searched my thoughts for a suitable topic and came up short.

"Did you hear they're playing *Loveless* at the theater?" Sarah piped up, and the other girls jumped on the topic as if it was food and they'd been up in the mountains for days.

The girls started chattering away about the movie, which was apparently my least favorite kind, a romantic comedy. I didn't have much to say; I'd never heard of it. Even as they moved onto school gossip, I remained oblivious. Mostly I just hunched behind the backpack. I became a little irritated with myself, but I didn't have it in me to make the effort. What if I said something that came out wrong?

The day went faster than the first, and rather uneventfully. Lainey and Madison pretended I didn't exist in gym, which I greatly preferred to being teased or almost knocked over. I sat at Becky's table again at lunch, still only listening to what the other girls had to say. I'd lost my opinions somewhere along the way. They didn't seem to mind. It was easier for everyone to pretend I was wallpaper.

As far as classes themselves, I enjoyed Warwick's the most and not because he was Hugh's buddy. I knew I wouldn't just get a good grade because of that fact. But listening to him embellish the events that happened in our country with outlandish tales made the experience endlessly interesting. We were trying to get through the revolutionary war as fast as possible, and George Washington was crossing the Delaware today.

Henry seemed to be busy chatting with his new friends. The group of guys were all laughing like they had known each other for years, in the way that people like that seem to do. Sticking with their own kind. Several of them wore gold and purple school jerseys.

The brief thought that I'd lost him flashed through my head. He was never mine to begin with, I rebuked myself. It should have been easier for me, because I didn't have to try. It should have been a relief.

In English, the same alone-in-the-dark feeling overtook me when the lights went out for the overhead projector. Luckily, Ms. Fellows didn't seem to notice as my eyelids drooped and I began to zone out. My thoughts still automatically went to Jenna, the empty hole in the room.

By the end of the day, I wanted out, though for no particular negative reason. Sleep chased me after the previous night, and my clothes reeked of ground pencil lead and cafeteria smells. I felt much less optimistic than yesterday, but I tried not to dwell on it. In art, I sat in the same place, with the same indifferent male, because the other seats were full up.

"All I'm saying is, since it's Hell, we should be able to sin and get away with it," Henry joked around with Lainey. His charming voice carried over to my seat, broken by Lainey's high-pitched, fake giggle.

"You're really bad," she tittered. "I'm surprised you've lasted this long without getting in trouble."

She tossed her shiny blond hair. The strands shimmered like a waterfall as they caught the light. For the slightest moment, I wished I was her. The biggest thing that scared her was that she hadn't put on enough eyeliner. Not that her best friend was never coming back. Or that pretend boogeymen lurked in her basement.

I dutifully texted Hugh as I set out on my journey back home. As I came around behind the house, I noticed my neighbor sitting on the swingset next door. She scribbled in the sketchbook on her lap, never taking her eyes from the paper. She wore a poufy, tutu-like black skirt and black and white striped leggings, and her glitter today was red, matching the vivid, artificial red of her hair. Her glasses kept sliding down her nose and each time she would push them up with two fingers. She didn't look so intimidating now; in fact, considering how little she was, she didn't look intimidating at all.

An impulse hit me. I was prone to them, but up until then I very rarely acted on them. I peeked my head inside my own house.

"I'm home," I said to Hugh, who sat at the table. "But I'm going to hang out in the backyard for a few minutes."

He saluted me and went back to his laptop. Paint drops splattered the shoulder of his shirt. He chewed the end of a pen to ruin, which meant he was concentrating deeply on something. I tossed my backpack on the floor of the dining room and slid the door shut. As I walked over to the fence, I anticipated what to say, and whether it was a good idea to say anything at all.

"Hey!" I called to the girl. She startled, and almost fell off the swing. The sketchbook went sprawling on the grass.

"Sorry!" I said.

I hadn't expected that kind of reaction. Most of the alt-kids in our school were tough and aloof, and talking to them was risking getting your teeth realigned. I noticed a bandage around her ankle, pushing up her left legging.

"What do you want?" she asked, picking up her book and sitting back down on the swing. The words didn't come out rudely, merely curious. She capped the pen she had been using to draw and looked up at me. I had never seen such vibrant green eyes; they were the color of limes. I assumed contacts.

"I just wanted to know if I've done something to offend you," I said calmly. "As far as I know, I've never talked to you before today, but it seems like I've done something to you."

She looked caught for a second. "No," she said. "Your friends just don't like me."

"I don't really have any friends at Hawthorne anymore," I said matter-of-factly. Saying it felt odd, like I should feel worse about the fact. I knew that I was discounting Becky, but to be honest with myself, I felt more like a charity case to her than a friend anymore.

"I thought you and that Lainey girl were friends," she said, leaning over to gather her sketchbook back up. I laughed for about the first time in a month.

"What would give you that idea?" I asked, leaning on the fence. "I am way too dorky for them, and also" — I gestured to my house — "I don't live in a mansion."

"Never mind, then," she said.

She started to stand up, but I found I had a sudden desperation to talk to someone who I wasn't related to. Someone who didn't know me and hopefully wouldn't make assumptions.

"Where did you move from?" I asked, trying to keep the conversation going.

"Chicago."

"Do you miss it?"

"Every day." She looked up at the sky, as if there were an invisible dome there. "I don't like this town."

"Me neither. And I've lived here my whole life." I brushed away a fly that landed on the fence.

"That sucks," she said, her nose twitching for a moment like a rabbit.

"What's your name? I'm Ariel."

She paused for a second, tucking a lock of ruby hair behind her ear. "Theo. Theo Weaver. Nice to meet you." She came over and stuck out her hand above the fence posts for me to shake, an oddly formal gesture I found charming.

"Likewise," I said. "Theo, that's a pretty unusual name for a girl."

"It's short for Theosophia. My mom has strange taste."

As if on cue, Theo's mom appeared in the doorway of their colonial-style house. To my astonishment, I saw that it was Ms. Vore, our art teacher.

"That's your mom?" I asked, even though I could already tell the answer. Theo nodded sheepishly. I could definitely see the resemblance, and it wasn't just the glasses. It was the same serious, smart look on their faces, the same small nose.

"I'll see you at school, okay?" Theo said, and retreated swiftly back to her house. I stood wondering what exactly had just happened, and if we were on good terms now or not.

In Gym the next day, I discovered I wouldn't be able to go two days in a row without being the target of mockery.

"Nice gym shorts. Did you snag them from a clothing drop off box?" Madison asked me when I was changing.

"No," I said. I looked down at the mesh black shorts I wore. I hadn't realized they were that bad. Sure, I had owned them for years, but so what? It was gym class, not a fashion show. At least not to me.

Madison herself was prancing around in pink ones with *Juicy* printed on the butt. They were so tight they could have been spray painted on. Logic told me that clothing was not my most pressing issue. But the other half of my brain wondered if I should beg Claire to take me to the mall for sportswear. It would probably make her think I was moving on. She would be pleased. The thought made me physically cringe.

I tried to ignore Madison and Lainey like my authority figures preached in kindergarten. Ignore the bullies, and they will eventually stop picking on you. The problem with that little theory is that I had been trying to do that for years, and it hadn't ever worked. If anything, they only found new, innovative ways to torture me.

Inside the gym, the bleachers were pulled out halfway in anticipation of some kind of social event that weekend. Theo sat on the bottom row by herself. I noticed her ankle bandage was gone. I immediately navigated to the empty spot next to her. She felt safe.

"Hi," she said with some surprise, raising her eyebrows over flashing emerald glitter. It looked pale compared to the unusual bright green of her irises. "Didn't expect you to talk to me in school."

"Why is that?" I asked. "You're the only person with a functioning brain around here."

She smiled and looked out over the masses. She didn't seem so twitchy now that she was away from her house and her mom.

"I didn't know you had gym this hour," I said. I didn't remember seeing her yesterday or the day before.

"Well, I got to miss the first few days because of my ankle," she said, pulling her leg up and gesturing. "I could have sat out today in study hall, too, but I figured I had milked it enough." She leaned in and admitted, "My ankle's been fine for a week."

I was curious as to how she had gotten hurt in the first place, but I didn't want to pry.

"Plus, I had to avoid that fitness test," she continued. "Fitness is the one test I know I would fail. I run at top speeds of two seconds an hour."

"You can't be that bad," I protested.

"Oh, I can," she said chuckling. "And the less that they know about my lack of athletic skill here at cheerleader camp, the better."

"Good idea," I agreed.

It was comforting talking to someone I actually *could* talk to. I no longer felt like a target, dodging around and waiting to get hit. Gym class became no more pleasant, but at least it wasn't dreadful anymore.

At lunch, I sat with my old acquaintances again. I even interjected into the conversation a bit at first, discussing some news I had caught on TV that morning. Being around Theo had bolstered my confidence a little. But the girls were all making plans to go on shopping in Ann Arbor that weekend, and they didn't invite me. Just when I finally started to find normal. I withdrew behind my backpack again. It was quickly evolving into a protective shield.

After English class, I went to my locker to drop off my books and take the ones I needed for homework. As I was headed to art, a crowd of people blocked the hallway in front of me, preventing me from going past. I peered around to see what the fuss was about.

Ambrose Slaughter had pinned another boy up against the wall by his shirt collar. I groaned. I knew he had been keeping too low of a profile. Last year, Ambrose bloodied more than one kid's nose in the first month, and he never seemed to get in trouble. Mostly due to the fact that his father owned all three of the car dealerships in town.

A junior, Ambrose was tall even for seventeen. Leather tanned, with gelled golden hair and blue eyes, he looked like a demented cherub. He slammed the other boy up against the wall again. I could practically hear his teeth rattle from where I stood. The boy was puny, and looked like a freshman.

"Are you deaf? Do you have a listening problem?" Ambrose barked.

He wrenched the other boy's shirt, and the sleeve tore with a loud rip. Fat tears rolling down his reddened face. His crying elicited cruel laughter from the crowd around them.

I noticed then that Lainey and Madison were both standing by.

Henry was, too.

It surprised me more than it should have. Part of me still held out that he was one of the good guys.

As I watched, Lainey leaned on Henry's shoulder. The very fact that she was touching him made me queasy. A smug smile spread over her face, contorting her beautiful features into an ugly caricature.

"You need to stay out of my way!" Ambrose yelled in the other boy's face. He reared his thick arm back to punch. "I'll teach you, and you won't forget."

"Stop it!" I yelled. The second after the words were out I realized I had actually spoken aloud, not just in my head. My fingers flew up to my lips, trying too late to catch the words.

Color rushed into my cheeks. What had I done? Every face in the crowd of jerks turned towards me. Henry's lips lowered into a frown, a line forming between his eyebrows. His wide brown eyes met mine and he looked — what, guilty? Like a little boy caught pulling a cat's tail. Or at least being complicit in the event.

Ambrose smiled at me. It was the meanest smile I had ever seen. Everyone else looked merely irritated that I had interrupted their fun, but still ready to pounce. I took a step backward on instinct. I'd never been beaten up, but I had the feeling today was my day.

Principal McPherson appeared suddenly out of nowhere beside me.

"Break it up, break it up," he said sternly, waving his hands. "No fighting in the halls."

As if he could call it a fight, the implication being that it had been two-sided. He swooped his sleeves around in a circle, conducting the traffic away. The crowd, including Henry and Lainey, dispersed as the bell rang. McPherson patted Ambrose's shoulder and sent him off.

"That's all now," he said, smiling and revealing all of his yellowed teeth.

He turned to the other boy, who still cowered against the wall, not quite understand he'd been saved for the moment. His shirt hung limply at the torn shoulder, his hair a messy mop.

"Don't be a troublemaker," McPherson told him. "If I catch you involved in anything like this again, I'll suspend you."

The frightened boy scuttled away, holding his shirt together. McPherson ignored me completely, striding back to whatever cave he crawled out of.

I headed quickly to class, worried because I knew I was late. But Ms. Vore didn't seem to notice; in fact, she smiled and greeted me as I came in and she shut the door behind me. Shutting me in with my troubles.

Theo patted the seat next to her, an inviting smile on her face. It was a stark contrast from the other day. I sat hastily beside her, happy to not be near Lainey or Henry. I realized I liked being around her not only because she was interesting, but because I didn't have to pretend to be happy, to fake a smile to put her at ease like I did so often with everyone else.

Theo and I both pulled out our sketchbooks. We had to turn them in at the end of every week, which meant today. All of my drawings looked lopsided, suffering from near holes in the pages from erasing and redrawing so often. Because of Hugh's hopes in me I had become neurotic. I figured as long as I tried, it would be impossible to fail Art, but I could be the exception.

My apple from our shading homework last night looked more like a wad of cookie dough. I glanced at Theo's book, and was instantly both impressed and deeply jealous. Drawings already crammed the pages — birds, horses, and a strange, exotic fish with looping fins. When she flipped to a page that held a drawing of human lungs, I couldn't help but say, "Wow."

"What?" she asked, nonchalantly. As if she'd drawn merely stick figures.

"You're so talented," I said. I knew I was gushing, but it was honest gushing.

She blushed, pushing her glasses up on her nose. "It's not a big deal. I just draw all the time. If you do something enough, you get better at it."

Turning to a fresh sheet, she smoothed out the paper. It was at least three quarters of the way through the book. I watched as her face became more serious, as though she were getting into creative mode.

"That's really impressive, is all," I said.

She just continued with the line she had started.

"Why don't you want people at school to know Ms. Vore is your mom?" I asked, taking a pencil from the plastic cup on the table. I'd been curious about it since yesterday, when Theo seemed to be horrified that I saw Ms. Vore coming out of their house.

"Wouldn't you be embarrassed if your mom was your teacher?" she asked, pausing for a moment.

"Well, yeah," I agreed. "I get embarrassed when Claire comes up for parent teacher conferences. Last time she grilled my teachers on their educational qualifications. I practically had to grab her arm and drag her outside."

"It was just another thing for people to tease me about back home," she said. "I'm not Goth enough for the Goth kids. Not common enough for the regular kids. I was lucky enough to have a few good friends. Here I don't have that protection."

I nodded, fully understanding now that my own defense had disappeared.

I'd never had the occasion to brag about Hugh owning a gallery, as Jenna never really had any interest in the subject. But I took this opportunity to do so.

"My dad owns Erasmus, the art gallery in town."

Her eyes became huger and rounder than they naturally were, as though I just handed her a Christmas present.

"Get out. Really?"

I nodded, bemused.

"That is...wow..." She looked at the piles of thick reference books and art supplies on her mother's desk. "I haven't been there yet, but I was impressed Hell had any kind of culture at all. When my mom told me where we were moving, I assumed there would be five houses and a watering hole."

"It was his dream to open it. I remember when he was still painting full time in a closet, before Claire finally let him have his own room." A smile found my lips at the memory. "He has a section devoted to local artists. You should show him your work." I normally wouldn't bug Hugh about his business, but Theo was so talented it felt criminal not to at least suggest it.

"That would be great. Not that I'm anything really special. But just to have the opportunity..." She trailed off, a dreamy smile playing on her lips. "If you can't tell, I'm kind of shy. I mean, I know I am, but it's hard to get past it."

"I could tell a little," I admitted. "It's not a bad trait. It serves you well here. But we're talking, so you seem to warm up. That's the important thing."

She peppered me with questions for a while, wanting to know when Hugh started the gallery and what kind of work was displayed there.

Later in class, I brought up the situation that had occurred in the hall to Theo. I felt like I had to decipher it, although I didn't know why it mattered. I had suspected deep down that Henry might be a jerk in good disguise because of how quickly he had become friends with the popular kids. My suspicions were just confirmed, that's all. But it bothered me deeply. More than I cared to admit.

"Maybe he had an excuse," Theo offered. We were whispering back and forth while Ms. Vore was talking about different drawing techniques throughout the ages. I knew it was rude to talk while the teacher was, but once I started spilling theories, I couldn't plug my mouth back up again.

"Like what?"

"Who knows? Sometimes it's better not to assume things, though, no matter how obvious they look," she said. I wondered briefly what brought her to that theory.

"That's very deep of you," I said.

"Thanks." Her pencil hadn't stopped moving since she put it to the paper, and her art was making me stunningly aware of my lack of artistic talent. But I didn't mind. I was just amazed that anyone could create that kind of beauty with the same instrument I used to doodle smiley faces. I often felt the same way about Hugh when I watched him paint.

"But why even be there in the first place?" I knew I couldn't let it go, and I was probably being annoying. Theo shrugged in response, eyes fixed on her drawing.

My eyes went to the back of Henry's head. His dark brown hair fell to the nape of his neck, where a short, inviting expanse of skin was exposed above his shirt collar. He ran a hand through his hair absentmindedly. I wondered for a crazy second if he could feel me watching him, then dismissed the thought as absurd. He looked like he was drawing in his sketchbook, too. I wondered how his talent fared.

While still looking at him, I started to say, "And also —"

"Ms. Donovan, repeat back to me what I just said." Ms. Vore was standing right in front of my desk, with her arms crossed. I looked up at her face slowly, heat spreading across my cheeks, completely powerless. Nothing could save me now.

"Um. Techniques. Throughout the...history. Of art," I said, fully aware of how lame I sounded. I was terrible lately at coming up with answers on the spot.

"What artist was I just discussing? Give me his name." Her monotonous voice complemented her *I am not amused* face as she peered at me over the top of her glasses. I wracked my brain desperately for a moment, trying to think up any fudged answer, but I couldn't. In fact, the only artist whose name I could remember was Theo's.

Great, now she would think I was not a serious student, even though her class was one of my favorites.



"In the future, I suggest you pay more attention to your education, instead of staring at Henry. You can do that on your own time. Instead, focus on your artwork." She seemed to find it amusing now, the corners of her lips jerking. So did everyone else in class, apparently, as they laughed at me.

"And the answer was Cezanne," she added as an endnote, clucking her tongue.

"I wasn't....staring..." I sputtered, but she had already moved on, and was continuing with her instruction at the chalkboard.

I *hadn't* been staring. Not really. There was a distinct difference between looking and staring and that difference was obvious, right? My cheeks were red-hot and I felt dizzy from embarrassment. Maybe I would pass out and they could just ship me off to the nurse's office. Theo had buried her face in her hands beside me.

"Mom..." she whispered to no one in particular, "Why was that necessary?"

Henry turned around slowly in his seat, his face holding a look of confusion. For a brief moment our eyes met, as my stomach swan dived. Lainey was glaring daggers at me, I could feel it. I imagined her drawing her finger across her neck to let me know I was toast. But I couldn't take my eyes off of Henry. Slowly, his lips curled into a smile.

I looked down at my wasted sketchbook, wishing I could jump into the empty pages.

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## Chapter 7

Theo stuck around after class as everyone else left.

"That's why I almost skipped art," she told me matter-of-factly. "My mom is nice most of the time, but she also thinks she's in a movie occasionally. But I couldn't skip it. Art is the closest thing I have to religion."

"It's all right," I assured her. Nothing could be done about it now. I gathered my supplies as slowly as possible to avoid people in the hall. Gossip spread like fire through dry brush at Hawthorne. "I should have dropped the Henry thing. It's my fault for harping on it so much."

"I'm kind of impressed you didn't cry," Theo said, studying my face like a sculpture. "If it were me, I totally would have squirted Niagara Falls."

I neglected to tell her that crying wasn't an option for me anymore. She said goodbye and glared at her mom on the way out as they walked to their car. I was the last one to leave the room, praying that everyone else was gone.

But as I walked into the hall, I had a shock. Henry stood casually across the way, in the darkened woodshop doorway. He looked down at the phone he was texting on. Was he waiting for me? I hoped not. I hurried out the door and past him, hoping I could avoid catching his too-focused attention.

But then he was right next to me, shutting his phone and sliding it into the front pocket of his jeans.

"In a hurry?" he asked pleasantly.

"Yes," I said. *To get away from you, you make me nervous and I have enough to worry about.*

"Art class was interesting today," he hinted, still with the same cheerful tone of voice. His gigantic smile was back, framed by his pillowy lips. "Really fascinating notes."

"Okay, now you *are* irritating me," I said, scowling. This only made him laugh more.

I spun around to face him, aware that we were the only two people around. My heart fluttered, but not in an enjoyable way.

"I wasn't staring at you. I was telling my friend that you just stood by today while that guy got the crap kicked out of him."

His handsome face fell, almost into a pout. "What was I supposed to do?" he asked softly.

"I don't know, stop him?" I couldn't believe the anger that had come from nowhere. All the time brimming below the surface of my calm thoughts.

"I don't want to step on anybody's toes," he explained. "There's a whole power structure in place in this school. It's very cult like, if you haven't noticed."

"I've noticed," I said shortly, and started walking away. But he kept up with me, matching my stride.

"I don't understand how you can be friends with those people," I said.

"I'm friends with lots of different people. You and I, for example, I would consider friends," he said.

This made me stop again. We had barely spoken a few words to one another, and now we were friends?

"You know that power structure you mentioned? It sort of means we shouldn't even be talking," I said. It was hard to glare at someone so cheerful and attractive, but I managed it anyway.

His phone rang, and he yanked it out of his pocket, sighing with exasperation.

"I have to take this," he said, looking at the screen. "But I want to keep talking later, okay?"

He held my gaze for a moment longer, then flipped his phone open and distanced himself from me as he headed for the exit.

"Hold on a second," he told the person on the other end. He turned back around, walking backwards, and said, "Promise me."

"Fine," I said through gritted teeth. "I promise." He nodded his head at me, and then he was gone.

I unclenched the fists I didn't know I was making. Well, that was that, whatever it was. His bizarre insistence that we chat had confused me. Thankfully, I had two whole days away from school to look forward to. No more politics or drama for forty-eight hours.

I don't know if I've ever appreciated a weekend more. I tried to pretend like school was a bad dream, and I was awake now that I was in my own house. The days were rainy, and I refused to get out of my pajamas or brush my hair.

On Sunday, Claire stayed in her home office, busy with a proposal for work. She worked for a life insurance company, approving or denying people coverage while she wasn't in meetings. It seemed like an incredibly stressful job, but it paid well, and besides, Claire seemed to thrive under stress. Without deadlines and last-minute fixes, I think she would have felt unimportant.

I could tell she didn't want to be disturbed because the door was shut. Lame, considering I wanted to use the computer. But probably best to keep me away from checking Jenna's page again.

Because of the nonstop rain, by noon it was as dark as evening. The walls in the living room had swirling forest green wallpaper Claire had installed last year, which only contributed to the lack of light. I walked around the house, flicking on lamps to try to brighten up the place. I found persistent rain comforting, as if it insulated me from the outside world.

"I have an adventure for us," Hugh said, coming out of the kitchen with a box of garbage bags in his hand.

"Are we burying our enemies?" I asked.

"Ha, you are just so funny." He chucked the box at me and I caught it with both hands. "We're finally going to conquer the storage room."

Claire had been relentlessly bugging Hugh for months, ever since our May yard sale, to clean out the room full of junk across from my bedroom. Claire's plan was to donate most of the stained stuffed animals and ill-advised fad footwear to the local thrift store, and turn the room into her own personal exercise haven. A little pile of weights and a yoga mat waited in the corner of the main basement room, for the day when the treadmill would finally be uncovered.

Hugh grabbed a stack of broken down moving boxes he had brought in from the shed. With me in front, we headed down the basement stairs. I flipped on the light switch in the storage room. There was hardly any room for us to stand inside, but we managed to squeeze in.

My grandparents, Claire's parents, died in a car crash two years ago. When that happened, much of their belongings came to us. Corinne had picked through what she wanted, and then left it to my mom to dispose of the rest. Claire had a hard time parting with much of it, and there was a lot to part with. My grandparents had been wealthy, and Grandma Eleanor collected antiques on the verge of hoarding.

Much of it had ended up going to auction. But a third of the delicate china and lacey linens sat here, collecting dust. I knew part of the reason Claire wanted us to take care of it was so that she wouldn't have to go through the emotional work of deciding what to give away.

Hugh was busy putting together one of the boxes and setting it on top of an unsightly, chipped end table.

"Where do we start?" I asked him. He looked as overwhelmed as I did.

"Wherever you want," he said. "Just start. I want to get it done today. Considering how you and I operate, if we quit in the middle, it'll never get finished." I knew he was right about that.

We set to work, digging through boxes and bags, and taking out garbage and donations to the main room. The charity pile began to grow, and after an hour had passed, we could move more freely in the storage room little by little. Like my room, there were no windows inside, and it was musty. Puffs of dust whirled up like spirits whenever we moved a box.

"Good lord, there's carpeting," Hugh remarked when he discovered a swatch of blue on the floor. "I had no idea." We looked at each other and laughed. It felt good since we hadn't done it in so long.

A rack of old clothing was crushed against the back wall. Hanging on rusty wire hangers was a baby blue tuxedo that I assumed had belonged to my grandpa, and a few sweaters with shoulder pads and color vomit that moths had nibbled.

"Everything on that rack can go," Hugh advised me. "In case you can't tell."

He helped me navigate the wheeled time machine out into the hall. I pulled a sticky cobweb off of my palm.

"I'm glad we have a van coming to pick this up. Otherwise we'd never get it out of here," he said, surveying the little mountain of junk that had accumulated.

"Do you think everything will fit?" I asked. It was an awful lot of our crap.

"We'll make it fit," he said determinedly.

Taking the rack out made a significant dent in the room, a full free corner. Nearby, I found some loose photographs in a box, of Claire and Corinne as kids. They are fraternal twins, but in the pictures, they were dressed in matching outfits. I watched them grow older as I flipped through the photos, morphing into their current personalities.

Claire looked fashionable for the time with a perm and short jean jackets, while Corinne's hair was flat and practical, held in place with barrettes. As I flipped through them, I smiled. I could totally see them fighting tooth and nail over the bathroom mirror.

A musty old file lay at the bottom of the box. "Eleanor's Medical Records" someone had scribbled in black on the surface. I picked it up, fascinated by my find.

"Take a look at this," I said, lifting the cover. Hugh snatched it out of my hands almost immediately, before I got a chance to look at the yellowing papers inside.

"Claire would want this," he said distractedly.

"Okay. But can I just look at it before you take it to her?" I pleaded.

"You wouldn't be interested in grimy old papers," he said. He had already tucked the file underneath his arm.

"Are you kidding?" I asked. "You know me. I would definitely be interested in grimy old papers."

"Looking at it would be a little disrespectful, don't you think, kiddo? You know the kind of medical tests old people have to have. I'm sure there's nothing fascinating."

He put the file in going upstairs box next to him. The subject was closed.

My mind raced with reasons why he would be so eager to cover up whatever was in the file. I wondered if I really was just being rude by wanting to look at it, but I didn't see the harm when Eleanor was my own grandmother. She had always enjoyed fairly good health as far as I knew, no cancer or diabetes, and her death had obviously been an accident. Still, I tried to put it out of my mind.

We finished the storage room in a few hours. The space was almost totally clear, save for some tubs of Christmas decorations in the corner, an old TV and DVD player we had rigged up, and the treadmill. Finally I had the heart to put most of my old stuffed animals and dolls in the charity pile, although a few of them now sat on my dresser.

Later on, I sat down to finish homework in my room. The light rain had been replaced by a full on storm outside, and I could feel the rumbles of thunder underneath my socks. Not wanting to think about school while I was home, I had put off my homework until the last minute. I hated the fact that the weekend was almost up. Time raced when I was out of classrooms and echoing hallways. At least I had someone to talk to in Theo.

I tapped my pencil on my Geometry worksheet. I was struggling with math already, not much, but I could imagine how it would be soon. I hated it because it made me feel stupid, even though I

wasn't. I filled in the holes in the letters of "surface area formulas" with pencil.

The last day of ninth grade captured my wandering thoughts. Jenna and I had been talking about moving on to sophomore year, sitting up front in Mr. Calhoun's class. He'd given us the last two weeks basically off, merely making us complete word find puzzles every day.

"It's like rush week. And it's finally over, and we survived," Jenna said, flaking orange polish off of her tiny fingernails. "Despite the hazing. And look, we still even have all our hair." She ran her hand lovingly through her springy, perfect curls. My hair could never do that.

"I guess you could look at it that way," I agreed. Mr. Calhoun handed out pamphlets about a job seminar the school was holding in July. Jenna picked hers up and read the summary on the back flap.

*"Ever wonder what technology lies ahead? You can become involved in your future starting now...Like I would really want to rush right back up to Hawthorne when I finally get out of here,"* Jenna scoffed, tossing it on her desk. "No thanks. I wish I never had to see this place again."

She crumpled the pamphlet up and aimed for the garbage can sitting beside the door. She missed by a fraction but didn't bother to retrieve her refuse.

"It's not that bad, is it?" I asked. "I mean...most of the time."

"Are you kidding me?" Her nostrils flared like she was on the verge of losing her temper. "This town is a nightmare, even if it didn't try so hard to be." This from the person who used to have the world's most optimistic attitude.

I shifted uncomfortably at my desk. The way she was acting was the beginning of the rift between us, little cracks in the smooth façade of our friendship. I had tried not to notice it, and I knew now that was a mistake. But back then I thought denial was my best defense.

"Do you know what you want to be when you grow up?" I asked her in my best teacher voice. I already knew it would be something with animals. Jenna had been a vegan since she knew what the word meant, and she was always pet sitting whenever she had the opportunity because her parents' wouldn't allow her to have animals in the house. She'd saved multiple mice and turtles and kept them in secret shoeboxes behind the garage over the years.

Jenna smirked, the angry attitude draining off her face. "*Veterinarian.*" She sang out the syllables. "Although at the rate my parents' money is going down the drain, I think I'll have to take up a job dancing on top of a bar to pay my way through veterinary school."

I frowned. I had always thought Jenna's parents were pretty well off. Not popular-kid-rich exactly, but definitely upper middle class. I had been amazed when she forked over a hundred dollars for jeans.

"What are you talking about?" I asked. "I thought they had a bunch in savings, college fund, everything."

She looked down at the floor. "They've been having a lot of bad luck. Their stocks tanked a while back. I know they've been dipping into their savings accounts. I keep hearing them late at night screaming at each other when they think I'm sleeping."

Maybe that was the reason she left. It could be as valid as any motivation, I thought as I sat in my room in the present, listening to the thunder. I wondered if her parents still blamed me. The day after Jenna disappeared, her mother grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me.

"Why her? Why not you?" she had shouted through her tears until my father pulled her off of me.

My parents told me not to think about it. She was just a scared mother. People say things they don't mean when they're frightened, especially when it involves their children. I couldn't just forget it, though. I still saw the desperate look in her eyes, and I knew she would trade me for her daughter without question.

*THUD.*

I jumped. Something had pounded the wall above my desk. I pushed my seat back and stood up.

*THUD.*

Maybe it was the water heater. I was pretty sure it was on the other side of the wall. But it appeared to be coming from high on the ceiling. I waited. For a few seconds, it seemed like the sound stopped, but as soon as I thought that, it came again.

*THUD.*

I flinched. Speed-walking out of my room, I stood up on the bottom step and yelled up to Claire. "Hey, did you drop something in the kitchen?"

"No, why?"

"I just heard a couple of loud sounds."

"It wasn't up here," she called. "Maybe it was outside. It's still storming; it could have been thunder or the deck chairs getting knocked around in the wind."

Well, it could have, had it not been right above my desk in the middle of our basement. I walked down to the end of the hall, past my room and to the little alcove beyond. But there wasn't much in the little space. The water heater I had suspected before was totally silent, and the furnace wasn't even on.

*THUD.*

I recoiled, hands clasping, teeth clenching. I definitely wasn't imagining it. My mind filed through the possibilities — pipes, the storm...maybe something else. Something that made voices whisper behind doors, and lockers shut and open. But that was stupid, that had been at school.

I slowly strode over to my open doorway, and glued my eyes to the innocuous, plain wall. I stood still, waiting for the sound again, but all was still. I could hear the faint sound of the TV program upstairs, but whatever caused the banging had finally stopped. *Like the whispering behind the door.* I shook my head. I didn't know if that made me more relieved or apprehensive. Either my imagination was going bonkers, or something more supernatural had started to affect me.

## Chapter 8

Luckily, no one appeared to care about my supposed staring problem last week. Even Lainey continued to pretend I was nothing more than a bug beneath her stiletto. Which meant I still wasn't important.

At lunch, I found Theo in the commons as we both got in line. Everyone had lunch at Hawthorne during the same time period, so there were two lunch counters, with people snaking out behind them. Theo really hadn't made other friends at school yet.

"How about you just come sit at my table?" I offered, assuming the other girls wouldn't mind. There were always a few free seats, I was sure we could make room.

"Okay," Theo said, nodding. Tiny sparkly flecks rained on her tray. We gathered our food and made our way to our destination.

"What are you doing?" Becky asked, alarmed. Theo and I froze as we were setting our trays down. Becky was normally so inviting, having rescued me the other day. I couldn't imagine what I had done to bring on the change. She beckoned for me to lean in so she could whisper to me, so I did.

"She's not sitting with us," she said, indicating Theo with a quick flash of her muddy eyes. Off of my confused look, she continued, "She's a freak. I don't want her bringing the rest of us down." There was no maybe about it, her mind was made up. Becky had become the leader of the group when I wasn't looking. The lippgloss she had been busy applying dangled from her fingertips.

"If you'll just drop her, we'd be happy to have you still sit here," she finished. Funny, I remember her bare faced and only interested in volleyball last year. Now her freckles were buried under thick foundation and she wore a low-cut top. I realized I hadn't been paying much attention at all. My mouth gaped open a little as I pulled back.

I took a second to compose myself. "You really don't have the hair to act like Lainey," I spat, and spun around, walking quickly away.

The word mad didn't cover the emotions coursing through me. I was revolted. It's not like they owed me anything, but it still made me furious. Theo stayed close on my heels, and nearly bumped into me when I stopped.

Surveying the commons for a moment, I looked for a seat. But as usual, it was completely packed. The tables were as cliquey as a movie cliché, too, and I didn't see any empty spots together. I glanced at Theo and she was chewing off all of her lip balm.

"Come on," I said, and we made a beeline for the back wall beneath the windows. It was the only place I could think of. I turned around, and plopped resolutely down against the wall. She followed suit.

"This is a little unusual," she said, adjusting her skirt underneath her. She started taking the cellophane off of her sandwich. "I like it."

"I just don't understand people sometimes," I said. "Or I guess I *think* I understand them, and then they morph into different people."

She nodded thoughtfully. "Well, you told me you didn't have any friends here."

"I suppose I was right," I said, sighing. "I just didn't realize it at the time."

We chatted for a bit as we were eating our bland cafeteria meal. Theo filled me in about moving to Hell, and about her parents' recent divorce.

"They still love each other," she explained, twisting the cap off of her water bottle and taking a drink. "They just can't live together. They tried to resist divorcing for a long time, but being caught up together just made them fight, even when they were in separate places. Now that they're totally disconnected entities, and they each have their own bank accounts, they get along fine."

"Does your dad still live in Chicago?" I asked.

"No, that's the funny thing," she said. "He lives four houses down from us. He moved here about a year ago. Mom followed him because she thought it would be easier for me. I think I'm just an excuse. It's not like there was anything for me here, really. I'm planning to go to the Art Institute of Chicago."

"Parents like to make excuses," I said, running my fingernail over the scratches in the tray. They had switched from Styrofoam to reusable brown plastic this year, but they were already suffering abuse. "Even when it's more like lying."

Theo nodded thoughtfully, and we both surveyed the busy, chattering mass of people in front of us. Even though we got a few odd stares from some of the tables nearby, pretty much everyone ignored our odd choice of seating. I was growing to like it that way.

I had been trying to ignore Henry as much as possible. I didn't like the effect he had on me, making me forget about what should be important. It was as if he lived in a parallel world that occasionally dipped into mine. Despite whatever promise he had made me give to continue our chat, I had little interest in picking the conversation back up.

Being the new guy, he got a lot of attention, especially from the girls, as I was well aware. It had been my experience that anyone who flirted with one girl, did it with all the girls. And so I tried to be as cautious as possible.

In History, I noticed everyone turning in their desks as he spoke, although I couldn't hear what he was saying. For a fleeting moment I wished I could, and tried to read his lips. His mouth had become an unconscious obsession for me, the first place I gazed when I saw his face.

Ambrose Slaughter, who was sitting next to him, frowned beneath the golden mass of his hair. Ambrose had always been as interesting to everyone as Henry was now, although I had never understood the attraction. He had the personality of a dripping towel. I turned back around in my seat, scribbling a tornado in the margin of my History notes.

In Art class, I got around to apologizing to Theo for Becky and the others at lunch. I hadn't wanted to mention it in the lunch room, worried it would bring up hurt feelings. But she didn't seem fazed.

"It wasn't right for them to act that way," I said.

Theo shrugged, putting the finishing touches on a feather of a bird in her book.

"I'm used to being picked on, Ariel," she said softly. "It's not a big deal. People leave me alone here, most of the time. I don't really care what they think of me as long as they don't say it. I was getting tired of being called Tinkerbelle every day."

"But Tinkerbelle's basically a fairy pinup," I said. "That's like a compliment."

She smiled slyly and shook her head.

"I was teased some last year," I said, turning my art gum eraser over in my fingers. "By you don't have to guess who," I continued, and nodded towards Lainey. "She's actually being nice to me this year so far in comparison. You know how you said you weren't Goth enough or normal enough for people? That's how it is here. I just never realized it before, back when..."

I trailed off. I hadn't mentioned Jenna once to Theo, and I preferred to keep it that way. To her credit, she never asked, although I assumed she had heard something about it.

Henry sauntered past our table then, causing me to straighten. I had gotten to the point where I could tell it was him just from seeing him walk in my periphery vision. He started digging in the supply cabinet behind us. Not wanting him to hear me badmouth his new best friend, I changed the subject.

"I think I'm going to fail Geometry this year," I groaned. "This morning Mr. Vanderlip held me after class to lecture me about my abysmal quiz score."



"That's no good," Theo said sympathetically. "I'd offer to help, but I don't do that great in math myself. I usually pull a little over a C."

"He told me I should get a tutor," I said. "But I don't know where to find one."

"Maybe ask one of the seniors?" she suggested.

Suddenly, Henry came around and put his elbows on the side of the table across from me. He leaned his face in his hands, his fists squishing up his cheeks. I tried to ignore how cute it made him look.

"May we help you?" I asked, and I heard Theo snicker beside me.

"Geometry is my second favorite subject, right up there next to physics," Henry said. "If you ever need any help, I'd be happy to offer my qualified services." He grinned at me, turning his charm up another notch.

"You want to be my tutor?" I asked, raising my eyebrows. The day was suddenly veering off into the bizarre.

"Sure, why not?" He stood up, and tapped his knuckles on the table. He had beautiful hands, I noticed, the rigid veins trailing like rivers beneath his skin. Really, he had beautiful everything. "If you can handle being around me for long without wanting to run far away."

"I don't know if that's possible," I said dryly. Though I was attempting teasing, I could feel my pulse racing in a peculiar way. Suddenly his attention didn't seem so unwanted. He lowered his voice to a throaty whisper and gazed into my eyes.

"Maybe I won't let you run away."

My throat tightened, my breath catching. I had no idea what to say. I couldn't look away from him.

After a second, his face broke into his usual smile, his eyes softening. "Okay, that was too big bad wolf, huh? I try for cool and it comes out corny."

"It was a bit corny," I pretended to agree. It had not been the least bit corny. "But I'd be grateful not to flunk." I really did need the help, I reasoned with myself. So what if it came from someone cute? It didn't make the potential knowledge any less useful. As long as I could focus enough on the math to retain it.

"Good. Here's my number." He flipped to a blank page in my sketchbook and scribbled the digits upside down, so that they were right side up for me.

"Text me and tell me when is a good day and time for you," he said.

He picked up the reference book that he had gotten out of the supply cabinet and headed back to his seat. My mind was foggy, as if I'd just been dosed with tranquilizers. A heady sensation of giddiness was speeding up my torso.

I ran my index finger over the penciled numbers, not believing they were real. The graphite smudged a little. Theo wacked me on the arm, knocking me out of my reverie.

"Ow."

"He totally wants you, you know that right?" Her voice was high and excited. "What I just witnessed was basically verbal foreplay."

"He does not want me!" I said in a loud whisper. The girls at the next table glared at us; I tried my best to smile so they would look away.

"Lainey has him tightly ensnared in her web," I continued, wiggling my fingers like spider legs. "There's no way to extricate him from that. If I so much as lay one finger on Henry, that finger is as good as torn off."

Henry put one knee on his seat. He looked back at me and quickly flicked his eyebrows up, smiling again as he shifted and sat the rest of the way down.

"Yeah, you just keep on denying it," Theo said, whipping her sketchbook open with a flourish.

The whole walk home, I debated my interpretation of the scene between Henry and me. With Jenna no longer around, it was possible that I was gullible. She had always been my logic for me, offering me advice that was more often than not very solid. Now that I didn't have a person to bounce ideas off of (I liked Theo, but I didn't feel completely comfortable talking to her about that stuff), I didn't trust my own feelings.

At dinner, both of my parents were home for once. It had been a while since I'd seen them eat together. Since my birthday, in fact, if cake could be considered a meal. I assisted Hugh in making spaghetti. As the garlic bread baked it made the whole downstairs smell heavenly. I set the plates and silverware out on the dining room table.

"Use up the party napkins," Claire suggested, breezing into the room and kissing my dad on the cheek. She tossed her briefcase and laptop on the counter.

I took the brown *happy birthday* napkins out of the drawer and nestled them beneath the forks and knives, glad to get rid of them. And to forget all about that strange day, and the dream that had given me more questions than answers.

Around the dinner table, I prepared my proposal, wanting to get it right.

"I got a D on my first Geometry quiz," I said. "And I thought I knew the material, too." I never would have been so open to telling them before.

Claire immediately crinkled her nose, a common gesture that also occasionally appeared on her sister's gaunt face. It meant annoyance, a rift in the predictable flow of her life. But I stopped them before they could start the usual "try harder" math lecture.

"So would it be okay for me to have a tutor from school over this week?" I asked. "Mr. Vanderlip, my math teacher, suggested it."

"Who's the tutor?" Hugh asked with some suspicion, fork poised in the air.

"Henry Rhodes," I said, trying to remain calm. Just saying his name made overexcitement appear in my voice. "He just moved to Hell."

"A boy?" Claire asked, in the tone of voice she would have used had I suggested a wild animal. Maybe she thought the two were one in the same.

"Yes, I believe so," I said.

"I don't know about that..." Claire said, leaning back in her chair. I watched the little vein in the middle of her forehead pulse.

"I need the help," I pleaded. "Without it, I'm sure I'll flunk. And Henry is in all of my Honors classes. He's smart. And he *offered*. It would be totally free, no strings attached." At least, I hoped so.

Hugh and Claire looked at each other. It was one of their moves that made me think they communicated by thoughts.

"All right," Claire said finally, pushing her plate away. "But I want him to meet one of us, first. If he's just some grabby-handed little..."

"He's not," I said firmly. "I wouldn't be asking if he was. I have better judgment than that." Her raised eyebrow indicated she wasn't so sure about my judgment.

"You said they just moved here?" Hugh asked in passing.

I nodded, dipping a piece of bread in the leftover sauce puddle on my plate.

"I went to school with a Phillip Rhodes, from first grade on up. I think we graduated the same year. But I know he left after high school, when he got married." A very thoughtful look had crossed my father's face, a skinny line appearing between his eyebrows as he gazed off into space.

"Cheryl Glass, wasn't it?" Claire asked him.

Hugh nodded. "Yeah, I think so," he said.

"Biggest snob in our school," Claire divulged. "She acted like she invented the side ponytail." It sounded like a familiar story.

"Henry said something about his parents moving back here. It's probably the same family," I told them.

For some reason, Hugh looked troubled.

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## Chapter 9

I paced back and forth in my room with my phone in my clenched fist. I had been repeating the same routine for about twenty minutes. Maybe the number was fake? Walk, pause, look at phone, walk. Maybe the whole thing was some horrible prank Lainey and Madison conceived over a tanning session.

Finally, I typed out a text, and forced my thumb to hit SEND. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Except possible humiliation. Having the text forwarded to everyone in school...

The phone shook in my hand. Every second I waited for a reply, I grew more anxious.

Thirty seconds later, the phone beeped. I almost dropped it on the carpet.

*Tomorrow after school is good*, his reply to my suggestion read plainly.

I let out a breath, and sank onto the floor beside my bed. I set down the phone next to me and my hand bumped something beneath the dust ruffle. I slid the object out. It was a familiar photo album, the glittery pink front covered with heart stickers. The anticipation in my chest melted into a numb block.

I thumbed through the photos of Jenna and me together. Birthday parties, on vacation. Smiling gleefully in almost every shot. I pitied the girls in the pictures, who didn't know how much their life would change when they got older. Guilt slithered through me again. What was I doing? Maybe I was just distracting myself.

I leaned my head back against the side of the bed, and shut my eyes, the photo album still in my lap. Jenna wouldn't trust Henry for more than flirting, I was certain of that. But that was Jenna, or at least, Jenna the next generation, whose buoyant attitude had crashed in flames somewhere along the way.

I wondered if she really had run away. It wouldn't be that out of the question. I denied it initially because I couldn't imagine her keeping such a big secret from me. But even I had to admit that things had changed in the last months of our friendship. And then there were all the times she had complained about feeling trapped in Hell, and hating her parents.

I wondered what she would think of me now.

Of most people I've heard it said that if they were gone, they would want their friends to move on and be happy. Not Jenna. Jenna would want me to set up a shrine and stand vigil to it every night. And I knew I wasn't doing enough. Over the summer, I had walked through every street and inch of woods surrounding her house. I had put up flyers all over town. I had answered every question her parents and, eventually, the police peppered me with, and there were stacks of pages worth. But it wasn't enough, and I knew it.

When I went to sleep that night, I had a different kind of dream.

Henry stood at the end of a thin ribbon of sidewalk. He waited patiently for me, his arms crossed in front of him. I walked to him, because there was nowhere else I'd rather go. His eyes were trained on my every step, and I couldn't walk fast enough. I reached him and our mouths met. Hands sliding through each other's hair. Tongues twisting. I had never had a dream like this.

We were on the couch in the basement then. His mouth broke away from mine, as he pulled his shirt up over his head, tousling his hair. There was nothing but a blur underneath, where his chest should be.

Someone knocked on the door. Persistent, they wouldn't stop, even though I tried to block it out. As much as I feverishly wanted to keep kissing him, I couldn't ignore the sound.

"I have to go," I whispered. His face retained its patience, his eyes soft and watchful.

"I'll always be here," he said.

I stood up off of the couch and walked through the filmy haze. Then I was standing in front of the back patio doors, staring outside. Someone stood out in the darkness, I knew, but I couldn't see them. That's when I woke up. The black air in my room suffocated me.

Nerves plagued me all day, to the point where I couldn't eat lunch or I knew I'd throw up. The dream I'd had about Henry made me both more aware of my feelings and more conflicted. Henry and I didn't acknowledge each other in school, and I wondered idly if he had changed his mind. I even scrolled through my text messages to make sure his reply was still there; it was.

I didn't talk to Theo about it, even though she had been there when Henry had first brought the suggestion up. Instead we compared notes we had taken in Spanish, our other class together, and kept our chatter to mundane topics.

After the bell rang in Art class for school to be over, I stayed behind as I had the other day. Only this time I was waiting for Henry instead of trying to avoid him. My stomach was a pit of nerve soup as I stood up.

Lainey tried to walk out with Henry and he said goodbye to her. I couldn't help but be a little pleased at the stunned look on her face as she watched him walk back to my seat. I looked down at the floor; a little afraid her eyes would become lasers and bore a hole in me.

"Are you ready?" Henry asked me in a low voice. I nodded. "Do you need me to carry anything?" He held out his arms, almost as if to hug me. I bit down on my grin.

"No, thank you," I said softly.

"Is somebody picking us up?" he inquired, grabbing his own books off his desk and holding them underneath his arm.

"I actually walk home," I said. "I don't live far." My speech stuck behind my tonsils, and I cleared my throat.

"Great," he said, the usually-present smile arriving. "We can take advantage of the warmer weather before it says goodbye."

We walked out of the emptying school and through the parking lot. Out of nowhere, shyness had overtaken me, rendering me speechless. I watched the cars pulling into traffic; I couldn't even look at him, afraid I would either start laughing and be unable to stop, or I would faint.

"What did you think of the quiz in History?" he asked as we made it to the sidewalk. I shrugged my shoulders, which had tensed up considerably.

"Half the time I don't know if Wick is being serious or not," he said, shaking his head. "I have a hard time editing my notes down." I knew I should respond with my own opinion, but I couldn't find the words.

We walked in silence for a few minutes, me berating myself inside my head. The sunlight made the gray sidewalk shimmer. I knew I was making a fool of myself, but I didn't know how to stop it. It was like watching a slow-motion video of a person jumping to their death from a skyscraper.

"Won't it be great when we can start driver's training?" he asked, still trying to get me to talk. "Finally be able to go wherever we want." I nodded noncommittally.

"What's with you?" he asked finally, stopping in his tracks. "You've barely said a word this whole time."

"Sorry," I said, finally turning towards him. He was almost exactly the same height as I was, maybe an inch taller, so I looked straight into his eyes. "I don't mean to be so awkward, I just...I've never been great at talking to guys. They all think I'm weird."

He smiled, not a smirk, but a genuine, nice smile. "Don't worry, I'm safe. Nothing freaks me out. You could tell me anything and I wouldn't think you're bizarre. Well, almost anything. You've never murdered anyone, have you?"

I shook my head, and a short laugh came out of my throat.

"Ha! I knew I could do it," he declared triumphantly.

"Do what?" I inquired.

"Make you laugh. You're always so serious around me. You've made my day, dear." He nudged me with his shoulder.

The old-timey affection was not missed, nor was the physical touch, but I chose not to comment on either of them. The dam on my words was broken, however, and I started talking back to him.

"You promised you'd bring up our discussion the other day," he reminded me.

"I did," I agreed.

"Why is it so bad that I'm friends with those people?" he inquired, searching my eyes.

I looked down at my feet. "They're awful."

"They're not so awful," he argued. "You just think they're better than you or something. Well, I'm here to tell you it isn't true."

I blushed, feeling my features become a little look of shock for a moment until I smoothed it away. "How did you know I felt that way?"

"You hunch your shoulders," he offered, looking up at the sky as he thought of other reasons. "You look at people as though you're afraid they will bite you at any moment. Why?" When he asked the question, he looked at me again.

I didn't have a real answer. Jenna felt like too sacred of a topic.

"Ever since we were little, I remember knowing I was different than them," I said, gazing up at the halo around the sun. "And it wasn't just their clothes, or the fact that they had white chocolate raspberry brownies at the bake sale when I had plain old chocolate chip."

That made him smirk. "So what was it that felt so different?"

"It was like they knew how much more important they were than me, and they never let me forget it," I said. I had never really analyzed the situation so much before.

"But nobody there is more important just because of how much their parents checks are worth," Henry countered.

That caused me to chuckle again. "That just tells me how new you are," I said, playing with the zipper on my coat. "And how innocent and sheltered from the world you must be. Money always buys power."

Henry pushed his hands in his sweatshirt pockets. I wondered for a moment if I offended him.

"Innocent is not the word I would use," he said, then appraised me. "Can you keep a little secret?"

"Sure. As long as it's little," I teased.

"My parents are mostly pushing me to hang out with specific people. To them, it's never too early to start networking."

"Ah." Sounded like Claire in overdrive.

"Ever since we moved back here in May, we've had a ton of dinner parties and social get-togethers that I have no interest in. I've had to wear a tie more than once, to give you an idea. They're all old friends, my parents and their parents."

"So your mom and dad used to live here?" I asked. He nodded, looking curious as I fit the pieces together. "Hugh said something about that."

"Who's Hugh?"

"Oh, my dad," I explained. "My parents were kind of hippies, I guess, when I was little. I've never called them mom or dad, just their names."

"My parents would kill me if I called them by their first names," he said ardently.

"Metaphorically, I hope," I said.

"Not really," he said, looking ahead as a couple of little kids cut us off on bicycles. "Respect is the number one rule in our house. I have to call my father 'sir.' My parents are both lawyers, and they

bring the courtroom home with them." That impressed me and made me wonder how he had turned out so down to earth at the same time.

The leaves on the trees had only begun to change, dots of color in the green flush. I wondered if he was warm in his sweatshirt as the sun beat down on us, even despite the cool breeze. I was debating taking off my coat myself. I plucked the hair elastic around my wrist, whipping my hair up and not entirely believing this whole conversation was real.

We turned onto my street after a few minutes. A few people were out mowing their lawns, or tending to their fall flowers.

"This is my house," I said when we arrived, with a faux grand gesture of my arms. "Ta da." He laughed, his eyes crinkling again. I don't know if I'd ever seen someone with a more genuinely happy smile, and it made his face more impossibly gorgeous the more I saw it. The goofiness I had once seen in it had disappeared.

Hugh was standing in the dining room when we walked in, waiting like a bouncer to either okay Henry or kick him out.

"Hugh, this is Henry," I said, watching his reaction for signs of trouble, ready to shield Henry from oncoming missiles.

Hugh shook Henry's hand, his eyes like an airport scanner. No detail unnoticed.

"Nice to meet you," Henry said cheerfully.

"Likewise," Hugh said, attempting gruffness. "My daughter hasn't told me much about you, other than your interest in helping her learn. So pardon me if I have some questions."

"Dad..." I moaned, putting my hands over my eyes. Let the mortification begin. Odds were Henry would never want to come back.

"Sure, anything you want to know," Henry said.

"What do your parents do for a living?"

"They're both attorneys. My father is in criminal defense and my mother deals with real estate disputes."

Hugh was unfazed. It probably counted as points against Henry's parents, consider how much the legal system irritated him.

"Where did you used to live?" Hugh continued.

"Westchester, Pennsylvania."

"Any siblings?"

"I have a sister, Andrea. She's a freshman in college at Villanova."

"Okay, I think that's enough third degree," I burst in, before Hugh could continue his investigation. I put my hand on Henry's chest without realizing it. "We need to be studying."

Henry looked down at my hand and grinned at me. I took it away, as if I had burned myself, heat prickling across my face.

Seemingly satisfied, Hugh sat back down at his laptop. The bridge was now crossable, apparently.

"Just so you know, the walls are very thin in this house," he said pleasantly.

Henry grinned widely and looked down at the floor, his shoulders shaking as he contained a snicker. I didn't get Hugh's meaning at first, but when I did I was horrified.

"Hugh! Please!" I implored him.

"Go study," he said.

Henry and I went into the den, and I shut the accordion doors so we would have some privacy. Since the walls were so thin and all.

"I'm sorry about my father," I said, gritting my teeth.

Henry laughed, his good mood only boosted by the interaction. "That's just the typical dad rundown. I would do much worse if I had a daughter. She probably wouldn't date until she was twenty-five."

"Well, still." I set my backpack down on the coffee table.

"It must be nice to have a parent home when you are," he continued, following my lead by dropping his notebook and book next to my stuff. "My parents are never home."

"Most people would love that, you know," I said, glancing at him sideways.

"Yeah, probably. I told you I'm not normal."

"Hugh and Claire are always watching over me," I complained, flopping down onto the couch. I was hardly ever in this room except to get books. The entire wall we were facing contained bookshelves crammed full of heavy volumes. Like I didn't have enough of my own. "Even when Claire is at work, she sends me texts. They worry about me all the time. Which I get, but I feel like I'm in an invisible cage or on a leash. I wish my parents were both out of the house sometimes."

Henry sat down next to me on the couch. His sudden proximity made my skin warm up. He smelled really good, of some random cologne but not put on heavily, just a hint of it in the air. It seemed bizarre to have him in my house, sitting on a couch I'd sat on a million times. At school, he was a distant, untouchable prize, but here, he seemed truly real.

The thought occurred to me that Lainey had probably told him all kinds of nasty things about me, and about Jenna. I tried to keep my mind off of it. I gripped the edge of the couch cushion with my hands.

"I did like being alone, for a long time," he admitted. "But now I mostly just wander around my house all day, reading. I could make you some high class microwave dishes. Sometimes I just drink and fall asleep."

"Drink, like alcohol?" I asked. I didn't much like being around drunk people; they always found themselves far more hilarious than anyone else in the room did.

"Not often. Just nips from what my mother has in the cabinets," he said, shrugging. "It helps me let go. Does that bother you?"

It didn't, not that much. I was more concerned with what he'd said about reading. "What kind of books do you read?" I asked. Most of the boys our age barely knew how to write their own names, let alone read for pleasure.

Henry looked bashful, copying my stance with his hands gripping the edge of the couch. He looked up at me from beneath his eyelashes. "Fantasy novels."

I chuckled. "You mean, like dragons and wizards and that kind of thing?"

"Yep, the very thing." He sat up a little, looking defensive. "And what do you like, romance novels? I bet you have a whole collection of sappy, sentimental vampire books sitting dog-eared on your nightstand."

He was only teasing, but he could see in my face that he had hit the nail on the head.

"I like escaping into a world that's more exciting than, well, this," I said, indicating our surroundings. "And what's wrong with romance?"

"Nothing at all, dear," he said. It was a strange word for him to use again, something my grandmother would say, but out of his perfect mouth it sounded lovely. "I hope to someday fall head over heels myself."

I let a little breath out of my nose, tugging a loose thread from the couch with my wandering fingers.

"Underneath this dashing exterior, I'm a huge nerd," he continued. "I'm just warning you before we continue any farther down the rabbit hole. Promise you won't tell anyone."

"You keep making me promise you things," I observed dryly. "What do I get out of it?"

"Something great. I'll figure it out," he said, and winked at me. "For now, though, don't you think we should get started?"

We opened our books, and actually did study for several hours. He helped me figure out a few things.



"I'm so stupid at this," I said at one point.

"You're just getting frustrated," he countered gently.

The usual lack of confidence I had began to break, due to having someone who believed I could accomplish the work. There was no room for me to just give up, like I normally did.

At first it was hard to concentrate. Up close, the complicated details that made him so attractive were evident. His brown eyes seemed to almost glow, framed by long lashes, and a well-defined nose balanced his face. A sprinkle of barely-visible freckles crossed over his cheeks. I took every opportunity I had to glance at him, studying every feature, trying to preserve it in my head for later. When he spoke, I realized he had a tongue bar glinting in between his teeth.

I could feel the warmth from his body, even a foot away. Was the room always so small? He had lowered his already deep voice to an intimate tone, making warmth bloom in my belly. But I started to get into the work, the daunting page of unions and intersections not so intimidating now. As I began getting answers correct, it felt like an ego boost.

At one point, I wrote down an answer that I had a feeling was wrong. He slid the pencil out of my fingers, making me shiver involuntarily as he corrected my mistake.

"This is how you write a complement of a set," he said.

"Oh," I said, still able to feel the touch of his skin on mine.

He moved closer so that we our clothing brushed together, his eyes on the notebook paper we were using for scrap work. I couldn't help but glance at his face again.

"I'm sorry," I said for about the tenth time. I was worried about wasting his time.

"Believe me; I'm usually really impatient if someone isn't getting it. You're doing fine. You're not the tragedy you think you are, so stop apologizing," he scolded lightly.

We finished up with several of the lessons I needed to know for the quiz on Friday. And I actually felt like I understood what I had just done. I hoped the feeling remained when he wasn't around.

Light came through the slats in the blinds, making a zigzag pattern on the gray wall.

"That must be my dad," Henry said, gathering up his stuff. He had called him several minutes before, a brisk conversation that did indeed prove his use of the word Sir. "Time went by fast, didn't it?"

"Yeah, it did."

I didn't want him to leave, suddenly afraid to be alone with my thoughts. Guilt always seemed to pop up the instant I was away from him, guilt for being here to experience anything when Jenna was not. I got up and peered out through the blinds. A shiny black Lexus sat in front of the house.

"Nice car," I said. I dropped the slat, and turned around. "So you really are rich?" I asked, and instantly realized it sounded tactless. "I mean, you know. Your family. With them being lawyers I suppose you would have to be..."

He just laughed. "I suppose so. Why are you so shocked?"

"You seem too humble to be from that kind of money," I admitted.

"It's just a part of who I am. Not the sum total," he said.

He tugged his sweatshirt on over his head. He had taken it off earlier and laid it across the arm of the couch. For a moment I flashed out of nowhere back to my dream, and looked away. He didn't notice my distraction. I walked him out of the room and to the front door.

"Bye," I said, leaning in the open doorway, wishing I had a reason to make him stay longer.

"Bye," he repeated, turning to leave. Then he stopped, and faced me again, flipping his hood over his hair.

"We could do this every week, if it would help," he offered.

"Okay," I said, feeling the smile grow on my face.

"It was fun. And besides, I have nothing else to do. Please don't make me to putzing around my house," he said, putting his hands together as if in prayer. "Save me from my boredom."

I couldn't help but laugh. It was extremely flattering. My laughter pleased him, and he looked satisfied, one side of his mouth smirking. It made him look incredibly sexy.

"Same time, same place?"

"Sure," I said. Henry waved at me. Blackbirds were printed on the white fabric inside his hood, framing his face.

Rain had begun to patter, promising colder weather. I closed the door, and waited for the inevitable crash.

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## Chapter 10

"Alright, what happened?" Theo asked, ambushing me the second I walked into the commons the next day before school. A polka dot skull barrette held up either side of her fiery hair.

"What happened with what?" I asked, feigning innocence

"Your tutoring session." She put the words in air quotes. "I saw Henry coming out of your house, late. So how many bases did you run? Was there tongue?"

"Whoa, whoa," I said, pulling her by the arm to a free corner. The commons was full and I didn't need everyone hearing.

"He was helping me study, the whole time. That doesn't require tongue, unless you count speaking," I explained. "Do you just spy on my house all the time?"

"Pretty much," she said, shrugging. "Don't feel special. I spy on all the neighbors. It makes for interesting drawing material sometimes."

I told her a bit about what happened. In truth, I was kind of dying to gossip about it. I didn't know if it was my imagination, but it had seemed like there was a spark between Henry and me.

Theo looked disappointed by the time I was finished.

"Boring," she declared, crossing her arms behind her head.

"What were you expecting?" I asked.

"After the other day, I had no idea," Theo said. "But since I can't get a boyfriend I'm living through your romantic life. In order to do that, you need to have a romantic life for me to live through."

"I'll get right on that," I said, rolling my eyes.

"Good," she said, looking satisfied.

"I've never really had a boyfriend either," I said truthfully. That's why Henry's behavior struck me as so odd. I didn't have the experience to judge where it could be leading.

Not much had changed with Henry during school. The occasional small smile came in my direction, but otherwise he didn't acknowledge me any more than he had before. I don't know what I had been expecting. I took comfort in the secret he'd made me keep, that it was all for show. I couldn't exactly imagine Lainey thinking dragon appreciation was a plus in a guy.

The next day, when I got home from school, Claire was in the kitchen in her best red dress. To my recollection, I had only seen her wear it before twice, which was a shame, because she looked fantastic, the color brightening her dull, office skin. She normally all but slept in a suit. Dangly rhinestone earrings glittered in the little elf ears I had inherited.

"What's up?" I asked her.

"Go up and ask Hugh," she said with a secretive smile. "Oh, and ask him for my necklace, too, the one that goes with these earrings."

I trudged upstairs to my parents' room. Hugh was trying to fix his lopsided tie, standing by the antique mirror next to their armoire.

"Claire wants her necklace," I said from the doorway. I leaned against the frame, feeling the latch bite into my lower back. "The one you bought her last year for Christmas."

He rummaged around in her jewelry box for the glittery item and handed it to me.

"What's the big deal?" I asked. "Why do you guys look like you're going ballroom dancing?"

It must have been really important; Hugh hated wearing ties. The dog collar of The Man, in his opinion.

"You know how I've been trying to wrangle Deborah Strait for months?" he asked.

"Vaguely," I answered, sitting on the edge of the flowered bedspread. "She's a pretty big name artist, right?"

"Right," he said. "Well, she's finally agreed to have a few of her paintings shown at Erasmus. And that means press and attention, not to mention a little more money coming our way." He had finally fixed his tie, although it still hung a touch unevenly. "We're going out to celebrate. Which means you have twenty minutes to get ready."

I took the necklace back down to Claire, who was busy carefully applying red colorstay lipstick in the bad light of the downstairs bathroom. I couldn't remember the last time we had gone out as a family. It had to have been over a year.

I took the world's quickest shower, and ran down two flights to my room to get dressed. Blowing my hair as dry as I could, and finally settled on throwing it up in an old butterfly clip. A few wisps fell out, frizzing around my face. I shrugged, not thinking them too important.

When I was finished and went up to the kitchen, Claire studied me.

"Why don't you put on Grandma's necklace? You haven't worn it yet, once." She seemed a little upset about it.

She was the one who adored jewelry, not me, but I didn't want to hurt her feelings. I did like the necklace; I just didn't wear jewelry often because I had a habit of taking it off without realizing it. Many a pair of plastic earrings had been lost that way at movie theaters and restaurants.

I retrieved the green stone from my jewelry box and put it on. It was heavier than it looked, even with the delicate silver chain. The oblong pendant fell in a flattering way just above the cleavage I hoped to have someday.

Claire was sitting on the arm of the couch in the living room, watching TV when I came up the basement stairs. An enlarged, pixelated photo of a little girl was on the screen.

"Alyssa Chapman was last seen in a blue raincoat and galoshes outside of Three Fire Middle School on Monday," the reporter said.

Claire paid full attention to every word. "That's your old middle school," she murmured.

"I haven't forgotten, you know," I said.

"It's just so sad," she said. "Her mother must be so frightened."

Hugh picked up the remote and flicked off the TV.

"Dinner," he said pointedly. "I'm starving."

We drove to my father's favorite restaurant in town, The Blind Devil. It was always packed on the weekends, but it was Thursday, so it wasn't too full.

"Since I only have this one dress," I said to Claire as Hugh pulled our car into a parking space, "can we finally go shopping?" I didn't bring up my need for fashionable gym attire.

Claire seemed to be miles away, absentmindedly tugging on one of her earrings. "Of course." It was the usual "someday" way she always put it.

"I'm just saying. I can't make new clothes out of notebook paper and tape."

"Speaking of which, how is art class going?" Hugh asked me, locking eyes with me in the rearview mirror.

"Just fine."

"Don't get too excited, Ariel," he muttered.

I smirked and looked down at my ruffled black skirt. I wondered if Theo had any cast-offs in her closet she would be willing to let me have, even though she was smaller than me. I probably wouldn't have the confidence to wear them, though.

The Blind Devil took being in Hell as seriously as the next business owner. A full-sized red imp in a waiter's costume was positioned in the front window, holding up a tray. Red chili-pepper shaped lights were strung around the window frame, offering a warning that most of the dishes were spicy. All the waitresses wore little shiny red horns on their heads, and had pointed triangle tails.

We were seated at a booth and the waitress handed out our menus, which had flames on the cover. As I skimmed down the list, I read off the Halloween-themed titles that were much like the offerings

at Hawthorne. Broomstick Bruschetta sounded a little too heavy on the straw.

"How is school going, other than just art?" Claire asked, flicking her napkin open and laying it daintily on her lap. "I haven't had much of a chance to ask you." She seemed to be back from outer space.

"It's been alright," I said, eyes still glued to the menu, but mostly to avoid hers.

"For one thing, you've mastered the skill of the vague answer," Hugh said sardonically behind his own menu.

"I've heard great things about your new tutor from your father," Claire mentioned. The woman was not subtle.

"Henry is very helpful," I said.

"He hasn't tried to make a move, once," Hugh added. "That counts for a lot in a teenage boy."

"Yes, I would say it does," I said, glaring at him.

"I want to meet him the next time I get a chance," Claire said. "I'm glad it's working out for you. I hope to see those As coming home." I already had straight As in most of my other classes, but I knew it didn't matter.

"How is your new friend with the boy's name?" Hugh asked.

I had told him the basics about Theo, although he hadn't had a chance to meet her. I told them both about how talented she was, and how she wanted to visit Erasmus.

"That's a good idea," Hugh agreed brightly. "If she's as good as you say I'll definitely take a look at her work."

They both seemed happy that I wasn't as depressed anymore, and they didn't seem to be tiptoeing around conversation topics like usual.

The waitress brought our dinners. I had ordered fettuccini alfredo, one of my favorite splurges. Claire hated it due to the high calories. She had basically lived on water and parsley since I was born, and made occasional hints for me to do the same.

For a strange moment, it was almost as if the pendant on my necklace heated up, right when I had a forkful of food between my fingers. I reached up to my neck without thinking and spilled greasy cream sauce down the front of my dress.

"Crap," I muttered, dipping my napkin in my water glass and trying to pat it dry. I excused myself to go clean it off in the bathroom. Claire almost stood up to go with me, but I gave her a "no" look.

"I can handle going to the potty by myself, thank you," I said shortly. She sat back down.

I walked by a table of popular-wannabe girls, the barnacles that clung to Lainey's fame. I was sort of surprised they would be slumming it at the RD, but maybe they spent all of their money on clothes.

"Her purse is totally a Vuitton," a red-haired girl said.

"It looks like a knock-off to me," said another girl, who was wearing huge black sunglasses in the restaurant.

The redhead scolded her. "Why would she need to buy a knock off? Do you know how much her dad made last year? He owns seven businesses, you know."

I tried not to pay attention to them, but it was hard as they were talking so loudly. I knew they were talking about Lainey. A cluster of small, sticky-faced children scrambling around in front of me as their parents tried to get out of their booth, so I was stuck.

"Did you guys hear?" chimed in another girl with an ear-splittingly high, nasal voice. "That new guy Henry Rhodes asked Lainey out."

Even though the family in front of me had finally cleared off, I stopped where I stood and listened. My heart paused for a moment, waiting with me.

"That's old news," said the red-haired girl. "He asked her out yesterday. It's not like it's surprising."

"It was only a matter of time," said the one wearing sunglasses. "They, like, belong together."

All of a sudden I felt like the time Jenna tried to pierce my navel. Like I was going to pass out and throw up at the same time. I rushed to the restrooms, hearing the awful girls giggling behind me. I pushed open the door with a black cat in a witch's hat and went in.

Thankfully, the bathroom was empty. I grasped the sides of the sink basin. The nauseated feeling passed, replaced by a wave of sadness that burned me to a crisp at the edges, as fragile as paper. What little hope I had been cultivating was gone. Why didn't he tell me? Wasn't this counter to everything he said the other night? Maybe it was all a game after all, just pulling a prank at my expense.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror over the sink. My cheeks were flushed and I had the heavy feeling in my chest I now associated with sorrow.

The pendant on my skin warmed up again. I wrapped my hand around it, encasing it in my palm. It definitely wasn't my imagination this time.

Footsteps passed outside the door. My skin bristled and for a brief second I had the sense of dread I had felt the night in my room when I was sure there was an intruder. For the moment, my Henry drama was forgotten.

I peeked out into the tubular, murky hall. A shadowy figure rounded the bend at the end of the hall and disappeared. I didn't see the man's face, but something about him struck me as suspicious. Against my better judgment, I found myself walking that way. Around the corner was a narrow hallway, the walls paneled in cherry wood. A door stood at the end. I didn't know what was compelling me to spy, but I felt as though I couldn't help it.

I crept over to the door and pressed my right ear up against it.

"Were you followed?" asked a gravelly whisper on the other side. My heart skipped a beat, thinking whoever these people were, they had already found me out.

"No. I made sure."

"Are you absolutely certain?"

"I'm not an idiot." I recognized Principal McPherson's voice through the door almost immediately, from the morning announcements he was so fond of giving.

"That's still up for debate," said another man. It shocked me that anyone would talk to McPherson that way without getting a detention. "Do we have clearance?"

"As much as I can manage," McPherson said. His voice was louder than the others, though intentionally or not I couldn't tell.

Another of their voices sounded familiar to me, but I couldn't place it as it was so much quieter. "That's not good enough," the person barked. I couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman, as the voice was high and reedy. "It has to be absolutely clean. No tracks."

They seemed to be talking in code, of a sort.

"It will be," McPherson said. "No one will know. No one knew before, did they?"

"Make sure that's the case. Go now."

I panicked, turning around and tripping over my feet as I ran. I heard the door open behind me the second after I cleared the corner. I hoped that he hadn't seen me.

I arrived back at my family's table out of breath. I had gotten lucky in not getting caught. I watched out of the corner of my eye as McPherson went out the back exit, a dark trenchcoat hunched up on his shoulders.

"Are you okay?" Claire asked. "That took an awfully long time."

"I'm fine," I said, trying to act like I hadn't lost my breath. "It was just a difficult stain to get out."

I realized I hadn't even bothered with the spot, which stuck out like a snitch on the bodice of my dress.

My pasta was cold and I could no longer taste the sauce. The rest of dinner was much more somber. I'm sure my parents wondered what had happened, but I no longer felt like talking.

I avoided Henry at school the next day. Maybe the flighty girls had their gossip wrong. But they were not the only ones saying that about Lainey and Henry. Several times I caught people putting their names and *dating* together in the same sentence. And I saw them walking together at lunch. This was not so unusual, until she linked her arm in his, and he didn't pull away.

My mouth went dry. That was all the confirmation I needed.

"What is that about?" Theo asked, watching them as well.

"I heard last night that they're" — I swallowed the hard lump that formed in my throat — "together."

Theo's bottom lip disappeared under her teeth. Trying to think of something to say, perhaps. "Where did you hear that bit of information?"

"I overheard some girls talking. I definitely think they had their facts checked, unfortunately."

She plucked at some lint on her rainbow leggings. "Don't be too upset about it," she said gently. "He's not that special. There are plenty of boys in this school who are just as cute. And it could still be a mistake."

"Thanks," I said, picking my food to pieces. But I didn't think anyone else like Henry really existed. He was the only one of his kind, and true to what she'd said, Lainey had snatched him up. I just wanted to stop thinking about it, hoping the burning sensation in the pit of my stomach would go away. "My parents and I went out to dinner last night, and I saw Principal McPherson."

"You mean he eats like a normal person?" Theo asked.

"Ha ha. Not just that. I followed him and he had a meeting of some kind with these other men. They were talking about something that I couldn't exactly understand. About clearances and being clean."

A scheme had been hatching in the back of my mind all morning. It appeared now as clear as day, a predestined path I had no choice but to take.

"I knew there was something wrong with him," Theo said, peeling the tomatoes off of her sandwich with her thin fingers. "He creeps me out. No one should get that excited about lunch menus."

"You like spying on people," I observed. "You said you do it all the time."

"Yes. I had a spy kit as a kid, magnifying glass and all. Until my mom caught me peeping into other people's windows. What are you getting at?"

"I want to make use of your talents, let's say." I felt like I should be stroking my chin as I revealed my nefarious scheme.

"How so?" She looked very suspicious, raising one eyebrow at me.

"What if we were to follow McPherson's moves, and see what he's up to," I suggested. I knew I sounded like a paranoid nut. "Then we could figure out what was going on. For all we know, it's just a role playing game or something, but it could be more sinister."

She thought for a moment, then shrugged. "Alright, I'm game. If McPherson's part of a drug smuggling cartel, we could get on the news. So what, we just track him between classes?"

That's exactly what we did. Between History and English, I found him and stayed several yards behind. I navigated around people getting to class, trying not to take my eyes off of the back of his balding head. He didn't seem to do anything unusual, stopping once to chat with some boys wearing varsity jackets.

Then, before Art class, I watched him go towards the back of the school. I followed him around the corner.

"Hello, Ms. Donovan," McPherson said, waiting for me on the other side.

I let out a little shriek. His smiled his lemon-toothed smile, hands clasped in front of him. I wondered if he had been on to me the whole time, and realized with a start that he probably had. Perhaps he wasn't as stupid as I had assumed.

"Do you need help with anything?" he asked in a syrupy voice. I knew he had me made, and so did he. He never spoke that nicely to me.

"No," I said, shaking my head slowly back and forth, my eyes widening as I stepped back.

"Then how about getting to class," he suggested in the same sickeningly sweet tone.

I turned and raced to Ms. Vore's room, flying all the way into the seat next to Theo.

"What just happened?" Theo asked, noting my agitated state. I tried to smooth down my frizzy hair, wrapping it into a ponytail and securing it behind my head to try to reduce the heat on my neck.

"McPherson caught me following him," I said, breathing hard. "I think he might have been aware of it all along. Did you see anything"

"Not really," she said, opening her sketchbook. "I even ran an errand during English for Mr. Boone, but McPherson was just in his office, working on paperwork. The only thing I saw was him telling Madison how "spiffy" her skirt looks, but that's hardly news. Gross, but still, not news."

"Maybe he just keeps a really low profile during school," I suggested. "I wanted to play girl detective; maybe I just didn't get the method right."

"We were a little obvious," Theo relented. "Do you think you're going to get in trouble?"

"I hope not," I said, the possibility not even occurring to me before. "What could he really accuse me of, though?"

"I'm sure you'll be fine," she said. "Forget I said anything. If he was going to punish you he would have done it already."

Between the McPherson strangeness and the drama with Henry, I was achingly glad when the bell rang and the weekend arrived.



## Chapter 11

On Tuesday of the next week, Henry caught up to me in between classes. I hadn't spoken to him since I heard about him asking Lainey out. I went back and forth from feeling like an idiot to feeling betrayed. Either I was naïve or I had been tricked. Or both.

"Why have you been avoiding me?" he asked. I didn't want to bring it up. I was still too hurt, and too vulnerable. I kept my eyes forward, hoping he would get the hint.

"I've been busy," I said curtly.

"Are we still on for studying tonight?" he asked. Lockers slammed around us, people chattering loudly, so he'd turned up the volume. "I made sure to clear my empty schedule for you."

I had completely forgotten we had agreed to continue the tutoring sessions.

"I don't know," I said, but then a thought occurred to me. I had my first big Geometry test coming up on Friday, and I could not flunk. "I mean, if Lainey says it's alright." I muttered.

"If Lainey says..." he repeated, frowning. "What does Lainey have to do with it?"

School was not the place to talk about it. I squeezed my eyes shut, pushing my feelings deep down.

"You know what? I need to be going," I said. "Just meet up with me after class."

The last thing I needed was to get upset and then have to sit in class and stew in it. I started walking as quickly as my legs would carry me, away from him. My daily sprint to school had given me more stamina.

After school, Henry followed me outside. This time it was much more awkward, with neither of us speaking. For once, he couldn't think of a thing to say. He always seemed like such a chatterbox in school. He didn't seem to be trying to get me to talk anymore, either. Finally, when we turned onto my street, he spoke.

"You're being distant with me again. Did I do something wrong?"

I looked at him, unsure of what to say. He seemed wrought with confusion, as though he had no idea why I would want to avoid him. I bent over and picked up a dry red leaf on the sidewalk, twirling it by the stem.

"If I did, I'll apologize a hundred times until you talk to me. I'm sorry," he said, walking around so he blocked my path and I had to look at him. I tried to concentrate on the space between his eyebrows. Looking into his eyes right now seemed too intense. If I did that, he would know exactly how I felt about him. I didn't even know that myself yet.

"You didn't do anything to me," I said. I held my breath for a moment. "I just wish you would have told me you were dating Lainey." The words sounded all wrong, like I was attempting a foreign tongue.

His reaction surprised me. He stared at me like I had grown another head, and then burst out laughing. Doubling over at the waist and clutching his ribs, he couldn't stop himself. I had no idea what he found so uproarious. Irritation filled me.

When he could finally breathe again, he stood up. His face was flushed, the corners of his full mouth turned up. Like he'd just been running around the block, or having sex. I blushed and looked away, hating my brain for its automatic thoughts. Why did he have to be so attractive?

"*What?*" he asked. Where did you hear that Lainey and I were dating? Is that why you've been avoiding me like the plague for days?"

"A bunch of people have been talking about it in school," I said defensively, holding on to my elbows with both hands for support. "It's common knowledge."

"It's not common knowledge to *me*," he protested. He bowed his head, getting me to look straight into his eyes. "I am not dating Lainey," he said. "I don't know if she passed the rumor on or what, but it's not happening. She is...vapid. And phony." He stopped, appraising me for a moment.

"Why didn't you just ask me?" he asked softly.

"I don't know," I offered. My eyes kept shifting all over his face, not being able to take him in properly. "It just seemed too good to be true that you would actually want to be...my friend."

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard," he jeered. "I expected more from you."

I glared at him, the harsh sun getting in my vision and making me blink, ruining the effect. "Why are you expecting anything from me? And why should I know any different?"

"Because I told you how things were," he argued, irritation flaring up on his usually agreeable features. "I thought you would believe me."

"I did believe you," I said softly, feeling defeated. "I just...thought I was wrong." I heard him scoff gently beneath his breath.

"I've told her that we're just friends," he said emphatically, retrieving the leaf that was still tucked between my fingers and spinning it with his own.

"Why are you always hanging out with her?" I asked. "I see you together in the halls, you sit with her in class...not that I'm paying attention." But of course, that's exactly what I'd been doing. I could feel the heat rising on my face, up to my forehead.

He shrugged, and we started walking on our way again. The clouds were hanging low in the sky, as if it might start raining. I wondered if we would make it.

"Because Lainey always seems to be around," he said. "Our dads are old pals, so it's an unfortunate requirement. But she drives me crazy." He snickered at some private thought I wished I knew. "Every conversation is about her clothes and her hair and *blah blah blah* and my only allowed input are my views on those things. I just do my part, nod and smile and it keeps her off my back."

I tried to take in what he told me. But for some reason it seemed like just words. I kept waiting for him to admit to tricking me, my paranoid nature winning out my thoughts.

"What is up with this, by the way?" he asked, snagging an acrylic black and orange striped spider off of the nearest mailbox. "It's like *A Nightmare Before Christmas*. I've never seen so many people decorate for Halloween. Do they know it's still September?"

He gestured to the huge blown up snowglobe in front of us, where a cutesy grim reaper and his scythe waited inside.

I shrugged, retrieving the spider and plopping it back on the mailbox, the googly eyes wiggling at me.

"That's just Hell. Everyone takes a lot of pride in whatever heritage they think we have. This is it."

We arrived at my house at the same time the first drops of rain splattered the pavement. Hugh merely smiled and said hi to Henry; no more questions for the moment. He apparently was satisfied with his interrogation last time.

We took our seats in on the couch in the den again. It seemed strange to have him back next to me, when I had assumed that since Lainey had snagged him I'd barely ever talk to him again. It was hard to concentrate on the numbers and shapes, but I forced myself to listen to the hypnotizing sound of his voice. I tried to pretend he was someone, anyone else.

By the time his dad came to pick him up, I felt prepared for my test, at least not to fail. As he waved goodbye to me, it finally sunk in that he and Lainey weren't actually together. I sat down on the couch in the living room, looking at the swirling green walls. I could almost imagine figures moving between the whorls.

If they weren't together, then why did everyone think they were? And what did they think about Henry and me?

October arrived, bringing the cold with it. I wore my jacket on my walk in the mornings. That Hugh and Claire still let me walk at all amazed me, since the other little girl disappeared. Alyssa still hadn't been found, and I saw signs stapled to electrical poles pop up next to the missing cat flyers all

over town. Jenna's face had been there a few short months ago. Perhaps it was because she was so much younger; my parents didn't seem to connect Alyssa to Jenna.

But a voice in my head nagged me whenever I let myself think about it. It was a pretty strange coincidence that two girls would go missing in our little town only months apart.

The trees were dressed for autumn now, orange and scarlet leaves that appeared almost overnight, turning the town into a postcard. The colder days meant gray skies and drizzling rain, and the insulated feeling returned. My limbs felt heavier, as though I were dragging myself to school and back.

Hell went into annual decoration overdrive. Most of the year, there were a few witches flying into telephone poles, or the mere names of businesses like Screams Ice Cream to represent Hell's uniqueness. But in October, nearly every business and lawn had Halloween décor, from plastic ghosts hanging in trees to full artificial graveyards, complete with the obligatory skeletal hand poking out. Every day it was like walking through a party store.

I ended up getting a B+ on my big test. It was the highest grade I had gotten in Geometry so far. I felt more confident in taking my time in math, and my grades stayed steady. I found Henry by his locker after class and held my paper up like an excited child.

"Good job. I don't know why you're surprised. I knew you could do it," he said. He slammed the locker shut. His reaction only made my pride swell, and I grinned.

"Thanks for helping me," I said. I'd said it before countless times, but I couldn't stop myself from repeating it.

"You're welcome, again," he said, looking amused. His eyes practically glittered when he was in such good humor, I'd noticed as the days we spent together began to add up. When he was irritated, his eyes would darken, closer to the brown of tree bark. When he was excited about something, which was often, light radiated from the center.

"You really don't have to keep thanking me," he said. "I'm not doing charity work. I like spending time with you."

I felt the thump in my chest as my heart skipped a beat, as though I had sneezed.

"I do too. I mean, I like spending time with you." Why did I always turn into a stuttering imbecile around him lately?

"I knew what you meant," he said, smiling gently. He nodded at me as he took off and walked to his next class. As he reached the door, he turned for a moment, and watched me go.

Whenever the cold seasons came, I always wanted to stay in and read. I plowed through the books that Corinne gave me for my birthday, using them as late night reading material. Of course, that bad idea only intensified the eerie feeling in my room. No more odd situations had happened, though. But I could never fully shake the feeling of being watched. It remained like a light that was always lit in the corner of my brain. When I changed in the mornings and for bed at night, I did it behind the closet door.

I realized that I needed to get new books, something to keep me occupied. I ran inside the library in the middle of the week, but the reconstruction was still in full swing. Plastic sheeting blocked off half of the interior. A loud buffer started up behind the foggy partition, so loud that I left before I even arrived at the fiction section.

School was just as tedious as ever; both of my Honors classes buried me under piles of homework every night. I learned to deal with Ms. Fellows' boring monotone and gloomy classroom by writing the entire time, even if it didn't have to do with what she was lecturing about. One day I just scribbled down the lyrics to all my favorite songs.

The school got just as into Halloween as the rest of Hell. My Spanish teacher wore a sweater with huge candy corn buttons, which were very distracting when we were trying to learn new verbs. Construction paper ghosts and black cats were taped up on the walls by the student council, and a giant papier-mâché pumpkin sat in the vestibule until I watched Ambrose Slaughter casually kick a football-sized hole in it.

On Friday in homeroom, two energetic cheerleaders replaced McPherson on the morning announcements. I looked up at the loudspeaker, curious at what brought on the change.

"It's October, Ashley!" said the first girl, her voice gratingly peppy. I twitched.

"I know! Do you know what that means, Brianna?" The other girl asked.

"I dunno...oh yeah, Halloween!" replied Ashley. Wow, did you come up with that all by yourself?

"Not just Halloween. The annual Hawthorne Halloween dance!"

There were murmurs of excitement all around. I groaned and put my face in my hands. Freshman weren't allowed to go to the Halloween dance, so this year would be the first time I was eligible. The second biggest dance of the year, next to prom, it was always held Halloween weekend. Basically they combined homecoming and winter formal.

"Attendees can wear full costume or formal wear with costume accents, as long as they abide by the dress code," the girl continued.

Dances never used to bug me; I usually just thought they were boring in middle school. All the boys had sweaty hands and took a bath in cologne. My toes suffered damage from being stepped on during the group dates Jenna and I went with.

But now that there was someone I could potentially want to go with, a person who seemed to only be my friend, it was hard to think about. I couldn't tell what was going on in Henry's head, even though he seemed to know everything that went on in mine. Even though he wasn't dating Lainey, I knew that I wasn't really his type. After our initial flirtation, Henry seemed to be all business during our tutoring sessions, which had continued through the month. I didn't really know what to think.

Boys like him favored the girls who always wore a bunch of makeup and dressed in designer clothes. No matter how different he seemed, the rules seemed certain.

I went over to Theo's house after school. I'd been there several times before, but only for brief moments when she needed to fetch something or take care of a chore. Normally we hung out at my house, without comment from me. I knew how trapped I felt sometimes in my own.

Sitting in her living room, our discussion was fixed on the topic of the dance. Her cats, Persephone and Pandora, strode into the room, jumping on the couch. I petted Pandora's rabbit-like white fur as she nuzzled up next to me.

Theo sat on the floor, a mug of tea perched between her knees. Motel-style paintings of bowls of fruit decorated the walls. Theo told me Ms. Vore painted them herself. A cabinet with china dolls and figurines, the type

advertised in catalogues for commemorative purposes, was tucked in the corner. It was nothing like I had imagined before I set foot inside; in my head, I'd pictured their house would look like something in a city apartment, Picasso prints and furniture from *Beetlejuice*.

"I've never actually been to a dance," Theo admitted, sipping her tea. The back of her hair fanned out on the faint plaid couch cushion. "No big deal."

"I just wish people didn't have to talk about it all the time," I said. I was only exaggerating a little; I had literally been hearing conversations all day about dresses and whether limos were a worthwhile investment.

"Anything to make them feel important," Theo said. "Have you heard or seen any shadiness from McPherson, by the way? We kind of dropped the ball on that one."

I had tried to put him out of my mind. The last thing I needed was to get on the Principal's bad side.

"Nothing. But I haven't been really paying too much attention to him, either. I don't want him to get too suspicious, especially when he already caught me following him. And I have no idea what he does after school."

"Do you think he still lives with his mom?" Theo asked randomly, looking at me.

"It's possible," I said, chuckling. "Why?"

"That's always a sign of a mentally unbalanced person, when they're over thirty," she said, tapping her forehead with one ink-smudged finger. "At least on TV. We should find out." I was glad to know I wasn't the only one who took my research from TV shows.

"Are you suggesting we locate his house and spy on it?" I asked, pretending to be taken aback.

"Nothing better to do. I'm bored," she said, stretching her arms up.

When one is in doubt, it's best to check online. We went to her computer (I had another short burst of jealousy at the fact that she even *had* her own computer, even though it was normal for most people) and typed in the school's name. Hawthorne had a pretty comprehensive website. Our parents could check our grades throughout the marking period online, so they knew when to berate us. It was a good bet that McPherson's personal information would be up, at the very least a phone number.

The entire administration had their addresses and phone numbers listed, including McPherson. We mapped his address and Theo printed out the

directions, making a neat crease in the paper. Going into the backyard, we retrieved our bikes. Theo's had polka dot ribbons tied to the handlebars. McPherson's house was about ten minutes away in the opposite direction from Hawthorne. We biked there in silence, the cool, autumn scented air blowing in our faces.

The house itself was plain, with white siding and a meticulously clipped lawn. A neat little orange wreath was hung on the doorway for the season. Theo and I knelt behind the shrubs next to his mailbox.

"Alright, we're here. Now what?" I asked her. She was the one with the veritable degree in espionage.

Theo squinted, looking at the house through the gaps of the shrub. There was no car in the driveway, or any sign that anyone was home. I wondered if he was in a meeting or something at school. We hid our bikes behind another nearby row of bushes.

"Let's go up to the house," she insisted. We crept around the back, parallel to a line of neatly clipped, ugly crabapple trees. Theo boldly strode over to the back windows, and peered inside.

"Now I know I'm doing too much trespassing," I muttered. Theo looked back at me quizzically.

"What?" she asked. I shook my head and joined her at the window.

Inside was sparse, plain furniture: a white couch, a few tables and a TV. It almost looked like he had just moved there, as there were no photos, no decorative touches whatsoever, really. He seemed like a very organized person at first glance. But there was nothing so suspicious about that.

"We should probably get going," I said. "He's bound to come back any minute."

"What about over there?" Theo asked, gesturing towards a little shed set apart from the house.

We walked over to the shed and Theo tried pulling at the handles. It was locked.

"Do you smell that?" she asked, wrinkling her nose. I did; it was a stale, moldy smell, like something rotten had been there for a while. Theo and I frowned at each other. It didn't seem to fit with the picture of the spotless showroom house.

The sound of a car pulling up made us move. We ducked behind the bushes as McPherson arrived and pulled into his garage. After a moment,

he came out and pushed the button for his garage door to lower, then stormed into his house. The front door slammed.

Quickly, we ran down the driveway and retrieved our bikes. Without a word to one another, we jumped on them and pedaled towards home.

"Wasn't the plan that we were going to spy on *him*?" I asked breathlessly as we slowed down, having put distance between ourselves and McPherson.

"Didn't you see him? He was not in the best mood," Theo replied, a little short of breath herself, taking her hand off the handlebars to push up her glasses. "If he had caught us snooping, he probably would have tied us up and stuck us in a box."

"What do you think was in the shed?" I asked as we pulled up into her driveway, safe and sound. "It smelled disgusting."

"I don't know," she replied. "But whatever it was, it didn't belong there."

On Sunday, I was doing homework in my room as usual. Theo and I had decided there wasn't much we could do about McPherson's mysterious shed, since we had been trespassing when we made the discovery. Still, the unknown made me nervous. McPherson had always thrown me a vibe that screamed wrong, and there had been something I couldn't put my finger on about his house that underscored the sentiment.

The letters in my biology textbook began to run together like broken eggs. I rubbed my eyes, yawning, ready for bed.

*THUD.*

I looked up above my head at the wall.

"Not again," I said to myself. I stood up and turned around, fully ready to go get one of my parents this time, no matter how immature that might make me seem. The lamp and the overhead light flickered for a moment, then disappeared, leaving me in total darkness.

*THUD.*

Fear pulsed through my veins with the beating of my heart. I was not alone in the room. Something was there with me. The dark was deeper than just having the lights off; something brought on the inky, thick air.

As I tried to make my way across the space to the door in the pitch blackness, it felt like something was pushing at me. Pushing me away from



the exit. I waved my hands out uselessly in front of me.

I turned back, and for the shortest of seconds, I thought I saw Jenna's face flash before me. The image disappeared before I could fully process it. I thought I heard whispering again, from the vicinity of my closet. I felt along the wall and found the light switch, which was still in the up position. I flipped it several times, but the light was gone, swallowed by whatever brought on the dark.

I reached the door and grasped the metal knob with both hands. The light in the hallway was on, but as I glanced back, my room was still dark. No light could penetrate the empty void of my once comfortable room.

I rushed up the stairs, leaping two at a time, and to the living room. Hugh and Claire were watching movies on the couch. She was snuggled up to him and he had his arm around her shoulders. I hated to break their companion time up, but I was scared out of my wits.

"There is something in my room," I said, chest heaving as I tried to breathe. A curious metallic taste filled my mouth, parching it dry.

"What?" Hugh asked, standing up.

"Something in my room," I repeated, gulping as I pointed to the staircase. "The lights went out. They won't come back on."

Claire started to stand as well, but Hugh held his hand out to prevent her from getting up.

"Just wait here, hon," Hugh said softly. "Pause the movie and I'll be right back."

He followed me back down the stairs and down the hall to my room. I stopped, allowing him to walk in front of me. I reached out and gripped his arm above the elbow, just in case.

We arrived at the door to my room, which was shut. I distinctly remembered leaving it open, when I stared at the black, yawning maw. He turned the doorknob slowly. The lamp glowed steadily on my desk, warm yellow light that seemed to mock me. Flipping the light switch, which turned on the overhead lamp, for good measure, he went inside.

I followed him in, looking up at the ceiling and over at the desk in disbelief. I hadn't imagined it this time, I couldn't have. The noise had been real, and the lights had definitely turned off. Was it a wiring issue? Or just the possibly faulty connections in my brain?

Hugh poked around in my closet, looked beside my bed and underneath, moving around the boxes, the same way I had when I thought there was a midnight intruder.

Finding nothing, Hugh stood up and turned to me.

"What exactly scared you so much?" he asked quietly.

"The lights went out," I said, disturbed to find my voice still shaking. I pointed at the wall. "And I have been hearing this banging noise, a couple of weeks ago and again tonight."

He went over and rapped on the wall, listening for any echo or response. When he heard nothing, he pulled back and regarded me, as I stood clasping my hands under my chin. I bet I looked just like a child, scared by imaginary monsters in the night. The thought made me feel utterly foolish.

"It's possible that an animal might have burrowed its way inside, trying to escape the cold," he suggested. "I'm sure it was nothing serious."

He gave me a familiar pat on the shoulder as he trudged out of the room, leaving me behind to stare at the space on the wall above my desk.

I knew better. Something was haunting me.

## Chapter 12

"Who would name a town "Hell" anyway?" asked Alex Perkins, our class clown eight years running, the next day in History. I had no idea how he would ever qualify for an Honors class. He was a year older than the rest of us, supposedly because he skipped Kindergarten but I figured he had been held back. He made the dumbest jokes and was always the loudest one to laugh at them. His parents had money, so he was considered part of the popular crowd.

Ambrose had taken to sulking in the corner by the back window. No one was willing to pay attention to his stories of false bravado and bedding head cheerleader anymore.

Warwick looked excited to have a chance to explain our town's history. He perched on his worn spot on the desk and looked thoughtfully at the floor, as if gathering his words.

"When George Reeves, the man who originally settled here, was asked what to call the town, he said "Call it Hell for all I care." At least, that's the charming anecdote they like to tell at town meetings," he explained.

"So what's the real story?" I heard Henry ask behind me. I listened automatically at the sound of his familiar voice.

"Depends on who you want to trust," Warwick said. His voice had taken on the quality of someone narrating a *Discovery Channel* special. "There are several theories supporting the idea that Hell was settled on a spot of evil earth."

Several students around me giggled. He looked up at them impatiently until they stopped. I couldn't tell if he took what he said seriously or if it was just an act. A born storyteller, he'd had told me a million wild, embellished tales when I was kid, about far off places and unusual animals, which I now knew were poppycock. I'd believed in jackalopes and unicorns until I was ten. My younger self had always trusted him, even when Jenna protested the things he said.

"We have more than our fair share of haunted houses," he offered as proof.

"Supposedly haunted," supplied Henry. I imagined his eyes darkening. "Just because people say they're haunting doesn't mean they are."

Warwick continued as if he hadn't heard him.

"Houses that are said to still be the home of trapped spirits, spirits that have been seen by plenty of respected citizens." The last sentence was said pointedly. He ticked the locations off on his fingers. "The blue house on Court Street, the old fire house, the orphanage..."

I perked up and raised my hand.

"You have a question, Ariel?" he asked.

"Are you talking about the Dexter Orphanage?"

"I believe that's the only one in town, so yes," he said, smiling.

"Do you know anything about that one in particular?" I asked.

"Nothing nice," he said, grinning wryly and shifting his weight. "It was said to be owned by John Dexter the third, a lifelong bachelor — spare us your commentary, Mr. Perkins —

who decided to take in orphans after World War One."

"The first few years went without remark, although he made the children work in the farm behind the house to help with money. The kids were seen working from sun up to sun down, no breaks allowed. That wasn't very unusual for the time period, but it was unnecessary since Dexter had inherited his father's fortune when he died. But he apparently believed in instilling a sturdy work ethic in very young people."

He picked up a dry erase marker and started transferring it from hand to hand.

"But then rumors started that horrible things were being done to the orphans in that house. That he was using them for ritualistic sacrifices." It may have been my imagination, but it seemed like the sky had clouded over outside the slender windows. "Feeding their blood into the earth, to rekindle the evil."

I shivered. "But why?"

"Something he read in a book, I believe," Mr. Warwick said, clearing his throat. "That he could gain great power from the rituals, power to rule the entire town."

"And that is why we should never read. Only bad things come from it," Alex joked.

"Hardly," Warwick said sardonically. He turned back to me, his expression curious. "Why the particular interest in the Dexter Orphanage, Ariel?"

I tried to play it off. "I just saw that they were having the haunted house there this year." I didn't know how to explain my dream.

He frowned. "That's a surprise. The house is falling apart. Last I heard, the board was talking about condemnation, but no one could determine who currently held the deed to the property. Rickety floors, ceilings collapsing — it's dangerous. They used to hold those haunted houses years ago to raise money for donations, and there used to be séances there all the time, but..."

"Séances?" I repeated, my breathing shallow.

"Oh, yes," he nodded. "Because of the paranormal nature of the place, people would even go to Dexter to dispel ghosts that were clinging to them, ghosts in their own houses. Which brings me back to my original point..."

"Could it cleanse you if a ghost was attached to you?" I interrupted again, not wanting him to move on.

"That's what many people believed," he replied.

"If ghosts existed, which they don't," I heard Henry mutter from behind me. I blushed, feeling like he was talking to me. Others in the class laughed, whether at the story or my insistence I didn't know, and didn't much care.

"Alright guys, time to get to work," Mr. Warwick said, back in teacher mode as he headed towards the blackboard.

After that, I couldn't get the séance part out of my head. Maybe it was possible to contact whatever was reaching out to me. Whatever clung to me. Maybe on my birthday, when I visited the orphanage, something had attached itself to me. I shuffled through my comprehensive mental catalogue of scary movie plots. I had to find a way to get rid of the spirit, or things would only get worse. I was sure of that.

Theo came over to my house that afternoon. In her hands was a leather-covered binder brimming full of artwork. She was already on her third sketchbook in class. She held the binder as though she wouldn't let it go.

"Hi, Theo," Hugh said warmly. They had exchanged a few words before here and there, but this was the first time they were actually going to have a conversation.

"Hi, Ariel's dad," she said back shyly, still holding her portfolio like a shield against her heart.

"I call him Hugh, you can too," I assured her quietly.

"Okay."

"Show him your drawings," I said, nudging her forward gently. The thing I had learned about Theo was that even though she was shy at first, if one could get her to open up, she became very talkative. It was just getting that first little fissure. Hugh pulled the chair next to him out for her to sit down.

Theo laid the portfolio on the table, and watching Hugh's face as he began leafing through it. She didn't take her eyes off him, paying attention for any change in his expression.

"This is impressive work," he said finally, holding up a sketch of different angles of hands done in colored pencil. "Ariel told me your mom is the new art teacher at your school."

"Yeah," Theo said, quickly brushing it off. "I don't really show her all that much of my sketches. I don't turn in my sketchbook anymore," she confided to me.

"Well, I don't just give compliments for someone's ego," Hugh told her. Except in my case, but I kept that to myself as he continued, "You have a lot of natural talent, especially at such a young age."

"I'll tell you what," he said finally. "How about you put together a couple of pencil studies like this, and I could find you a space on the wall at Erasmus?"

I thought Theo would have a heart attack. She put a hand to her chest, eyes like glittering pools of green water. "Seriously?"

Hugh nodded. "In fact, I'm going over there right now to drop off some paperwork. Would you girls like to hitch a ride with me?"

Theo nodded her head furiously, a big smile plastered on her face. The pink plastic anchor around her neck jiggled against her shirt. We piled into the Mazda, Theo and I in the backseat. The sky outside was overcast again, as it had been for a string of days.

As we drove, Hugh turned the local radio station on, keeping the volume low. This time of year, there were always a million advertisements for haunted houses.

"Named the scariest attraction in Hell two years in a row," the announcer on the current ad said. "Hell's Orphanage is back after a five year hiatus and ready to claim its next victim..."

"Can you turn that up?" I asked, gripping the back of the passenger seat.

"Discounted tickets are available online. Now through Halloween, get your scare on at the old Dexter orphanage on Canyon Road." The garbled

voice finished up, replaced by an ad for toothpaste.

"That was awfully cheesy for Hell's scariest attraction," Hugh said. "'Get your scare on'? *I'm* more frightening than that."

"I don't know, I think it sounds interesting," I said, shrugging and sitting back in my seat, trying to act as nonchalant about the whole thing as possible. I knew I was terrible at pretending. "I haven't been to a haunted house in years."

"Remember when we used to go every year to the one in the old cider mill?" Hugh said, smiling at the memory. "You were just a little girl then, so it wasn't too scary for you. And then we would eat caramel apples and cider on the picnic tables out back and watch the sun go down."

"I do remember," I said. "That was always a lot of fun." I turned to Theo. "Would you be interested in going to this one?"

"Sure," Theo agreed brightly. "That would be great." Her smile remained a bit too tight. She seemed very nervous about going to Erasmus, even though she was around people who were on her side.

A red brick building from the turn of the last century housed Erasmus. The perfect place for an art collection. Slender topiaries in planters guarded the entrance. Black and orange bows had been tied on them. Theo looked up at the building like we were about to enter a holy temple. I thought she might cross herself.

"Come on," Hugh said, waving us inside to follow him.

The interior had modern architecture, with high ceilings and bowed archways. Windows lined the entire front side of the building, with vertical, mood-setting tan blinds. I had been there numerous times, accompanying Hugh when Claire was working since he didn't trust me to function by myself. There was now a permanent collection of snacks in my honor sitting in the back room.

Gwen, my dad's assistant, greeted us by the front counter. "Hi, Ariel. Who's your friend?"

Gwen was from Louisiana, with a deep southern drawl. She always wore bright jewel tones that complimented her dark skin. She smiled warmly at Theo, and extended her hand to shake.

"This is Theo," I informed her. "She's my next door neighbor. She just moved here this past spring."

"Don't worry, I'm pretty new myself," Gwen said with a wink to Theo.

Gwen had been working for my dad since she moved to Hell last fall. She'd been an integral part at the very start of the business. Hugh didn't have a great grasp on things like taxes and bills, so the gallery would never run without her. Not to mention she brought so much life to the building it was hard to imagine Erasmus without her.

"Well, feel free to have a look at anything you like," she said, as she and Hugh started talking shop behind the counter.

Theo and I wandered slowly from room to room. Painted benches sat in the center of each open space, to admire the treasures on the walls. Not only did Erasmus house paintings and sketches, but also sculptures, painted tiles and more unusual fare for collectors. A gray, squat potter in the shape of a medieval beast lurked in the corner. High windows along the front let in streams of sunlight.

Theo regarded everything with reverence as she took it in. The thought of how much everything probably cost made me wince. But I knew there were many people in Hell who could obviously afford fine art, as the gallery did steady business.

My thoughts kept going impatiently to the orphanage. Now that I was so sure that something was haunting me, I had to admit I was apprehensive about ignoring it.

"Alright, you're going to think I'm weird," I said.

I wanted Theo to know what my plans were. I didn't just want to foist them on her at the last minute; I wanted to make sure she was willing to go along with them, or at least tell me if I was crazy.

"Don't worry, I already think you're weird," she teased. When she saw my serious look, her face became solemn. "What's up?"

We sat down on one of the benches, painted with orange tropical flowers.

"I was thinking of maybe having a séance," I said carefully. I had listened many times when Corinne told people about her beliefs, and watched their faces become skeptical and mocking. But I didn't see that look in Theo's watchful eyes. "Warwick was telling me about the orphanage, the one that was advertising on the radio. That it used to be a hotbed of spiritual energy or something. I thought maybe it would be interesting to try to, I don't know," I shrugged, unable to find the explanation I was looking for, "Call it up?"



Theo's eyes went to the tall sculpture made of crushed cans in front of us. "For sure," she said after a second. "I would love to be a part of that. Consider me in."

We ended up spending the remaining afternoon in Erasmus, drinking strong coffee diluted with creamers as Gwen and Hugh walked around and planned where they were going to fit Deborah Strait's work. By the time we got home, it was deep into dark, and Theo was chatting excitedly about her plans for her sketches.

"Thanks," she said genuinely, putting her hand on my arm.

"You deserve for people to know how talented you are," I replied. "You can't keep that to yourself. You'd regret it forever."

I watched her skip back to her house, leaning on the same fence that had separated us a month ago. It was funny how fast things could completely change.

I went into research mode in the following days. I visited every site I could find on séances that didn't require me to sign up with a credit card. The most legitimate of what I found required four to six people. There were all kinds of different methods, all touted by the people who provided them to be the best. Some involved holding hands, some just touching fingers, some standing, some sitting. I filled an entire legal pad with notes, but looking them over I found a convoluted mess. I would only get one chance, so I didn't want to fail. I figured Aunt Corinne would know exactly how to perform one.

But where would we get two other people? It wasn't like I had a large pool of friends from which to draw.

Of course, I knew who I was most willing to extend an invitation to, and any excuse for me to talk to him worked, even if he didn't think ghosts were real. Henry wasn't going to make it to study this week because he was helping his dad clear out old court papers in their storage unit, so I knew I had to scout him out at school.

I found Henry outside, waiting for the Lexus to arrive. He was leaning in front of the twisty oak by the bottom of the school steps, his foot up on the trunk. The top button of his shirt was undone, letting me peek at the smooth skin of his chest beneath it.

"Hi," he greeted me. I looked up into his eyes, embarrassed as he spoke. "How's Vanderlip treating you?"

"Fine," I said with a soft laugh. I had no idea how to bring up my plans without it being awkward, so I just said them. "You want to go to a haunted house this weekend?"

His warm eyes assessed me for a minute and he slid his hands in his pockets. "Honestly, haunted houses aren't really my thing. I don't know if you heard me in Warwick's class or not, but I don't believe in ghosts. That stuff is brainless."

"Yeah, I heard you saying that," I admitted. "But it's just for fun. We're not taking it seriously. We were going to stick around and hold a séance. That's how Hell people get our kicks, y'know. Halloween is in our blood."

The wind caught his hair and ruffled it. A pensive look on his face, like he was bracing to deliver bad news, he said, "Séances, also corny."

"Well, I know it's not as cool as dragons," I said, rolling my eyes.

"I know how to separate fantasy from reality," he said seriously, his eyes darkening a little.

"So do I," I retorted. Most of the time.

I started to turn away, deciding it was a lost cause.

"What the hell, I'll go," he said unexpectedly. "You've convinced me. What day are you planning?"

"Saturday," I said, trying to contain my irrational excitement. "We're going to the orphanage where the haunted house is, and then I think we're going to hang around after. Oh, and make sure you bring a fourth person. It doesn't matter who it is as long as they're willing. And as long as it's not Lainey, or Madison."

"Okay. But don't be offended if I laugh," he warned. His father pulled to the sidewalk and Henry nodded goodbye as he got into the car and disappeared.

## Chapter 13

Hugh and Claire went to the airport Friday afternoon to go to a wedding in New York. It was the weekend before Halloween. They asked Aunt Corinne to come over and keep me company, which decoded meant watch over me.

"You need a babysitter at fifteen?" Theo had asked skeptically at lunch.

"Yeah, you know. I might try to put metal in the microwave, or get a boo boo and need it bandaged," I joked. "Or throw a banging party considering how popular I am."

In reality, I didn't protest my parents' decision. I knew that it was shaky ground allowing me to go back and forth to school, and I didn't want to jeopardize the only real freedom I continued to retain.

I had two hours to myself before Aunt Corinne came, in which I caught up on my laundry and read *A Tale of Two Cities* for English. I cleaned off the counters in the kitchen, and re-vacuumed the living room carpet, trying to make everything as nice as possible for my picky aunt, even though Claire had been scrubbing her hands raw up until the last minute. The house now smelled strongly of the five apple cinnamon candles burning on the kitchen windowsill.

Corinne arrived a half hour late, pulling two huge suitcases and a steamer trunk out of her minivan.

"There was traffic," she said in her nasal voice as she began to drag the bags in. I had no idea what she could possibly need so desperately for two days; she only lived thirty minutes away in Ann Arbor.

I helped her get settled in the den where she was staying. She griped about the short length of the couch, and the lack of a TV, but otherwise seemed semi-satisfied. About an hour later, I hung out in the kitchen while she botched an attempt at dinner. I peered in the deep stew pot and couldn't identify the vegetables within the greenish sludge.

"Have you ever seen a ghost?" I asked her, attempting to sound nonchalant as I took a seat at the table. I shifted the full napkin holder back and forth.

"What do you mean?" Corinne turned to me while stirring, her nose scrunched up. If I didn't know her better, I would assume it was the noxious fumes the pot was starting to emit. But that was Corinne's default face.

"Have you ever actually, with your own two eyes, seen a ghost?" I asked again, lacing my fingers together.

She paused for a second, tapping gunk off of the spoon and setting it on a paper towel on the counter.

"I've had paranormal experiences before," she said cautiously, coming over and taking the seat across the table from me. I watched her pick out her words. "I've heard them and I've sensed them. I can feel when a spirit is nearby, or even if it's just the energy that the being has left behind." She moved her arms in a windmill motion as she talked, giving her the loony psychic aura.

"So the answer is no?" I asked bluntly.

She met my eyes and looked irritated. "That's right." She let out a great big sigh, and her pointy shoulders shuddered underneath her navy blouse. "Not for lack of trying, however. Guess I didn't inherit mommy's little gift." Her tone was unmistakably bitter.

I perked up. "Mommy's little gift?"

She laughed, her lips curling into a sneer. "You mean Claire didn't tell you?" Off of my puzzled look, she said, "Of course not. I'm sure she thinks it's shameful to the family."

I waited for her to continue. It didn't take long.

"My mother, your grandma, Eleanor, saw ghosts. Not just communicating with them, she saw them, as real as anything," Corinne divulged.

My jaw nearly dropped off of my face. The skin covering my spine slithered. What was she telling me? I briefly remembered the file marked *Eleanor's Medical Records* in the basement.

"She wouldn't want me telling you," she said matter-of-factly, standing and returning to her pot stirring. She had missed her calling as an old-fashioned witch decoration, complete with cauldron. Or maybe that was just Hell having its affect on me.

"I won't tell her," I pleaded. "I'd really like to know."

"She never told me that much about it," Corinne said, but I couldn't tell if she was lying or not. "She would tell me stories when I was little, but around the time I turned ten she..."

And here she paused, and I could practically hear her brain picking out her words again like a toy crane machine.

"She stopped."

There was finality in her tone that told me not to push it. When a person irritated my aunt, she would give them the cold shoulder for months, sometimes decades. She stood and started rooting around for plates in the cupboards. I got up and retrieved the regular dinner plates.

"If someone wanted to go about having a séance, what would they do?" I asked as innocently as I could muster.

"Someone as young and inexperienced as you wouldn't be able to do it," Corinne said finitely. I felt insulted, especially considering the fact that at the moment it seemed like I was having more contact with spirits than she ever had.

"Well, I wasn't necessarily talking about me," I backtracked. "I was just curious. For a beginner, what would be most helpful?"

She brought two steaming bowls of gunk to the table and set one at my place. I sat down and swished the spoon around, mentally envisioning the microwavable ham and cheese pockets in the freezer. Less nutritious, maybe, but definitely tastier.

"Where's the necklace that your mom gave you for your birthday?" Corinne asked unexpectedly. I wondered if she would lecture me about not wearing it enough.

"I keep it in my jewelry box," I said, wondering how I could avoid eating the soup without hurting her feelings.

"How about you go and fetch it while I order pizza?" she asked. That was surprising for her, considering she hardly ever indulged in junk food. Of course, she had actually tasted her own food.

I ran downstairs and picked the necklace up out of my jewelry box, inspecting it tentatively. I hadn't forgotten how it heated up when I was at the restaurant, spying on McPherson's hidden meeting. Back upstairs, Corinne had already picked the table up a bit, although drops of liquid still shined on the surface that I rubbed off with a napkin.

Corinne held out both of her hands for the necklace and I gave it to her. She squinted at and turned it around.

"This could be a talisman to help increase spirit view. It reminds me of something in one of my books, but I don't think I have it with me." She pointed a sharp fingernail at some etchings I hadn't noticed before on the back.

"See these designs?" she asked. "These look like alchemic symbols. Sometimes alchemy has been used in modern times for spell craft. This could prove to be a powerful tool when trying to contact spirits."

I sat at the table as she called the pizza delivery place, staring at the funny symbols on the back of the necklace, and thinking about what to do.

After we had finished our pizza, I excused myself downstairs to kill some time. I fiddled through books and with my homework, unable to concentrate. Every few minutes I'd get up and pace, checking the clock. When I came back up long after dark, Corinne had passed out on the recliner in the living room, a bottle of wine and an empty glass beside her. Her snore carried all the way down the basement stairs. A TV special about arsons was blaring loudly. I sneaked into the den, pushing the door almost shut. Her trunk was pushed against the bookshelves.

I didn't like taking things. But I rationalized that I would bring them back as soon as I was done, and take every precaution to make sure they weren't harmed in any way.

I was already being bad, anyway. I told my parents I would be spending the night at Theo's, and that we were going to Hell's Orphanage with Ms. Vore as our chaperone. I knew there was no way they would approve of us going alone. But the nagging urgency to go through with my plan wouldn't let me stop.

Roses were carved into the antique wood of the trunk. Opening the heavy lid, I propped it up against the bookshelves, hoping it wouldn't come slamming back on my fingers. I rummaged around inside. There was a stack of books against the back, so I shuffled through them. At the bottom of the stack was a tome entitled *Modern Séance Methodology*. Flipping through it quickly, I gathered the supplies I needed and shut the trunk.

With the book tucked under my arm, I tiptoed through the living room and down the hall to the staircase. Upstairs, I navigated with gentle steps to my parent's room, hoping Claire hadn't tied a string or anything on the door to check for snoopers.

I opened her dresser drawers and rummaged around, looking for my grandmother's medical records. But wherever Hugh had hidden them, there were nowhere to be found. He could have put them anywhere in the house.

Deciding not to push my luck, I crept back downstairs and to my room, preparing for the next night's deception.

I had been planning for this night for a week, but for some reason, I was more nervous than I had been on the first day of school. I intentionally refused to examine my motives. Something was haunting me, but it wasn't Jenna. Whatever it was, it was manipulating my emotions to make me see and think of her. That was all. Every possibility remained that she now resided in Las Vegas or Hollywood. I shut my eyes, pictured her in gigantic designer sunglasses with a floppy hat over her hair.

I stood in front of the mirror in my room, studying my reflection. My face looked thinner than usual, but my hazel eyes were bright and excited. Maybe too excited. I was putting a lot on this evening. There was every possibility that we would go there and it would be a total bust. I glanced at the wall above my desk in the reflection, half expecting the thudding sound to start up again.

I said goodbye to Corinne, taking my roomiest purse with me and hoping she wouldn't notice the weight of it. She didn't, and only pestered me a little before I got out the door.

"Call me when you get to Theo's house." She pronounced her name "Tay-Oh" even though I had already corrected her twice. "And be careful. Remember that your mom and dad don't want you getting in any trouble."

"Sure," I said. I knew there was a good chance she might forget that she had told me to call her when the time came.

Ms. Vore drove Theo and me to the orphanage and dropped us off around eight in the evening.

"Be back by 11:30, have fun," she told Theo, and sped off in her car. She seemed to be rather lax about Theo staying out, or maybe that was just me being used to overprotective parents. For a moment I felt guilty that Hugh and Claire didn't know about my ruse. Being partially honest was still lying. But I tried to tell myself I wasn't hurting anyone, and I would take care of myself.

Theo wore huge, glittery bat earrings, her red hair up in a bun. With her glasses she looked like the world's coolest librarian. As we walked through the gate I had a flashback to long-ago birthday dream. The moment when I

realized that I was locked out and I could go no further. Jenna standing in front of the house, hands hanging at her hips...face flat and hopeless...

"Where's Henry supposed to be?" Theo asked, breaking me out of my memory.

"He just said he would meet us here," I replied. "No specific place."

"Hopefully we can find him," she said.

There were lots of juniors and seniors from Hawthorne, although I didn't see anyone I knew by name. They all towered above us, making me feel adolescent. Theo and I peered around the tall crowd of bodies, but I saw no sign of Henry. The lawn looked like someone had come along and done a cleanup job since my last visit.

"Maybe he ditched on me," I said, not wanting to accept the disappointing possibility. In my head, I tormented myself for thinking he would follow through with it. "I should have found someone who didn't think the whole idea of ghosts was the most ridiculous thing they'd ever heard."

Just then, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned to see Henry, smirking. I felt the same sense of relief as I did when I was lost as a child, and I spotted one of my parents' faces in the crowd. A familiar, safe beacon. Hope.

"Were you going to give up on me that easily?" he asked with a mock hurt expression on his handsome face. I noticed with some trepidation that Henry had obtained Alex, the idiot always cracking jokes in History class, as our fourth person.

"This is who you came up with?" I asked, raising my eyebrows and scrutinizing the other boy.

"I'm just here for the free entertainment," Alex assured me, running a hand through his hair. "You did buy me a ticket, right?"

I frowned and nodded at the same time.

"Yes, I bought you a ticket." I distributed the little printouts I'd bought online out to everyone.

"I don't have to pay you back, right?" Alex asked.

"Uh, no," I said, annoyed.

We handed in the tickets as we got in line. The sessions, as the staff referred to them, ran early in the evening, and we were there for the eight-thirty, the last. I had tried to time it so that hopefully everyone else would leave and we'd have the property to ourselves.



I was somewhat excited to see the haunted house itself, even though it presented merely a distraction. I shifted on my feet as we stood in line. Everyone spoke excitedly in little groups, their speech peppered with apprehension. A few girls appeared scared, their boyfriends comforting them with quiet words.

A chill had arrived now that the sun had gone down, making me glad that I had dressed in a chunky sweater and jeans. There were a few guys in costumes, one even wearing a skull mask. I peered around the people in front of me. The line went to the entrance, the double doors underneath the staircase. Our little bunch remained near the back.

"You females can cling to me if it gets scary," Alex said. I figured he would start beating on his chest like a gorilla any minute. It was a show I would be delighted to miss.

"Stuff it, bro," Theo retorted. "We can take care of ourselves."

My phone beeped and I pulled it out of my sweater pocket. Henry's name was on the screen. *Sorry, he has a car* was all it read. I giggled.

After a few minutes of waiting, the doors flew open with a puff of thick fog. I couldn't help but be reminded of my dream, and I shut my eyes. The line quickly moved as everyone shuffled inside. I took a deep breath, and Theo and I walked in. The doors slammed shut behind Alex and Henry, rending the space in darkness.

"Whoa, what the —," Alex sputtered.

The dark inside was impenetrable, and I could not even make out my own hands as I waved them in front of my face. My heart skipped a beat as I thought back to the recent night in my room, when all the light was sucked out of the bulbs. I'd always prided myself on being brave when it came to this stuff, and thanks to circumstances beyond my control, I was losing my edge.

Blacklights on the wall flickered on with a hiss, making Theo's red hair glow hot pink.

"That's better," she said.

We were in a dilapidated little room, with collages of body parts on the walls. Cavernous darkness stretched out before us. The people in front had already run into it, the shadow swallowing them. The faint strains of an out of tune piano came from somewhere inside. I squinted into the dark but couldn't see anything.

"Let's go," I whispered, looking at Theo.

She had a tight smile on her face, as though her stomach was upset. Our little group stuck together as we shambled down the hall. I could hear the boys talking quietly amongst themselves behind us.

The first room bore the first scare. Theo wandered into the center, when suddenly a trap door opened above and a rubber corpse in a cheap suit deployed on her. She screamed and doubled backwards, nearly falling into me. Righting herself, her face remained frightened, eyes big as soup bowls. Her tiny hands were clasped up by her chin.

"Are you okay?" I asked, concerned.

"Just a little scared, that's all," she said, smiling self deprecatingly. "I'm a wuss when it comes to this stuff."

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked, surprised. She had seemed as keyed up as me to visit the haunted house. "You did fine when we were spying."

"When you were what?" Henry asked. I ignored him.

"I didn't want you to think less of me," she admitted. "It's only in situations like this, when there are jump-type scares. The anticipation makes me jumpy."

Suddenly, I felt very selfish. I grasped her hand. "If we stick together, we'll get through it fast." I assured her. She nodded, visibly gathering her resolve as we proceeded farther on into the house.

Haunted houses were old hat for me, but I quickly became disoriented. Not good when I was trying to comfort Theo. We made our ways through the rooms in the murky space, only occasionally lit by dull colored lightbulbs. The sound of other people shrieking farther inside made Theo tense up. Every time there was another shout she squeezed my hand.

A monster jumped at Theo from the left and she screamed, dropping my hand. The mechanism rattled as it retreated back into its hiding place inside the wall.

"See, just a stupid old contraption," Henry reassured her, patting her gently on the shoulder. He could tell she was scared, in fact it looked like she was trembling. Again I felt like a jerk for bringing her there, for my own selfish reasons. Especially when odds were that the house would keep all of its secrets and not share any with me.

We came out to a pencil-thin hallway. It was only big enough for one person to go through at a time. I went in front and edged forward. Theo

followed me, took hold of my hand again. I had never suffered claustrophobia, but the battered walls suffocated me. Although I had been looking forward to the cheap thrills, I didn't like being in the orphanage, not only for Theo's fear, but for reasons I couldn't quite name.

In the next room, a boy our age was sitting in a creaky rocking chair. He had his legs pulled up beneath his chin, wearing what looked like ripped, dirty pajamas. His tortured eyes remained on a spot on the floor.

"He locked us in the closet," he gibbered, rocking back and forth, the chair squeaking in time with his movements. "He locked us in the closet and we couldn't get out."

Next to him was, I guessed, the closet door he spoke of. It swung open, revealing hanging plastic skeletons that began to shake. Henry started laughing behind us. The boy in the rocking chair stopped for a second to glare at Henry's disrespect, then went right back into his act. Seeing that made my anxiety lesson a bit. I heard Theo chuckle beside me. Seeing the real people behind the illusion always made it easier to believe all of it was fake.

In the next room, red light cast a bloody glow on the walls. We seemed far behind the others, who I couldn't see or hear anymore. Dizziness swept over me suddenly, a metallic taste on my tongue that seemed both familiar and wrong. Like I had bitten down on the inside of my cheek. I licked my finger, but of course underneath the light I couldn't tell if it was blood or not.

Children's voices filled my ears, and I cringed, looking around for the source. They were all talking at once, and I couldn't separate the words. Pushing in, trying to tell me, trying to —

"What's wrong?" Theo whispered. As quickly as they had come, the voices stopped, along with the funny metal taste. My mouth was suddenly parched.

"Nothing," I whispered back, not wanting either her or Henry to see me afraid. I pulled a water bottle I'd stuck in my purse out and took a swig, swallowing hard. "I think all the fog is making me nauseous, that's all."

Piles of broken furniture sat in the corner. A discarded playpen remained in the center of the room. I ran my hand along the splintered wooden rail. A china baby doll with a smashed face lay inside, covered by a

moth-eaten blanket. I realized that a subconscious part of me was waiting for Jenna to pop out from behind a corner, and tell me it was all a joke.

The next room was wider. A wall of cages stood on the one side, reaching to the ceiling. A disembodied voice spoke to us suddenly. "When the orphans became too difficult to deal with, they were kept in these cages," the voice warbled. It sounded like it was being put through a distorter. "And when there were too many of them, The Master left them here and forgot about them, leaving them to their doom."

"Where's that voice coming from?" I heard Alex ask. His voice shook like he was as scared as Theo.

"It's not the dark ages," I said. "There are such things as speakers." I realized that's where the children's voices must have come from, too, but I kept that to myself just in case. A scuffling noise started up from behind us.

"Oh, boy," Henry breathed, and we all turned around to see what he was referring to. Two guys with sheets draped over them were running full speed in our direction, their arms outstretched. Loud growls emitted from their throats.

We ran as they chased us towards the red EXIT sign. I propelled myself forward as fast as I could go; I knew they wouldn't hurt us, but my adrenaline still screamed in response to the spooky atmosphere. The boys veered off to the left at the last minute, leaving us alone.

"Thank god," Theo moaned, stumbling out into the night. "I need a valium." I wondered for a moment if she was going to throw up. The boys followed her out.

"Always having to take care of the women," Alex joked to Henry as he rolled his eyes. We all knew Alex had been just as afraid as anyone. I was about to follow Henry out.

*"Ariel..."*

Confused, I turned to my right. I had definitely heard my name.

*"Ariel..."*

My heart was thumping so hard I worried I would have to grab it with my hands and push it back into my chest. Whatever haunted me followed me there. That was the plan, but I didn't know if I could

control it. As I started to creep down the hall, which was barren except for a stack of crates at the end, everything began to get fuzzy. Blood rushed into my temples. I was going to pass out. Pinpricks of black filled my eyes like wasps.

*A child is standing in front of me. Its back is against the wall. Hair chopped around the ears, face dirty with grime. I can't tell if it's a boy or a girl; at that young age where unless they wear pink or blue it's hard to tell.*

*I walk slowly toward them, compelled. Nerves jump beneath my skin, warning me of a danger I ignore.*

*Is it another trick? No. This is definitely a child. And then it runs to me. Grabs my arms, shrieking in my face. Rancid breath stings my eyes. No longer a face, it is a screaming hole.*

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## Chapter 14

I staggered out of the orphanage, disoriented. Something had just happened, but my thoughts were on lockdown. I couldn't quite grasp exactly what had occurred, or how long the span of time was that I had suddenly lost.

"Thanks for joining us," Alex said smugly, stubbing out his cigarette on the side of the house.

"Fire hazard," Theo muttered, rolling her eyes. She was busy fixing her bun, bobby pins in her teeth.

"Are you okay?" Henry asked, touching my arm. He pulled his fingers away and rubbed them together. Soot covered them. I looked down at my forearms: ash marks, almost in the shape of fingerprints, stood out on my pale skin. I brushed them away. Old houses could be so dusty.

"Do you want to go home?" I asked Theo, who was looking much better. The night was dark and full of voices. Our fellow haunted house survivors were still milling around, talking about how scared they had been inside the orphanage. Stars filled the sky, clearly visible since we were farther out near the country.

"No!" Theo shook her head fervently. "I'm alright now. I just don't like it when things jump out at me. But I'll be fine for going back inside alone." The way she held her purse like a stuffed animal to her chest did not convince me.

"Are you sure?" I insisted.

"You'll be all right, Theo," Alex said, trying to put his arm around Theo's shoulders. She wriggled out and stepped away.

"Okay, the question is now, where can we hole up until everyone else is gone?" I asked.

"How about over there?" Henry asked, gesturing towards an ugly jackpine squatting on the side of the yard. Barely visible behind it was a little shack.

We sneaked over behind the tree while the others were heading to the front. The tiny cottage looked like it was out of a fairy tale illustration. Brown paint was peeling off of the wood in strips, and dirty white gingerbread trim ran around the windows.

One at a time, we went inside the shed. It smelled stale, like old standing water. I shut the door behind us tightly. Henry had brought two camping flashlights. He turned one on to and pointed it at the ceiling, cutting through the gloom and lighting up the room rather brightly.

"Do you think they'll be able to see that outside?" I asked.

"Shouldn't be able to," Henry said, looking around for possible flaws. "I think the only window is that one with the shutters. But those should protect any light from getting out."

"It's gross in her," Theo said, surveying the state of dirt and decrepitude. A metal bed held a mattress torn up by nesting mice. Boxes of supplies were piled in the corner. Alex and Theo looked through them, holding up glow sticks, old rolls of yellowing carnival tickets, corroded batteries.

"What exactly is it that we're doing?" Henry asked me. "I'm just curious. Are we really going through with this whole séance bit?"

I didn't know exactly how to explain it now that I was on the spot.

"We're going to hang out here until everyone clears off, and then we'll go inside to hopefully...call up some dead people."

"Just your typical Saturday," Theo said wryly.

"You didn't really strike me as the law breaking type," Alex said to me. "Hot."

Henry scowled at him. "As simple as that then?" he asked, looking back at me.

"As simple as that," I echoed. "As long as we don't get caught."

"Well then, let's not get caught," he reasoned.

A splintery wooden table and mismatched chairs sat in the opposite corner beneath a shelf. Henry started rooting around in the shelf, and found an old deck of casino cards. "Something to pass the time," he said, more to himself even though I was watching over his shoulder.

Alex moved one of the chairs over and started pulling at the braided rug beneath it.

"What are you doing?" I asked. Every movement he made irritated me more.

"This rug is all damp and moldy," he complained. "I don't want my shoes ruined, they're new." He tilted his foot so I could get a look at the sneakers in question. They looked like boy shoes to me. I rolled my eyes. He

succeeded in pulling away the offending floor covering, revealing a small painted door underneath.

"Look what I found," Alex said, already kneeling down. "Where do you think this goes?"

"No idea," I said, kneeling beside him. The wooden door was a perfect square, only several feet across. I scratched off some of the dark, colorless paint with my fingernail. "But I'd love to know."

"Come help me with this," Alex instructed Henry.

"I didn't know I was your servant," Henry said, but he came over anyway. A thin loop was hooked to the bottom. Both Alex and Henry took turns trying to pull up the door with it but it was either locked or stuck.

"If we had a crowbar," Henry suggested. "Otherwise I think it's hopeless."

"Oh well, not important," Alex said, losing interest instantly as he stood up and brushed off his khakis. "Where's the booze?"

"Nobody brought booze," Henry said, his voice strained. "We can play cards, though." He patted the deck he had counted out on the table. "Only the Queen of Hearts is missing, but we can just use the joker."

"Whoopee," Alex scoffed, flopping down into his chair.

Theo and I stood over by the window, keeping watch. We didn't have a great view, but I could see the majority of the cars parked on the lawn, as the headlights came on two by two and the drivers pulled away onto the road.

"Can I ask you a question?" Theo asked quietly. "You don't have to answer it if you don't want to."

I laughed lightly at the unexpectedness, assuming it to be about Henry. "Of course, what?"

"Could this whole new found séance interest have anything to do with..." she swallowed hard before continuing. "Your friend?"

She pushed her glasses up on either side with both palms. I assumed that meant a major attack of nerves. The next words ran together as if they were one. "I mean, if you don't want to talk about it, I won't pry. I was just curious."

"That's not prying," I said gently. "I'm really surprised you've never asked me about Jenna before." I looked back through the slits in the cracked shudders, trying to decide what to say.



"I'm sorry," she said, look apologetic. "I didn't..."

"No, no. You're fine. I had so many people walking on eggshells around me; it was nice to be treated like a person for once, and not just some pathetic loose end." I cleared my throat. "To answer your question...maybe. I don't think she's...dead." My voice cracked on the word. I shut my eyes.

When I opened them, I saw the boys peering up from their card game. Henry's brow was furrowed, and I knew he was trying to decipher my look. I attempted a weak smile for him. He and Alex looked down again, making themselves artificially busy.

"But something's here," I continued to Theo. "And I think it has to do with her, or why she disappeared. I keep imagining what could have happened that night. It's like a movie in my head but I have no idea what scenes are right."

When the last car pulled out of the gate, it was after 10 pm. I watched a woman get out of the driver's side and shut the gate, then speed away like she felt happy to be rid of the place. I pulled out my phone to text Corinne about being at Theo's. The reception kept dropping to zero bars, and I walked around the tiny interior of the shed.

"Is anyone else having crappy service?" I asked, looking around at my cohorts. Alex whipped out his phone and held it in front of him like he was in a commercial.

"Uh, yeah. That sucks," he muttered, glaring at his phone like it was a personal sleight.

I finally sent the text through and hoped Corinne would find it acceptable. She could very well be passed out in front of the TV again, so I wasn't too worried. She didn't really have a drinking problem; it was more that she liked using up my parents' stuff.

We exited the shed the way we had come in and stood on the lawn, four awkward teenagers that had no idea what we were doing. The high, ancient birch trees growing around the fence made us practically invisible.

"Why does this feel like the lead in to a news story?" Henry asked, and adopted a broadcaster voice. "*Four teenagers arrested today for abandoned house shenanigans. When asked for comment, they said, 'Ariel made us do*

*it'.*" He grinned at me and I bumped his shoulder with mine, happy to have him next to me in the dark.

"We'll be careful," I assured him. "No shenanigans. Can you guys check the doors and see if any of them are open?"

The boys trudged off and disappeared around the side of the house. Meanwhile, Theo and I checked on the rows of windows in the back. The place had seen its fair share of hard partying, the evidence all over. Many of the panes had been broken in, and black garbage bags and grocery sacks had been taped to the frames inside.

"I've never done anything like this before," Theo whispered, sounding giddy. "Peering in windows, yes, but never actually going in the houses. This is really exciting."

"All that means is that we both need to get out more," I said, but I was smiling.

Graffiti in the shape of a devil's face stood out on the wall. *Hell is closer than you think* read the scrawl beneath. There was a big broken window at the back of the building, near the center, which had also been given the garbage bag treatment. The boys came back around, faces hidden in shadow.

"Everything's locked up tight," Henry reported.

"I think we can sneak in through here," I said, gesturing towards the window. With careful fingers, I pulled off the bag and the tape, exposing the hole into the house.

"Not exactly trying hard to keep out intruders, are they?" Henry asked.

"Well, maybe that means we're invited," I said. "Who wants to go first?"

"Me!" Theo chirped, all of her earlier fear replaced by eagerness. She scrambled up to the window, where Alex gave her a boost up. When she was inside, she stuck her upturned thumb out for confirmation. "Just be careful of the glass, you guys."

Alex proceeded in next, his rotund behind filling the window frame before he landed inside. He towered over the rest of us short people at over six feet, and he was built like a linebacker. We watched as the two of them walked further into the house.

Henry gestured for me to go next. "Ladies first, to be cliché."

"I appreciate your cliché. It makes you sound like a gentleman." I looked into the bleak hole. *It's just a house. It can't hurt me,* I thought.

I grasped the sides of the window, carefully avoiding the broken glass still stuck inside the frame. I pulled myself up, but lost my grip and fell, tumbling inside on my arm and the side of my head. I saw stars as my skull thwacked the hard floor. It happened so fast I was in shock.

So much for the not getting hurt theory.

Henry scrambled in beside me. My head was throbbing, but I was vaguely aware as he leaned over me, assessing the damage.

"I'm so sorry," he said, although it had been my fault. He gently grabbed my arm, inspecting it. "You ripped this up pretty good."

I sat up slowly and looked myself over, more aware of him touching me than I was of any pain. Bits of broken glass were lodged inside my flesh. Blood bloomed from the cuts.

"You're bleeding," he said softly, his brow knit.

"It doesn't hurt," I said in an equally soft tone. With his face so close, I had the sudden, desperate urge to kiss him.

"Blood doesn't bother you?" he asked skeptically, raising one full eyebrow.

I looked down at my arm, and picked out the shards of glass quickly with my fingers, wincing only a little. "Not really. I used to be the neighborhood tomboy. My tree climbing was unparalleled."

My arm didn't hurt much, but my head was killing me.

"You should go into medicine," he said humorously.

"Because of my tree climbing?" I asked, confused.

"Well that would be a useful skill, but I meant for your strong disposition," he explained.

"Don't I need to not suck at math to go into medicine?" I asked. Henry scoffed, shaking his head at me.

"We should just leave," he insisted. "You need to get that arm looked at. With all the dirt that's around this place, you could get a nasty infection."

"I'm all right," I insisted. "We're doing this."

I felt like I was finally going to get some answers, and I would be damned before someone stopped me. I pulled my purse strap up on my shoulder and stood, while he offered his arm for support.

"I'm fine," I insisted.

"All right, but don't say I didn't warn you when they have to chop your arm off," he grumbled, shoving his hands in his sweatshirt pockets.

I stood and walked away from him, wanting to put distance between us so the unrelenting urge to kiss him would go away. It ached that I couldn't touch him. In my eagerness to get away, I was glad he couldn't see the fat drop of blood roll down my forehead and fall to the floor.

In the dark, I felt less self-conscious as I blotted my bleeding head. From what I could tell, it wasn't too bad, but the thin trickle didn't seem to be totally stopping, either. Henry turned on one of his flashlights. He offered me the other, but it was too hard to juggle everything in my hands.

"Your head is bleeding, too?" he asked. I had been trying to hide it by awkwardly holding the back of my hand to my forehead, imitating Scarlet O'Hara.

"A little," I said meekly.

"Ariel, come on," he said in exasperation. "You should really go to the hospital."

"I hate hospitals," I said, shivering. "No thank you."

"You will be the death of me, I swear," he muttered. "You drive me crazy sometimes."

His words stung me deeply.

"I didn't know I was so irritating," I said.

"That's not what I meant," he said, frowning.

"Let's keep going," I said flippantly.

The light bobbed through the rooms, illuminating now why our haunted house experience had been confined to specific parts of the orphanage. I had once seen pictures of Chernobyl, a city destroyed by a nuclear plant explosion. The inside of the building reminded me of that.

A lot of it was just as Mr. Warwick had described in class. Huge gaping holes in the floor looked like a giant had bashed his fist in. Stale air blew through the halls, carrying with it the bitter stink of mold and rotten wood. More than anything the house held sadness, like the feeling itself had absorbed into the flowery wallpaper. The children there must have had terribly unhappy lives.

The rooms were tiny, with short ceilings. In a way, it reminded me of a neglected dollhouse. I imagined Alex would have to duck through the doorways and wondered if he had during the session. Speaking of which, he jogged up to us, with Theo close behind.

"What's the hold up?" he asked at the same time Theo said, "Oh my gosh, what happened?"

She took my arm and fussed over it as Henry had. It looked much better to my eyes, scabs already starting to form.

"We're staying," I said, answering the question before she asked it. "We've gone to too much trouble. And I'm fine, nothing some antibiotic ointment and bandages won't fix."

"She's being as stubborn as possible," Henry told them. Then he turned to me. "What are we doing now?"

"We need to find somewhere to hold the séance," I said. "Preferably a table or a good flat expanse of floor. We should split up."

"Uh, no, we shouldn't. That's always when the bad stuff happens on *Scooby Doo*," Alex said, waving his hands dismissively.

I rolled my eyes. "Theo and I can go together..."

"You're going to think this is sexist of me," Henry interjected, "But I think maybe it should be one girl and one guy together. Between your injuries and Theo's phobias" — she wrinkled her nose at him — "it might be a good idea."

"Yeah, you need a strong man to protect you," Alex smarmed at Theo.

"Are you freaking kidding me?" Theo asked, one notch below yelling. "The one who was just whining about an old cartoon?"

"God, I'm joking," he said, rolling his eyes. "Lighten up, Morticia."

"Wow, that's a new one," Theo spat, her eyes glowing with anger in the light from the flashlight. "Did you use all two of your brain cells to come up with it?"

But we split up that way anyway. Maybe it would be a good idea, I reasoned without a whole lot of reasons to support it. I was on edge and in no mood to argue. I drove Henry crazy? He drove me crazy every moment I was around him.

Henry gave Theo one of the flashlights and Alex had an LED light on his phone. After they had departed, Henry and I stood awkwardly across from each other, listening to the fading sound of their bickering.

"Let's keep moving," I said, and we set off.

"I thought I saw a table back in that room full of cages," Henry offered.

So we headed in that direction. We wound up there after what seemed like ten minutes of getting lost. The house was like a maze, with dead ends

caused by decay. I took out a little pink emergency flashlight I had in my backpack, and shone it around the cages. On closer inspection in enhanced light, they looked like they had all been purchased at the pet store. A few still had price tags wound around the bars. But no table.

Back in the room with the rocking chair and the skeleton closet, Henry wandered over to the closet door, smirking in anticipation as he nudged it open. But as I peered over his shoulder we both saw it was empty.

"What the hell?" I asked, a chill going through me.

He tilted his head, inspecting the back wall of the closet. Then he leaned in and tapped the ceiling with his fingers. Pushing his hand through the flaps he had discovered, he stepped back as the obviously plastic skeletons dropped down.

"All parlor tricks," he said softly, reaching out and rubbing my shoulder. My heart leapt up into my throat. We gazed into each other's eyes for a moment, and then parted, making ourselves busy in different parts of the room.

Having not had any luck we made our way into a different skinny hallway. It was pitch black beyond where even the strong beam of his flashlight couldn't penetrate.

"I'm not going any farther that way," he said. "I don't like the looks of those ceiling beams." There were a few hanging precariously low, as if they could drop any moment.

"Well, then, I'll go," I said, shuffling around him.

He caught my arm to stop me from going further. "It could be dangerous," he pleaded. "You never know if the ceiling might collapse, and I bet there are weak spots in the floor."

I stood in front of him, acutely aware that our lips were merely inches apart. I wondered if I was the only one. But as his eyes became heavy lidded, and his breathing sped up, I realized my answer.

"Theo was right, I can take care of myself," I said gently, not taking my eyes off of his mouth.

"I don't want anything to happen to you," he whispered, moving closer to me. "That's all I meant. I care about you."

I could almost feel his lips on mine.

"Heads up!" Alex yelled from the left. Henry dropped my arm and we pulled away from each other, as if caught in an embarrassing scene. Alex

didn't seem to notice how flustered we were.

Theo was on his heels. "We found the dining room. Should be a good spot."

We followed them back down the hallway, and up a short set of stairs. The remains of an old kitchen sat at the top. I paused and looked inside. Gutted spaces where the old appliances had been ripped out left bouquets of blackened electrical wiring. The black and white tile on the floor was cracked and peeling, sticking up in some spots.

"This way," Theo gestured, and Henry and I followed them through a door into the dining room. A narrow room that had probably once been grand, there were high-backed chairs around an elongated mahogany table. Two dust-layered, silver candelabras sat in the center of the tabletop. I brushed dust off of the back of the chair standing at the end.

I battled dizziness, my head pounding, but I figured I was so close now...I hadn't come this far just to quit. I would drive myself nuts with maybes.

Besides, I didn't hit my head that hard. My stubbornness continued to win out.

Alex was making jokes, as usual. He carried a plastic skull he had picked up somewhere and used the mouth as a puppet, adopting a Cryptkeeper voice.

"Welcome kiddies," he said. "Would you like to dance to death?"

"He is such an idiot," Theo whispered to me.

An oversized, muted portrait of a man hung above the huge fireplace. I had never seen a fireplace so wide. A pile of ashes remained at the bottom from some long-ago fire. It smelled awful and I wrinkled my nose, turning away.

Each one of us took a seat at the table, with me at the head. The bleeding from my forehead had stopped, and I stuffed the red tissues in the side pocket of my purse. I set the purse on the table, unzipping the main section, and started to take out the supplies I had borrowed from Corinne. Four white candles, to represent us; one red candle, to represent whatever we were contacting; a small mirror, to act as a portal; and different pieces of metal. Finally, I pulled out the séance book, which had a photo I had printed out of the orphans tucked inside between the pages.

Henry picked up the picture and looked at it, reading the caption.

"Orphans at Dexter House, 1926, with John Dexter the third." He nodded towards the ugly portrait above the fireplace. "I'm guessing that's the same guy."

I looked over the picture, too. Dexter was standing behind the row of children, his face shadowed by his wide-brimmed hat. All of the kids had their hair cut short, and were wearing what looked like tattered nightgowns. For a moment that look seemed familiar, although I couldn't tell why.

Henry rubbed the picture with his thumbs. "Did you laminate this?"

I nodded. Everyone at the table laughed.

"I was worried it might get something on it, ectoplasm, or s-something," I stuttered, defensive.

"Spirit fluids?" Alex asked, causing everyone else to crack up again.

I looked up at the painting again. The man gave me the shivers. It reminded me of an evil painting in an old movie I had seen, that cursed anyone who looked at it. Or the idea that a soul could be trapped inside a photograph. The oil-painted black eyes never left mine.

Theo helped me set up the table to match the picture in the book, putting the candles in a diamond shape with the red one in the center.

"Where's the Ouija board?" Alex asked.

"I didn't bring one," I said.

"What kind of fake séance is this?" he demanded. I gritted my teeth.

It had started to storm outside, bursts of thunder rattling the walls. Funny, it seemed like a clear night before we came in. But I hadn't been worried about the weather then. And in Michigan, a storm could start on one side of the sky while the other half was sunny and clear.

"*It was a dark and stormy night,*" Henry recited.

"Be serious," I said. I sat down again, and stumbled a bit on the way down.

"Are you okay?" both Henry and Theo said at the same time. They looked at each other, exchanging silent communication. It reminded me of my parents, and irritated me even more than Alex had.

"I am fine," I repeated yet again. "Let's just do this. Oh...before I forget."

I rummaged through the side pocket of my purse, and pulled out Grandma's necklace. I brought it in a plastic sandwich baggie for safekeeping.



"Fancy," Theo said. "Wouldn't want the ghosts to see you without your fine jewels."

"Are you going to pick on me, too?" I asked wearily.

"Sorry."

I put the necklace around my neck and attached the clasp. The green stone was already promisingly warm.

Alex lit the candles with his lighter. We joined hands around the table, Theo and Henry holding mine, and Alex holding Theo's.

"Gross," Theo moaned, her eyes closed.

"What?" I asked.

"His hand is wet," she said, pulling hers out of Alex's and wiping it on her skirt.

"I have a sweating problem, okay?" he said. "And I'm not holding hands with Henry."

"You don't have to. As long as we form a chain," I said, looking at the book. Theo gingerly took Alex's hand back. I took a deep breath, and began chanting the text.

*"We gather here to call the spirits that have been left behind,"* I recited. *"He who cannot face death, and so has turned away. We call thee to our gathering."*

Henry started to chuckle. "'Thee'?"

"Keep it on thee low," Alex said in an old man accent. Both he and Henry laughed.

"You're really not funny," I said to Alex. Then I glared at Henry.

"I'm sorry, but I warned you," he said, still smiling. His eyebrows raised apologetically as he laced his fingers through mine again.

I tried to focus back on the book, but I was more aware of how he was running his thumb over the back of my hand. He didn't seem to notice he was doing it. All was forgiven.

The amulet was growing almost uncomfortably hot. I had to resist the urge to take it off, reasoning I only had to keep it on for a short time. I expected the stone to emit a glow or something, but it looked the same. The candles gave me tunnel vision and I blinked, mentally envisioning the Tylenol at home on the kitchen counter.

*"We gather here to extinguish the flame that keeps you from finding the dark,"* I recited, fully aware that Henry was still chuckling under his breath.

*"Appear to us, so that we may send you on your way. Appear! Appear!"*

A lightning bolt shot through the center of the table. The accompanying boom deafened me, and I went blind.

*We are starving. He won't feed us. We are locked in the room all day long. I haven't seen the sun in weeks. I don't remember what it feels like.*

*A little girl, cuts visible on her arms.*

*This is what happens when you disobey me.*

*A little boy emaciated from hunger. In a box beneath the ground.*

*This is what happens when you try to destroy me.*

*I am on fire. My skin burns, the pain like nothing I've ever known before.*

*Jenna stands with her face in the corner of the room. Weeping.*

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## Chapter 15

I woke up looking at a sky full of stars. I hadn't rested that well in months. For a moment in my disorientation I thought that I was in my backyard, like when Hugh used to put out a tent and we'd pretend to camp behind our house. Then I heard someone sobbing.

I looked around. We were on the lawn of the orphanage. The source of the crying was Theo, sitting back on her haunches. Tears streamed down her face.

Alex was pacing the hard ground. "We're going to get caught. This is *trespassing*. And I knew it, and I came along anyway, because hey, I have no life. I don't even like you guys and I'm not going down for you."

"Shut up, Alex," Henry growled, glaring at him.

"Let's just chuck her in the jeep and go," Alex said. "We can take her to a hospital —"

"And explain what exactly?" Henry was sitting stone still beside me. None of them were aware I had woken up. I didn't see what the big deal was. "We were trespassing, holding some idiotic *séance* like a bunch of ten year olds, and then she started having a fit?"

"I didn't throw a fit," I mumbled, sitting up. The ground was wet from rain underneath me, and the back of my clothes were damp.

"Oh, god," Theo sobbed, taking her hands from her face. "You're okay."

"Don't celebrate yet, she had a seizure," Henry said. His tone seemed rather harsh, not what I expected from him.

"What are you talking about?" I asked. "I didn't have a seizure."

"That's what it looked like," he said. "One minute you were chanting from that goddamn book and the next minute you fell on the floor, twitching." His cheeks were flushed, and his eyes were on fire.

"I'm sure it was nothing," I said brightly. I hadn't felt so fantastic in years. Energy flowed through my blood, and the trees on the lawn looked beautiful in the light from the stars. I wondered if Alex slipped me drugs. "I feel awesome," I assured them.

Three faces showed nothing but doubt.

"I don't really remember anything after...I was chanting and then I thought I saw lightning..."

Whatever it was, it didn't seem important. My hand flew to my neck, seeking my pendant.

"What happened to my necklace?" I asked.

"You yanked it off and threw it in the corner when you were...before..." Theo said, wiping the tears from her cheeks. "I got all of the other supplies together, though. I figured you would want them." She held up my stuffed purse.

"Thanks," I said gratefully. The space between my collarbones felt burnt, and I rubbed the skin gently.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Henry asked quietly, his eyes staring intensely into mine. I remembered my earlier urge to kiss him, and licked my lips without thinking. I wanted to eat him alive.

"Let's go," I said, and the words had a double meaning.

"Do you want to go back and get your necklace?" he asked.

I shook my head vehemently, surprising myself.

"No, let's get out of here." The euphoric cloud in my head began to dissipate.

As if on cue, police sirens started up in the distance. Whether they were coming for us or not didn't matter. We ran off of the lawn, the front gate slamming behind us. Hopping in Alex's jeep as he gunned the engine, we drove speedily away.

I watched the orphanage through the rear window as it became a small dot in the distance and disappeared. The earlier elation I felt when I woke up was gone, leaving me with a deep feeling of uneasiness. I never wanted to go back there. There was something in the house all right, but it was no friend of mine.

Claire and Hugh arrived home safely on Sunday.

"How was the wedding?" I asked them, helping them inside with their luggage.

"Just fine," Claire said. Her skin looked more tan than usual, even though they had only headed East. "The bride looked beautiful."

"Typical wedding, a yawner," Hugh offered. "The most noteworthy part was the best man putting one too many away before he gave the toast. I'm going to check my email and see if Steve made a video." My father, ever the romantic.

Corinne already had her minivan packed. She left, none the wiser. I had carefully returned her supplies back to her trunk the instant I got a chance. Thanks to Theo, nothing was harmed. For the first time in my life, I was convinced Corinne had no psychic ability.

Claire noticed the bump on my head as soon as we got back in the house, despite my attempts to hide it with my hair.

"How did you get that?" she asked with concern.

"Bumped my head on one of the cupboard doors," I lied. It was a good lie, because I was always leaving the cupboards open when I unloaded the dishwasher.

"You have got to stop doing that," she said, pushing my hair back. "You really got yourself. Ouch." I had tried putting a bandage over it, but the cut was in a terrible spot due to my hair. It looked like the skin split open. I hoped it wouldn't scar too much.

I wore long sleeves, since it was harder to explain the scuffs on my arm. And the burnt mark I had found on my neck on examining it in the mirror.

Even though I hadn't been in contact with anything in the house, and no answers came to me for my trouble, calm settled over me. There was no way Jenna was there. Nothing could make me voluntarily go back to that creepy house, anyway. And whatever had been tormenting me before, now left me alone. At least for now.

Henry's father dropped him off at my house for our now-weekly tutoring session. Henry had gone to a doctor's appointment that day, and since he had been busy last week, too, we had catching up to do.

I'd never actually been introduced to Phillip Rhodes or talked to him. He remained the shadowy figure behind the wheel of his Lexus. Occasionally I would feel him looking at me through the tinted windows.

Though I was loathe to admit it, I treasured having Henry all to myself. Whenever I was around him, I felt a thousand things at once. My dull brain awoke from the slumber that captured it for months. It was often agony being in the same room with him without being able to touch him. But I didn't want to be away from him, either.

I answered the door and Henry stood there in a long sleeved shirt with his books held at his hip. He leaned with the palm of his hand against the siding.

"Hello, doll," he said, lifting his eyebrows at me like he often did. "You're mine now."

I felt giddy. He affected my brain like depression medication.

"Are you ready to learn?" he asked as I let him in.

"Ready as always," I said, and we went to the den, which had become our tutoring room.

"How are you doing?" he asked more cautiously after I had shut the door and we sat down. His cautious brown eyes went to the mark on my head.

"Why does everyone keep asking me that?" I asked, rubbing my temples. "I'm sick to death of saying I'm fine. My head is healing up, so is my arm, and I didn't have a seizure."

"I've never seen anyone have a seizure before," he admitted. "But that's what it looked like to me." He inspected my arm for himself. "Your cuts look better, though. You're lucky you didn't get tetanus."

We pulled out our books and followed the normal routine, wading knee-deep in numbers. He seemed surprised by how much better I was doing.

"You don't even need me anymore," he said.

"I need you," I said quickly, and then blushed at how I had blurted the words. He chuckled.

"Well, alright then. I'll stay."

We finished early and started chatting about the rest of school.

"I wish there was a way to make Ms. Fellows more interesting," Henry said, echoing my sentiments. "I almost fall asleep in her class every day."

I laughed, agreeing. "She almost makes me hate reading. And I thought that was near impossible. English is my favorite."

"I told you mine is physics, right?" he asked.

"I vaguely remember that," I said, nodding. "When you offered to start tutoring me. What do you like so much about it?"

"Everything is physics," he said simply. "Like gravity, the attraction of one body to another. Why we stay on earth instead of floating. Or between you and me, for example," he teased with one of his token smiles.

"Yes, gravity is what keeps us together," I said, rolling my eyes. "Or just my terrible skill at math."

"If you don't stop saying that, I'm going to stop helping you," he said, but I could tell he was only vaguely irritated. "You need to stop beating yourself up."

"I have my reasons," I said.

"Really?" he asked, curious. "What are those reasons? I'm always telling you my secrets, but I've yet to hear any of yours."

"I don't have any secrets," I said, knowing it wasn't true.

"Everyone has secrets, Ariel," he said. The sound of his voice saying my name thrilled me more than was logical; I wanted him to say it again.

"Maybe I'll tell you someday," I offered.

He checked his watch, and as if on a timer, we heard a car pull up outside.

"Time to go," he said, standing up.

"One of these days I have to find a way to repay you," I said, following him to the den doors. He stopped in front of me and turned around.

"Well," he started, rubbing the back of his head, "I know it's late notice but — what do you think about the dance coming up?"

"I think it's so stupid how into it everyone gets," I complained, not understanding where he was going with the question. "Two hundred dollars for a dress you're going to wear for one night? No thanks."

"Oh." His beautiful face fell. "Then I guess you wouldn't want to go with me then."

I nearly choked. I coughed and he patted my back, his face concerned.

"You're asking me to go with you?" I asked finally when I regained the ability to speak. He nodded.

"Sure," I said, the giddy feeling returning. "I'd love to." I had imagined this moment, complete with what we would be wearing and what his facial expressions would be, but I figured that jinxed me from ever having it come true.

"Even though you think it's silly?" he teased.

"Well, I'm returning the favor from you going with me to the haunted house," I offered. Inside I had the heart of a hummingbird, fluttering like crazy. We walked out of the den, me behind him, grateful that he didn't see how absolutely thrilled I was. I had to stop myself from doing a little dance.

It wasn't Henry's father who had arrived, but Claire, who had come home from work. She was waiting for us in the dining room. She had still not met Henry yet, and pestered me about it endlessly, as if I should have waited for her to be home to have him over just so she could.

"Hi, you must be Henry. I'm Claire," she said brightly, holding her hand out to shake. Her blonde hair was pulled into her usual work up-do, and she wore a pinstripe suit, looking as though she had just gotten ready instead of working for ten hours.

"Nice to meet you," he said. I think she was disappointed he didn't say she looked like my sister.

"My daughter and my husband have said nothing but great things about you," she beamed. I groaned internally. "You really have me impressed by how much her grades are improving."

"Well, Ariel did all the work herself," he said modestly. "I've just been sitting there."

"I'm sure that's not true," she said, smiling coyly. I could tell by the way she was looking at him that he had worked his charms on her.

"It's completely true," he said. "Your daughter is a very smart, capable girl. And I hope you don't mind, but I asked her to be my date this weekend for the Halloween dance."

I think I could have pushed Claire over with a piece of paper. The excitement that glimmered in her eyes made them sparkle. "That is just wonderful!" she said. "When did this happen?"

"Just a few minutes ago," I said, and she looked at me as if she had forgotten I was still in the room.

"Well, we have to make sure you get a great dress, and new dancing shoes..." she put her arms around me and led me to the living room as I glared at Henry. *I'm sorry* he mouthed with a grin.

I'm surprised Claire let Henry out of the house when his dad showed up. By the time we said goodbye, I had been asked about so many dance plans my head was spinning. I hoped it was a good idea to accept, after all.

The next day in Art, we were starting to move on to painting. Small easels with blank canvases sat on all the tables when we walked into the art room.

Theo looked excited. I didn't feel that way; I inflicted more damage with paint than I did with pencils. Being Theo's friend hadn't helped improve my skill any.

"How are your sketches coming along for the gallery?" I asked her as I zipped up my backpack.



"Pretty good," she said optimistically, laying out several paintbrushes like surgical tools. "I'll have a batch ready to show your dad by the end of November. I hate being a perfectionist. It takes me forever to finish anything."

Suddenly, the lights flickered. I looked up at the ceiling, pausing. Then the lights went completely out. Fear bubbled up inside my chest for a moment, until I realized everyone else saw it, too. Ms. Vore kept all her windows open, facing the field, but a few girls giggled at the semi-darkness. After a moment the lights blinked back on.

"McPherson needs to take care of that," Ms. Vore muttered as she was walking down the aisle with a tub of acrylic paints.

"Is there an electrical problem?" I asked.

Realizing she'd been heard, she grinned sheepishly. "They've just been having wiring issues with all the remodeling. They were flickering like crazy a few weeks ago during parent teacher conferences. I heard they're going to schedule some electricians soon."

I sat back in my chair, happy that for once there was a logical reason for the lights going out.

"Why won't you tell me who your date is?" I asked Theo, kicking a rock down the sidewalk. It was the Thursday before the dance, and we were walking into town to go dress shopping.

She stared straight ahead, her small face resolute. "You'll see him on Saturday," she said. "Why is it an issue?"

"That's precisely my question, why is it an issue?"

She grimaced and remained silent. "Can't we talk about something else?"

Thankfully, Claire couldn't get the afternoon off, so we were on our own. I could only imagine the ribbon-festooned monstrosity she would have unleashed upon me. The air had dipped much colder, wintery, the smell of bonfires seasoning the air. I was glad for the deep pockets of my coat as I jammed my frigid hands into them.

A cheery bell dinged as we entered the dress shop. The warmth inside was a relief. In the front window, skeletons instead of mannequins were decked out in red formalwear. Whether this was a comment on the fashion industry or just the usual Halloween Town fun, I didn't know.

There were racks of bridal gowns and bridesmaids dresses in a rainbow of colors, along with a bunch of different styles of formal dresses. The store smelled strongly of eucalyptus, jammed into tall white vases all around the room.

"Where do we start?" Theo asked, dismayed. Her brow puckered as she cracked her knuckles. I surveyed the dizzying array of choices. For once, I wish I had the fashion sense of my mother.

The eager saleslady descended on us, smelling fresh meat. Her unnaturally tinted hair was piled tightly on her head.

"Hello, ladies," she purred. "Looking for dresses for the school dance?"

"How did you guess?" Theo asked, taken aback not just by her words but by the spooky expression on the woman's heavily made-up face.

"My daughter goes to Hawthorne, too," she beamed. "Shawna Jameson."

"Oh, yeah," I said, nodding. I had never heard of the girl, but I wanted to be polite.

Charleen, according to her nametag, guided us over to a rack of dresses in darker tones of mauve and olive.

"These are brand new for the winter season," she said. One leopard print, claw-like fingernail trailed along the shiny, intimidating fabrics. She pulled out a pumpkin-colored two piece with a flourish and held up to Theo. The dress dwarfed her.

"Oh, wow," Theo said, the side of her face twitching. I was worried she would have a stroke. "That sure is a dress."

"Do you maybe have something more...traditional?" I asked in the politest way I could think of.

"Sure!" The woman crowed, and jammed the dress back in with its companions. "Follow me, ladies!"

She led us to rack of dresses that looked like they were leftover from my mother's prom, all poufy sleeves and bright neon colors. Theo was biting her lip raw, trying not to laugh. I felt the same way, although I really didn't know *what* I was looking for.

"I don't know if that's exactly what we had in mind, either," I said delicately, fiddling with the price tag on a purple dress with blue sleeves.

"You know what, let me take a look in the back," the woman said, not to be discouraged. She disappeared behind a set of thick green curtains.

"This is some overpriced polyester," I said, balking at several of the price tags.

"Yeah, we need cheap polyester, the way it's meant to be," Theo said. "Everything in here is ugly. Let's scoot before she locks the door and makes us play dress-up."

We escaped out of the store before Charleen could come back out.

"What now?" Theo asked breathlessly as we were chugging away on the pavement.

"We could try the thrift store," I suggested. My breath was coming out in little puffs. I wondered how long snow would hold off this year. "Not glamorous, but they might have something. If you dig hard enough you can usually find some kind of treasure."

It was a short walk down to the thrift store. I hadn't been in a long time. Housed in a large building that used to be a warehouse, the store was crammed with ceramics, dishes, toys and clothes. As usual, the building was full of shoppers picking through the goods. Theo followed me over to the section with discarded dresses and costumes.

"Looks like they were cleaning out the theater department," I observed. A decent amount of costumes hung on the rows. We shifted the hangers and looked through the offerings. A plaid shirt and fringed pants complete with a cowboy hat, a Native American dress, something that looked like a deconstructed spacesuit.

"Not seeing anything yet," Theo reported. We moved on to the racks of formal clothes, although most of them looked like something a hip grandma would wear.

"I like this..." Theo pulled out a long dress covered in delicate blue and green sequins.

"That's beautiful, Theo, but it's huge," I said, looking it over.

"Mom has a sewing machine," she said hopefully. "I've made a few skirts and tops before; this wouldn't be too difficult to turn into something wearable."

I began to get discouraged as we continued to paw through the crowded racks. I wondered if I would find any of the things we had tossed out of our storage room. From the looks of it, half of Hell had the same idea about cleaning out their old junk.

I knew I was being picky, but since I was going with Henry, I wanted to look my best. I was about to give up and go home begging to Claire, when I saw a swatch of shimmery silver-white fabric. I pulled out an elegant dress with a halter top. The cascading fabric looked magical. There were no tags, and it appeared handmade. It was exactly what I wanted, even though I hadn't known what to look for.

"Wow, that is really beautiful," Theo said. "Try it on."

I went into the little fitting room in the back, pulling the dress over my head. It fit perfectly from what I could see in the mirror, curving gently around my hips and even giving me the appearance of something in the chest. I walked out and showed Theo, whose face lit up.

"It's a great contrast with your hair," she gushed. "You have to buy it."

"I don't know about the back, though," I said, turning around and putting my long hair over my shoulder. There was a deep v plunge that stopped midway down. It felt a little odd having my whole back exposed.

"Well, you can make it like a costume, so how about some wings?" Theo suggested. "I'm sure you could find some cheap at the costume shop."

That settled it, and we took our finds up to the checkout counter. As we paid for them, I knew Saturday was going to be a very interesting night.

## Chapter 16

Theo and I sat in our dresses on my living room couch. I had just been through two hours of makeup application and hair styling. My scalp itched and I felt like I had pancake batter smeared on my face. And now I couldn't stop twiddling my thumbs. I shifted, the feathery white angel wings I was wearing cutting into my back.

Theo had done major reconstructive surgery to her dress in just two days, shortening the front and turning the excess into a long train in the back like a mermaid tail. The result was stunning. She'd found an unusual mix of chunky blue and green glitter from the craft store that now not only framed her eyes, but decorated her cheeks.

"I really don't want to wear my glasses," she complained, taking them off and squinting at the TV, "but I'm completely blind without them."

"They look fine," I assured her. "You look really pretty."

"I feel kind of exposed," she admitted, putting up the front of her dress.

Claire came out of her office, where she had been clearing old pictures off of her camera. She held the camera with both hands, her face excited. But it fell when she saw us, the corners of her mouth dipping down.

"Why are you two sitting?" she squealed. "You'll wrinkle your dresses!"

Theo and I glanced at each other, both releasing sighs at the same time. I stood up, careful to make sure my wings weren't snagging on the couch pillows. Theo followed. Claire started snapping photos, barely giving us a chance to pose. I imagine Theo and I were both grimacing in all of them.

My mother had offered about twenty times to drive us, but apparently Theo's date was older and had a car. This mystery man was really piquing my interest.

"You're going to run out of space before the guys even get here, Claire," I observed dryly. "Don't you want some couples shots?" She lowered the camera and frowned at it.

The doorbell rang, and I hustled over to beat my mother.

Henry stood on the porch, dressed in a knight's costume made of white and gold fabric. His head was uncovered, dark hair in its usual carefree style that fell however it wanted to. The costume was both a little goofy and attractive. Much like the person wearing it. When he saw me, his eyes lit up and his smile was soft and private.

"Wow," he breathed, eyes sweeping up my body.

"Hi," I said shyly, pulling at one side of the halter. I felt the wings wiggle behind me.

"You look amazing," he said quietly. The way he held himself now, hands pressed to his sides, looked like he was containing the urge to reach out and touch me.

"Move out the way bro, I gotta see my date," a familiar voice said behind him. Alex slapped Henry on the back and walked inside. Henry winced.

I turned to Theo, eyes wide, shaking my head. *Are you kidding me?* I mouthed.

She shrugged, her face contorted. Alex's tuxedo was the color of grape juice, but he otherwise had no costume elements. He was his own costume.

Claire positioned all four of us over by the closed doors to the den and made us pose for pictures until I finally whisked our little group out of the door and down the walk.

"We're going to be late," I reasoned as we escaped.

"Have fun!" she called, waving from the doorway. If she could she would have hopped in the car with us.

Inside Alex's Jeep, we were all like awkward kids. None of us looked at each other; we found endlessly fascinating sights out of the window. No one brought up our last misadventure; it was as if we silently agreed to stop talking about it. Alex managed to stay on the road most of the time, and had turned off the heavy metal that normally blasted from his cheap subwoofers. I still couldn't believe that Theo would want to go with him. I wondered who asked who, as my eyes darting back and forth between them.

I glanced out of the side window. A little girl stood by herself on the sidewalk. She wore a blue raincoat, even though the evening sky was clear. I had never seen someone look so utterly abandoned.

The Jeep whizzed by her. I craned my neck back.

"Did anyone see that little girl?" I asked.

"What little girl?" asked Henry from his seat beside me. But I couldn't see her anymore. Maybe her parents had been nearby, after all, and had only just picked her up.

Although the school didn't have any decorations on the outside, it looked different when we arrived. More mysterious, the tall exterior standing

resolutely against the night. We got out of the car, and Henry held out his arm.

"My lady," he said, grinning his cheesy grin.

I smirked and took his arm. I finally noticed the stone fountain a few yards from the steps, since a spotlight was thrown on it for the night.

Inside, a purple fabric roll was duct taped to the floor to resemble a rug. It led, presumably, to the gym. In the entrance hall, hundreds of paper bats hung from the ceiling. Alex shrieked as they brushed the top of his head, batting them away.

"What have I gotten myself into?" I heard Theo mutter as we continued towards the gym. She was pulling at the fingerless blue lace gloves on her hands. I wondered the same thing myself. The two of them together was the strangest combination I'd ever seen, especially considering he was almost a foot taller than her.

"The dance committee went all out," Henry said, giving me a side grin. He was so handsome I couldn't help but smile, remembering how I couldn't when we first met. I couldn't believe that I was actually there with him. It seemed like some untouchable fantasy that had amazingly come true.

Volunteers were offering face and body painting out in the hall, and one girl had a full dozen roses across her back, starting to slowly melt in the warmth coming from the gymnasium.

Inside the gym, everyone was so dressed up they were almost unrecognizable. The regular lights were turned down, and tons of twinkle lights were strung up on the walls. Most people were wearing formal wear with masks or horns or tails, but a few people had full on costumes. The teachers especially had gotten into the festive mood. Mr. Vanderlip was dressed as a pilgrim complete with buckled hat, which for some reason made me giggle.

Madison and Lainey were parked by the refreshment table. Both wore low cut dresses — Lainey had devil horns, and was wearing a two piece red dress that looked like it could easily be from the dress shop Theo and I escaped from. A good four inches of her tan stomach were on display. Madison had at least used some creativity. The fabric of her modest dress looked fluffy, and she had lamb ears and white tights.

Lainey's date appeared to be Ambrose Slaughter, who swayed and looked a bit tipsy as he took a drink from a presumably tainted glass of punch.

Lainey didn't seem too thrilled. She and Madison were arguing, Lainey moving animatedly and waving her hands.

"You look ridiculous," Lainey yelled angrily, her high-pitched voice carrying over the floor. I looked away from the car wreck they were quickly becoming.

Mr. Warwick sidled up to us, a grin plastered on his face. A bulky trenchcoat draped over his lanky frame, the collar flipped up around his neck.

"Hey, Wick," Alex said. "What's your costume supposed to be?"

"I'm a turncoat," he said, showing the yellow lining of the coat which looked totally different. Alex just looked confused.

"Is that one of those guys that sells counterfeit watches in the city?" he asked.

Warwick looked at him with his head cocked to one side. He waved at us as he went off to talk to someone else.

"Have fun, you guys," he said.

"Excuse me," a woman next to us said to a teacher I didn't recognize. The teacher was dressed up as a box of French fries, "Have you seen Mr. McPherson?"

The French fry lady shook her head. It gave me pause for a second, but I brushed it off, not wanting to think about our strange Principal.

"Alright, let's boogie," Alex said, grasping Theo's hand. They went off to dance.

"I hope she'll be alright with him," I said to Henry over the music.

"She'll be fine," Henry assured me. We were huddled close so we could hear each other. "He's not that bad of a guy when you get to know him. He's not that great either, but not the slimeball he may appear to be."

I opened my mouth to protest that declaration, but he silenced my argument by taking my hand and leading me to an empty space on the floor where we started dancing.

I felt a bit awkward at first, but I got caught up in the spirit of everyone having such a good time, and the strobe lights flickering to the bass beat.

Alex passes by with Theo, spinning her around, and they tangoed off, her cheek to his chest.

Henry and I danced close, not letting go of each other's hands. We laughed, pressing our foreheads together and looking into each other's eyes.



It dissolves into a fit of giggles on both sides. Song after song passed, the night stretching out endlessly.

I was getting tired and I could feel sweat rolling down my back, my wings crooked, but I didn't care. I felt free. I couldn't get enough of Henry so close to me, and I didn't take my eyes off of his handsome face now that I had an excuse.

The night began to wind down, a few people taking off or sitting down. A slow song started up. I looked around at all the other couples dancing as they started to sway slowly. Henry took both of my arms by the wrists and pulled them up around his neck, never looking away from my eyes. He slipped his hands down and slid them around my waist below my wings.

I gulped. The friendly mood between us had taken on a different tone entirely.

We pulled closer, so that our bodies were pressed together. Henry smelled so good and felt so warm, and fit so well against me that my head swam. I couldn't get close enough to him. I wanted him everywhere.

His face nuzzled into my neck. I felt him begin to kiss my shoulder, sending little electrical shots through my body.

Pulling away from me, he held my gaze with his own. So many times I had thought about this moment in the last few weeks. Our faces moved towards each other, and then our lips touched.

One half of the gym lights flickered on, blinding me. For a moment, I just assumed another electrical issue, which had come at exactly the wrong time, as usual. I was prepared to shrug it off, nearly frenetic to kiss Henry again. Now that I'd had a little bit of him, it wasn't enough. I had to have more. Then I heard a woman arguing with others in a hysterical voice.

"Don't tell me to calm down!" she shrieked. "I am not calming down! My daughter is missing!"

As my eyes adjusted, I saw it was one of the chaperones. With a chill, I realized she was the one who had been asking about McPherson. I wondered if that meant he was involved.

"I'm not going to calm down!" The woman repeated. "There was *blood* on the floor of the ladies' room."

A few people gasped, frightened. The floor swiftly cleared off.

"I guess the dance is over," Alex said, sidling up to us with his arm around Theo. For once she didn't seem to mind.

Although some people began to file out of the gym, our group went over to where the woman was talking. I watched as a lone purple balloon deflated and fell gracefully to the table behind her.

"What's going on?" I asked. The woman turned to me, her face blotchy with conflicting emotions.

"I brought my ten year old, Susan, with me," she explained. "And she was right beside me the whole time. Then suddenly, she was gone, and I can't find her. And when I looked in the girl's bathroom, there was blood all over the floor. And they won't call the police!" she jabbed her thumb accusingly at the group of harried-looking teachers next to her. Their costumes made them look ridiculous now.

"There's a protocol we have to follow," one of the teachers started, but Henry cut her off.

"Let's look for her," Henry said decisively. "She's got to be somewhere." Everyone else began to split up into groups to search the school. The four of us, with a few adults, headed off down past the main hall, lead by the woman who told us her name was Lynn. She came to the girl's bathroom near the Science hall and pushed open the door.

Theo and I peered inside. Blood was smeared all over the tile floor, like someone had wiped it around with their hands.

"This is bad," I whispered to Theo. Her face was very pale, and she nodded silently.

"See what I mean?" Lynn said. "You see."

"I think you should definitely call the police," Henry told her. "Don't worry about what the teachers are saying."

The woman nodded decisively, and walked off, cell phone in her shaking hand. The rest of us, without a word, continued down the hall to keep looking.

"Susan!" we called, her name echoing off the walls, almost as if to answer us. In the night the school looked strange, and I felt like we shouldn't be there.

We stopped in the hallway after a few minutes. Alex leaned against the wall. He looked pale against the purple of his suit.

"What's taking the cops so long?" he asking no one in particular, taking off his shoe and rubbing his foot. Henry started popping quarters in the

vending machine to get drinks. He handed each of us a Coke and I thanked him. It felt like we had been in the school for days.

*Ariel...*

Someone was calling my name again. Putting the pop down on a nearby drinking fountain, I left the others where they were standing and discussing what to do next, and turned the corner. A sharp pain stabbed my temple, as if something was forcing its way through. Electricity danced its familiar pattern on the surface of my skin.

The little girl in the blue raincoat was standing in front of me, about two yards away. I could feel reality trying to fall away, my body starting to float, and in my dissociation I clung to myself as hard as I could.

The little girl turned and walked silently away. I remembered where I'd seen her — she was the little girl that went missing a month ago. The knowledge that her name was Alyssa entered my mind, and I pictured Claire watching the news the night we had gone out to dinner. I could faintly see the hallway through Alyssa's raincoat. The lights dimmed, everything taking on a bluish hue, like we were underwater.

I knew she was dead. But for some reason, I wasn't frightened anymore. Tranquility settled over me. Calm in knowing that what was happening was real.

I walked towards her slowly, and called her name. She turned around. Her eyes were completely black, like those of an insect.

"Everyone's been looking for you," I said. She stared almost through me. I couldn't really tell if she knew I was there or not, as if we were in two different but very close parallel worlds, or I was looking at her through broken glass.

"What happened to you?" I asked.

As if in answer, Alyssa's small hands went to the hood of her coat, and pulled it down. I stifled the gag in my throat. Her neck was cleanly sliced from side to side. Even though there was no blood, it was grotesque.

And then she was gone, and the blue of the walls melted into the regular cream that I saw every day.

"Ariel, what are you doing?" Theo called.

I turned around, and saw my three friends waiting for me.

"Nothing," I called. "I'm coming back."

I jogged back to them. I didn't tell them about seeing the girl. I didn't have any urge to; it was my own personal gift.

We walked to the front of the building, where the police were questioning the now-sobbing Lynn. Tears flowed freely down her cheeks now, and she was having tremendous difficulty speaking.

When I was a little girl, burglars broke in to the house across the street. The police came to the neighborhood, and talked to Hugh about it, asking him if he had seen anything. Jenna and I stood behind him the whole time, so excited that a real life drama was taking place in front of our eyes.

It was less exciting when they grilled me after Jenna left. Why had I let her go? Did I know if she was involved in drugs? A hundred questions were aimed towards me, and I couldn't answer them fast enough.

As we departed Hawthorne, treading over the torn purple carpet and fallen paper bats on the floor, listening to the woman sobbing and being taken off by a family friend without her daughter, it was all I could think about.

## Chapter 17

School felt like a crime scene. After my parents received word of Susan's disappearance, I wasn't allowed to walk to school anymore. I had a feeling that the time was coming, but getting rid of the one big freedom I treasured was still a blow.

The fact that I saw a ghost didn't surprise me as much as perhaps it should have. Instead, I felt more relief than anything. Even though it was entirely subjective, I felt like it proved that I wasn't crazy, especially after hearing about Eleanor from Corinne. I had inherited mommy's, well, grandma's little gift, after it skipped a generation. But I didn't know what to do now. I kept expecting her to pop up again, but I didn't see anything unusual, for a change. But I knew with total certainty that what I had seen was real.

Hugh dropped me off Monday morning. I had forgotten to set my alarm, and the bell was due to ring in a few minutes. I wasn't late yet but I was close.

I walked up the stone steps and opened the door to the vestibule, rubbing sleep from my eyes. When I took my hand away, I gasped.

Jenna laughing. In front of me. And next to her was Alyssa.

Their faces were printed on black and white flyers that someone had taped to the entrance doors, and Susan's face joined them. The word MISSING was typed in thick font below each photo. Shaken, I opened the door and walked inside.

Lainey and Madison sat at a metal card table, like they were at a bingo meet, in the front hall. Stacks of neat flyers were piled in front of them. Their own missing girl committee. My stomach did a somersault.

I walked over to the wall and ripped down one of the Alyssa's flyers. I couldn't bear to do it with one of Jenna's. I went up and shook the piece of paper in Lainey's face. She leaned back in her seat, her chin doubling.

"What are you doing?" I barked.

"What does it look like?" she asked, a condescending smile on her bow-shaped lips. "I assume your eyes still work. We're *helping*."

"If I had any inkling that you had an ounce of good intentions, I would thank you," I said. "But this is nothing more than a ploy to get more attention to yourself. You don't need it!"

"I'm just a concerned citizen, Ariel," she said, her chocolate chip eyes round and innocent. "Even if Jenna was a waste."

I had never had such a massive urge to punch someone, especially when she said, "I haven't seen you do much for her, and trying to get into Henry's pants doesn't count."

I crumpled the flyer and tossed it in Lainey's face. It bounced off her powdered forehead. Madison scoffed and leaned back in her own seat, glaring at me as I stomped away.

Despite the events at the dance, school kept going like nothing had happened. A lot of people were talking about it, and the dance in general, but the teachers seemed to stay away from the topic, even with the gaudy flyers in every hallway. I wondered if they had a meeting on how to deal with us. For damage control, counselors wandered into first period, offering "someone to talk to" in case we needed it.

In gym class, we were starting tennis. It was always the one sport that I kind of enjoyed. Claire and I used to drive up to the court at the middle school during the summer and play until the sun went down, drinking Kool-Aid mixed in water bottles. I had even taken a few lessons.

Theo and I paired up, grabbing rackets out of the metal bin.

"Why Alex?" I finally got the chance to inquire, still curious about how that pairing had been established.

"I honestly have no idea," she said, shrugging. "He's just really into me. It's flattering. And he's not as bad as he seems. After I left your house on Saturday, we talked online for an hour. He has a sweet side; it's just buried deep, deep below the douchey act and terrible jokes."

We played against the other pairings in class. It felt nice to get my body moving, almost like I was taking out my stress on every swing, successful or not. I hoped the hour would run out before we had to play Lainey.

But of course, it didn't, and we were pitted against the torture twins. We made the slow march to their net. They were stretching their shoulders out, using their rackets for resistance. Lainey's eyes held a curious fixation as she looked at me. I wondered what insults were brewing in her tiny mind.

Theo served first, tossing the ball too high in the air in her fervor. She swung clumsily and grazed the ball with the edge of her racket. Her second

try whizzed right into our side of the net. This had been her experience the whole time, but this was the only match where it really counted.

Lainey and Madison tittered with laughter. I looked at Theo sympathetically. Her face was almost as red as her hair.

"You serve first, Maddie," Lainey commanded.

Madison tossed the ball up daintily and swung her racket to meet it. Theo and I scrambled to the side of the court and ended up rebounding it.

Despite the bad start, we held our own for the duration. This seemed to make Lainey angry. Not only when I returned her shots, but when she missed mine. Her eyebrows puckered, and her hair was unraveling from the tight, slick ponytail at the top of her head.

I had never seen Lainey sweat, but little beads broke out across her tanned forehead. Her mascara was running underneath her eyes, making her look worn out.

The score had been tied the last few minutes. Every time the ball whizzed over the net I prayed we could hit it back and win.

Lainey got ready to serve. Her gaze locked right on mine. Hate made her eyes hard. She tossed the yellow ball up in the air and slammed it with all her strength, nailing me directly in the nose. I felt the sickening crack resound in my skull. My body fell backwards in slow motion. I expected to hit the hard parquet wood floor, but instead I fell through, the jolt I expected never coming.

I tumbled.

And then I stopped, and everything was black and silent.

I felt warmth on my cheeks, and I could smell the ocean. I opened my eyes and saw blue sky above me.

I could feel my limbs resting on a bed of sand. On a beach. Before I had much time to contemplate this, Jenna leaned over me. The necklace with her name on it dangled from around her neck. The sun caught the tiny rhinestones and they twinkled.

And then the sky was dark, raining. Large droplets splotched my skin. I felt paralyzed, unable to move much. The smell changed to something briny and complicated.

Jenna was still leaning over me, although now the necklace was missing. Her face was as blank as it had been the first time I saw her, like she was

inspecting an alien. Curly hair like brambles fell around her face. Seeing her gave me no solace. Only fear.

I noticed with a chill that her eyes were entirely black. No longer sky blue, it was as if the pupils had taken over everything else. Who else had I seen with black eyes...with I start I realized it was the little dead girl. That meant...

My vision flickered again, and we were on the beach. I felt myself able to sit up, and began to do so. But as I moved the vision again wavered. We were on the shore of a lake, the muddy bank beneath me. My fingers sank into the muck. The green water boiled.

Again to the beach. Sunlight glittered off of the lazily moving waves.

*You've never been to the beach, Jenna.* I thought. *You always wanted to go but your parents never had the time...*

I tried to speak.

But I was tumbling again. The sun became the yellow orb of the tennis ball, whirling straight for me.

White hot pain split my face in two. The blackness swept up and pulled me under. A roar of noise filled my ears like water. It hurt.

Hawthorne Gymnasium crashed back to reality. I didn't remember opening my eyes; they were just open. My entire head and face hurt, radiating back to my ears. My eyelids were puffy, so I could only see through little slits.

I found my limbs again and brought my hand to the wetness on my upper lip. Blood coated my fingers. My mouth was full of the rusty metallic taste, choking me. Not to mention I had the worst migraine ever, even worse than my unfortunate head injury at the orphanage.

I sat up. My t-shirt was dyed with blood, the entire front so red it looked fake. I silently thanked the universe for my strong stomach. Seeing that much blood come from my own body terrified me. For a split second I wondered if I was going to die, before I pulled myself together. No one could die from a tennis ball.

The gym was chaos. Kids were shouting, screaming. Everyone had stopped playing and had formed a circle around me. A forest of faces, some scared, some flushed with excitement like this was the best entertainment they'd had in weeks. The attention I hadn't wanted was all on me. I caught a



few phones filming me and I cringed, not wanting to see this particular video pop up online and knowing there was no way to prevent it.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Theo's voice rang out clearly, like a very pissed off bell.

"It was an accident!" Lainey replied, the ever-present self assured quality in her voice gone.

I searched the crowd for them, and found them by the red patch of Theo's hair. The people around them were backing away. Theo stood with her fists clenched, rising on her toes as if to unconsciously appear taller. Lainey held her ground, but she looked like she was shaking.

I heard Coach Fletcher's voice in the back of the crowd.

"Get out of my way!" she shouted.

I tried to stand, but I was still disoriented, not only from the pain and the shock but from the vision of my absent friend that I had just been wrenched from. Reality didn't feel real or right. It felt more like watching a badly filmed movie.

Theo stepped up so that she was now nose to nose with Lainey. "You can't get away with this," she said, putting both small hands on Lainey's shoulders and pushing her.

Lainey stumbled a fraction of an inch. A switch flicked on inside her.

"Get your grimy hands off of me!" she squealed. She pushed back with her palms flat, sending Theo staggering into some onlookers. My trauma was all but forgotten, and they were the new sideshow. The paparazzi of camera phones turned their way.

Lainey hauled her fist back in a decidedly unladylike gesture to punch Theo. Before I could yell, Coach Fletcher appeared, with an unfamiliar woman in a white uniform at her side. She caught Lainey's punching arm by the dainty wrist.

"Enough!" she growled. "Office. Both of you. Now!"

"But..." Lainey spluttered, her face flushed.

"Not fair!" Theo said.

"Go. Now!" Coach repeated, pointing to the open gym doors. The fact that everybody had lost the ability to use complete sentences tickled me. Maybe due to massive blood loss. I snorted a laugh and immediately regretted it as blood sprayed out of my nose.

Lainey screamed in frustration, clenching her fists so hard her manicured nails must have cut her palms. She stormed off, messy ponytail swishing behind her. Madison followed, meekly, even though I hadn't seen her involved in anything.

"You too," Coach said to Theo.

"But she's my friend," Theo objected.

"I'll tend to her." Her statement was final.

Theo looked at me, frowning. She looked caught between crying and rage. I attempted a little wave and fell back on my elbows. For a moment she looked as though she would shirk Coach's orders. Then she was gone, too.

A moment later Coach and the other woman kneeled down next to me. "How are you feeling?" I was surprised by how kind Coach sounded. People change when you're wounded. She held up starched white towels to my still-bleeding nose.

"Lightheaded," I said, my voice crackling.

"I brought the school nurse," she said, and it almost sounded like an apology.

"Lie down," the nurse said, rolling up a towel and placing it on the floor. She guided me back down, putting my head on it. She was pretty and young-looking, with coffee colored skin and kind eyes. Sparkly green baubles dangled in her ears. "You look like you were in a prize fight," she said, smirking at me.

"The nose is bad enough, but she hit the back of her head pretty hard when she went down," Coach said to her as if I wasn't there. She seemed scared. The nurse nodded, her face professionally emotionless. She pulled out a stethoscope and held the metal end to my chest.

"What about us?" A boy in basketball shorts whined. Now that the entertainment was gone, the masses were getting restless.

"You're dismissed, go change," Coach said distractedly, as she cracked an ice pack and placed it gingerly on my nose. The gym emptied out quickly, everyone chatting loudly. In that moment, I would have given anything to know what they were saying. The nurse continued checking my vitals.

"I'm Nurse Callie, by the way," she said. "I'm going to take you to the office. It's really important that you see a doctor, okay? So either we call

your parents, or we call an ambulance if they're working and can't come pick you up."

"Call Hugh...my dad, he can come. He'll...be able..." The lightheadedness was getting worse even on the floor, and the gym was twirling gently like a ferris wheel.

"Okay. Does the office have his number?" She asked, maintaining eye contact with me. I nodded. She checked my pupils with her pen flashlight.

"Can you stand?" she asked finally.

"I don't know, but I can try."

They each took hold of one of my arms, and I pushed my body up. I was unsteady on my feet, but I figured I could make it out to the office. It wasn't very far from the gym through the commons.

"Lean on me, we can make it," Nurse Callie said resolutely.

"Can I get a new shirt? This one is gross," I said. I didn't even want to know what my face looked like. From the feel of it, Quasimodo would be about right.

Nurse Callie chuckled. "A little blood goes a long way. I'm sure we have a few extras lying around. Never know when someone is going to throw up."

I reflexively wrinkled my nose at the image, and winced at the sharp pain that followed.

"You okay?" she asked. We were finally out of the gym. We passed by the trophy case that took up half of the opposite wall.

"Can we just rest here for a moment?" I asked hoarsely. The ferris wheel was turned up to high and nausea was overtaking me. Although I hadn't had lunch, I didn't want to revisit breakfast.

"Of course," she said, helping me lean up against the trophy case.

"McPherson would hate me even touching this...with my unworthy fingers..." I said, shutting my eyes and laughing a little.

To my surprise, I heard Nurse Callie laugh back. "What he doesn't know won't hurt him."

After a moment we began again, me still leaning on her for support. We went out into the commons, where everyone who had been dismissed was sitting around, enjoying their free time. I groaned. Several of them openly gaped at me.

"Just ignore them," Nurse Callie whispered in my ear. I tried to focus on my steps on the floor. I had never realized just how huge the commons was. We finally navigated out, and down the long, empty hall to the front of the school. When we arrived at the office, the bell rang for the end of class.

"Good timing," Callie said.

She held the door to the office open and ushered me in. The door shut with a shushing sound, shutting us off. The secretary behind the desk gasped beneath her blonde, poodle-permed hairdo, nearly dropping the phone in her hand.

"What happened to you?" she asked. "Were you in a fight?"

"Sports accident," Callie said, picking up a clipboard off of the counter and scribbling on it. "Got it covered."

She led me back down the hall and into a little closet of a room with a cot. Fluffy white clouds were sponged on the baby blue walls. My nausea rolled into my throat again. The starched cot sagged as I sat down.

"Just lie down here and I'll call your dad, okay?" She said with her smile. I wondered how old she was; she couldn't have been more than twenty-five. "And I'll get you some less gruesome clothing."

She returned a second later with an oversized t-shirt with Hawthorne's mascot on it, the Hawthorne Hellcat. It had always looked like a tiger with horns pasted on the head to me.

"Thank you," I said, realizing I hadn't before. She just nodded and shut the door for my privacy.

I peeled off the bloody t-shirt and my bra, for once thankful I didn't really need it. Those went into the biohazard bag Callie had provided and into the trash.

I grabbed some paper towels from the dispenser on the wall and wet them in the little sink that stood in the corner. For the first time I glimpsed myself in the mirror. As I wiped blood off of my chest, I examined my face. Blood choked my nostrils and ran down to my chin. The bridge of my nose and my cheeks were puffy and purple. All and all it wasn't as bad as I expected beneath the gruesomeness, but I still looked like crap. I had no idea how someone could cause that much damage with a tennis ball, and the hatred that had to fuel that made me shudder.

Now that I no longer looked like a murder victim, I sat down on the cot, leaning my head back against the wall. My legs wouldn't stop jiggling.

Hugh would be so worried, not to mention Claire...I hoped he wouldn't tell her until she got out of work, knowing that was futile.

I looked around the room for distraction. Flyers addressing good health habits filled a plastic rack on the wall. The whole room smelled of illness, with hints of cough syrup and vapor rub.

I sat up when I recognized Theo's voice. It was coming from out in the hallway.

I stood up on still-weak legs and crept over to the door. Voices filtered through, one of them Theo's and the other Lainey's. I opened the door carefully to avoid making noise.

"I already told you a million times, it was an accident," Lainey said. In the minutes since she had left the gym she must have composed herself, because her voice was as steady as ever.

They were sitting a few doors down the hallway in McPherson's office. The door was cracked. I couldn't see them but I could hear them clearly.

"You aimed for her face, Lainey," Theo said. I imagined her pushing up her glasses. I had never heard her so mad, despite the few demonstrations of her anger streak I had witnessed.

"What motive would she have to hurt Ms. Donovan?" McPherson interjected, his tone maddeningly disinterested. For a split second, I remembered the strange odor in his shed, the impersonal way his house was decorated.

"Are you kidding me?" Theo asked. "Do you pay any attention?"

"I am your principal, Ms. Weaver, I would care for you to show me some respect." he said coldly.

"Why, when you don't respect any of us whose parents aren't rich?" Theo said, baiting him.

*C'mon, Theo, don't get in trouble,* I silently begged. What I wouldn't give for telepathy.

And I knew why Lainey had attacked me. Henry. It was because I went to the dance with Henry, who she had branded on day one as hers. Whether he agreed with that or not. There was every possibility she had started that rumor about them dating, as well.

"That's enough," McPherson growled.

"Yeah, I mean, I was hoping that Ariel and I could be friends," Lainey purred. "But it's like they won't accept me into their little club." Now she was just pushing buttons.

"Don't exaggerate," McPherson said to her. "We need to talk about a fair punishment."

"Punishment?" Lainey sputtered.

"You were fighting in class. We have a no tolerance policy for fighting. I think that three lunch detentions, for both of you, is an extremely fair and mild discipline..."

"What?" Theo asked. "What about punishing her for the fact that she broke my friend's face?"

In my lightheadedness that made me giggle again. I noticed warm wetness seeping out of my nose. More bleeding. I rushed over and grabbed some paper towels. I walked too fast and swayed on my feet, so I had to sit on the cot. Unfortunately I missed the last few minutes of the discipline meeting, and Theo and Lainey were in the hall.

They must have stopped right outside the sick bay door.

"How would you like it if Ariel's family sued the crap out of you?" Theo asked bitterly.

"I'd like to see them try," Lainey snorted, in the same tone of voice that she probably used to talk about the weather. "My father's lawyer has never lost a case, and we'd bankrupt her family with legal fees before it was over. But give her my condolences for her nose, anyway. My uncle's a plastic surgeon; I should give her his card."

"What is wrong with you? Are you even human?" Theo asked incredulously, speaking my feelings out loud.

Lainey dropped her voice low. "Maybe she shouldn't have gone after what was mine."

I heard hear footsteps going down the hall. When I was sure she was gone, I cracked the door open. Theo was still standing in the hall, frozen, the detention slip in her hand.

"Well, didn't that just suck?" I said. Theo turned unfocused eyes to me. Without a word she came over and hugged me tightly. She pulled back and studied my face, wincing. Okay, maybe it was a little bad.

Pink glitter was smudged all over her cheeks and forehead, and her eyes were bright red from crying.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"For what?" I asked.

"That all of this happened."

"Uh, it's not your fault," I said, leaning against the door.

"Are you okay? It looks terrible." She tilted her head to inspect my wound from a different angle.

"Well, it hurts, yeah."

"It made a really nasty sound when you hit the floor," she said, shaking her head. "That was really twisted."

"That's Lainey for you."

"He didn't even punish her for hitting you," Theo said, jerking her thumb in the direction of McPherson's office. "He said it was an unfortunate accident. He just gave us detention for fighting."

"I heard," I sighed. "We just can't win."

"Because everyone puts up with it," Theo reasoned. Her anger was coming back. I could tell she had quite the temper buried beneath the colorful cuteness.

"Can I remind you not to piss Lainey off?" I said gently. "Remember, more money, more connections, way more power than we lowly worker ants?"

She pounded her fist against the wall. "That's the same crap she pulled when she sprained my ankle."

"What?" I asked, frowning.

"She knocked me down at the mall, and my ankle got twisted." Her eyes flickered to one of the many pictures of missing girls that were in the hallway. "And I wasn't going to say this, but...I'm pretty sure that she was there, too. I recognized her when the posters went up."

I glanced at the picture. She was talking about Jenna.

"But that was back in May, so I didn't think it was important," she continued.

A bell rang, the perfect excuse for her to bolt.

"I've got to go," Theo said, scampering away before I had a chance to digest what she was saying.

"Theo?" I called, but she just ignored me.

## Chapter 18

"Your dad is here," Nurse Callie said, appearing behind me from the door to the Nurse's station. "You were supposed to be lying down."

"I thought that I was going to throw up," I lied. "Walking around helped."

I followed her to the front office. Hugh was standing in his tweed coat, looking uncomfortable and worried. There were circles under his eyes. When he saw me, both relief and unanswered questions flickered on his face.

"What happened?" he asked, hugging me and avoiding my nose. He was talking to Callie. She opened her mouth to speak, but McPherson breezed in from the hallway.

"Just a little accident during gym class," he said, ugly smile appearing beneath his bushy moustache.

"What kind of accident, Edgar?" Hugh said coldly. I had no idea that was McPherson's first name, and it took me a second to connect the two.

"Another student hit her with a tennis ball," Callie supplied.

McPherson gave her a look that said *shut up*.

"The situation has been dealt with. I assure you that everyone here feels terrible about it."

"The situation has not been dealt with," Hugh said, getting angry. His arm was still around my shoulder. "My child was just injured on your property. I want answers. Who is responsible?"

"The identity of the student isn't important..." McPherson started.

"Lainey Ford," I mumbled. McPherson turned, looking at me like I was a bug to squish.

"And why not?" Hugh said, laughing angrily. "How much money have the Fords dumped into this pet project of the Thornhill Society? Of course they would have you comfortably stashed in their back pocket."

"Thornhill has nothing to do with this!" McPherson said, raising his voice in anger. I just wanted to lie down. This was too much. The walls started to undulate, the counter swooping up and down. Nurse Callie and I made eye contact.

"Gentlemen, I think that's enough. Ariel needs to see a doctor," Callie advised, stepping in between them. That brought Hugh back down to earth.



She handed him my backpack, which had appeared in one of the office chairs.

"Right now, I need to drive my daughter to the emergency room," Hugh said through gritted teeth. "But this discussion isn't over."

McPherson nodded his head and retreated, swinging his arms like a soldier. Hugh, grim faced, signed me out of the office and led me out.

"Good luck," Callie said, and winked at me.

It was raining heavily when we got out to the parking lot. Hugh opened the umbrella he'd bought over our heads. We didn't speak until we were safely buckled inside his car.

"Accident?" Hugh echoed, turning to me. His eyebrows were raised nearly up to his sandy hair. He waited for my reply.

I bit my bottom lip. How could I put it so Hugh wouldn't get all up in arms? I didn't want my family to go up against Lainey's; she was right, they would bankrupt us for looking at them funny.

"That's what she says," I said carefully. "We were playing tennis in gym, and she hit the ball, which struck my nose. It *could* have been an accident, yes."

He studied my face, gently grabbing my chin and rotating my head side to side.

"I think you made enemies with the wrong person," was all he said, and started the car.

We spent the afternoon at the hospital. The emergency waiting room was packed when we arrived, full of coughing kids and broken limbs. It took nearly forty-five minutes for the triage nurse to get to me. I felt goofy as I explained what had happened.

After more waiting in the exam room, a technician performed a CT scan on my head to check for problems. But when the doctor breezed in, he told me there was no internal bleeding or real cause for concern.

"And there's just a small fracture at the top of the bridge," he said cheerfully, as if it were good news. Did he not see that I was a fifteen year old girl, not a football player?

"My nose is *broken*?" I asked, horrified.

"Yes. But once it heals you shouldn't notice any difference in the way you look," he said dismissively, before hurrying back out into the hall. Easy for

him to say.

"You'll be okay," Hugh said, more to himself than me, his voice cracking.

Hugh stopped at the drugstore on the way home, and stocked up on ice packs and tabloids, the best reading material when one is incapacitated.

"Does this mean I get to stay home tomorrow?" I asked.

"I suppose it does," he said, a tired smile forced on his lips.

I leaned my head against the window. It bumped against the glass as the tires navigated potholes. My eyes kept sliding shut, lids heavy from a combination of swelling, tiredness, and medicine. I was suddenly very hungry but food sounded gross.

By the time we got home it was dark. We went inside and Claire squeezed me in a tight hug. It was a rare show of affection, for her. I patted her back through her jacket for comfort.

Pulling back, she inspected my face like Hugh had; only her hands were on my cheeks. Exchanging one of her glances with Hugh, sharing their worries silently.

"I wanted to come to the hospital," Claire said, apologetic. "I couldn't get off of work, and your father said it was alright. She looks awful, Hugh."

"Thanks so much," I said.

"She's fine, Claire. The doctor checked her out, he ran a head scan, and he didn't find anything to concern him. Her nose will heal. She's going to be okay."

He preached all of this as if trying to convince himself. He couldn't stand still in the kitchen, tossing his keys on the counter and drumming his knuckles, then pacing over to the fridge and back. Unspent anger colored his cheeks.

"Honey, why don't you go take a shower?" Claire said to me. That meant they wanted me out of the way so that they could argue. "The steam will probably make you feel better," she finished.

The suggestion did sound heavenly. My back was sore from both falling on the floor and lying in the hospital bed. *Falling through the floor* my thoughts whispered. *You fell through the floor and you saw...*

"Yeah, I think I'll do that," I said, willing my thoughts away. It was just a dream, no different than when I had dreamed she was at the orphanage. So what if I had seen the ghost of a little girl merely a few days ago. That was a totally different experience. A person had to be dead to be a ghost. Jenna

had run off, like everyone said, and was now living it up, and had totally forgotten the small town she came from. *But her eyes were black...*the same little voice of my thoughts whispered. I shook my head.

I went into the downstairs shower. Hugh and Claire talked in hushed voices, but I could still make out a few words."

"Is it dangerous for her to be at that school?" Claire asked.

"I don't know," Hugh said after a moment.

I paused, shivering in the bathroom even though it was warm. I hadn't thought about it like that. I turned the shower on hot, letting the steam fill the bathroom and fog up the mirror.

"There's definitely favoritism," Hugh said. "The Thornhill reach extends all the way into the classrooms."

"You really think it has to do with that silly committee?" Claire wondered aloud.

Hugh didn't respond.

I undressed and stepped into the shower. The sharpness was beginning to return to the pain in my face, meaning the painkillers were wearing off on schedule. I shampooed quickly, then just stood in the hot water. It felt good on my aching face.

I got out eventually, fully expecting Claire and Hugh to be yelling. But there was silence. The kitchen was empty by the time I had gotten dressed. It must have meant they had retreated to their individual corners.

A few pieces of baked chicken sat on a cookie sheet on the stovetop. I made myself a small plate, and while I didn't usually take food to my room, I figured this time would be alright. I trudged down the stairs with my tabloids and my food.

It didn't take long after eating and taking my pills to fall asleep.

The next morning I woke up to find Hugh had already called in, for both of us.

"What if Gwen needs you there?" I protested.

"Gwen runs the place better than I do. Have a seat," was his reply.

He slid two pieces of French toast from a skillet onto my plate. My favorite breakfast food since I was a little girl. I couldn't taste anything very well because of my nose, but it was still a nice change from plain cereal.

I spent the day lazing about the house, watching daytime TV and putting together an old puzzle I found underneath the couch. I wondered what Theo was doing, hoping she was keeping her anger to herself. And I wondered if Henry had heard about me getting hurt.

Around 3:30, I heard a knock on the front door. I got off the couch where I had been watching courtroom shows and answered it.

Theo stood on the porch. She smiled sympathetically when she saw me. The world behind her looked inviting after being cooped up all day. I didn't know how I'd lasted so long over the summer inside.

"How are you?" she asked.

"Bored," I said. "Come in. Did I miss anything at school?" I shut the door behind her.

"No, nothing as exciting as yesterday," Theo said, taking off her sneakers. "You *are* the gossip around school, though." She ran a hand through her hair. "Henry asked me how you were; I thought you would want to know that."

A little thrill went through me. "Oh." I wondered why he hadn't gotten a hold of me himself.

We sat down on the couch. It took a moment before either of us spoke. Theo picked up the cushion behind her and hugged it to her chest. Her admission yesterday about Jenna hung heavy in the air.

"I wanted to check on you," she started. "But I also wanted to tell you more about what I said yesterday."

I sat up straighter, bracing myself for whatever bad news she would share.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you about seeing Jenna before," Theo said.

"Are you sure it was her that you saw?" That was the biggest question that had been nagging at me to ask her.

"Positive."

Hope inside me deflated, right when I realized I was holding onto it. Theo ran her finger along the hollow of her pale throat.

"She was wearing a necklace with her name on it."

"I gave her that necklace," I said. I ripped a tissue to pieces with my fingers and didn't realize it until I looked down at the mess on my lap. I scooped up the pile and put it on a leftover plate on the table. "For her tenth birthday. She gave me a turtle piggy bank."

We were silent.

"She didn't do anything to me," Theo said finally. "It was sort of how it was when you saw Henry stand by and watch that kid get beaten up. She didn't do anything wrong, really, but she didn't stop it, either."

I nodded. As much as I didn't want to admit it, I was starting to think there things about Jenna that I didn't know.

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## Chapter 19

I was ready to go back to school the next day. I got a lot of stares in my direction, but I clutched my books to my chest and did my best to ignore them. In Gym class, Coach insisted that I sit out even though I told her I was fine. I peered across the floor to the spot where I had fallen. The blood was all cleaned up, of course, but I could almost see it, a shiny crimson puddle.

I didn't even look at Lainey and she ignored me in kind.

At lunch, even though Theo had to serve her unfair lunch detention, I still sat in our spot against the wall, enjoying my Spooky Spaghetti in peace. Theo had gathered up my homework from the day before and I was trying to blow through it as fast as possible, not wanting to fall behind.

Henry suddenly crouched down in front of me. Oh no. I hadn't wanted him to see me like this. Calling was one thing, but seeing the actual nose brokenness...

"Hi," I said, embarrassed and trying to duck my head.

He remained where he was, shaking his head back and forth slowly. That didn't instill a lot of confidence. "They weren't kidding."

I wished he would stop looking at my face.

"What did the doctor say?" he asked.

"I'm fine. It's not even broken. Just looks ugly," I muttered.

"Oh shut up," he scoffed lightly. "You're always beautiful, this doesn't change that fact."

A thrill rushed through my blood. He patted my nose with gentle fingers. I thought I had imagined him saying it. My heart was dancing out a contorted rhythm underneath my shirt.

"Did they give you painkillers?"

I nodded.

"Sweet," he said, grinning. "Gotta look at the benefits, right?"

"Right," I said. I wanted urgently to kiss him again, even if it was in the middle of the noisy commons. But that seemed like a long time ago. Even though it was the most recent of many times that I thought our relationship, as it were, had finally progressed into something more than friends, I wondered if I had imagined that, too.

Although Lainey and Madison carried on relentlessly with their missing girl's committee, stopping people in the hallways and handing out information cards, not much came from it. I wished that I had seen more when I saw the ghost of the girl, and now it nagged at me. Was she the one who had been following me? There had been no more noises in my room...did the séance actually dispel the spirit? And why was she appearing to me, anyway?

In homeroom, a girl who sat behind me was talking about how her father ran the police department tip site.

"The missing child inquiry is clogged," she said. I listened intently without turning around. "They've been getting a bunch of false leads and prank submissions, hundreds that they have to sort through a day."

I knew that Jenna's own fanpage had blown up with posts from various people with clues and bogus "tips". At first I had been extremely excited, until I started scrolling through them and saw that it was a bunch of garbage. The page had been cleared out and shut down, with a note to contact the Hell Police Department directly.

I tried not to look at the flyers, but I gravitated towards them. Jenna's face seemed to follow me everywhere. On the paper, her eyes reminded me of how black they were in my vision.

The lights began flickering often in school, and no one could figure out the cause of it. Which drove everyone nuts, especially the teachers. The electricians still hadn't been called, and even though we kept hearing it would happen during the morning announcements, there was always an excuse as to why it didn't happen.

"This is no way to conduct school," Warwick muttered after another blackout. The only teacher who didn't seem to be affected was Ms. Fellows. Her projector would shut off, and she would merely stare at the roll down screen, blinking, until the power came back on.

After class late in the week, Mr. Warwick pulled me aside. My nose was healing pretty fast, although it was so still so bruised that concealer hardly made a difference.

"Great job on the test, Ariel, really," he said. I had gotten an A on practically every assignment I'd done in History, but it still gave me an accomplished feeling. Seeing the big red letter on the page brought me back

to first grade, when we would get check marks or minuses. I always felt smart when I'd get those little checks.

He sat on the edge of his desk, looking at me expectantly. Warwick was the same age as my dad, which made sense considering they went to school together forever ago. His cautious gray eyes analyzed my face. He was familiar to me, but at the same time cut off, sort of in the same way Aunt Corinne was.

"It must be hard for you," he said finally, crossing his arms. The pale blue stripes on his shirt contorted and twisted at odd angles.

"What's hard for me?" I asked. My eyes found the globe behind his shoulder and focused there, picking out England, Spain, China.

"Seeing your friend's face all over school," he said. "You've been doing great in my class, but I can tell that you're upset. You don't interact much with the other students. You don't ever raise your hand even though I know you know the answers."

"I don't have anything to say," I said, shifting my binder from one arm to the other. I was very uncomfortable with heartfelt talks. My heart could stay right off my sleeve and inside my chest. "I prefer to write my answers down."

"I just wanted to let you know if you ever need anything, there are people you can trust here. I'm one of them. Your dad and I have been friends for many years," he said. "You could tell me anything that was bothering you."

I mumbled my appreciation, looking at the floor. I was suddenly feeling weirded out, and I didn't know why.

"Thanks," I said.

"So is there anything you want to share?" he asked. There was an unusual twinkle in his eyes I'd never seen before. I didn't want to say anything.

"No, not right now," I said.

"Okay," he said, jumping off of his desk. "Just wanted to let you know that I was there. Go on off to class now, I'll write you a hall pass."

I took the pass and walked out of his classroom. In all honesty, I couldn't stand being treated like that, even if it was from someone who cared. I wondered if that made me a bad person.

Would it always be this way? Would I be getting print outs in the mail in ten years, age progressed to make Jenna look like she was twenty-five? Maybe I would never know what happened to her.



Before school on Friday, I waited at a table for Theo in the commons before first bell. We were going to quiz each other for math since we both had Geometry, and there was another big test today. Mr. Vanderlip seemed fonder of tests and quizzes than he was of his chalk.

But Theo didn't show. I flipped through my flashcards absently, hoping I was prepared enough. I had been up on the phone for an hour last night with Henry, his soothing voice asking me questions and nearly lulling me into a trance.

A few minutes before the bell rang, my phone beeped a text alert. It was Theo, saying *I'm not coming to school, I'm sick. Doctor's office. Sorry! Hope test goes okay.* Theo texted novels the same way I did. She had been complaining of the sniffles and a sore throat yesterday, I recalled. I sent her a get well text back and went to class.

I was happy I had Geometry first hour, only because I could get the test out of the way so it wouldn't be on my mind all day. I was confident I more than passed, but didn't want to speculate. More than anything I just felt relieved. I didn't celebrate until I received the paper back with the grade on it.

I missed Theo in gym, although luckily we were only doing yoga poses led by a college instructor, so we kept busy. The lesson was complete with new age music. I was jealous of Lainey's flexibility as I wobbled from one pose to another. She was still pretending I didn't exist, which was a relief as well. I wondered if her parents had coached her on ways to avoid retaliation for my still-bruised nose.

In Art, the empty seat that Theo usually occupied made me lonely. I felt selfish depending on another person so much for companionship, but it had helped so much to pull me out of my introverted state. Theo was so different from Jenna in so many ways, but we had already become quite close friends when I wasn't paying attention. Part of me felt like I was betraying Jenna by moving on. But part of me argued that perhaps she had betrayed me.

Art class itself had taken on a relaxing atmosphere. We were still deep in free painting, and now that I didn't take my attempts at art so seriously, I was actually enjoying myself.

I picked up my brush and dipped the end in brown paint, working on a ropey-looking horse's tail. In actuality it looked more like a camel than a

horse.

Henry seemed tense, shifting around in his seat. Without Theo there, I didn't check myself in looking at him. Twenty minutes into the hour-long class, he got up and asked Ms. Vore for hallway permission. Since I pretty much always involuntarily looked at him whenever he moved, I gazed up at him and was surprised to see him staring intently at me. Either me, or the poster behind me of the talking pencil. He didn't smile like he normally did when our eyes met. What was going on with him?

He left the room, and didn't come back. I couldn't help checking the clock as the minutes ticked by. Ms. Vore was too busy helping other students with their paintings to notice.

Out of nowhere, the fire alarm started blaring. It was so loud my ears hurt. I dropped the paintbrush in my rush to cover my ears. The muddy paint made a splotch on the floor.

"Okay, everybody, let's go," Ms. Vore said calmly, already standing at the door. Everyone lined up, shuffling out into the hall. Our teacher remained as unruffled as could be, although I saw her push her glasses up her nose and it reminded me of Theo.

I followed the quiet procession of kids, strangely somber. I was the last in line since I sat in the back corner. But as we were heading down the hall towards the exit, I imagined I heard someone calling to me from down the hall. It wasn't the same voice that had called me when I saw the little girl, but it was almost an echo of that. The same strange urge that I was being pulled manifested again.

I suddenly had to find Henry. He could be in danger.

I ran down the hallway. Ms. Vore didn't notice me because she was already at the exit. I walked quickly, swinging my arms to propel me forward, hoping I could find him fast and get out. I had no idea what had caused the fire alarm to go off, but it couldn't be good.

Further into the school, the electricity suddenly went out. I froze, skidding to a stop and almost falling over. Of course today would be the day I didn't wear sneakers, the impracticality of the heeled boots on my feet never occurring to me.

The red emergency backups came on, but then they shorted out, as well, and I was left in soupy, gray darkness. I cursed the school's cheap budget

for not fixing their real problems, especially when it seemed so easy for them to add more volleyball courts or basketball hoops.

Even though I had spent many months in these halls, I became lost. I didn't know which way to follow. Everything felt too real, my vision wobbly and at the same time too sharp in the dark. Like watching a documentary.

I spun around, not knowing where I was. Why did I insist on being so impulsive? I patted my pockets for my phone, realizing I had left it back in my bag in the art room. Panic seized me, my heart beating wildly, and felt as though I would jump out of my skin.

I crept down the hall, even as I had the urge to run. Shadows had taken on form, like living things. It was as if the insides of the school had changed, warped. Hallways seemed different. Common landmarks had lost their meaning.

I turned a corner, and bumped hard into someone. I started to fall. Whoever it was grabbed my forearms and lifted me up before I hit the ground.

"Careful," a familiar male voice said, and I recognized with immediate relief who it was.

"Henry," I moaned. It came out more passionate than I intended.

"Ariel?" he asked with concern, looking into my face. I had no idea how he could see me in the dark. But then I realized I could see his face now, too, more familiar than my own. The red emergency lights were back on. I frowned.

"You're not supposed to be here," he said softly. *Neither are you*, I thought immediately, but did not say.

A blast of fire erupted from my left. It was the basement access door; I could see the sign above the orange flames. He grabbed my hand and we rushed past it, running down the hallway. I quickly knew where I was again as we passed my homeroom, and couldn't believe I would have ever gotten so lost. There was another fire in a classroom to our right, smoke pouring out into the hall and stinging my eyes.

We burst out through the vestibule and outside. The afternoon sun stabbed my eyes. The lawn was covered with students, a chorus of voices talking on cell phones and with each other. A fire truck was parked in front

and firemen in yellow reflective jackets lined up to go inside. They staked out the area, communicating with one another on walkie-talkies.

McPherson spotted us and began stomping up the stairs, face purple with fury. Henry dropped my hand without looking down. It felt so empty.

"And so the trouble begins," he whispered under his breath.

"What the hell were you doing still inside?" McPherson hissed, looking at Henry. Then he turned at me and glared. I resisted the urge to cower. McPherson's moustache was trying to meet his eyebrows. I didn't know that it was actually possible for a person's face to be that color. "What a surprise that you of all people would be caught where she shouldn't be."

I didn't like the implication.

Henry stepped forward. "If you really need to discuss this further, you can speak to my father. You have his number, correct? Or do you need his card?" He had affected an almost snotty tone that I'd never heard out of his mouth before. It both impressed and confused me.

McPherson stood still as a statue, at a loss for words. Henry placed his hands on my shoulders, leading me down the stairs and into the crowd.

"Walk over by that tree, there's an empty spot," he whispered in my ear. I melted a little, feeling his breath on my neck.

"I didn't need you to save me," I said finally when we were out in the crowd. But he wasn't looking at me. He was distracted by something. I looked at his face, the one I had secretly studied countless times as he sat on the den couch in my house. I knew his right nostril was a fraction bigger than his left one, and one of his canine teeth had a small chip. And I could tell he was keeping something from me.

"So what did you have to do with the fire?" The words were out of my mouth before I knew I was thinking them. Of course it made perfectly logical sense now that I said it. He had plenty of time to set them when he left the classroom.

"Why would you think I have anything to do with this?" he asked, his voice too innocent. He wasn't as good of an actor as he thought he was, and it didn't help that he couldn't look at me, still gazing off into the sea of students. It was as if the rules had reversed, and he was the avoidant one. That part he performed expertly. The openness that was normally all him had disappeared.

"What's the matter with you?" I asked, peering again at his face, trying to catch his eyes.

"There's nothing," was his only answer. The way he was avoiding me reminded me painfully of Jenna's transformation, and panic flared illogically inside me. It was no big deal, I assured myself. He was just freaked out. Regular Henry would return soon, the one that I knew, the one that cared about me.

"I have to go," he said, and prepared to jog off, when he finally looked at me. He paused, and tilted his head.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

Now that he mentioned it, I was starting to feel really sick. My throat was sore and I could hardly breathe through my still-sensitive nose. My eyes were watering like I had hay fever. In the sun, I could barely keep my eyes open.

"Actually, I feel sort of crappy," I admitted. "I didn't think I inhaled that much smoke. I still have trouble with my nose."

He looked conflicted for a moment, emotions playing on his features. "Well...take care of yourself," he said cryptically, and left me behind as he walked away.

The firemen had headed inside while I was trying to decode Henry. Smoke was billowing out of some of the front windows where we had been a few minutes earlier. I watched as the spray from their hoses doused the impending blaze.

I wandered around and found Ms. Vore's class fairly easily, hiding near the back. I hoped my absence had not been noticed, but I couldn't tell for sure.

After the fire had been put out, we were allowed ten minutes to go in and get our things, as long as we stayed with our teachers. School was supposed to be dismissed a few minutes earlier, but in the confusion no one had said anything. Parents were showing up scared, worried about bomb threats and phantom explosions.

I went inside to get my backpack. Henry was nowhere to be found; his books were already gone. I was feeling progressively worse, both physically and mentally, with all the questions running through my head. McPherson was wandering around doing damage control out in the hall; the sound of his voice made me anxious, like I was about to be captured.

As I slung my bag over my shoulders and tried to leave the classroom, Lainey stuck her arm out, blocking the exit. I hadn't even realized she was still in the room.

"I'm only going to tell you this once," she said. "It's silly that I have to tell you, because I thought I already made myself clear. *Leave Henry alone.*"

"What?" I asked, stupefied.

"You heard me," she spat, showing every perfect, shiny-enameled white tooth in her mouth as she snarled. "You are not one of us. You don't belong. Obviously, even Jenna realized it when she dumped you."

I could have slapped her. I clenched my fists instead. "*What if he doesn't want you?*" My mind screamed. But I was not that brave, and feeling sick made it even worse. I just nodded meekly and let it go, ashamed of myself.

For a moment, it almost looked as if Lainey was going to spit on me, but she turned and walked away, her heels clicking loudly down the hall.

The sobs trapped in my chest made it harder to breathe. I realized that Lainey scared me, something I had never really put together before. She had already broken my nose and gotten away with it. What else would she do?

Ms. Vore came back into the classroom then, and saw me. I must not have looked well.

"You look like you're about to pass out Ariel," she said, steadying my limp shoulders with her hands.

"Just the smoke," I said, looking away and sniffing as my nose started to run. It must have looked like I was tearing up, even though it was due to whatever was wreaking havoc with my sinuses.

"How about I walk you out?" she suggested softly. I nodded. She grabbed a patterned bag full of sketchbooks from the back of her chair and slung it on her hip, flipping off the classroom light.

"How is Theo doing?" I asked as we walked.

"She's alright. She has the flu, and her dad's taking care of her since he works from home," she explained, tucking her short brown hair behind her ears.

"Theo told me about him," I said. "How he lives right down the street, right? What does he do?"

"He makes wooden sculptures and sells them online," she said, shrugging. "It's a living. Anyway, I think you might want to head to the

doctor yourself, honey. You look like you've got the flu, too."

I groaned and palmed my face. Of course, I was coming down with the flu. "I don't know why I didn't think about that. We spend so much time together now..."

"I've noticed that," she said. "I wanted to tell you I'm really grateful that you took her under your wing." It didn't seem that way to me, at all. As far as I was concerned, Theo helped save *me*.

"She was really depressed for a while, especially before we moved out here," she explained. "And in the meantime I thought I was moving here for her benefit. I'm just really glad she made such a good friend."

We continued walking through the hall silently. I just wanted to be at home and sleep, but I tried to keep up. It meant a lot to have a friend's parent actually like me, and not think I was either a bad influence or roadkill.

"I know it wasn't very fair of me to call you out for looking at your boyfriend," she said out of the blue. I had nearly forgotten the incident in the months since, but I looked at her, neglecting to correct the "boyfriend" part.

Her face was solemn. "It's just that you have vision, and if you only stop yourself from being distracted by silly school stuff, you'll go far. I know that's silly for me to say, that it all will pass, but it will, even though the easiest thing to do sometimes is to get caught up in it."

"My art isn't exactly good," I countered shyly. "Or really, even art."

"Maybe you won't win any awards any time soon," she conceded. "But you do have an eye for seeing things in a new perspective."

We had reached the front doors of the school, where the fire truck was still waiting outside. I was not in the mood to have to walk home, but I braced myself anyway.

"Do you need a ride?" she offered. I nodded, grateful. I was already sweating through my coat and I shifted uncomfortably.

I didn't remember much of the ride home, trying my best to stay alert. When we pulled into my driveway, I stepped out of Ms. Vore's car.

"Tell Theo I said feel better," I told her. "I've already said it a few times, but more won't hurt. And...thank you." She nodded, smiling, and pulled into her own driveway.

I walked in through the front door, not able to make myself go around the back, and chucked my backpack by the doorway. I rubbed my temples, which were throbbing in time to music on TV.

Hugh came out of the den with a stack of books in his hand. "What's up?" he asked. "No more sports incidents, I hope."

"I think I have the flu," I groaned. I swayed on my feet and headed for the couch, pulling the quilt on top of me and yanking it up to my chin. I still had my shoes on.

Hugh came back in with the thermometer. I started to tell him about the fire at school, but it came out like gibberish. He was even more concerned when he saw the 103.1 fever. Next I was aware, he was on the phone with the pediatrician. He told me if my fever didn't go down significantly tonight, we should head to urgent care, and gave me some Tylenol. Hugh always got very nervous when I was even the least bit sick, ever since I was a little girl. I closed my eyes and fell asleep, burrowing under the blankets, my mind a peaceful blank sheet.



## Chapter 20

My fever dropped a little overnight, but it was still holding steady over 101. I felt very warm, instead of the chill a fever often brings, and alternated throwing the covers off and yanking them back on me. I hated being cold when I had the flu; it made my skin prickle.

In the morning, I stayed parked on the couch. My head was so stuffy I felt like I was in another world, and my skin burned all over. I couldn't stop sneezing and my throat hurt like crazy. I watched morning cartoons and then an onslaught of infomercials. I never realized just how many gadgets were created for the sole purpose of cutting up vegetables. Chopping carrots didn't seem that hard.

Claire came in every once in a while to monitor my fever. Between this and my nose, I had given them too much to worry about lately.

"Am I dead yet?" I asked, coughing. My lungs felt as though they were full of nettles.

"Don't say that," she said sternly.

"What's wrong? At least no one tried to take off any of my body parts this time." I made hacking motions with the side of my hand. I had a tendency to get juvenile when I was sick.

Claire rolled her eyes, dropping emerald green flu pills into my palm and closing my fingers around them. Then she whisked used tissues off of the table and the ones that had overflowed the grocery sack propped up on the floor.

I took the pills with a swing of ginger ale. I couldn't focus, feeling the drowsy effect taking over, and closed my heavy eyelids.

I noticed the tick-tocking of the grandfather clock in the dining room. Slight at first, so I barely noticed a difference, then louder still. The sound warped, and distorted, into the sound of thumping on the wall behind me.

I was in a white corridor of doors. It was pristine, like something in a fancy hotel. For a moment, it flashed to a dank replica, with detritus and old leaves on the broken wood floor. But only for a moment. Then the elegant hallway was back. This time it stayed in place.

As I walked past each door, it disappeared into the wall. I ran my hands along either side, and felt nothing but smoothness beneath my fingertips. It was a sort of numb, detached sensation, like I was just borrowing the body I was in.

Where the corridor ended was a black door. A strange, coppery metal symbol sat in the center. It looked so familiar, but at the moment I couldn't place it. It looked like a bunch of sticks.

I opened the door, and the world shifted so that I lost my balance. I fell on the ground, with the door above me. I stepped up and through the door, and found myself in the caretaker's shed by the Dexter Orphanage. I walked out of the shed and across the sprawling lawn, crossing to the gate without looking behind me.

The thick air was hot. I walked through town, but I didn't recognize where I was. Everything seemed just a little off from what I knew. The world was wrong, angles tilting precipitously, the street was black and undulating like snakeskin. The swirling sky was violet, full of angry clouds. I heard girls screaming, not one, but many frightened, hopeless voices. Then the street burst into flames around me and I was sucked back into my body.

I woke up on the couch, sucking in my breath, sitting up. I was drenched in cold sweat, my shirt sticking to my chest and back. But I felt like my fever had broken. I put my hand to my forehead and my skin was clammy.

"What the hell is this, the haunted couch?" I mumbled to myself.

I was miraculously better in time for school, due to my religious use of flu medicine. The sides of my abused nostrils were red from tissues.

Being sick, I had all but forgotten about the fire incident on Friday. But everyone in the commons was talking about it when I walked in on Monday. Basement Access was no longer locked, but was symbolically blocked off by traffic cones. I wondered if that would actually keep people away. There were scorch marks under the door, as if something had been trying to reach out.

The most prevalent theory surrounded an antisocial group at school that always wore black and pretended to be anarchists. That it was some kind of political statement against forced education. There were lots of whispers involving my and Henry's name.

When I arrived in the locker room, Theo was waiting expectantly for me.

"Seems like I chose the wrong day to get sick," she said, fiddling with her combination lock. "What happened while I was gone? I keep hearing people talk about a fire."

Before I could open my mouth, Coach Fletcher walked in. "Don't bother changing," she said. "There's going to be an assembly concerning the fire. Leave your stuff here and let's go."

"Do we have to?" groaned Madison, who had already donned her gym shorts.

"Yes." Coach marched back out.

Theo and I were still wearing our street clothes, so we walked straight into the hall. I filled her in on what happened during the short walk to the auditorium. She agreed that Henry sounded suspicious.

"But don't write him off, yet," she said. "He obviously cares about you. You should have seen the look on his face when you...passed out at the orphanage. You might as well have been his wife or something. Maybe he just got scared, or worried he would get in trouble. You know how guys are; they can't talk about that stuff."

Lainey and Madison passed by us then, as always wanting to be at the head of the crowd. I waited until they were out of earshot before I spoke again.

"His wife?" I asked.

"You know what I mean," Theo said.

"He does seem kind of romantic. Sometimes he's all I think about." I'd never admitted it out loud before, but I knew Theo would understand.

"Well, yeah, if I had a sickly hot guy falling all over himself for me, it would be a huge deal," she agreed.

"What about Alex?" I teased. "He's not bad looking for a meathead."

"Meh," she said, shrugging. She rubbed glitter out of the corner of her eye. "I still have to think about that. He did send me a get-well email. There were kittens. That has to count for something."

The auditorium was packed nearly to capacity when we arrived. It looked like every freshman and sophomore sat there. I had no idea what to expect. Public execution wasn't out of the question. The faculty members stood along the walls, talking to each other.

McPherson appeared onstage, lit like a ghoul in the stage lights.

"Quiet down now," he said without pleasantries, waiting until everyone was silent. "Although most of you were here last Friday, let me give you a reminder. We had a serious incident. Several fires were set on school properties, causing minor damage. The staff and I have discussed this matter. We will not rest until whoever responsible is punished."

"Some of you may be wondering who among you is to blame. We know of several people of interest that I will be interviewing."

"Do you think he's talking about you and Henry?" Theo whispered.

"Of course he is." Although it was impossible, I felt like McPherson was looking directly at me.

The assembly lasted for fifteen minutes, the whole time McPherson going on and on about personal responsibility and the limits of freedom in the school being in our best interests. Sure, I thought.

When we were finally dismissed, our class filed back out into the hall with everyone else. I started to follow the herd back towards the gymnasium. But Coach Fletcher stood in front of me, stopping me from going further.

"Donovan, you need to go to the office," she said. She had gone back to treating me like any other kid, broken nose all but forgotten.

I sighed. Theo smiled sympathetically at me, raising her crossed fingers for emphasis.

Nerves took me over. I had never really been in much trouble before, save for the time I drew with crayons instead of chalk on the sidewalk in elementary school and had to wash it off for an hour with a garden hose.

I headed to the front offices and walked into the inner sanctum. Carnation bouquets were wilting on the counter, the school colors they'd been dyed with fading. I had been here too often lately.

"I was told to come to the office. My name is Ariel Donovan," I told the secretary. I couldn't tell if she recognized me when I wasn't bathed in my own blood. She pointed with her pen back to McPherson's office. I shuffled across the brown carpet and to my doom.

I knocked on the door, but no one answered. When I opened it, Henry was already sitting, rather casually, in one of the chairs in front of

McPherson's tidy desk. His office was just as organized and sparse as his house had looked.

"Hi," I said meekly to Henry.

"We meet again," he replied, brushing dirt off of his shoe onto the floor.

"What's going on?" I asked him, sitting in the chair next to him. He was as aloof as he had been last week. He simply shrugged.

I wanted desperately to ask him why he was being so evasive. Had I done something to stop him from liking me? After how close it had seemed we had gotten...and the kiss at the dance...

"I just want to get this over with," he said. "I have things to do." Fire burned behind his usual energy. He seemed far more pissed off than anxious or worried. He kept shifting in his seat, and his eyes were lit with some unspoken passion.

"This is serious, at least to me," I whispered harshly. "I don't have lawyers for parents." I couldn't understand what had happened to my Henry, the one who was always kind and had a joke for every occasion. The one with the amazingly clever, fast-paced brain that kept me on my toes. The one that I loved, I realized at the worst moment.

The office door opened, and we both turned. McPherson entered with a stack of papers and walked to his desk, setting down the bundle.

He sat down in the wingback chair, resting his elbows on the desktop. Tenting his fingers, he looked down his nose at us. Henry snorted with derisive laughter, making it known that he thought McPherson was a joke. I looked at him like he was crazy. I had no pressing interest in getting in trouble.

Then all the humor washed out of Henry's face. "Is all this really necessary?" he spat.

"I assure you it is, son," McPherson said calmly. Then his head snapped to me.

I was scared, not only because I knew I was not McPherson's favorite, but also because of how he demonstrated it when Lainey hurt my nose. Not to mention what I knew about his weird living quarters.

"Why were you still inside the school after the alarm went off?" McPherson interrogated me. "Why didn't you go out one of the fire exits?"

I paused, mouth open, unsure of what to say. Honesty seemed like the best defense. But at the same time, I would embarrass myself to Henry.

"I need an answer," McPherson snapped.

"I went to find Henry," I admitted, hoping I wasn't getting him in more trouble than he was getting in himself. "He left during class and he didn't come back, so I wanted to make sure that he got out safely." I didn't look at Henry, too humiliated by my revelation.

"Basically, her behavior was stupid, but well-intentioned," Henry said coldly.

Anger filled me.

"No more stupid than whatever you were involved with," I countered.

"You have no idea what I was doing. Stop pretending like you do," he said, glaring at me and sitting up in his seat.

"What I do know is that I did nothing to you to make you act this way towards me. So why the change?" I said, matching his posture.

"Enough bickering," McPherson said, interrupting us. For a moment, McPherson and Henry just looked at each other. I wondered what I was missing.

"I believe you've already spoken with my father," Henry said. "He'll give you any answers that you need."

McPherson sat still, debating what to do with us.

He scribbled two hall passes. "Go back to class for now. But this isn't over." He leaned back in his chair, looking smug. "Don't get too comfortable."

After we left McPherson's office, I walked out of central office, with Henry trailing behind me.

"What is it?" I asked again, when we were alone. Henry wouldn't even look at me, finding everywhere else to train his eyes. He made me furious, treating me like an idiot in McPherson's office. After all the time we had spent together, I deserved better.

"I don't always have to explain everything to you," he said.

The familiar sensation of having someone I cared about turn on me was too much to handle. Maybe there was something wrong with me that caused it to happen. "What would you suggest I do? I can't get in trouble."

"You're not going to get in trouble," he snapped, glowering at me. He leaned in close and said, "You will be fine."

"How can you possibly know that?" I asked, looking into his eyes. He stood for a moment, biting the inside of his cheek.

"Just leave me alone from now on," he said, starting to walk away. "You'll stay out of danger that way."

For once I was happy as hell that I was immune from crying as I watched him go.

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## Chapter 21

Ms. Vore lobbed my sketchbook on my desk when I arrived in Art. Her eyes met mine, a paler green than Theo's, but just as full of emotion.

"I want you to know that I vouched for you being in class when the fire alarm went off," she said. That surprised me.

"Thank you," I replied genuinely. "I'm really sorry if I caused you any trouble..."

"You should be," she continued. "The school could have brought disciplinary action against me if anything happened to you. It's very disappointing." She ran her hand through her hair. "It just proves to me that I shouldn't try to be your friend. I'm your teacher."

"Please don't think that way," I started, but she just shook her head, and resumed handing out sketchbooks.

"She'll move on," Theo said after Ms. Vore had walked back up to her desk. "Give her time."

I felt really horrible, and the twisted thing was, my thoughtless actions weren't even worth it. Nothing but bad had come from them.

Hugh was reading the paper at the dining room table when I arrived home.

"Why didn't you tell me about the fire at your school?" he asked the minute I walked in. Claire had driven me home since she had taken a vacation day, and dropped me off on her way to the store. I wasn't ready for another ambush.

"I thought I did," I said, shutting the sliding glass door. "It was on Friday, when I was sick. My head was a little wonky. But I need to talk to you about it now."

He folded the paper back up in a messy lump and tossed it on the table.

"I think there's a possibility I might get in trouble," I started. "But I didn't really do anything wrong."

He was starting to look angry, which was exceedingly rare for Hugh. I stood on the opposing side of the table, twisting the hem of my shirt in my hands. The familiar surroundings of our house suddenly felt like a courtroom, with me presenting my case.

"What happened?" he demanded.

I explained, but left out the part about Henry. Claire would ban him from the house if she thought he was getting me in trouble. Not that I thought he



would be back any time soon.

"That was incredibly foolish of you," he said once I was done. "You get indignant that your mother and I are worried about you, and then you put yourself in danger."

I had no reply for that.

"Jenna's disappearance is affecting your judgment, whether you see it or not."

Yeah, and he didn't know the worst of it. Sneaking out and having possible seizures in abandoned buildings. Seeing dead little girls hanging out at school.

"There is still the matter of what happened with the Ford girl," he said, getting up and going for more coffee. "McPherson knows I will bring it up if he dares press anything with this. So don't worry."

"Are you sure?" I asked. Ever since he had caught up to us on Friday, I had been apprehensive McPherson would kick me out of school, but I had been trying not to think about it.

"I'm sure," he said. "But that doesn't by any stretch mean that you're off the hook. Now go downstairs and work on your homework."

Not only was I grounded, but I had to fork over my phone for the week. I begged him not to tell Claire, but he said he couldn't keep secrets from her, because they were in a relationship, and relationships meant honesty. If only I had the same courtesy with Henry.

Despite my hope that things would change, I soon discovered that Henry wouldn't talk to me in school. In fact, the person he had been disappeared, replaced by a specter that shuffled down the halls and never smiled. Every time I saw him I wanted to reach out, to talk to him, to shake him and ask him what was going on. But I didn't know how.

"What is up with your boy?" Theo asked one day as November chugged on. She had finally gotten around to putting together a set of sketches for my dad, and they were going up in the gallery in a few weeks. It had seemed to fill her with a sense of self-confidence I hadn't seen before.

"He's not my boy," I said emphatically. "And your guess is as good as mine."

Henry laid his head down on his desk. He was wearing the sweatshirt with the blackbirds inside the hood, pulled over his head. I clenched my fingers, ignoring the strong impulse to go over and stroke the back of his head.

"Maybe he got sick like us," Theo suggested, but I knew it was more than that.

For the next week, he acted distant. He brought his thick fantasy books to class, kept them open on his lap under his desk, reading. He sent me a text on Tuesday to let me know that he couldn't do tutoring anymore. It interfered with his schedule, he claimed. Although it shouldn't have been a surprise, it felt like the final blow.

I got the picture. It was a bleak one.

A loud banging noise woke me up. I began to panic before I even opened my eyes.

"Not again," I whispered, sitting up on my bed in the dark. My room had been peaceful for weeks, with no strange occurrences or vanishing lights. But the sound wasn't coming from my room, it was coming from out in the hall. Pulling my door open gently, I stepped out into the hallway. It was pitch black and chilly. The furnace groaned gently at my back.

The noise again came again. A fist on the glass door was my best guess. I crouched and grabbed a weight from Claire's still-untouched exercise room, sitting just inside the door. I made my way through boxes and around the pool table with its canvas cover, to where I could see outside.

The motion detector light was activated and someone lurked just outside the door. A dark figure like in an alarm company commercial. I stifled the urge to scream. As my eyes focused, I recognized Henry's face, peering in and using his hands as binoculars.

I sped over to the door, unlocked it, and pushed it open.

"What in the hell are you doing here?" I hissed, wrapping my arms around myself to keep out the frigid night air.

"Are you going to hit me with that?" Henry asked, gesturing to the hand weight and leaning back.

I tossed the weight on a nearby chair. "I needed to talk to you," he said urgently. His cheeks were flushed from the cold.

"And you couldn't find a better time than three in the morning?" I asked skeptically.

"Well, I knew you would be free," he said, in a shadow of his old good humor. He rubbed his arms through his sweatshirt and complained, "It's cold out here. Are you going to invite me in or am I walking the long walk home?"

I hesitated. This was so against the rules. But the pleading look in his eyes and the thrill of having him here for me won out.

I stepped aside and swept my arm out. I was suddenly acutely aware of my cupcake pajama pants and frizzy bed hair.

"Thanks," he breathed, the air expelled from his lungs like vaporous ghosts. He stepped in and I pulled the door shut as quietly as I could.

"You have to be really quiet," I whispered. "If my parents knew..."

"Understood," he whispered back, holding his hands up like stop signs.

I couldn't believe this was real. Maybe it wasn't. Maybe it was just another dream. And that made me remember my long ago dream that wound up in my room, and I blushed in the shadows. We were right by the same couch.

"Follow me," I whispered, and led him down the hall. Being out in the main basement felt too open, like we were just waiting to get caught, but when I stepped into my room and turned on the lamp, it felt too intimate.

"Have a seat," I said.

Henry sat down in my desk chair. I sat on the bed, aware that the floor was my only other option, and that would put me in an even more awkward position.

"What was so important that you needed to walk to my house in the middle of the night?" I asked.

As he dropped his hood, I noticed that his hair was disheveled, like he had been lying down, tossing and turning while trying to sleep. He stared at the floor before speaking. "Do you trust me?"

That was out of left field. "Should I?" I was beginning to have reasons not to, but I didn't speak them aloud.

He worried his full bottom lip with his teeth.

"Do you trust me?" he repeated, more emphatic.

"I don't know," I said automatically. "I used to."

I remembered how soft his lips felt on mine when we kissed for the briefest moment at the dance, his hands on the small of my back. I looked away.

"I want to be able to prove to you that you can," he said.

"Why? To start with, you haven't spoken a word to me in weeks," I said, the hurt that I felt bubbling to the surface. "You were the one going on about how we were friends, and then you just ignored me like I was invisible."

"I know." He looked down again.

I quickly scanned my room to make sure I had no embarrassing personal effects sitting out. He was twisting his key ring around his thumb, the keys jingling softly. "I found out some things and...there's a lot going on in my life right now."

"Yeah, well, mine too." I was uncomfortable, thinking that it was a mistake to let him in. Not just into my room, but to let him in to my life at all. There was a moment of loaded silence.

"I pulled the fire alarm."

"What?" I asked, my eyes widening. But I had heard him fine.

He squeezed his eyes shut tightly. "I pulled the fire alarm."

I opened my mouth to speak, and shut it again. In my shock I had no words, no clever response.

"But I didn't start the fire," he said, and now he was looking at me, his eyes begging me to believe him.

"What are you talking about?" I asked. I stood up, suddenly wide awake and alert. And very aware that I could be in the room with an arsonist.

"It's such a long story, it's hard to explain. I don't even know if I know enough *to* explain it." He was babbling, unlike most of the time when he always seemed to know the right words. "I was being blackmailed."

I stood silent, my look conveying that he should continue.

"When we moved here, I started getting emails from an address I didn't recognize. The person presented evidence that he had something bad on my father, something that would destroy him professionally and maybe even destroy his marriage to my mother."

I sat back on my bed, legs crossed as I held my ankles for support.

"The last email that I received told me to go up to the top floor of the school, and pull the fire alarm. It didn't say why, it just gave me a time and

a location. I figured they needed to clear the school for some reason, but now I'm thinking I was being set up. And I think I know who's behind it. McPherson."

"I just felt like I had to talk to someone," he continued. "And you're the closest person to me right now. I avoided you before because I didn't want to pull you into this with me. When I'm stressed out, I'm a bastard. I can't deal with anything. I told you I care about you and I meant it. That's why I had to come here tonight."

That admission made my heart swoop, at the same time that my head was reeling.

"I wasn't supposed to ask questions," he said, rubbing his face with his hands and then looking up at me. "So I tried not to."

I could tell he was sure I didn't believe him. "I swear, I'm telling you the truth. I have no reason to lie."

"Do you have any idea what the blackmail itself is?" I asked, pushing my hair back.

"I'm guessing it has something to do with his work," he said thoughtfully. "In the profession he's in, there are all kinds of situations he could get himself into. Lying for a client, stealing..."

"Is your father capable of that?" It was a hard question, but I felt that I had to ask it.

"Yes," he said without hesitation.

"What do you suggest we do about it?" I asked, my shoulders slumping as I tried to process what he told me. The surrealism of the night, having my real life crush sitting in my bedroom, unloading all of his secrets to me. A month, even a few weeks, ago I would have welcomed it. Now it felt like I was being handed a slice of an incredible burden.

"I want to check out the security office," Henry said, his mind made up. "I figure we find some way to get everyone out of the office, and then go in there and look through the files."

"And you make fun of my strange trespassing ideas," I scoffed, trying to bring a little levity to the situation. He smiled weakly, a shadow of its former glory. Everything about him seemed paler and muted, like the colors were washing out and soon he would be completely gray.

"Will you help me?" he asked, his dark eyes pleading.

"Yes," I said.

After a moment, he put his hands on his knees, and boosted himself up. "Okay," he said, getting up to leave the room.

"Where are you going?" I asked, frantic.

He thought about it for a moment. "Home, I suppose."

"You can stay here," I offered, gesturing randomly to my room.

"I don't know if your dad would like that," he said, smiling wryly. He looked so tired, I couldn't possibly imagine him having to walk all the way back home in the cold.

"You can sleep in here. On the floor," I added, in case I was giving off any other vibes.

I took a pillow and an extra blanket off of the foot of my bed, and propped them up on the floor.

"I know it's not fancy," I said apologetically.

"It's fine. Thank you." He took off his sweatshirt and laid it on the back of the chair. The homey gesture reminded me of when Hugh would come home from work, and toss his jacket on my parents' bed. As he propped himself up, I sat down next to him on the floor. I couldn't help myself.

His eyes registered confusion now that I was so close. I stroked the side of his cheek with the back of my hand.

"Can we finish one thing?" I asked softly. And then I kissed him, gently at first. He responded immediately, moving his lips against mine, putting his arms around me and running his hands along my back. The kiss grew in intensity, all of my feelings rushing to my mouth, searching his with my tongue. When I finally pulled away, gasping for breath, we looked at each other.

"Goodnight," he said, pressing his forehead quickly against mine, and then lying down on the pillow.

I crawled into bed and shut off the light.

## Chapter 21

I took it as a cosmic sign that McPherson was absent from school the next day. Nurse Callie did the morning announcements instead, a welcome change.

At lunch, Theo and I gathered around Henry and Alex's table to make plans.

"I don't know about being a part of another one of your crazy schemes," Alex said, shaking his head.

"Okay, Ricky, you just go to the Tropicana," Theo said.

"What the hell?" Alex said, looking like he was about to sneeze.

"You never watched *I Love Lucy*? Why am I not surprised?" She scoffed, rolling her eyes.

"Can we please get back to the topic?" Henry asked impatiently.

"Sorry," Theo muttered.

"We need to have a distraction, so that we can get into the security office," Henry explained. "That way we can check out the tape of the day of the fire."

"How exactly are we supposed to do that?" Alex asked.

"Figure something out," Henry said. "You're both very creative." Theo and Alex exchanged a look, eyebrows raised.

Ten minutes later, we were all standing over by the administration offices, watching the office workers through the glass front as they chatted by the counter.

"I hope this works," I said softly.

"Me too," Henry replied. We stared at each other. If we got caught, we would be in too bad of trouble for even his father to get us out.

Theo fell to the hard floor and started screaming.

"I didn't mean it!" Alex shouted, all part of the scene we had rehearsed.

The two office assistants, followed by Nurse Callie, ran out to where Theo lay twitching on the ground.

Henry and I rounded the corner, walking quickly. The security officer took his lunch breaks outside, so we had the office to ourselves. We slipped inside the door, hopefully unnoticed.

I followed Henry back into the security office. A slideshow of images of different parts of the school cycled on the monitor.

There were boxes of labeled DVDs beneath the desk. We each pulled out a box and started thumbing through them. Every DVD was dated.

"What was the date of the fire?" I asked.

"November sixth. It's not here," he said, not sounding entirely surprised. "Son of a..."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"I'm completely sure. Thursday the fifth is here, Monday is ninth is here. No Friday." He pushed the box back in place.

"Then our only alternative is to go down in the basement," he continued. There was a need in his eyes I couldn't argue with. "We have to see what he's hiding."

"Why are you so sure there's something down there?" I asked, but I knew he was right. The voices I had heard there the first day, the charred black marks like a sunburst from underneath the door. All obscure evidence that the basement harbored a secret. Not to mention McPherson's creepy shed, and the fact that he was conveniently missing.

"It's something so important he felt the need to stop the electricians or anyone else from going down there," Henry reasoned. "They were supposed to come on the following Monday, Wick told me."

We slipped out of the office, where Theo and Alex were still holding everyone's attention. It looked like they were running out of ideas. We skidded back around the corner, keeping fast to the wall, and then came back, walking as casually as we could.

"Oh my gosh, Theo! Are you okay?" I asked, rushing to her side. I hoped my acting skills were okay, as I hadn't needed to use them since the school play in seventh grade.

"I think I'm alright, I just got knocked down by this dummy and I thought I broke something," Theo said groggily. I caught Alex wrinkling his nose at her. I helped Theo up to her feet, where she immediately straightened.

"Yep, I think it passed," Theo said, striding away with her shoulders back.

Alex shrugged to the others left wondering what had happened, and trailed behind us. I especially hated tricking Nurse Callie since she had been so nice, but I felt like it couldn't be helped.

"Did you find anything?" Alex asked when we were out of earshot. Henry filled them in on the missing DVD.



"So now you're going into the basement?" Theo asked, looking concerned.

"We'll be careful," I assured her. I found I was just as curious as Henry to find out what McPherson had been hiding down there. I had a feeling little Alyssa had something to do with it, as much as that made me fearful. There was a reason she showed herself to me in the school.

The two of them headed back to class as the bell rang. Henry and I joined the crowd heading to their classrooms. When we reached the blocked off area, Henry and I waited until the hall cleared out. Making sure no one was around; we slipped through the traffic cones and into basement access.

The acrid smell of fire damage still clung heavily to the room. We entered onto a small platform, with a burnt circle in the center of the floor. Navigating around the burn mark, we began to descend the metal stairway.

Our steps echoed in the air, metallic tinks as we went further into Hawthorne's belly, the old foundation. The area in which we found ourselves had existed for a long time. The rooms were filthy, poorly lit, with grime on the drab gray walls.

"What are we looking for?" I asked Henry, putting my head on his shoulder without realizing I was doing it.

"Whatever it is that snake is hiding down here," Henry said. He pulled out his phone and lit the back light, casting a synthetic glow, which only illuminated the ugliness of our surroundings more. Barrels of some unknown substance slouched against the wall. He walked over and cracked the top of one; it was empty.

"This is disgusting," he commented. As if to prove his point, a trio of rats scurried along the wall. I jumped, while he remained in place.

"Does anything scare you?" I asked, checking the pulse in my neck.

"Of course," he said. "Just not the normal stuff. I guess I've immunized myself a little over the years."

We stopped when we heard noises beyond, like someone dragging a cumbersome object across the floor and struggling to do so. Exchanging a look, he shut his phone and we made our way to a closed door behind which the noise was coming from.

Henry jiggled the handle. It appeared locked.

"What do we do — "

I was cut off as Henry pulled out his wallet, retrieving his Visa and sliding it into the slit between the door and the frame. The lock popped easily.

"How do you know how to do that?" I wondered aloud.

"I told you everyone has secrets," Henry said.

Inside the room were rows of old supplies that had been there possibly for decades. It looked mostly like pool equipment — buckets of old chlorine, hoses, broken floaters.

We walked behind a shelf, and peering through the gap, saw the source of the noise. The bucket next to the man wafted the smell of strong chemicals our way. Two filthy sleeping bags were next to him on the floor. To my horror, I noticed human hair spilling out of them, and I had to jam my fist in my mouth to stop from screaming.

Mr. Warwick scrubbed the floor furiously. His throaty breathing was loud in the short-ceilinged chamber.

"We need to get out of here," I whispered.

Henry's fingers were busy. "I'm telling Alex to call the police," he whispered back, hands visibly fumbling.

"Who's there?" Warwick called out. Henry and I froze, peering back through the gap.

He stood up, his shirt sleeves rolled up to the elbows. A gritty sponge dripped dirty water from his hand.

"I know someone is there, I heard you." His voice wavered.

"What do we do?" I whispered frantically. For once, Henry looked scared. The color washed out of his face, leaving his skin gray. His fear worried me most of all.

Warwick started advancing to where we were, hiding behind the flimsy shelving.

"Just let me think for a second," Henry whispered, squeezing his eyes shut.

"We don't have a second!" I said through gritted teeth. I looked around the area we were in. Diagonal to us was a stack of large, rolled up tarps in a wire bin.

It was only a matter of moments before Warwick reached us. Chlorine stung my nose as I breathed rapidly. It was either there or nothing, as I

couldn't see anywhere else the two of us could even try to hide.

"Over there," I mouthed, and ran and dove underneath the stacks. Henry followed, and we shimmied into the space, sitting against the wall.

"I'm going to find you," Warwick called out. "I know you saw me. And the girls. Sorry to say that means I'm going to have to shut you up. For the greater good."

We watched as he reached into his pants pocket and retrieved a small gun, which glimmered in the faint, grimy light. My stomach dropped and I swallowed hard.

I squeezed my eyes shut, pressing my chin down towards my hammering heart. I never would have imagined Warwick being anything but kind. He was the person who performed magic tricks with decks of cards and pulling quarters out of my ear.

He passed the stack of tarps that protected us. He kept talking conversationally, as if he were lecturing us on Abraham Lincoln instead of being caught trying to hide a couple of rotting corpses.

"The girls won't tell anyone. They're dead. Funny thing about being dead. It makes it so you can't tattle." He continued to stalk the area, peeking into shelves and around items, and out the door.

"I think he's in the other room," I whispered after a few minutes, my voice shaking so much I could barely articulate the words.

"How do we get out of here?" Henry asked.

"I don't know," I said, my mind racing with possibilities, all tumbling over one another so I couldn't separate them into a coherent plan.

"We should just wait," Henry said.

"No, I'll go look and see if there's a way out," I said firmly. I started to get up.

"Are you nuts?" he asked, pulling the sleeve of my shirt, hard. His eyes were wild. "He'll kill you, Ariel!"

"Me doing something is a better option than us staying here and waiting to be killed," I said, and yanked my sleeve out of his grasp. "And besides, he's my dad's best friend. He won't kill me. The police are on their way, but who knows how long it will take for them to get to us?"

Bravely or stupidly, maybe a mix of both, I crept out, and around the shelving, leaving Henry protesting behind me.

I crept down the row of crowded pool supplies, looking back and forth. I tried everything I could to squash the rising fear within my chest. Panic would only make things worse. I'd seen him go through the door ahead of me, but I didn't know where he was looking, and how much time I had. I couldn't see any other doorways. If only there was a window or a vent shaft...

"Gotcha!" Warwick said, catching me by my hair as I shrieked. He had been hiding in a shallow space in the wall between two stacks of bromine buckets. My eyes bugged out of my head as my vision shook, every cell inside me screaming at me that I was trapped and disaster awaited me.

"I should have known," he said, shaking his head and laughing grotesquely. "Daddy's little girl."

"You're Hugh's friend," I said, my breath hitching in my chest. My scalp stung as he continued to yank at the roots of my hair. It felt like he was pulling clumps of it out. "Doesn't that matter? I thought you cared about me."

The most horrible, twisted look appeared on his face.

"Friend? He's on the other side in this. There are no friends, when the Master comes to earth. Hell is closer than you think, Ariel."

He raised the gun with his free hand, pointing it at my face as I sputtered nonsense.

"You're not going to shoot me," I said, more of a plea than a sure statement anymore.

"Are you so sure about that? Because this looks like a gun in my hand. And I don't think anyone would miss you too badly. You're always just sitting there, coasting through life like it owes you. Well, think of this as your just reward."

I was fully convinced that he had lost his mind. And now I was going to die for it.

"And I will have a seat on the throne when that day comes," Warwick said, cocking the gun and reading his finger on the trigger. "He promised me a seat."

"Drop it!" said a voice to my right as another gun appeared and pressed against Warwick's temple. "You don't want to die today."

*I don't want to die today.*

Warwick dropped both me and his gun, and I fell to the floor, my arms flailing above me like I was falling off a cliff. My feet scrambled for purchase but found nothing. I fell with a heavy thud onto the hard ground, feeling my body instantly bruise. The roots of my hair stung.

I saw four policemen standing behind my would-be murderer. Warwick looked at them, dropped his gun, and attempted a smile.

"Gentlemen!" he said cheerfully, "You interrupted us. I was just informing her..."

"Shut your mouth," said one of the officers sternly. He spun Warwick around forcefully and grasped his wrists, hooking handcuffs over them.

Another officer came over and knelt beside me. "Are you alright, miss?" he asked.

I couldn't catch my breath. All I could see was the barrel of the gun in front of my face, the imaginary bullet travelling a pathway through my skull to destroy my brain. My finger reached out and pointed to the area where the girls' bodies were wrapped up as they led Warwick away.

"Aw, no," the man muttered under his breath, and went over to the sleeping bags. "Mike, come over and look at this."

I stood without realizing I was doing it, and walked beside them. Someone stood behind me, but I couldn't tell who it was.

"You need to stay back," the second officer said.

"My friend...my friend Jenna," I stuttered, aware that my face was twitching and I would probably have a nervous breakdown any moment. "I need to know if it's her. If she's dead. Please."

I watched as they slowly unzipped both sleeping bags, even though my stomach rolled and I wanted to run, to see anything but the shriveled bodies in front of me. Alyssa was still wearing her blue raincoat, even though her flesh was mostly gone, revealing a smiling skull beneath. The other girl I didn't recognize at all, but I assumed it was Susan, the girl who went missing at the dance. Beside the filthy sleeping bags, a purplish blur of soap remained on the concrete from where Warwick had been scrubbing.

Strong hands grasped my shoulders, and I turned around, not knowing who to expect. Henry stood there, his hair for once a mess, his face blotchy with tears. I fell into his arms with a gasp of relief and he hugged me tightly. I just wanted to disappear inside of him and pretend the world stopped. Tears rolled off of his cheeks and pattered the top of my hair.

"This is too much," he said softly. "This is too much. I didn't know. Are you okay?"

I didn't feel okay. I didn't feel anything at all. "I'm alive," was all I could say.

My parents were speechless as they drove me home from the police station. Claire kept turning around and looking at me. I stared straight ahead, more tired than I had ever felt in my life. Hugh especially seemed drained. It was understandable, considering he had just found out his best friend was not only a kidnapper, but a murderer. Who also almost shot his only daughter.

School shut down for a week to help assist in the police investigation. McPherson had supposedly been visiting his sick mother, and was quite surprised when he came back and saw the drama that unfolded in his absence. I didn't know what I would do with all the time off, and I hated the idea of having to sit around and think about things.

There had been no sign of Jenna in that horrible basement. Just more confirmation that everyone had been right and she had abandoned me. I started compulsively checking my email, wondering if I'd get a note from her. No note ever came.

Theo came over and we had a sleepover in the living room, with me on my unusual couch and Theo on the recliner beside me. We didn't talk much, but it was nice to have the company. Theo fell asleep early, the princess comforter on top of her tucked under her chin.

Even though I was groggy, it took me a long time before I drifted off to sleep. I didn't dream.

## Chapter 23

Theo and I hung out for the next week, not doing much of anything. I had hoped that Henry would have visited me or let me know how he was doing, but I didn't hear from him. I tried calling him twice, but his phone was off. I was too drained to analyze his up and down evasiveness — I figured that avoidance was just how he dealt with things.

It was strange being back in school, like it had been on the first day. Like sleepwalking. Maybe things would get better now, I thought. I rounded the hall to go to homeroom when I stopped dead in my tracks.

Henry and Lainey were in the hallway, talking intimately. Her hands were grasping the lapels of his shirt. As I stood there, she reached up and kissed him on the lips. My throat ran dry, tasting betrayal. Lainey broke it off, smiling brightly and waved him goodbye as she sauntered off to class.

I walked up to him, my legs barely able to support me in my shock. After all that we'd been through, all that we'd seen...

"What the hell was that?" I demanded.

His voice was flat as he looked into my eyes.

"Lainey and I are together now, Ariel. I'm sorry."

Without another word, he turned and walked away from me. It felt as though he might as well have thrown a punch at my stomach.

"I am done with boys, forever. There is too much drama," I told Theo later in Gym. "I think we've been through enough of that lately."

We were performing belly dancing to an instructional DVD, while Coach Fletcher updated charts on the sidelines. Lainey looked so incredibly smug; it took everything I had not to track down a tennis ball.

"It is time for thirty cats," I said.

"I wouldn't go that far yet," Theo said, laughing gently. She rotated her hip in a circle, but she went a bit too far, wobbling and falling into me. We sat on the floor laughing, as the rest of the class turned to look at us.

I didn't notice Nurse Callie come into the room. I was paying too much attention to our clumsiness. Laughter was a release.

But I saw her now, as she and Coach Fletcher came over to where Theo and I were getting up. Coach's face was more serious than usual, which was saying something for someone so humorless.

"Ariel, I'm here to take you to the office," Nurse Callie said.

I looked between their faces. "Am I in trouble?" I asked.

"No, honey," Callie said. She was very quiet. "Don't worry about changing. Just come with me."

I looked back at Theo, her frown mirroring my own. Everyone in class was still looking at us, the joyous belly dancer on the television unaware that she was dancing alone.

I walked with Nurse Callie to the office. It had already been a surreal nightmare of a day. How could anything else go wrong? The universe couldn't be that unfair.

Hugh and Claire were standing in front of the reception desk when Callie and I arrived.

"Everyone looks so serious," I said, trying to break the ice. They just looked at me solemnly.

"What are you doing out of work, mom? Did something happen?" I realized she didn't correct me. This couldn't be good. They looked at each other. No one was telling me anything, and fear began to creep up on me.

"Tell me what it is," I said, panic rushing inside my chest.

But some part of me knew.

I had known the words were coming all along.

"They found Jenna," Hugh said, his voice cracking. It struck me as funny. She'd always driven him nuts. "She's dead."

The entire world shrunk down to the badly lit office. Everything I'd done and every word I'd said in the last few months. A distracting prickle hit the back of my eyes. I wiped off my cheek, and my hand glistened.

I was crying.



## About the Author

Abigail Boyd (she prefers that you call her Abbey) has been writing ever since she can remember, and there was always a ghost in the story. In between watching Mystery Science Theater and making concoctions out of crackers, she is now pursuing her dream of making a living writing young adult fiction. *Gravity* is her first novel.

Look for the second book in the *Gravity* series, *Uncertainty*, coming soon.

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