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K.F. BREENE



Secret
— of —

MCKINLEY
MANSSION

Table of Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty-One
Chapter Thirty-Two
Chapter Thirty-Three
Chapter Thirty-Four

Chapter Thirty-Five
Chapter Thirty-Six
Chapter Thirty-Seven
Chapter Thirty-Eight

SECRET OF MCKINLEY MANSION

K.F. BREENE

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SECRET OF MCKINLEY MANSION

It was a dark and stormy night...

But then, it was always a stormy night when she came. Beckoning. Calling to her followers.

And follow her they did - never to be seen or heard from again.

Larkin, MO is not the cute, sleepy town it appears to be. Beneath the quaint façade lurks a secret – a secret everyone knows, but no one will talk about.

Everyone knows to keep curfew. To stay in on stormy nights. To avoid that big, empty house up on the hill.

Until one day, a new family moves to town...



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CONTENTS

Secret of McKinley Mansion

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Read Born in Fire](#)

[Try: Chosen](#)

[Try: Into the Darkness](#)

[Also by K.F. Breene](#)

[About the Author](#)

CHAPTER ONE

These Events Unfolded In October 1991

I FLINCHED as a thick sheet of rain slapped the window in front of my desk. I looked up from my homework and squinted through the streams of water running down the glass.

Trees waved wildly in my front yard, bowing near to snapping. Leaves broke loose and tumbled down the street, pounded by the downpour. An eerie howl of wind drifted through the attic above me.

I hated storms like this, when nature whipped up enough energy to lend bodies to the dead. Or at least that was what happened in Larkin.

The floorboards creaked in the hallway outside my bedroom door.

I froze in the stillness of my room, a stark contrast to the wildness outside.

Another creak, this one right at my door.

Holding my breath, I turned slowly and stared at the worn gold-brown handle. My rapidly beating heart kept the time. My shallow breath barely inflated my lungs.

Another sheet of rain smacked my window. I jumped, still staring at that handle, a light sheen of sweat covering my forehead.

Nothing.

If it was my resident ghost, my roommate, as I liked to call him, he either didn't have enough energy to open the door—yet—or he wasn't ready to try

and force me out of what had once been his room. If only he were the worst of my problems...

I turned back to my desk slowly and took a deep breath, resting my hands on my open calculus book and peering out the window.

The light bled from the sky as evening snuck closer and the clouds darkened above. Across the street and two houses down, a large moving truck sat in front of a previously vacant house, the new owners having made the poor judgment call to move to this town. Hadn't they taken a hint from the fact that their new house had sat unoccupied for five years? I could barely see the movers, heads ducked and shoulders hunched against the raging storm, carrying boxes or struggling with plastic-covered furniture.

Of course, a little wind and rain wasn't the problem with Larkin. No, the problem was what the storms summoned in many of the older houses.

Across the street, two movers struggled with a tarp-covered couch.

Of all the towns in the Midwest, so many of them cute and placid, why on earth would they move *here*? Hadn't they done any research? Plenty of our problems ended up in the papers, after all. Deaths and disappearances going back generations. Unexplained phenomena no one who lived here wanted to talk about. They could have chosen a place where the beautiful architecture didn't feel rotten. Where the lush greenery didn't have a black presence lurking within.

Another angry pelt of rain slapped my window. Light continued to seep out of the sky.

I caught an unusual sight for this neighborhood: a guy walking his dog in the driving rain.

Who would be fool enough to get a dog in this neighborhood? Animals sensed the supernatural, and the barking would be enough to drive a person insane, not to mention their neighbors.

I leaned forward and attempted to peer through the rain-smearred window, hoping for a better look. No go, so I opened the window slightly and squinted out, ignoring the mist from the water splatting on the screen.

A stranger, a guy about my age, sauntered up the sidewalk, holding the leash loose and low, clearly having no idea his dog could spook at any moment and take off running. His wide shoulders and trim hips suggested a football player, or someone who was fit, active, and strong enough to be one. Despite the wind yanking and pushing at his umbrella and the rain drenching his legs, he glided down the street in apparent unconcern, his gait smooth and

confident. His dog zigged and zagged at the end of the bright green leash, trying to smell and pee on everything at once.

Strangely, as I watched him make his way, a peculiar sensation overcame me. Tingles, then shivers, rolled over my skin. Time slowed down to stillness, all movement swimming in molasses.

The raging of the storm bled away into the background.

His head swiveled in my direction. His eyes locked on to mine.

I felt more than saw his eyebrows dip, a strange sensation, given I was feeling his confusion, not seeing it.

And then reality rushed in and stole the moment.

He was probably part of the new family moving in across the street—and his first glimpse of me would be with my face smashed against the screen, now soaking wet, showing him what my mother called my “mad-dog face,” an unwelcoming sort of expression over which I had no control. In other words, I was ogling a handsome stranger like an absolute creep.

“Oh my God,” I said, and slammed the window shut before dropping out of sight like a complete doofus.

I was nothing if not socially awkward.

As if agreeing with my self-assessment, the floorboards outside my door creaked again. The handle jingled and I whipped around.

The door swung open and my mother poked her head in, her pretty face lined with fatigue and pinched with worry. Once she was the belle of the town, getting crowned prom queen and marrying her king. That was before adulthood, bills, and a kid—me—stole her vitality and her ability to jump on a trampoline without peeing herself. Oh, and Dad’s rad bod. Her words, not mine.

“Ella?” she said, her eyes roaming my face.

I let out a shaky breath and allowed myself a relieved smile. I hooked a thumb toward the window. “Some day to move into a new house, huh?” The handsome neighbor boy was out of sight. He’d probably run for cover as soon as he saw me.

Her gaze followed my gesture and an exhale deflated her chest. The smile on her face didn’t reach her eyes.

She took a few steps into my room, angling herself so she could see the moving truck. “Stella Rhodes, the new neighbor, stopped by after you went to school. Apparently the shipping company was ahead of schedule, so they had to fly in during the week instead of on the weekend like they’d planned. I had

to get to work, so I didn't have much time to chat, but she seems nice enough. Very well-to-do. She works a few hours from home. Marketing or something? I couldn't make sense of it. Her husband has a high-powered job in textiles. No, wait..." She tapped her chin and glanced out the window. "I'm not sure that's right. But he'll be commuting most of the week. Forty-five minutes each way. I'm not sure why they didn't just move to St. Louis. They certainly have the money for it. But when I asked, she gave me a vague non-answer and changed the subject." Her brow furrowed. "Something seemed off about that. Almost like she was hiding something..." My mom's voice trailed away while she looked out the window.

I couldn't help a grin. Mom loved her mystery shows and novels. She always thought someone was up to no good. She spent her crochet time in the evenings pondering the various deceptions and betrayals that might be afoot in our neighborhood. The fact that she always came up empty didn't daunt her in the least. She never missed a detail that might launch her into the next investigation.

"That explains why they moved in on a Tuesday, then," I said, throwing an arm over the back of my chair and leaning against it.

She shook herself out of her reverie and her eyes snapped back into focus. "Yes. Their son isn't supposed to start school until Monday, but she said she might send him early. Get him out of the house. Her explanation checks out. Long-distance moving companies can be unpredictable at the best of times."

Yikes. I wasn't looking forward to meeting him after my less-than-graceful welcome.

The wind picked up in intensity, howling like a tortured beast through my old, cracked window frame. Mom drew closer and bent so she could see the sky out of my window.

"How much more do you have to do?" She pointed at my opened calculus book.

"Only a few problems."

"Well, hurry up, okay? The power is likely to go out tonight. You should get to bed early." She leaned down and kissed me on the head before glancing out the window one last time. When she left, she closed the door behind her with a soft *click*.

I took a heavy breath and watched the movers for a moment more, trying to slow my racing heart. The streetlights clicked on, doing little to brighten the graying street.

I stared down at the calculus problem, trying to force myself to concentrate. I needed to graduate and get into a good school, somewhere far away from here. I could already taste freedom, less than a school year away.

My purple pager shook against the hard wood of my desk. I grabbed it and checked the phone number on the small screen.

My best friend Scarlet's number showed up. The fact that she'd paged, not called, meant she wanted me to know she was thinking of me. She knew the score. She knew what tonight was likely to bring.

My eyes flitted to the window again.

This time, I didn't look at the new neighbors—my gaze shot toward the large mansion topping the hilltop at the end of the court. From this vantage point, my neighborhood's cute, well-kept homes blocked my view, hiding the vacant and run-down mammoth. But I knew McKinley Mansion was there, looming over the rest of us, poisoning our town. Everyone in Larkin felt the silent pressure of it, whether they were willing to admit it or not.

We'd all heard the tale of the Old Woman of the mansion. Kid snatcher. Responsible for countless deaths over the last century. When she stood outside your window, you had no choice but to follow her. And what awaited you was death.

Or so the rumors had always gone. From where I stood, there were a few discrepancies, like the age of the victims. Those who disappeared in the middle of the night, never to return, weren't all kids. And they hadn't all given in to her.

I was living proof.

Sighing, I bent my head over the textbook, but before I could get anything done, a light clicked on in an upstairs window of my new neighbor's house. I squinted through the streaked glass, ignoring the wildness of the blowing street. A figure appeared, wide shoulders on top of a powerful frame. This had to be the guy I'd seen earlier.

I leaned back a little, cutting off my view. I didn't want to get caught staring again. Sure, from this distance, he wouldn't be able to see the drool, but he'd still know I was watching. There was a level of creepy that I didn't aspire to.

"Ella."

I jumped and spun, not having heard the jingle or clicks of my doorknob turning. My dad's girth filled the doorway.

"Yeah?" I asked.

He looked beyond me out the window. “How much work do you have left?”

“Just”—I tapped my open book with my eraser—“two problems.”

“All right, well...” He shifted and tapped the doorframe. “Finish up. The power is likely to go out with a storm like this one.”

“Okay. Can you close the door—” He was gone before I could finish the question. The door stood wide open in his wake.

I sighed and thought about closing it, but decided against it. I didn’t feel like getting up. Sometimes my laziness won the war against my desire for privacy.

I glanced at the curtains, the same laziness keeping me from rising and reaching for them. Not like it would matter, anyway. Curtains had a tendency to open by themselves.

I put pencil to paper, working through the next problem. The squeak of the door broke me out of my concentration. That was when I felt it. The heaviness on my chest and shoulders. A chill settling over my skin.

My heart sped up. My breath came in short, fast spurts.

The hair on the back of my neck standing on end, I slowly, ever so slowly, turned in my chair.

My door stood open, empty. I could barely breathe, waiting.

It wiggled, just a little, and I felt my eyes widen and my fingers clutch the desk. Was this it? Was my roommate here?

The door groaned as it moved on its own, gliding toward the doorframe as if pushed by an unseen hand on hinges not from this decade. Those hinges had recently been oiled.

The door stalled a quarter of the way open.

“Go away,” I said in a hoarse, shaky whisper. Scarlet said this approach seemed to work for her, and though it never had for me, I always kept trying. “This isn’t your home anymore. Go away.”

The door slammed shut.

The lights clicked off, dousing the room into darkness.

No... An answer so faint I barely heard it. A voice like an echo in an empty chamber.

“Oh crap.” I launched out of my chair and dove for my bed. My hand glanced off something, but when I looked around wildly, nothing was there. Tremors ran the length of my body as I pulled up my feet, shoes still on, and grabbed the comforter.

I pulled it, intending to cover my head.

Something yanked it back.

“No. Let go!” I shouted, my heart feeling like it was punching a hole through my chest. I wrestled with unseen hands. “Let *go!*”

The comforter came free abruptly and I punched myself in the face. My cheekbone throbbing, I fell back onto my mattress and jerked the bedding over my body.

Shaking, I squeezed the bunched-up comforter, keeping it wrapped tightly over my head. There was probably a better defense against dead attackers, but cocooning myself with bedding had worked in the past, so I went with it.

The sound of my harried breath competed with the beating of my heart rushing in my ears. Rain beat at my window in angry raps. Footsteps pounded across my floor, heavy and purposeful.

My unwelcome guest had returned, and he’d brought his surliest attitude with him.

I squeezed my eyes shut, tremors making my limbs shake. More footsteps, this time above me in the attic, a place my family seldom went. Not all of the dead had made the transition to the afterlife. Some of them had stayed behind, either unaware that they had died or uncertain if they really wanted to leave. I never saw them, but they still made a racket.

I curled up a little tighter and closed my eyes, hoping beyond hope that the Old Woman would not come tonight.

My last thought before falling into a fitful sleep: why would anyone in their right mind want to move *here*?

CHAPTER TWO

THE CLAP of thunder startled me awake.

I blinked my groggy eyes open. Pitch black greeted me, the covers not having been disturbed. That was a good sign, at least. Not that they ever had been disturbed before, but I'd never stopped fearing that the rules would suddenly change.

Hot, dense, suffocating air wrapped around my head. No power had the unfortunate side effect of no air conditioning. I felt like I was roasting slowly in an oven, my shirt stuck to my sweaty back. There was no way I could stay under here all night. I could barely stay under here another minute.

The only problem was: what awaited me in my room?

I lifted the corner of the comforter and peered out through the little opening I'd made. Sweet, (relatively) cool air rushed in and I sucked up a lungful. Then I saw the pale, flickering light against the wall. Someone had lit a candle in my room, and my parents certainly wouldn't have done so while I was asleep. They liked their house too much to want it to go up in flames.

It was *her* signature move. Her calling card.

My stomach flip-flopped and I bit my lip, closing up the gap in the comforter.

"She can't hurt you unless you follow her," I said softly. "She's not dangerous unless you follow her. She won't come in for you. She'll wait for you. She'll wait there, forever."

Those were part of the rumors, too. And so far, they'd been true. So far.

I squeezed my eyes shut. I didn't want to get up to blow out the candle. That seemed like a suicide mission. Not to mention the angry door slammer

was probably still lording over the room, and the heavy presence upstairs might've found its way down. As far as I was concerned, hanging out in my bed and sweating half to death was a better alternative than dealing with the various presences that had overtaken my house.

But if I didn't do anything, a lit candle would be left unattended.

I took a big, hot breath, steeling my courage, and pushed the comforter down to my waist. My hands flew up in front of my face in a protective maneuver, but silence greeted me—no footsteps above or in my room, no moving doors, and no swiveling chairs. Just quiet.

Like *she* preferred.

I swallowed past the lump in my throat as I sat up. Quietly, so as not to disturb anything, I swung my feet to the side of the bed and placed them flat on the floor. Here I paused. Just in case.

Still, nothing moved.

She wanted my full attention.

Both of my candles sat in the center of my desk, side by side, having been moved from their previous locations. One rested on my sheet of homework, and the other sat perched on my open calculus book, tilted on the slope. Wax had run down the side of the shallow candleholder, pooling onto the page.

A horribly familiar feeling gripped me. Pulled at my chest, and clutched my center.

The floor creaked under my lead-filled feet. At the desk, it took all my willpower not to look up and out the window. I ignored the incredible desire to turn and head for the door. To leave the house and run to the spirit that awaited me on the street.

I bent and, with dry lungs that couldn't seem to get enough air, tried to blow. The flame of the dangerously balanced candle danced. The need to look up blotted out my thoughts. The longing to go outside throbbed through me.

"No." I gritted my teeth and sucked in more air, cold settling over me, the temperature of the room turning on a dime. I blew with everything I had, my nails digging into the desk. My breath huffed out in a white cloud, and the flame flickered, the wick glowing red. More wax spilled over the side and leaked out onto my book. The flame sputtered back to life.

I licked my fingers with a tongue two sizes too big and stuffed them against the top of the candle. Pain bit my fingertips, but the candle didn't reignite this time. One down...

Keeping my eyes low, I bent to the other candle. A loud thump from somewhere in the house made me jolt. My desk rammed against the wall, shaking the candles on it. The one on the book fell over, splattering the remaining wax in the container across my desk. The other shook, but the sturdier holder held firm.

I turned back to my door—still shut. The pale light danced around my room. Nothing interrupted the silence.

Whatever had made the sound wasn't in my room. Thank goodness for small miracles.

Impatient to get back to my protective cocoon, I spun toward the candle, sucking in a breath as I did so. As I blew with everything I had, a healthy concoction of air mixed with spit, my eyes darted up of their own accord. The light blew out. Darkness engulfed me.

The spot on the street directly in front of my house, the one always occupied by the familiar translucent form on the nights when the candles lit themselves, was deserted.

Shock lifted my eyebrows and I paused for a second, staring at the patch of clear cement.

But...I felt her. I felt her waiting, expecting me to come down to her. Expecting to lead me up the street to the mansion, a place no one ever came back from. Except...she wasn't there.

Blinking in confused relief, I glanced left then right. That was when I noticed light flickering from a different window.

The new guy stood with a candle in hand, staring out. On the sidewalk in front of his house, closer to him than she'd ever waited for me, stood the milky-white form of a woman, her back hunched and her hands outstretched. She gestured down the street. But she wasn't gesturing toward the mansion this time—she was gesturing away from it. Toward me.

The new guy pushed up closer to the window and shifted, searching for whatever she was motioning at. I braced myself for the moment he would notice me, but my room was completely dark. He wouldn't be able to see me.

Clearly seeing his confusion, the woman turned and pointed.

At me.

A string of jagged white lightning raced across the sky. The new guy's face snapped up, and though he was at a distance, I knew he'd caught sight of me.

Standing in my window instead of sitting.

Staring at him.

Again.

Social anxiety overrode the fear and uncertainty of the moment.

I dropped like a stone, hitting the deck. Scarcely able to think, I army-crawled across my floor, slipped off my LA Gears, and hoisted myself into my bed. I pulled up my comforter before pushing off my jeans and shoving them out of the side of the sheets and onto the floor. Once the comforter was safely back over my head, I regrouped.

This had never happened before. Since the disappearances of Janine Roth and then Alex Morgan, three years ago, the only time the Old Woman was seen walking through the town was on the nights she visited *me*. Never had she messed with my things and moved on. Not once.

In the past, I'd look out the window, and there she'd be, beckoning me out. Imploring me to meet her in the middle of the street. Coercing me with that awful supernatural pull. If I didn't go, she'd walk up toward the mansion, turning every so often to beckon me to follow. Trying to lead me to slaughter, as she'd led the others before me.

But she wasn't trying to lead the new guy to McKinley Mansion—she had directed him to *me*.

What if the pull he felt from her wasn't to follow her to the mansion, but to force me out of my house and drag me to where I wouldn't willingly go? From what I'd seen, he easily had the brawn to do it. He could throw me over that wide shoulder and go for a jog, I had no doubt.

Tremors of fear shook my body.

If rumors could be believed, I'd withstood her for longer than any of her previous targets. I was nearly out of this town. I was nearly free.

Did she know that? Was this her last-ditch effort to get me up to the mansion so she could select her next victims?

More questions tumbled through my mind.

Had she decided to select a helper, unwilling or not? Someone who didn't know the ways of this town? Why else would she point him back in my direction, after waiting all this time for me in vain?

My heart wouldn't slow down.

I had to make sure the neighbor knew what he was up against. Regardless of *her* intentions, I had to make sure he didn't succumb to her pull. To her induced madness. I had to make sure he didn't become the next victim—and doubly sure he didn't unwittingly become the ghost's accomplice.

CHAPTER THREE

THE NEXT MORNING, I sat in the chair at the kitchen table in front of a bowl of cereal, my eyes sandy and fatigue dragging at me. My dad stood at the open refrigerator door, hunting for food.

“How’d...uhh...” My dad hitched up his slacks as he struggled for words. “How’d things go last night?” He scratched his chin, a sound like moving his finger over sandpaper, before leaning against the open fridge door. “Did the storm wake you?”

An outsider might’ve wondered how my parents hadn’t heard my skirmish with Mr. Angry Door Slammer, a.k.a. my roommate. The thing was, they probably *had* heard it. But this was a town where there were a lot of randomly slammed doors, howls, and angry shouts no one could explain. In as much as they were willing to admit that things *did* go bump in the night in Larkin, they probably thought I’d be plenty safe hiding under my covers.

I leaned back in my seat at the round table, my breakfast momentarily forgotten. “I saw the Old Woman. She—” I stopped when my dad pursed his lips and his eyes tightened. *Here come the stories*, he was probably thinking.

I shrugged, swallowing the rest of the words. I’d learned over the years that it didn’t matter how much I pushed, explained, or attempted to prove what happened the nights when the Old Woman walked the streets, my parents weren’t believers. They’d never seen her with their own eyes, and therefore assumed her story was like all the other rumors and urban legends steeped in the town’s roots—fabricated and blown way out of proportion. That I believed was not surprising to them—I’d had a plethora of invisible friends growing up, after all. In their opinion, I had a hyperactive imagination.

I pointed at the refrigerator door, heading back into safer ground. “You’re wasting electricity.”

He grunted and bent to the fridge.

After a last bite, I deposited my bowl in the sink. “See ya,” I said to my dad, and left the kitchen.

My backpack lay where I’d dropped it earlier, in a lumpy heap on the floor. I scooped it up as feet pounded down the stairs.

“Ah, Ella. Headed out?” my mother said.

A breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding tumbled out. “Hey, Mom,” I said, finally turning.

She wore light green scrubs and scuffed white sneakers. Her hair, tightly curled in a new perm, dusted her shoulders. She paused at the bottom of the stairs, her hand still on the banister. “How was last night? Did you finish your homework?”

“Almost. A slamming door and some tug-of-war with my favorite poltergeist, who’s still pissed I’m in his room after all these years, cut my time short.”

She huffed out a laugh and rolled her eyes. “Funny. Well use your break or lunch to finish up, okay? You don’t want your grades to slip, or you won’t get into college.”

I didn’t want to succumb to the Old Woman and be killed before my grades could slip, but sure.

“And Ella?” She stopped at the bottom of the stairs and pointed at the side table by the door. “Don’t forget your lunch. The food in that school is the nutritional equivalent of cardboard. You don’t want your teeth to rot out of your head.”

I rolled my eyes at her and snatched the brown paper bag off the small table. “Anything else?”

She took quick steps forward and grabbed my head before laying a kiss to my temple. “Have a good day. Go, Bears!” She pumped her fist and disappeared into the kitchen.

My parents had had very different high school situations than I had.

I checked the tape inside my Walkman for my latest mixtape.

After clicking it shut, I patted the pockets of my stonewashed jeans, making sure my pager was still tucked snugly inside. After positioning the headphones, I swung open the door and stepped out into the brisk fall air.

Clouds rolled and boiled above me. The moisture from last night merged

with the dwindling heat of late summer and wrapped around me like a suffocating blanket. I glanced off to the left at the new guy's house. A sleek sports car sat in the opened garage, cherry red and probably lightning fast. In the living room windows were the shades from the Johnson family, left behind when they moved five years ago, still hanging in limp sheets. Those in the new guy's window had also been closed, shutting out the outside.

My gaze traveled beyond, to the empty space at the end of the court, the spacious grounds that housed the new guy's visitor from the night before. I couldn't see the mansion from my position, but that didn't matter. Even in full light and surrounded by life and activity, I could feel the animosity leaking from the massive structure. It seeped into the world around me, ensuring I felt its effects and noticed its influence. The pull to drift closer and check it out, even when I knew what lived in its depths, nagged at me.

I hit the triangle on my Walkman. "Ice Ice Baby" by Vanilla Ice filled my world as I forced myself to turn and start down the street to the bus stop. Up ahead, my freckle-faced, red-haired nemesis stepped out of his house, staring down at something in his hands. Dirk laughed, a booming, annoyingly loud affair, before his hand moved to his side and he clipped something onto the outside of his pocket. His lime-green pager, no doubt, the color as obnoxious as his personality. Someone had probably sent him "8008." Boob. So immature.

Pronouncing my hunch and pulling my Jansport strap a little higher on my overburdened shoulder, I slowed my step, hoping he didn't look down the street and notice me. A moment later, he sauntered toward the sidewalk, popping the collar on his St. Louis Cardinals Starter jacket.

He swung his backpack onto his shoulder as he reached the sidewalk, then glanced in my direction. A wicked smirk curled his lips and he stalled.

Dang it. Why was he out early?

"Well, look who it is," I heard over my music. "Heya, Fella."

I gritted my teeth. Fella was a nickname I'd picked up in the second grade when it was widely acknowledged that my bowl haircut made me look like a boy. Growing up and filling out had had no effect on the name calling. Dirk and his friends still taunted me like we were eight-year-olds.

He stayed rooted in the middle of the sidewalk. "Headed to the bus stop, I see?"

I made a show of turning up the music on my Walkman. His eyes caught the movement, but instead of taking the hint, he found something new to

mock.

“Holy smokes. Nineteen-eighty called—they want their music player back.” He laughed heartily. If Mr. Varsity Football hadn’t been a solid block of muscle, and therefore certain to hurt my fist, I would have decked him.

He tsked as I neared him, shaking his head sadly and pulling keys from his pocket. “Such a shame. Your parents won’t get you a car. Are they stingy, or just poor?”

“I live in the same neighborhood as you, dickweed,” I said through my teeth.

“Stingy, then. Too bad. Guess you’ll be a nerd forever.”

I tried to focus on Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit,” but his laugh cut through the music.

“The offer stands, Fella. I got a car if you want a ride.”

There was no missing the ham-handed double entendre.

“No.”

He made a show of stepping to the side and giving me an *olé* motion. “Off you go. I wouldn’t want to keep you from a date with the bus,” he yelled, making sure I could hear him.

I glanced at his beat-up old Honda parked by the curb, and bit my tongue to keep from commenting that his parents weren’t all that generous themselves. But he had a car, and I did not, and he’d win that bout of verbal sparring. And if he didn’t, he’d give me a charley horse, a relic from our unfortunately shared childhood.

At the bus stop, I found Matt and Stan, two geeky freshman who were comparing pogs, and Carla, a sophomore whose eyes were glued to her pager. I took my place, a little removed from the others. Despite seeing one another five days a week, we rarely spoke. They looked at me like I had a contagious, incurable disease.

Maybe I did. It was called *senior who rides the bus*. And it seemed like something no one wanted to catch.

As the song in my Walkman switched, I heard, “Losers!”

Dirk’s beat-up Honda clunked by. He leaned out the window, making an “L” shape across his forehead with his fingers.

Carla huffed and flicked her crimped hair before looking down at her nails, and Matt and Stan hunched down a little lower. I ignored Dirk completely. At least, it looked like I did. He made me so angry that it was hard to block him out entirely.

The bus lumbered toward us a moment later, throwing up occasional splashes as the tires rolled through leftover water from the night before. The brakes squealed as the yellow beast stopped and the door clattered open.

Carla sashayed forward like a movie star toward her limo. It took more than a lack of a car to derail her ego. Matt and Stan followed her, still hunched over, heads bowed low and pogs held tightly against their chests. I climbed up last, nodded to the driver, who stared back without expression, and swung into the empty first seat.

Yup, the first seat.

Only nerds sat in the first couple rows, I knew, and usually only because they were relocated from the back by a cooler (and much larger) kid who wanted their seat. In an early move of social suicide, however, I'd relocated myself.

My motion sickness in the back of a bus was extreme. Any time I tried to ignore the queasiness of my belly, I ended up blowing chunks. The last time, in my sophomore year, it had taken just twelve minutes for the volcano to erupt. The effects of those twelve minutes had been far-reaching, and they'd ensured Dirk and I would remain enemies forever.

The bus lurched forward with a groan before immediately skidding to a halt. Maggie, the grizzled middle-aged bus driver, slammed her hand on the horn. The blare drowned out her curses.

A sleek red sports car—a Corvette—skidded out in front of us. The driver smirked our way and my heart stuttered in my chest.

It was him. The new guy.

I nearly flung myself sideways to escape his notice, but he was already peeling out, shooting out in front of the bus and taking off down the street.

“Wow, did you see that?” someone said.

“Where did Maggie learn to drive?” someone shouted.

People laughed and joined in. “Take her license away!” “She should be walking.” “We’re all gonna die!”

Maggie’s eyes snapped to the large rearview mirror mounted to the windshield.

The voices fell to a low murmur peppered with a laugh or two. The hard brown eyeballs in the mirror darted around, taking notice of anyone who wasn’t settling down. Slowly, the bus fell into complete silence. Finally, we started moving again.

As we made the rounds and worked closer to school, my stomach became

increasingly more agitated. The new guy was handsome, built like a star football player, and had a Corvette. He would have no trouble making friends among the top tier of cool people. And I, Ella the Fella, would have to confront him about ghosts and hauntings—the things for which I was routinely mocked.

Yeah. That would go well.

I really hoped he didn't laugh in my face. I hoped even harder that he didn't do it in front of the whole school.

CHAPTER FOUR

AFTER I STEPPED down from the bus, my Walkman already stowed in my bag, I caught sight of my friend Scarlet by the bike racks. It was our meeting place every morning, because while she did have a car, she didn't have the money to fix it. She was left taking her bike until it got too cold, and then her mother dropped her off (usually late) in a really ugly brown station wagon. Scarlet hated winter.

She stood a little removed from the bike rack, staring down intently at the book in her hands. Her straight brown hair partially obscured her thin face.

"Reading for pleasure?" I said as I neared. "You're going to get made fun of for that."

She glanced up, her hazel eyes half hiding behind thick-rimmed black glasses. "Oh, hi." She pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. "You scared me. I didn't hear you come up." She moved the bookmark into position and closed the book before stowing it in her backpack. "Technically I'm doing homework," she said as she slid the strap up her arm to her shoulder.

"How many pages ahead are you?" I turned toward the steps and the stream of students heading into the school.

"A few."

"A few...hundred?"

"Maybe. It's a good book! I can't help it."

I laughed as we moved into the crowd. "You are probably the only one in school who can't help it. Which is why you'll get accepted by any college you choose."

She grabbed two halves of her side ponytail and pulled it tighter,

adjusting her sparkly pink scrunchy. “That’s the plan. My parents can’t afford to send me to college, so if I don’t get a scholarship, I’ll have to stay around here. No thank you. Oh, speaking about here.” She glanced around us and lowered her voice. “Was your house incredibly active last night? Because mine was. I got hit with a marble!” A delighted smile lit up her face.

Scarlet’s and my versions of “incredibly active” differed significantly. As did my version from most of the town. Her biggest event was getting hit with something small or hearing footsteps, whereas I had someone who wrestled with my covers or rearranged the furniture in my room.

The rest of the town seemed the same. Houses might have some grievances and spooky events, but nothing like what routinely happened around me.

I shook my head at her delight, something I’d never felt about my own brushes with the supernatural. “I don’t know about incredibly, but *she* made an appearance.” At least I could talk openly with Scarlet. She didn’t try to deny the truth about this town any more than I did.

Her eyes widened. “And you resisted, obviously. Was it any harder?”

We slowed at the steps. Bodies pressed in around us, everyone anxious to get inside, but there was some kind of holdup. When I got near the double doors, I saw the reason for it. The jocks and their fan group had chosen the entrance, of all places, to have their pre-school powwow. The large group took up half the hall, forcing the crowd to reduce down so they could get by.

“Really? They do this *here*?” I muttered under my breath.

Someone flat-tired my shoe. An elbow jabbed me in my side.

“Ouch. Watch it.” I flared my elbows, giving myself a little room. Scarlet did the same before straightening up out of her hunch to her full height, easily topping the crowd.

Dirk’s booming laugh filled the hallway. As the crowd shifted, I caught sight of his broad, freckled face. He was talking to Bobby Dawson, the starting pitcher on the baseball team, whose attractiveness was tarnished by his constant vague expression. It was like someone had snatched his brain and no one had caught on.

“Go back to hunching,” I said, and yanked Scarlet a little closer to my level. It wasn’t easy for her, being that she was five inches taller than my five-five.

“Why?” She looked around wildly.

“I ran into Dirk earlier. I’d rather not deal with him a second time.

Especially since last night...”

“Ah.” She tapped her finger to her nose. “Gotcha. We’ll talk about...*the big show* later.”

Only Scarlet would call it a *big show*.

Past the cluster of jocks and their Madonna lookalike groupies, the crowd once again spread out, thinning as it did so. Dented lockers with years’ worth of school-kid graffiti lined the walls, only breaking for doorways. Flyers waved and fluttered, one occasionally slapped or ripped off the wall as students passed.

“We should start entering school from the side entrance,” I said as we put distance between us and Dirk. “The jocks seem to be hanging around the front more often lately.”

Scarlet tugged on my sleeve to slow me. She pointed behind us. “Look, Dirk just grabbed that guy you ride the bus with. What’s his name?”

“Matt. Oh no, there go all his pogs. Dirk is such a butthead.” I watched as Matt bent to scrounge up his prized possessions. The crowd continued to push forward, their shoes landing on the array of pogs or kicking them across the linoleum. Dirk’s laughter boomed and he looked up, his gaze snagging on mine. “Walk. Start walking.” I tugged at Scarlet’s loose maroon sweater.

“We should definitely go the other way from now on.” Scarlet jolted forward. “A little more walking wouldn’t hurt—”

Her words cut off as the toe of her Converse stubbed against the floor, sending her staggering, proving why, in her case, extra walking might indeed be more trouble than it was worth. She reached out to me for stability, but fell on me instead.

I fell-jogged sideways, trying to keep my feet under me. The door to the office swung open right as I was shoved toward it. The edge of the door smacked into my shoulder and slapped my forehead before I forced it shut with my body. I tried to push off, but Scarlet still hadn’t regained her balance. I braced myself as she clutched my shoulders and struggled upright, refusing to let my knees buckle under the extra weight. If we face-planted, it would be the talk of school for *weeks*.

The door shoved against my palms, but whoever was behind it wasn’t applying much muscle. They probably hoped we’d get the message and get out of the way. If only. Our combined weight pushed them back, and the door banged shut for the second time.

“I’ve got it,” Scarlet said, finally stepping away. “Got it. Sorry, I—”

“Did you have a nice trip?” a bucktoothed boy said as he and a friend passed. “I guess I’ll see you next fall!”

“Good one.” His friend slapped him five.

“I am so ready to graduate,” Scarlet said, staring after them. She turned back to me. “Are you okay?”

The shade covering the window in the door to the office zipped up. Mr. Morris’s face appeared in the beige frame, his mouth a thin line, curving down at the edges, and his fuzzy brow resting low over his disapproving brown eyes.

Dang it. He was the absolute worst school official to tangle with—he even beat out Maggie the Unimpressed Bus Driver. I was a straight-A student, but he had it out for me anyway.

“Sorry about that, Mr. Morris,” I said, grabbing the handle and pulling the door open for him. I flashed him a sheepish smile. “I fell into the door.”

His girth nearly filled the doorway as he stood staring at me, his expression devoid of humor.

“Sorry. Won’t happen again.” I put up my hand. “Scout’s honor. I fell.”

“You fell?” He glanced at the ground. “I find that hard to believe, given your body is not lying on the floor.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but words eluded me.

“She pushed it.”

My heart sank upon hearing that voice.

The Red Monster was lounging against the lockers on the other side of the hallway with dopey-faced Bobby and Bobby’s mean-spirited girlfriend, Buffy.

“I saw the whole thing,” Dirk said, puffing up his chest. “She thought it would be funny to push the door when you were coming out. I saw it.”

“I did not.” I balled my fists. “Scarlet tripped, fell into me, and then I fell into the door.”

“Yeah,” Scarlet said, her voice barely audible and her face bright red. She didn’t do well with authority figures.

“You expect us to believe you’re a human domino?” Dirk nudged Bobby with his elbow. Bobby, bless his heart, frowned and looked down at Dirk’s arm. Having clearly decided he didn’t need backup, and wouldn’t be getting it, Dirk added, “Don’t dominoes usually fall down in the end? As Mr. Morris so cleverly pointed out, where’s the body?”

“What is this, a murder scene?” I asked, outraged.

“Enough.” Mr. Morris looked between Dirk and me. His gaze settled on Mr. Varsity Football. “Get to class, Mr. Curry.”

“Yes, sir.” Dirk’s eyes sparkled with glee. He leaned toward me just a bit. “See ya around.”

I watched him go with narrowed eyes.

“Mr. Morris, honestly, I didn’t—”

He held up a hand to me as he looked at Scarlet. “You better get to class. You’ll be late.”

“Oh.” She clutched the strap of her backpack. “Did the bell ring? I didn’t hear it.”

Neither had I, but there was no denying we’d been preoccupied.

“I better get going too. I have a test that I should—” I pointed down the hall, but Mr. Morris’s glower left little to the imagination.

“In.” He gestured toward the office.

“Seriously, Mr. Morris, when have I ever done anything malicious? Or gotten into trouble?” I stayed where I was, sparing a quick glance for Scarlet, who was drifting away with an apologetic frown. “I’m one of the best students in the school.”

“Anything malicious?” Mr. Morris shifted. A couple of lingering students hurried through the nearly deserted hallway. “Like putting itching powder on Mr. Curry’s jockstrap?”

“Oh. That.” I scratched my temple. “That wasn’t really my fault, actually. He drove me to it, you see.”

“Or cutting holes in the nipple region of Mr. McAffrey’s practice jersey?”

“Well, in my defense, I thought it was Dirk’s. You have to understand, Mr. Morris, Dirk and I have a longstanding—”

“In.” He gestured me in again, his movements harsh and precise.

I sighed, before I threw up my pointer finger in a last-ditch effort. “Doesn’t it seem suspect that it was *Dirk* who said he saw me? Because of our history, you understand. I definitely think you should look at the facts—”

“In.”

I bowed in defeat. “Fine.” I slouched past him.

A high desk greeted me, its surface plastered with multicolored papers and a few baskets in varying stages of overflow. Three pens lay near the edge, each with a discolored beetle glued to the end. As if the bugs weren’t deterrent enough against stealing, the pens were attached via string to a dirty-looking brick with chips and pock marks around the edges, probably from

having been dropped a time or two, possibly in the midst of a pen heist.

If I were a betting woman, I'd say Susan, the purse-lipped lady behind the desk, was not overly fond of continuously supplying writing equipment.

"Susan, she is to remain here until I have a chance to see her." Mr. Morris lifted his chin, watching me take a seat along the wall beside the door.

"But what about my test?"

"You can do your test later, in detention," Mr. Morris said to me, pushing the door open, now unhindered.

"In detention?" I said. "I was *falling*."

"Whining doesn't become you, dear," Susan said after Mr. Morris had left. I crossed my arms over my chest in response. "If you'd come quietly, he probably would've been easier on you."

"Or...you know, had I not fallen into the door in the first place. Prevention, as it were," I mumbled.

Her lips tightened. She shook her head and looked down at the papers in front of her.

I sighed dramatically and glanced down the row of empty seats. Half of a heavily scribbled-on navy backpack peeked out from under the chair nearest the principal's door.

At least I wasn't alone. Some other poor schmuck would also have to endure one of Mr. Morris's never-ending lectures. Although, sadly, this meant it would take longer for him to get to me.

I slouched a little harder, contemplating finishing the calculus problems—assuming I could even see the rest of the assignment under the wax. It would give me something productive to do while I waited.

A door bumped softly against the frame to my left, and a moment later, I registered movement. Someone coming from the bathroom. I didn't bother to glance up. Knowing my luck, it was a younger version of Dirk. I knew the score. Jocks were preternaturally inclined to single out and torment nerds and misfits, regardless of who might be within hearing distance.

I tapped the little strap on the top of my backpack, still debating the homework, when a pair of brand-new Air Jordans stalked through my field of vision. The most divine scent flirted with my senses. Fresh cotton mixed with an earthy smell infused with spring mornings and blooming daisies.

I glanced up as a guy dropped down into the empty seat over the backpack like he was waiting for a movie, not a care in the world.

Oh holy handsome.

It was him! It was the new guy from across the street.

A crisp white shirt stretched across the expanse of his shoulders, pulling at the seams. The collar folded over a navy tie with faint red spots that circled his neck and dropped down his chest. Black slacks hugged his thighs, and if it weren't for the Jordans, I'd assume he was headed to a business meeting. As it was, he was *way* overdressed for this school.

Any thought of finishing my homework fell out of my head. I had bigger fish to fry, like talking to him about the Old Woman. Or even talking to him at all.

"Mr. Morris will be right with you, dear," Susan said to the new guy with a smile, revealing a spot of pink lipstick staining her teeth. "He had to run out for a minute."

A masculine mumble preceded the new guy's shifting in his seat. He bowed to rest a forearm on his knee—very Dylan from *90210*—and glanced my way.

I yanked my eyes to face forward, feeling my face heat. Would he recognize me instantly, or would it take a moment?

The phone rang and Susan picked it up. "Montgomery High School, this is Susan, how can I help you?"

She paused to listen, and I tapped my fingers against my knees. I should say something. Greet him. We were neighbors, after all. Starting a conversation should be easy.

"What are you in for?"

I jumped, not expecting his very relaxed, very easygoing question.

"Hu-huh?" The way it came out didn't even sound like a word, but a collection of syllables that had been smashed together and thrown away.

"I said, what are you in for?" He swiveled a little, still leaning on his leg but now mostly facing me. A smile curled his full lips and a little dimple appeared in his cheek. Dark brows matching his equally dark brown, almost black hair, lifted. "Why are you here?"

I cleared my throat, getting my ducks in a row. "My klutz-o friend fell into me, and I fell into the door. Mr. Morris was trying to come out as I was falling in."

His smile burned brighter and his startlingly blue eyes glimmered with mischievousness. "You fell into the door..." He glanced at Susan, who was speaking into the receiver while flinging around papers like they'd wronged her in some way. His voice lowered. "Or you pushed the door?"

Hesitant to be labeled a nerd so soon, I merely shrugged.

He leaned back, chuckling softly, and looked away. Susan's voice, an octave higher now and much faster (she was clearly upset about something), filled our gap in conversation.

"So..." I said, stringing out the word and working up the courage to combat the real issue at hand. His focus drifted back. "Uh...about last night..."

The entire vibe of his body changed instantly. The glimmer in his eyes dulled, the smile melted off his face, and every muscle stiffened. I caught a glimpse of what was beneath the surface of his ultra-cool exterior.

Last night he'd been terrified out of his mind.

And while he'd probably been scared a good few times in his life—who hadn't?—he'd never been scared like that. Not the type of scared that came from watching objects move and candles light themselves. He'd probably felt the pull to go down to her. Felt the itching along his skin as she stared up at him with those sightless eyes.

In that moment, I felt a kinship with him that I hadn't felt with another living soul since Janine and Alex disappeared. I felt closer to him than I even did to Scarlet, whom I'd known all my life and whom I'd told everything. Because that shadow crossing over his eyes said he *knew*. The Old Woman had visited him, and it had affected him the same way it always affected me. It wasn't the kind of experience you could properly convey to your bestie. It was something you had to feel for yourself. If you hadn't, then you never really *knew*.

"I should probably start from the beginning," I said into his undivided attention. "You see, this town—"

The door to the office swung open and Mr. Morris barreled through it, his gaze sweeping across Susan's desk before landing on me. His brow furrowed and he *harrumphed*.

A renewed urge to defend my case rose to the surface. One of my biggest pet peeves was to be wrongly accused, and unfortunately, with Dirk always lingering close by, it was something that had happened a lot in my life. I started babbling before I could help myself.

"In all fairness, Mr. Morris, how could I even have known it was you? And look." I felt the tender spot on my forehead where a bump was forming. "Why would I want to bang my head on a door I was pushing closed? That doesn't make any sense, you must see that."

He squinted at my head before his gaze darted to my cheek. His eyes narrowed, and I knew he had found the tiny bruise from the night before when I'd punched myself in the face.

"No, no. That's a different thing," I rushed to say, then realized I was sticking my foot in my mouth. "What I mean is, that was just an accident. That happened last night during the storm—"

The look in his eyes shifted to one of suspicion and fear. He knew the rumors about me. Everyone did. But he was one of the rare people who didn't laugh it off. I couldn't count the number of times he'd warned me not to spread tall tales that might frighten his students or send them on an expedition to the mansion.

And mention my belief that Janine and Alex didn't run away, that they were lost to the mansion like so many before them? He started throwing around the word *suspension*.

Bringing up last night to Mr. Morris would put a nail in my coffin, especially since the new guy had shifted again, his body taut.

"The lights went out and I stumbled, that's all," I said. "I stumbled into my bedpost. Because it was dark. And I'm clumsy. Which jibes with how I fell into the office door. See? It all makes sense if you think about it logically."

Lame.

Mr. Morris glanced at the new guy, then back at me.

I knew what was coming.

CHAPTER FIVE

“I AM SO SORRY,” Scarlet said as she caught up to me after fourth period. We walked down the hallway filled with students. Metal clanked and slammed as books were thrown in lockers, changed out for the two classes after lunch. “I should’ve stuck up for you. I barely said anything. I just froze.”

“It’s fine.” I rubbed the lump on my forehead as we turned the corner and walked toward our lockers. “I got two detentions. One for causing a ruckus, and one for spreading filthy rumors meant to inspire fear. His words.”

“Filthy rumors—oh no, Ella, you didn’t tell him about...*the big show*...” She looked around us. “You know he doesn’t believe in that stuff. He punishes anyone who talks about it.”

“I know. Trust me. Who has gotten the most detentions for talking about ghosts in this school?” I raised my hand. “He saw my bruise from last night when I pointed out the lump the door had left on my forehead. All I did was mention the storm. That was it.”

“What bruise?”

I paused in front of my locker and pointed at the tiny bruise on my cheekbone.

“Oh wow, I didn’t even notice. It’s really faint,” she said, squinting into my face.

“It seems our principal is exceptionally detail-oriented.” I rolled my eyes and reached for the combination lock.

She did likewise, her locker and mine only separated by one.

“Ah, great.” Sam, he of the in-between locker, came to a stop behind us. His shaggy hair fell halfway down his round face.

“The man that stands between us,” I said to Scarlet.

She snickered and opened her locker.

“Why did I get stuck in a geek sandwich?” Sam moaned.

“Takes one to know one,” Scarlet said.

His eyebrows settling low over his eyes, Sam trudged forward and shoved his way between us. He grabbed his lock with a pudgy hand and clutched it in a death grip, apparently concerned we’d try to push him away.

“Don’t wait your turn or anything.” I huffed and stepped farther away, getting into my locker at an angle.

“Ella, did you hear?” Scarlet asked.

“What?”

“Can’t you wait to talk to each other until I leave? It’s annoying,” Sam groused.

“Should’ve waited your turn,” I said.

“There’s a new guy in school,” Scarlet said with a big smile. “He’s in my second period. He is *gorgeous*.” She bit her lip and a dreamy look crossed her face.

“Get me outta here,” Sam mumbled. He snatched out a book and then jammed the lock shut before marching away in a huff.

“He really needs to take a chill pill,” Scarlet said, watching Sam go.

I swapped out books and grabbed my lunch, noticing a suspicious brown stain at the bottom corner. I would grab something small in the lunch line so I’d fit in, then eat the packed fruit and veggies on the sly. I wasn’t about to bring a sack lunch into the cafeteria. Dirk would have a field day.

“He is definitely cute,” I said. “His family is the one that bought the Johnson house.”

“Oh right, the Johnson house. I’d completely forgotten.” She pushed her locker shut and paused with her palm still spread out across the green metal. “Wait...” She stepped closer and lowered her voice. “Do they know it’s haunted?”

“I doubt it. That’s not something a real estate agent would include in the write-up.”

“I can’t *believe* you live so close to him. He—is—a—*hunk*.” She fanned her face. “And he seems smart. He was only called on once, but he knew the answer right away.”

“Smart, or he learned the information already.”

“If he did, he still remembered it. That means he’s smart enough. I much prefer a smart guy. They can carry a conversation.”

“He can certainly carry one better than I can. I acted like a total ditz when I saw him in the principal’s office.”

“You saw him in there?”

“Yeah. He witnessed Mr. Morris telling me off.” I sighed as we left the hall and turned down the covered cement walkway between the buildings. “He’s not in any of my classes.”

“Hello? You practically live next to him. That’s better. Plus, you never know. There are two periods left today. Maybe he’ll be in one of those.”

A large, mostly cement area opened up to our left as we continued down the covered outdoor hallway. Three sets of low brick walls, perfect for sitting on, encircled groupings of stark trees and scraggly bushes. Pieces of landscaping bark littered one corner of the concrete.

This area was pretty packed during recess, when the small snack shop near the vending machines in the corner was open, and before school, but the majority of the students hit the cafeteria at lunch. Only a few groups of students lingered here now, some with brought lunches, some munching items purchased at the snack shop earlier in the day, and a couple loners who preferred their solitude or had no friends.

We walked past them to the double doors of the cafeteria, standing wide open. The end of the line nearly reached the opening, and we drifted closer as the smells of lunch wafted toward us.

“He smells really good,” I said without thinking.

The boy in front of us, a freshman or sophomore with a flattop, looked back.

“Not you,” I said, frowning at him. He matched my frown before turning around.

“Who?” Scarlet asked.

“The new guy,” I whispered.

“His name is Braiden.” The dreamy look crossed her face again. “He was across the classroom from me. I couldn’t smell him.”

The kid in front of us looked back for the second time.

“Do you have a staring problem?” Scarlet asked him.

The kid huffed and turned away.

“I had just gotten up my courage to tell him about *you know who* when Mr. Morris came in.”

“Oh,” she said in a release of breath. “Do you think he might be affected?”

It dawned on me that the morning's commotion had kept me from telling her the full story.

In hurried whispers and half mutters, I told her everything, from getting home from school and seeing the moving van, to his Corvette shooting out in front of the bus.

"He has a Corvette?" she asked after we'd gotten our food and headed to the back corner where we usually sat.

"Seriously? That's your takeaway? I tell you about"—I lowered my voice again—"the Old Woman waiting on his sidewalk—not even the street, but the *sidewalk*—and you ask about his car?"

"Hey, Ella." Odis, a guy in a couple of my classes with brown hair and large teeth who insisted I join the chess club even though I was terrible at the game, waved from the other end of the table we were passing. His friends all stopped talking and eating to gawk. "I paged you last night."

I waved back, only slowing long enough to respond, "Yeah, sorry. I was trying to finish my homework before the electricity went out."

"Oh right. Did you finish— Okay, see ya." He waved again as Scarlet and I increased the distance between us and his table.

"Thank goodness he didn't ask you to sit with him. It's so awkward when he forces you to come up with a reason why you don't want to," Scarlet said.

"It's not that I don't want to, it's just that..."

"You don't want to. Just admit it."

"It's more his friends that I don't want to sit with."

"Well, don't tell him that. He'll try to get you alone. Anyway, I take your point that your story had a lot of bombshells, but a *Corvette*? Who has a Corvette in this town? I wonder where he's from..."

"Are you guys talking about Braiden?" someone whispered from behind us.

I turned to find Shana, a girl I shared a few classes with and who hung out at our lunch table when she couldn't weasel into the popular table. We saw her nine days out of ten.

She tilted her face down with a coy smile, her signature look when she had juicy information. "C'mon." She jerked her head in the direction of the table. Her poufy bangs, curled in layers that increased her height by three inches, didn't even shift.

"What's up, beanpole?" someone said as we followed her.

Scarlet hunched, trying to reduce her height. "I hate being so tall," she

muttered.

“Five-ten is supermodel height,” I said. “If you could walk in a straight line without tripping, you could rule the basketball court. I’d kill to be your height.”

“She’s right,” Shana said over her shoulder, clearly not realizing we didn’t want this particular conversation shouted to the whole cafeteria. “Your height and weight are perfect for modeling. Cindy Crawford is five-nine and a half.”

“You can have my height and I’ll take your face,” Scarlet said to me. “And hair. And boobs.”

“Ew, Buffalo Bill.” Shana glanced back with a disgusted look. “Next you’ll be throwing her down a well and yelling about lotion.”

“What...” Scarlet’s voice caught.

“*Silence of the Lambs*,” I said.

“Oh. My mom wouldn’t let me go to the theater to watch that.”

Shana threw us another look. “You’re not sheltered. *Not!*”

I ignored Shana. “When it comes out on VHS, you can watch it at my house.”

“I’m not sure I want to, now,” Scarlet muttered.

Shana threaded between two tables and was jostled when someone leaned back unexpectedly and bumped her. “Watch out, butthead.” Shana rammed into his back with her upper thigh.

“Cut it out!” the boy said.

Shana had already passed him, leaving us to get the dirty look.

We arrived at our table, the second from the wall in the last row. Shana slapped her orange tray down, making her milk wobble. A group of sophomores at the next table looked over at the commotion. Shana didn’t notice. “Have I got some juiciness for you...”

She unslung her backpack and dropped it to the ground before kicking it under the table. Next she swung her legs dramatically over the bench seat, one after the other, and waved for Scarlet and me to sit down.

“First.” Shana zeroed in on me. “I heard you got detention. *What?*” The word was a screech.

I groaned for effect. “Two detentions.”

“Two? What did you do, steal one of Susan’s pens?” She snickered and, before I could answer, moved on. “I’ve got the skinny on Braiden,” she said in a singsong voice.

“Oh, did you know that—”

Shana raised her voice over Scarlet. “From what I heard, his family lived in New York City.” She paused for effect. “Manhattan.”

“Oh wow. I’ve always wanted to go there,” Scarlet said.

“What’s he doing here?” I asked.

“Well...” Shana took a bite of her pizza and chewed for a moment, a delightedly smug expression on her face. “A-p-parent-ly he got in a lot of trouble in New York. A real rebel.”

“What did he do?” Scarlet paused with a French fry halfway to her mouth.

“All kinds of stuff. Vandalism, rowdy behavior, breaking and entering...” Scarlet gasped. Shana nodded dramatically. “Yup. That was the final straw, I guess. His dad up and moved the family here.”

“But...why here?” I asked.

The sophomore girls openly looked our way. Apparently they’d been eavesdropping, and were now waiting for an answer to that head-scratcher of a question.

Shana noticed and leaned back a little so she’d be in the spotlight. She took another bite of her pizza as we all hung on her every word.

“It seems...” she started.

“Oh my God, there he is!” One of the girls at the other table flung out a pointed finger.

Her friend dragged it out of the sky. “Don’t act like such a div, Jenny,” the friend chided.

A hush fell over the cafeteria. Movement slowed, all eyes on the newcomer who was entering with a group.

I groaned and sank in my seat.

Right beside Braiden, as chummy as two chums could be, was none other than my red-headed nemesis, Dirk.

CHAPTER SIX

“Looks like he’s already in with the popular group,” Scarlet said as she rose in her seat to get a better look. “Dang.”

“What’d you think, he was gonna hang out with you?” Shana rolled her eyes. One of the sophomore girls scoffed and glanced back before leaning over to whisper something to her friend. They giggled.

“Well, it’s not like he’d hang out with you, either,” Scarlet shot back. “And no way would he hang out with a bunch of der-brained sophomores.”

The gigglers turned around to shoot her a nasty look.

“Of course he’s in the popular group,” I said. “He has money and he’s attractive. But why would he be friendly with Dirk? Why is Dirk even in that group, with his Whac-A-Mole face and bad attitude? I’ve never understood it.”

“Dirk may be a dog, but he’s one of the best football players,” Scarlet said thoughtfully. “That’s why. He’s friends with the other great football players, and they’re all rich, handsome, and famous. Birds of a feather...”

“No one in this town is rich,” I said. “Or famous.”

“Braiden might just be the first. And that makes him the hottest bachelor in town.” Shana finished off her pizza before turning to look behind her. I wasn’t sure what she was looking for. Unless she stood up, all she’d be able to see was crimped, permed, or teased hair.

After lunch, I snuck out an apple as I took the long way around the school to my calculus class. That homework assignment was still unfinished, and I knew I’d get crap for the state of my book. I just wanted a little more time before the drama pressed down on me.

Finally, unable to stave off the inevitable any longer, I turned into the

hallway before coming to an immediate stop. A certain new student stood fiddling with his locker. He'd undergone a style change that I probably would've noticed at lunch if I hadn't been so distracted by the Red Monster. The collar was popped on his dress shirt and a few buttons had been undone down the front. His tie hung loose at his neck and half his shirt was untucked from his slacks. The look screamed *Footloose*, a dated trend, but the way Braiden carried it made it seem fresh and rad. He'd be handsome in virtually anything, I had no doubt.

He kicked his locker in a fit of rage, and all the things Shana had said about him came flooding into my mind. Words like dangerous, and bad boy, and rebel...

And all I could see was the Old Woman standing in front of his house, pointing at me.

She must have plans. *Must*. Why else would she try to send a guy like him over to me?

Before I could decide what to do, Braiden stepped back and glanced my way. His gaze caught on me immediately, the creep standing in the middle of the hallway, staring at him. If he'd forgotten seeing me in the window yesterday or last night, the memory had probably just been jogged loose.

"Sorry." I yanked my gaze down and half turned to walk the other way. But my classroom was in his direction. Not only would it look weird if I about-faced, but I'd also be late.

"Do you know how to work these things?" Braiden called down the hall.

I started and then jabbed my chest with my pointer finger before looking around, wanting to make sure he was talking to me. A skinny kid with a big nose and glasses was standing a little behind me, exactly in the same position—pointing at himself and looking around.

"Ella, right?" Braiden called, his voice ringing with frustration.

"He means you." The skinny kid turned and bolted out of the hall.

"Isn't that your name?" Braiden said, facing me with his hands on his hips.

"Y-yes." I started forward. "Yes, Ella. How'd you know? Did your mom tell you?"

"My mother? What?" He shot me a confused look, tinged with exasperation.

"Never mind." I waved the thought away. "Do you need help?"

"I mean, I shouldn't, right? It's a lock. They aren't that complicated." He

gestured at it angrily. “But the damn thing won’t open.”

I grimaced at the vehemence. “Maybe they gave you the wrong combination?” I asked.

“The wrong permutation, you mean,” he mumbled, shaking his head. “I opened it when they first assigned it to me, then again right before lunch. There’s no reason it shouldn’t open now, but I’ve tried it—”

The second bell drowned out his words.

He threw me an apologetic look. “Sorry, I’ve made you late. You can go if you want. I’ll figure it out.”

I sighed as the last red door on the left swung shut. “Too late. I’m officially tardy.” I sighed again for good measure. “It’s par for the course. I didn’t finish my homework, anyway.” I took the slip of paper from him. “Can I have the...” I huffed out a laugh, remembering his offhanded remark. “You’re right. Technically, the lock is a permutation, not a combination, since the order of the numerical sequence matters.”

“Yeah,” he said without inflection, studying the piece of paper in my hand.

“Right, okay.” I studied the locker assignment slip and began with step one in my personal problem-solving guide: check to make sure you’re not missing the obvious.

He didn’t have the right locker.

I laughed and handed the slip back to him, pointing at the locker next to the one he’d tried to kick his way into. “Remember it this way. Yours is the one with the yo mama joke written across it sparkly gold letters. This is some other poor shmuck’s locker.”

A stubborn expression crossed his face and he opened his mouth, probably to argue, but then his eyes did their own spot check between the paper and the locker number, and a smile took over. He chuckled softly. “I’m an idiot.”

“Hey, you not only know the difference between permutations and combinations, but can actually apply that knowledge to real life. You are certainly not an idiot.” I pointed at the dent in the bottom of the locker. “Or even-keeled.”

“I have a small rage problem,” he said with a smile. It seemed like he was joking, but as he turned the dial on his lock, I noticed the white, jagged scars on his hands and fingers. Standing next to me, his size came into perspective. He was at least seven inches taller than me, with a robust frame coated with

lean muscle. His bicep was large enough to strain his shirt as he pulled the lock open, and his stomach was flat and probably defined. He was a powerful, well-built man...and the Old Woman had pointed him in my direction.

Cold washed over me and I stepped away. I did need to warn him about the danger he was in—or we both were in, or maybe just I was in—and try to help him shut her out, but at the moment, all I could think of was him hitting me over the head and dragging me up the street to McKinley Mansion. I needed some time and space to shrug off these heebie-jeebies and let logic take over.

“All right, then,” I said, backing into the middle of the desolated hall. “Glad that worked out.”

“Hey, wait. Ella.” He held up his hand. “I can walk you to your class and explain why you were late. They’ll probably give you a pass for helping the new guy.”

I clenched my fist, because that would be totally rad for popularity points, but the shivers were still running rampant, warning me to steer clear. “Nope. I’m fine. Honestly. See ya.”

I started walking. A book thunked in his locker before the harsh sound of metal slamming made me jump. I picked up speed, now power-walking through the hall.

“Ella—”

I glanced back and he was behind me, his pace much too fast for a guy who planned to let me get away.

My heart leapt and the events of the night before replayed in my memory. The poltergeist, who’d plagued the children of town for over a century, standing beneath Braiden’s window as he looked down at her, holding a candle, the light flickering across his face and creating deep shadows in his eyes and the hollows of his cheeks. Like a ghoul ordered to kidnap me.

Did her influence on him extend into the daytime?

My breath caught in my throat. I gasped for air. I reached the door and grabbed the handle.

“Ella, I think we’re—”

I pulled it open and stepped in. Mr. Williams, the calculus teacher, stopped what he was saying mid-sentence and turned to face me. Everyone’s eyes in the classroom snapped up, finding me immediately.

A new fear washed over me, this one of the social awkwardness variety.

“Look what the cat dragged in.” Buffy leaned in her seat so she could see me better. Her pink-glossed lips twisted into a smirk. “Tardy. Doesn’t that mean another trip to the principal’s office? Detention number three, here you come.”

A presence filled in behind me. A large hand covered my shoulder, followed by a gentle yet firm push, making me take another step into the room.

“Sorry, Mr. Williams,” Braiden said as he followed me in. With the other hand, he gave Mr. Williams a yellow slip of paper. “I’ve been assigned to this class. Ella was just helping me with my locker and showing me around. I apologize for keeping her.”

Buffy’s mouth dropped open in disbelief. Shock quickly turned to anger and her eyes narrowed.

“I see.” Mr. Williams glanced at the slip. “Yes, Mr. Morris mentioned you would be starting early. Have a seat. Ella, you too.”

Three empty seats were spread out around the room, one next to Odis, where I usually sat, one at the front, and the third in the back.

Braiden didn’t take his hand off my shoulder. “Actually, sir, since the school year is already underway, the other teachers paired me up with a classmate to get me up to speed.”

Mr. Williams paused in turning to the chalkboard. His brow furrowed. “I was under the impression you’d be ahead of us, what with the prep school you previously attended and your high grade point average.”

Braiden directed me past my seat, leaving a confused Odis in our wake, and headed toward the open seat at the rear. “That’s true, sir. The only thing is, the style of teaching is a little different here. It would be helpful to have a guide.” He stopped us near the open seat.

“Fine—”

Buffy’s hand shot up. “I can do it, Mr. Williams.”

“—Ella, as the leading points holder, see that Mr. Rhodes gets what he needs.” Mr. Williams waved us away and finished the turn to the chalkboard.

“And you thought you’d gotten away,” Braiden said in a deep tone, his eyes boring into mine.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A SHIVER of fear worked down my spine, softened somewhat by the glimmer in his blue eyes. He was kidding, and while I wished that would erase the danger, it didn't.

Had any other popular kid ordered me to take a different seat, I would have scoffed and rolled my eyes before sitting exactly where I wanted to. But I needed some one-on-one time with Braiden, and this might be my best opportunity to have a safe chat with him.

"Fine." I nudged the leg of the occupied chair in front of his, it being closer than the one next to him, given the spacing of the rows. Andrea was a brainy girl who could run circles around me in French and daydreaming, but wasn't so adept at math. Her hair spread out from her head like a fuzzy halo. "I need this seat. Because of the new guy." I hooked a thumb over my shoulder at Braiden.

Her gaze found him before she looked at Mr. Williams, who was scrawling a problem across the chalkboard. Instead of landing back on me, her gaze traveled across the way to Odis. Her recently downturned smile headed in the other direction.

Face reddening, she clutched her book to her chest and grabbed a strap of her backpack before standing. I motioned for Braiden to take the seat.

"I'll sit in this one." Braiden touched the back of the vacant chair behind it.

Yeah, right. If he was hanging out with Dirk, he might get ideas. I didn't need any more gum in my hair.

"Nope. This one or no dice." I nudged the chair leg again with my foot, making the recently evacuated seat/desk combo slide over a fraction.

“Is there a problem?” Mr. Williams asked.

Andrea paused next to the desk in front of Odis, her book still tightly clutched to her chest.

“Does he really need someone to help him?” Odis asked, turned sideways in his seat so he could see the room at large. He gestured our way. “Anyone in their senior year can figure out how to turn in homework and write their names on tests.”

“How do you know? Did you recently move from New York City?” Buffy shot Odis a scowl before giving Braiden the pouty sort of smile all the guys seemed to love. “Fella obviously doesn’t want to help you. I can do it. I know the ropes.”

“What did she call you?” Braiden asked.

“I think you need to focus on your own homework, Buffy,” Mr. Williams said. “Ella, take a seat. We’re already behind.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Williams.” I straight-armed Braiden, forcing him to step back, and then walked in front of him and swung down into the last seat in the row.

“You too...Braiden.” Mr. Williams motioned for him to sit.

A sexy, lopsided grin worked up Braiden’s face. “Yes, sir.” He moved slowly, taking his seat, his mischievous gaze rooted to mine for as long as possible.

My heart went *thump-thump-thump*.

My brain tried to smother my heart.

“Now. What have I put on the board?” Mr. Williams asked the class.

“Greek,” Sam, my locker neighbor, called out. “Or is it Sanskrit?”

“Very humorous, Sam,” Mr. Williams drawled.

I pulled out my book and placed it on my desk before grabbing out my binder. I flipped it open as Braiden hopped around in his seat, the metal legs chirping against the linoleum. After pulling out my incomplete homework, I took out a couple more pages for note taking and put the binder away. His plastic seat hit my desk as he turned it around, the sudden contact jolting me.

He was shifting his desk sideways.

“What are you doing?” I asked as Mr. Williams said, “Brandon, is there a problem?”

“Braiden,” he corrected, reaching toward me.

“What’s that?” Mr. Williams put a hand to his ear.

“You have to speak up,” I muttered. “He’s notoriously hard of hearing.”

Braiden pointed at his chest. "I'm Brai-den."

I edged back in my seat as he reached toward my chest. He hooked his fingers around my desk and pulled, dragging my desk/seat combo closer to his.

"What are you doing?" I repeated in low tones.

"I apologize. Braiden. Is there a problem?" Mr. Williams said, holding the chalk to the side as he awaited an explanation. The rest of the class had turned to look.

"This is all new to me, Mr. Williams," Braiden said smoothly, and something about his tone rang false. "I just want to make it easier for me to ask Ella questions in a way that won't disturb the class or take up valuable teaching time." He clasped his hands on his desk, a mockery of Mr. Perfect Student.

I narrowed my eyes at him, but Mr. Williams didn't seem to hear or see the same things I did. He blinked for a moment, considering the request, and then nodded. "Good thinking, Brandon. Now, class, let's turn our attention to what I have on the board."

Realizing I had no dog in this fight, I took a pencil out of my front flap before placing it in the little groove at the top of the desk. I tucked my papers under my book and then opened it to last night's problems. As expected, a quarter of the page was covered in hard green wax.

I picked at the edge with my nail, trying to pry it off. It pulled at the paper before a small rip made me pause. The best-case scenario was that the wax would peel off all of the text, as I'd already discovered. The worst, and more likely, possibility was that the whole page would rip out.

"Crap," I muttered. Maybe I could appeal to the state's historic society for the money to replace the book, since they were the psychos who owned McKinley Mansion...

"Do you do your homework by candlelight?"

Braiden's voice wasn't the light and teasing tone I'd grown accustomed to. This time it was deeper and rough. Plagued by the memory of the night before.

"No. Can I borrow your book for a second? I need to finish up my homework really quick. I can use your excuse for making me tardy as my reason for not turning it in when I got here."

He passed over his book without a word, swapping it for mine. I didn't complain. He could have it. The fine would then be on him.

“You spoke about...last night,” he said, unheard this far in the back of the room. Mr. Williams had launched into his lecture, but I hadn’t registered a word. I’d have to ask Odis for the notes. “I saw you. In your window.”

I kept my face pointed down at the book so he wouldn’t see the flush that had infused my cheeks. *Yup, that was me, staring like a creep. Twice.*

“Did you...” He leaned toward the front of the room. I couldn’t see his face, but I could read the stiffness in his shoulders. He was not processing this well.

“Do you believe in ghosts?” I whispered. Might as well start there.

His face came around and I marveled that he could make even a constipated expression look hot. He didn’t answer.

“Before last night, I mean.” I finished writing down the problem before meeting his wary eyes. “Before last night, did you, even a little bit, believe in ghosts? You can answer honestly. I won’t judge, either way.”

“No. They’re fun to watch shows about, but in real life, no, I didn’t... I don’t...” Frustration crossed his face.

I held up a hand. “I get it. More than fifty percent of people don’t believe in ghosts. One in two.” I pointed at myself. “This one does.” I pointed at him. “That one does not. We validate the statistic.”

A grin broke through his serious expression.

I glanced up at the board, hoping Odis was getting all this down. “The thing is.” I went back to my homework problem. “You live in a house that will start to mess with your mind. It’s one of the most haunted houses in the town, if the Johnsons could be believed. So, if I were you, I’d keep an open mind or you’ll go crazy. Like their dog. Also, prepare for a lot of barking from your dog and dirty looks from your neighbors. Including my dad. He cannot stand the racket.”

I scratched my head, squinting down at the paper.

“Did you see me last night?” he asked.

“Here’s the thing.” I ran my fingers through my hair, which was a mistake, given the amount of hairspray I’d used on the elaborate tease I’d put in to give it body. I should’ve just gotten a perm with my mother. “I need to bust out this problem, then I’m all ears.”

He leaned toward my paper, looking at the problem. A moment later, he turned and swung his arm around, barely missing my face with his elbow. He captured the book and took it back to his desk, but didn’t return mine.

“Okay then.” I pushed Mr. Williams’s drone of a voice to the back of my

head and focused on the problem. It was just like the others, so all I really had to do was apply the same framework.

I was halfway done when a sheet of paper was slapped down at the side of my desk. As I watched his hand pull away, I realized two things. One was that both of Braiden's hands were marked the same way, with little scars around his knuckles, and two was that he'd finished the problem I'd been working on in less than half the time.

Eyes wide, I blinked at him. "How far ahead are you?"

"Did you see me last night?"

I pulled his page in front of me and looked over his problem and the half I'd finished on mine. They were identical. His was just complete.

"Dang, you *are* smart." I began copying immediately while silently considering his question. I went with the information-gathering approach. "You couldn't tell I was looking at you?"

"I...wasn't sure if my eyes were playing tricks."

"I did see you," I said, glancing at the board again to check where Mr. Williams was in his lesson. He was like clockwork—he lectured, walked through a problem, gave notes on how to solve it, and then asked questions. I just had to make sure I was paying attention by the time the question-and-answer portion of class came around. "You were at your window with a candle in your hand."

He rested one of his elbows on my desk and stared at the board quietly for a moment. I wondered if he was refreshing himself on the information in Mr. Williams's lecture.

"My room had a bed, a couple of other pieces of furniture, and a lot of boxes in it," he said softly, still looking at the board. "I hadn't unpacked my clothes. This isn't even clean." He plucked at his shirt.

"That's...probably not something you want to tell girls. We're sensitive about hygiene—"

"Even if I had unpacked, I am nearly certain I didn't have a candle in those boxes."

There it was.

It was hard to be a nonbeliever when the unbelievable happened.

"Firstly, you should always have candles handy. We lose power more than is probably normal. Secondly, yeah," I continued, "the candle thing. That's...something I need to talk to you about. But to really understand it, you need a history lesson. And honestly, you probably need to spend a few

nights in your new house to open your mind some. Assuming you don't want to go crazy."

Braiden shifted, and I could tell he was uncomfortable. His new life would be a shock to the system, I could tell. "The candle...thing. Why is that a thing? What's the thing?"

I grinned at his confusion. It was endearing for some reason—it made him less of a rich and handsome god, and more of a normal guy. More personable. "The candle wasn't just in your room—it was lit, right?"

The blood drained from his face.

At the front of the room, Mr. Williams wrapped up what he was saying and put his chalk on the metal tray below the chalkboard with precise movements. He wiped off his hands and turned to the class.

I straightened up and tapped Braiden's arm. "Here we go. Question time. Look alive."

"Now, who would like to tell me—"

"How did you know my candle was lit?" Braiden asked, his voice a little too loud.

James, the kid sitting in the row next to Braiden, looked over, his eyebrows climbing his forehead.

"*Shhh.*" I gave Braiden a light shove as two people raised their hands to answer Mr. Williams's question.

"Brandon, please pay attention," Mr. Williams said. "Ella needs this information, too."

"It's Braiden." He shifted so his body was straight in his seat, facing the front corner of the room.

"Sorry, yes. Braiden. And Buffy, there are better things you could be doing than putting on lip gloss," Mr. Williams said. "Like paying attention."

A smattering of laughter filled the room. Buffy's expression soured and she rammed the end of the lip gloss into the tube before shoving it into her bag.

Braiden didn't say one more word to me throughout the rest of class, nor did he pay attention. He stared out at nothing, or looked down, studying his hands.

When the bell rang, he slid out of his seat, leaving it crooked, and slung his backpack over his shoulder. By the time I had stood, he was waiting for me.

"What's going on?" Braiden asked.

I glanced at everyone moving toward the door with us, most giving Braiden furtive glances. Buffy's look before she exited the classroom was downright predatory.

We'd had a few new people in the school before, but none had drawn this kind of interest. His looks, his body, and his money clearly put him on the "hot" list. I didn't want to spoil that for him.

"Here's the thing. You have the rare opportunity to learn from my mistakes." James looked at us again, his speculative gaze now on Braiden. I changed up what I was going to say. "I know the ins and outs of Mr. Williams's class."

A frustrated look crossed Braiden's face, but then he noticed James's assessing stare, and his expression shifted to a savage look. Hard, intense eyes and a suddenly taut body emanated a ferociousness that no bully at this school could master.

James's eyes widened and he ripped his gaze down to his feet. I didn't blame him. *No one* would want to mess with that.

"I'm not worried about making your mistakes, Ella," Braiden said in a low voice I could barely hear. "I just want to know what's going on." We reached the door, and he slowed and shifted just enough to ensure I had the doorway to myself. He hung back a little before following me, not only being a gentleman himself, but ensuring the other guys crowding around the exit did the same.

"Thanks," I mumbled, embarrassed and not sure why.

"Did you see the woman on the sidewalk last night?" Braiden blurted.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“OH NO, DON’T TELL ME—” Dirk swaggered forward with his blaring red hair and condescending smile. He looked down on me before slapping Braiden on the back. “She’s been filling your head with urban legends, huh?”

I held my breath. Dirk had just given Braiden a great *out*, assuming I played hero and went with it. Otherwise, that outburst would seal Braiden’s fate in this town as the next attention-seeking crazy person.

“She has to seem interesting in some way.” Buffy smirked, drifting to Braiden’s other side. “Little does she know it only makes her sound desperate.”

“Why are you always around?” I asked Dirk. “Every time I look up, there you are. Do you have nothing better to do?”

He spread his hands out and grinned. “Why are you always noticing where I am?”

“Your hair is like a beacon. It probably glows in the dark.”

A kid passing us in the hall coughed out a laugh.

Dirk’s face went red, and I couldn’t tell if it was from embarrassment or anger. “I was in the area and thought I’d drop by to see if my buddy Braiden escaped all the nerds that plague this school. Clearly he did not.”

“The poor guy has to sit with her.” Buffy popped out a hip. Her arm glanced off Braiden’s. “And now we know what she was filling his head with.”

“The woman on the sidewalk is an urban legend?” Braiden asked, his eyes tight.

“Oh no,” Dirk said sarcastically. “She’s real. Isn’t that right, Fella?”

I rolled my eyes and turned toward my next class.

“Wait, I want to hear this.” Braiden caught up to me.

“No, dude, you really don’t, trust me.” Dirk stuck by his side and Buffy hurried up to fall in on the other side. The three trailed me like a bad smell.

“Who is this woman?” Braiden persisted.

“She’s a woman that used to—”

“Okay look,” Dirk said, cutting off Buffy. “You want to know, I’ll tell ya. You know that big old house at the end of our street?”

My ears might’ve deceived me, but it seemed like Dirk put the emphasis on *our*, turning that simple question snobby.

“That giant old place at the end?” Braiden asked.

“Yeah. It’s vacant. Has been for decades. Back in the day it was called—”

“The turn of the century,” I cut in.

Dirk paused. “Like I said...*back in the day*, it was called McKinley Mansion—”

“Jiminy Christmas, Dirk, if you’re going to tell him about it, at least give him *one* correct fact.” I saw Scarlet waiting by her fifth-period class with her head in her book. She glanced up and saw me approaching. She was about to start forward when she recognized my entourage. Her eyes widened and she froze.

“Then why don’t you tell him, butt-munch,” Dirk spat.

I couldn’t say I blamed her for ditching me yet again.

Nate and Leo from the football team, both solid blocks of muscle on legs, sidled up. They slapped Dirk five and joined up, walking down the hall in a loose cluster. The way in front of us opened up, as if a magical force parted the sea of students.

I couldn’t hide a crooked smile. This was fantastic! So much easier than zigging and zagging through everyone and apologizing if I bumped into someone. A girl could get used to this setup.

“Hello? Earth to dweeb,” Buffy called.

A girl *could* get used to it, but clearly I wouldn’t get the chance.

I sighed as I turned into the covered outdoor walkway. “Robert McKinley built what would later be called McKinley Mansion in 1853. He spent a fortune on it, building up a home of lavish luxury this area had never seen before. It boasted grand stairwells and pricey imported wallpapers, among other things. He died young of a strange illness, leaving behind a wife and no children. The wife, Florence, inherited the entire McKinley fortune, but it

was said that what she really wanted was children—”

“Dude, where’s the campfire and s’mores, right?” I recognized that as Nate’s voice, but when I glanced back, I saw my three poltergeists still keeping pace. Behind them the group of jocks had grown, and I wondered why they weren’t scurrying off to their next classes. “It would be better if she had a flashlight under her face.”

“She was always the best at telling ghost stories,” came a girl’s voice I didn’t recognize. “Remember? My mom banned her from my slumber parties.”

Ah. Buffy’s friend, Maria, once my friend, back when first graders weren’t so discerning about the social hierarchy.

“The problem is, she believed she was in them,” Buffy said. The rest started laughing.

“Shut up, I want to hear this,” Braiden admonished. The voices behind me died down.

“She took on another husband, but still no children came,” I continued. “That husband, from old money, also died early, though the cause was never known. He left her all his assets, ensuring neither she nor any children she might have would ever have to work again. Florence was up in her years at this point—at least for the time—and still childless.

“Taking matters into her own hands, she married a younger man of little fortune, hoping his vitality would ensure her children. It was after they were together for nearly five years that all the trouble in the town started.” I slowed as I reached my class and checked the time. I had a couple minutes. I turned to face the crowd of popular kids, which had grown quite large, and noticed an additional swarm of kids following on the fringe. No matter how much they mocked me for believing, the people in this town, secret believers and skeptics alike, loved a good ghost story.

I swallowed, trying to push past the stage fright.

“Go on,” Braiden said, his eyes soft. For once, Dirk didn’t harass me. The kids around me were actually leaning forward in their eagerness for me to continue.

“One dark and stormy night, a woman was seen strolling through the middle of the street. The rain didn’t seem to touch her. The wind didn’t seem to move her clothes. Several people claimed to recognize her as Florence McKinley. The next morning, when the townspeople awoke, a child had gone missing. No locks had been tampered with; no doors had been forced. The

child was simply...gone.”

“Ooh,” one of the jocks in the back said. The whole group shifted and moved, and Claud’s head poked out, his eyes wide. “Tell us what happened when they searched the mansion.”

“*Shhh.*” Leo elbowed him. “Let her get to it.”

“A full-scale search was put into effect. The nearby towns were searched, the empty fields and forests combed, but they couldn’t find the child anywhere. Finally, they knocked on Florence’s door. She opened her home to the search. They didn’t find any hint of a child, but there was a room dedicated to each of her dead husbands, both of them full of belongings. Eerie places, organized like the men might come home at any moment.” I held up a finger. The crowd as a whole leaned slightly forward. “The dead husbands, I mean. Not the one who was supposedly living.”

“What do you mean supposedly?” someone asked. “I don’t remember this part.”

“He wasn’t there. They couldn’t find hide nor hair of him. Florence said he’d gone out. ‘Where?’ they asked. ‘We’ve searched the whole town. We didn’t see him.’ ‘Traveling,’ she cut in. ‘He went traveling. He’ll be back shortly.’ But the days came and went, and her last husband never returned. And neither did the child. A year went by without any incident. The storms came and went, and though the townspeople continued to worry and hold their children tightly, none went missing. Until the same night, a year later. The winds howled. The rain poured down. Lightning lit the sky. On that night, a few people saw a woman who resembled Florence McKinley wandering through town. In a daze, they said. Stumbling down the middle of the street—”

“Why didn’t someone help her?” a girl I didn’t recognize said from the outskirts of the now-massive group.

“Because it was storming or something, *shhhh!*” Nate made a shushing gesture.

I forged on as if he were right, hoping that meant I didn’t have to answer the question, because it was a good one, and I honestly had no idea.

“And on that night, two children, ages four and ten, went missing from different homes.”

“No,” someone breathed.

I checked my watch. “I have to finish really quickly because the bell is about to ring.”

“Go, go, go!” Nate made a circular gesture with his hand.

“Yeah,” someone else agreed.

“No doors were forced. No one saw an abduction. The kids were just... gone. Well, the town looked. They searched. And they finally found their way back to the McKinley doorstep. Once more they were let in, and once more they came up empty.”

“What about the husband?” someone in the gathering crowd called out.

“‘Traveling,’ she said.” I shook my head. “‘You’ve just missed him. He is off traveling again.’”

“Yeah, right,” Nate said, and crossed his arms.

“They looked all through her house, but they found nothing. Not a sign of the children, or her missing husband. So they went about their lives. What else could they do? They had nothing on her. But just six months later, it happened again. The same as before. Well, now the townspeople were fed up. They went to her house with pitchforks and torches, hellbent on dragging her out—”

“You all need to get to class,” my sixth-period teacher, Miss Potters, said as she appeared in the doorway. The bell echoed through the halls. The large crowd standing in front of me all looked up in confusion.

“But we need to hear the end of the story,” Nate called out, refusing to let the now-scurrying students move him.

“They dragged her out of her home and stoned her to death in the middle of the street,” Miss Potters said with clipped words, “without a trial. And guess what? The mysterious abductions continued. Clearly someone else was responsible, but a woman was blamed, even after death. It was a black spot in our town’s history and we shouldn’t pass off tall tales as truth. Ella, you’ve been in detention for this. Many times. You should know better.”

“Oh man. They stoned her to death? That’s a bad way to go.” Nate drifted away with Leo, shaking his head. “I hadn’t heard that part.”

“Out of all I said, that’s what he chose as the takeaway?” Miss Potters mumbled.

“I apologize, Miss Potters.” Braiden stepped forward with a charming smile. “I’d heard someone mention the mansion in third period, so I asked Ella about it. She was just telling me the town’s urban legend. I think we’re all fully aware of the falseness of the story, and the injustices women have faced throughout history. It was purely for curiosity’s sake, believe me.”

“Yes, well.” Miss Potters blushed a little and adjusted her reading glasses.

If any hair and makeup trends had knocked on her door in the last decade, she hadn't bothered to answer. "Fine." She grabbed the edge of the door and ushered me inside. "Just remember, there are two sides to every story."

"Yes, ma'am," Braiden said.

"And don't believe everything you hear. Especially in regards to this town being haunted."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Do you want a note so you won't be marked tardy?"

I stalled in entering the door. Since when did Miss Potters bend the rules? Braiden had allowed himself to be tardy on purpose, just like everyone else.

"That's okay, ma'am. I have a free period. My physics credits from the summer transferred over."

"Oh. Of course."

I drifted into the class, thinking on what Miss Potters had said. She was certainly correct—history was peppered with false accusations, and women often got a crappy deal. But in this instance, I'd seen it with my own eyes. People like Miss Potters thought I lied about the Old Woman to get attention. They thought Alex and Janine had, too. But we'd all seen the same thing. Felt the same things. And now they were gone. It was that woman, Florence, who kept trying to will me out of my house. I'd looked up her picture, and it matched. She wanted me to follow her to the mansion.

A place from which no kid ever returned.

That wasn't fabrication, that was really happening, whether they wanted to believe it or not. The question was: would logic overrule Braiden's memory?

CHAPTER NINE

THE NEXT MORNING, I stared off into space at the bus stop, sleepy-eyed but relieved that I'd beaten Dirk out of the house. Nightmares had plagued me, the anxiety of this new situation with Braiden manifesting in one chase scene after another. Sometimes he caught me and dragged me to the mansion before flinging me through the front door. Other times I escaped, only to get trapped in a small cage or fall into a pit filled with murky water. And still other times he wouldn't drag me away at all. He'd wrap those big arms around me and kiss me, his lips soft and his hands exploring.

Okay, so some of those dreams hadn't been nightmares at all, but they'd still gotten my heart racing.

I wiped the sweat off my forehead despite the chill in the air.

"Hey." Carla waved at me with eyebrows lifted in annoyance.

Surprised she was acknowledging my presence, I pulled an earphone away from my ear. "Huh?"

"This is the single best day of your life. The. Single. Best. Don't blow it."

"What?"

"Hello?" She jabbed her finger through the air, pointing over my shoulder.

"Ella," I heard, the voice sending shivers down my spine.

A shiny red Corvette sat by the opposite curb with Braiden's arm hanging out of the open window. He smiled at me in greeting and I could just see the hoodie bunched up around his neck. No suit for him today. He was dressing down to match the student body. "Hey. Do you take the bus?"

I felt my face flush and tucked a strand of crimped hair behind my ear. I'd put a little extra effort into getting ready that morning in an attempt to turn

my average, not-all-that-trendy appearance into something a little more exciting. “Yeah. My parents want me to buy my own car, but I don’t have a job, so…”

“Don’t admit that to him,” Carla said through her teeth. She moved up to my side and flicked her hair over her shoulder. “Make up something else, quick.”

“That’s a bummer,” Braiden said, pulling his arm into the car.

“Too late. Fine. Keep him talking,” Carla advised, elbowing me forward.

“They’re trying to teach me responsibility,” I blurted.

“Oh my God, you are hopeless,” Carla said. A smile spread across Braiden’s face and Carla mumbled, “Holy smokes, he is super freaking hot.”

“How’s that going?” Braiden asked.

I shrugged. “As well as can be expected, I guess.”

“Good answer. That was a good one,” Carla murmured. “Now turn the conversation to wishing you could get a ride.” Carla clearly thought she was a dating guru.

“I wish *I* could get a ride,” said one of the guys behind me. “That’s a really nice car. I’ve never ridden in a sports car. Have you?”

I tried to glance back to see if he was talking to me, but before I could turn, Carla grabbed my arm to keep me steady. “Keep talking to him. You don’t want him to get bored and leave.”

“No,” the other guy said. It sounded like Matt. “I’d sure like to, though.”

“So,” I said, hooking my thumb into the strap of my backpack and trying to act natural. “That’s your car?”

“It is so clear why you have no friends,” Carla muttered, shaking her head.

“It’s my dad’s, actually,” Braiden said. “He’s letting me borrow it. I might end up taking the bus with you.” He laughed and looped his arm through the open window again.

Carla clutched my arm. “That would be so radical. Oh my God.”

“But while I have it, do you want a ride?” he asked.

“Yes,” Carla answered for me. She shoved me into the street. “She definitely does, yes.”

“Are...are you sure?” I asked hesitantly, my face burning. The loud rumble of the bus approaching sounded behind me. “I don’t want to give you any trouble.”

“Yes, he is sure.” Carla shoved me again. “You are definitely sure. Go.

Do not ruin this. *Go.*”

The bus’s brakes squealed as it slowed to the stop. With a last glance back at it, I said, “Sure, okay,” and started across the street. Before I reached his car, I spotted Dirk coming out of his house. He caught sight of me and then the Corvette and stalled on the walkway, staring. He was no doubt annoyed that I got to ride to school with his new man-crush and he didn’t. *Ha!*

I put a little swagger into my strut, rounding the rear of the Corvette and pausing by the door. I thought about flipping Dirk off, but decided against it. It would look better if I completely ignored him.

The car seat was plush and the interior thrilling. The whole look and design screamed *fast* as well as *luxury*. I brushed off my clean jeans and considered running my hand across the smooth dash. “I can’t believe your dad lets you drive this.”

Braiden shrugged. “He’s driving the commuter car. No sense in letting this ride go to waste.”

“That would not be how my dad saw it at all.” I succumbed to the desire and slid my hand across the dash. “My parents barely let me drive their Bronco, and that thing is five years old.”

“Ghost stuff aside, you seem pretty tame. Why don’t they trust you?”

I huffed out a laugh as the engine roared and we shot forward. I clutched the handle on my door. “They say I need to earn my privileges, but I have a sneaking suspicion it has to do with a certain dead woman who haunts the town. They think I invent stories and daydream a lot. Basically, they’re waiting for me to get my head out of the clouds, and they think withholding things like the car will hurry that along.”

His expression closed down. “I hit the library after your ghost story. The general consensus is that the story of the old McKinley Mansion woman is just what you said—an urban legend. But children still go missing. Just three years ago, two disappeared.”

“Alex and Janine. In the same night.” I sighed and stared out the window, the familiar pang of loss in my chest. “Alex came from an abusive home. His dad was a drunk. He ran away a few times, but more often he’d just dally and not go home until after dark. Janine, him, and I had started hanging out because of our shared nighttime visitor, but he lived closer to Janine, so they saw each other more often. They could walk to each other’s houses, whereas I’d have to have my mom drive me. So when they disappeared, and after the

police came up with nothing, everyone just assumed Alex had run away for good, and he'd taken Janine with him."

"Wow. Did they question you?"

"Of course. And I told them that I was certain they'd finally succumbed to the Old Woman. That they would be in the mansion."

"And that didn't go well."

I laughed sardonically. "Nope. The cops were frustrated I was telling stories, my parents were disappointed, and I was labeled a glory seeker. They were pissed that I was still harping on about stories in a time like that." I shook my head. "That sealed my *very unpopular* coffin."

"The write-up painted a picture just like the story you told. That the kids just...disappeared."

"Yup. They're all like that. No forced entry, no broken locks, no trace. And some of the earlier stories feature kids too young to have run away."

He jerked the wheel and stomped on the gas, taking a corner much too fast. I squeezed the handle and couldn't prevent a curse from escaping my lips. The rear end slipped, threatening to fishtail. Another curse competed with the motor as Braiden corrected, keeping the car under control at a breakneck speed.

"Not used to going fast?" he asked, and I could hear the laughter in his voice.

I did not find this amusing.

"Not used to my life flashing before my eyes. Are you in a hurry, or something?"

"Nope. Just experiencing life to its fullest."

"Righteous. But can you experience life later, when I'm no longer sitting in the car?"

He laughed and the car coasted, his foot off the gas. "You aren't a thrill seeker, huh?"

"Definitely not, no. Also, my stomach doesn't have a superior track record in cars."

That whipped the smile off his face. The car slowed even more.

"It doesn't make sense, though," he said. "That teacher acted like the crimes continued because they didn't punish the right person, but these crimes extend longer than any one person's life. Sure, there could be copycats, but then there's...what I saw."

"The Old Woman."

“Except she wasn’t old. I mean, she was hunched over, but she looked more sad than old.”

“That’s just what she’s called around here. Old Woman. She died when she was middle-aged, by our standards. Anyway, to answer your question from yesterday, which you hopefully know better than to ask in public again: yes, I’ve seen the Old Woman. She walks through town whenever there’s a major storm...and sometimes on calm nights when electricity charges the air. There’s no other way to describe it. It’s just a feeling. Now that the other kids have disappeared, she only stops in front of my house. Well, before you came to town.”

“How do you know?”

“Because she is a ghost. A strong one. We’re the only ones who feel the maddening pull to follow her, but other people can see her. If anyone bothered to look out of their windows on one of the nights she walks the street, they could vouch for my story. It’s maddening! No matter what people outside of this town think about it, her existence is factual. She’s not a story, and shushing me won’t make the reality of it go away. But people want to believe it’s just an urban legend. It doesn’t make sense.”

“No one wants to go against the grain. To sound crazy. Except you. You steered the conversation away from my talking about the Old Woman and the candle. You thought everyone would persecute me.”

“They would’ve.”

His smile made my heart flutter. “Nah. It’s not what you say—it’s how you spin it. But you were ready to accept the ridicule on my behalf.”

“Sure.” I shrugged. “Why not? I’m already the town nutter; it’s expected of me. The fact that I haven’t disappeared yet means I’m just looking for attention.”

“You have to die before the town as a whole believes you.”

“Basically, yeah. But even then, they might say I went out to California or somewhere. The weird ones do things like that, didn’t you know?” I rolled my eyes.

He shook his head. “People are sheep. They’re scared of what they don’t understand. Be that as it may—”

“Where are you going?”

He finished the turn in the opposite direction of our school. “We have some time. I want to make use of it.”

My fingers tightened on the handle in the door. “How?”

He laughed. It seemed as if my sudden anxiety tickled him. “By driving. Trust me, you’re safe. You’ll always be safe with me.”

His assurance loosened a tightness I hadn’t realized I’d been carrying around since his first night in town. It was nothing more than a gentlemanly gesture, but the sentiment felt real. It felt like he’d agreed to protect me, and for some reason, a part of me believed him.

That part wasn’t logical, however. I had to remember that. He might think he could keep me safe, but he had just started living in this town. He had no idea how strong the Old Woman’s influence could be.

“Anyway,” I said. “Yeah, the Old Woman was killed in the streets like a barbarian, but the killings kept on going.”

“Did someone else move into her house?”

“Yes. Two families have lived there since, but they only stayed briefly. The first claimed—”

“That the house was haunted.”

“Yup. They were strangely closed-lipped about the place, but the stories are that they couldn’t get out of town fast enough.”

“And the second owners?”

“The second owners, a young couple with more money than sense, much like your parents for moving here”—he barked out laughter—“killed themselves. They both did. The woman hung herself, and the guy shot himself in the head a year later. The owners after that tried to set fire to the house. That’s when the state stepped in and took over. It’s a historical site. They were going to turn it into a tourist attraction, but a few years ago a group of people went in to assess the property, and there was a disturbance of some kind. The cops were really hush-hush about it, but since then, no one has gone in there. No kids, no teens, no cops. No one.”

“But...” Confusion crossed his face. “There isn’t any tape across the doors. I walked by there last night. It just looks like a big old house. How do the cops keep people out?”

I huffed. “We’ve just been talking about kids disappearing and people going crazy in that house. And you wonder why no one wants to go in?”

“Intriguing,” he said softly.

“No. Not intriguing. It’s scary.”

“Uh-huh. And the deaths keep happening, but less now?”

“It’s because of me.” I stared out the window. “So far, I’ve held out the longest. And I’ll keep holding out. I’m nearly out of here.”

He was quiet for a moment while he turned and got us back on track toward the school. We had about ten minutes before the first bell. After a while, he said, “I felt that pull you speak of. It was powerful.”

“I know. You need to resist.”

A pregnant silence stretched over us. His fist clutched the gear stick tightly. Finally, as he parked in the school parking lot, he told me what was on his mind.

“The pull was powerful. But it wasn’t to go to her. It was to protect you.”

CHAPTER TEN

“WHY WEREN’T you on the bus?” Scarlet asked as I met her at the bike rack.

I stared up at the steps. Braiden had met up with the popular crowd, quickly sucked into their core like a king.

What he’d said in the car, before quickly getting out and striding away, still rattled around in my brain.

“I got a ride,” I said, drifting toward the steps with numb feet.

I didn’t really know what to think. Or how to feel. I’d never heard of anything like this happening before, but that didn’t mean it hadn’t. Given this town’s desire to sweep anything paranormal under the carpet, maybe someone had felt like he did without admitting it. Or maybe no one had listened to them.

“Don’t tell me—you broke down and got a ride with Dirk?” Scarlet said.

I came out of my reverie with a frown. “Why in the world would I get a ride with Dirk? He’d probably take a turn at a high speed and push me out. Or bury me in an unmarked grave.”

Scarlet checked her watch as we merged with the group of students slowly working up the steps to the jam-packed double doors. “We should’ve gone around. I bet the jocks are in the middle of the hall again.”

“We don’t have time. Just don’t push me into the office door again.”

“When do your detentions start?”

“Next week. Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday.”

“Three? I thought it was two?”

I pushed out my elbows as we neared the double doors, ready for the crush of bodies squeezing together. “Mr. Morris found out that I told the McKinley ghost story and made a bunch of people late. I’m actually surprised

he only gave me one more detention and not two.”

“Did you tell your parents?”

“Mr. Morris took care of that for me last night when he called them.”

Scarlet groaned. “He really has it out for you.”

“I’m a nuisance. A menace. Someone that fills his students’ heads with misinformation. But honestly, I think it was Miss Potters who told on me. She’s not overly fond of me, either. She’s always got her eye on me.”

“Don’t take that to heart. A lot of adults do.”

“Gee, thanks.”

As predicted, the crowd of jocks and their followers waited inside the doors, stretching out to cover more than half of the hall. “This is a fire hazard,” Scarlet muttered. “They give you detention for tripping into the office door—”

“I think you’re remembering who tripped incorrectly.”

“—and telling a story that everyone knows, and yet these hooligans don’t get in any trouble for blocking traffic. It’s not fair.”

“They win us trophies.” I glanced into the group as we passed, seeing Dirk’s thatch of bright red hair next to dark and handsome Braidon. “Whatever, who cares. Soon we’ll be across the country at college and they’ll be here, trying to find work. Our life is about to begin. Theirs is about to end.”

She nodded firmly. “Exactly.”

Nate stood at the edge of the crowd, swaying his big body as he talked with Leo, occasionally hitting a younger, smaller person with his arm or shoulder and sending them careening into the crowd. Nate didn’t seem to notice. When I got close to him, trying to work my way to the other side of the hall through the press of people, he noticed me.

“Hey, Fella.” He held up his hand for a high five.

“What?” I looked around in confusion, then put my finger to my chest. “Me?”

“Don’t leave him hangin’, Fella.” Leo nodded at Nate’s hand. “Hey, I heard you got detention for telling that ghost story.”

I hesitantly offered my palm and received a blistering slap. “Ow.” I shook out my hand before dropping it, almost groaning when Leo lifted his for a high five as well.

“I’ve heard that story a few times,” Nate said as my hand received another too-hard slap. “But you told it really good. I was enthralled.” He

winked at me, his face scrunching as he did so. “We need to invite you to the next kegger in the woods. You’d be the hit of the party.”

“Have I entered the Twilight Zone?” Scarlet asked.

“Yes,” I answered Scarlet, but Nate took that as a response to him. His face brightened. “Tubular! Hey, how was the ride in the ’vette? Was it awesome?”

Ah. That was why these guys were suddenly talking to me. I was temporarily cool by association.

“He went really fast. It was great.” I smiled and picked up the pace, getting a free ride through the hall for a moment as people tried to steer clear of us.

“Did I just hear that right?” Scarlet asked, her eyes bugging out. The first bell rang and I stayed way clear of the office as we passed it. “Did you get a ride in the Corvette?”

“Yes.” I couldn’t keep the excitement and thrill from my voice, my anxiety about the ghost forgotten for the moment. “He saw me waiting for the bus and asked if I wanted a ride.”

“No way.” Scarlet beamed. “I am so excited for you. Of course, I’m also horribly jealous, but in a good way. Excited, and a good sort of jealous. How was it? Did you love it?”

“I’m here first,” Sam said as we flanked him at our lockers. “I got here first. You have to wait for me.”

“Sam, time is not on your side, buddy.” I bumped my shoulder against his.

“No.” He flinched away, only to flinch back when Scarlet stepped up. “Come on. Can’t a guy have a moment of peace?”

“It’s a locker, Sam, not a spa,” I said. Scarlet snickered.

Sam sighed and flared his elbows, pushing us away. Given his size, his efforts were fairly effective. After packing up the books he needed, he shot a final sour look at me, slammed his locker, and engaged his lock.

“At first he was going really fast and reckless.” I placed two books in my locker and balanced my lunch bag on top. “He was taking corners way too fast.”

“Uh oh. You didn’t upchuck in his car, did you?”

“No, thank heavens. I told him I might, though, and he slowed down.”

“Good. Come on, we have to hurry.” She shut her locker and waited for me to follow. We started off toward our first class. “What did you guys talk

about?”

“The conversation we couldn’t finish yesterday. About...the *sighting*.”

Her mouth rounded in an O. “Does he believe?”

“He seems to. I mean, he knows he saw what he saw. But he did a bunch of research, so I’m not sure what he thinks overall. I *do* know he doesn’t seem afraid. He’s not acting how people around here have always acted.”

“You mean scared or disbelieving?”

“Exactly, yes. And...” I was about to tell her about the strange pull he’d felt, but for some reason I found myself stalling. “Anyway. It was good while it lasted.”

“Yeah. Soon your reputation will catch up to you, everyone will make fun of him for talking to you, and he’ll steer clear.”

“Yup. Just like always.”

I said goodbye and peeled off into my classroom. More eyes stuck to me than usual as I made my way to my seat. Assessing. Calculating.

I ignored the attention and pulled out my notes. A second later, the first four periods were over and I was walking with Scarlet toward the cafeteria. The morning had passed like a blur, lost to the thoughts whirring through my head. Braiden was in my next class. All I had to do was get through lunch and I’d see him again. Then I’d...

“Hello? Earth to Ella.” Scarlet nudged me as we stood in line.

“Sorry, what?”

“Did you end up finishing your calc homework yesterday?”

“Oh.” A wave of nervous flutters filled my stomach. “Yeah. I finished it in class. I forgot to turn it in, though, so I stopped by the classroom after school really quickly and explained.”

“Mr. Morris was okay with that?”

“I blamed it all on Braiden. Shamelessly, I might add.”

She laughed as we moved up to the first array of options, a greasy pan of mac ’n’ cheese that looked like it had been reheated and re-served for three days running, dried-out carrots, and cardboard-like pizza. I grimaced.

“Don’t look now, but—”

I immediately looked out over the crowd.

“I said *don’t* look. Honestly, Ella, why do you always do that?”

“I have a problem with impulse control, you know that. What am I not supposed to be looking at?”

“Don’t look now, but behind you, by the door—I said *don’t* look now.”

Scarlet scoffed and grabbed a slice of pizza. Bobby stood facing Buffy, his arms crossed. Buffy's expression was somewhere between bored and apologetic.

"Buffy is breaking up with Bobby," Scarlet finished in a whisper.

The girl next to her jerked before giving Scarlet an incredulous expression. "As *if!* They are, like, *the* couple of the school. They'll be king and queen, you wait."

"They don't look too king and queenish right now." Scarlet pointed at the couple, her reservations about openly observing them taking a back seat to being right.

"They're probably just working things out," the girl said.

"I have second period with Buffy." Scarlet grabbed a side of fries from under the heat lamp. "Trust me when I say she's over it. She was telling anyone who'd listen that she needs some time to be free and find herself."

"No way. She was after Bobby *forever* before he agreed to go out with her. There is no way she'd just ditch him." The other girl dug a ten-dollar bill out of her pocket.

"She would if she has her eye on someone better," Scarlet insisted.

"Like who?" the girl asked.

"Are you serious? Braiden, that's who." Scarlet rolled her eyes.

"Ohh..." The sound was like air leaking out of a tire. "I'm such a div. I completely forgot about him."

Scarlet nodded. "Exactly. First step, ditch the dead weight. Next step, land the *new* hottest guy in school. I hope he sees right through her."

The girl stepped aside to give Scarlet room to pay. "They're men. They never do. All they see is a pretty face, a half-exposed rack, and a willing body. She'll get her guy."

With a last glance at Bobby and Buffy, the girl stalked away.

"She's probably right, that's what's annoying." Scarlet took her change from the cashier before looking down at my empty tray. "You're not getting anything?"

I curled my lip without meaning to. "No. It looks like they've left this food out all week."

"They have. But it has so many preservatives in it, it'll never go bad. Are you sure you don't want some fries or something?"

"Nah." I put the tray back and followed her toward our table, scanning the crowd as I did so. It took me no time at all to find Braiden, halfway down the

row on the right, sitting with his new friends. He and Dirk glanced up at me at the same time.

“What are you looking at, Fella?” Dirk asked with narrowed eyes.

“Me, I hope.” Braiden gave me a winning smile. “How goes it, Miss Fella?”

His teasing tone and kind eyes attested that he wasn’t making fun of me. He was bringing me in on the joke.

I frowned in confusion as Scarlet plucked at my sleeve. Trying to talk to the popular table at lunch was social suicide. They ridiculed nerds for less. But Braiden’s gaze was so inviting, his smile so disarming, that I found myself stepping closer, out of the way of those walking to the tables at the back of the room.

“I’m still trying to find my stomach after the ride this morning,” I said with a confidence that surprised me.

His eyes glittered. “I’ll create a daredevil out of you yet. Why don’t you join us?”

I felt my smile falter and all the eyes in the cafeteria burning into me. Nate and Leo’s eyes widened in shock. Dirk’s lips twisted into a malicious, humorless smile.

Talking was one thing, but walking into the lion’s den was something else entirely.

I took a step back. “Thanks, but I usually eat with Scarlet.” I hooked a thumb behind me, only then realizing she’d taken five steps toward the back and was hunching so badly that she looked like she was trying to melt into the floor.

Braiden looked between us, then surveyed the surprised faces around the table. He shrugged. “Another time, then.”

“Yeah, right,” someone muttered, and Dirk, Leo, and Claudia, a regular at the table, snickered.

“What is Braiden trying to do, make you a laughingstock?” Scarlet muttered when I caught up to her.

“I already am,” I said softly, trying to ignore the interest from everyone I passed.

“Not like this. It’s like he’s trying to shine a light on you or something.” She shook her head as we threaded between two tables that went quiet in our presence. “Something isn’t right. He’s not acting like popular people usually do. I don’t like it.”

I chewed my lip. She had a point. He should know by now that I had no place in his crew. To try to integrate me would mean friction and nastiness directed at me.

On the other hand, there was something strange between us. What he'd said in the car cemented that. Maybe there was a deeper motive for his wanting me around. Something he might not understand himself.

And I had to remember that that something might've originated from the Old Woman. Her influence on him could be her last-ditch effort to get me out of my house, and into hers.

When it came down to it, I had to look out for Number One. Me. And that meant keeping vigilant at all times. Until I could be completely sure of his involvement, and until he fully understood what it meant to be on the Old Woman's radar, I had to avoid being completely alone with him. In the name of self-preservation, I had to have someone within screaming distance.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MUNCHING ON MY APPLE POST-LUNCH, I turned the corner into the hallway of my calc classroom. I hesitated when I saw the familiar form halfway down, retrieving books from his locker. Students crowded the space, sauntering to or ducking into classrooms, and some getting supplies out of their lockers.

I hunched a little, channeling Scarlet, and drifted to the opposite side of the hall as Braiden. Just when I thought I would get by without being sighted, he glanced up and caught me mid-skulk.

“Hey.” He pulled out a book and slammed his locker, the metal clang making me jump. That didn’t stop my stomach from swimming in butterflies at his smile.

“Hi,” I said, straightening up a little.

His gaze took me in, pausing on my apple and then noticing the brown bag still clutched in my other hand.

“I noticed you didn’t have a tray at lunch. Whatcha got there?” He circled around me as he slung his backpack over his shoulder. Before I could protest, he snatched the brown bag out of my hand. “Oooh. Look at you. A treasure trove.” He dug out a banana. “Carrots and ranch, too. But no potato chips.”

“Uh, yeah. My mom says carrots are the potato chips of champions.”

He laughed as he took out the banana. “This is insanely rude of me to ask, but...” His lips pulled to the side in a lopsided smirk. “Do you mind?” He held up the piece of fruit. “The food in the lunch line is...” He grimaced. “It’s not what I’m used to. I’d kill for a piece of fruit that isn’t spotted brown.”

“Oh.” I gingerly took back my proffered brown bag, waiting for the punch line. Usually I was made fun of for bringing a lunch, much less eating it. No one, not even Scarlet, had ever asked for some. “Sure?”

“You’re the best.” He pulled his backpack around to get at the zipper. “I’m going to save it for after fifth period, if you don’t mind. Something tells me there’s a reason you hide your bagged lunch.”

My face heated and I wondered if he was just taking the banana to make me feel less odd. To that end, I stuffed my bag into my backpack without another word.

“Listen,” he said. “Some of the others are going to give me a tour of downtown after school. Wanna come?”

Another effort to do the unthinkable and merge me into the cool-kid group. He clearly couldn’t take a hint. “No thanks. I have homework to do.”

“We all have homework to do. We’ll have plenty of time after.”

“I’m dense. It takes me longer.”

He laughed. “Yeah, right. You’re one of the smartest people I’ve met in this school. Come on, come with us. You can give your spooky take on things.”

“I doubt your friends will appreciate that.”

“Are you kidding? Nate is your biggest fan. Despite Dirk making fun of him for it, he *loves* that stuff. He’d be stoked if you came. We all would.”

The way he said it, low and deep and with that intense look, spread tingles across my skin and made my breath catch in my throat.

“Scarlet can come, too, if you want your girl with you,” he said as we reached the classroom. “You’ll have power in numbers.”

And there he went, sweetening the deal.

But why? Why was he trying so hard? He had his pick of very pretty popular girls. I was his lunatic neighbor who suffered from a severe case of social awkwardness. He couldn’t possibly want me, with the help of Scarlet, ruining his outing after school. It just didn’t add up.

Which furthered my worry that he wasn’t solely in the driver’s seat on decision-making. He clearly had a silent partner, whether he knew it or not.

The classroom was mostly full when I entered. A couple people looked up, watching me out of boredom or from within the thrall of a food coma.

I paused by my desk, currently occupied by Andrea. “We can switch back now,” I told her, ready to unsling my bag.

Her face turned red and she looked down at her book and open binder, spread across the desk.

“Hey, Ella.” Odis smiled at me. “I missed you sitting here yesterday. The class was, like, ten times longer. Oh hey.” He put up a finger and reached for

his bag before digging out a sheet of paper. “I made a copy of the notes for you. I figured that would be easier than...” His voice trailed away and his eyes darted over my shoulder.

I felt the presence lurking behind me, large and masculine. A glance confirmed that Braiden stood patiently, waiting for me to get out of his way.

“There are other ways to the back,” I told him, taking the paper and trying to back up so Andrea could stand.

Braiden didn’t budge. “I figured this must be the best way, since you chose it. Aren’t you going to help me out today?”

“You don’t need help.” I looked down at Andrea expectantly.

“Oh.” She glanced at Odis. “Are you sure? Because I’m fine to sit here if...if you want? I don’t mind.”

Mr. Williams entered the room as the bell sounded. He turned back for the door. “You are nearly tardy, Buffy. You might keep better time from now on.”

“I was keeping the same time as you.” She sauntered in with a haughty expression.

“Take your seats, everyone. Let’s get started.” Mr. Williams closed the door before stashing a small lunch cooler under his desk. He paused next to the blackboard, ready to get going.

Still Andrea stalled. I wondered why she wasn’t jumping at the opportunity to sit next to someone who smelled as freaking good as Braiden did.

“What’s going on?” Mr. Williams asked.

“I’m waiting for Ella to take her seat,” Braiden said. “There seems to be some confusion as to where she’s supposed to sit.”

“There are two open seats in the back. Sit there. Hop to it. We have a lot to cover. Ella. Please.”

I sighed in resignation, and to my surprise, I noticed Andrea’s lips curl into a small smile.

She hadn’t wanted to move. Rather than sit near someone incredibly handsome, with some sort of pheromone superpower, she preferred to stay next to Odis.

“What kind of a heartless person tears someone away from their crush?” Braiden whispered as we made our way back, reading my mind.

“I had no idea,” I murmured. “I mean...Odis? He’s such a goober.” I held up my hand, realizing how that had sounded, as Braiden hopped his desk to

yesterday's crooked positioning. "Don't get me wrong, he's an insanely sweet, really awesome guy. I meant goober in the nicest way possible. A really lovable goober..."

A smile pulled at Braiden's lips. "You're sticking your foot in your mouth, Fella."

I covered a giggle with my palm. "I just meant I've never viewed him as boyfriend material, so it hadn't occurred to me someone else might." I pulled out my book, which had been waiting for me on my porch yesterday when I got home. Braiden had somehow managed to scrape off the wax without completely ruining the book.

"You don't view him as boyfriend material?" Braiden asked, his gaze delving into mine.

"Brandon, eyes up front," Mr. Williams said.

"Braiden, sir." Braiden's gaze lingered on mine for one more moment, as if trying to pry open my head and read my thoughts, before he turned to watch Mr. Williams scribble something on the chalkboard.

"Do you want our homework?" someone up front asked.

"Shut up, Jane," someone else said.

"Homework, yes. Send up your homework. Now, turn your attention to the problem on the board..."

CHAPTER TWELVE

A LARGE HAND, palm up, interrupted my harried note taking. Mr. Williams was really on fire today. He hadn't been kidding about having a lot to cover.

I pushed Braiden's hand out of the way.

Braiden's palm interrupted my efforts again.

"What do you want?" I whispered, shoving him away a second time.

"I changed my mind. I want the kiwi instead of the banana. It's been forever since I've had a kiwi."

I paused as Mr. Williams studied what he'd written on the board. "It's in my bag," I said. "Help yourself."

"Help myself? How intriguing." He reached an arm over and around my desk, grabbing my backpack off the floor. He hoisted the whole thing up, the heavy textbooks not giving him the slightest of problems. When it was on his lap, he opened it up and started digging through.

"The brown bag," I whispered. "It's right on top."

He pulled out the kiwi and a spoon and set them on his desk. He stuck the banana back in the bag, then pushed the bag to the side and went digging.

"What are you doing?" I whispered.

"You said I could help myself." Braiden pulled out my little black notebook with the red ribbon marking my place. He undid the small clasp.

"No, no." Notes forgotten, I reached over his large bicep, trying to get at the notebook. "I meant you could help yourself to my lunch. I didn't mean you could poke through my bag and read my private stuff."

"You should've been more specific." He yanked the notebook out of my reach and parted the pages.

"Give it back." I pushed up and over my desk, reaching for it. My pencil

rolled off the edge and onto the floor.

“Oh wow, Ella.” Braiden studied a page. “This is...”

“Give it—”

“Ella, Brandon, what’s the problem?” Mr. Williams asked.

I couldn’t help but laugh at Mr. Williams’s insistence on getting Braiden’s name wrong. “Nothing, Mr. Williams,” I said, my hand still out. “Brandon missed what you said a moment ago and asked for my notes. Only, I need to make an adjustment really quick.”

“Brandon, did you have a question?” Mr. Williams waited patiently.

“No, Mr. Williams. I’m all set, thanks.” Braiden continued to look down at my drawing.

Mr. Williams frowned before shifting his gaze back to the board. “There are better ways to get what you want than by screeching, Ella. Try saying please next time.”

“Yes, sir. Good tip.” I lowered my voice. “Brandon, can I *please* have my very important notes back?”

Utter seriousness stole over his expression. He tapped the drawing. “Did you do this?”

My smile melted away. “Yeah.”

“What is it?”

“It’s the old mill in town. It was deserted when the company found out how much it would cost to update the building. They moved a town over to a more modern location.”

“They just left this behind? It’s a great-looking old building.” He studied the pencil drawing, not making a move to give it back.

“Well...” I scratched my burning face. I didn’t usually show anyone other than Scarlet my drawings. They didn’t help my reputation as the town nut case, and most importantly, I had a feeling that Mr. Morris and the other teachers wouldn’t approve. “Emphasis on *old*. It was just a couple rooms when it was first built at the turn of the century. They kept adding to it as the town and business grew, but yeah, finally the need to update technology and everything else had them looking elsewhere for a more modern location. It was the cheaper option.”

I grabbed my pencil off the ground.

“So they stopped using this place? Just like that?”

“The majority of it, yeah. A manufacturing plant looked into it, but they found the same problems. The nicer parts have been turned into art studios or

small businesses. But the structure needs work, so only the people who can afford to get it up to code can move in. The other parts are vacant.”

He started flipping pages, checking out each drawing. I should’ve been taking notes diligently, but I couldn’t help watching his facial expressions. He studied each picture in apparent rapture. His eyes widened occasionally, and he shook his head more than once. Finally, he stopped on a drawing of his house.

“Is that me?” he whispered, pointing to his bedroom window.

I swallowed and tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. “No.”

His eyes snapped up to mine, deep and blue and infused with the same haunted wariness I always saw in my own blue eyes in the mirror after a rough night.

“Check the date,” I whispered uncomfortably.

His release of breath fluttered the pages.

“Four years ago,” I said. “A year after the Johnsons ran from this town like their butts were on fire. The house was vacant at the time of that drawing.” I looked down at my hands as I rolled my pencil across the desk. “I have pictures of it, too. The entity is hard to make out, so those pictures wouldn’t sway anyone, but...”

“My door opened by itself last night.” He licked his lips. “Then it closed, by itself, at a different speed. I’m a believer.” He closed the notebook and handed it back. The haunted look was still in his eyes. “What exactly have I moved into, Ella?”

The bell rang as we stared at each other, and the gravity of his last words hung heavily between us.

I tore my gaze away and reached down for my bag, quickly stuffing my notebook into its depths.

“Not for nothing,” he said as he righted his desk and stood, all ease and grace, “but you are an exceptional artist. Is that what you’re going to go to school for?”

I laughed sardonically, my parents’ expressions etched into my brain. “Not hardly. They wouldn’t pay a red cent if I tried to get a degree in the arts. I know this for a fact. They’ve told me several times.”

“So you used to want to be an artist, and the real world crushed your dreams before you even had a chance to reach for them.” He tsked and shook his head. His side brushed against mine. “That’s a shame.”

“Judging by the passive-aggressive undertones, it sounds like you’re used

to that song and dance.”

He huffed and looked away as we edged closer to the door. “Could be.”

“So what was your dream, then? Sumo wrestler?”

“Sumo...” This time his huff turned into a laugh. “You’ve found me out. Sumo wrestling was my pie in the sky before my father ruined it for me.”

“That’s too bad,” I said. “I hear they are revered, and get to eat a lot.”

“The eating was a decided attraction, yes.”

As he had yesterday, he slowed as we neared the door, letting me go ahead and preventing anyone from squeezing in beside me. Braiden’s groupies waited for him in the hall amidst the students passing by. Odis stood off to the other side, looking down at his notebook.

“Oh good,” I said, hurrying toward Odis. “You’re still here.”

“Can we walk with you now, Braiden, or are you still off-limits?” I heard Buffy say.

“Hey.” Odis smiled and pulled his backpack around so he could drop his pager into the smaller compartment. “Sucks that you didn’t get to move back into your seat. Though it seemed like you were having a grand ol’ time with Braiden.”

I frowned, because while his face was perfectly placid, I detected a sour note in his voice. “Not really. It was business as usual until he grabbed my... book.” I started walking, and Odis kept pace. “Can I get the last ten minutes or so of notes? I have everything else, I just missed that last bit when he grabbed my stuff.”

“I noticed,” he said, and I heard that sour note again.

“No big deal if not. I just thought I’d ask.”

“It’s fine. But...” Odis glanced behind us. “Just be careful, okay?”

“What?” I asked as we reached the end of the hallway. We paused, each needing to go a different direction.

He scratched the side of his nose, glancing away from me. “Look.” He faced me head-on, looking concerned. “I know Braiden just got here, and he seems charming, but trust me when I say that he doesn’t have your best interests at heart.”

Lead filled my stomach. “Why do you say that?”

His eyes tightened. “Just trust me, okay? He’s got a reputation.”

“In the last two days?”

Odis took a step away as Braiden and his cronies drew nearer. “From New York. He got into a lot of trouble there, Ella. I mean...a *lot*. He’s not a

good guy. People like that don't suddenly become saints. And guys like him don't normally notice girls like you."

I felt the frown crease my face. I knew it was true, but still, it wasn't the nicest thing he could've said to me.

He gave me an apologetic smile. "Just be careful, okay? I don't trust him. He must be up to something."

Before I could reply, he was striding away.

So it wasn't just Scarlet and me that saw the oddity that was Braiden's notice of me. But a part of me—a small, totally girly part—had held out hope that his attentions had been genuine. That he did actually want to hang out with me, to get to know me.

I blew out a breath and hurried away before Braiden caught up with me. It was best to ignore him, as originally planned. From that moment on, I'd make sure to stay away from him. It was the safest approach. The only approach, if I wanted to finally get out of this town in one piece.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AFTER THE FINAL bell rang that day, granting all the students temporary freedom, I walked with Scarlet down the front steps of the school. The wind blustered across the school grounds, making the trees sway to its silent tune. Clouds drifted overhead, puffy and white. Students poured into the school parking lot or walked to the drop-off and pick-up area to meet their parents. Off to the side, a line of three buses waited at the white curb.

“Did I tell you?” I asked Scarlet, walking her to the bike rack. The bus wouldn’t take off for another twenty minutes. “Braiden’s door opened and closed on its own last night.”

“You did, remember? Right before Miss Potters walked in and told us to stop talking. I guess the Johnsons weren’t lying about the house being haunted.”

“We knew that. How many times have I seen an apparition standing in Braiden’s window?”

“I know, but this proves you aren’t crazy.”

I snorted. When it came to ghosts, we both knew a silly thing like proof didn’t go far in this town. Logic took a quick back seat to willful ignorance.

“Was he freaked out?” Scarlet asked.

I thought back to our conversation, remembering his expression. “Not really. He’d been looking at my notebook, though, so—”

“You showed him your notebook?”

“He grabbed it when he was getting some fruit out of my lunch. He found the picture of his house.”

Scarlet’s eyes rounded. “Did he notice the date?”

“I pointed it out because he thought the figure in the window might be

him.”

She pulled her lock from the tire before stuffing it into her backpack. “He thought you were drawing him? That’s embarrassing, especially after the creepy staring and everything.”

“Yes, thank you, Scarlet. That hadn’t crossed my mind.” I brushed my limp hair out of my face. Regardless of the buckets of hairspray I’d used that morning, the style was not holding. “He wanted to know what he’d gotten into moving here.”

“Oh wow.” Scarlet stood, leaving her backpack at her feet. “He went from a nonbeliever to a believer really fast. That’s good. It means he has an open mind.”

“I think a candle appearing out of nowhere and lighting itself helped speed things along. Not to mention the Old Woman showing up outside of his house.”

“True.” Scarlet looked beyond me and her brow furrowed. “Don’t look, but—”

I spun around, unable to help myself.

“—there’s the devil now. Why do you always look when I say not to?”

“Why do you keep saying not to look when you know I’m going to look immediately?”

Braiden stood off to the side of the front stairs with a group of his new friends. He was talking to Nate and Leo, who were nodding with grins on their faces. Bobby stood a little removed with Dirk and Cliff, another varsity baseball player, with his arms folded. Buffy stood just a few feet away, chatting carelessly with a couple of fellow cheerleaders, Maria and Emily.

“Odis warned me away from Braiden.” I turned back around. “Not that I needed it, but still. He said that he’d heard Braiden had a reputation in New York.”

“You already knew that.” Scarlet moved as someone came up behind her, trying to get to his bike. “Remember? Shana basically told us he was a bad boy.”

“I know.” I studied my shoes. “Odis made it sound worse, though.”

“Well, I mean...” Scarlet raised her eyebrows. “Odis can be pretty dramatic at the best of times. I don’t know. Braiden seems perfectly friendly to me. He always said hi when I see him in class. Why are they...”

With Nate in the lead, the group stalked across the area in front of the steps, parting students like Moses parted the Red Sea.

“Oh no, they’re coming right for us.” Scarlet took a step back in panic. Her foot caught on the strap of her backpack. She tripped, flailing her arms in a windmill and shouting, “Whoa!”

She was clearly trying to stagger her other foot back to catch herself, but it hit off a bicycle tire and caught. Her body stiff, she timbered backward.

“This is the worst time to fall,” I said through my teeth. “They’ll make fun of you for a solid month.”

I darted in, slamming my shin against the tire she’d hit and knocking it aside. My leg throbbing, I grabbed her around the middle. Using everything I had, realizing this probably looked even stupider than Scarlet hitting the ground, I heaved and tried to hoist her back to her feet.

“Whoa there.” A large body bumped my back and another set of arms braced under Scarlet.

Panting, severely taxed with the weight, I glanced over and met Nate’s alarmed gaze.

“I got her,” he said.

“Are you sure?”

“I shove way bigger guys than this.” He pushed Scarlet up to standing.

“Comforting,” she said.

A strong hand wrapped around my upper arm, stabilizing me as I stepped away. “You okay?” Braiden asked, his minty breath dusting my face.

“That was a nice trip,” Dirk said, laughter ringing in his words. “I guess I’ll see you next fall.”

The cheerleaders laughed and Cliff put up his hand for Dirk to high five.

“Yes, very original,” Scarlet said, brushing Nate’s hands off her. “I haven’t heard that one before.”

“Get it?” Cliff said, his square face screwed up in laughter. “Because you tripped? And a trip. Like, going somewhere?”

“Our school system hard at work, folks,” Scarlet muttered.

This time, it was Braiden who barked out laughter.

“Are we doing this, or what?” Leo asked, running his hand up the side of his large and pristine flat top. The thing was a work of art. “I only got a couple hours before practice.”

“Me too,” Nate said.

“Let’s go. Scarlet, Ella, you in?” Braiden directed the question largely to Scarlet. “We’re going to check out the town and thought maybe you gals could tell us a few more ghost stories.” He’d guessed, correctly, that I hadn’t

shared the invitation with Scarlet earlier.

“Yeah,” Nate said, his eyes on me. “This town is full of that stuff. You tell it the best.”

Scarlet grabbed the handle of her bike. “I...um.” She shook her head, looking at me. “Have to do homework, right, Ella?”

“That’s no excuse.” Leo took a step away, motioning for Scarlet to get moving. “We all know it’ll take us longer to do our homework than it’ll take you.”

“Are we seriously trying to talk *them* into going with us?” Emily asked Buffy much too loudly.

“Sorry, guys. I need to catch my ride.” I barely stopped myself from pointing at the row of buses.

“You can ride with me. Come on.” Braiden took me by the hand.

Warmth seeped into my palm and electricity ran up my arm, sizzling through my body. I stared dumbly, hardly able to breathe.

“Ready?” he asked, his gaze intense.

Scarlet started to talk, but her words were lost to me. I was too transfixed by the strange yet intoxicating sensation rolling through my middle.

“Yes,” I heard myself say, stepping toward him. Allowing him to lead the way.

“Is this really happening?” Maria asked Emily and Buffy. The sparkly black hair band nestled in her Madonna ringlets caught and threw the light.

“Yeah,” Emily said as she chomped her gum. “Is Braiden bringing nerds?”

“Ella, wait. This is a terrible idea.” Scarlet hurried after me before halting and turning back to her bike. “I can’t leave my bike unlocked.”

“What’s terrible about showing a newcomer around town and hearing some spooky ghost stories?” Nate waited for her.

“Because something about Ella brings those stories to life,” Scarlet said with a warning in her voice, her hands working quickly. “You have to be ready to travel into haunted places with her. And ready is one thing this crowd of novices is not.”

“Oh man. You two should sell tickets. You are a great team.” Nate chortled.

“She’s not exactly blowing smoke,” I said softly as Braiden led me to his car.

“Are we in danger?” he asked.

I blew out a breath, thinking over the many experiences I'd had throughout the years. "Physically, I doubt it. You might feel strange emotions, see things, or get rocks thrown at you, but that's about it."

"Doors closing on their own?" He opened the passenger door for me.

"That's a given. But you're used to that."

He handed me in before starting around to the other side. I barely heard, "I wouldn't say that I'm used to it, exactly."

As we left the parking space, I saw Scarlet climbing into Nate's large truck. The others in the group split up, too—those who had a car driving, and those who didn't getting a ride. Buffy scowled at me through the windshield of her VW Cabriolet, waiting for us to lead the way.

Braiden turned out of the driveway, heading toward the downtown stretch, and I watched the town drift past out of the window. "What would you like to see downtown?" I asked.

He took a left and punched the gas, surging forward. I found my old friend, the handle on the door. "I want your take on the main drag and its offshoots."

"Its offshoots?"

"Yeah. You know. The side streets and interesting places. And I want to see that mill."

"Oh." I kicked my backpack to the side so my legs had more room. I wanted a larger area with which to brace myself. "You want to compare my notebook to real life?"

He smiled. "Yes. I'm intrigued. You've captured something with those pictures and I want to see if I can identify it in person. If we're both being visited by the same phantom, maybe we have exciting superpowers that will save the world."

"We definitely don't." I laughed and uncurled my fingers from the handle in the door. He'd thankfully slowed down again as we neared the hub of town. "At least, *I* definitely don't."

"Where should I park?"

I gave him directions to Main Street and pointed to a small parking garage. Once in there, I had him park on the second of three floors, near the back.

"I was actually hoping *not* to get broken into," he said, sitting in the parking space with the car still running.

"No one is going to break into your car. This town has problems, but

large-scale vandalism isn't usually one of them." I pushed open the door and climbed out. "But there is exactly one fancy sports car in this town. If you parked on the street, you'd get a lot of attention. People would watch you and mutter about your business. You don't need that."

"I've seen a couple sports cars rolling around." He opened his door as Nate's truck rolled in.

"I said *fancy* sports cars. This one looks really new and sleek. It's the only one, trust me. You have to get closer to the city to find more like this. Your dad really stuck you in the backwoods of nowhere." I shifted and crossed my arms. "Why is that? Why did you move all the way out here if he commutes to the city?"

An uncomfortable expression crossed Braiden's face. "Look, Nate is getting out. Let's go meet him."

It didn't take a genius to know that he was hiding something.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“GOOD IDEA, PARKING IN HERE,” Scarlet said as she half fell from the truck. Nate rushed over and grabbed her before she could face-plant. “Thanks,” she said, once again dusting his hands off her arms. “Otherwise you’ll have people looking out for you. The people in this town treat gossiping like a full-time job.”

“You’re really clumsy,” Nate told Scarlet, clearly not having heard a single word she’d just said.

She frowned at him. “Thanks. Oh goody. Here are the cheerleaders in their clown car.”

My mouth dropped open. Fatigue and hunger could make Scarlet show her more sarcastic side, but she was usually pretty good about keeping it under wraps around other people.

“I have some carrot sticks,” I offered, pointing toward the Corvette.

She looked over tiredly but shook her head. “It’s fine. Let’s get going.”

Nate nodded a hello to Leo, Cliff, and Dirk as they stepped out of their respective cars.

“So what are we doing again?” Emily asked, running a tiny nail file over the tips of her fingernails.

“A tour of the town. Come on. At this rate, it’ll take us all day to make it one block.” Scarlet turned and walked toward the stairs.

“I don’t remember ever hearing her talk, let alone ripping on us,” Nate said as he fell in line with Leo. “Do you?”

“How would I know? I haven’t been in one of her classes since middle school, dude. I can’t get into that advanced crap.”

“Good point.” Nate scratched his head. “Well then, I don’t feel bad that

she basically just called us stupid.”

“We’re not stupid. She’s just annoyingly smart,” Cliff said, trailing them.

“Good call. Yeah, that’s a better way to look at it.”

“When you two lug nuts are ready…” Scarlet, who’d already reached the stairwell, held up her hands in aggravation.

“Scarlet, are you sure you don’t want those carrot sticks?” I called after her, stuck behind the others.

“No, no.” Braiden fell back with me. A lopsided grin twisted his full lips. “Let her go. This is hilarious. She always seems too sweet and reserved. I like this side of her.”

“She doesn’t have sides,” Dirk muttered to Buffy. He glanced back at me. “She’s a nerd through and through.”

Buffy and her friends laughed.

Braiden stiffened. “I shouldn’t have invited them,” he murmured, for my ears alone. “I apologize. I thought they’d settle down once the decision was made to bring you and Scarlet.”

“What were you planning on doing before you saw my notebook?”

He shrugged, pausing for me to precede him down the stairs. Scarlet had already stomped down, with the others in tow. “Still a tour, but probably a far less interesting one. This town has an old-world feel to it. It’s different than any place I’ve ever been. I want a little insight, and what better way to get it than have the locals fill me in?”

“Old world.” I huffed. “It’s a broken-down town on the road to nowhere. You’ll see. We’re all too stubborn or poor to uproot and start again somewhere else. We’re stuck here, just like the entities are stuck in our houses, dead for decades but unable to move on.”

Braiden paused on the second-floor landing and held my gaze. “What if everyone renovated? Tore everything down and started over?”

I didn’t break eye contact as I quirked my eyebrow. “There are plenty of new developments that are haunted—places built on old fields, that kind of thing. It isn’t the old buildings that keep the restless spirits here. It’s the mansion on the hill. It’s the town’s history of suffering.” I shook my head. “If you mowed down your house and built a new one in the same spot, I’ll bet the spirits would still be anchored there. The only way to escape this place is to leave.”

Braiden gave me some distance as I finished the descent, probably thinking on what I’d said. That, or he was fighting his logic, his life up until a

couple of days ago telling him I was a superstitious whack-job without a marble in my head.

Out on the sidewalk, Scarlet swooped in and clutched my forearm, dragging me ahead of everyone else. “What are we doing here, Ella?” she asked through a clenched jaw. “We’re hanging out with a bunch of people who have been making fun of us for years. Add in some of your stories, and things will go downhill really quickly. Really quickly. We need to get out of here or our senior year is going to be unbearable.”

I ran my hand through my hair, getting it stuck in a tangle of hairspray halfway through. I sighed, looking back at Braiden, who was surrounded by the others, all chatting amongst themselves. He stared down at the sidewalk, his brow furrowed.

“You’re right,” I said. “I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Yes I did. I was thinking about his touch. About the shivers it sent across my skin and the fire that filled my gut. But that was not something I planned on admitting. She’d just tell me what I already knew: Braiden was out of my league, and even if he wasn’t, he had become king of the popular crowd in two days. A person couldn’t get that kind of status without a thorough understanding of how to manipulate people. I was gullible by nature. I wouldn’t stand a chance with him.

“You’re right,” I said again. “And even if he and some of his friends are into the ghost stories, that’s all it is to them. Stories. Fiction. They’ll catch on that I absolutely believe, and then...”

“Hard-core make fun of you. Like in sixth grade when you described what it was like to get visited by the Old Woman. Remember that? The whole school laughed at you.”

Of course I remembered. The only people who hadn’t were Janine, Alex, and Scarlet. Two of them because they knew the feeling from experience, and one because she wasn’t afraid to show the world that she believed me.

That was when Scarlet had become my best friend.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said. “We can take the bus.”

“We have to get our backpacks first. Just tell Braiden that—”

“I don’t remember seeing this building in your notebook, Ella.” Braiden’s voice had a strange heaviness to it. He stood on the sidewalk a few paces back, staring up at the upper window in the antique store across the street.

Scarlet’s hand fell away from my arm and her mouth dropped open. “I just saw something,” she hissed.

“What? Where?” Nate said, moving closer to Braiden.

“What’s happening?” Leo turned and looked, his head moving from side to side and his eyes darting all over the place.

I drifted closer to Braiden, my curiosity piqued. Scarlet followed me. “What’s weird about that building?” I asked, following his gaze to the upper left window. Jagged cracks ran through the glass, two of them slathered with duct tape. The next window over, spaced two feet away, was the same, as if something had been thrown at them hard enough to maim but not to break.

“It does look creepy,” Leo said. “I’ve always said that. Haven’t I said that, Dirk?”

“It’s an antique shop. Of course it looks creepy.” Dirk rolled his eyes and shifted, looking down the sidewalk. “Come on. Let’s go. Unless you want to buy a lamp?”

I studied the window that had Braiden’s undivided attention. The weakening sun was reflected on the corner of the glass, offsetting the dark area next to it. If anything was standing there, looking out at us, I couldn’t see it. Neither had I seen anything move, though I could understand how a shift in position would make the flare of the sun’s reflection give the illusion of someone stepping out of sight.

The hollowness had returned to Braiden’s gaze, infused with wary intensity. Goosebumps covered his skin, and I belatedly noticed the tightness in his shoulders and his overall rigid stance.

He hadn’t been messing around. Nor had he been mistaken. He wasn’t operating solely on his eyesight, like Scarlet was. Something told me he was using another sense, and he *knew* something had been in that window, looking down on us. Watching.

My desire to grab my backpack evaporated.

“Do you want to go inside?” I asked around the lump in my throat.

Fear sparked in his eyes before his eyebrows pinched together and stubborn determination stole his expression. “Sure.”

He was the type to confront his fears. I deflated, because for all of my talk, I was not.

“Come on, really?” Dirk threw up his hands. “Look, Braiden, you have to understand. These girls think an army of the dead drifts through this town on a normal basis. They get nervous when the wind blows. That antique shop looks creepy because it sells old stuff. That’s all. Come on. At the other end of town I have a hookup. I can get us beer.”

“Why would you want to drink beer?” Scarlet asked, annoyance bringing her hands to her hips. “It tastes like a punch in the face.” She pointed at the antique shop. “If the new guy wants to check out rusty stuff, why not let him?”

“I still don’t see anything,” Cliff said.

“Me neither.” Nate shifted, looking away from the face of the building. “Do you, Ella?”

“Yeah, *Fella*. Do you see anything?” Dirk taunted.

“Forget it,” Braiden said, walking forward. “Let’s head toward Dirk’s hookup.”

“Finally.” Dirk threw his arm around Buffy. “Don’t worry, I’m sure they have wine coolers.”

“Puh-lease. I drink beer, too.” She shrugged off his arm and added, “Which you should know, given how much you stare at parties.” Suddenly I didn’t dislike her quite so much.

“I see now what you mean about some of the people in this town,” Braiden said quietly as the line of people spaced out in twos and awkward threes. Scarlet was one of the awkward ones, tagging along behind us, with Nate and Leo bringing up the rear. “Dirk is vehemently against anything to do with ghosts. Which strikes me as strange, given where he lives.”

“His bedroom is at the back of his house.” I watched as Dirk fell back with Emily, leaving Buffy and Maria in the lead. “His family has never spoken of anything going on in their house. Either they are pretending nothing is wrong with dogged determination—similar to how some families pretend their lives are roses and sunshine when really they’re miserable—or they’ve lucked their way out of a haunting. Dirk might never have seen the Old Woman.”

Braiden shook his head. “I find that hard to believe.”

I shrugged. “It doesn’t really matter. Whatever the reason, he’s vocally against the idea of ghosts. Like a lot of the town. It’s best to zip the lip.”

“Unless you’re around like-minded friends.” His deep blue eyes twinkled down at me.

“Yes,” I said, suddenly out of breath.

“Did Ella tell you to *never* set foot outside of your house when the Old Woman comes calling?” Scarlet whispered, pushing forward until she was practically bumping into us. “Because that equals death. I don’t mean to be so dramatic, but... Actually, yes, I mean to be dramatic. Because that’s how

Alex and Janine died. By succumbing to the desire to go to *her*.”

Braiden’s eyes delved into mine, intense and troubled. “Ella mentioned that, yes, but my desire wasn’t to go to the Old Woman. Or to walk to the mansion.”

“Oh, really? But you did get a candle, right? Because it’s strange that you didn’t want to go to her. Ella, did you know that?”

My mouth dried up. “He mentioned that, yes.”

“Huh. Have you ever heard of that happening?” Scarlet asked.

“No—” I cleared my suddenly hoarse throat. “I haven’t.”

“Me neither. But then again, we really only know about your experiences. Janine was a bit more open, but Alex never said much. Maybe they felt the same way Braiden did.”

“Maybe Alex did,” Braiden said. “And maybe he didn’t answer the calling. I won’t make that same mistake.”

Something warm and gooey bubbled up through my middle. I didn’t know what to say. How to respond.

“Get”—Scarlet shoved Nate’s chest with her forearm—“back, would you? You’re sandwiching me.”

“I’m just trying to hear what you all are saying,” Nate whined. “I’ve seen this town a million times. It sucks. Fill me in on the juicy stuff.”

“You are way too into this, man,” Cliff said from in front of us.

“Did you not hear Ella tell that ghost story the other day?” Nate frowned at Cliff. “Tell me you’re not interested in hearing another one. Go ahead. Tell me you aren’t hoping Ella tells another one.”

Cliff shrugged and looked away.

“That’s what I thought,” Nate said smugly.

“Are you going to take us to the prison?” Leo asked.

“What prison?” Dirk looked back. “It’s a stone wall.”

“Yeah, it’s dumb. We had to go there for, like, a hundred class field trips,” Maria said.

“A hundred? Really?” Leo asked sarcastically.

“There’s no point in going to the old prison,” I said. “It is pretty lame.”

“Finally.” Dirk threw up his hands. “Some sense.”

“But if we turn right at the next block, we can check out the old mill.” I pointed, even though the leaders of the group wouldn’t be able to see my gesture.

If Braiden wanted to see what horrors lurked in this town, I’d show him.

It was time he knew *exactly* what his family had gotten him into by moving here.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE MILL WAS SOMEWHAT REMOVED from downtown, a massive two-and-a-half-story building, with the ground level sunken halfway into the hungry earth. Twisted weeds choked the dying grass along the side, dotted by drooping trees. A cracked and crumbling sidewalk cut a path near the street, lining the hulking structure that took up the whole block. Modest houses, many in disrepair, lined the other side of the streets, facing the mostly vacant beast.

There were many vacant old buildings and residences in this town, but none so massive, with such little hope of ever being fully restored.

“Those are signs for businesses,” Braiden said into the hush as our feet crunched through the gravel parking lot. “Maves?” He squinted at a small sign hanging above a window beside the door.

“That’s a coffee shop,” I said.

“It’s the best in town,” Maria said as she passed us with Buffy.

“It’s not anywhere near as good as a beer,” Dirk muttered.

Scarlet shook her head, but didn’t argue for once. Instead, she was looking at the front of the building with trepidation.

Her and I had come here together exactly once. She’d never forgotten the experience. It was a wonder she was agreeing to come here now.

“And they don’t have a problem with its history?” Braiden asked me quietly, standing close.

I knew he meant ghosts instead of history, but I let it go. Baby steps. “Not really. A few sightings and talk of furniture moving, but it’s laughed off or it makes people roll their eyes. No one has caught any of it on camera or in a photo or anything, so without proof, it’s hearsay.”

The rest of the group met us at the steps leading into what was actually the second floor. Brick walls painted over in cheery white lent the greeting area all of the appeal of a mental institution.

A little farther in, the smell of freshly brewed coffee lightened things up, almost making the wayward wanderer forget the bloody nightmare that had happened in the belly of this mill.

Almost.

“I’m getting coffee,” Buffy said with a raised chin. She strolled through a brick arch to a newer wooden door.

The other two girls followed her.

“Braiden, you want something?” Dirk asked, stalling near the arch with his hands in his pocket. He stared at a small grouping of furniture that had been arranged against the wall leading to the bathrooms. Two rocking chairs abutted a coffee table, all of it arranged on a red rug. A tall plant shot up beside it, its leaves dusting the edge of the tabletop.

If not for the vibe of violence oozing from the walls, the place might’ve been homey. Certainly comfortable.

As it was, I felt the press of the building on my shoulders, grinding my feet into the ground.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“YEAH. A coffee. Two packets of sugar.” Braiden walked into the center of the large room, where he had full visibility of the corridor beyond.

“Nate?” Dirk asked, relief crossing his face.

“Nah. That’ll mess me up for practice. Get me a water, would ya? I’ll get you back next time.” Nate caught up to Braiden as everyone else besides Scarlet and me went for coffee. Clearly coffee trumped ghost stories.

“I’ve always thought this place was creepy. They do it up for Halloween. That’s probably why.” Nate nodded to himself as he looked around.

Braiden took what looked like a grudging step toward the entrance of the corridor. To the eye, not much changed beyond the colors. The deep brown of the hardwood floor ran on, but the bricks were painted a much dingier white. Dark gray, almost black lines outlined each brick, and no windows lined the walls until the very end. Shadows pooled at the bases of the walls and stretched overhead until interrupted by one of the weak lights running in a straight line on the ceiling.

“Ella, you want coffee?” Scarlet asked, backing toward the archway leading to the little shop.

“Yes, please. You know what I like.” I took a deep breath, watching her go. “And then there were three.”

“What’s through there?” Braiden pointed down a side hallway leading away and to the right.

“Uh...” I thought for a moment. “An art studio, I think. Like I said, this building is huge, but a lot of it is closed to the public. It needs a serious rework. That wing has a couple businesses, and there’s room for a couple more, I think.” I glanced around at the pictures on the walls, the little sitting

areas, and the small, badly leaning bookcase at the back with a tree. “This area is a cute central hub to what they hope will be a business park, of sorts.”

“It’s not cute.” Braiden glanced at the ceiling. Then the walls. He gave a shiver. “It’s *off*.”

“Yeah.” Nate nodded, looking around. “I get that. Off. Like...it feels weird?”

Clearly he didn’t get it at all.

I shook my head and started forward. “Let’s get started, shall we?”

Two doors stood dark and ominous at the end of the corridor. Sitting in front of the doors was an old-style wooden school chair, complete with a half desk. It sat peacefully in front of a tiny white bookcase. Near the shelves, a thin black cord hung down from the ceiling, stopping four feet from the ground. Its purpose was unclear. Off to the side was an easel without a canvas.

Someone often set up little tableaus in that corner, and this was clearly no exception.

I stepped across the invisible threshold separating the corridor from the entrance area, an action that, for some reason I didn’t understand, awoke all manner of activity within the old building.

“Oh wow.” Nate paused just beyond the line. He looked back the way he’d come. “That’s weird.” He stepped back across the line. Then forward again. His eyebrows lowered. “I could have sworn the temperature just dropped.”

Braiden drifted to the middle of the wide corridor, his movements slow, his face a stone mask. “I felt that.”

“No, but...see”—Nate put a finger to his temple with a crooked smile—“you didn’t, because I just retraced my steps, and the temperature wasn’t different. She’s getting to us, man.” He laughed delightedly. “She’s getting inside our heads.” He shook his head as we neared the empty desk facing the one window at the end of the corridor. White light spilled across the shiny, empty surface. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m not Mr. Morris—I don’t think she’s into witchcraft or anything. That guy’s got a screw loose. I’m saying it’s cool—”

“Mr. Morris thinks you’re a witch?” Braiden asked me, anger crossing his face.

I circled the desk until I stood between it and the doors leading to an art studio and a math tutor, facing the way we’d come. To my left, a short

hallway led to a different closed door, this one embedded with twelve panes of glass cut through with tiny, shatter-proof black cords, leading to the stair well.

“Mr. Morris thinks I can turn people into believers with my stories, which may then lead to panic and riots when storms come through. It’s never happened before, but he is ever cautious,” I said dryly. “Besides, I am a woman. The term witch comes pretty naturally when speaking of the occult. It’s actually better than some words they could call me.”

Braiden shook his head, looking through the cracked glass of the door at the end of the hallway. “That’s a stairwell through there, right?”

“Oh look, they have Christmas lights on the banister.” Nate pointed, trying to get a better look. “A bit early for that.”

Braiden turned the knob, only to find it locked.

“So what happened here?” Nate rejoined me, standing near the window at the end of the corridor and basking in its light. “A bunch of murders, right?”

“Allegedly.” A puff of white blew from my mouth. The falling temperature bit into my exposed skin. “There’s no solid proof. At least, none that survived. Many believe the people in charge tried to cover it up.”

“Start at the beginning,” Braiden said.

“You’ll probably want to get away from that door.” I clasped my hands in front of me, thankful the others were still in the coffee shop. I hoped they stayed there.

“I’m good,” Braiden said with a stubborn set to his jaw.

“Suit yourself.”

A shadow crossed the windows embedded in the stairwell door to my left. The hallway darkened, bleak and deep gray.

“Oh, whoa.” Nate stretched out his arms as though he could see the skin under his Starter jacket. “I just got a serious dose of the shivers. This is gnarly.” He put his arms down and grinned. “I am digging this.”

“This place had come a long way from its modest beginnings. By the time it closed, the townspeople had largely grown up working at this mill one time or another—”

“Why did they close it, again?” Nate asked.

One of the lights flickered at the other end of the corridor. The entryway beyond fell into a soft haze, almost like fog was drifting in.

“The modern era outgrew the humble beginnings. The business owners opted for a newer, swankier setup. Despite the location change, nearly

everyone was guaranteed their jobs after the move...save one." I paused as another light flickered. A click sounded to my left. The lock on the door to the stairwell. "The groundskeeper."

Braiden's head snapped toward the door, which he still stood beside, and then his whole body followed suit. I heard him suck in a breath.

"Oh sh—" The rest of Nate's word was consumed by a heavy release of breath. "The Christmas lights clicked on. That's...supposed to happen, right? What time is it?"

I continued in a hollow monotone. It felt right under the circumstances. Creepy. "It was said that the groundskeeper was a good man, though simple. He did his work and did it well, even if he worked a little more slowly than most. But for some reason, the business owners decided not to include Russell in the move. He would be given a watch, a handshake, and a 'thanks for your service.' When everyone else moved locations, his employment would be at an end."

Braiden reached for the handle.

"You might not want to do that," I said.

"I don't know about this, Fella." Nate's voice was shaking. He wasn't smiling anymore.

The outline of a slender shape moved through the gloom of the sitting area outside the coffee shop, a slight haze clinging to her school uniform. Her glossy brown hair was tied up in a bun at the top of her head. She held a sack against her hip as she crossed the divide into the corridor.

Prickles crawled up my spine, biting as they did so. It felt like thousands of insects were crawling over my body.

Braiden slowly backed away from the door until he could look around the corner and into the corridor. His eyes widened as the young woman, probably about my age or a little older, sauntered down the hall with an inhuman smoothness. Her lips moved silently and her head turned as she talked to someone I couldn't see.

A light at the mouth of the corridor went out. The tapping of her footsteps echoed against the walls.

"She doesn't look right," Nate said, his voice hoarse. He rubbed his eyes with his fists and blinked rapidly. "She's still there. But she doesn't look right."

The woman didn't glance at any of us as she came near. She slowed to a stop, still in conversation. The faded light sparkled off her shimmery form. I

scooted until my back hit the wall.

“Why doesn’t she look right?” Nate whined.

“Ella,” Braiden said in a low voice.

Pressure squeezed my chest as more footsteps sounded. Laughter and chatter drifted through the halls. The shift was done, and everyone was headed to break or headed home for the day.

A gunshot cut through the merriment and echoed off the walls. It sounded so real that I always felt a tremor of terror that this time it wasn’t the past, but the present.

The young woman jolted ramrod straight, hearing it.

Nate staggered back, his eyes wide and his head swiveling all around, trying to locate the source.

Laughter turned to screaming.

More gunshots echoed through the corridor, louder now. Getting closer.

The doorway near the stairs slammed open. Glass shattered. The screams welled up.

Workers surged through the doors and around the corner, sprinting down the corridor and toward the exit. They jostled the woman, frozen in fear, to the side. Pinned her against the walls. Trapped her there.

“None of them look right,” Nate yelled, terror lining his face. “What’s happening?”

The desk went flying across the hallway as though it had been a chair back in that time, and for a moment, the image wobbled. The past faded into the present, showing the chair hitting the far wall, before the planes shifted, and we were once again watching the terrified workers flee for their lives.

“What’s coming?” I heard Braiden ask over the din. His face ashen, backed against the wall, he looked through the wide-open stairwell door with the glass spread across the floor at its base. “Who is that?”

The maddened stampede of workers tapered slightly, allowing for the view of a greasy, brown-haired man, balding on the top, drifting up the stairs.

“That’s Russell,” I said without inflection, the fear shutting off my ability to feel.

The groundskeeper topped the stairs and came at us, his shotgun lowering as he did so. The handle of a revolver stuck out of his belt.

“Ella, *run!*” Braiden surged forward and grabbed my arm, forcing me to flee like the workers before us. Nate staggered behind, reaching out to the woman, ever frozen in fear. It would be her undoing.

“Running won’t change anything,” I said as the weight of expectation settled over me.

Russell cocked his shotgun.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE BLAST BLEW RED across the white wall to our right. Nate screamed and threw his hands over his head, staggering the other way. His foot scuffed the ground and he fell, sprawling out across the floor. He curled into the fetal position, once again covering his head.

I opened my mouth to yell at him that this wasn't real—this was an episode of the past on repeat, relived by these haunts, a never-ending cycle of terror—but I didn't have the time.

Braiden grabbed my arm and pulled me into his chest, shielding me with his body. He pushed on, half lifting and half dragging me, doggedly heading toward the end of the corridor.

A blast from the revolver ricocheted against the walls. It drowned out all sound. A chunk of the ceiling dropped down beside us, the shot having gone wild. I ran with Braiden, the horror of the moment momentarily stealing my senses.

As we reached the end, Braiden shoved me, forcing me left and behind the wall. I stumbled and then tripped, falling into a heap. He braced himself at the corner, his large body prone and flexed, muscles pushing at his shirt and jeans. Eyes fierce, jaw locked, he looked like he was ready to take on an army. Except the danger had passed more than a decade ago.

The mist around us cleared. The screaming and crying died away. Soft sunlight filtered in through the windows of the sitting room behind us, back to comfortable if not cozy. The sound of a door bursting open interrupted the sudden silence.

“Finally,” someone muttered.

“Sometimes it sticks. We have no idea why,” another person said. “Sorry

about that.”

“I bet Ella will say it’s because of ghosts.” Buffy’s comment was followed up with a snicker.

Braiden’s face was hard and his eyes tight as Cliff emerged from the coffee shop, followed by the others. Confusion stole over his expression—something I understood all too well. It was hard to come back from something like that and return to the “real” world. But he surprised me. As fast as the mist had cleared a moment before, he relaxed and turned toward me, sticking out his hand.

“Hurry up now, Fella,” he said softly, his smile uneasy.

I took his hand and allowed him to pull me up. When he let go, his arm came around me, giving me a quick squeeze before letting me go and stepping away. Sparing one glance for the corridor, he walked forward to meet everyone, his confident swagger erasing any hint of fear he might’ve had from a moment before.

“What took you so long?” Braiden asked as the others filed out.

Scarlet drifted to the side with two paper cups, her eyes wary.

“The door got stuck.” Maria put a hand to her hip. “We were trapped in there forever.”

“Overdramatic much?” Buffy flicked her hair. “It was, like, two minutes.”

“What’d you do to Nate?” Leo asked with a wicked grin.

Braiden looked over his shoulder, laughing. The sound was forced. “Ella told a helluva ghost story and I kicked the desk to punctuate the pivotal scene. He didn’t take it so well.”

Cliff and Leo burst into laughter as I edged around the corner to get a look. Just like before, a square of sunlight streamed in from the window at the end, now highlighting just the end of the leg of the overturned desk. In the middle of the corridor, curled up in a little ball with his arms wrapped tightly around his head, Nate lay on the floor.

“What a clown.” Emily rolled her eyes. She gave a small shiver and rubbed her arms, glancing around. “What’s with the air conditioning? It’s October.”

“Let’s get out of here before someone sees the desk,” Braiden said. He walked forward without glancing back at me. “I’m tired of the tour.”

Unexpectedly, the words stung, his tone suggesting I was a bore and a waste of his time. I watched the others follow him, muttering their approval.

Scarlet silently drifted closer. She handed me one of the warm cups.

“What happened?” she asked quietly, sneaking a peak at Nate still curled up in a ball.

“Same thing as last time. This time, though, the scene played through to a shot from the revolver.” I contemplated going for Nate, but I didn’t want to cross the threshold. I doubted the scene would play again so soon, being that the energy in the building had to be thoroughly sapped at this point, but I didn’t want to chance it.

“The revolver?” Scarlet asked in a haunted voice. She’d fared about as well as Nate had when she’d seen the scene. She hadn’t run, though. She’d reacted similarly to that ill-fated young woman, pushed against the wall and frozen with fear. “I didn’t see a revolver when it happened with us. Did...did he...get anyone with it?”

“I don’t think so. We need to get Nate out of here.”

Scarlet clutched the neck of her sweater. “Hopefully Braiden will deal with him like he dealt with the others.” She sighed as she stared at Nate, now peeking up through his arms with eyes as wide as the world was round. “I suppose I’ll have to get him. Remind me never to rely on him in an emergency.”

Like she could talk. “What do you mean, how Braiden dealt with the others?”

She gestured the way they’d gone. More people drifted out of the coffee shop, migrating toward the chairs. “He spun that story before taking them out of here. That’ll save you. They’ll think Nate was imagining things. Hopefully Nate just shrugs it off. You really shouldn’t have brought them here, Ella. If he doesn’t decide he was hallucinating, he’ll go around calling you a witch. You should’ve seen the dark looks Dirk was giving you. Just stay away from them. They’ll make the rest of your high-school year—”

“I know, I know.” I, once again, caught my fingers midway running them through my hair. I needed to pick a less hairspray-riddled hairstyle. “Can you please get Nate? The sooner the better. Hopefully we still have a ride when we get out of here.”

Scarlet tentatively crossed the threshold into the corridor, picking her footing carefully despite the floor being cleared of debris.

“Do you know what I wonder?” she said as she edged toward Nate. “Why are *all* those workers in the scene? I mean, I know why the younger woman would be, since she died. She’s obviously not at rest. But the others look like they got away free and clear. So why are they in it?”

I shook my head, having no good answer for her. I'd pondered that myself. Even with a revolver, Russell wouldn't have been able to get them all. Especially with the shoddy shooting.

"Maybe the fear haunted them throughout their lives, and a piece of them will remain here forever? Or maybe the moment was so horrific, it left an imprint." Those were the only guesses I had.

Scarlet paused next to Nate, her face screwed up in thought. "Maybe. That sounds plausible." She bent and touched Nate's arm. He jolted. "Come on, Nate, you're overreacting."

Again, like she could talk. She'd been sobbing by the end.

Scarlet shook Nate again. "Come on, Nate. Time to get moving. It's all over now. The drugs have worn off."

I grinned despite myself. "The drugs?"

"Yeah. The drugs I slipped into his water in the truck."

I quirked an eyebrow. "Drugs, plural?"

She gave me a look that said, *Shh—I'm fabricating a story here!* "Yeah. You know, the ones that hop you up and make you see things?"

"Like... 'shrooms?" I asked.

Her look darkened. "Something like 'shrooms, sure. Just not as powerful."

Nate loosened a little, his hands pulling away from his head. "Drugs?"

"Yeah. Ha ha ha." Scarlet grabbed her stomach, punctuating the worst fake laugh in history. "You love your ghost stories, so I figured you might want to live one. Was it fun?"

Nate's body uncurled little by little. He looked up at me. "Ella?"

"Yeah, sure," I lied. "Drugs...that Scarlet cooked up in the chemistry lab. You know how smart she is. She can do crazy things with a Bunsen burner."

"B-but..." Nate stuttered, letting Scarlet help him sit up. He pointed a shaky hand at the overturned desk.

"Braiden was in on it," I said.

"Actually, he made me do it." Scarlet patted Nate's back. "He thought it would be fun. Was it fun?"

"Did you give it to him?" Nate asked.

"Not this time. Come on. They're waiting for us outside. Let's go." Scarlet glanced back at the desk nervously.

"But...that chick. What happened to that chick? She didn't run. Why didn't she run?"

“All a figment of your imagination,” I said from the sitting area, turning away and squeezing my eyes shut against the memory of the red splattering the wall.

“Of Ella’s imagination, actually, since she was telling the story,” Scarlet corrected.

Silence rained down for a moment.

“That’s messed up,” Nate said, getting up. He took a long look at the overturned chair, shaking his head slowly. When he finally let us lead him out, he was muttering about horrible stories and what a bad idea it was to teach chemistry to smart people.

The others stood in a loose circle when we got to the parking lot. Braiden glanced over, his gaze hitting Nate and then Scarlet before pausing on me. Something flickered in his eyes, and I remembered how, in the heat of the moment, when he’d thought we were all in danger, he’d shielded me with his body.

He hadn’t been acting, he’d been reacting, and he would’ve protected me with his life. Whatever the Old Woman had in mind, Braiden proved that his motives were pure.

“Let me guess,” Dirk said to Braiden with a sour expression. “You want us to invite *her*.” He pointed at me.

“Oh, please. Haven’t we had enough of the nerd herd?” Buffy threw her empty paper cup on the ground.

“Oh sure, ruin the earth for everyone like you ruin high school.” Shaking her head, Scarlet retrieved the cup.

“I know I’ve had enough of the nerd herd,” Maria muttered.

“How about it, Fella?” Leo asked me with a smirk. “Want to come with us to McKinley Mansion?”

My blood ran cold. Scarlet dropped the cup.

“Wh-what?” I asked.

“Forget her. She can tell a good story, but when it comes to reality, she loses her nerve,” Cliff said. “I say leave her behind.”

“You guys aren’t seriously considering going to the mansion, are you?” Scarlet asked. “Because that would be crazy. People have *died* at the hands of that mansion.”

“Uh, professor?” Cliff raised his hand. “Mansions don’t have hands.”

“Maybe she’s right.” Emily licked her lips. “I heard that anyone that goes in...never comes out.”

“Oh *puh*-lease,” Leo said. “That’s just what they say to keep people out.”

“But what about the stories of the Old Woman?” Emily insisted. “She steals kids and takes them back there. No one ever sees them again.”

“Are you listening to yourself?” Cliff laughed. “You’re as bad as Fella.”

“It’s true,” I said with clenched fists, shaking all over. “Only an idiot would go into that house where children have been disappearing for over a hundred years, Leo. Cliff. Think about it.”

Cliff dramatically rolled his eyes. “That story is crap. You heard Miss Potters the other day. That Old Woman stuff is all made up. Fact is, no one knows what happened to those people who disappeared. They all could’ve fallen into the same sinkhole.”

“They all could’ve fallen into a mysterious sinkhole no one knows anything about...in the middle of the night?” Emily asked sarcastically.

“That sounds more plausible than a dead old lady somehow convincing kids to follow her to the mansion in the middle of the night.” Cliff quirked his eyebrow at Emily.

“He’s got you there.” Buffy snickered.

“Whatever.” Cliff waved it away. “I vote for checking that place out. What’s the harm in it?”

“Well, for one, you might die,” Scarlet said.

“We’re not going to die.” Leo checked his watch. “I gotta go. Look, a lot of us are going together. I’ve always wondered. And like they said, if it was so dangerous, it would be boarded up and closed off. Nate and I have been talking about checking it out for years, haven’t we, Nate? Nate?”

The group turned to look at Nate, slightly removed from the others and staring silently at the mill building. He shook himself out of his reverie and faced everyone with haunted eyes. “Huh?”

“Dude. You really did a number on him, Fella,” Cliff said with a delighted smile. “I wish you’d waited so I could hear.”

“We’ve always said we wanted to go up to McKinley Mansion, haven’t we, Nate?” Leo persisted. “I bet DJ would go, too. He’s talked about it with us.”

“No.” Nate shook his head and started walking back toward town. “No way. I’m done with this stuff.”

Scarlet shrugged at me and followed her ride home.

Leo watched his friend go before turning to Braiden. “He’ll go. We’ll all go.”

“Except for them.” Dirk nodded at me. “Leave her and her friend behind. They’d only slow us down.” He nodded again before turning. As if on cue, the others dispersed, probably heading back to their cars, the girls talking quickly amongst themselves.

I grabbed Braiden’s sleeve. “You’re not seriously considering going to the mansion, are you?”

His deep blue eyes roamed my face. They settled on my lips. “It sounds like they’ve been threatening to go for a while now. I guess it can’t hurt to have a look. But I’d have to agree with Dirk—you should stay home for this one.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“THEY’RE THE CRAZY ONES, ELLA,” Scarlet said the next day, walking closely by my side. “It’s not up to you to cure crazy.”

I’d taken the bus to school as normal, and the shiny red Corvette had pulled out in front of us in a repeat of Braiden’s first day of school. Dirk wasn’t far behind him, though he didn’t gun it to get in front of the bus. Instead, he stared through the window at me as we took off, his eyes narrowed.

I shook off the memory. “Braiden’s new here.” I stared at the steps leading up to the front entrance, full of students. For a moment, I considered walking around the side to avoid the inevitable traffic jam caused by the popular kids’ new hangout. It seemed they wanted to stay stuck in the way. “He needs to be given a dose of reality.”

“But you tried that yesterday evening on the way back from the old mill, right?” she asked.

I batted the hair from my face, a curled, teased mess that unfortunately looked nothing like a Madonna music video. “I told you. He kept changing the subject.”

She shrugged as we entered the throng of people, shuffling toward and up the steps. “His mind is set. You aren’t going to change it. Nor is it your job to do so.”

“But I *have* to, Scarlet. He’ll get himself killed.”

“Ow.” Scarlet shoved a smaller girl away and rubbed her side. “She had sharp elbows.”

“How about this?” I moved around a boy who’d bent to pick up something he’d dropped from his backpack. “How about I warn the

ringleaders one more time? If they insist on going, I give myself free license to watch from the sidelines.”

“The definition of crazy is doing the same thing repeatedly, and expecting different results.”

“Not crazy, tenacious.”

“Just let it go, Ella. I know you. You’ll get frustrated that they aren’t listening and end up chasing after them to drive the point home. This is really dangerous. For you more than anyone. You need to steer clear.”

But I couldn’t. And come fourth period, after Braiden made a conscious effort to avoid looking at me in the cafeteria or running into me in the hallways, I was nearly bursting with the need to get my way. I didn’t even glance at my old seat. Didn’t care that Odis stared at me imploringly. I took a seat at my new desk at the back and waited semi-patiently for Braiden to come in and take his seat.

Except he never did.

The bell rang, the door closed, and the seat in front of me remained empty.

Worse, Buffy’s seat was empty, too. And Dirk didn’t happen by after class.

They’d cut school, probably to keep me from telling on them, as if anyone would believe me. Even the people who pretended they didn’t *believe* knew a trip to McKinley Mansion was basically suicide.

I stood outside my last period of the day, my heart thumping and a cold sweat drenching my body. They were probably already headed to the mansion. Maybe even already there. Broad daylight had to be the safest time to go, but *safe* was relative. The sun wasn’t armor. Not for something like this.

“Where are you going?” Scarlet called after I’d turned around, my decision made.

“I have to keep them from making the last mistake of their lives.”

A large shape, round in the middle, interrupted the light streaming through the end of the corridor. Mr. Morris strode toward me with a set expression.

“Ella,” he said as he stopped in my path. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Miss Potters fill her doorway. “A word?”

“Oh.” I pointed at the classroom I had been intent on abandoning. “But I have class.”

“Yes, you do. So then why are you walking *away* from that class?”

“Bathroom?”

“Come with me, Ella. You too, Scarlet.”

“M-me, Mr. Morris?” Scarlet froze near the door and touched her pointer finger to her chest. “Me?”

“Yes, you. Both of you. Come on. Miss Potters, excuse the interruption.”

Miss Potters crossed her arms over her chest and shifted her weight until she was centered in the doorframe, her stance defiant. “I have a lot to go over.”

Scarlet’s mouth dropped open. I agreed. I’d never seen teachers have a standoff before. That Miss Potters would do it over us talking to Mr. Morris was...peculiar.

“It’ll only take a moment, Rose,” Mr. Morris said, gesturing us on. “They are smart girls. *Usually*. They’ll be able to catch up.”

Scarlet and I looked between the teachers, each of their faces etched in hard lines. Finally, Miss Potters turned away, grabbing the edge of the door and closing it behind her. It was just Mr. Morris and Scarlet and me, standing in the empty corridor like a remake of the O.K. Corral. Except we didn’t have any power. Or weapons.

“Come on, girls,” Mr. Morris said in a tone that brooked no argument. He turned and walked from the hall, ensuring that we followed him like a couple of whipped puppies.

His office was ten degrees too cold, making me fold into my sweater to conserve heat. We lowered slowly into the worn fabric chairs facing his desk, waiting for the other shoe to drop. He settled into his desk chair after he closed the door, the seat groaning under his weight.

“So,” he began.

Scarlet fidgeted in the resulting silence.

“There have been some rumors going around school,” he continued, his eyes darting between us.

Scarlet fidgeted harder.

“Do you know anything about that?” Mr. Morris lifted his brows.

“I know about all sorts of rumors, Mr. Morris,” Scarlet said before I could get a word in. “A great many. Why, just last period I heard that Mrs. Philips—you know, the lunch lady?—chews her fingernails and spits them into the mac ’n’ cheese. But don’t worry, sir. I don’t believe that for a second. I told Bi—” Her face turned red as she swallowed the name. “I said as much. He...

or she wasn't doing anything but rumormongering, if you ask me. I think it was just boredom—"

"That is not the rumor I mean, Scarlet," Mr. Morris said.

She froze with her mouth open before slightly tilting her head. "No? Well, sir, there are just oodles of rumors out there. This is high school, after all. In first period I heard that we don't take showers at school anymore because the well under the school was poisoned by a dead body. I mean, that's just silly, isn't it? I didn't even waste my breath debunking that one—"

"This is about your foray into ghost hunting yesterday, Scarlet." Mr. Morris leaned forward against his desk. "I am talking about the rumor that Ella led a group of students through the town and told them various ghost stories."

"Oh." Scarlet swallowed noisily. "That rumor."

"Yes, Scarlet. *That* rumor."

"I was invited to help show Braiden the town." I paused before adding, "Sir."

That hard, brown-eyed stare swung to me. "And did you tell a story so frightening that Nate soiled himself?"

A grin fought my lips. I hadn't heard that one. I'd just heard that I'd scared Nate so badly he'd collapsed to the ground and whimpered like a baby. Half the school wanted to hear me tell that ghost story, and the other half thought I was even weirder than they'd always suspected.

Regardless, the student body at large wasn't talking to me any more or less than normal.

"I did not," I said with a mostly straight face.

"I heard that one," Scarlet said. "I really should've said something to quell it, Mr. Morris. That was my fault. Ghost stories are just a bit of fun, after all. Completely made up. I wasn't thinking—"

"And what about the rumor regarding that same group of students heading up to McKinley Mansion this evening?" Mr. Morris clasped his fingers together.

"This evening?" I asked.

Mr. Morris studied me. "Yes. This evening."

"I hadn't heard the part about this evening," Scarlet said. "Just—"

I kicked her, and at her grunt, Mr. Morris quirked an eyebrow at me.

"I tried to warn them away, sir," I said demurely. "They have ignored and avoided me. More than usual."

“The popular kids always avoid Ella,” Scarlet said. “More than me, even. Dirk the Jerk—I mean, Dirk Curry says it’s because they don’t want to catch her weird.”

If only she’d just stop talking, it would help everyone out.

“So you’re not trying to lead this expedition onto private property to earn popularity points?” Mr. Morris asked.

I jerked back as though slapped. “No way. Are you kidding? That is the *last* place I would willingly go. There is my history to consider—” Mr. Morris’s lips thinned. I changed course. I was already slated for a few detentions starting Monday. “I don’t want my rep for weirdness to get any worse.”

“Not that it really could, at this point.”

I kicked Scarlet again.

“And do you have any idea where they have gone?” Mr. Morris asked.

I stared off into nothingness, thinking.

Why would they need to cut half the school day if they were headed to the mansion in the evening? That didn’t make any sense. Unless they were getting supplies or something, but really, what would they need? Weapons wouldn’t work on spirits.

I shook my head, refocusing on Mr. Morris. “I honestly have no idea.”

“They probably wanted to avoid you, Ella,” Scarlet said. “They must’ve known you’d try to talk them out of it. Or...” She bit her lip. “Actually, you know what? I bet they took off because word got out. They didn’t want to stick around and get detention like Ella always does.”

Mr. Morris watched us for a moment, the lines in his face so deep they looked etched in. He pushed back from his desk. “Okay.”

“Oh...kay.” I started to rise.

“No.” He held up his hand. “You stay here. You can wait in here for the rest of the day.”

I froze halfway out of my seat. “Wait...what?”

He walked around us to the door, his gaze sweeping his office for a moment before pausing on a filing cabinet with locks on it. Apparently deciding it was safe from us, he grabbed the door handle. “I don’t need you girls to cause any more trouble. You can do your homework in here until the bell rings. After that, you will *go home* and stay there. Do I make myself clear? I’ll be calling your parents to ensure that happens.”

“It’s just that...” Scarlet raised her hand shyly. “I think you are

overstepping your position as a principal, Mr. Morris.” Under his scrutinizing glare, she continued with a red face. “I mean, you can certainly confine us to your office during school time, however strange that seems, but what we do after school is well and truly beyond your control. The final bell is where your jurisdiction, as it were, ends.”

His hard glare bored down into her and she shrank back.

“I could put you in detention after school. That would be within my *jurisdiction*. Would you rather have that?” he asked.

The color of her face rivaled a ripe tomato now. “No, sir,” she squeaked.

“I didn’t think so.” He pulled the door open. “Stay here.”

And then he left, shutting the door behind him.

A strange feeling turned my stomach. “What is going on?”

“If I had to guess, I’d say that Mr. Morris has been corrupted by power.”

I stood from my chair and went to the window. Out front, two kids were ambling by on the grass, heading to the sidewalk. “We clearly aren’t involved in what Braiden is doing. If we were, we would be gone like they are. Nor do we know anything.”

“Any more than anyone else, you mean.”

“Right, right.” I chewed my lip. “So why is he locking us in his office?”

“I don’t think he locked us in...”

I rounded on her. “Are you *trying* to be unhelpful?”

She had reached down to grab a binder from her backpack, but she paused mid-action. “What am I supposed to be helping with? Honestly, Ella, I really think we should just ignore this whole thing. The ghost chasing, the rumors, the weird situation in which we have been left unsupervised in the principal’s office...”

“There.” I jabbed a finger at her. “It is a weird situation. Why wouldn’t he let us go back to our class? Miss Potters would keep an eye on us. She could raise the red flag if we tried to leave.”

“Unless he doesn’t trust her.” Scarlet resumed pulling out her binder.

“Why wouldn’t he trust her to keep an eye on two students? That’s her job.”

“Well, I mean, they’ve always had a rift, haven’t they?”

I leaned against the filing cabinet. “What rift?”

Scarlet rolled her eyes. “Do you never listen to Shana?”

“Not if I can help it, no.”

“Mr. Morris nearly had Miss Potters fired a long time ago for dereliction

of duty.”

“What did she do?”

“I don’t know. It was before we got to this school. But it had something to do with her getting dumped by a fiancé and letting her work suffer because of it. The superintendent made Mr. Morris give her another chance. She’s had it out for him ever since. You saw her when Mr. Morris wanted to take us away—she’s always like that with him.”

It added up that Mr. Morris wouldn’t trust someone who held a grudge against him to go along with his less-than-regular decision regarding our situation.

“So Mr. Morris doesn’t trust, or maybe just doesn’t like, Miss Potters. Fine. But he *does* trust us to hang out in his office and not rifle through his things? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“No, it does not.” She grabbed a pen from her backpack. “But I’m not complaining. Miss Potters’s class is a serious bore. All you have to do to keep up is read the textbook.”

“You read the textbook?”

“You don’t?”

“No. She tells us everything. Why would I read the information again?”

Scarlet gave me an incredulous look. “Aren’t you worried she’ll miss something?”

“Well...I wasn’t until this moment.”

Scarlet shook her head and bent over her book. “And that is why I get better grades than you.”

“No, you get better grades than me because you’re way smarter.” I turned back to the window, seeing a pile of gray clouds in the distance. “Something feels wrong about all this.”

“I don’t know about feels, but the logic is off.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, for one, you always get in trouble for talking about ghosts or the Old Woman. So why would he assume you’d want to open up about it now? And then there’s this whole deal with the mansion. If he doesn’t believe in ghosts or the Old Woman, he shouldn’t believe in the dangers of the mansion. So then, outside of his students ditching, why would he care where they went? Why would he want more information at all?”

“To send the cops after them for truancy?”

She tilted her head. “Oh. Yeah. That could be it. But still, why would he

command us to go straight home and stay there?”

“So that we don’t get up to mischief and possibly help the others deface historic property?”

“Oh. Yeah. Another good point. Well, you’ve got me. It does line up logically after all.”

But as I stood there, gazing at the gray clouds drawing closer, I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was very wrong. That Braiden and his crew were about to disturb something that should be left alone. And despite the teachers of this school having no tolerance for ghost stories and talks of the Old Woman, they seemed to share my worry that unlocking the mansion’s doors would plague the whole town.

The question was: what could I do about it?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“STRAIGHT HOME,” Mr. Morris called after us as we walked toward the bike rack. The bell had rung five minutes before, prompting a strange and awkward chaperoned walk to the front of the school, where the principal took up a sentinel’s position at the top of the stairs.

“I think I’ll just head to the bus,” I muttered to Scarlet, feeling those watery brown eyes digging into my back.

“Ella.” The warning in Scarlet’s voice caught me up short. She stood hunched over her bike, braced against the force of Mr. Morris’s prolonged stare. “Do as he says, though, okay? Just this once. Stay in your house. Don’t go after the others.”

“Ella Beck,” Mr. Morris boomed. “Straight home.”

I was walking before the last syllable fell. “I won’t,” I lied over my shoulder to Scarlet. Because while I definitely wouldn’t go after the others, I absolutely planned to visit Braiden’s house and warn him away from the mansion. I had to. He was likely doing this because of that strange paranormal pull to protect me. It wasn’t fair. I couldn’t yank him into the dangers of my world and then ignore him while he acted on them.

While I waited for the bus, I caught sight of Nate walking along the sidewalk toward the parking lot, chatting with a few of his friends.

It really wasn’t fair that he got to be afraid of ghosts and still be popular. That wasn’t how it was supposed to work. At least, that wasn’t how it had always worked for me.

As I was pondering the social injustice of high school, he glanced my way. His body went rigid and he turned, stalking away from his friends without another word. A moment later, he pushed a younger kid out of the

way so he could stop in front of me.

“Ella,” he said, his voice gruff. “Do not go into that mansion tonight.”

I put up my hands to ward him away, frazzled by his intensity.

“Don’t follow them,” he continued. “I don’t care what anyone says—you’re not a fraud. The stuff you say is real. I saw it. With my own eyes. I *felt* it, Ella.” He pointed to his chest. “I felt it. And you felt it.” He went to prod me in the chest, and I batted his hand away. “We both know I wasn’t drugged. The chemistry teacher said making something like that in class is impossible. So stay the hell away from that mansion, okay?”

“Okay,” I said, aware of all the eyes directed at us.

“And I’ll tell you something else.” He shifted his weight and poked a finger at my chest again. “Dirk believes in all that stuff, too. I know he does. I saw it. Here.” He spread two fingers and held them in front of his eyes. “Right in his peepers. He’s scared, but he’s trying not to show it. But I know.” He nodded, and I worried that maybe the experience the day before had done irreparable damage. “I know what his game is. He’s trying to save face. Trying to keep people from talking crap.” He spread his hands out wide and everyone around us took a step back, including me. “Do you see me caring? I know what I saw.” His gaze swept the staring faces around us. “I *know* what I saw, and I’m not stupid enough to play dumb and risk my life. And neither are you, Fella. You’re not either. So stay home tonight. Got it?”

“Got it,” I said, a little awestruck by the whole exchange.

“Good. Smart.” With a defiant look around him, he turned and stalked back toward his waiting friends.

“You are *seriously* hooked up,” Carla said in reverence, having drifted closer without my noticing. She stared after Nate. “*Seriously* hooked up. Hey.” She turned her large blue eyes on me. “Want to sit together?”

“Not really,” I answered before I could stop myself. I opened my mouth to apologize, but she was already nodding in approval.

“Well played.” She stood her ground but half turned—near me, albeit clearly not *with* me.

This day was only getting weirder.

My pager lit up with my mom’s work number, but I headed straight to Braiden’s house when I got off the bus anyway. I felt shivers as I crossed onto their yard and walked to their front door. Eyes burned into my back, but when I turned, nothing was there. The tree branches in the yard swayed. Wind mussed my hair.

The door swung open on the third knock and the smell of fresh-baked cookies wafted out to greet me. A striking woman in her mid-forties with dark hair and Braiden's vivid blue eyes smiled.

"Mrs. Rhodes?" I asked tentatively, noticing the floral print of her apron.

"Yes—you're Ella Beck from across the street, right?" She pointed toward my house. I nodded. "Yes, I thought I recognized you. Quite the show stopper. You must have to beat boys away with a stick."

Her smile was genuine, and I didn't have the heart for a sarcastic response.

"Is Braiden home?" I asked.

Her smile slipped. She brought up her arm and glanced at the time. "No... He should be home any minute, though. He didn't call to say he'd be late."

"Oh. Okay." I took a step back. "Well, can you tell him I stopped by? Or have him call me? I can give you the number."

She glanced over my shoulder at the street. "Of course. I have your house number. Or do you have your own line?"

"No. Just the one. The one for the house. We all share it."

She nodded, thankfully ignoring my bumbling. "I'll have him call as soon as he gets home. It should be any minute now."

"Great—" The door swung shut, her expression turning more troubled as it disappeared from view.

Tingles ate away at my belly, and I didn't think it was the strange presence I could feel watching me from somewhere on the property. Braiden's mom didn't like that he'd stayed out without checking in. It was a more extreme reaction than most parents would have if their kid stopped somewhere on the way home. She was clearly reacting to past experiences.

I wondered, not for the first time, what skeletons he had in his closet.

Back in my room, I sat at my desk with growing concern. A book assigned for my next essay lay open on my desk, something productive to do while I waited. But the words wouldn't stick in my brain, and as the light seeped from the sky, and the shiny red Corvette and Dirk's beat-up Honda stayed absent from the street, I couldn't help but feel deeply that I was waiting in the wrong location. That they would access the mansion from the back, a route that wasn't through our neighborhood, so as to hide their cars from the street.

I was clutching my desk, deciding what to do, when my pager clattered across my desk. My mother again. I'd called her as soon as I got in the door,

but clearly Mr. Morris had riled her up. She wanted to make sure I was home to stay.

Right behind that, another number. This time Scarlet.

“Ella.” I jumped at the sound of my dad’s voice. He hovered at my door, his hand on the knob.

I glanced at a new number coming in on my pager. Odis. “Yeah?” I asked my dad.

“Your mother had to work late. She said to make sure you stayed inside.” She must’ve told him why.

“I know. I talked to her already.”

“Right. Well, there’s leftovers in the fridge.” He patted the handle before turning, leaving the door standing open in his signature move.

I rolled my eyes and shut it after him before I dialed Odis’s number. “Hey,” I said after he answered. “What’s up?”

“Oh hi. Um...” He cleared his throat, and I stared out the window, seeing two orbs moving slowly down the street. Old Man Foster’s Mustang, one headlight slightly dimmer than the other. “I wondered...”

I pushed forward to see Dirk’s house. The living room light was on, but still no Honda parked out front. Mr. Morris had probably called everyone—unless I was the only one whose parents he felt comfortable harassing—so by now the parents should be trying to find their kids and make them come home.

Unless the parents thought ghosts were preposterous and their little angels would never trespass. Which, in this town, when dealing with star football players and their proud parents, was all too possible.

“I wondered if you wanted to...uh...come over and watch a movie,” Odis finished.

I’d half forgotten who was on the phone.

Two more orbs appeared down the street and I pressed my face against the glass to see. A Firebird. Mr. Chassman’s pride and joy. It passed my house before slowing to turn into his driveway.

“Just because, you know, of the temptation,” Odis said into my distracted silence.

“Oh, right,” I said, mentally returning to the phone call. “Sorry, I can’t. My mom wants me to stay in.”

“Of course. I get that. Well...if you wanted...I could head over there?”

I tapped my fingers against my desk, sitting in the dark, since I hadn’t

turned on my room lights. Streetlights outside showered the cement. My clock read 8:23.

“It’s late,” I said to myself, then remembered it was Friday. The night would just be getting started for those with lives, and if the parents all planned to ignore Mr. Morris, they wouldn’t expect their kids home for at least a few hours.

“I know. Yeah, I know that,” Odis said, having assumed the comment was directed at him. “Maybe another time.”

I couldn’t tell if that last line was a question or a comment. “Sure,” I said dismissively. “Sounds great.”

“Yeah?” He perked up, and I suddenly got the impression we were having two different conversations. “Oh great. But hey, Ella...don’t, you know.”

“What?” I slouched against my desk, my remaining patience eroding.

“Don’t go with him. You know, even if he asks you.”

“Who? Braiden?”

“Yeah. It’s dangerous. Because, you know...”

“The mansion, the Old Woman, ghosts, yeah, I got it.”

“Right. That...that stuff.” Odis never shrugged me off, but I could tell the thought of the Old Woman and my predicament made him uncomfortable. “So keep to your house. Stay in tonight. Don’t do anything else...with anyone else, okay?”

How many mothers did a girl need? “Sure thing. Okay, I better get going.”

I barely waited for his goodbye before returning the phone to its cradle. Clouds drifted over the sliver of a moon hanging low in the sky. The last of the day bled away from the night, leaving me in near blackness as I stared out my window, willing something to happen. Willing the boys on the street to return unharmed. Dirk sucked royally, but I didn’t want him dead. Or whatever else the spirits could do to a person. I just wanted this night to end peacefully for all of us.

But the two cars that swung their lights across the empty street over the next half-hour pulled into the wrong driveways.

Ice-cold air washed over my body, and I *knew*.

If I didn’t get Braiden back in his home, he would die tonight. Without question, he would never return.

If I didn’t at least *try* to talk him around, one last time, could I live with myself?

I pushed back from my desk and grabbed my sweatshirt.

No, I could not.

I'd have to convince him to go home before the Old Woman stepped out of her door, or we'd both be lost.

CHAPTER TWENTY

MY BREATH CAME in fast pants as I ran up the street. Fear ran through my blood like a live thing.

“This is so dumb,” I muttered to myself, squinting through the wind blasting my face. Trees swayed harder now and the cold bit into me. No storms had been predicted, as far as I knew. The only signal had been those gray clouds on the horizon, and yet the air felt supercharged with electricity.

I blew out a breath and slowed as the air condensed around me. The edge of the McKinley property started ten feet away. I hadn’t even stepped over the threshold and I could already feel a cluster of presences waiting beyond.

“Oh, this isn’t good,” I said as my belly flip-flopped.

Browned grass choked with weeds grew wild within the confines of the property. A large tree stood proudly in the center of the front yard, its branches spread wide in a tangle of leaves. From this distance, however small, I couldn’t see those branches moving with the wind. The tree stood still and silent, a watchful sentry. Behind it rose the large estate, the columns on the front arching to the roof, framing an abandoned porch with two ancient rocking chairs on either side. Blackened windows looked down at me, watching any who might approach.

I did not want to approach.

I walked around to the path that would take me alongside the huge estate, safely outside of its perimeter. When it came to spirits and unwanted entities, the name of the game was not invading their world. The second the living brought their energy into the realm of the dead, things got exciting. I wanted to keep things as far from exciting as possible tonight.

I ignored the gravel lane leading up to the house, a driveway made long

after the house was built. Around the side, I spotted the path that I had been on exactly once in my early life. After the spanking my mother had given me upon finding me there, I had never gone back.

The streetlight seemed to wave goodbye as it was swallowed by the lush vegetation surrounding the path. The moon, mostly covered now, offered me little by way of light. A smart person would've brought a flashlight before setting out into the night. Sadly, I'd been so preoccupied with getting out of the house unseen that it had completely slipped my mind.

A wispy hand grabbed my face.

I swallowed the scream and bent away, but the hand came with me. I clawed at my face, tearing away the spider web. Breathing deeply, I combed my hands through my hair, scraping away the rest.

I hated spiders. I really, really hated spiders.

Breath slowing, my heart still beating wildly, I started forward once again with my hands out. Sticky strings attached to my skin, invisible in the darkness. I stopped and sliced my hands through the air, clearing the webs away before wiping them on my jeans. A little farther along, I had to repeat the process.

Getting smart, I searched down to the ground for a stick. That acquired, I started forward again, hacking my way through the path like I was in the rainforest with a machete. It worked. Only slight wisps of web clutched at me as I passed.

Barely able to discern the path, I worked around the grounds, keeping my patience in check. It wouldn't be good to panic. Panicking would lead to bad decisions should I come to a fork in the road, and the last thing I needed was to be lost out here all night.

The light from above dimmed even more as a heavier cloud drifted over the moon. I kept going, my stick moving and my other hand extended to the side as a feeler.

I wound around until the insistent, high-pitched throb of crickets invaded my tunnel of mostly darkness. Continuous and aggressive, the sound came at me from all sides. The whine of a mosquito grew louder near my right ear, the little beast floating on the sticky breeze, about to land.

It was then I realized the difference in temperature. No longer did the air feel like mid-October climate. Now it felt like late summer, hot and sticky. It coated my skin and seemed to soak into my suddenly too-warm clothes.

Light sprinkled down from a clear, star-studded sky, harboring a

completely full moon.

I licked my lips, frozen on the path.

This wasn't right. The heat and the chorus of insects spoke of a warm night in midsummer, not the frigid darkness of fall. The same lush vegetation rose on either side, but the path seemed bigger somehow. Wider and cleared of almost all debris. A proper, well-used walking path.

Trudging on, I gritted my teeth against the prickly feeling along my skin. I was within the boundaries of the mansion. I had to be. The change in climate, the improved appearance of the path—the past was rearing up again, wanting someone to play witness. Or maybe wanting someone to pay homage.

With a shudder, I sped up, thankful when the path bent away again and the moon slipped behind the clouds that had repopulated the sky. I no longer minded the darkness.

My heart rushed in my ears, drowning out the sudden silence. After another few feet, I heard someone say, “*Shhhhh*,” followed by a low murmur. A surge of joy—and then dread—overwhelmed me. I wasn't alone, which boosted my dwindling confidence, but it also meant Braiden and his friends hadn't had the sense to wander away on their own.

The path bent around. The murmur of voices increased.

Something dropped onto my head. I slapped at it, but little legs skittered across my forehead and down to my cheek.

“Oh no!” I shouted, slapping at my face. “Oh no, no. Get off!” I convulsed, dancing in place and flapping my arms, my usual defense against bugs. Something touched me from the other side, sliding against my temple.

I screamed, a high-pitched sound common for those unnaturally afraid of creepy-crawlies, and unfortunate for those trying to stay quiet. I stabbed at the bush with my stick, realizing belatedly that the second creature that had “attacked” me wasn't a critter at all. It was a leaf.

Sucking in air, I tried to center myself on the path. The crawling sensation still moved over my skin, but I tried to push past it and regain control.

Fingers shot out and wrapped around my upper arm.

I screamed again, this time hoarse with terror. I swung my stick around. It hit off someone's face as I struggled to break free. The hand didn't let me go.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Ow. ELLA,” I heard. “It’s me.”

The voice was familiar, but it was hard to make out, given my rough panting and the sound of my wildly beating heart in my ears. Not totally in control, I swatted again, hitting the man in the shoulder.

“Dang it, Ella. It’s me. It’s Braiden. Stop hitting me.” Another large hand closed around my other upper arm, trying to still me.

I wiggled for freedom before my fight-or-flight reflex simmered down. Despite the fear still pulsing through me, butterflies filled my stomach. I held on to the stick for good measure.

“What are you doing here?” Braiden asked, his voice dropping to a whisper.

“Looking for you. You need to go home. Now. You shouldn’t be here, Braiden. This is a dumb thing to do.”

His sweet breath dusted my face as he exhaled. One hand released my arm and the other slid along my back and around to my other shoulder as he turned, pulling me to his side. “You’re the one who shouldn’t be here.”

“That is also true. Neither of us should.” Ten feet farther down the path, the space opened up around four parked cars, spread to the sides of a circular area. Flashlights or small battery-powered lanterns spread a dim glow. Plants and bushes reached from the sides and weeds sprang up through the gravel.

An overgrown lane led away from the open area on the other side. A small crowd of people waited near Braiden’s car, some of them pantomiming fear with their hands raised near their chests, and others playing at courage. All of them looked our way. “None of us should, I mean.”

A beam of light zipped up from the ground and blasted me in the face.

“What’s *she* doing here?” That voice could only belong to one person.

The light was ripped away and Dirk stalked forward with tense shoulders and balled fists.

“I’m glad *one* of us asked,” someone said in the crowd, and I was almost positive it was Buffy.

“This is stupid, you guys,” I said, loud enough for everyone to hear.

“*Shhh.*” Someone of big stature raised a finger that was quickly lost in the shadows draping his face and upper body.

“News flash—the people in that house died a long time ago,” I said, shrugging out of Braiden’s protective embrace. I needed to lead this group, not hide in the shelter of the very person who’d embraced this madness. “Anything that can hear us already knows we’re here. Look, you guys, I know this seems like fun. It’s scary and forbidden and all that, but this is a terrible idea. Can’t you feel the energy in the air? The Old Woman will be out tonight. We need to be in our houses.”

The group shifted in nervousness before a guy muttered, “Give me a break.”

“This town is superstitious because of people like her,” a girl said, sticking her hand out and turning her back to me. “But none of it is true. Trust me. I’ve been here before. Like, *in* this driveway.” Her voice and actions seemed really familiar, but without seeing her face, I couldn’t place her.

“I have literally touched the house,” she went on. “*Touched* it. I mean...I have looked in the windows. That’s how close I’ve been. A few times, too.” She held her hands wide. “Do I look dead to you?”

“Death warmed over, maybe,” someone said. A few in the group snickered.

The girl turned around to face Braiden and me, the light splashing her face.

“Shana?” I said, shocked. “What are you doing here?”

She bent, and I recognized it as her *I can’t believe you’re this stupid* posture. “What’s your damage?” She gestured toward the house, the roof just visible over the tall vegetation. “Ever since we were kids, we’ve talked about checking out this house. I am not missing this for the world. I want to see what’s so scary about a deserted house.”

The crowd behind her shifted again, and I got the distinct impression that the rest of them weren’t so keen on finding out for themselves.

“You need to go home,” Dirk said, stepping forward again. I could barely make out his features at the edge of his flashlight’s glow, closed down into a hard mask. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“He’s right.” Braiden put a gentle hand on my shoulder. He turned, now facing me and standing close. “You *should* go.”

I stepped away from them both. “Everyone should go. Maybe you don’t all have weird things that go on in your homes, but some of you do. That’s a fact. Maybe one or more of you have seen the Old Woman wandering the streets. You don’t want to admit it. That’s fine. But that is *not* superstition. That is not your eyes playing tricks on you. How could it be, when so many of us have seen the same thing? When the kids whose houses she’s chosen have all disappeared?”

“You haven’t disappeared,” Buffy accused.

“That’s because I’ve armed myself with knowledge. I’ve read about the urban legends, and talked with others who felt the same things. They didn’t make it, and that haunts me, but still I’ve stayed strong. It hasn’t been easy, let me assure you. Which is why I’m here. If you trust anyone about all this, trust me.”

Shana turned back to the others. “So she says. If she’s lying, then we’re fine. And if she’s telling the truth, we’re still fine, because she’s the one this Old Woman seems to want, not us. I mean, are we seriously going to go back to school and say we didn’t go through with it because Ella—I mean, Fella—talked us out of it?”

I withered where I stood. Shana had turned on me. Our friendship, such as it was, didn’t mean as much to her as doing something gossip-worthy with the cool kids.

I swallowed past the pain and disappointment. “You have no idea what you will be walking into,” I managed to say. “No idea. You might not believe in ghosts, or *her*, but the second you cross the boundary, that’s it. You’re in that world. And maybe it won’t seduce you. Maybe it won’t even scare you. But it will change the way you see ‘reality,’ forever. You don’t want that. Continue to live in ignorance. If you have an unwanted houseguest of the invisible variety, continue to ignore it as best you can. It’s better that way. Trust me. There’s no telling what you’ll find in that mansion, but if it’s anything like the rest of this town, it’ll cause you nothing but hardship and pain.”

Braiden shifted, leaning toward me. If I was reading his body language

correctly, he was having second thoughts.

“I mean...” A guy took a step away from the group, moving toward the mansion. “We don’t have to go inside. We can just have a look and report back to the school.”

The others murmured, and I suddenly understood what Shana was saying. The whole school knew about their plans, including the teachers. To leave now would result in a lot of *looks*. Blaming me wouldn’t work this time. This group would join me as part of the punch line, and for a bunch of popular kids, that was a terrible fate.

I spread my hands. “Or you could just say the cops showed up. Going to jail for trespassing is no joke.”

“I thought you were supposed to be smart, Fella?” Buffy said, a hand on her hip. “This is a small town. And all the cops have kids. They’ll know no one showed up.”

“Then just say your parents wouldn’t let you out because the principal called them,” I tried, knowing by their collective shifting and shuffling that I was losing this battle. “Say you were grounded.”

Someone snickered, drowned out by two others laughing outright. “Seriously? Who gets grounded anymore?” a girl asked.

Me...

“Come on.” The guy who’d already stepped toward the mansion waved the others on. “This is stupid. I ain’t afraid of no ghost.” His reference to *Ghostbusters* brought more laughs.

“Go home,” Braiden told me softly.

I looked back the way I’d come, a black maw between walls of nature.

I’d done my part. I’d caught them, warned them in no uncertain terms, and implored them to do the right thing. To turn back. It wasn’t my fault they’d chosen to ignore me.

Yet something kept me from walking away. Something told me to stay.

Was it the same something that urged me to leave the house and follow the Old Woman every time she came calling? Or was it something else?

I chewed my lip in indecision.

“Ella,” Dirk said, stepping forward and grabbing my arm. “You need to get lost. If the Old Woman is out tonight, she’ll find you. And us with you.”

I stared up at him in confusion. “Since when do you believe in the Old Woman?”

“He lives on our street, Ella,” Braiden said in a rough tone, his gaze

boring into Dirk. Dirk let go of my arm. “I told you he must’ve glimpsed her a time or two.”

Nate had implied the same thing.

“Fine, but why care now?” I looked between the maw of relative safety, and the small crowd of kids heading through the bushes to the mansion beyond. I needed to make a decision.

What decision? You need to get out of here!

“He’s always cared, haven’t you, Dirk?” Braiden asked, and it would’ve sounded like he was teasing if it wasn’t for the edge in his voice. He stepped between Dirk and me and handed me the flashlight. “Use this. Get home safely.”

I wrapped my fingers around the hard plastic, my skin glancing against Braiden’s. Electricity sizzled up my arm.

“Come to my house,” I begged Braiden. “Walk away. Seriously, if you ignore her, all you have to worry about is a fire hazard. And you’re definitely strong enough to ignore her. I believe that. As long as we walk away from here, we’ll both be fine.”

A cloud slid off the moon, and light highlighted Braiden’s handsome face. A smile slowly pulled at the corners of his lips. “I would love to go to your house with you,” he said, and his unspoken meaning sent hot shivers racing through my body. “But I can’t. I told you, I don’t know what this feeling is, but it’s strong. I feel drawn here, somehow. Like I can actively try and banish the threat...to keep you safe.”

“Banishing won’t work in this place. Rushing to the source of the problem is not the right way to answer it.”

“Then what is?” His voice was so soft. The trail of his fingertips along my jaw scorching hot.

My breath caught in my throat as he bent. As his lips neared mine.

I let my eyes flutter closed, expectant but anxious. Excited but terrified. Relishing in a tightness I hadn’t felt before, throbbing in my middle.

“Ella?”

I wrenched away from Braiden.

Scarlet stopped pedaling her bicycle and planted a foot to the ground. “Ella,” she said again. The beam of her flashlight waved dramatically, hitting each car in the makeshift lot before blasting across Dirk’s face, making him reel backward. Braiden stood tall within the glow, his arm wrapped around me again. When it was my turn for scrutiny, I clicked on my loaned flashlight

and met her beam for beam.

We squinted at each other. “I was just trying to warn them away, that’s all,” I said. “I was about to leave.”

I wasn’t even sure that was a lie.

“Well, at least it’s just a few of you.” Scarlet swung her leg over the bike before kicking the kickstand. “Wait.” She swung the light on the cars again.

“I thought she was supposed to be good at math?” Braiden said, turning me and giving me a small shove toward Scarlet. “The two of you need to get going. I’m just going to check things out and—”

“Braiden,” a girl called from within the wall of plants nearest the mansion. “Are you coming?”

“Yes,” he answered. “Ella, go with Scarlet. Go home. I’ll check in tomorrow, okay? You can show me your room.” Then he was marching off, Dirk following close behind.

“You guys are making a big mistake. Remember the old mill, Braiden?” Scarlet called after them. “Remember that? I saw the look on your face. That freaked you out. Do you think the mansion is going to be any better? It won’t. It’ll be— And he’s gone. What a fool.” Scarlet shook her head, her light trained on the spot where they’d disappeared. “I mean...Ella, maybe we should’ve physically stopped them.” A ghastly expression covered her face. “Will we ever see them again?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

LIGHTS DANCED and bobbed from the driveway. A car came rolling in, and I recognized it immediately.

“Oh good, at least we can get a ride back,” Scarlet said.

Odis stopped just behind Scarlet with the engine running. He stepped out of his parents’ Oldsmobile. “Ella? Scarlet, what are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same question,” Scarlet said.

“You should be at home,” Odis said.

“I came to make sure Ella didn’t do something stupid.” Scarlet pointed at me. “What are you doing here, Odis? This is a terrible way to try and be popular, you know. I expected more from you.”

“I’m not trying to be popular.” Odis shook his head. “Ella, get in the car. I’ll take you home.”

“How’d you know she’d be here?” Scarlet asked him, training her flashlight beam on his face.

He put his hand up to block the light. “She didn’t answer my 9-1-1 page. And she hates when people don’t listen to reason. Would you take that thing away?”

I stood frozen in indecision, feeling the pull of the mansion. And additionally, the need to go after Braiden.

Something occurred to me. My inability to leave had to do with him. I wanted to stay with him. To stick by his side. Something in me felt that we’d only beat this together.

But was that because I was crushing on him, or because something paranormal was pushing us together?

“Ella, hello?”

I turned to Scarlet. “What?”

“Are you coming? Odis can take us home. We’ve done all we can. We can’t stay out much longer.” She squinted up at the sky, blinking rapidly as a gust of wind rolled over us. “I feel restless. That usually means bad things for the paranormal activity meter. We need to go.”

“The what?” Odis asked.

“The energy in the air, yeah.” But I couldn’t step toward the car. I couldn’t willingly head in that direction.

A scream tore through the night.

I was running before I knew what had happened. Branches and leaves slapped my face. A twig scraped my cheek. I burst through the shrubbery and stumbled into wild, knee-high grass. High-pitched, babbling voices sounded to my left. I hurried in that direction, stepping as carefully as I could, lest my foot land incorrectly and send me sprawling.

“Ella, wait,” Scarlet yelled after me.

“Go back,” I said.

The mansion stood beside me, a looming shape. Dark windows overlooked the land, some of them cracked. A seething presence hung heavy near the walls, something wicked and sinister and pulsing.

“Go back,” I yelled again as I neared an overgrown hedge with wild, reaching limbs. There was no way to get through. I’d have to go around.

Another scream, suddenly cut off. Silence descended, thick and gooey.

“What was that?” Odis asked as he caught up, faster than I would’ve given him credit for. He’d never been great at gym.

“You need to get out of here,” I said, more out of breath from fear than from running.

“Only if you come with me.” But he didn’t slow or turn back. He kept pace, his expression anxious and eyes wide.

We saw them near the front of the mammoth house, clustered together and staring at the porch. Braiden was in the middle, his body rigid and shoulders set, his determination not to feel fear clearly fighting said fear.

“What is it?” Odis asked quietly as I slowed.

Heat crept into the air around me, and I knew this was the beginning. Things were on the verge of transforming, and those who still didn’t believe in the paranormal were about to have a change of heart.

“She just appeared!” one of the girls shouted, pointing. I couldn’t tell who it was. Flashlights and lanterns had been turned off. “I swear, she just

appeared out of nowhere.”

“I screamed because she screamed.” Another girl shifted and chuckled—Shana. “I didn’t see anything.”

“What are you seeing?” a guy asked.

“What do you mean, *what am I seeing?*” the first girl demanded. “Are you blind? Look at her. Right *there.*” Her finger waved in the air, mostly a blur in the darkness.

“I’m blind, yeah. It’s dark. Why aren’t we using our flashlights again?”

“Because we don’t need someone calling the cops, you idiot.” That was most certainly Cliff. “We’re trespassing.”

“I don’t have a good feeling about this,” someone muttered.

“She’s gone. She’s gone!” The first girl backed away from the porch. “She was there...and then she disappeared.”

“You’re seeing things.” The comment was accompanied by a loud huffing sound.

“I am *not* seeing things. I have very good eyesight.”

“You also freak out easily.” Buffy’s voice. “So if you ‘saw’ something that disappeared before anyone else saw it...” I would bet a hundred dollars that Buffy had rolled her eyes.

“Whatever,” the first girl muttered. “I know what I saw.”

Scarlet paused beside me next to the end of the wild hedge. She wiped sweat off her brow. “What was it?”

“Someone thought they saw a ghost,” I whispered.

Another scream ripped through the darkness. Two hands flung up, pointing at us. “Ghost!” someone shouted.

A guy in the back took off running, faster than a shot. A gust of wind grabbed his baseball hat and tossed it up behind him. He didn’t seem to notice.

“Bobby, what the hell?” Cliff yelled, turning to watch his friend bolt across the dead grass.

“Wow. And I thought you were fast,” I said to Odis.

A click announced the blast of light a second before it hit my face. Another blast doubled the horror and I reeled back as though struck.

“Oh. It’s just Fella and her entourage of nerds,” Buffy said. One of the lights clicked off.

“To stay or to go, that is the question,” Scarlet whispered. “I vote go.”

“If we go, we’ll look like losers,” Odis said.

“Our entire high-school career has been spent looking like losers. Why would this one self-saving incident change that?” Scarlet pulled on my sleeve. “I vote go.”

I nodded, still blinded by the light. But I didn’t turn away. That same something as before held me to the spot.

“I vote stay,” Odis said. “They didn’t tell us to get lost. When will we get another opportunity to hang out with these guys?”

“Well now, that is a serious change in motive.” Scarlet crossed her arms. “What happened to making sure Ella was okay? Or is that just something *nice* guys say to try and get what they want? It was never about her at all, was it? It was about you, you sonuva—”

“Whoa, Scarlet, dial it back,” I said. She’d never been overly fond of Odis, but this was taking it a step too far.

“Ella?”

That deep voice cut right through me. I stepped forward without meaning to, then my feet just kept on going until I almost shoved Buffy out of the way to get to Braiden.

“What’s going on?” I asked, stopping by his side.

He turned his focus back to the mansion. “You shouldn’t have come, Ella. It’s not safe for you here—”

“It’s not safe for any of us here.”

“But...at this point...I don’t know if turning back is an option.” He jerked his chin toward the house.

I followed his gaze and saw it immediately. My startled gasp had Scarlet hurrying over.

“What is it?” she asked, huddled by my side.

“Did she see something?” someone whispered behind us.

“*Shhh.*”

A pixie-like little girl sat in one of the rocking chairs on the porch, her little legs dangling. Stringy hair draped around her thin face and a ruffled dress covered her slight frame. She was almost totally translucent. If it weren’t for Braiden pointing her out, I would’ve missed her, as had everyone behind me.

“That is freaking creepy,” Scarlet said, clutching my arm. “Come on, Ella.” She pulled at my sweater. “Let’s leave Odis to his new friends.”

The little girl on the porch scooted to the end of the chair and hopped off before disappearing into nothing.

“Did you see that?” someone said. I saw a pointed finger in my peripheral vision. “Look! The chair is moving.”

Lights clicked on and beams found the chairs on the porch, the one on the left slightly rocking.

“Ha!” the girl said triumphantly.

“That could’ve been the wind,” someone said.

“Turn the lights off! Do you want the whole neighborhood to know we’re here?” Dirk said.

The flashlights clicked off one by one and the group at large shifted and settled down.

Warmth continued to fill the air, leading to the sticky suffocation I’d felt earlier. Clouds drifted out of the sky, releasing the moon and stars. Insects started to sing, softly at first, then in a loud, monotonous whine.

“What’s going on?” The light from the full moon showered Maria as she hugged herself, looking at the sky.

“I told you it wasn’t going to storm.” DJ, the quarterback of the football team and built like a brick, pushed forward.

“Okay, but...I don’t remember it being a full moon,” Maria said.

“It was,” someone in the back answered confidently, and it sounded like Shana.

“No, it—”

“Let’s look around.” DJ glanced behind him at the distant street beyond the grounds. Seeing the all-clear, he mounted the stairs to the porch, making his way slowly and testing each footfall. Boards creaked under his weight.

“Be careful,” a pretty girl with long hair said. I didn’t recognize her from school.

“The wood isn’t rotted.” DJ carefully took the handle on the front door and paused.

We all leaned in a little, waiting with bated breath.

He pulled his hand back slowly and looked upward.

“What is it?” Emily asked.

“It’s locked.” DJ moved aside. He peered in through the dark window before cupping his hand near his eyes to block out the light.

“What light is he trying to block out?” Scarlet muttered.

“You seem awfully interested for someone who wants to get out of here,” Odis said.

“I didn’t say I wasn’t interested in this mansion, I just said that Ella

shouldn't be here. Well, none of us should be. But since she won't budge, I might as well be a participant."

"Wow, you two talk a lot," someone murmured.

"We use words instead of grunts, yes," Scarlet said. "They take longer, but are infinitely more helpful."

"Doesn't seem like it to me."

DJ turned from the porch. "It's all dark in there. I don't see anything."

"It's a vacant house. Did you expect to see a party or something?" Buffy asked with snark in her voice.

DJ stared at her for a moment, straight-faced, before stepping off the porch and heading toward the side.

"See?" the guy at the back said. "He didn't say a word, and Buffy knows exactly where he wants her to shove it."

"Shut up, Carl," Buffy said.

I racked my brain to place "Carl." A baseball player, I thought. I didn't have him in any of my classes. Maybe he was the one who kept getting suspended from the team because he couldn't maintain the two-point-oh grade point average. Which didn't bode well for the combined brainpower in this gathering.

"What should we do?" one of the girls asked Buffy. "Should we follow?"

"I'm going to." The pretty girl hurried after DJ. The rest drifted slowly after them.

Braiden continued to stare at the house.

"What is it?" I asked.

"You were right, Ella. I was a fool for thinking this could be solved by waltzing in and telling the entity to leave you alone. I can feel the badness of this place. Like a black pit. It's worse than anywhere else I've seen in this town. Worse than that mill."

"You're admitting I was right?" I snickered. "I didn't think guys like you admitted to things like that."

"Only with you." The moonlight illuminated his crooked grin. He reached up to trace his free thumb along my lips. "What should we do, Fella? How do we keep you safe?"

"I stay in my house when the Old Woman comes around, and you stay in yours. Did you hear that? *You stay in yours*. Don't go trying to banish her, either. That doesn't work around this town."

"Yes it does."

“What’s that?”

“Banishing. Of course it works.” He gave me a funny look. “Haven’t you told the entities in your house to leave?” He leaned down a little and turned me so my face was in the light. “Tell me you have told the spirits trapped in your house to leave. Because that is ghost hunting one-oh-one.”

“You’re a ghost hunter?” Scarlet asked, having stayed beside us even though Odis had tentatively crossed the distance to the others.

“I watch a lot of those shows. Anything paranormal, actually. It has always fascinated me. Now I know why.”

“Why?” Scarlet inched closer. “Because you can sense them?”

He shook his head a little and his hand flattened against the side of my neck, but he didn’t comment.

“I’ve told them to leave, yes,” I said. “And some of them do, but the guy in my room doesn’t care what I tell him.”

Braiden’s head tilted. “Really?”

“Oh yes, nothing is normal where it concerns Ella and this stuff,” Scarlet said matter-of-factly.

Braiden dug something out of his pocket, a tubular shape about a palm’s length. “I brought a smudge stick. It was the best I could find on short notice. I was hoping it would help.”

“A smudge stick?” Scarlet edged forward to look. “Do you know the ritual to go with it?”

Braiden glanced at her before putting the small bundle back in his pocket. “The smoke and telling the spirits to go should be enough.”

Scarlet huffed and turned away. “Confidence is one thing, but delusion is a different thing entirely. Oh hey, they’re going around the corner. Should we follow them? I mean, we should either follow them or head home. The only way people don’t get killed in horror movies when they split up is if someone actually goes home. They are always the rescue party. I’d like to be the rescue party.”

Braiden dropped his hand. “What do you say, Fella?” he teased. “Should we head home and check out your room?”

Odis stuck his head out from around the corner. “You guys, DJ found an open window! They’re going in!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

BRAIDEN AND I BOTH REACTED, though very differently—I took a few quick steps in Odis’s direction, and Braiden tugged me back.

“Ella,” he said in warning.

Scarlet stalled ten feet away and hunched, clearly guilty that she’d been about to sprint off with the others—and excited and scared and, most of all, desperate to sate her curiosity after hearing stories about this place all her life. I knew exactly how she felt. The house had a strange sort of draw. It pulled in a way that was hard to communicate. I often wondered if people in the town honestly didn’t believe in the paranormal, or if they just couldn’t seem to escape the pull of the house, and therefore ignored the strange happenings to keep some sort of sanity. When you were trapped, you tended to make the best of it.

Here, right beside it, that pull intensified until it was almost a suction, dragging us closer.

“Right,” I said, stilling. “We should take a moment and think this through.”

“Are you guys coming?” Odis called.

Braiden glanced at the sky. “Nothing has changed since we’ve been standing here. If we leave now, maybe nothing else *will* change. Maybe they’ll just check out a haunted old house and head back to school on Monday with stories of what they found.”

“And how cowardly you were,” Scarlet said. She put up her hands. “That should be mentioned. Otherwise it’ll be a surprise when everyone laughs at you, and you’ll vehemently blame Ella. I’ve seen it before.”

“That’s probably true,” I muttered. “There have been a few examples.”

“Let’s go,” Odis called. “They aren’t going to wait forever.”

“A man is never cowardly for leaving his friends to go spend time with a woman. Especially a woman as beautiful as you.” Braiden squeezed my hand.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Scarlet said. “Her black cloud of weird eclipses her appearance, trust me. Now, if you went away with Buffy—”

“Scarlet, don’t help,” I cut in.

“Right. Sorry. I’m hungry.” She rubbed her stomach. “It affects my communication filter.”

“I think Braiden knows that by now,” I said dryly.

“So what do we do?” Braiden asked.

I shifted from side to side, thinking. Feeling the pull of the house. The electricity in the air.

“We really should go home,” I said.

“We should.” Scarlet bit her lip.

“The push and pull in the air is getting more extreme,” I said.

“The push and pull is getting more extreme, yes,” Scarlet agreed. “I feel it, too.”

“It is only a matter of time before something bad happens,” I said. “Or we see something we really wish we hadn’t.”

“Or the Old Woman steps out of her house and sees you right at her doorstep, easy for the taking.” Scarlet crossed her arms.

“On the other hand, we don’t actually have to go in.”

“We could take a look without actually crossing the threshold.” Scarlet nodded.

Braiden shifted, and I could just make out a smile at our antics.

“It’s still relatively early as far as the Old Woman is concerned,” I said.

“And there isn’t *that* much electricity in the air...”

“We still have a while,” Scarlet confirmed.

“And I have always wondered what the inside of this magnificent house looks like...”

“It is a pretty cool old house, despite the malignant feel of it. Worst case, we just peer in a window. Nothing bad ever came from peering in a window...”

“If anything changes, I’ll sense it right away, and we can make a run for it. A Corvette is super fast. No ghost would be able to keep up.”

“And we are super fast, when running for our lives.”

“Right.” I nodded. Then shook my head. “No, this is crazy. We should go.”

But when Odis called out to us again, something came over me. A need so extreme it blotted out my thoughts. Shut down my logic.

I was walking after him without registering the desire to move. “Just a look,” I heard myself say, losing grip of my self-control. This house had loomed over my life for as long as I could remember. Maybe it was time to face my fear. Maybe Braiden really could help.

Or maybe it already had me in its clutches.

“Are you sure about this, Ella?” Braiden asked, by my side. I half wondered if he could read my mind.

“Do you feel the urge to go in?” I looked up at the old house, at the windows staring down at us. It was so massive and forbidding, stoic on its big hill. But under that, something about it sang to me. Beckoned me and called me into its depths. It was like the Old Woman herself, singing me a lullaby. I’d resisted for so long, but part of me had always been eager to heed her call. And now, this close...

“Yes,” Braiden whispered. “But I’m at war with my internal logic. It *feels* like this is the way to end this. Like I need to go in there and confront the entity that has a grip on you. But when I actually think about it, the idea seems preposterous. All of this seems preposterous. Yet...here I am, desperate to go inside and wage war.”

“With what, the Old Woman?” Scarlet asked.

He shook his head helplessly and entwined his fingers with mine. “That’s just it. I have no idea. I don’t know what possessed me to come here. I can’t be the only one who’s tried to banish her. It seemed like such a good idea until you started talking sense.”

“Scarlet is good at talking sense,” I murmured.

“It’s a buzzkill superpower if ever there was one .” Scarlet pursed her lips.

Odis waved us on, his movements jerky, before disappearing behind the corner. We were there a moment later, striding down the side of the house. A mosquito whined next to my ear and I waved it off. Scarlet slapped the side of her head, then pulled her hand away and tried to see the damage. It was too dark to see little insect bodies, though. She wiped her hands on her jeans.

“I wonder if the others have realized that it is too late in the year for insects to be out,” Braiden asked. “Too cold, too.”

“It isn’t too cold at the moment,” Scarlet answered. “That’s all they’ll probably think about. If they were going to apply logic to any of this, they would’ve done it already.”

“The mansion has them distracted,” Braiden said. “Has us all distracted.”

“That’s a nice way to get around commenting on their intelligence,” Scarlet said. “Although, being that we’re in the same boat as them, it is a moment for self-reflection, I’ll tell you that much.”

“You need to start carrying a bar of chocolate or some nuts with you, Scarlet,” I whispered. “This lack of a filter issue is getting out of hand.”

“There they are.” Braiden pointed.

About halfway down the side of the mansion, the others were gathered around a window. Because of the slope of the land and how the house was situated, the bottom windowsill was at about chest height. DJ had pushed it up and had both hands on the sill, looking in.

“What is it?” Emily asked, wringing her hands.

“I thought I saw something moving in there,” DJ said.

Dirk shoved his hands in his pockets and took a step back. He caught sight of us, but his expression didn’t change. He was apparently tired of telling me to get lost. Then again, with Scarlet and Odis crashing the party, maybe he felt there were just too many of us to chase away.

“What was it?” Buffy asked anxiously, then cleared her throat and fixed her hair. She shrugged. “I doubt it was anything.”

“Nice cover.” Cliff chuckled darkly and stepped closer to DJ. “Need a boost?”

I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. A flicker. A moment later, I made out a door tucked into the wall down the way, deeper than a normal door would be. Moving closer, I realized why: this portion of the house was all odd angles and slopes, the architecture looking like a patch job at best.

“This probably used to be the carriage house,” Braiden said, looking around.

Something about the door drew my notice. It wasn’t the look of it, though, it was the feel. A heaviness exuded from it—the kind of amped-up air density that always seemed to accompany the paranormal. More so than the rest of the house (at the moment), this door called to me. Begged me to check it out and see what, or who, was behind it.

“Through here,” I said softly, inching closer to Braiden. “It’s through

here.”

“What is?” Cliff hastened over and DJ paused in his attempt to get in the window. “What’s through there, Fella? You sniff something out with your Spidey sense?”

“Spider-Man doesn’t have an extra-keen sense of smell,” Scarlet said dryly. “And he doesn’t combat ghosts.”

“Did you try the handle?” DJ stalked up, not an ounce of fear in him. He stopped beside us, clearly giving us the right of way. But after a moment of inactivity, he cut in front and grabbed the handle.

My belly fluttered. Before he turned the rusted, mottled knob, I already knew two things—it would fully turn, and a moment later, the door would swing inward.

The gasp of the crowd punctuated exactly that sequence of events.

“Ta-da,” DJ said triumphantly.

Everyone pushed forward to see through the wide-open door.

“I guess you were wrong about that Spidey sense, weren’t you, Super Brain?” Cliff huffed and pushed passed Scarlet.

“I wasn’t wr—” Scarlet threw up her hands in exasperation. “There are no words. *No words.*”

“Are we…” Despite the growing heat, Emily clutched her sweater tighter across her chest. “Are we going in there?”

DJ paused at the door, and I squeezed Braiden’s hand. Most of me hoped he wouldn’t step in. That he would feel the evil emanating from inside that dark cavern and decide the best thing to do would be to turn around and get lost.

But I couldn’t deny that part of me wanted to push in right behind him. To experience this old house and its past. To understand it.

“Everyone have their flashlights?” DJ felt along the inside of the wall. “Because I don’t feel any switches.”

“Nor will you. This house will probably have gas lamps or candles,” Scarlet said. “It predates the widespread use of electricity in homes. They might have updated it, but given its history, I doubt it.”

“I take it back. She can stay,” Cliff said.

“Gee, thanks,” Scarlet answered dryly. “I didn’t know you were the authority on who is and isn’t allowed to trespass.”

DJ stepped into the house, and a deep shadow slid across his back. Emily reached out and clutched Buffy, who didn’t shake her off for once.

“Oh sh—” DJ’s body was ripped into the house, doused completely in shadow.

Buffy and Emily screamed. Shana clutched Cliff, who froze. Braiden let go of my hand and pushed forward, moving through the quivering group and to the door, ready to burst in.

“Braiden, wait,” I called, hurrying after him.

“Got ya!” DJ stuck his face out and into the moonlight, everything else left in deep shadow. A cheesy grin spread across his face. “Look at you all. You guys, it’s only a freakin’ house. There’s nothing but varmints in here. Ghosts aren’t real.”

Braiden backed away from the door, his eyes darting deeper into the interior. They didn’t fix on anything, which was a good sign.

“Come on. Let’s check this place out.” DJ waved everyone in before turning and letting the darkness swallow him for the second time.

“I don’t know about this,” Emily said with a shaking voice.

“What are you, chicken?” Shana said, her swagger offset by her clenched jaw. “I’ll go in. I don’t care.” She followed DJ into the maw.

“I ain’t afraid of no ghost,” Cliff mumbled, the catch phrase sounding slightly pathetic now, and stalked forward.

Maria grabbed on to Emily and Buffy, followed by the girl I didn’t know. They squeezed through the door in a group. The guys followed next, many of them not looking so sure of themselves.

“I wonder where Bobby went,” Carl said before he disappeared inside.

“Come on.” Odis grabbed Scarlet’s arm and rushed forward, clearly needing the momentum so he wouldn’t chicken out.

“Wait, Scarlet,” I said, reaching for her. My fingertips glanced off her sweater.

She stumbled into the darkness with a “Whooooaaaa—”

Without thinking, I charged in after her, still reaching. Darkness engulfed my sight as my fingers grazed the fabric of her shirt for the second time. I staggered to a stop, waving my arms. Braiden’s big body hit me a moment later, and we half fell farther into the cavernous space.

“Scarlet?” I said, panic riding the name.

“Here.”

Only two feet away. I clutched her shoulder as Braiden wrapped his arm around my waist.

I’d crossed the threshold. Only time would tell if that action awakened

whatever spirits waited inside.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“LET’S GET THOSE FLASHLIGHTS ON,” DJ called out.

“Hey, Braiden. I thought you were leading this expedition?” Dirk said from somewhere in the darkness. A light clicked on and flashed upward, illuminating Dirk’s smirking face and the fire of his hair. “Did you suddenly go chicken?”

“This has nothing to do with being a chicken, Dirk,” Braiden said, tapping my hand that held the flashlight.

“Through here.” DJ’s light ran along a wall before he disappeared through a doorway.

“This place is creepy,” Maria said. She illuminated a large wooden beam above her. Despite the size of the space, it felt closed in. As suffocating as the growing humidity outside.

“Come on,” Odis said, plucking at Scarlet’s sleeve. Even he had a flashlight. Apparently I was the only one who hadn’t planned ahead and brought one.

Scarlet pulled away from me and followed Odis.

“What are you doing?” I yanked at Braiden’s arm to get free.

“Wait, Ella, are we sure—”

“Braiden, let me go. I’m not leaving her.”

Last in line, I caught up with her just inside the hallway. The ceiling dropped considerably, and the walls pushed in close together, intensifying the claustrophobic feeling.

“This would’ve been for the servants,” Scarlet said in a hush, her voice barely rising above the scuff and scrape of everyone’s shoes against the dirty tile floor. “You can tell by the cramped feel of it. Cost-saving strategies, you

know?”

“Scarlet, remember where you are. This isn’t a tour of a safe historic site. *We are inside McKinley Mansion, Scarlet.*” I tugged on her sleeve.

“I know. I know.” She made an annoyed sound and clucked her tongue. “I know. This is stupid. But look at this place. You can feel the history in it. It’s fascinating.”

“It won’t be fascinating when it comes alive.” But I followed her even as I said it, squinting into the darkness to get a look at the house that had plagued my life for years.

“Give me the light,” Braiden said, reaching forward. “I need to keep an eye on whatever’s coming behind us.”

The line of people stopped moving, everyone in front of us as silent as the grave.

“What’s happening?” I asked Scarlet.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, pass it on.” I motioned like I was telling her to move forward.

She leaned forward and asked the question. A moment later, the answer came back. “DJ is at some stairs. He’s debating going up, or going forward through some creepy-looking doors.”

“Neither of those are good options. We should head back now, Scarlet,” I said, shifting from side to side.

Without warning, the pressure around us changed, popping my ears. Freezing cold settled into the hall, accompanied by the heavy feeling that proclaimed spirits were within our vicinity. A low rumble vibrated the floor.

“We need to get out of here!” I yelled. I spun and grabbed Braiden. “Go,” I barked, jostling him. “Go!”

He didn’t ask questions. He turned and surged forward.

“What’s happening?” Scarlet yelled, grabbing my hair.

My head was yanked back. “Ow!”

“Sorry.” My hair was released, then I heard Scarlet yell, “Ow! Get off.”

Odis’s apology drifted forward.

“Come on.” Braiden grabbed my hand and pulled, getting me moving again.

A door slammed somewhere in the house, followed by a surprised yelp. Another door slammed, closer. One more, the sound echoing through the door we’d just come through. My heart leapt into my throat.

“No,” I said, powering ahead. “Use a window if you have to, Braiden.

Break it. We need to get out!”

Braiden turned the corner and swung his light. The breath left his mouth and he staggered. I knew what he saw.

“Use a window,” I yelled again. “Break your way out. Just get us out of here.”

“What’s happening?” Odis hollered.

“They’re locking us in,” I answered in a high-pitched, terrified voice. “They’ve probably been storing up energy for years. Decades. The spirits are locking us in!”

Braiden reached the closed door we’d entered through and cranked the handle. It didn’t turn. He shook it. Nothing happened.

“Window, I said.” I looked around desperately, seeing a faint light at the other side of the large room.

“Let me out of here,” a guy yelled.

A feminine shriek preempted a girl tumbling out of the hallway and onto the floor of the room we were in. Cliff barreled in behind her, crunching her fingers with his heavy boot. He looked around wildly, seemingly unaware of her cries of pain. “The door shut on its own. The door shut on its own!” He ran at Braiden. “Let me out.”

“It won’t open.” Braiden realized just in time that Cliff wasn’t working on brainpower. He barely dodged Cliff’s body as the guy rammed into the door with his shoulder. The old wood groaned.

“The door doesn’t open out, Cliff, it opens in,” Scarlet yelled.

Cliff grabbed the handle with both hands and yanked. The door held fast.

“Quick, who knows how to pick locks?” Cliff shook the knob.

“It’s unlocked,” Braiden said, moving toward me. “The lock is on the inside, near where your hands are. It’s unlocked.”

“But that’s impossible.” Cliff rammed his shoulder into the door as more people filed out of the hallway. He flicked the lock, but the knob didn’t turn. He flicked it again, getting the same result. “That’s impossible!” He rammed the door with his shoulder. And again.

“Leave him,” Braiden called to Scarlet, who’d moved forward, probably trying to talk sense into him.

I tripped over something on the floor. After a stumble, I righted myself. “Watch out for the—”

Braiden’s foot caught the same impediment and he staggered after me. He couldn’t get his feet back under him in time and sprawled out onto the floor.

I didn't stop. He was a big boy—he could pick himself up.

At the grime-covered window, I touched it to make sure it was glass and not some strange figment of my imagination. Then I felt along the wall, flinching at the spider webs but not stopping, until a handle of some sort filled my hand. A hammer, it felt like. This area must've been used as a garage or maintenance area.

Back at the window, Braiden was up and had his light trained on my target. "Do you want me to do it?" he asked.

In answer, I swung with all my might, putting all my fear and desperation behind the strike. The metal end hit the window with a dull *bommm*. Not so much as a crack.

I struck again and again. Still nothing. Not even a scratch to show for my efforts.

Breathing heavily, I stepped back and held up the hammer. Braiden exchanged it for the flashlight without a word.

"They're panicking," Odis said, jogging over. "They're panicking. You need to get control."

It sounded like he was included in that *they*. He was right, though. Someone needed to get control, and Braiden was the guy to do it. He'd known how to get control since his first day in Larkin.

Except he had more important things to do right now.

"Scarlet," I barked, my voice confident and my legs shaking.

"Yeah?" she said, stepping closer. I hadn't seen her waiting there, three feet away.

"Tell everyone to get near the door. If we can't break this window, we need to find another. But we have to stick together. Time to roll out your hangriest persona."

"Okay," she said weakly.

"I could've done that," Odis said.

"You don't know Scarlet. When she gets frustrated with her peers, a different sort of girl emerges."

Braiden swung, all grace and power, with the perfect form I'd seen in a million baseball games. The hammer rammed against the window, the sound sharp. Braiden fumbled his weapon, then shook out his arms. "That should've done it. I've never had to hit a window twice to break it."

"You've broken windows?" Odis asked.

Braiden ignored the question, leaning forward to study his handiwork.

As before, not a scratch marred the plane.

Braiden's swear matched my own.

"What's the likelihood that these are bulletproof glass," he asked, "designed not to be broken by a kid and his metal rod?"

"There is a dirty joke in there somewhere," I muttered, trying to keep from succumbing to panic. The air hung heavy around me, thick and gooey. The chill had seeped through my clothes and invaded my body, making my bones feel brittle. Soon the spirit, or spirits, would reveal themselves. Judging by what they'd done with the doors and windows, they had a crapload of energy, and couldn't wait to unleash it on new victims.

We had to get out of this house and off this property.

The problem was, we couldn't.

We were trapped.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“I DOUBT the windows are bulletproof glass,” I said as Scarlet raised her voice at the other end of the room. “Just like I doubt that door is simply sticking. If you know how to banish spirits, now is a great time to dust off your skills, because I get the feeling that we’re about to become the pawns of an enemy we can’t physically fight.”

“Hard to banish one when you don’t know where it is,” Braiden said in a humorless voice.

I ran my fingers through my hair, then cursed myself for forgetting, yet again, how much hairspray I had been wearing the last few days.

“So what do we do?” Braiden asked.

Scarlet’s voice cut through someone’s frantic wails.

On any other occasion, I might’ve found it odd that someone was asking *me* for guidance. No one ever listened to me. That was either because I was the nerd in a group of not-as-nerdy people, or because Scarlet was around and had a better answer. But in this situation, given my history, I knew there was no one more knowledgeable.

“Right.” I cracked my knuckles. My knees still shook. “There’s energy in the air, but this place is also changing the landscape—dragging us back in time.”

“Like at the old mill.”

“Exactly. It has something it wants to show us. That, or it has enough energy to relive the horrors of the past. Possibly both. We should start off by checking a few other windows, starting on the main floor and then moving to the second floor. Maybe the haunting is already sapping their energy, and they won’t be able to keep us in.”

“They? You think it is more than one?”

“Honestly, I have no idea, but I’ve never felt this”—I held my hands near my chest and clawed the air—“density before. You feel it, right? The press of the air on you?”

“Yes.”

“It’s never been this extreme. Not even with the Old Woman. So that’s...terrifying.”

“Don’t say terrifying. It’ll get into your head. Say challenging.”

“Okay, challenging.” It didn’t make any difference to my anxiety level, but whatever floated his boat.

“Basically, we have to ride this out until it—whatever *it* is—expends enough energy to let us out?” Braiden was nearly drowned out by Scarlet yelling again.

“Yes. At least, that’s what I’m thinking. I’m no expert.”

“Well it seems to jibe with the shows I’ve watched—about the energy, I mean. I figure you’re the closest thing to an expert we have.”

“Comforting.”

“Challenging.”

I sighed. “I’m of the mind that we shouldn’t split up. The paranormal seems to be the most active in my house when I’m not with my parents. That’s when ghosts use the most force.”

“You have that much activity in your house?”

“Yeah.” I tilted my head at him. “Don’t you? The previous owners were at their wits’ end before they moved—one of the few that escaped this town. I figured it had to have been bad.”

“No. Not that I’ve seen. I told the one to get lost, and that seemed to do it.”

It dawned on me that he didn’t have any *real* experience. When he’d claimed to have banished a ghost, his voice steeped in his infallible confidence, I had instinctively gone along with it. After all, this guy seemed like he could do anything.

What I was failing to remember was that he had only been living here for a few days. Total. Sending the spirit away might’ve worked that night, but it didn’t mean the entity had left forever. In my house, that meant the entity was simply gone until it collected enough energy to throw something else. Or slam another door. Or bang around in the kitchen until my dad ran down with a shotgun (my dad believed a shotgun would rid a house of all intruders, and

so far, he'd been right).

Braiden's knowledge was all theoretical at this point. Even his smudge stick was theoretical. I had to remember that. I knew the real world would not go how he thought.

"Let's get going," I said.

At the other end of the room, everyone was huddled near the door, their faces hard or ashen and trained on Scarlet. She stood a few paces away with the flashlight illuminating her face. "Let's look at it this way: we know *that* door doesn't work. It's jammed. But what do we know about the other doors?"

"We're trapped," Cliff said, and jiggled the handle for good measure.

"I should've followed Bobby," Buffy said, tears running down her face.

"That's not helpful, Buffy, and no, we're not trapped, Cliff," Scarlet said. "We can't say that until we've tried *all* the doors and *all* the windows, right? Remember me saying this to you thirty seconds ago?"

"Hey," I said, stopping by her side.

She sagged with an exhale. "It took you long enough. It's hard to keep these guys under control. And we have to, because do you know what happens when fairly dumb jocks run amok? They crash into people and step on fingers. Honestly, we couldn't be stuck in here with a worse group of people."

"You said we weren't stuck," Cliff yelled.

"No," Scarlet said, bristling. "I said that we weren't *trapped*. There's a difference."

In this case, there really wasn't.

"All right, everyone." Braiden stopped halfway between the huddled crowd and the hallway we'd recently exited. "It seems this house hasn't finished shifting yet." He pointed at the door. "That one is jammed, like Scarlet said." He pointed at the window. "And the window over there is made with special glass to keep intruders out. Because obviously this is the place they'd most likely try first."

Everyone nodded like that made some kind of sense, except for Scarlet. She opened her mouth to argue.

I pinched her.

"Ow." She twisted away from me.

I held my finger to my lips as Braiden continued. "So fine. We can't get out this way. What of it? This is a huge house. There was that window DJ

found originally, plus a bunch of other doors. Let's go check those out."

"Bu-but..." Leo outstretched a shaky finger. "The doors. They slammed. They slammed all by themselves."

"I told you I saw something on the porch," Maria said indignantly, cradling her fingers. She was obviously the one who'd been trampled by a rampaging Cliff.

"That was probably just the wind," Braiden said. "Right, DJ? All this spirit stuff is stupid. It isn't real."

DJ, standing next to Cliff, stiffened. "Yeah," he said, though his quivering voice wasn't selling it. "Yeah. Stupid. I never seen anything like that at my house—"

"Saw," Scarlet muttered.

DJ's chest puffed out slightly. "It was probably the wind, yeah. The weather was weird when we came in. The clouds was scattering in a hurry."

"Does fear negate grammar all of a sudden— Ow! Stop pinching me, Ella!" Scarlet twisted away from me again.

"Exactly," Braiden said. "Right, Dirk? You've never seen anything out of the ordinary in your house, either."

Dirk's lips pressed together, holding back his comment.

Braiden motioned for us to follow him before starting off with a straight back and squared shoulders. He didn't once look back to see if anyone was heeding him, like I would've done. But they did—hesitantly at first, then in a frightened flock.

"Ella, here." Scarlet grabbed me and yanked me closer, positioning me in front of her. Odis was directly behind us and the popular crowd was trailing after. "If one of those big lugs comes tearing through here, he'll have to get through Odis before he knocks us down."

"Hey," Odis said from behind.

I had to hand it to Scarlet: she was good in a messed-up survival situation. I still couldn't believe she'd gotten the crew of jocks and cheerleaders to listen to her.

"Ella, what do you think?" Braiden asked in a loud, clear voice.

"I think you shouldn't speak so loudly." I realized that he was trying to make sure everyone knew I was a co-leader, but under the circumstances, that was not the most important consideration.

The hallway curved around, opening up as it did so. The ceiling and walls gave us some breathing room until we entered a larger area with more

windows. “Should we try to break one of these?” I asked quietly.

Braiden studied one of the windows for a moment before shaking his head. “That’s the one DJ opened.”

It wasn’t open anymore.

“I have a bad feeling,” Braiden whispered, “that if these windows turn out like the others, this crew won’t shrug off their fear for much longer. Unless you think things have changed...”

An otherworldly presence pulsed all around us, draping the walls and slithering across the floor.

“No, nothing has changed,” I answered.

Scarlet groaned from behind me.

“What?” Odis said.

“Don’t ask,” she answered. “Trust me, do not ask.”

“Don’t ask about what?”

“What it means when Ella’s voice sounds like that.”

“Like what?”

“I literally said, two seconds ago, not to ask.” Scarlet scoffed. “I thought you were supposed to be one of the smart ones on this journey.”

Braiden glanced back, shifting his flashlight as he did so, and I could barely make out the grin on his face. It didn’t stay long. As his eyes took in the house around us, all evidence of good humor fled.

“Scarlet,” I said, motioning for her to walk beside me. Her beam danced across the floor in front of us. “You did a research paper on this house once, right?”

“I started to, but my mother made me stop when the librarian told her I was looking into ‘morbid and unseemly affairs.’ Her words.”

“Because you were researching a house?” Braiden asked.

“This place isn’t just a house.” I saw a stairwell up ahead. “It is the pinnacle of all things evil in this town, whether you believe the stories or not. Its presence is like a black cloud following you around, saturating your mood. Everyone feels it; they just try to ignore it. Don’t talk about it—don’t even think about it—and it’s like they think it will stop existing. It’s crazy.”

“Ah. Ignorance is bliss.” Braiden shined his light on the bottom of the stairwell. The beam slid upward a ways before moving on. “I wouldn’t believe half of this stuff if I weren’t here witnessing it.”

“And you’ve only been in Larkin for a few days. Wait until you’re here a couple years. The way people talk around the weird things that happen will

bend your mind.” A double doorway to the left opened up into a room beyond. I tugged on Braiden’s shirt to slow him.

“Except for on Halloween,” Scarlet whispered, hunching beside me, her light trained through the open doorway. “If you read between the lines in the jokes and ghost stories people tell, you can get a better picture of what they’re usually trying to keep under wraps.”

“If so many people are having the same problem, I don’t get why everyone tries so hard to pretend it isn’t real. Or just leave.” Braiden shook his head. “What’s up, do you want to go that way?”

“I don’t know.” I bit my lip in indecision, checking in with my inner paranormal compass.

“Some people can’t leave, because of the cost of moving,” Scarlet said. “We aren’t a wealthy town. Most people are just scraping by.” She paused, and I nearly commented on the pull I knew we’d all felt earlier. The unexplainable draw of this place. But before I could, she continued. “But believing in it is going against the grain. Even with picture evidence, people shrug it off. If you’ve been taught about heaven and hell all your life, your belief system doesn’t support spirits lingering in the world of the living. The odds are stacked against a bunch of grown adults having a lively discussion about hauntings if there’s even *one* naysayer in the group. And there are a great many naysayers in any place, including this one.”

“What are we doing?” one of the girls asked from the rear.

“Make a decision, Ella,” Braiden urged.

The flashlight beam plunged into the gloom beyond the doorway, swallowed by the blackness. An eerie sort of feeling came over me, like the room wanted us to get closer so it could suck us into its depths.

“Let’s keep go—”

Before I could finish, a gasp sucked the words back into my mouth. A shape zipped through the light. Someone screamed. Braiden jerked backward, his hands coming up to his chest, a defensive move.

“Did you see that?” a guy shouted.

“What?”

“What’s happening?”

“See what?”

“Go, Ella.” Braiden grabbed me by the arm and pulled me forward. “Keep moving. Keep them moving.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“WHAT DID YOU SEE?” I asked, panic squeezing my chest.

“A shape. Same as you. We need to keep everyone moving. If they feel like they’re actively doing something—” Braiden staggered to the right.

A feeling of vertigo swept over me. I slowed and put out my hands, one of them hitting Scarlet. She clutched on, standing stock-still.

“Did you feel that?” I asked her.

“What?”

It was hard to hear her over the babbling behind us.

A door to the side drifted open, silent on well-greased hinges. My breath caught in my throat and my eyes widened. A moment later, a dim light flared off to the side, an old-timey gas lamp resting on a dresser that sat below a window.

Someone gasped. Heads swiveled. Some of the others had likely missed the opening of the door and were now searching for the source of the extra light.

“There,” someone shouted. “There’s a door.”

Before I could protest, Cliff knocked people aside and broke for the door.

“Where’s he going?” a girl screeched.

“Cliff, wait!” DJ yelled.

He didn’t.

“Who lit that lamp?” Maria pointed, her face as white as her shirt.

“How could there still be oil in that lamp?” Scarlet asked quietly.

Cliff barreled through the door, swallowed by shadow.

“Do we go after him?” I asked Braiden, poised on the balls of my feet. Goosebumps coated my arms, and I knew, without a doubt, that following

Cliff was the very last thing we should do.

A flame ignited on a candle, held with four others in an ornate candelabrum stationed on a small table next to the door that had originally caught my attention. The one through which I'd seen movement.

Another candle flared to life, lit by itself.

"Look!" Buffy pointed.

A third candle blazed, followed by the other two.

"What's happening?" a girl screamed.

"Those candles just lit themselves," DJ shouted. A curse word was drowned out by wailing.

"Do we follow him?" I asked Braiden again, trying to stay steady despite the group's rising panic. But the fear had locked me up, freezing my limbs, and my teeth started to chatter. There was no bed to hide in, no curtains to shut. I had no escape this time.

"Is that an exit?" one of the guys stuttered. It sounded like Carl.

"No," Scarlet said, her voice quivering. "It can't be. Not in that direction. That's likely a solarium or something."

"A what?" Carl edged that direction, his eyes wide and confused.

"A sol—a room that gets lots of sun, likely in the middle of a cluster of rooms so the natural light can help people see."

"Th-those ju-just...those just..." Odis was holding out a shaking finger. "Those just..."

"Those just lit themselves, yes. Now who thinks Ella has been lying all these years?" Scarlet audibly swallowed. "I will say, light is very helpful. Of all the scary things that could happen, this is by far the least frightening."

Braiden's fingers wrapped around my upper arm. "Ella, let's keep moving."

"What about Cliff?" I licked my lips.

"I'll get him." Dirk, amazingly calm in comparison to everyone else, moved around the huddle of terrified spectators. He even mumbled, "Excuse me," and ducked his head past the beams of light zipping around the room.

Soft music reached my ears, bleeding through the walls. String instruments, with no bass or drum accompaniment. Footsteps sounded overhead, light and agile.

One of the flashlight beams swung up to the ceiling. "Did you hear that?" Buffy said, her voice choked.

"He's not in there," Dirk announced, reappearing in the threshold of the

door. “Scarlet was right—this isn’t an exit. It’s...like...” He looked upward. “It’s a big open space. It goes three floors up. It must be glass at the top, because I can see the sky but can’t feel any breeze or anything.”

“A solarium,” Scarlet said, just barely on this side of patient.

“If it’s not an exit, then where did he go?” the unknown girl asked, clutching her earlobe for some reason.

Dirk disappeared for a moment as Braiden put his hand on my shoulder. We heard doors open and close. “There are other doors...they are all unlocked. I bet he went through the open one...these rooms are all furnished. Like...completely furnished. And...they all have—”

His voice cut off and I instinctively held my breath. Braiden’s fingers tightened on my shoulder.

“Ella,” Braiden whispered.

Dirk walked through the open door before turning, taking the handle, and shutting the door firmly behind him. “Cliff took off,” he said in a monotone.

“That’s it?” Buffy asked, and though she sounded angry, tears were threatening to overflow.

Someone giggled.

“Really? You think this is funny?” Buffy turned on Maria, who was standing next to her.

“Ella,” Braiden said insistently.

“That wasn’t me! That must’ve been Clarissa.” Maria jerked her head toward the pretty girl next to her, still holding her earlobe.

“*Ella!*” Braiden’s circle of light was directed at the base of the doorway in which we’d seen the shape. The beam crawled up the side of the door before shifting to the interior of the room and covering the floor. At the very edge of the glow, hardly noticeable, was a black half-moon, disrupting the arc of the beam.

It took a moment for my eyes to make sense of it, and then they slid over just a bit farther, landing on a pair of legs. Small legs, covered in strange stockings.

No...those weren’t stockings. The effect was caused by the translucence of someone no longer living.

“Take your light away,” I whispered furiously. “Don’t let the others see. They’ll flip and probably scatter deeper into the house.”

“I didn’t laugh,” Clarissa said, clutching the fabric of her sweater over her chest.

Braiden's light swung the other way, the *wrong* way, in time for Scarlet to suck in a loud breath. Her eyes widened, staring at the little girl from the porch, who had a tight grin spread across her pixie face. That smile wasn't sweet and innocent.

It was predatory.

"Keep it to yourself." I clutched Scarlet's arm, tight bands of panic wrapping around my chest.

"Is Cliff gone, then?" Braiden asked, amazingly blasé.

The little girl moved her head slowly, surveying everyone in the corridor. Her grin spread a little wider, showing teeth.

"Yeah," Dirk said without emotion. "He went through another door."

"All right, let's keep going." Braiden grabbed my hand, and for the first time, his hand was shaking as badly as mine.

"Aren't we going to go after him?" Leo asked.

"He's the one that ran off," Buffy said, wiping her nose. "Leave him."

"That's what he deserves." Maria looked at her hurt hand.

"As soon as we get out, we'll send someone back for him." Braiden took up a fast pace. "This house is massive and he isn't making rational decisions. It'll either be a wild goose chase, or he'll find his way out while we're all wandering around inside looking for him."

"Take a lesson, everyone," Scarlet said over her shoulder. "Stay close. Don't be Cliff."

"The li-lights came on by themselves," Odis said.

The hall came to a closed door. Braiden took a deep breath before opening it. A small room, almost like a nook, awaited us on the other side. Trays filled with half-empty glasses littered a circular table. Gas lamps flickered along the side walls.

The music from string instruments was much louder here, emanating from the swinging door on the other side of the space.

"We are absolutely, one hundred percent sure this house isn't in use, right?" Scarlet asked, crowded in behind me.

"It is definitely in use," Braiden said, staring at the other door before looking back the way we'd come.

"I mean...by living people." Scarlet picked up one of the glasses on the tray and swirled the contents. "This looks fresh."

"Don't touch it." Odis ran forward and swatted at her hand. The glass tumbled free, falling end over end until it shattered against the floor. Red

splashed out, spraying our shoes.

“Dang it, Odis,” she said, backing up to avoid the liquid.

“What was that?”

“What happened?”

Those behind Odis shoved him forward so they could see.

“Should we find a different way around...” Braiden paused as a long note hung in the air before the music faded. Talking and laughter filled in the space. “Or maybe we should just hunker down and wait for them to use up their energy?”

“The thing is, we have no idea how long that might take.” My whisper was barely heard over the demands of those gathered behind us and the clamor of the ghosts. “This house has been abandoned for *years*. If it’s been dormant, it could have a whole store of energy at its disposal.”

“Except it hasn’t been dormant.” Scarlet looked over the other glasses without touching. “It’s lured kids back here, hasn’t it? It must’ve been active in those instances. Or else where did all of the kids go?”

“How can we be sure the kids actually came back here, though?” Braiden asked. “Has anyone else ever followed the Old Woman?”

“That’s a good point. There is no actual proof.” Scarlet gave him a flat stare. “The ghost of the woman who owned this house walks through the town, and kids go missing afterward. For all we know, she takes them to New Orleans for a good time, and they have so much fun, they don’t want to come back. It’s certainly possible. We have no way of knowing.”

“All right fine, point made.” Another melody started, drawing Braiden’s attention. “The question remains—go through, or go around?”

“Go around.” I made a circle in the air for Scarlet to turn. “Let’s try to avoid anything...odd as much as we can. Watch out for that creepy little girl. Give her a wide berth if you see her.”

“Like I’d drift in close and try to shake her hand,” Scarlet muttered. “Just so you know, that’s probably the ballroom. Clearly there’s some sort of spectral ball going on. Beside that would be a formal dining room, probably large. Behind that...maybe a sitting room or something. The sitting room would have windows. I’m not sure about a door, but it would definitely have windows.”

We pushed the others back through the door, ignoring their demands to keep going. Through the press of anxious bodies, I couldn’t see the periphery of the group. I wondered if that little girl was still watching, and if so, what

she intended.

“This way,” I murmured to Braiden, sliding by Maria and scooting past Clarissa. There was only one path we had yet to try beside the stairs. I had a feeling it wouldn’t take us to a sitting room as fast as the other way might’ve, but the less active areas of the house were likely less dangerous. With the amount of energy surging throughout the house, there was no telling what they might throw at us.

“What’s the problem?” DJ crossed his arms over his chest stubbornly, which did nothing to detract from his paleness. “Why are you turning back?”

“Scarlet?” I said, walking softly to the far door, the one we had not yet explored.

“Forcing them to use logic is exhausting,” Scarlet whined, her back bowing.

“You’re really good at it, though,” Odis mumbled, stuck to her side like a Velcro suit. For once, she wasn’t pushing him away. “Your explanations are too smart and dry for anyone to get mad at you.”

She sighed dramatically. “Fine, but only because I have no other use right now.” She clasped her hands in front of her as I reached the door, slightly ajar.

“Careful,” Braiden said, quickly at my side.

“DJ, there are a great many problems that you might’ve noticed,” Scarlet began, “like the oil lamps that haven’t been used in *decades* suddenly coming to life. On their own. Or the music drifting out of that swinging door. But what you might not have realized is that the glass I dropped on the floor was filled with what smelled like fresh, sweet brandy wine. Ghostly items don’t shatter, DJ. They disappear. If wine sat in that room for decades, it would no longer be wine. So you see, there is a lot wrong, DJ, with this whole setup. A lot wrong, and if we aren’t careful, we will panic and make a life-threatening mistake. To head off your next question, yes, I am saying that if we panic, we will surely die.”

“I take it back,” Odis muttered as I spread my palms against the wood, my eyes on the dark sliver between the door and the frame. “She’s laying it on a little thick now.”

“That’s because I’m freaked out of my mind, Odis,” Scarlet said, rounding on him. “And all these mind-boggling questions are frying any ability to remain calm—”

“Well, if the glass was real, and the wine was real, then...that solves it,

right?” Carl pushed toward the small room. Everyone looked around, not sure what that solved. “I mean, she just said ghost stuff disappears. That glass didn’t disappear. And that music is definitely real. So...this place isn’t haunted. It’s being used by squatters.” A laugh rode his release of breath. “So that’s no big deal. They’re probably more afraid of us than we are of them.”

“Except...squatters don’t have string orchestras and fancy glasses to put their fancy wine in,” Scarlet said, having regained control. “They use bags and drink directly out of the bottle. And though your argument might be true if we were dealing with small rodents, I’m not convinced it applies to criminals.”

“It’s probably just someone from the city that traveled up here to use this old house. I mean, it’s a pretty cool house if you look past all the creepy stuff.” Carl brushed his hand along the wall beside the door. “Look at this wallpaper. It’s really neat. It’s like braille.”

Clarissa’s face crumpled. “Do you even know what braille is?”

“It has to be expensive, that wallpaper,” Buffy said, looking it over with a shrewd eye. “But still, what about the lamps lighting themselves?”

“Um, hello?” Carl’s eyebrows rose. “Lighting effects?”

I pushed the door open and looked into the darkened space behind, no light from candles or windows to help me determine what was in there, or even if the space was big or small. I took a step through the door. Chill air washed over me, but the pressure in the air didn’t increase. “The coast is clear. For now.”

“They are oil lamps,” Scarlet was saying to Carl.

“They *look* like oil lamps—” He paused, and I figured he was probably making a gesture to punctuate his point. “But that doesn’t mean they are actually oil lamps. The owner of this house is filthy rich. They can make a light look like anything they want, and connect it to a sensor.” Another pause. “Easy.”

“Except the owner is long dead and no one has lived in this house for decades,” Scarlet argued.

“That we know of,” Carl retorted.

“I think we’d know—”

“Let’s get moving,” Braiden said, cutting Scarlet off. “This way looks clear.”

“That way looks dark and creepy,” Carl said. The onlookers murmured their agreement.

DJ stepped forward, renewed confidence showing in his straight shoulders and raised chin. “I don’t know about you guys, but I am tired of dark and creepy. It’s been fun, and it’ll certainly make for a good story, but it’s time to call it a night. I say we get out of here and find us some beer.”

“Dude, there is wine just through there.” Carl pointed at the door he was still standing next to.

“What about Cliff?” Emily asked.

Carl waved his hand through the air. “What *about* Cliff? That dude ran like a coward.”

DJ nodded and strolled to the door leading to the nook. “I agree. Let’s go.”

“You guys, wait.” Scarlet held out her hands, fear rolling over her face. “What you’re saying is crazy. Use your heads. You know this house has been empty for years. All of you know that. If someone lived here, people would’ve seen lights. Heard music.”

“We see the lights. Hear the music.” DJ pushed open the door.

I stepped forward. “You only see and hear them right now. While we’re trapped inside. They aren’t real.”

“Save it, Fella. We’ve had enough of your stories.” DJ walked out of sight.

Carl laughed at me before waving the others on. “Come on. Let’s go.”

“And now we know how a town steeped in ghosts can convince itself that the paranormal is a bunch of malarkey,” Odis mumbled. “A better study couldn’t have been set up.”

Shana stepped away first, her face blanched and jaw tight. She’d been so quiet that I’d completely forgotten she was in the group. Maria and Clarissa followed, clutching each other. They all glanced back at Buffy and Emily. “You coming?” Maria asked, still cradling her injured hand.

Buffy looked between them and my group, her face hard to read. Finally, she huffed and walked in my direction. “You think I’m going to believe guys who can barely read over a bunch of nerds? Dream on.”

“Backhanded compliment,” Scarlet muttered.

“I’m going with her.” Emily, hunched over and wringing her hands, scampered after Buffy.

“Are you *serious*?” Maria’s mouth dropped open. She shook her head. “Whatever. Hang around in a dank pit.” She moved to flick her hair with her hurt hand—the dominant one—before wincing and stopping. “You’ll see.”

“Enjoy your warm beer,” Buffy said, standing near me. She made an L-shape with her fingers and put it to her forehead.

That left Leo standing on his own in the middle of the hall in the flickering light.

“You too?” Carl gave Leo an incredulous look. “You’d rather hang out with a bunch of nerds than party with the rest of us?”

But Leo didn’t look at us. He glanced at the door through which Cliff had disappeared. “It’s not right, leaving Cliff behind.” Leo raised his flashlight. “I’m going to go after him.”

“I wouldn’t advise that,” I said.

Leo shrugged. “I’m the one that talked him into coming. I should go get him. I’ll see you guys later.”

I watched him disappear through the door, his shoulders hunched and his flashlight out. A moment later, the darkness swallowed him.

“Suit yourself.” Carl swung his glance our way as Maria and Clarissa paused beside him. “You sure?” he asked us as a group. Then he shifted his gaze to Braiden. “Think it through, man. She’s hot, I’ll grant you, but seriously, dude, she’s frigid. Not to mention seriously weird. Not worth the hassle. Ask Dirk.”

Wait...where was Dirk?

Ignoring Scarlet muttering about pigs, I looked around for Dirk, finally spotting him off to the side by himself, immersed in a shadow. He stood stock-still, staring back the way we’d come when entering the house.

“You’ll want to come with us, man. Seriously.” Carl waved Braiden over. “We can get girls all day long. Cool chicks that’ll let you do anything. I’m looking out for you on this one.”

Braiden didn’t so much as shift. Scarlet reacted enough for the both of them, her face closing down in anger and a distinctive finger being raised.

“I’m good,” Braiden said. Scarlet nodded, finger still held high.

Carl chuckled and shook his head. “Don’t come crying to me when you don’t round the bases.”

“See ya,” Braiden said.

Carl shrugged. “All right.” Goofy grin still in place, he shoved his way past the girls and into the room. His delighted exclamation indicated he’d found the wine. Clearly he didn’t have a problem drinking strangers’ leftovers.

“Let’s go,” Braiden said, putting his hand on my back.

“Wait.” I nodded toward Dirk.

Braiden squinted, probably having a hard time picking Dirk’s frame out of the shadow. “Dirk?”

Dirk startled, looking around with large eyes. He blinked a few times at the empty spot where the small crowd had stood not long before, as if he’d only just realized the group had split up. His gaze shot back in the other direction. “We need to hurry. They don’t like us in their space.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

A GIGGLE DRIFTED down the corridor.

“What did you see?” I asked Dirk as Braiden pushed through the door and pulled me behind him.

“Hurry,” Dirk seethed, pushing Buffy and Emily in front of him. “A little girl. The one from the porch. She was taunting me, I could tell. Something else was lurking in the shadow with her. It started to emerge right when you called my name. These aren’t ordinary house ghosts. These are...dangerous.”

“How do you know all that?” Buffy asked in a thick voice.

“It’s not hard to know when they’re around. They give you all kinds of signs.” Dirk slammed the door behind us, dunking us into inky blackness. “Then it’s just a matter of picking out the form. And avoiding it. If you can.”

“But you always said Ella was full of it,” Odis said, clicking on his flashlight.

I grabbed it out of his hand and clicked it off. “Shut up, everyone.”

A new sensation settled onto my shoulders. Thick and aggressive, it slithered along my skin and sent spikes of adrenaline through my blood. A low rumble vibrated the floor.

“Go.” Dirk shoved the girls, pushing them toward us. “Go!”

I didn’t ask questions, though I had a *million* of them dating all the way back to our childhood. I did as he said.

I ran.

Screams erupted, muffled yet dense, from somewhere else in the house. Braiden grunted and something went clattering across the ground. My hip hit the corner of something—a small table, I thought—knocking me to the side. Scarlet barreled into me a moment later, clutching for something to keep her

upright.

One of the screams cut out. Male voices hollered, their pitch rising in intensity.

“What’s happening?” Emily said, her breath coming fast and shallow. “What’s happening to them?”

“Keep going,” Dirk said, his voice still flat and even, though now with an edge. “Just keep going.”

The agonized screaming reached a fever pitch. I ground my teeth, my whole body shaking.

“Braiden,” I managed, struggling with Scarlet’s weight and my panic.

The male voices cut out, followed by the last screamer. Disgusting silence rained down on us.

Braiden’s arm wrapped around my middle, pulling me to him. Scarlet lost her grip and fell. Her limbs slapped off the tile, the sound ringing in the silence.

“What just... What just...” Odis’s voice trailed away.

“Keep going,” Dirk said into the hush.

“Scarlet?” I called softly, my focus fraying, memories of those screams echoing through my head.

“I got her,” Emily said with a thick voice heavy with unshed tears. “I have gym with her. She’s the clumsiest person I’ve ever seen.”

“That didn’t need to be said.” Scarlet grunted, probably as Emily helped her up. “Just have to focus on logic.” It sounded like she was talking to herself. “Focus on logic. Get out of here. Focus on that. You can come apart when you’re safe.”

“Okay.” Odis sniffed, which turned into a grossly wet sound, like he’d wiped his nose with the back of his hand. He’d thought she was talking to him, and why not? Her words applied to each and every one of us. “Okay.”

“They’re probably okay,” Buffy said in a hollow voice. “They were probably just psyching us out. Carl and DJ are dumb like that.”

“Yeah,” Emily said quietly. “That’s probably it. Then they’ll make fun of us for choosing the nerds when we get out of here.”

“No doubt.”

Frail light suddenly glimmered to life ahead of us, shining down from the ceiling. It spilled down the side of what looked like a butcher’s block and spread across a counter top.

“The kitchen,” Scarlet said, back by my side. “Which makes sense, given

the location of the ballroom and dining rooms. Look, a door.”

We hurried that way in twos, the area, though large, sectioned off by furniture and the natural contours of the structure. When we reached the other door, we peeked through, trying to see what lay beyond.

“How is it looking behind us?” Braiden asked Dirk.

“I have no idea. I can’t see in the dark.”

More low light greeted us on the other side, a window letting in traces of moonlight, highlighting a row of basins.

“What are the odds that the windows through here would lead outside?” I asked.

“Unless you can climb three stories or fly, nonexistent,” Scarlet said. “Mrs. McKinley loved light and hated wasting money. She had a lot of solariums and sunrooms built into this place because of it.”

“How would that save money?” Emily asked.

“They wouldn’t need as many candles or as much oil.” Scarlet peered around me for a moment before moving toward the left. Since she hadn’t let go of my sweater, she took me with her.

Since I was a chicken, I yanked on Braiden to follow.

“What is it?” I asked her.

“That would be the laundry room. Mrs. McKinley was good to her employees. She gave them the best. Kept building until the day she died. A large laundry room, a well-stocked kitchen and pantry—this place isn’t just one room; it’s several clustered together. But through one of these doors—I can’t remember the layout exactly—is a small staff dining room. Beside that is a larger personal dining room where Mrs. McKinley took her meals alone between the deaths of her husbands—”

“You mean the *killings* of her husbands?” Buffy said.

“We’ll never know.” Scarlet paused. “I hope. Anyway, if we can find her personal dining room, it’ll be connected to a sitting room, I guarantee it. These old houses are filled with sitting rooms, and those rooms were all located at the sides of the house to let in a lot of light. It’s no good having guests if you can’t see them.”

“Any idea of direction?” Braiden said, his hand squeezing mine.

“Well, let’s use logic. That is the laundry room, which should be the opposite direction or thereabouts to the dining room, right? We’ll need to go through the kitchen. So let’s go this way.” She reached through Braiden and I to point.

We passed a large fireplace with a hanging pot.

“Cobwebs,” Odis muttered as we passed.

“That’s a good sign,” Dirk whispered.

“Why?” Emily asked.

“Because it means there’s not much activity in this area.” I crept along with Braiden quietly. “This kitchen would be a madhouse if the McKinleys were throwing a party. The fact that it’s so quiet and...old means we’re still in reality.”

“Reality is good,” Odis said on a release of breath.

“I can’t believe I am actually going along with this.” Buffy tsked. “This better be as messed up as it seems, or there will be hell to pay. Carl will have a field day.”

“Carl was screaming a moment ago,” Dirk said in a hard voice. “I wouldn’t worry about him making fun of you.”

A stack of old pots and pans lined two shelves—the heavier ones on the bottom shelf or floor, and the others tilted every which way, stacked on top of one another. The dim light highlighted layers of cobwebs, all blessedly empty.

“Doorway,” said Emily, pointing to her side. “Hallway leading from it. See?”

“Odis, check it out,” I instructed.

“No way. Are you insane? You have my flashlight.”

“I’ll do it.” Dirk pushed Odis out of his way and gingerly grabbed the doorknob.

“Why are there doors for every room?” Buffy whispered. “We don’t have a door between our living room and kitchen.”

“You have central heating,” Scarlet answered. “They had fireplaces that used wood or coal. They needed a way to keep the heat trapped during the cold winter months.”

Dirk pulled on the door, but it didn’t move. My heart revved up. He used both hands and pulled again. After a breathless moment, the door jerked free of its frame, the hinges squealing.

The group collectively released a breath.

A heavy crash rumbled across the ceiling. I jumped and clutched Braiden. Scarlet jumped and clutched me.

“What was that?” Emily asked, looking up.

“This is a dining room,” Dirk said, ignoring Emily.

“For staff or the owners?” Scarlet asked.

“How can I tell?”

“Is it big or small, with nice furnishings or simple ones? Honestly, am I the only one who knows about older-styled homes?”

“Yes,” Emily and Buffy said at the same time.

Loud thumping came from above. Something hit the floor and rolled, and ten feet away, another crash shook the ceiling.

That sounded like someone fighting. But was it someone from the past, or had the occupants of the house found Cliff or Leo?

A chill settled in my core.

“It’s a good size,” Dirk said, not having so much as glanced upward. He had a knack for ignoring terrifying goings-on. “Rectangular table that could seat—”

“Just go look.” Buffy shoved Scarlet in that direction.

Scarlet stubbed her toe and tipped forward, her arms swinging. She shoved at the door and then clawed Dirk’s arm, trying to find purchase. He turned and grabbed her, hauling her to her feet.

“Watch out,” he said, stepping out of her way.

“It’s not like I asked to be shoved across the room.” She dusted herself off for no real reason and peered through the doorway. “For the staff. Okay, so...” She looked down the hallway Emily had pointed out, leading right. “That hall would take them to other parts of the house without the owners or guests seeing. Then...” She put out her finger and turned, pointing in the direction we’d been heading. “I think this is right. I really do.” With a last look the other way, she nodded and started to say “yes,” except the word trailed away.

She tapped Dirk on the arm. And pointed.

Tingles spread through my body when they both stiffened. The feel of the room didn’t change. The pressure didn’t ease or increase. And yet...

“Let’s go,” Dirk said, grabbing Scarlet’s arm and yanking her in our direction.

“That wasn’t a little girl,” Scarlet said in a wispy voice.

“I know,” Dirk answered, motioning for us to get moving.

“That was a full-grown man—”

“Yes. Go Emily. Buffy.”

“—with a knife sticking out of his heart.”

“Yeah. Hurry.”

I spun and lunged through the kitchen, Braiden by my side. Our hurried footsteps, scuffing and squeaking on the tile, filled the space. The rest of the house remained quiet, no thumps, screams, or drifting music.

“I like this less than I liked the activity,” I murmured as we reached a door with no knob.

Braiden stepped in front of me and pressed his hand to the wood, pausing for a moment. I could barely see his jaw clench in the dim light before he shoved the door open and pushed through. Darkness greeted us—exactly what I would have hoped for a few minutes earlier. But that had been prior to the revelation that random men wandered the unlit halls with weapons sticking out of their person.

Shapes lurked in the darkness, low and long. A table, probably, with chairs dotting the sides, proving Scarlet was right about the design. The Old Woman would’ve eaten here at one time, though the house had probably never been as quiet or as dark as this.

Scarlet bumped into me. Unlike usual, she didn’t mutter an apology. Instead, a shaky hand came up and pointed out an archway within the room. There were no instructions to go with the leftward point.

“Cross your fingers.” I pushed forward, using the chairs to guide me around the table. When I reached the next archway, blessed light filtered in from the windows. I hurried toward the large windows, already smiling. That smile melted when I saw the bright moonlight filtering through the branches, throwing shadows onto what looked like a well-kept lawn.

The house might’ve been quiet for the moment, but that didn’t mean we were out of danger. We were still trapped in a bizarre connection between past and present.

“It’s like...” Odis stared out the window as Braiden moved through the room, picking up things and testing their heft. He was trying to find something with which to break a window. “Magic, almost. Paranormal magic.”

“It’s the worst magic I’ve ever heard about.” Buffy ran her hands along the frame of the window. “These have to open. Or... Wait. Shouldn’t there be a door close by?”

“Y-yes.” Scarlet cleared her throat. “Yes,” she said with more force. “In theory. Through that archway over there you’ll probably hit a large hallway that should take you, eventually, to the front entrance. Or side entrance. I’ve lost track of where we are.”

“Then what are we doing at the windows?” Buffy strode off toward the other archway embedded in the side of the room.

Emily watched her go with rounded eyes before taking a step that way. “Should someone go with her?”

“Wait, Buffy, wait for us,” I said, but she was already through the door.

“Not that I’m criticizing, but she does have a point,” Odis muttered. “Regarding finding a door instead of trying to bust through a window.”

Dirk stalked to the archway and looked through it as Braiden came back with an ancient fireplace poker. “They would assume we’d go for the door,” Braiden said as he hefted the poker in two hands. “That’s where I would wait to head us off.”

“Unlike *you*, we’re not dealing with people that have a police record,” Dirk spat.

“Are you sure?” Braiden retorted.

“You have a record?” Despite the situation, a lustful grin spread across Emily’s face. “You *are* a bad boy.”

Dirk glanced back, disgusted. For once, he and I were in agreement.

“Go,” I told Braiden. “Hit it, already.”

He swung in that perfect batter’s form, smacking the window with metal. It bounced off. Not a scratch marred the glass.

He did it twice more without stopping, violence and aggression fueling each swing. It didn’t help.

“I wonder if that will show tomorrow when the paranormal magic or whatever wears off,” Odis said in a strained voice.

“Let’s hope we’re around to find out,” Dirk muttered. “I can just barely see Buffy. She’s a room away. She looks like she’s about to... Yeah, she’s kicking the door.”

Sure enough, repeated dull thunks interrupted the renewed silence. Followed by a howl of frustration.

“The door won’t open,” Dirk said.

“I doubt any of us are surprised,” Scarlet said. “So now what?”

“We check out the second floor, I guess.” I shrugged. “Maybe the entities in here are using all of their energy to block off the first floor. Maybe they figure the second floor is too high for us to jump, so they aren’t expending any effort on protecting it. Or the third floor. Or the attic, if there is one.”

“They would have a solid point.” Odis looked upward. “Even if the windows opened, we wouldn’t be able to safely jump.”

“We could hang off the gutter and drop down.” Braiden started toward Buffy. “I’ve done that before.”

“Sounds like you’ve done it all,” Dirk said with disdain.

“You have really done a one-eighty since coming in here, Dirk,” Scarlet mused, voicing my thoughts as we passed through the archway toward Buffy. “From not believing in ghosts and following Braiden around like a lost puppy, to being the best at *spot the ghost* and giving Braiden snide comments. What gives?”

“It just took me a while to realize he was full of crap.” Dirk waited until everyone went by before stepping in line at the rear. “As for ghosts...I live on Ella’s street. How could I *not* know? My parents could only explain away things moving and doors slamming on their own for so long. After that, you enter into an unspoken agreement not to mention it. And do you know why?”

“Because it is social suicide to blab,” Odis said.

“Exactly,” Dirk said. “I’m not an idiot. I saw firsthand what would happen if someone spouted off a bunch of paranormal nonsense.”

“Even though it isn’t nonsense?” Scarlet asked.

“That’s just a matter of opinion,” Dirk replied. “This town does not want to speak about anything other than reality. End of story. If you persist in telling ghost stories that hit too close, you will be shunned. That’s how it is. That’s how it has always been. You should’ve just shut up and dealt with it, Ella, rather than parading your experiences all over town. You wonder why I hang with the popular crowd and you don’t? *That’s* why. Too bad for you that it’s too late to learn the lesson.”

“You are such a...”

I couldn’t see her, but I knew Scarlet was balling her fists and clamping down on a cuss word. Probably a nasty one, too. Dirk’s dark chuckle confirmed he knew it.

“This door won’t open,” Buffy said when we reached her. “It’s unlocked—see?” She threw the deadbolt, then dislodged it. “Unlocked. Yet...” She yanked on the handle with her whole body. “Stuck!”

“They all will be. The windows won’t break. Come on, we’re going to try the second floor.” Braiden turned toward the stairway deeper in the house, partially visible in the grand hall.

A flicker of movement caught my eye. A shoulder disappearing from view ahead of us.

I grabbed Braiden’s sleeve, tugging it to slow him. The wide stairwell

with its decorative banisters came more thoroughly into view. A walkway swung around it, leading deeper into the house.

A man staggered out from that side. Blood ran down the front of his faded denim shirt, stemming from a hole near his heart. A knife glinted from his right hand, its bloody blade between his wide fingers.

He paused, braced, and brought the knife up.

To throw.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“WATCH OUT,” I gasped, suddenly out of breath.

The man wound up, a sickly grin on his face.

Braiden shoved me to the side before diving the other way. “Get down!”

The knife tumbled end over end in the air, right down the heart of our group. I heard someone suck in a surprised breath. Metal tinkled across the floor.

“Run!” Buffy screamed. “Run!”

I jumped up, getting to my feet before Braiden, and sprinted for the stairs. Scarlet was right behind me, soon to overcome me thanks to her long legs.

The man let out an inhuman yell. He launched himself at Emily, who stood frozen in fear. His hands curled around Emily’s neck and he squeezed, shaking her with a manic expression.

Dirk moved toward her, but instead of helping her fend off the larger man, he turned to the side...and slipped past, running for the stairs.

“Help her!” I shouted, jostling through everyone to try and get to her, but Braiden was already on the move. He jumped from the bottom step and barreled into the man. The man’s grip came free, and Emily clutched at her neck and struggled for breath as I shoved Odis to the side.

“I got her.” Buffy turned back and ran to her friend, taking her by the arm and roughly dragging her out of the way.

Braiden punched the man in the face, making him stagger back. The solidity of the man’s body flickered, looking real one moment, and vaguely translucent the next. The man stopped and straightened. The sickly expression once again curled his lips.

“Come on,” I shouted at Braiden. “Run. Now!”

“Watch him.”

I knew that I should watch for the man to possibly find another knife on his person. Or *in* his person, as the case may be. But he needn't have worried. The spectral man turned, spotted the knife on the ground, and walked with slow, unhurried steps to pick it up.

It was a big house, but with possibly limited escapes. The man probably knew he had time to find us again.

Heart hammering, I waited until Braiden was close and then ran after the others, hurrying to catch up. They ran up and right, seemingly running blindly.

“Wait,” I tried to say through panicked breaths. “Wait.”

Scarlet was in the lead, and though she was probably our best guide, she was also in full-on panic mode. She led the way through a room and out the other side, oil lamps providing light. These rooms appeared to be in perfect condition, untouched by years of neglect.

We followed through a room with shelves and racks before randomly turning left and into another bedroom.

Out the other side was a huge solarium. Moonlight poured down, shimmering on the banisters protecting people from falling down to the first story.

Scarlet tripped and fell against the banister. Dirk broke right, running for a dark room, and Buffy broke left, going for a flickering room through a wide-open door.

“Wait,” I shouted, stopping by Scarlet. “Wait, we need to think about this.”

Dirk stopped at the door, his hand braced against it, but Buffy kept running with Emily following behind.

“Dang it,” I muttered, struck with indecision.

“Let's go after them,” Braiden said, breaking in their direction. “We need to stick together.”

Something hard poked my arm. I glanced over, expecting Scarlet, but the jab had seemingly come from nothing and nowhere.

“Ow,” Scarlet said from behind me, and she put a palm to her head.

I barely caught movement from one of the rooms along the hall running along the solarium, something flying out. It arched over us, visible in the moonlight, before clattering against the banister on the other side of where we stood. Another flew after it, just missing Dirk.

“What are you doing?” Braiden said, coming back for me.

A manic cackle blasted out of the room the rocks had come from. A huge shape stepped forward, a burly man wearing overalls and a dirty shirt beneath. His form wasn't solid like the knife thrower, but it was solid enough for me to see the grisly, glistening wound extending from one ear to the other. His throat gaped open.

Braiden yanked out his smudge stick from one pocket, and a lighter from the other. The man paused, a smile taking over his face, as smoke rose from Braiden's hands.

“This is not your place,” Braiden said in a loud, clear voice. “It is time for you to move on.”

The man lifted his head and cackled, the sound grating. He yanked back his arm, then let fly. It was only a small rock, but fear dumped into my system nonetheless.

“Go, go, go!” I put on a burst of speed, grabbing Scarlet and running through a stately room and around the corner. Braiden jogged backward, still trying to have some impact with his smudge.

A scream pierced the night. Buffy stood at the top of a flight of stairs, staring up in agony. “It just ends,” she cried. “It just ends!”

“What?” I let go of Scarlet and fought my way past Emily. Two flashlights clicked on and their beams fell across the smooth, featureless ceiling above Buffy's head. “Is there a latch or something?” I asked, confusion warring with fear. “Check to see if there's a latch.”

Buffy felt along the ceiling and then started banging on it.

“Who cares, let's go,” Braiden called from the bottom, stick still smoking in his hand and apprehension covering his face. His hopes of banishing were clearly on the way out. “There's plenty of house to run to.”

“But why is there a set of stairs that leads up to the ceiling?” Buffy banged again. “There has to be a reason this is here. Scarlet? There has to be a reason, right?”

Scarlet shook her head. “This was never mentioned. Construction like this was never mentioned.”

“Why does it matter?” Braiden demanded. “The stairway doesn't lead anywhere. So what? Let's go.”

Laughter filled the air. Something sailed past us and hit the stairs.

“It matters because this either means there are other strange traps and pitfalls around this house, and we need to be a lot more careful,” Scarlet said,

thankfully thinking straight again, “or the path of this staircase was plugged up for some reason, and that speaks of...evil.”

“There is evil coming through that door.” Braiden gestured to the door we’d just run out of. “We need to move on and ponder this great mystery from another location!”

“Maybe she just didn’t finish renovating because she was stoned to death,” Dirk said. “This shouldn’t be an issue.”

“Or that, yes. That is probably option three.” Scarlet bit her lip.

Braiden was nearly dancing with anticipation. “With all due respect, standing there staring at it isn’t going to answer these questions.” He wiped his forehead and stared back the way we’d come. Mr. Overalls stared back with a smile and a handful of rocks.

“Yes. Right. Being chased. Must run.” Scarlet stepped away, clearly not thinking as clearly as I’d previously thought.

The lights in the room we’d just left slowly dimmed, until it was dark once again. The man and his laughter died away. Vanished, for no real reason. Silence reigned, if you discounted the harried breathing.

“Does that mean we’re safe?” Odis whispered.

Braiden held up his hand, listening.

Buffy didn’t seem to notice. She stomped down the steps to the bottom, her face streaked with tears. She wiped her forearm across her nose. “I am fed up with this dump of a house. Do you hear me? *Fed. Up!*”

“The haunting is certainly different from anything else I’ve ever seen,” I muttered, working to get my breath.

“Wait.” Dirk tilted his head. He took a hesitant step toward the banister as Braiden turned, his hand still raised and head tilted. They looked like a pair of dogs hearing a whistle.

Dirk bent over the banister, looking down, and I finally heard it. Heavy breathing and a stutter step, as though someone was half dragging one of their legs.

“Oh sh—” Dirk sagged against the banister, his swear drifting away. Emily moved closer to him and looked over as well.

“Hello?”

The voice sounded hoarse and dry but vaguely familiar.

Emily gasped and slapped her hand to her mouth. Braiden scooted up a little closer, his expression pained. I moved close enough to see, then felt all the hope drain out of me.

“What is it?” Scarlet asked in a faint whisper, facing the rooms behind us. Odis leaned against the stairwell banister, his elbow in his hand, seemingly uninterested in the newcomer.

“Carl,” I said, my voice apologetic, though I had nothing to apologize for. Blood coated the side of Carl’s head and dripped down his neck. He held his arm tightly to his chest, and I could see a couple fingers bent at odd angles. The jeans on the leg he was dragging were in shreds, and crimson glistened underneath.

“What happened?” Dirk asked, his voice flat and even. He was pushing away the emotion. He was ignoring his fear or panic. I now knew it was what had kept him calm at various points throughout the night. And while that seemed like a great tactic to deal with what was going on, it hadn’t helped Emily downstairs.

I moved a little closer to see Carl. Braiden followed, his hand braced protectively on my shoulder.

“I...” Carl blinked up at the light streaming in through the skylight high above. “I don’t know. There were people. *Real* people. They were chatting and drinking and talking. Laughing. They seemed like they were in a great mood. And we got a glass of wine. It tasted weird, but I drank it. I actually drank it. It was real. But then...” He slid his leg closer before swaying. “I don’t know. Suddenly they were attacking us. The girls, DJ—they were screaming. I was screaming. And they were ripping our skin...”

“We have to get him help,” Emily said.

Dirk gave Emily a flat look. “How are we going to get him help? We can’t get out.”

“I mean...I don’t know, but we can’t leave him down there.” Emily leaned over the banister. “What about the others, Carl? Did anyone else get out?”

“It went dark. All the lights went out. The music stopped.” Carl took a shaky step and looked back in the direction he’d come. “I was on the ground. I don’t remember how I got there. I don’t remember falling. A leg was near me. Someone’s...” Carl trailed away, looking at nothing now.

“He’s in shock,” Braiden said. “We need to go down and get—”

Emily screamed and pointed. “Carl, look out!”

A knife was hurled through the open door, spinning end over end.

Carl’s head dropped down. He stared at the very real-looking hilt protruding from his heart before his legs gave out from under him.

“Oh no!” Emily screamed. “No, no, no, no. They’re supposed to be ghosts!”

“Time to go.” Dirk pulled Emily away from the banister and pushed her in front of him. He grabbed Scarlet next.

“What happened to Carl?” Scarlet asked, turning to look. Her face blanched.

The man stepped into the moonlight, looking up at us with his sickly grin. Carl gurgled at his feet.

The contents of my stomach came surging up, but thankfully, the last thing I’d eaten was lunch. I dry-heaved, clutching Braiden’s arm as he moved me away from the banister.

“Maybe he’ll be okay when everything goes back to reality,” Braiden whispered urgently, moving us down the hall to a far room. “Maybe that’s what happens when this...magic or whatever dissipates.”

“No one has ever come back,” I said with a constricted throat. “No one has ever come back from here.”

“We need to find a way out,” Scarlet said. “Now!”

“But how?” Odis cried.

“Through here.” Dirk led us right, through some kind of sitting room and into a large bedroom. He stopped at the window on the far side, pointing at the branches hanging still in the thick night air. “Let’s try this window. If we can’t drop down, we can get onto those branches. They look sturdy.”

“Then what?” Buffy demanded, looking through another window at the tree. “There’s no ladder to the ground. How are we supposed to get down?”

I didn’t see what Dirk grabbed, but he took a step hop to the window and swung with compacted power. His instrument bounced off and he tried again, his form not nearly as smooth and precise as Braiden’s, but just as powerful. It hit the window and bounced off again.

“This can’t be happening,” he yelled, throwing the thing at the window. It ricocheted and came back at him. He kicked it with wound-up frustration he’d clearly been stuffing down and hiding. “This cannot be happening.”

He rounded on Braiden with his finger out. “You,” Dirk said through his teeth. His eyes glinted with malice. “This is all because of you. Everything was fine until you showed up. I kept people away from here easily. All it took was an occasional joke, making fun of Fella over there, and calling anyone who wanted to check it out crazy—it was no problem. They were already wary. I just pushed the envelope. But then you came along, and now look

where we are.”

“What do you mean, it was his fault?” Buffy put a hand to her hip, her face tear-streaked but full of stubborn indignation. I could tell that all of her terror and uncertainty was boiling into anger. “You’re the one who wanted to come. You and Leo and the guys.”

“They always want to come. Every few months, someone mentions it. I go along with it until I can talk them out of it. But no one acted until *he*”—Dirk jabbed his finger at Braiden—“wanted a ghost tour from our very own whack job.” I got the next jabbed finger. “Then suddenly this stupid expedition is fast-tracked, and here we are, trapped in this godforsaken place with a collection of morons.” He picked up the thick object and threw it across the room.

“Oh, really? We’re morons?” Buffy took a step toward him with her fists clenched at her sides. “If you’re so smart, if you knew what coming here would mean, why did you bother? Bobby took off. Nate didn’t even come. Why did you tag along if you are so much smarter than the rest of us?”

Dirk spread his hands and a mocking expression crossed his face. “Why do you think? I know what you girls say behind my back.” He changed to a high-pitched voice and put his hands up like he was about to frolic through a meadow. “I’d only do him if he put a brown bag over his head.” He went back to his normal voice and disgust contorted his features. “I’m a pity lay. I get it. I’m a dare. You think I don’t know that? Hell, I can’t even land the nerd from up the street.”

“At least you get laid,” Odis muttered. Scarlet scoffed.

“Me?” I took a step back, just as confused about this as I was about the stairwell leading to nothing. “But all you do is make fun of me.”

“You literally just called her a whack job,” Scarlet said.

Dirk sniffed and shook his head. “Unbelievable.”

“I told you those offers to take you to school weren’t poking fun,” Scarlet whispered.

“Or the wildflowers. Or the offer to lend you a movie. Nope, you ignored me, or rolled your eyes and gave me a snide remark. I got the picture. Little Fella is too good for the likes of me.”

“Those wildflowers smelled like pee,” I said, my voice rising. I’d thought them a prank. It was the worst time to plead my case, but the urge to defend myself was a personality flaw that would not go away just because I was in a haunted house with knife-throwing ghosts. “You gave me urine-encrusted

wildflowers. What was I supposed to do, jump for joy?”

“They weren’t—”

“Oh, they so were. And that movie? The one my mother asked me to borrow? Yeah, I handed it off without checking what was in the case first. My bad. But then, why would I suspect a porno had been slipped in instead of *Dead Poets Society*? Do you know what sound a mother makes when she mistakenly plays porn for her friends at their monthly social?”

Buffy spat out laughter.

“How was I supposed to know it was for your mother?” Dirk demanded, facing me with his fists balled.

“Why would it have mattered?” I yelled back.

“That’s how the guys show they are interested in you,” Buffy said, a wicked smile on her face as she looked at Dirk. “You like *Ella*? Oh my goodness, this will ruin you. And to think, all the slander was really just intended to cover a grade-school crush. How cute. Who’s next? Samantha with the headgear? I hear she needs more members for her saxophone band...”

“Jazz band,” Scarlet said before holding up her hands. “Look, this is enlightening, and we definitely need to hash this out...maybe never, but—”

“This won’t ruin me,” Dirk said, still staring at me. “Not now that he’s in the picture.” Dirk glared at Braiden, standing near the door. “She’ll be untouchable, and everyone will see that I had good taste.”

“Wait...what?” Buffy braced her hands on her hips, looking between me and Braiden.

Dirk retargeted his scowl to her. “And to answer your question? I didn’t think anyone would actually go through with it.” He paused, staring Buffy down. “My bad.”

“Ooooh.” Scarlet nodded like she’d figured something out. “That makes sense.”

“What?” Braiden asked.

“His one-eighty about you. Ella made her choice, and it was you, not him. Sour grapes, much? Serves you right for all those times you—”

“Scarlet,” I said through my teeth. “Keep a lid on it.”

A small smile graced Braiden’s face as he glanced my way. He looked at his feet for a moment, then back out the door, keeping watch.

“Are you for real?” Buffy said. “No way. No. Way. That is grody to the max.”

“Are you blind as well as dumb?” Dirk snatched up his flashlight from where he’d left it before his attack on the window.

“Gag me with a spoon. No.” Buffy shook her head. “I don’t believe it.”

“You didn’t believe in ghosts, either, and look how that turned out.” Scarlet started toward Braiden. “And maybe later on someone can explain to me *why* sending a girl porno is supposed to be a turn-on.” She stopped at the door and put her fingertips to her temples. “Okay, let’s figure out what to do. We can’t succumb to our terror and shock, or we’ll die. We have to keep functioning.” She looked back at me. “We can’t get out. We’re officially trapped. So, back to the question on repeat—now what?”

I took a deep breath, fighting the memory of Carl in the solarium. Fighting the fear and shock. Fighting to stay alive.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“IF IT WERE JUST door slammers and rock throwers, I’d say we find a place and wait it out,” I said, willing my mind to clear. “The energy keeping this place alive is bound to run out sometime. Or stop with daylight. When that happens, we can get out—”

“Why are you suddenly the leader?” Buffy asked, her eyes narrowed.

“Jealousy really turns people ugly,” Scarlet muttered, her fingers on her temples again. “You know why, Buffy. But just so we’re all on the same page, and don’t have to answer this question eight more times, it’s because she’s the only one in this whole house that has been upfront about presences from beyond. She’s the only one who’s had serious experience with all this. Experience that she talks about. That she figures out. If anyone knows the best plan, it’s her.”

“But she—”

“Stop.” Scarlet held up her hand. “Just stop. You lose. You’re not the smartest, strongest, most knowledgeable, or the most needed one here. If you keep it up, we’ll tie you up and let the grinning knife thrower have at you.”

Braiden’s eyes widened and a cockeyed smile crossed his face. We went back to looking out the doorway. Dirk drifted to the other side of the room. No one was arguing with Scarlet.

Buffy scoffed and flung her hand up before stalking over to Emily and muttering quietly. That had to be my cue to keep talking.

I met Braiden at the door, looking out at the darkened house. “With the knife thrower around, and the other mobile spirits we haven’t met yet, we’ll want to keep moving. They don’t seem to have a sense of urgency. For now, that’s our greatest asset.”

“What about hiding?” Odis asked, his voice strained.

“I don’t trust that we’d find a place the inhabitants of this house wouldn’t already know about.” I shook my head. “I say we stick to the more open places. The large rooms—”

“As long as they’re dark,” Braiden cut in. “When the lights come on, it seems like the spirits go active. When they’re off, only a few roam around. So let’s stick to the dark.”

“Good call.” I glanced at the flashlight dangling from his hand. “I’d say to keep the flashlights off whenever possible. If we look at light, our eyes will get used to it. It’ll be harder for us to catch anything moving in the darkness.”

“If there’s no light, it’ll be just as hard to see anything moving in the darkness,” Dirk said.

I chewed on my lip. He had a point. And judging by the silence that descended, everyone else thought so, too.

“Maybe flashlights when it’s too dark to see,” Scarlet said, “And no flashlights when we have natural light.”

Braiden and I nodded at the same time. I looked at the others. Buffy turned away and Emily followed. Dirk shrugged, and Odis sagged against the wall, clutching his arm.

“You okay, Odis?” I asked. It occurred to me that he’d been strangely quiet for the past several minutes.

He looked at his upper arm. “I’m not sure.” Everyone in the room turned to him. He shrugged. “I think it’s just a scratch. It didn’t stick or anything.”

“What didn’t stick?” Braiden moved in Odis’s direction, and I stepped out of the way to let him pass.

He pointed back at the door. “Watch.”

Scarlet took his post.

“I didn’t get out of the way in time. But I think it’s okay.” Odis took a shaking hand away from his arm. His palm glistened.

“Why didn’t you say something?” Braiden ripped Odis’s shirt away before clicking on his flashlight to inspect the arm.

“I...I don’t know. It just...d-didn’t seem like a b-big deal?”

“He was probably afraid to admit something was wrong,” I murmured.

“Did he get stabbed?” Scarlet asked.

“It looks deep, but...” Braiden shook his head. “Does anyone know first aid?”

Scarlet pointed at me as Emily raised her hand slowly.

I slapped Scarlet's hand away. "Wounds turn my stomach, Scarlet."

"Kind of," Emily said. "My dad is a doctor. I know a little."

"If it weren't for Emily, you would've been our only hope," Scarlet told me

"Not even remotely," I replied. "You know more than me. You took a sports fitness class, for heaven's sakes."

"You really haven't picked up *anything* from your mother?"

I gawked at her as Emily crossed the room. "She works in emergency. I'm not about to go to take your daughter to work day in a place where people are all split open. Think it through."

"Where do you think she works, in a horror film?"

"He needs to put pressure on it." Emily bent to inspect the wound. "It's not that deep, but there's risk of infection if something gets in it. We should wrap it."

Everyone exchanged looks. "Think they have first-aid supplies in this house?" I asked lamely.

"Sure," Dirk said, and I knew I wouldn't like his response. "Which would you prefer? The ones covered in decades' worth of dust hidden in a bathroom somewhere in this giant house, or the kits that came alive with the murderers? The latter should be easier to find."

"It's fine," Odis said in a shaky voice. "It's okay. I'll just hold it."

"Use his sleeve," Dirk said.

"It's got blood all over it." Emily fingered the material. "And it's dirty. No, I wouldn't advise that. We need something clean to put on it."

"Here." Braiden shrugged out of his light sweatshirt, then the polo shirt underneath. He then stripped off the white tank top he wore beneath, revealing a defined torso. "We can use this. Rip it up. We'll keep what he doesn't need...just in case."

Emily slowly took the shirt, her eyes glued to his exposed six-pack.

"What about cleaning it?" Braiden asked. "Emily?"

She startled out of her trance. "Oh. What?"

"Shouldn't we clean it?"

"Y-yes. Yes, of course. Wait, what am I saying? How are we going to clean it?"

For the second time, everyone looked around.

"We can see if there's running water," I offered. "Does the state turn that

off when someone moves out?”

“Do you know anything?” Dirk asked.

“About running water in a state-owned home” I replied. “No, I sure don’t.”

“Simmer down, lovebirds.” Buffy grinned at Dirk.

“Ella, take watch.” Scarlet motioned out the door. “There’s a bathroom just through there. I can check really quickly—”

“Well, let’s...” Braiden took back his shirt when it was clear Emily wouldn’t be able to rip it. His biceps bulged with the effort. “Let’s get it wrapped to stop the bleeding, right, Emily?”

“Huh?” she responded.

“Oh, for God’s sake.” Dirk walked to the doorway at the far end of the room, the second of two. It belatedly occurred to me that someone should’ve been watching that one all along.

“Should we wrap the—” Braiden said.

“Right, yes.” Emily took the first strip of fabric. “Wrap it, yes. Then find running water. Together. We shouldn’t split up.”

“Even if there is running water, can we trust it?” I asked, seeing a flicker of movement within the darkness beyond the door. I pushed up next to Scarlet and dropped my voice to a whisper. “It would’ve been sitting in the pipes for how long?”

“We can just let it run for a while. It’s not our water bill.”

A shape streaked through the end of the hall, moving from one door to another. “Did you see that?”

“What?”

I jumped at Braiden’s voice behind me, not having heard his approach. He pushed his arm through his polo shirt before putting his head through.

“I saw something,” Dirk said in a hush from the other side of the room.

“I thought I did, too. But in the opposite direction as you.” I pointed out the area to Scarlet, but she didn’t seem to notice. She looked straight ahead. “Do you see something?”

“No.” She glanced the way I’d gestured, but her eyes flitted away. “I don’t want to fixate on anything. That’s the way you miss an attack coming from somewhere else.”

“Smart,” Braiden said, putting on his sweatshirt. He was standing so close that I could feel his heat coating my back.

“I have to focus,” I muttered, trying to shake off the effects of his

presence.

“Something...” Dirk’s voice trailed away as he gripped the edge of the doorframe and leaned out. “Do you see anything else?”

I squinted into the darkness. The hallway stayed clear. The silence seemed to bear down on us.

“Look at the door outlines.” Even though he was speaking in a low voice, at a distance, I could hear Dirk with crystal clarity. “Look for disturbances in the lines.”

I did as he said, following one straight line after the other, framing the doors with my gaze. At last, I shook my head, ready to tell him that I hadn’t seen anything, when the edge of the door across from us bulged.

“I have something,” I whispered.

Scarlet sucked in a breath. “I do too. Straight ahead. Is that...?” She leaned forward as I did, trying to make out the shape in the darkness. It looked like the wood had bubbled, though not in a perfect circle.

Looking harder, straining, I noticed fuzziness on the top. Like...hair.

“That’s an eye. One eye. It’s a person.” Scarlet pushed back, bumping into me. “That’s a person. A kid.”

“Yeah.” Dirk clutched his flashlight like a weapon. “Mine looks a little older than a kid. Not...real, though. It’s looking right at me.”

A soft giggle drifted from the corner of the room we were in.

We all spun at the same time.

The little girl from before, with her pixie face and strange smile, stood under the heavy velvet curtain, her skin glowing white and hair hanging limp around her face. She giggled and swayed as if exulting in the attention. Her hand came from behind her back, revealing an old-fashioned nail file with what looked like a sharp point. The tip was covered in glowing red. Blood.

Without thinking, I took off running. I couldn’t help it. My brain had shut off, and my legs took up the call.

It turned out everyone else had done the same.

We all sprinted from the room at the same time, splitting up and heading for whatever door was closest. Another kid, six or seven, burst out from the door down the hall, the shape Scarlet and I had seen earlier. He ran at us with childlike glee, his face a grimace and his hands bent into claws.

More laughter trailed us from the other side. The voice sounded like it belonged to a boy going through puberty, his voice cracking as he wailed. Giggles from the pixie girl followed us out of the door.

My stomach dropped when I saw who was down the hall, her face screwed up in a rage-filled howl. Janine.

“Oh my—”

She turned and ran in the other direction, savage and untamed like all the others. Did that mean Alex was here somewhere, too? Dead but not dead? Destined to spend eternity in this horrible place.

“Was that—”

Amidst the fear and pandemonium, a new feeling rose in my middle. A pulsing sort of pull—the sensation I’d always felt with the Old Woman, but stronger than I could remember.

Braiden swore behind me.

I narrowly dodged the little boy sprinting past us, only to see what he was running from, glowing in the dim light.

Her.

Here.

“No.” I put on a burst of speed, panic rising in my throat and choking me.

A teenager stepped out of a dark corner, reaching for me. And my earlier question had been answered.

I dodged Alex’s hands, scared by the seething anger contorting his face. My heart lodged in my throat and pain twisted my gut as my shoulder hit off an arched frame. I found myself in a hall and heard Scarlet scream somewhere behind me. I half turned to look, still wildly running forward. That small, unexpected slowdown had Braiden smashing into my back, just as out of control.

We crashed into the wall and staggered toward a dead end.

“Scarlet,” I said, fighting around him and running back to the door. Alex, a stocky kid with glasses, stood in front of the door with his hands out. Scarlet stood on the other side, her eyes as wide as saucers and her face screwed up in terror.

“It’s him,” she said. “It’s him. He wants to kill me.”

“It’s not him anymore. It’s a shadow, badly twisted by this place.” Not thinking, I swung up my foot. My shoe rammed into the center of his wide stance, hitting his apex from behind but still getting a solid crunch.

He crumpled to the floor and curled into a ball, howling with pain.

“They’re real,” Scarlet said. “They are real.” She jumped over him, more agile than I’d ever seen her. “Are they real?”

I waved her past me. “As real as the knife thrower.” Alex, at my feet,

disappeared. I lifted my gaze in time to see a running child on the other side of the room wink out of existence.

The Old Woman drifted into the archway, alone in a suddenly placid hallway. She beckoned to me, a sad smile on her face. The throb in my middle urged me to step toward her.

“Let’s go.” Scarlet pulled at me.

My feet felt heavy. My thoughts swam.

“Ella, come *on*.”

I grudgingly let Scarlet pull me back, each step like wading through quicksand. But the fuzziness surrounding my mind started to clear a little. The throb within me faded.

“Why are you waiting here?” Scarlet demanded.

I blinked, fighting through the fog, and realized Scarlet had addressed the question to Braiden. We all stood at a dead end in a strangely short hallway. “There’s no escape here. Come on, hurry—”

But it was too late. A yank on my gut preceded the Old Woman gliding out from the archway, her feet skimming the ground.

“This can’t be a dead end,” Scarlet said, shoving me to the side. “It can’t be. It doesn’t make sense. The house extends farther than this. There must be a room beyond this wall.”

Braiden stuck his arm in front of me and pushed me behind him. “I lost my smudge stick. I dropped it.”

“I don’t think it matters,” I replied.

“No. Will I die if I touch her? Is that how this works?” he asked.

“I don’t know. All I know is we’re not supposed to follow her to the mansion. But we’re already here. So...I guess now we’ll find out why no one ever returns.”

“No, we won’t.” Braiden’s muscles flexed under my palms. “Whatever happens, run, okay? Keep yourself safe.”

“No, wait, there has to be another way—”

“Yes, there does.” Scarlet thumped on the wall. “I will not die here. Not here, where no one will know what happened to us. I’ve been invisible to everyone all my life—I don’t want to die that way.”

“Stay safe,” Braiden whispered, and dashed forward.

CHAPTER THIRTY

I GRABBED Braiden's shirt as something clicked behind me. Scarlet grunted, and then a squeal from rusty hinges echoed through the hallway.

The Old Woman beckoned us closer. The pull just about tore me in half—everything in me wanted to step around Braiden and go. I *had* to. All I could think about was fulfilling whatever duty she had in mind for me.

“Do you see?” Scarlet yelled triumphantly. “*Do you see?* Never discount a nerd with great survival instincts.” She pulled at my shirt, moving me away from the Old Woman. Away from where I wanted to go.

“No,” I said, though I wasn't sure who or what I was denying.

“Come *on!*” Fabric ripped but held, pulling me back.

I staggered a few more steps backward, my grip still firm on Braiden's shirt. But he was walking back with me, slowly at first, then in jerky movements.

“Here we go,” Scarlet said, her voice strangely far away. “Just a little faster. Here we are. Walk like zombies, that'll do. Oh crap—”

My shirt was yanked one last time and then abruptly set free. Instead of rocking forward, I found myself falling backward. My foot had stepped onto nothing.

The Old Woman's pull snapped away, replaced by blind panic. I reached out to grab something, but only empty air met my fingertips.

The scream never made it past my lips.

My butt hit the ground, the impact forcing my teeth together with a click. Braiden fell on top of me a moment later, his chest smashing my head sideways and his stomach pressing down on my chest. The door we'd fallen through shut with a soft click.

He rolled to the side. “Are you okay?” he asked, his breathing frantic.

“Do you have any fat on you at all?” I felt the side of my face as I struggled to sit up, needing to get going but having a hard time convincing my body to cooperate.

Braiden didn’t answer my somewhat serious question. “She didn’t come through.” He looked at the door a couple of feet above us. The handle was rusted, but otherwise it resembled all the other doors in the house. From this side. There had been absolutely no indication of its existence from the other. “We’re safe.”

The lights in the room—or wherever we were—were on. A flickering candle encased in glass sat on a shelf built into the wall. There was another one down the way, and the dancing shadow cutting across the floor hinted at more of them around the corner. The other direction was the same.

We were far from safe.

“We need to get moving.”

“Yes, we do.” Scarlet stood a few paces away, looking at the walls. The black, unfinished boards had small gaps between them that gave us glimpses of the building materials used for the house. The air smelled stale, as though it hadn’t felt a gust of wind in centuries. “This is nuts. I’d read that there were rumors of secret passageways in this place. I assumed it was just hearsay. But when the logic in the hallway didn’t add up...”

“Her logic and mine are sorely different,” Braiden mumbled as he climbed to his feet. He offered a hand to me. “I *never* would’ve believed that was a hidden door. How would you even get in and out without people seeing? And why does this place have so many sitting rooms?”

“Well, it’s definitely a strange place for a hidden door, but not as strange as the staircase that leads to nowhere,” Scarlet said. “I wish the ghosts in this house weren’t trying to kill us. I’d love to wander through and discover all the hidden places. It is *fascinating*. I bet there are a ton of them.”

“We need to find a way out of here before whoever uses this place comes wandering through with a machete.” I dusted myself off.

“Why not have any stairs?” Braiden was staring at the door. “Honestly, it makes no sense. Who built this place, M.C. Escher? And how come we didn’t see the light on the other side of the door?” He scratched his head.

“All good questions.” Scarlet inspected the candle. “Maybe this hallway was put in after the McKinleys decided to try their hands at serial killing. In which case, they were trying to make it good enough, and not perfect. That

would explain the lack of stairs and the strange location.”

Braiden’s hands found his hips. “There is no way this tunnel was put in after the house was built. They would have needed to put it in at the time of building.”

“Oh really?” Scarlet stepped away from the candle and caught me edging down the hallway. She started after me. “By that rationale, how do you suppose the conversation went about the staircase to nowhere? Oh hey, Builder Guy, can you build me a stairway up to this ceiling here?” Her voice dropped an octave. “But we have no access to the third floor there, ma’am.” She raised her voice again. “I know that. Just build it up to the ceiling.” Dropped. “For what?” Raised. “I have my reasons.” Dropped. “Well, okay, ma’am, you’re the boss. But I have to tell you, that is crazy.” Back to her normal voice. “I doubt that’s how it went down. Guests would’ve been freaked out.”

“Or amused,” I ventured.

“No.” Scarlet shook her head adamantly. “Freaked out. That is just weird. It’s unnatural. This door is a secret hallway. It makes sense. That stairway...”

“Unless that was also a secret door?”

Scarlet sighed. “It doesn’t make sense if it was, but I guess—”

“Name one thing we’ve just gone through that makes sense!” Braiden said too loudly, trailing along after us.

There was more of the same around the corner, but a new feeling oozed along my skin, prickling between my shoulder blades and giving me the willies.

I rubbed my arms and looked at the slats in the boards beside me, terrified I’d see eyes staring out.

“This is another reason this portion of the house couldn’t have been built at the same time as the rest.” She indicated the slats in the wall. “It isn’t finished. Sure, there are little shelves for the candles, but that’s it. They didn’t finish the walls.”

“It doesn’t matter when it was built.” I kept to the very middle. “It feels like something bad happened here.”

“Well, that’s no mystery,” Scarlet said. “Violence. Murder. Evil deeds.”

“It definitely feels that way,” Braiden murmured, and I could tell he felt what I did. The press. The ickiness.

I stopped in front of a door, this one lower than the last, about a foot off the ground. I could just see Braiden shaking his head down the way.

“We have no idea what is through that door,” I said.

“That’s true. But we have no idea what will be through any of the doors except the one we came through,” Scarlet responded. “The layout of the second floor is still a big question mark.”

“The Old Woman would probably expect us to come barging out of the first door we came to.” I wiggled my shoulders, the awful feeling around us getting progressively worse.

“There were two ways we could’ve gone,” Scarlet said. “She’d have a fifty-fifty chance of picking the right way. After that, it’s more guess work.”

“Go to the next one.” Braiden shifted from one foot to the other. “And hurry. I don’t like the pressure in this hallway.”

“The pressure?” Scarlet asked.

I veered right with the hallway. The heights of the candle-bearing shelves weren’t uniform. Or, at least, they didn’t seem to be to my untrained eye. This place did look a little rough, like it had been slapped together by a do-it-yourself weekender. “We aren’t alone.”

Other than the little squeaky noise she made, Scarlet didn’t comment. She followed along behind me quietly, the reality of the situation probably settling back down into her awareness. The puzzle of the architecture couldn’t compete with mortal danger, not even for her.

At the next door, we stopped in front of four steps.

“That is half the height of a normal door.” Braiden didn’t make a move forward. “It looks like a kid’s door.” He shifted and half turned away, not looking at it anymore. “I’m afraid of what we’ll find through that one.”

“Let’s take the next one,” I said softly.

“What do you think happened to Leo and Cliff?” Scarlet asked in a small voice. “And what do you think the others are doing?”

“It’s best not to think about that. Not yet,” Braiden said. “We need to concentrate on getting out. We can send help once we escape. Until then, we’ll keep moving through the house, waiting for it to exhaust its energy. Hopefully we’ll find the others as we go.”

The next door was ground height, full-sized, and its handle looked less rusted than the others. We stopped in front of it, nearly at the end of the hall.

“Our other option is to go back and around,” I said, staring at the generously used handle.

“What about the next door?” Braiden asked, pointing to the very end of the hall.

“I think we should just get it over with.” Scarlet pulled at her collar. “Something feels...weird.”

“Let’s take the next one.” Braiden shivered. “Something about this one...” He shook his head.

I didn’t question him. I turned as the jiggling of metal echoed through the hallway. I hadn’t made it five steps when the door swung inward.

Braiden flinched and pushed Scarlet and me forward.

“Well, well,” I heard in a slightly affected accent, the words and tone as smooth as silk. I couldn’t help but look back.

An attractive, dark-haired man in his late twenties or early thirties stepped into the doorway. “Look who is loitering on my stoop.” His eyes, dark brown and shrewd, flicked between us before sticking to me. A smile accented his striking features. “You’ve finally come, have you? Good. She’s been waiting, you know. For years. It is not polite to make her wait. She wants to show you something.”

Scarlet put her hand on my shoulder—a light touch at first, sharing her shock. Then firmer, pushing me. Then shoving.

“Go,” she said through clenched teeth. “Go!”

I jerked sideways, turning it into a run, then a sprint, pumping my arms as fast as I could. Whereas the Old Woman pulled at me, beckoning me to her, this man’s presence felt like barbed wire abrading my skin.

We reached the other door as the man stepped into the hall, his charming smile not reaching his eyes. “It is not polite to keep her waiting.”

I grabbed the handle and turned. It didn’t move.

“No.” I turned harder, reaching for it with both hands. And again, adding a kick for good measure.

“Here.” Braiden handed me his flashlight before taking my place.

Deep and hearty laughter drifted down the hallway. “It is not polite to make her wait.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

BRAIDEN RAMMED the door with his shoulder and turned the handle again, his arms bulging with the effort. His hand moved, ever so slowly. Forcing the tumbler to finally click over.

He pulled it open, the area beyond blessedly dark.

“Go.” He waved us through. “Hurry.”

The man with the charming smile took another step forward, watching our escape. “Where do you think you can hide?”

I kicked something in the almost pitch-black room and tripped, falling flat onto my face. I’d be speckled with bruises when this was all done, but at least I’d managed to hold on to the flashlight.

Scarlet grunted and fell on top of me, pressing my body into the thing under my shins. It was soft and firm at the same time. Slightly warm.

“No.” I bucked Scarlet off and scrambled to my feet as Braiden grunted. His trip didn’t turn into a fall. He staggered into me, tilting wildly and grabbing me to stabilize himself.

“Sorry, Scarlet,” he muttered.

“I’m not Scarlet,” I said, grabbing his sides to help him keep his balance.

“I know.” He hugged me close and finally stilled. “I think I stepped on her arm.”

I closed my eyes for a moment, soaking in his comforting warmth. I knew a moment was all I’d be afforded.

“That wasn’t me,” Scarlet said. I could just make out the outline of her form, crawling along the ground. A moment later, the harsh beam of her flashlight clicked on, showing a beautiful oriental rug in shades of blue and green. She moved her flashlight, casting a glow on the object that had tripped

us.

Scarlet sucked in a breath and dropped the flashlight. The beam spun dizzily, finally stilling on a crimson stain. The edge of a person's ruined scalp just barely invaded the glow.

My stomach swam and I dug my face into Braiden's neck, willing the bile to retreat back down my throat. His arms tightened around me.

"Who is it?" he asked in a barely steady voice.

A dull collection of thunks announced that Scarlet was attempting to retrieve the flashlight. She was breathing heavily, and Braiden's arms tightened just a bit more, his fingertips digging into my back.

"Cliff," she croaked before clearing her throat. "It's Cliff. It looks like—" She gagged. "Something hit him on the head, but...I don't see the weapon..."

The beam of light slid over a four-poster bed with a little bench at its base. A bare table sat in the corner, with three chairs pushed in around it. Next, the light swept the far side of the room, traveling along the ground until it caught the edge of a doorframe. A double door, both doors standing open, led to another room, sprinkled with a little more natural light. A small couch sat near what was probably a window, though it obviously didn't have direct access to the moonlight. A chair sat opposite it, with a little table between them. There might've been another chair facing the couch, but Scarlet didn't investigate further.

She slid the light along the ground back toward us, searching for the murder weapon. As she did so, I noticed a familiar theme in the room: masculine. Bold colors, men's items on the surfaces, a pair of men's slippers at the end of the bed.

"Is this one of the husband's rooms?" I asked quietly, each sweep of the flashlight confirming my suspicion.

Scarlet slowed for just a moment, finding a razor and gentleman's comb near the washbasin.

"That is definitely odd, having all this set up for someone that died." She shook her head and ripped the beam of the flashlight back to the ground. "It doesn't matter."

"Maybe the person took the weapon with him, like the knife thrower," Braiden murmured.

"Maybe. I don't see it. But it would be hard to spot it without proper light." Scarlet rubbed the side of her horrorstruck face. Still, if I knew her, she was clinging to logic—whatever logic was possible in this place—so as

not to derail into a state of complete panic. I was fighting that same battle.

“We should get going.” I rested my forehead on Braiden’s chest and willed myself to step away. “We need to keep moving.”

“Ella...” Scarlet’s voice wavered and Braiden’s body went rigid.

We’d clearly stayed in one place too long.

Scarlet’s shaking light illuminated a spot next to the couch in the other room. A burly man with giant forearms and squat legs spread wide for balance stood with a gun in his hand.

“What are the chances that the gun doesn’t work?” I asked, dread flowering.

“That’s the way out.” Scarlet was losing her fight with panic. “It’s the only way out.”

“It’s not the only way.” Braiden pushed me away from him and grabbed my hand. He leapt over Cliff’s body, forcing me to follow. Scarlet hurried behind us, racing for the lesser of two evils—the door we’d come through.

A blast shook my bones and made me clench my teeth. I barely noticed something smacking the wall to our right, probably the bullet.

I staggered into the back of Braiden, who had stopped in his tracks.

“The gun works,” Scarlet said in a high-pitched voice. “The gun works. Go through. Go through. Go through!”

“I can’t! It’s a secret door from this side. I can’t find—”

“Move.” Scarlet shoved me out of the way. “Very few people get creative with secret doors. You know how to open a few, you know how to open them all.”

“How do you know how to open a few?” Braiden got out of the way, his gaze swinging to the opened double doors. “Crap.”

I swung around to look. Dim light flickered from the outer room. The room we were in was still dark, but now a fresh vase of flowers adorned the little table in the corner, and little plates with fresh bread dabbed with butter sat in front of each of the seats.

Despite the situation, my stomach growled and my mouth started salivating.

The man in the door took a drunken step in our direction, his gun hand swaying with his body.

“She has a secret cubby in her room,” I said to Braiden through numb lips, shifting from side to side, waiting for that man to stop and take aim. “Ever since she found it, she’s been slightly obsessed with secret doors.”

“You would be surprised how many historic houses have them. Especially the families that had a keen interest in alcohol.” Scarlet felt around beside a gaudy picture frame.

“Why alcohol?” Braiden’s hand covered my shoulder and he held on a little too tightly as the man stepped farther into the room. The man jerked a little, and I realized he’d burped.

“Whach you doin’ herr, you filthy...” His heavily slurred words trailed away and he wiped his face with the forearm of his gun clutching hand. “You bitch. Li-ar! I knrrow.” He punctuated his words with a jab of the gun. “I know. You dunthink I know? I do.”

“Keep him talking. I feel the cracks. I know where the door is. I just need...” Scarlet bent, running her hands along the bottom.

“It wasn’t me,” I blurted, because I wasn’t very good at improvisation.

The man leaned back, then aggressively tilted forward. “No?” He turned the gun toward Braiden, who flinched. “Then who irz dat, huh? Who irsss *that*?” He swayed backward. “I’ll *tell* you who—” His burp turned into a groan. “I’ll-tell-you-who.” He swung the gun up. “A dead man.”

“Hurry, Scarlet.” I stepped in front of Braiden, waving my hands in front of me. “I can explain. It was my sister, see. My sister. She has done me wrong. All wrong.”

The man swayed to one side, and strangely, the gun swayed in the opposite direction. He opened his eyes wider, then closed one eye to study me.

“Yer sis—ter? Urrrugh.” He rubbed his chest with the gun.

“Yeah. Yes.” I wiped at the sweat running down my face, scoping out the room and trying to plot a path I could use to sprint past him. I’d have to leap over shapes I could barely see, which I wasn’t desperate to try. Scarlet would undoubtedly fall if I didn’t. Then this guy, drunk or no, would have a clear, close-up shot. “She’s my twin.” At this point I was just babbling the first thing that came to mind. “She’s my twin, and this is her boyfriend. He’s visiting, but she is gone, so I have to get him some...milk.”

“What in the world?” I heard Scarlet mutter, and I couldn’t tell if she was reacting to my nonsensical story or some quirk of the secret door.

“Twin?” the man said, staggering a step closer to keep his balance. “I ain’t no—met no twin.”

“Sure you have. You have. Remember? That one night, when you were drinking?” I drew circles in the air with my finger, half hoping he’d try to

follow the motion with his eyes and fall down.

“But sherr-was in o-ur *bed*.” He shook the gun at me. “*Our* bed. You were. You were! With him!” He punched off a wild shot, and the sound of the blast weakened my knees. My stomach swam.

I would’ve dropped like lead but for Braiden catching me under the arms and pulling me close. “Now or never, Scarlet,” Braiden said, bracing himself to move.

The man swayed, staggered, and hefted the gun again. “You lyin’, cheatin’—”

“Now!” Scarlet pulled the door open and burst through it into the lit space beyond. Braiden and I were right behind her. A metal click sounded behind us, followed by a slew of mumbled swears. For some reason, the ghost man’s revolver only had two bullets in it. The logic of this place was...well, it certainly wasn’t logical, but this once it had worked in our favor.

Count my lucky stars.

Braiden had shoved the door closed after I’d gone through it, and we tore down the hallway, quickly passing the door used by the Charming Man, thankfully closed, and moving on to the kid-sized one. Scarlet grabbed the handle, turned, and pushed it open. She scampered through it without a sound.

The room inside was dark, though I now knew better than to assume that meant it was empty. I clicked on my flashlight, adding its beam to Scarlet’s. An old-fashioned crib sat in the corner with a rotted mobile hanging over it. A baby stroller sat at the other end of the room and a rocking chair stood empty in another corner. Clearly it was intended as a nursery, but only for one child. A baby.

“Isn’t the whole point of the story that she never had a kid?” I asked as we hurried to the door. A huge solarium greeted us, three times the size of the one we’d seen before. The other one had to be on the opposite side of the house, though my sense of direction was completely skewed. This time, though, the opening didn’t extend from the roof level to the bottom level. Here there was glass sectioning off the second floor from those above and below, the panes poised at different angles that caught and threw the moonlight.

“She couldn’t have,” Scarlet said, glancing back before nodding, apparently checking to make sure Braiden had followed us. “If they searched this house, there’s no way they would’ve missed a child. But she tried for a

long time. She probably set up the nursery in the hopes it would happen.” Scarlet pointed down the way at an open door at the end of the corridor. “That’s where we just were. So that…” There was no door between the far room and the one nursery. Just wall. There had been three doors in the tunnel, and there were two here.

I shivered and hurried away from it. “Let’s just go the opposite direction and hope that dark-haired guy stays put. He seemed harmless, which probably means he’s the most dangerous thing in this mansion.”

“I bet he’s the third husband.” Scarlet hazarded another backward glance as we worked around the solarium. “He died, right? I’m hazy on which did what. I didn’t get that far into my research.”

“It’s said that he disappeared. They didn’t see him when they searched the house, and the Old Woman always said he was traveling. They eventually came to the conclusion that the Old Woman killed him.” I looked down a softly lit hallway. Gentle music was playing from one of the rooms at the end. “At least, that’s the story I’ve always heard. I’ve never looked it up or anything.”

“Well, I guess we know where he could’ve hidden,” Braiden said.

Scarlet clicked off her flashlight, and I followed suit. We crept down the hall, looking in all directions. We passed a large sunroom outfitted with chairs, tables, and couches. If it hadn’t been part of a haunted house, it might have been a lovely place to spend the day. Through a door beyond was a collection of pots placed as if they’d once contained plants. Like in the sunroom, the ceiling was glass.

“She seemed to like light and plant life,” Braiden murmured. “That doesn’t speak of someone who kills children.”

“Sociopath, maybe,” Scarlet said.

A soft glow from an open doorway brightened the floor ahead. This was the source of the tranquil music. If this had been any other situation, in any other house, I would’ve loved to wander into that space and take a load off. To sink into a soft chair with a world-weary sigh and accept a warm drink.

Getting closer, I could see shelves of books through the large and stately sliding double doors. It was the library. It had to be. I would have given anything in the world to check out a library in a house like this. I had no doubt the volumes in there would widen my eyes.

“Walk faster, Ella—you don’t know what might pop out of that room.” Scarlet reached back and grabbed my sweatshirt, giving it a yank. I wondered

why Braiden hadn't already stepped in and pushed me along.

A quick backward glance froze my blood.

He wore a soft smile and a longing expression, looking at the opened doors. His feet had slowed like mine had, and now he was drifting to that side of the wide hallway.

It wasn't the desire to sit down that had called to me, I realized. It was the room in general.

As if on cue, *she* emerged, young and vibrant and beautiful. Her hair was perfectly styled in curls atop her head and her red lips drifted up into a smile. Solid, without any translucency at all, she held out her hand.

"Please," she said in a musical voice. "Join me. I have so much to tell you."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“WHAT IN THE HOLY—” Scarlet grabbed my reaching hand and yanked it away, making me take a big step with it. “Run!”

“But—”

“Run!” She flung me with unexpected strength.

I crashed into the far wall, near a closed door. There was certainly an abundance of doors in this house.

“Braiden, you idiot, that’s *her!*” Scarlet screamed. “Don’t touch her!”

I heard a slap as I reached for the handle.

“No, no. Don’t go through that one,” the ghost said, her musical voice echoing around my skull in a strange and terrifying way. “Not that one. That was my séance room.”

“Lay off the weights, would ya? You’re like a stone wall.” Scarlet pushed Braiden toward me.

I stood frozen with my hand on the knob, everything in me saying to turn away from that door.

“Go! What’s wrong with you?” Scarlet reached around me, batted my hand away, and turned the handle.

“She said it was a séance room,” I muttered, blinking stupidly at the tiny square room within.

“Who did?” Scarlet pushed me into the space and turned back for Braiden. “I didn’t hear anything.”

“You didn’t?” Fear crawled up my spine. I wanted to go back to that library. I wanted to sit down with that beautiful woman and hear what she had to say.

“Why does she walk through town as a hunched, middle-aged woman?” I

asked. “She’s beautiful. So vibrant. Why not walk the streets as she is?”

“This isn’t how she died. This is from...some other time. Before that. Twenty years before that, it looks like.” Scarlet slammed the door shut. “Finally. A door with a proper deadbolt.”

“No, wait—” I held out my hand to stop her, but it was done. She threw the deadbolt.

I didn’t know if I was reacting to potential danger, or the sadness that we were locking *her* out. Braiden had a confused expression that probably mirrored mine.

Scarlet clicked on her flashlight even though a large window let in enough light to see. The beam of light sailed over an empty table with two chairs. They were the only pieces of furniture in the room.

“This must be a room that connects a few areas of the house or something.” Scarlet frowned and eyed the two remaining doors. Of the four walls, three had doors, and one boasted a huge window. There were plenty of ways out, but not much reason to stay in.

“A séance room,” I repeated, rubbing my hands along my arms. I suddenly felt devoid of any sort of paranormal presence. From the moment we entered the house, I’d felt its energy—sometimes tingling, sometimes spiky and almost painful, and sometimes pressurized with danger—but this room felt like normal life.

Or what passed for normal in this town, anyway.

“Has it been lifted?” I asked, hope springing up. “Braiden, do you feel anything?”

His eyes shifted to me. I’d jogged him out of his daze. “What?”

“Did you feel the need to protect me back there?” I asked, that question suddenly taking precedence despite the lunacy of that choice.

He blinked and shook his head, looking at the deadbolted door. “I wanted to escort you inside. I wanted to sit and chat with you and her. My desire for —” He cut off abruptly, and the dreamy expression was wiped off his face. He gave me a flat look. “I didn’t feel any danger.”

“For what?” Scarlet asked, looking between the doors. When he didn’t answer, she gave him her full attention. “Your desire for what? Something in this house?”

His eyes were still rooted to mine. “Yes,” he said softly. His eyebrows pinched together. He blinked and looked away. Heat unfurled deep in my body. “I think she’s messing with our minds.” He ran his fingers through his

hair.

“Of course she is messing with your minds. That’s her whole gig.” Scarlet huffed. “We need to pick a door, but I’m feeling gun-shy.”

“Did you feel threatened that first night?” I asked, drawing Braiden’s gaze back to me. “When she pointed back at my house?”

A small crease formed between his brows. He swallowed. “I felt the need to protect you. But a moment ago, it felt like you would be safe. We’d all be safe.”

“You know...” Scarlet tapped her flashlight. “I’ve been wondering about something. There are so many violent characters in this house. Even the children. There’s no way *all* these people could’ve lived here. And they’re all men. Or mostly. If this house was so messed up it drove the people who lived here crazy, surely there’d be a woman or two wandering around. What if the paranormal crazy of this house has called to the spirits of all the violent offenders from the town?”

I exhaled, suddenly exhausted. “I have no idea, Scarlet.”

“You should think about it. It gives your mind something to do. Otherwise you might be tempted to curl up in a corner, start sobbing, and rock yourself back and forth.” Scarlet wrapped her fingers around the handle on the far door. “We’ll just have a little looky and see what horrors await us behind Door Number One.”

She turned the handle and opened the door slowly, a rusty sort of squeak filling the room. She paused to look out, and almost at the same time, the squeak stopped.

I tilted my head, listening. I could have sworn the squeak had lasted longer than the door moving.

“Dark,” Scarlet whispered, and a tiny squeak wormed through the following silence.

“Do you hear that?” I asked into the hush.

“What?” Scarlet asked.

But it didn’t repeat. Maybe Scarlet had accidentally nudged the door, something I couldn’t see through the gloom.

“Let’s go,” I said, my unease growing. “Let’s keep moving.”

Scarlet pulled the door open a little more before drifting through. She waited on the other side as I moved closer.

Without warning, the door slammed shut. I jolted back, surprised. The deadbolt on it slid home, and the rusty squeal started again.

Pounding sounded through the wood as I rushed forward, gripping the handle and cranking it over. Braiden was there a moment later, working at the deadbolt.

“What happened?” Scarlet’s voice was muffled through the door. “Open up.”

“We’re trying!” I stepped to the side, hoping Braiden’s muscles would be able to solve the problem. He yanked at the deadbolt with both hands. Rammed his shoulder into the door while pulling harder. It still wouldn’t budge.

The squeal grew louder. Something else was moving, and it had nothing to do with this door.

I turned around slowly, my heart ramping up and my stomach flip-flopping.

The deadbolt on the door to the solarium was moving on its own, peeling back from the lock that kept the door fastened.

“Braiden.” I tapped him. The wild knocking on Scarlet’s door suddenly ceased. Silence filled the room except for that horrible squeal. Stillness, except for that slow slide of metal. “Something is trying to come in. And I don’t have a good feeling about it.”

Braiden ran to the other door and jammed his hand against the end. “Work on Scarlet’s door,” he said, his face screwed up in determination.

I did as he instructed, but if he couldn’t get it open, and with his body weight wouldn’t slam it open, there wasn’t much hope I could do any better.

“Scarlet,” I yelled through the door, fear drowning me. The knocking hadn’t resumed. “Scarlet?”

“I’m not having any effect.” Braiden stepped back and shook his head. “It’s almost open. Hurry! We’ll just have to try and work around to find Scarlet. Hopefully she stays put.”

Eyes fixed on the moving deadbolt, he yanked open the third door without a problem. The metal latch of the deadbolt had nearly cleared the hoop. Soon, whoever was on the other side would join us.

Without another thought, I ran through the opened door, tearing my eyes away from the danger only as I crossed the threshold. My feet hit empty space. Gravity reached up its greedy hands and grabbed hold of me.

Like the stairs on the first floor, this door led to nowhere.

On instinct, I spun and reached for the lip of the floor behind me. Braiden had turned, ready to run after me, and I grabbed his leg with one hand, barely

managing to catch hold of the edge of the floor with the other. The jolt of his sudden stop almost pulled my hands loose, but panic and sheer will kept me holding on. The other drop had not been steep, but I couldn't see the floor this time. For all I knew, this door dumped out onto the first floor.

"Oh crap!" Movements as fast as lightning, Braiden knelt and grabbed my forearms. "I've got you. I've got you, Ella."

"And we meet again," came the charming voice from the secret hallway, slithering into every corner of the séance room. "How lucky."

Braiden's jaw clenched. Instead of pulling me up, he pulled me away from the side and lowered to his belly.

"What are you doing?" I said, panic ringing through my voice.

His eyes were intense. "He wants to kill you. Don't ask me how I know... I just do. I will not let that happen." He licked his lips. "Don't worry. The drop isn't that high. Your feet are about four feet off the ground. Bend your knees on impact and roll. Okay? You'll be fine."

"But—" And then I was airborne.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

MY FEET HIT THE GROUND, and I did the whole stop, drop, and roll thing—the same strategy I used for jumping out of trees. The tile wasn't so easy on the body as grass or dirt, and I slapped limbs as I rolled.

Sounds of fighting came from above. A thud and release of breath. A grunt and a howl of pain.

I scrambled up and looked through the open door. Braiden landed a solid punch. The Charming Man's head snapped back and he staggered out of sight. A moment later, I saw a fist swing into view. Braiden ducked away with the ease and grace of someone who knew how to fight. He batted away a jab and threw an uppercut, stepping forward to deliver it.

I didn't know much about boxing, but I knew when someone was good at it. Braiden was great.

He was at the door a moment later, looking down at the ground below. Before I could see what he was scouting out, he jumped.

"No!" I shouted, slapping my hand to my mouth. The drop hadn't been so horrible for me, but I'd already been swinging from the ledge. He was about ten feet off the ground.

He hit the wall, which was when I spotted what he'd been aiming for: a pipe about two inches thick. His body hit off the wood and he scabbled for purchase. Flakes of paint rained down, his feet scraping the sides, but his hands found purchase on the pipe.

"You think that is all it will take?" The Charming Man filled the doorway, his lip split and his cheek swollen. Blood dribbled down from a cut in his brow. He took a white pocket square from the breast pocket of his suit and dabbed the liquid away. "Running?" His easy smile held an edge.

“Running won’t get you far. Not in this house.”

Braiden slid down the pipe with obvious effort, his toes finding purchase on the braces. He looked beyond his feet, the distance about six feet.

“Here.” I ran to him with my arms held up. “I can catch you. Or at least help break your fall.”

“Get out of the way, Ella. This isn’t my first rodeo.”

It was only the sheer confidence of his voice that convinced me to move aside.

He jumped, swinging his feet out enough to miss the braces before tucking them back around the pipe. He slid, his hands going one over the other, alternating. Another couple of feet and the train derailed. He slipped and fell, pushing himself away from the wall at the last second, and hit the ground with his feet. He fell back onto the side of his butt and half rolled, half tumbled onto the tile.

I was at his side a moment later, ready to face my hatred of blood to attempt damage control.

“I’ll see you soon,” the Charming Man said. A door slammed upstairs. Silence descended, fragmented by our harried breathing.

Braiden sat up, grimacing with the movement.

“Are you okay?” I touched his handsome face, unmarred by his tussle.

He brought his hands up, scraped from the climb-fall.

“I’m fine.” He winced as he shifted. “I’ll have a nice bruise on my butt cheek, but at least I didn’t fall on my tailbone.”

I stroked his hair, not sure what else to do.

His eyes met mine in the half-light, their color lost to the darkness but not their intensity. He grabbed my face in his hands and pulled me closer, meeting my lips with his. Warmth rushed through me, flipping my belly and sending tingles deep into my middle. I wrapped my arms around his neck, sinking into the comforting feel of him. Soaking up the confidence and courage with which he faced every situation.

“We should go,” he murmured against my lips.

He paused when my face was inches from his, his eyes roaming my face. “I’ve wanted to do that since you stared me down through your window.”

“My... When?”

A smile graced his lips. “When I was walking Bowzer. You stared at me through your window with this...tough face—”

“I can’t help that face. My mother tells me I could scare Satan with it.”

“—and something about you...called to me. But then you ducked out of sight, randomly, without even waving, and I couldn't stop laughing. I wanted to knock on your door and meet you right then. I chickened out, though. Then everything got confusing with the candle, and the ghost in the street...” He tucked a flyaway strand of hair behind my ear. “I guess it doesn't matter how I got to know you. The important thing is that I did.”

He kissed me again, so full of passion and longing that I momentarily forgot that we were stuck in McKinley Mansion. That we needed to find Scarlet and possibly run for our lives. My brain went fuzzy and my body went tingly, and I just held on for dear life.

When he pulled away, my sigh of regret was audible.

“We'll have plenty of time for that,” he said in a teasing tone. “First, I have to get you out of here.”

Reality slapped me in the face, and I sat back and surveyed our surroundings. We were in the kitchen again, at the end of the laundry area. The door to nowhere dropped people into a working area of the house. That seemed awfully dangerous for guests.

“We're going to have to work our way back upstairs to find Scarlet.” A shiver of fear wormed through me, but I pushed it away. I couldn't worry about her. I had to trust her intelligence and survival instinct. So far she'd been integral in keeping everyone out of danger. I had to trust that she would have an even easier time doing it by herself.

Braiden rose stiffly and rubbed his butt. “Okay. Do you know the way?”

“Not even remotely. My directional sense is somewhat limited in huge and strange houses with a seemingly endless number of rooms and doors and staircases that lead nowhere.”

He nodded and took my hand. “Agreed. I have a similar problem. Which is why we need Scarlet.”

“And we're going to find her, if I have to yell her name through every room in this mansion.”

We started forward, retracing our steps from our previous visit to the kitchen. Light dimmed the farther away we got from the backside of the solarium.

I looked at my empty hand, our clasped hands, and finally Braiden's other empty hand. “Where's the flashlight?”

Braiden repeated my scan. “I don't know.”

I couldn't even remember who had held it last. All my memories were

hazy after our encounter with the younger Old Woman. Almost like I had drifted through a dense fog.

“We’ll look for one along the way,” he said, and didn’t elaborate, for which I was grateful. Any flashlight we found would be the property of someone who, unfortunately, didn’t need it anymore.

“You’re good at fighting,” I said as we walked.

“Yes. After losing a couple fights in school, my dad thought I should get some lessons.”

“Is that the reason you came out here? Because you were getting into trouble all the time?”

Braiden tensed. His glance back at me was guarded and uncomfortable. He set his jaw firmly. “Not entirely. No.”

Curiosity tugged at me, but the need to know what he was hiding was momentarily forgotten when we passed a large alcove and I halted. My mouth dropped open and I stepped closer, just to see. “Is that...?”

“A huge block of ice, yes.” He stepped closer and gingerly touched it. “That’s how they used to keep their food cold. Icebox. That’s what my grandmother called a freezer. This is why. They’d use a real block of ice.”

“This isn’t a box, though.” I looked around the alcove, bigger than the séance room. It’s an entire pantry.”

“I guess rich people had an ice *room*.” He backed out. “And the fact that ice is here means this part of the house is going active. Let’s get a move on.”

As we reached the servants’ dining room, lights flared all around us, brighter than the other times. Singing drifted down from the direction of the formal dining room, a man’s voice. Despite the pleasant melody, icy tendrils pierced me. It was *him*. The Charming Man.

“Not that way.” I pulled on Braiden’s hand as something flickered in the servants’ dining room. Not a light but a person, wispy at first and almost translucent until she solidified. A plain brown dress, badly torn, draped her body. Tear stains made tracks down her dirty face.

She started toward us, and though she didn’t have a weapon, her vengeful expression was enough to make me back away.

“The servants must’ve had stairs,” I said, turning down the hall Scarlet had identified as the path servants would use to roam the house out of sight. “We can get up that way.”

“Yes. But where are those?”

“We’re in the servants’ area. Surely it would have to be around here

somewhere, right?” I turned down a hall I didn’t recognize, jogging through the narrowing corridor. Lights flared from the direction we’d come. More from just up the way.

A strange sort of haziness filled the air, billowing out from the walls and drifting through the air like mist. We turned right, entering a room with a modest table and some benches hugging the walls. An old-style water jug and a chipped tea set sat in the corner.

“A break room, maybe?” Braiden asked, continuing through it. “Maybe a place for deliveries to...”

His voice trailed away as we heard, “Come out, come out, wherever you are.”

The Charming Man.

We picked up the pace as the mist thickened. After turning left, we finally found the staircase through a low doorway without an actual door. Heavy footsteps clunked down, one after the other, until an older man emerged. One eye had been gouged out, the socket oozing a blackened sort of pus. His shirt was half torn away, and bleeding slices marred his bare skin.

He reached for us with a three-fingered hand. Blood dripped onto the wooden steps.

“I can get through him,” Braiden said, bracing himself in that now-familiar way. “No problem.”

More footsteps echoed behind him, just as heavy, lumbering down the steps. We couldn’t see anyone approaching through the mist.

I turned wildly, seeing a dark area through the hall opposite us. “There, look!”

“Ready or not, here I come...” the Charming Man called.

We jogged in that direction. I glanced back and saw him. Sleek in his suit and completely healed from his fight with Braiden, the Charming Man sauntered up the hall with a sly smile and one hand in his pocket.

Adrenaline dumped into me as we raced for the darkened area. Around a bend, we met yet another set of stairs, this one reaching down into the bowels of the house. My mind hazed over and the pull from the younger Old Woman wrapped around me, begging me to descend the stairs. To seek solace with her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

BRAIDEN STEPPED FORWARD. “COME ON.” He tugged on my hand. “This way.”

I pulled back. “That’s *her*, Braiden. Can’t you feel it? This is a trick. We can’t go that way.”

Frustration crossed his expression and his grip on my hand tightened. “This is the safest way. I can feel it, Ella. We have to go this way.”

“We’ll be trapped.” I tried to pull back. To reclaim my hand. “That’s where they want us to go. Where we can’t run. Where we can’t get out. It isn’t safe, Braiden. Use your head.”

He turned to me, his expression insistent and eyes pleading. “Ella, I feel the rightness in this. I *feel* it. This is our only chance at safety. You have to trust me.”

Time was draining away, our window of opportunity passing.

“No.” I shook my head. “Scarlet’s right. I’ve only made it this long by refusing her. I won’t give in now.”

“There you are.” The Charming Man filled the end of the hall, a hand still in his pocket and a lit cigarette between two fingers near his mouth. “Easy finding you, I have to say. You haven’t even *tried* to hide. I cannot tell if that is courageous, or simply stupid.”

“Ella,” Braiden insisted, pulling me toward the stairs, “come with me. I said I would protect you. Let me do my job.”

“Yes, Ella,” the Charming Man said, sauntering toward us. “Let him protect you, by all means. Let him drag you down to the crypt. With the magic in your blood, you’ll get to live in this house for all eternity. Like the others. Like me. Won’t that be fun?”

Braiden grabbed me around the waist and slung me over his shoulder. I sucked in a breath to scream as he jostled me down the steep wooden steps.

“We shall get to know each other very well, Miss Ella,” the Charming Man said, and I shivered in disgust, my scream trapped in my throat.

Braiden ran me around a corner before ducking under a thick metal pipe. The concrete ceiling pressed down on us. The rough concrete walls and uneven ground gave the area a haunted feeling. Oil lamps and candles rested on available flat surfaces, and I belatedly realized they were lit.

I beat on his broad back and bucked, trying to get loose. All the while, my heart surged, feeling the rightness of where we were going. Feeling the intense pull and the glory of finally succumbing to it.

“No, Braiden,” I forced out, gritting my teeth and squeezing my eyes shut for a moment, trying to block it out. “We have to resist.”

“Trust me, Ella,” Braiden said, his voice hollow and distant. “Trust me.”

He took a right at an ancient furnace-looking thing, then went up a cracked cement slope and down two uneven stairs to a rectangular raised area, the outsides of which were walls of cement brick. Wood seats lined the walls, a resting place for workers after doing...whatever it was that needed to be done.

Without hesitating, ignoring my attempts to get free, Braiden headed to a darkened corner, removed from the walkways and seating area and draped in shadow. He paused in front of it, and the light flickered on and off, one second enough to see and move around, and the next nearly pitch black, with a paltry beam fighting the dark from a couple of thin, horizontal windows at the very top of the walls.

In one of the lights-on moments, he slipped his hand around an edge I didn't even notice, reached with his fingers, and pushed or flipped a switch that even Scarlet would have been hard-pressed to find.

Alarm bled into all the other horrific emotions running through me.

“How did you know about that?” I asked in a choked voice.

A hidden door sprang open within the shadow. Braiden bounced me into the air. I barely kept myself from squealing as he caught me in his arms and held me tightly against his chest. Before I could resume my struggle, he had ducked and walked through the door, shutting it behind him.

Inky blackness settled around us, so dense that I couldn't see his face near mine.

“No!” I curled my hand into a fist and punched, hitting him in the jaw.

Pain shot through my hand, but he didn't release me. I rocked forward and then back, trying to break free while also cradling my throbbing hand.

"Here. Just through here." He relaxed his grip on my back, moving the hand that supported me away from his body a little, forcing me to lean back. I grabbed his shoulders to stop from falling on my head and kicked out my legs.

The oddness of his hold broke, and I fell onto my side.

"Ella, you are safe here," he said in a voice that didn't sound like his. It was too flat and high. Too listless and without expression.

"Oh no," I said, scrambling up.

He stepped forward and retrieved something from his pocket. Light flared from a match and then bloomed as the wick of a candle took the flame. Another candle's light was added, and then a third.

Before I could run, he was there, faster than me on my best day, sweeping me up into his arms again, the hold sweet but for the situation surrounding it.

"Almost there," he said, and continued walking.

The concrete ended, turning into a rough stone path. He stopped and lit another candelabrum. The rest of the area was all dirt, some of it heaped in small mounds, a few in recess, and a few larger mounds lining the dark, distant walls.

My gaze snagged on one of the piles alongside the wall. The lumps in it didn't look right. They had more definition, somehow. After he lit the third candelabrum, I saw why.

I scream-gasped, clutching Braiden's shoulders.

Bones. Human bones. Discarded into two piles, each topped with the small skull of a child.

"Oh God," I said as my middle burned with terror and sadness. "Oh God."

I tried to look away, to avert my gaze and find air to fill my lungs, but on the shelf to our other side sat ornaments. Little things, all. A retainer. A pair of old-style glasses. A teddy bear.

Keepsakes.

"No," I said through a constricted throat. Tears rolled down my face. "No!"

It was all the kids. The ones who had left their houses, answering the pull of the Old Woman. They hadn't been killed by the house. They'd been killed below it, and buried in its depths.

Fueled by adrenaline and desperation, I flung out my arms and legs at the same time, making me as awkward to hold as a flopping fish. I twisted to the side and back, trying to wriggle free.

Braiden staggered, his grip loosening.

I jabbed him in the eye with my finger, making him jerk back. I rolled and bucked, breaking out of his hold.

“No, Ella, you have to see. You have to *see!* This is the only way you’ll be safe. Trust me.”

I’d been right all along. The Old Woman was using him to bring me to her...only he didn’t seem to realize what was happening. Right now, I wasn’t sure he was in control at all.

I jumped up from where I’d fallen and tried to run around him, desperate to get back to the door. He spread out his arms and stepped in my way.

“Ella, trust—”

“Stop saying that!” I batted his hand and balled up my non-throbbing fist. I punched, aiming for his stomach. He grabbed my fist in his and held it tight.

“Ella—”

I stepped in front of him and swung up a knee. He clamped it between his thighs, keeping it from reaching his apex.

“We’re almost there, Ella,” he said in that strange voice.

I reached for his eyes, but he was onto me. He shoved my arms to the side, thus forcing my upper body to swing with them, and wrapped his arms around me. He flung me over his shoulder again, much too big and strong for me to escape.

That didn’t mean I stopped struggling. You only lost when you stopped fighting.

I tried to knee his chest. To punch him in the kidney. Anything to break free. I reached back and scratched his neck, to make sure I had his DNA in my fingernails. Even if I didn’t survive, I wanted the police to know he’d played a part in this on the off chance he was a willing participant. They’d question him. They’d see the scratches on his neck. And if they ever found me, they could match it up.

No one’s going to find you in this place, Ella. They never found all of these other kids...

He headed to another shadow-draped corner. This time he bent, nearly putting me down as he did. The door popped open and we were through. He set me down on the other side, and a click announced the closed door.

Pitch black accosted me again, but I didn't let it slow me down. I ran for the door and felt along the rough wood. As light from more candles filled the room, I saw that there was a handle.

A handle!

I grabbed it, but his hands were already on me, turning me around.

"Witness," he said in a voice that made my middle ache.

Without realizing what I was doing, I turned to see.

Seven little graves lined the walls, their gravestones round and pristine, each with a different name. Mary, John, Helen, George... Those with female names had little bows at the base, and those with male names had little baseball gloves. A rocking chair sat on a rug in the corner. Beside it, a stack of books.

A presence drifted in, and I knew who it was before I saw the form. Sure enough, the Old Woman walked along a path with her head hanging low and tears dripping from her cheeks. She stood in front of each little grave, her hands clasped solemnly at her waist.

"The doctors said I was cursed. That the miscarriages were my fault for my wicked ways." Her voice was like a bell. She wiped her cheeks. "No God I know would punish innocent children because of their mother." She sniffled. "I was not at fault for my husbands' deaths. Nor for inheriting from them. I tried to do good. I gave to charity. I helped the community. But still..." She put out her hands, and I could feel the misery emanating from her. "I lost them all. The last, Margaret, made it the longest. Stillborn at eight months. She died like all the others."

She looked at each one, her soft prayers filling the silence. At the end, she sat in her rocking chair and picked up a book. "I think John killed someone. I have no proof. I can't be sure. But he went a little mad after the last pregnancy. After Margaret. His head isn't right." She shrugged, the tears renewed. "It was wrong not to go to the police. I know that. But John doesn't know what the doctor told me. That the miscarriages are my fault. He blames himself. And so, the spilt blood is on my hands." Her book trembled. She stared straight ahead sightlessly. "I can't feel anything for whoever he lured into the woods the other night. I can't feel...anything at all, other than grief for my children. I am dead inside. Dead." She stared down at her book. "Maybe it is for the best."

"But you were the one walking the streets," I said without meaning to. "Not him. You. You still do."

She blinked rapidly a few times, and the lights wavered. Her form flickered.

She went back to studying her book.

Suddenly it all made sense.

I was standing witness, like a confessional. I was letting her vent her grief. The past was revealing itself to me, to those of us who'd come to McKinley Mansion, but this *wasn't* the past. This was right now. Florence's ghost sat in this room with me, spilling her guts. The power of the mansion allowed her to communicate with me in words. Past and present had converged so that I could play witness and let her tell me her sins.

Well, I wasn't buying it. Not after seeing the outer room. Not after being plagued with her visits for most of my life.

"You did it," I accused her, bolder now. "You lured someone back here. Maybe he killed that someone, but *you* were the one who wandered the streets."

She blinked rapidly again, and the candlelight dimmed. Her face swiveled around, moving farther than a human neck would allow.

"You did it," I said again, adding a finger jab.

"What did you say, little girl?" The mood in the room changed. Intensified.

"You are the one who lures kids back to your house. Before you died *and* after. Were you the one who killed them, too? Buried them down here where they wouldn't be found?"

Her eyes narrowed, and the room dimmed a little more. "My children are in this room. I would never taint their memories like that. John can't even get in here. He doesn't know it exists. He thought my babies were incinerated. Burned, like dirty secrets." She scoffed. "I would never. I had them buried down here, in my home. Here. Where they would always be loved."

"Where are we?" Braiden said softly, grabbing his head in confusion.

"What about all those children out there?" I pointed, bile rising in my throat. "What about them?"

The light dimmed again, almost snuffing out. I could barely see.

"I don't know what he did with the body," she said in a sickly voice. "Bodies, I should say. I think there was more than one. It helped him forget the pain, I think. I should've said something. Told the police. But it was my fault."

"How did you get the kids out of their houses?" I asked, pushing through.

Wanting her to admit it, for my own peace of mind if nothing else. “The whole town recognized you walking through the streets. How did you get the kids to come to you?”

“I went for walks. Long walks. I...don’t remember what happened, but sometimes flashes of memory stayed with me. Seeing a little boy that looked like what George might’ve looked like had he grown. I called for the boy to come down to me, I remember. I called to him. I wanted to show him my George. To let them meet.” She blinked rapidly and touched the pad of her finger to her temple. The lights burned a little brighter. “A little shoe was left behind. Red had been smeared across the sole. John snatched it from me. The next morning, when I found it, he snatched it from me. Told me to go to my room. That I wasn’t well. And I suppose I wasn’t. I couldn’t remember anything after calling down the little boy. But...when John turned, he had a splatter of red across his side.”

I let out a breath I hadn’t known I was holding. “You lured them back, and he killed them. Not once, but multiple times. And you did nothing to stop it, which made you an accomplice.”

The candles went out. Pitch black took away my sight, enhancing my other senses to compensate.

I heard a deep groan from the ancient wooden rocking chair. “Yes...” The word was like a sigh.

Maybe this was what she had actually wanted—to make a confession. To admit her wrongdoing. To ease the burden of guilt that had trapped her.

Or maybe she was stuck in an endless loop, appearing when her energy was at its highest, trying to lure out kids like she had before she died.

What Braiden had said came back to me. Maybe I could get her to move on. Maybe I could put an end to this for good. I could at least try...

I increased the firmness of my voice.

“You have been heard. Losing your children was not your fault. I will make their existence known. The historical society will make sure they won’t be forgotten.” As would the newspapers, when the police found the room outside this one. “And you have admitted to the role you played in the deaths of the missing children. You have admitted it, and in life, you were punished for it. You know...the stoning.” I cleared my throat. “You must leave this town. You must leave it alone. You cannot stay here. You cannot plague it any longer. Do you hear me?”

Something thumped above us. The candles flickered back to life, the

illumination dim but bright enough for me to see the woman sitting in the chair with her head bowed. A tear dripped from her face. Relief coated her expression.

And all went black again.

Silence descended and a weight was lifted from my chest and shoulders. “That worked,” I said with a sense of awe. “She’s gone. Can you feel that?”

“Yes.” Braiden sighed. “I wouldn’t say I’m relaxed, but I’m not as stressed, either. Let’s get out of here.”

My feeling of relief was short-lived. I remembered that the first door we’d come through, the secret door, didn’t have a handle on the inside. Now that he was no longer bewitched, Braiden wouldn’t know its secrets. We still had to find a way out.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

“I KNOW YOU MEANT WELL, but coming to this house was the dumbest idea you’ve ever had in your whole life, and I will never let you forget it,” I told Braiden.

Another thought crossed my mind. The Old Woman hadn’t lived long enough to kill all of the kids whose bodies were collected in the other room. Even if John had carried on after her, he must’ve died of old age years ago. And while the ghosts in this house certainly could’ve been responsible for the deaths, they wouldn’t bury the bodies.

So who was responsible?

A shiver ran through me. That bit of detective work would have to be reserved for the police.

I just hoped we could get out of here to alert them.

I grabbed Braiden’s hand, groping in the direction of the shelf where he’d lit a couple of candelabra while I was trying to escape. He must’ve gotten a match from somewhere... “Stay there.” I felt along the top until my hands hit off one of the candelabra. Next to it sat a small tin, and beside that a rough, flat something or other. It felt kind of like wood, but harder.

Something rattled inside the tin. It groaned when I opened it, and inside lay a bunch of little sticks I knew were matches. I took one out, felt along the sides of the metal container, and realized the little thing off to the side had to be for striking the matches.

With the smaller end between my fingers, I slid the bulbous end along the little flat something-or-other. My heart stilled in anticipation. Then the match crumbled in my fingertips.

“Dang it.” I threw it on the ground and grabbed another one. Same result.

“They’re too old. The Old Woman’s energy must have made it work before. We’ll have to use our other senses to get this door open.”

I swung my hand until I felt Braiden and grabbed his wrist.

“Hold on to me, okay?” I placed his hand on my shoulder. “The layout of the next room is etched into my brain. I can get us to the second door.”

“Okay.” He reached up and squeezed my hand. “I’m sorry,” he said as I let my fingertips skim the wall and walked to the nearest door. “I...I was the danger I was supposed to protect you from.”

“What do you last remember?” I opened the door easily and led us into the other room.

“I remember the haze, and someone coming down the servants’ stairs, but things get...dim after that. I can vaguely remember being terrified of the man who found us. The one I fought earlier. I knew something bad would happen if he got you. Then everything went black.”

“I’d bet a million dollars that Mr. Charming is John. A million dollars. Florence was out of her mind, and maybe he was, too, but unlike her, he doesn’t seem to have any remorse as a ghost. Either he didn’t recover in death, or he was bad to begin with. After she died, and her ghost still lured out kids, *someone* continued to kill. Who else would it have been?”

“You won’t be seeking him out to ask him,” Braiden said in a hard tone.

“No.” I wiped the hair from my damp face. “No, I don’t suppose I will. That’s the piece of this we’ll never know. It’s too bad her life had to end up like that. In this day and age, she would’ve been able to get help. She could’ve at least seen a different doctor. At the very least.”

I kicked something right before my face hit the wall. I bounced off and felt Braiden’s steadying hands.

“What’s the matter?” he whispered urgently.

“I’m dumb and I punched the wall with my face.” I scrubbed at my nose.

“What were you doing with your free hand?”

“Letting it hang at my side like a doofus. I just said I was dumb. Leave me alone about it.”

He laughed and slid his hands down my arms and to my waist. “Mum’s the word.”

I felt along the wall, horribly distracted by the weight of his warm hands, and eventually found the second door. Where the handle should’ve been, there was a small, raised circular area, as if someone had taken the handle out and patched it up. I felt along the sides and to the bottom, where Braiden had

found the handle or lever or whatever on the other side. I was no Scarlet, though. I didn't find anything.

"Step up here." I shifted to the side and dragged him closer. "You knew how to open this from the other side. I know you weren't...well, you, but if you just...open your mind, can you figure out how to open it from this side?"

I heard something slide against the wood. His hands, probably. "I don't remember coming through here, much less opening it."

I thought back to the old, brittle matches in the other room. Certainly they'd be the same out here. Still, I told him to keep trying and felt my way over to the shelf by the door.

"What are you doing?" Braiden asked, scratching at the door.

"Trying to see if I have luck with the matches out here. It can't hurt to try."

"There is...something covering the handle hole. It seems...glued on, I think. I can't feel any holes for screws or anything. I wonder if we could pry it off. Although..." He paused for a moment. "We'd need something to pry it off with."

The side of my hand hit a bumpy surface. The candelabrum and a pool of hardened melted wax. Beside it was a different box than the one from the other room. This one was large and paper, with a familiar sandpaper strip for lighting.

I frowned in the darkness, because this style of box felt like the ones I had in my house, which I'd blindly used on many occasions when the power had gone out.

The matches were long and dry, and when I struck one against the side of the box, it immediately ignited. Sure enough, it was a newer-style box made by a company still in business.

"This box of matches was purchased recently..." My voice drifted away after I lit the four candles in the candelabrum. It struck me that the style of the metal holder was different than the one I'd seen on our way through this area. It looked...current. "Someone is still using this room."

"Why do you say that?"

I noticed a large yellow plastic lantern, also from current times, but the other two candelabra Braiden had lit were gone—relics of the past, apparently. The keepsakes stretched out beyond that, as many as I'd seen before, organized in two neat rows. The past and present had definitely overlapped on our first trip through this room.

I clicked the button on the lantern, blasting us with white light. The skulls in the corner showed their grim smiles, watching us from hollowed eyes.

“That’s...helpful,” Braiden said, turning around to explore the now-illuminated space. “And not from the— Oh sh—” Braiden braced against the door as he noticed the piles of bones. “Are those... Those are human.”

“Yes.”

“The heads are smallish...”

“Yes.”

“But how...”

“I don’t know.” I moved toward him. “I don’t know, but those patches in the dirt look like graves. Some with people still in them, I’d bet.”

“Yes, they do. And the others look like someone was pulled out of a grave... But why...”

“I don’t know. The smell, maybe? Bury them until they turn into bones, then pile them in the corner?”

“That sounds crazy.”

I swung my hand, encompassing the whole room. “What part of this reads rational to you?”

“Good point.” He wiped his forehead with a shaking hand.

“Here.” I handed him the lantern. “Find something to pry off the circular part on the door. That’s our only hope. I doubt we can figure out where the secret switch or whatever is. Man, I hope Scarlet is okay.”

“She’s smart.” Braiden scanned the ground. “She’ll make it.”

A few tense minutes later, where the only helpful thing I did was quietly fret and look for a button or switch that I never found, Braiden returned with a flattened piece of metal that was rounded at one end. He held the rounded part, his eyes glued to the rust-colored sharp area at the other end. But it wasn’t rust.

Neither of us said what we were thinking, but I bet it was the same thing: he probably held a murder weapon.

Braiden went at the door with a gusto born of desperation. It only took ten minutes for the little circular piece to pop off. He stuck his fingers in the hole to manually turn the mechanism.

“Let me guess,” I said, “you learned that in New York.” My thoughts were on the people—the kids—in this room and how they’d actually died, but my instinct was to keep a light conversation going. Anything to stay sane.

“No.” He gently set the metal piece beside the door. “I learned how to

pick locks in New York. I've never gone up against a door with no lock or handle."

"Ah. But that's not the reason you moved."

"My desire to find a door that didn't have a lock or handle?" He beckoned me to come closer. "No. Especially not in these circumstances."

I paused in the doorway. Leaving those candles burning was probably a bad idea. The house was made of wood, after all, and they were next to a wall. I didn't want the place going up in flames, not when we—and hopefully the others—were still trapped inside. That could happen once we were free.

"What are you—" Braiden cut off when he realized what I was doing. "Good thinking."

I blew out the candles. Without someone to hold it open, the secret door tried to swing shut.

"We should prop this open so the police can get in easily," I whispered. The heavy weight of the house had been lifted, which meant there didn't seem to be any presences down here, but that didn't mean the rest of the house was back to "normal." The Charming Man, John, had seemed almost as powerful as Florence. "Unless you get taken over by a poltergeist again, we might not be able to find the secret switch."

Braiden nodded and stepped around the door, reaching for the ground. He held up a smooth rock that might've come from a garden. "Someone already thought of that. Well, clearly not the police aspect, but holding the door open."

"How nice of them."

"Very," Braiden said dryly.

Backtracking was easy, since there wasn't much in the open space of the basement. I led the way to the stairs, pausing only when I was in the hallway. Ahead were the servants' stairs. Behind was the basement entrance. Around me was nothing. No press of mood or entity, no tingling across my skin or the syrupy, condensed air of a being. Nothing. Just an empty house.

"It's gone." I shuddered out a sigh of relief and tears came to my eyes. "It's done. The energy is gone."

"Are you sure?" Braiden stepped around me and held the light a little higher.

"Can't you feel it?" I put out my hands and wiggled my fingers. "The air is chilly, but it's no longer cold. Fall weather, not ghost air."

"I can't feel— Oh. Stupid me." Braiden rolled his shoulders. "You're

right. It feels like everyday life.”

“Normal,” I said, laughing to myself. “This is the *normal* everyone talks about. When you’re actually on your own. When the living are the only ones around.”

I shook my head, nearly breaking down in sobs, I was so relieved. But we weren’t out of the woods yet. We still had to get help, and our friends might be seriously hurt or worse. “Scarlet.”

Braiden’s comforting touch landed on my shoulder. “We need to get to a phone and call for help. Then we’ll run back and look, okay?”

I swallowed down the lump in my throat and nodded. A part of me wanted to tell him to go, that I could go find Scarlet on my own, and hopefully the rest of the crew, too, but there was no way I wanted to split up now. We were so close to actually getting out of here...

“Let’s hurry.” I ran up the stairs and then fell into a light jog, remembering (slightly) how we’d gotten there and getting us back to one of the crossroads we’d taken. The lightening sky glowed through the windows, as light as the full moon from yesteryear, with dawn not far off. I thought I remembered where we’d entered the house, and when I pointed, I received a nod.

Before I could start jogging again, a sound caught my ears—so soft I barely heard it. I paused to listen. Nothing in this house could be taken for granted.

A scuff, like a shoe on the floor.

Braiden clicked off the lantern. His hand found my shoulder as I struggled to adjust to the change in lighting.

Another scuff, then a squeak. Tennis shoes. And it wasn’t just one set of feet.

I scooted out of sight around the next corner. Braiden pushed in next to me, and on a silent cue, we both leaned forward just enough to see into the hallway we’d left.

The sound of the staggered footfalls increased. Movement caught my eye and I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding.

Scarlet!

I dashed out and around the corner, running at her. Joy and relief brought a fresh set of tears to my eyes.

“Oh!” She threw her hands up in defense when she saw me, startled. A moment later, she wrapped her arms around my back and whispered in my

ear, “Tell Braiden to run. Tell him to run and go for help—”

“You made it! Oh thank God! What—”

I startled at the sound of a familiar voice...one that didn't have any place in this house. I stared, wide-eyed, at the best sight I had seen in the thirty seconds since Scarlet came into view.

“Miss Potters! You got in,” I said, the need to get out of the house so intense that I could barely think straight. “Did you find anyone else? Are they okay?”

“That's right. You're safe. I found you.” She gave me a big smile. Her eyes sparkled with excitement, but they looked a little...wrong. *Off* somehow. “I don't know about anyone else yet. Scarlet, here, was the first one I found. How many were with you?”

Scarlet gave me a tight smile with warning in her eyes.

“What happened?” I asked her.

“She barely escaped with her life, that's what happened. But everything is going to be okay, don't you worry. Come on.” Miss Potters ushered us along. “I know just the cure to your ailment.”

“Our ailment?” I asked in confusion as we reached the place where Braiden waited.

“No,” Scarlet said softly, and sagged.

“Oh!” Miss Potters laughed and put a hand to her chest. “Braiden. I didn't see you there. Fantastic! I've heard about your past. Very troubled.” She tsked. “That is too bad, dear. Sometimes we can't choose how our parents affect us. But then...” She brightened. “Sometimes we can, and John thinks you are definitely one of those cases. Besides, you were visited, were you not? You have the affliction.”

“John?” I said.

“Yes, of course. You didn't think I could do this all on my own, did you?” She laughed again and raised her hand.

I found myself staring into the barrel of a handgun.

“What's happening?” I asked as my world swam. To be so close to safety, only to fall into danger all over again. I didn't think I could go for round two.

Braiden turned to run, and Miss Potters shoved Scarlet out of the way and grabbed me by the scruff of my neck. “Come back, or I will shoot her. Look at me and see if I am lying.”

“She's not lying!” Scarlet screamed. “She shot Leo in the head. He had a badly broken leg and a head wound, but he was alive. He was alive, and she

shot him!”

“Oh right, yes. We found Leo, too.” I felt her shrug. “I forgot to mention that.”

Braiden slowed to a stop with his back to us. His shoulders dropped and he turned around.

“There you go. Yes, come on back.” Miss Potters walked toward him with the gun pressed to my temple. “Fantastic. This is just fantastic. We don’t have much time, though. Let’s hurry. Stay in front, Braiden. You too, Scarlet. If you try anything, anything at all, I will shoot you. Got it?”

“And then what?” I asked, gritting my teeth. I’d already had a gun pointed at me tonight. Shot at me, too. Men had thrown knives at me. Funhouse children had chased me in this maze of a house. I’d seen dead bodies... I’d been through a lot of horror in the past however-many hours, and if I was honest, this didn’t seem like the worst of it.

My resolve hardened. I hadn’t been able to get away from Braiden, but this woman was half his size and twice his age. If I got an opportunity, I was going to take it. I hadn’t survived this long to be killed by a teacher. That was not how this journey would end!

“You’ll be wanted for murder,” I said.

She laughed, a high-pitched, insane sound. “How naïve. All those unsolved cases over the years, and you think you’ll break the mold? The police will wait until the light of day to come barging in. Everyone in town knows that. Agrees with it, too. They’ve lost some of their own within these walls. Haven’t heard about that, Scarlet? Always so skeptical. I don’t even need to show you the way to the other side, Scarlet. You aren’t on the list. I could just kill you now. But I will show you the way. Slowly and painfully, I will. It will be a pleasure. I’ve hoped to pay you back for the way you always attempt to overrun my classroom, you snotty little brat.”

“The police?” I asked, grimacing with the dull pain of the gun being pushed harder into my head. I had a feeling we didn’t want Miss Potters to get worked up.

“The police, yes,” she said with a small sigh. “They’ve come in here a couple of times over the years. The last time, when they were looking for that missing historical society member that was nosing around, they got locked in. I heard all about it. They were chased around the mansion until John locked them up in a room. One was tortured in front of the others. They were told not to come back.” She sniffed. “Well, they haven’t, have they? Of course

not. This town knows what breeds between these walls. If they don't mention it, don't speak its name, they think it will leave them alone. But John is forever, and when the time is right, I'll join him and rule by his side."

"She's cracked," Scarlet muttered.

"Shut up!" Miss Potters yelled. Sadly, unlike in the movies, she didn't pull the gun from my head and point it at Scarlet. I could've elbowed her in the face if she had. Or tried my trusty eye gouge. That move had seemed to work on Braiden.

"John...the charming, handsome ghost that roams these parts?" I asked in a calm, even voice. In contrast, my whole body trembled. "You know him?"

"I was chosen." Miss Potters puffed up with pride as she jerked her head for Braiden to take the hall leading to the steps to the basement.

Everything clicked into place and my heart sank.

Miss Potters was going to try and add us to the pile of bones below the house.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

“HERE.” Miss Potters dug into her pocket and held out a flashlight to me. “Turn that on.”

Braiden paused in front of the stairwell and clicked on the lantern.

“Oh.” Miss Potters reached around and grabbed my hand, directing the beam of the flashlight to the lantern. “That’s... Is that mine?”

“Why are you doing this?” I asked.

Braiden gave me a hard look before descending the stairs. Scarlet followed, her shoulders hunched, but I knew she wasn’t defeated. Not really. Anger was plain in her expression.

“Like I said, I was chosen.” Miss Potters pushed me out a little, holding on to my shoulder. I felt the gun press between my shoulder blades. “People like you need to be shown the way to the other side.”

“What other side?” I asked. “Heaven?”

She laughed. “Don’t be absurd. Evil creatures like you can’t go to heaven. You know, back in the day, they would’ve burned you at the stake, or drowned you in the lake. Or cast stones at you, like they did *her*.”

“I thought you said the Old Woman was chosen as the fall guy,” Scarlet said, pausing next to Braiden at the bottom of the stairs.

“See?” The gun jabbed me. “That’s why everyone hates you, you little know-it-all.” She paused, and when we got to the bottom, I could see it was because she was rolling her shoulders. “Braiden, you clearly know the way, thief that you are. That *is* my lantern, isn’t it? I guess it comes naturally to you now, stealing, doesn’t it? So angry on your mother’s behalf...but instead of helping her, you acted out. Thieving, bullying, fights, breaking and entering, and let’s not forget selfishness. Such a shame. Alas, I’ll make it

right.”

His shoulders tensed, and everything I thought I knew about him went out the window.

“Which side did you say you were sending us to?” Scarlet asked.

“To hell, of course. You don’t deserve to go anywhere else,” Miss Potters said in a musical voice. She was enjoying this.

“And here I thought it was somewhere more interesting,” Scarlet muttered.

“What did you say?” Miss Potters demanded.

“Nothing, Miss Potters,” Scarlet said in a practiced way.

“Filthy little...” Miss Potters paused again. “Florence did take the fall for John, make no mistake. She didn’t kill those children. She pulled them out of their houses, but—simple fool that she was—she tried to care for them like her own. It was John who did what had to be done.”

“Which was *not* taking them home and explaining what had happened, I gather?” I asked.

That earned a little shake. “And allow the town to call his wife crazy and sully his good name? No. He took care of the problem.”

“And buried them under the house?”

“How did you—” The gun jabbed me again. “Doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter now. Yes— Wait, no. The first one he took to the swamplands, where he knew no one would ever dig. And no one has. It wasn’t until he caught her visiting the area under the house that he found the perfect place. She was in such a fog by that point that she didn’t know up from down. Every time she brought someone back, he sedated her, took the offering, and did away with it in his special way. A necessary measure to protect the townspeople.”

“To protect the townspeople from what?” Scarlet asked.

“Why, from people like your friends. I was amazed she brought back Alex and Janine, but not you, Ella. You were stronger than them. Stronger than them all.”

“How do you know all this?” Braiden said, stopping by the door.

Miss Potters puffed up with pride. “John tells me everything. He has confided in me like no one before me.”

“That can’t be true,” I said, my need for the truth overcoming any thoughts of strategy—namely, not getting shot. “People must have...worked with him before you.”

“Oh, he has had many disciples, but very few women, and of them, he has

only trusted me with the details of his past. It was a painful time for him, but he was chosen, just as I was chosen. He had to enact the ritual for himself, taking his own life so he could grow his power. He made a great sacrifice so as to live eternal. *We must continue the tradition.*”

“The tradition of stealing kids and killing them to cover it up?” I asked.

“The tradition of stoning innocent women in the streets?” Scarlet asked.

“She wasn’t innocent. She stole those kids, or near enough.” Miss Potters waved the flashlight at Braiden. “Don’t just stand there looking pretty—open the door.”

Braiden looked at the gaping hole, the door still standing open.

She waited as though he were doing her bidding.

“She had a mental illness brought on by losing so many children, especially since her doctor named her the guilty party, and you think she should’ve been stoned?” It took everything I had not to throw an elbow right then. “The woman needed help.”

“Is that right?” Miss Potters said smugly. “Well, what would you say if I told you that *she* can sense people with magic in their blood? Those are the ones she visits. The ones that call to her, and she to them. She brings them back here to witness her inability to produce—her lack of womanhood. What would you say then?”

“That you’re crazy and an asshole,” I blurted.

Scarlet’s mouth dropped open. Braiden smirked. Still we stood at the door, no one making a move to go in.

A silent beat passed.

“You have resisted the longest,” Miss Potters said in a quiet voice. “He thinks there is great strength in you. He has something planned—”

“So I heard,” I said dryly.

“—but you’ll still be second to me.”

“Didn’t you just say you were sending us to hell?” Scarlet asked.

“I don’t think she has all the information,” I muttered.

“What was that?” Miss Potters shook me, more roughly this time.

“Nothing, Miss Potters,” Scarlet said dutifully, looking at her feet.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Miss Potters snapped. “Braiden, open the door!” She swung the gun away from me and toward Braiden.

I seized my opportunity.

My elbow hit her on the breast plate. The breath whooshed out of her lungs, but I wasn’t done yet. I swung around, bringing the other elbow up to

face height. I'd learned the hard way not to use my fist on a face. I smacked her right in the cheek. Spittle flew out of her mouth and her whole body jerked to the side.

The gun went off, blasting a hole in the wall left of Braiden. He launched forward to grab it, but Miss Potters raised it as she staggered, much better with it than I'd given her credit for.

"Get out of the—"

The blast of the gun drowned out my words. This shot barely missed Scarlet, who was already running for the shadows, thankfully away from the secret door.

I didn't waste any time. I scurried around the corner and sprinted for the nearest support post.

"Get back here!" Miss Potters screeched.

"Get help," I heard Braiden yell before another gunshot ripped through the space.

As much as I hated the thought of separating from them, he was right. I ran back toward the steps. Darkness blanketed my vision. Deep shadows pooled everywhere the feeble light from the small and high windows didn't touch.

I felt my way mostly from memory, bumping into a beam and kicking something that rattled. The screeching from deeper in the basement stopped. Miss Potters was listening for me.

Breath harried, hoping the others were hiding or at least moving targets, I kicked the wood of the steps and tripped, falling against the banister. Circling around it in a flash, I pounded my feet against the wood as I ran up. Light danced behind me. Miss Potters was hurrying my way.

Heart racing, at the top of the stairs I slid my palm against the wall and ran, trusting there would be nothing in my path until I reached the crossways. Turning toward the side of the house, I hurried along, the light from the windows in front of me letting me increase my speed.

Nearly there now, I hazarded a glance back to make sure Miss Potters wasn't standing in the hall, aiming her handgun.

Empty. Oh thank heav—

"My, my, where are you going in such a hurry?"

I whipped my head back around.

John stepped into the hallway, as easy and nonchalant as an oil tycoon, with his pristine suit and clean white pocket square. A charming smile lit his

handsome face and his left hand stayed casually in his pants pocket.

I skidded to a halt, unable to help my scream.

Nothing about his presence ignited my senses. I didn't feel any prickles or tingles of the otherworldly, nor even the awareness of a dangerous stranger in my midst. Nothing.

"You are a wily one, I must say." His smile grew. "But this is where it ends. You don't have your protector by your side anymore. It's just you and me, and I have oh so much power left."

I looked around desperately, taking in the darkened walls and the darkened halls behind me. "But nothing else is active. This area of the house is not active."

"Not all of us are tied to this house." He sauntered closer. "Some of us have risen above such trivial entrapments. We can go anywhere, to any house. That's how I met the desperate Miss Potters. Such a shame, the life she lives. Did you know she has five cats? Five. And in such a small house. There is cat hair everywhere. I loathe spending time there. Luckily, she needs very little persuading. She is a sucker for romance, and wouldn't you know, I excel at pleasing ladies."

"Ew. How is that even possible— Never mind, I don't want to know." I backed up a step, knowing that he stood between me and freedom. I was so close. So close.

A gunshot rattled my bones, echoing out from the basement, I knew. Miss Potters had left me to John, and was going after Braiden and Scarlet.

"You can't run, Ella. There is nowhere you can go to escape me. I will be in front of every door. Within every room. I have but to wish it, and I will be there. I am as close to a magical being as there can be. You will succumb to me, just like all the others. You will succumb so that I can complete the ritual and claim your soul. You have so much power in you, Ella. I must harness it. But have no fear: I offer a trade. You will be granted eternal life. In death, you will live forever. You will rule by my side."

"Make that promise to all the ladies, do you? Does no one ask *what* they'd be ruling? Because wandering around a funky old house with a bunch of homicidal ghosts seems like a pretty miserable way to spend eternity." My mind worked furiously, trying to think of a way around this. Should I run back down to the others and hope for power in numbers? Call his bluff and try to get out another way? Or just sprint right at him to see if I could power by?

I thought of my earlier struggle with Braiden. He'd been gentle despite his determination. He hadn't hit me or shown excessive force. I doubted John would afford me the same courtesy. He wouldn't want to, after all. His end game was to kill me.

"I won't stay here," I said, losing more ground to John's slow advance. "I won't stay. I'll cross to the other side and will be forever out of this world. I won't help you."

He laughed. "But you will help me. I've had plenty of practice at snatching souls and keeping them here. It is amazing the things you can do if you really apply yourself. Like ignoring the lure of my dear wife. Not even your boyfriend could withstand her, and yet...here you are."

"You are the reason she died so horribly."

"Yes."

I stammered for something else to say, losing more steps. I was nearly at the hallway I'd emerged from. I needed to make a choice. Had to.

"How could you do it?" I asked through clenched teeth, bending and straightening my knees, trying to work up some courage.

He spread his hands. "The townspeople saw her as a murderer. What could I do? She'd outgrown her usefulness."

"Why did she protect you?" I clenched my hands. I had no choice but to run for it. I would tear through the house and try to get out another way. It was the only viable option. I just had to actually make the move.

"Because she thought it was her fault. She thought everything was her fault. The losses, my grief, her grief—everything." He laughed a little to himself. "It is so easy to control someone. You merely need to find their trigger. Did you know there are drugs that can cause a miscarriage? Drugs that can be hidden in drinks, for example. Doctors who can be bribed. Anyone can be bought, and anyone can be manipulated. I'd thought I would have to hunt in new towns after she was stoned, but no. She stayed and continued to hunt for me. That's when I realized about the special blood..." He touched his finger to his nose. "Strongest in children. My dear wife must've had it, and she seeks it out in others. Through trial and error, and succumbing to the ultimate fate myself, I've been able to harness the magic. The power. To drink from the Fountain of Youth, as it were. I do not age, nor am I restricted by the perils of human flesh. I am invincible. And in you, I will harvest greatness. My power will be mighty."

"You're not invincible, you're dead." My stomach rolled. "You're sick."

His smile was sly. “Doctors would say so, yes. I prefer to think of myself as a soul collector. This house is my shrine.”

“You collect the damaged and disgusting.”

“And the innocent.” He stuck up his finger. “Mustn’t forget the innocent.”

“You’re a ghost, plain and simple. A strong ghost, fine, but a ghost all the same. All ghosts can be banished, one way or the other.”

He laughed, and it was clear he didn’t believe me.

I turned to sprint away.

Hands grabbed me from behind and yanked me back. The blistering cold of his touch soaked into my skin.

“Get off.” I ripped my arm away, but he gripped the other arm he held tighter, pinning me.

I kicked back with my heel as the hand wrapped around my face. It covered my nose and mouth, cutting off my air. Ghostly lips touched the shell of my ear.

“You will be mine for eternity.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

BLACK DOTS SWAM before my eyes. My lungs burned for air. I struggled and twisted, but when he wrapped a hand around my middle, nothing I did helped. He held me fast, draining my energy as my body used up my oxygen.

Tears filled my eyes and my body convulsed, on the edge of asphyxiation. This was it. This was the end. After all the time I'd spent refusing to leave my house, I'd delivered myself into the clutches of a murderer anyway. It just happened to be a different murderer than the one I was expecting.

A tear ran down my cheek, and I was about to think my final farewell when John grunted and his grip suddenly loosened. He grunted again, his hand slipping off my mouth.

I gasped, knocked away from him and to the ground. Impossibly strong arms wrapped around me and I was flung through the air. I hit the wall and slid down to my side, coughing and choking, sucking in huge lungfuls of sweet, blessed air.

"I was such a fool to trust you," someone said in a bell-like voice.

It was her. The younger Old Woman!

She stood in front of me, her feet spread wide apart, holding a baseball bat. Both of their forms glowed just a little, revealing them as the spirits they were.

"It was you the whole time. And to think, I blamed myself." She tapped the bat against her palm. "Now I know. Better late than never."

He hunched a little, like a fighter ready for a charge. "You are no match for me, Florence. You know that. I proved it to you, over and over."

She huffed out a mirthless laugh. "I'm not the same woman I was, John:

weak of the flesh and, by then, the mind. For one, I'm dead. You might've been stronger than me then, but you aren't now."

"Is that a fact?"

"It is. As you know. This is *my* house. I *allow* you to use it for your base, John. I did so out of misery." She tapped the bat against her palm. "No more. You've plagued this town long enough. As have I. This is the end."

A sneer twisted his lips. "This is only the beginning. She will give me new life, I feel it."

"She is not yours."

Their speed was incredible. They ran at each other, clashing like superheroes. The bat swung, cracking him across the face. He flew back and rammed into the wall. No sooner did she swing to finish the job than he ducked and leapt at her, snatching the bat from her hands.

She punched forward with both fists, driving them into his chest. Her lips pulled back into a silent snarl and a war cry tore loose from her throat. She yanked out her hands, pulling black, stringy clumps with them.

Acid rose through my throat and I dry-heaved, but he wasn't done. He swung the bat up before bringing it down on her shoulder. The *crack* elicited another dry heave. She kicked, and I noticed she had on heels right before the spike of one of them dug into the area between his legs.

His howl of pain curled my toes. He swung the bat wildly, bent awkwardly at the waist.

"The memory of pain is still present in you, as is the memory of pleasure," Florence said knowingly. "You try to hold on to this world. You are connected to it. Which means that no, John, you will never truly be free. Once this house is finally given its rest, you will be a listless spirit, wandering from place to place, homeless. It will be a horrible existence, and I am thankful to be the one to give it to you."

He took another crack at her with the bat, but she stopped it with her hands, wrapping her fingers around the wood and ripping it away.

He flung a hand up to protect his head. She swung the bat down, cracking his forearm. And again, getting his shoulder. And again, his head.

I turned away, shuddering and heaving and knowing they were dead and this wasn't actually real and still not able to stand it. A groan rumbled through the house, deep and low. The floor beneath me trembled. Shrieks and howls joined the strange groan, until the unrest died down. The strange surge of emotion that had filled the air finally settled. Morning light filtered

through the windows.

Silence settled down, and a feeling of utter peace rose through me.

I pulled my hands away from my head, not even realizing I'd ducked and covered in the first place. John was gone, leaving the hallway empty but for me, and the woman-not-really-a-woman. The younger Old Woman who had saved me from a truly horrible fate. Florence.

Her expression was sad and a single tear sparkled as it ran down her smooth cheek. "Thank you," she said, and I felt her emotions radiating. The sudden calm, gratitude, and overwhelming peace that now overwhelmed me. "Thank you. You have put me at rest."

And with that, her form blinked before fading into the lightening hall around her.

A moment passed. Then another. All I could do was stare at the spot where the woman had stood. Warmth blanketed me, a strange mixture of joy and relief.

"Ella?" I heard someone call. It was the first time I was happy to hear this particular voice. "Ella!"

Dirk limped toward me, a bad gash in his thigh oozing blood down the side of his leg. Behind him lumbered Mr. Morris, his face screwed up with worry. Three men in blue trailed behind him.

Help had finally arrived.

"Miss Potters. It's Miss Potters! She's been killing the kids!" I pointed in the direction of the hallway. "She's armed. Braiden and Scarlet are trapped down there with her."

"We know, Ella." Mr. Morris knelt by me as the police ran down the hall, all of them armed. "Dirk saw her shoot Leo and take Scarlet. He ran out the back to get help and found me. I called the cops from my car phone. I'm sorry—I would've been here sooner, but the police wanted us to wait for them before we went in."

"You were at the back?" I asked, not sure who to trust anymore.

Sorrow made deep lines in his face. "That's where I broke in when I was a kid. My best friend and I. We had no idea what this house was capable of. There were so many stories...we wanted to see for ourselves." He helped me stand and waited for me to check myself over. Many sensitive areas, but nothing broken. "We got separated, and he never made it back out. They found his body, mangled and twisted. No human could've done that. The things I saw...that I ran from..." He shook his head. "I apologize for being so

hard on you in school. But this house is better left forgotten.”

He must’ve been allowed in when the Old Woman had finished confessing her sins. She’d shut the paranormal in the old house down. Except for John. What he had said must’ve been true—he’d harnessed enough power to stay separate from the house. He wouldn’t be allowed to use it as a base, but that apparently didn’t mean he’d vanish from the world of the living.

Just so long as he vanished from the town—and given the house’s influence on our community, I was betting he would—it would have to be somebody else’s problem.

“I’d never heard about that,” I said in disbelief. Seemed like it should’ve been common knowledge, especially given the principal’s anti-ghost-story rule.

“People don’t talk about what goes on in this house. It’s better that way. Safer. Just ignore it, and it will ignore you.”

“It didn’t ignore me,” I muttered, but he didn’t seem to hear me.

“You knew it was Miss Potters,” I said, thinking back to how he’d kept Scarlet and me in his office.

He shook his head and walked Dirk and me to a spot near the windows to wait for the police to do their work. I stared down the hall, torn between my desperation to help my friends and the knowledge that it was a terrible idea to get in the way with all the armed people down there.

“I thought something was fishy with her...” Mr. Morris said, watching the hall—one hand on my shoulder, and one on Dirk’s. “Something was off. She was erratic at times, and it struck me that she always paid special attention to any child who was rumored to have seen the Old Woman. In the last few years, she has paid even more attention to you. It didn’t seem healthy. Now, granted”—he shifted uncomfortably—“I didn’t think it was anything like this—”

Shouts echoed out of the basement. Gunfire made me jump, followed by more shots. A woman screamed, someone yelled, and another gun went off.

“I thought she had a fascination with ghost stories...maybe even cold cases,” he said into the sudden silence, his voice thick and trembling. “That was all. That was plenty, but I had no idea... Or I wouldn’t have employed...”

Two figures emerged from the hallway, sandwiching a police officer. A relieved gush of breath left my mouth. Braiden and Scarlet. Alive!

I ran at them, my arms held out. They met me halfway, crashing into me

and wrapping me in their arms as I hugged them. We sank to the ground, clinging to each other and crying. Someone called Dirk over, and he joined the huddle. No one needed to talk, because we all felt the same way—thankful to be alive and hopeful more would be found alive with us.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

“ELLA, GET THE DOOR!” my mother shouted from upstairs before the knocking even stopped.

Butterflies swarmed in my stomach as I hurried to put my bowl in the sink. My father looked up from the fridge, narrowing his eyes at me. “Is it that *boy* again?”

It had been one week since we’d been rescued from McKinley Mansion, and Braiden had stopped by every single day to check on me. Today would be our first day back at school. So many emotions were running through me I could scarcely think.

“The Corvette was taken away, remember? We’re going to take the bus together,” I said, then patted him on the back and hurried to the door.

“I don’t like him,” my dad called after me. “He is bad news. Got in a lot of trouble back in New York. You don’t need that sort...” As usual, his complaints evolved into muttering.

I was pretty sure he only brought that stuff up because he felt it was his duty as my dad, but he knew that if it weren’t for Braiden, I probably wouldn’t have made it out of the mansion alive. Even succumbing to Florence had been the right move, given the alternative.

Scarlet, too, had been integral to my survival. As was evidenced by her ability to stay unscathed after we’d separated. She’d known enough about the layout from theory and her minimal amount of research to keep moving, always staying ahead of the areas of the house that came alive. She’d had some narrow misses, and she hadn’t wanted to talk about anything ghost-related since, but she’d made it out alive.

Of the original crew, except for Braiden, only Dirk was able to walk out

of there. He didn't have the layout of the house down—he had plain old athletic ability and stamina. His strategy, according to him, had been to run and hide, run and hide, always just ahead of anything that came at him. Several times he'd thought the jig was up, but he'd managed to get help and save the day.

All of that could've been a lie, of course. Knowing him, he'd probably shadowed someone else at all times, staying just ahead of *them* when the ghosts came. I'd seen him duck out of the way when the Grinning Man went for Emily's neck, after all. Dirk hadn't been interested in helping—he'd been interested in saving himself.

Emily hadn't made it out. Neither had her friends, except for Buffy, who was in the hospital in a coma with head trauma. Of the guys, DJ had been found alive...barely. He was in ICU for five days, but he was slowly recovering. With a broken back, he might never be able to walk again. Odis hadn't made it, either. He'd already been slowed down because of his arm, and hadn't been able to stay ahead of the danger.

I heaved a hard exhale as tears rose. It would be a long time before I could think on all that happened without my emotions getting the better of me. The experience had been horrific, and the horrible loss of life soul crushing.

Probably because there'd been survivors this time...not to mention the collection of bodies in the basement, the incident had garnered interest from the media and over a dozen paranormal groups. No one could believe that that sort of damage could be inflicted by the non-living. And because of that, no one *did* believe it. National news was calling for an investigation. Miss Potters, who hadn't survived the shootout, was being painted as a mastermind. Her accomplices were being sought out. A full-scale investigation would be launched.

But they wouldn't find the true mastermind behind the years of deaths in the town. Just like Florence had said, he'd lost his home. He'd been evacuated from the town. I couldn't be sure, of course, because there was no way I was going into that house again, but the feel of our neighborhood was different. The deep-rooted malice emanating from the house was gone. It still didn't feel right, and I had every reason to believe there were still spirits living among us—just as there were everywhere—but the man who'd spent so many years summoning those spirits, capturing them, had finally been evicted, and with him, the supernatural power that had kept them strongly

rooted to our world.

I also believed I'd never see Florence again. The Old Woman would no longer plague the streets of Larkin. She'd finally found her peace and could move on. I was happy for that. If the town would freaking believe me for once, they would be, too.

Bones were still being pulled out and put together so they could have proper burials for all the bodies in the basement. It would be a while before the area was completely excavated, but at least the families that were still alive would get some closure. They would finally have a proper burial for Janine and Alex, but more importantly, people would finally know the truth.

I pulled the door open to find Braiden. His backpack hung off one shoulder, his sport coat was buttoned over a V-neck, and his face was as hot as any Hollywood star. His blue eyes glittered as he beheld me.

"Hey," he said with a lopsided smile. "You ready?"

I turned back to the house. "Bye, Mom. Bye, Dad."

"Come home right after school," my mother called down.

"Alone," my dad shouted after her.

I rolled my eyes and stepped out of the door.

"How am I ever going to win that guy over?" Braiden asked, his gaze lingering on the newly closed door.

"Stop breaking and entering, for one."

"That was, like...one *week* ago." He slipped his hand into mine. "Listen, I've done some thinking, and...I feel like I should be completely honest with you. I need to make a confession."

"You *did* eat the last of the M&M's last night, didn't you?" I softly slugged him with my free hand. "I *knew* it."

"No, I wasn't talking about that." He laughed as we turned onto the sidewalk. "I mean, that did happen, but that isn't what I wanted to say."

I bumped into him with my shoulder. "That was low. I was saving those."

"My parents did move here because of me, but not solely because of me."

My humor drained away as I listened.

He scratched his nose. "The rumors are true. I did get into a lot of trouble. I'm guilty of most of the things people have said. But...Miss Potters wasn't totally wrong about me. My mom has severe anxiety and depression. It started after she had me, but the doctors thought they had a handle on it through medication. But then my grandmother died, and we realized Grandma was the one who'd had a handle on it. She had been helping my

mother, supporting her, more than anyone had realized. My dad isn't much of a...family man. He prides himself on his job and achievements, not in being a father and husband, and I was too young to know what to do. Everything snowballed. When I was fourteen, I came home after football practice and found her..." He swallowed as we neared Dirk's house, on the other side of the street. Dirk was just coming out, his red hair catching the light and making his head look like it spurted flames. "She'd taken a bunch of pills. She was lying in a puddle of her own vomit, unconscious. I was the one that had to get her to the hospital and sit with her. That had to hold her hand, terrified she would die. I didn't have any help. Anyone to turn to. I felt helpless and terrified." He squeezed my hand a little tighter. "That's embarrassing to say."

"It shouldn't be. I don't know if I could've done it."

He took a deep breath. "My dad hired a caregiver, and things improved for my mother, but I couldn't get the image of her lying there out of my head. I couldn't stop worrying it would happen again. And maybe this time...I wouldn't be able to save her."

I wrapped my other hand around his arm and pushed in close. "That must've been awful for you."

"I went off the rails. Got into trouble, let my grades slip, ran away a few times—I couldn't cope. My dad tried to discipline me, but it didn't work. My teachers tried to punish me, but I didn't care. Finally, my mother sat me down. We had a long talk about things—about where she was right then, where I was, and where both of our futures were headed. That was when I realized how off-track I had gotten. How crazy. I didn't want that life, and neither did she. What we needed was a fresh start. A quieter place, a small-town vibe, but close to a city to ensure she could still get the help she needed. And, of course, an office nearby for my father, who did not love the idea. Larkin was on the list of prospectives. I chose it. I don't know why, other than—"

"Lunacy?" I asked.

He smiled as we stopped on the corner before crossing the street to the bus stop. "Fate." He tilted my head up with his fingertips and kissed me softly. "Destiny."

He draped his arm around me and turned to cross the street, where Dirk was waiting. Apparently he'd be taking the bus with us. Lovely.

"Why did you tell me all that?" I asked as we passed Dirk. Dirk filed in

after us, heading to the front of the waiting crowd, all staring at Braiden and I with solemn expressions. Apparently, a *lot* more people would be taking the bus now.

“Because...” Braiden turned to face me, holding my hands in his. His eyes delved into mine, his expression suddenly nervous. “I wanted to know if you’d be my girlfriend?”

Carla gasped and shushed the people talking next to her. “This is *epic!*”

I glanced at all the people riveted to our discussion, and at Dirk with a sullen glower. “Kind of putting me on the spot, here...”

A sly grin curled his lips. “I know. There is a purpose for it. Trust me.”

I was transported to a darkened hallway above a descending set of stairs. Danger lurked all around us. *Trust me.*

I always would.

“Of course I’ll be your girlfriend,” I said breathlessly.

He kissed me again, in front of all those people. A couple cheered (Carla being one of them), but most weren’t interested in relationship issues. I could tell by their haunted eyes and rapt attention that they were interested in the story. In our experiences in McKinley Mansion.

It would be a long time before I would relive it.

When the bus arrived, Braiden blocked everyone so I was the first on, and then he sat beside me, in the front row.

“I liked it better when everyone sat at the back,” said Maggie, the grumpy bus driver.

Flowers and reporters adorned the school. Many students had their heads down, feeling the loss of so many people. Probably afraid that they’d been living next to that danger for so long without realizing it.

I met Scarlet in the usual place, trailed by what was left of the popular group.

“Odis would’ve loved this,” Scarlet said sadly as we made our way up the steps. “All the cool kids and the fanfare.” She shook her head and sniffed. “I didn’t like him much, but I miss him a little.”

My stomach clenched and fresh tears sprang to my eyes. I nodded mutely, and Braiden squeezed my hand.

Mr. Morris stood in the entryway of the school, watching everyone with hard eyes. The scowl he gave us told me we were back to business as usual, but he didn’t holler at us to get moving today. Instead, he hollered at all the students stopping in their tracks and staring at us with wide eyes.

“Fella!” Nate shoved two pale-faced students out of the way to reach me, then bumped Braiden out of the way. He wrapped me in a tight hug. “I still don’t forgive you, but it is good to see you.” He threw up a hand for Braiden. “Dumb hero.” Braiden grinned and high-fived him. “Cowardly hero.” Dirk did *not* grin or high-five. “Smart coward.” Bobby’s sullen face didn’t change, but he did meet the high five.

Bobby had been called a coward for running away by a few people, and intelligent by many others. The fact that he hadn’t told anyone what we were doing got him in trouble with the police. Something that didn’t stick for any sort of incarceration. His popular status was untarnished.

Nate had shown up at my house two days after the fact and given me a stern talking-to about my decision to go into the mansion. In his words, he’d thought I was smarter than that. If anyone should have known not to go in, it was me. But after he’d insisted we hug it out, he lightened up, and ate his way through our house.

My father didn’t like him, either.

YEARS LATER, it turned out I had been right. The Old Woman never did walk the streets again. But while she might’ve been gone to her eternal resting place, it didn’t seem as if John intended to settle down, even if he could.

Within the paranormal community, reports of a disturbing presence popped up often, always with the same characteristics: serial killers speaking about a man coming to them in dreams or in reality, always sharing John’s dapper description, promising them vast rewards, or telling them they had been chosen for some special destiny. Houses taken over and turned into violent places. Mysterious deaths. Women speaking in hushed tones about nightly visitors.

Every time, my advice was asked on the subject. And though I’d turned into a sort of paranormal investigator, my reputation always preceding me, I never could get wind of John. When I showed up to investigate the ghostly charmer, the presence would vanish, only to pop up later in a different part of the world.

John seemed to be avoiding me, and while I had no idea why, I was thankful for it. Ghost hunting aside, after my entire family and Braiden’s moved away from Larkin, I was happy to not see that mansion, or that determined poltergeist, ever again.

THIS BOOK WAS GIVEN to newsletter subscribers for FREE! It's just one of the perks of being in the know :)

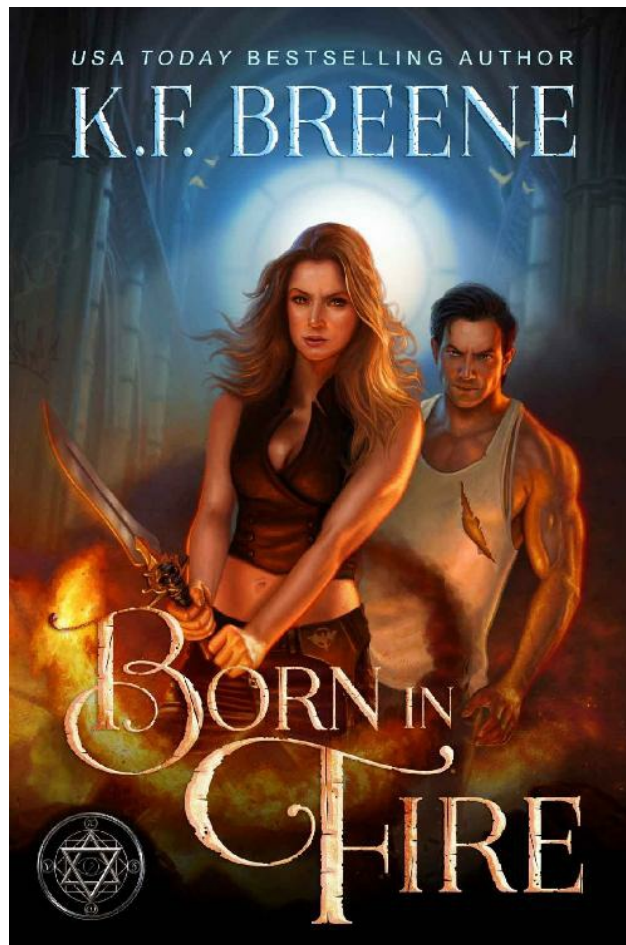


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Supernatural Bounty Hunter isn't the sort of thing you see on LinkedIn. But with a rare type of magic like mine, I don't have many options.

So dangerous or not, the job is mine. And it was going fine, until an old as sin vampire stole my mark, and with it, my pay day.

Knowing I'm poor and desperate, he has offered me a job. I'll have to work by his side to help solve a top secret case.

Everyone knows not to trust vampires. Especially a hot elder vampire. But without any other jobs coming up, I'm stuck. As I uncover a web of lies and treachery, revealing an enemy I didn't know existed, the truth of my identity is threatened. I might make it out alive, only to end up in a gilded cage.

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TRY: CHOSEN

Want more K.F. Breene? Try *Chosen* - the first book in the epic fantasy Warrior Chronicles series.



Runner up in the SpaSpa Book Awards for Action and Adventure!

It is said that when war threatens the world, one individual will be selected by prophecy to lead the Shadow Warriors out of the Land of Mist and reclaim the freedom which has been stolen.

Shanti has grown up under the constant threat of war. Since she helped her people defeat a raiding party by using a special power, she's been a hunted woman. Carrying rare abilities and an uncanny fighting aptitude, Shanti is the only hope of salvation for her people. The problem is, she doesn't believe in her own divinity, and when she flounders, she nearly fails in the duty hanging so heavy on her shoulders.

It seems like any other day when Sanders and his band of misfit boys find a foreign woman clinging to life in the wastelands. Oblivious to the weapon they now have in their possession, they are content to harbor the mysterious woman until she is well enough to continue her journey.

But when the war spreads its arms and lands on her borrowed doorstep, Shanti has no choice but to reveal her secrets, plunging her saviors into danger. If they band with her, they will face certain death. But to trade her to Xandre, the warlord desperate to add her to his war machine, would be to give up their entire way of life.

Chapter 1

"What is it?" Gracas asked. He stared down at an oddly shaped bundle. Despite the rule against it, he stood with his hands in his pockets.

"A girl, I think," Leilius commented slowly.

Both boys stood frowning down at the twiggy, brown-splotched limbs slumped against the burnt trunk. It almost looked like a skeleton had been held next to the tree on a string, and then released, falling in a cascade of bones to form a pile at the base. The frayed, dirt crusted sheet covering the pile of probably dead human needed to be incinerated to rid it of the obvious bacterial infestation.

"Kick it," Gracas whispered. A boy just budding into manhood, Gracas was still fascinated by slugs and bugs and, apparently, slightly alien dead

things.

“I’m not going to kick it! What if it is a girl? The last time I kicked a girl my dad slapped me across the room then made me do hard labor for a week. And she deserved it!” Leilius was only a year older than Gracas, but he was one step higher in the chain of command. It was a small step, but it was large enough for his chest to puff up with importance.

“It could be a Mugdock girl,” Gracas spat. “They’d be the type to just dump one of their women.”

“The skin’s too light to be Mugdock.”

“It looks brown to me.”

“That’s dirt, I think.”

“Kick it,” Gracas prodded again, leaning over to get a proper glance into the bundle of probable human and possible female.

“What if it *smooshes*? Commodore Sanders just had me shine my shoes. *You* kick it.”

Sanders stopped in mid-stride as he noticed the two cadets staring at the ground a ways away from camp. Biting back a swear, he changed course. “What’s going on?”

The boys jumped and flinched at the same time.

“N-nothing, sir,” Gracas stuttered, peeling away to the side.

Leilius, losing the arch in his back, hurriedly backed up next to Gracas. Apparently not quite sure where to look, but not wanting to meet Sanders’ glare, he turned his face to the sky. “We’ve found an unidentified object, sir.” He followed his words with a vaguely pointed finger.

Sanders glanced at the base of a dead tree, found a pile of clothes not fit for a beggar, and turned back to the two nitwits. It was then the image of a pale leg filtered through his red hazed thoughts.

His gaze snapped back to the tree as his eyebrows drooped. *It was a girl!*

In a rush of movement, he threw out a hand to balance against the destroyed tree. With his other hand he flicked away a piece of fabric, revealing a mat of light hair coated in grime. He felt along a fragile neck until he reached the base. There, weakly pushing at his fingers, was a pulse.

“Gracas, tell Marc to meet us at camp! Make sure he gets his doctoring kit. Leilius, fetch water.”

The boys barely waited for the whip crack of commands to end before scurrying away. Commander Sanders scooped up the girl.

There couldn't have been a worse scouting party to find her. Except for him, currently doing penance for tardiness, all five boys were in training, and showing no progress. They were the five worst cadets in the entire training camp, and if it weren't for the Captain's leniency in punishment, the boys would have been apprenticed out a long time ago. They needed to find something they were good at, because soldiering wasn't in their future. Or doctoring, as in Marc's case.

Back at camp, Sanders gently lowered the long waif in front of Marc. The young idiot at least had the sense to lay out a blanket.

Marc kneeled beside the girl slowly, his hands resting on his knees. With wide eyes he asked, "Is she dead?"

"You're the doctor, *moron!*" Rachie, another trainee, shouted. The rest of the boys smirked, shifting closer to get a look at the girl.

"*Silence!*" Sanders barked. His glare backed the boys away.

It also made Marc flinch back.

Sanders pulled his irritation back in and hatched it down. He didn't need anybody pissing themselves, and this girl was in a bad way. He adopted the high, quiet voice he used with his two-year-old niece. "She has a faint pulse. Don't you remember anything of your training about faint pulses?"

Marc gulped and stared down at the girl. He shook his head.

A vein began to thrum along Sanders' neck. His manic smile did not hold any humor. What it did hold, however, was the promise of agonizing pain.

The boys all took another step back.

"Think, Marc," Sanders tried. His voice sounded like a knife sliding across a whetstone. "Check for wounds."

Marc raised his hand to shade his face from Sanders' glower. The other hand hovered over the girl's torso, shaking, afraid to touch her frail skin.

Sanders' clenched his fists and took a steadying breath. Marc was barely on the man side of puberty, still a virgin, and had never seen anyone hurt with more than a broken arm. A half dead woman was out of his league. The kid tested way above anyone else in his class, and his teachers said he knew all the information backwards and forward. But he refused to apply his knowledge in real life, retreating into his own introverted world.

If ever there was a time to rectify that little problem, it was now.

Sanders smiled again. Marc's gulp echoed.

Sanders bent, looking over the still body. Her chest barely rose with each breath. She was covered in dirt from head to toe, but he didn't notice any

blood. No obvious injuries, either.

Leilius scuffled up with a bucket of water. Considering his effort, one would think he carried the bottom half of a cow. “I got the water here, Chief.”

“It’s *Commander*,” Sanders enunciated as he took over the bucket with one hand. “Rag?”

Gracas scurried up with a blue cloth. It looked like a piece of someone’s uniform. Judging by his sleeveless arm, it was his.

With quick movements, Sanders started to gently wash the dirt from the frail limbs. As the sludge rolled away, he noticed her skin color, pale where it wasn’t red. A foreigner. A distant foreigner at that. She looked about mid-twenties, if he was any judge.

He continued with his treatment, washing everything in sight, and emptied half the bucket over her filthy head. Other than a few scratches, however, she was devoid of visible injuries or bruising. And he couldn’t help but notice she had more muscle development than was normal for a female.

“Help me remove her clothing,” Sanders said as he lifted the bottom of her cover.

Marc’s face turned bright red. “Are you sure?”

Through clenched teeth, Sanders answered, “If you don’t start following orders, I am going to finish with her, and then beat you senseless. You get me? Now, help-me-remove-her-dress.”

Marc reached for the filthy garment with shaking hands, gingerly lifting it past her groin. The girl was bare underneath, and Marc strangled a petrified groan as everyone else gasped.

“Evacuate!” Sanders barked, clearing the space in seconds.

They’d all been on the receiving end of Sanders’ displeasure once or twice, and while looking at a naked girl was high on the list of *very important things to see*, he was pretty sure it ranked low on the list of *ways not to get noticed*. As well it should. Sanders would not hesitate to punch out a few more bruises.

As Marc worked off the rest of the fabric, Sanders continued cleaning, not finding anything of note. That was, until they got to the torso. Her skin sunk between each rib. Starved.

“She needs food and water. Nutrients,” Sanders whispered, covering her as a list of needs raced through his head. “Get a clean rag and dribble water into her mouth. If she wakes and starts to drink, give her no more than a dribble.”

Marc let out a noisy exhale of relief as the nipples disappeared, releasing him from paralysis. And while he nodded, he didn't move.

Fire danced in Sanders' eyes. The smile was back. "Then why aren't you moving, Cadet?"

Marc made a sound like, "Huuuuuhhhhhhhrrrrn," as unshaped words escaped numb, petrified lips. A second later he took off running like his heels were on fire.

In quicker time than ever before, owing to somewhat harsher treatment by Sanders, the boys had the camp packed up and ready to go. They didn't have anything to use as a stretcher since that numbskull Gracas had used it to start a fire their first night, and Sanders didn't want to make a travois and leave heavy tracks, so the largest of the boys and Sanders took turns carrying the girl. They would hike for a day and a half, but while she was a tall girl, she weighed next to nothing. The hardest part for whichever boy was carrying her was focusing on walking rather than the female in his arms.

Unfortunately, that wasn't so easy for a bunch of budding men holding something with breasts. Distraction was inevitable.

Throughout the day, Marc kept dribbling water into her mouth. He made sure to wet her head and neck, keep the sun off her face, and continue with the water, slowly, methodically. Sanders, eyes always moving, constantly surveying their surroundings, made sure to never keep his gaze on the doctor-in-training long. If the kid thought no one was looking, he seemed to settle into his ministrations. He displayed empathy for the unconscious girl instead of the need to seek approval. He made his own decisions regarding what nurtures were needed when, and how much liquid she could take at any given time. And he was doing it with confidence.

The one time Sanders commented on a job well done, the whole thing went to shit. The kid went back to useless immediately; stumbling, apologizing, and whining; seeking approval for everything; not making a decision on his own. It took three hours of being ignored for him to settle back into his rhythm. Sanders took the hint.

By dinnertime the band of boys were sullen and quiet, constantly shooting glances Sanders' way. This was Rachie's fault.

Under Marc's diligent care, the girl had taken three gulps of water just before they stopped and then let out a long, pain induced moan. Rachie, who was carrying her at the time, had shouted, "Oh shit, she's alive!"

The idiot had thrown his hands out to the sides as if she was a poisonous

spider. Her body spilled across the ground, bringing forth another moan from her and a string of curses from Marc.

Rachie had been the first to learn that Commander Sanders, though one of the shortest men in the Soldier Force, was strong enough to get him airborne. Rachie also learned that being hurled head first into a dead tree hurt quite a lot. At least, that's what Sanders' took from the groan.

After the setback, Marc was able to get her to take a few more successful gulps. Then, after a lot of moaning and eye fluttering, he began giving her broth. He had turned more nursemaid than doctor, but he was obtaining results, so Sanders said nothing. After a few pointed glares, each with a hovering threat of violence, no one else did, either.

Later that night Sanders sat in the camp, looking out at the night. A silver moon glowed high overhead, faintly illuminating the burnt and twisted land. A couple hours ago Rachie had woken him for his shift, complaining that something felt weird. When asked to elaborate, the youth couldn't do it, just shrugged and scratched his shoulder, looking out at the night.

At the time, Sanders hadn't thought any more about it. These boys wouldn't know danger if it popped up in front of them wearing a sign. But as he sat, taking the deepest part of the night for guard-duty, the heavy feeling of dread had slowly settled on his shoulders. It pressed down, squeezing his chest and making his small hairs stand up.

Something was out there. Something was wrong.

One by one the boys started to toss and turn in their sleep. Even the girl, sleeping soundly for most of their journey, was writhing, moaning and whimpering in her sleep.

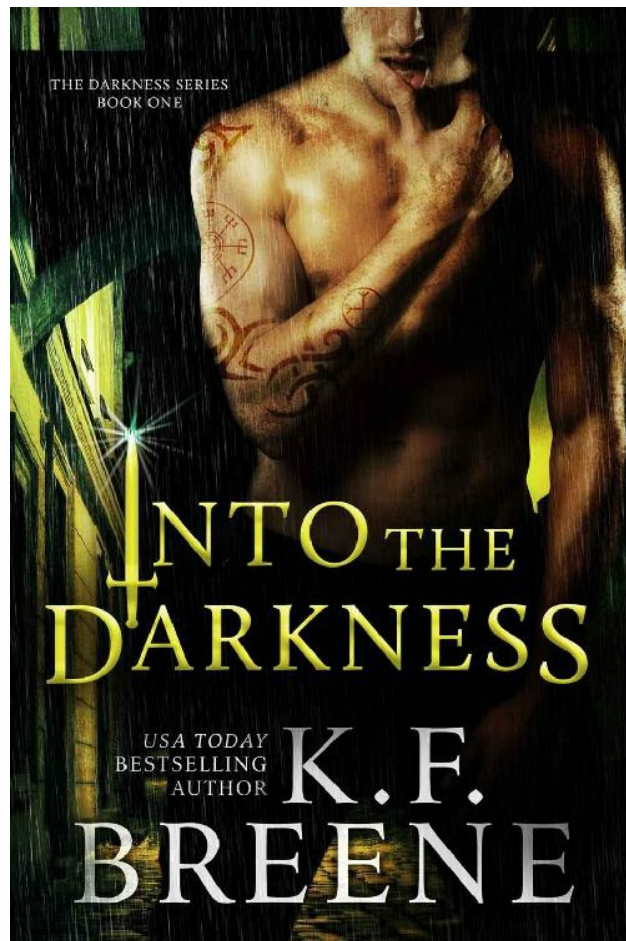
Yes, something was there. Danger lurked.

Sanders turned his knife over in his fingers. His sword lay in front of him on his sleeping bag, the hilt within easy grasp. Whatever it was, it wouldn't be alive for long.

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TRY: INTO THE DARKNESS

Want more K.F. Breene? Try *Into the Darkness* - the first book in the (very!) steamy paranormal romance Darkness Series:



18+ for strong language, sexual situations, and darker themes.

The First Book in the USA Today Bestselling Series

Sasha has been different her whole life. She sees things in the shadows that no one else can see. But it isn't until a mishap on the wrong side of town that she meets him.

The Boss.

A powerful, primal being that enforces his own set of rules. Scorching hot and wickedly deadly, he takes what he wants. And he wants her.

As a new world unfolds around her, Sasha discovers that not all secrets stick to the shadows. The Boss has brought out a magic in her that is centuries lost, and greatly needed.

Her struggle isn't just to stay alive. It's also against her desire to flirt with danger.

Chapter 1

“Sasha? What is it?”

My face slipped off my palm and jerked my shoulders toward the table. Blinking away the daydream, I tore my eyes away from the balmy day peeking out of the window. My boyfriend, Jared, stared at me out of a cute, boyish face, his eyebrows quirked quizzically.

“Not a thing,” I answered with an easy smile. “Where we headed tonight?”

He crinkled his nose. “You’ve been daydreaming all day. Was it that imaginary guy from yesterday? The invisible male model strolling down the street?” He laughed at the absurdity of what he’d said.

I threw a wadded up napkin at him with a smile. “Be quiet, you. You go spreading that story around and everyone’ll think I’m crazy.”

“Nah. They already know it.” He sipped his coffee, his brown eyes sparkling above the rim of his cup.

“Actually, smart guy, I was thinking about that test.” I rolled my eyes. “I hate tests. Why don’t they just trust me that I don’t know the material and give me a passing grade anyway? It would be so much easier on everyone.”

Jared laughed and leaned back in his chair. “You want help?”

“Argh!”

“What are you, a pirate?”

I smirked and sipped my coffee. “I guess. I’m certainly not going to pass it without you.”

He shook his head and laughed. “You need to have some faith in yourself.”

“That’s your job. I stick to reality.”

He shook his head and got up to pay the check. My thoughts immediately went right back to the enigma. That man.

He’d been gliding down the street, movements lithe and graceful, unshakable confidence in every step. His powerfully muscular body belied an age ten years older than his youthful looking mid-twenties. My eyes stuck to him like a butterfly’s wings in honey. Something about him drew me. Pulled my attention and then tugged at my body.

It wasn’t just that he was breathtakingly handsome with perfect features. Which he was. But there was something else, too. A deadly grace—like a dancer—etched his every movement. His muscles moved in perfect harmony, a chorus of power and might. Dominating. Oh-so-god-damned-sexy.

As he neared, he drew me like a magnet. I could feel my body responding, wanting to go to him. Wanting to take those three short steps and touch his body. Smile up at him. Anything to get his attention; to get his praise.

Eyes the color of sparkling onyx had swung my way, feeling the weight of my stare and answering. I devoured the challenge in his eyes. Answered it with a yearning that consumed my entire being in a way I’d never felt before. A way I’d never even heard someone could feel. Like a deep ache burning in the pit of my stomach and spilling over every inch of my frame, I tingled with the need for him. I pounded with it, the beat of my heart throbbing in a few choice parts of my body.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K.F. Breene is a USA TODAY BESTSELLING author of the Fire and Ice Trilogy, Darkness Series, and Warrior Chronicles. She lives in wine country where over every rolling hill, or behind every cow, an evil sorcerer might be plotting his next villainous deed while holding a bottle of wine and brick of cheese. Her husband thinks she's cracked for wandering around, muttering about magic and swords. Her kids are on board with her fantastical imagination, except when the description of the monsters becomes too real.

She'll wait until they're older to tell them that monsters are real, and so is the magic to fight them. She wants them to sleep through the night, after all...

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