

# I CALL UPON THEE

A NOVELLA



**ANIA  
AHLBORN**

BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
OF *BROTHER AND  
WITHIN THESE WALLS*

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# I CALL UPON THEE

*A Novella*

Ania Ahlborn



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To the ghosts that haunt us.

# ONE

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WHAT THE HELL was that?!” Dillon bolted upright, his hair a perfect Albert Einstein emulation. She could practically hear his heartbeat thudding straight out of his chest.

Maggie peeked an eye open despite herself. Personally, she wasn’t concerned about the oncoming storm. Having grown up on the Georgia coast, she’d lived through dozens of tropical depressions far worse than this. But Dillon was a different story. A Maine transplant, he was unshakeable when it came to blustering nor’easters. But toss him into the path of a potential hurricane, and the man lost his ever-loving mind.

The sheets were pooled around Dillon’s waist, mimicking the way rainwater was inevitably doing so just beyond Maggie’s front doorstep. There was a divot in the brick walkway, a perfect spot for a miniature lake to form every time it rained. And it was pouring now—diagonal sheets that pounded against the windows like a madman trying to break in. It streaked silver across the light that filtered in through the bedroom window. There was a gas street lamp not more than a few steps from the door, forever casting the apartment in a warm amber glow.

Dillon—bare-chested and undeniably scrawny—scrambled to retrieve his glasses from atop a knee-height stack of Maggie’s magazines: *Popular Mechanics*, *Popular Science*, and *Discover* among the majority, though half of them had yet to be read. The maelstrom continued to beat against glass,

plaster, and wood, determined to rouse them both. But Maggie refused to be rattled. No, she wouldn't move. After all, it was just going to get worse.

A peal of thunder led to a bang against the outside of the building, like God had plucked a giant bird from the sky and tossed it against the exterior wall.

"Maggie!" Her name escaped Dillon in a near squeal. A death grip seized her arm.

Another bang. Perhaps another unfortunate bird. Or Atlas throwing small boulders against the building's bricks.

"Christ, what *is* that?!" Dillon was ready to jump out of his skin. He was the polar opposite of the ultramasculine beefcakes who traipsed around campus—biceps flexed, strutting across the concourse in pastel polo shirts and board shorts—but he was still a guy. Maggie didn't want to bruise his ego. And so, rather than lying there and laughing as her boyfriend squirmed against the rumble of thunder, she rolled toward the edge of the bed.

"Relax," she said, extended an arm, and snapped on the bedside lamp.

"I know you say it's no big deal . . ." He was stammering; he always did this when he was scared. "But it sounds like, like . . ."

*Bang.*

"Fuck! *What is that?!?*"

"Probably a killer." Maggie sat up, her feet hitting the nondescript raglan rug she'd bought at Target when she moved into the place. When she stood, Dillon's expletives were immediately silenced. She could feel his eyes following her across the bedroom, his gaze roving along the curve of her backside as she adjusted her boy-short-style underwear.

"Or maybe just a broken shutter." Turning to the window, she unlatched the pane and opened it wide despite the wind and sideways rain, then

yanked the damaged storm shutter inward. She'd complained about that broken latch to the super at least a half dozen times, but the mountain of a Croatian man couldn't have cared less. *You want feex, you feex.* Surely *his* storm shutters at home were fine. If the little American girl got slashed to ribbons by exploding glass thanks to a hurricane, this apartment complex was hot property, especially with those pretty gas lamps and the UNC campus a mere ten minutes away. Her place would be rented out by another student in five seconds flat, probably by one of those pastel 'roided-out dudes with perfect hair and way too many abs. Arms the circumference of her thighs. CrossFit every day after class. Cheat days spent at Momma's table, filling up on barbeque shrimp and stone-ground grits.

"Y-you should get that fixed," Dillon stammered.

She turned away from the window, her rear brushing against the sill, and rolled her neck—a habit born of chronic pain that had abated years before, thank God. During her last semester of high school, she was handed an official diagnosis: fibromyalgia. Pain meds had done little, probably because of the stress at home. It was only after she left Savannah that she'd started feeling normal again.

"Yeah, I should," she said. But Croatia. Apparently, there was some sort of language barrier. *Feex.* Whatever. It wasn't worth the hassle. She let her hand fall from her neck and cast a glance Dillon's way. He was staring, and he *was* scrawny. The first movie they'd watched together was *Particle Fever*, about the origins of matter. He only ever indulged in three shows: *Cosmos*, of which he was currently on his eighth viewing cycle; *Dexter*—sometimes Dillon would do the monotone soliloquy thing, which she found both odd and sexy; and *Bob's Burgers*, which he quoted on an unconscious loop. Annoying, but endearing. Nerdy, but hilarious. He kept her grounded,



stopped her from losing herself inside her own head, especially when that nagging guilt hit her hard. Because Dillon knew about Maggie's parents, and she assumed that was why he belted out made-up show tunes on her worst days. He even bought a tiny domed barbeque grill for her miniature patio so that he could make burgers and dogs when their research papers got to be too much. He was, as her mother would have put it, *a fixer*. (*You feex*, ha-ha.) And yet, Maggie was still surprised he'd stuck around as long as he had.

She moved back to the bed. That shutter would loosen itself again before sunrise, sooner if the wind kept up, but it currently held its place. Dillon was still staring, because Maggie's tank top was lying crumpled on the floor on his side of the bed. He had tossed it aside a few hours ago, during one of their romps. He'd been talking like Dexter again. Sometimes, she couldn't resist.

"Better?" she asked once she reached the mattress.

"Uh-huh." His response was dazed, a pubescent boy at a topless variety show.

"That's good," she said, one knee pressing into the sheets, then another. Before he knew it, Maggie was doing a slow crawl toward her skinny-armed beau. Sultry. Seductive. Dillon leaned back while the ends of her hair traced a trail across his chest. "Know why?"

"Nuh-uh." She hated it when he responded in grunts—it seemed that even the smartest boys regressed to Cro-Magnons when aroused—but she let it go. He was studying to be a mechanical engineer, not a poet laureate.

"Because I have an exam tomorrow," she said, ignoring the fingers that were now grazing her right breast. "First thing. And unless Wilmington floods overnight—"

“Which it might,” he cut in.

“—which I *doubt*,” Maggie continued, “I have to pass my phytoplankton exam.”

“Phytoplankton,” Dillon echoed. *Talk dirty to me.*

“And you know how I’m going to make that happen?”

“By clearing your mind and gaining new focus?” He grabbed her hips and pulled her down against the bulge beneath the sheets.

“By sleeping until the sun comes up,” she said. “Like a baby. Because these storms? I love ’em.” She rolled off him, snapped off the light, and pretended she didn’t hear the muffled *awh man* escape his throat.

“Fine,” he said, relenting. “But can you at least flip your cell onto its screen? It’s been lighting up the place for the past half hour.”

“What?” She’d been sleeping while Dillon had clearly been wide-awake, probably anticipating the moment Maggie’s apartment was torn from its foundation and flung up into the sky, *Wizard of Oz*–style. Maybe, if she had been as jumpy as he was, she would have noticed the room light up bright blue, but she’d been sleeping like a baby. The sound of the rain comforted her. The louder, the better. Louder meant she couldn’t hear herself think.

Reaching over, she grabbed her cell off the bedside table and squinted at the screen. Nearly four in the morning and three missed calls. One voicemail. Her phone was set to automatically go silent at midnight, so she hadn’t heard them come in.

Rubbing the sleep out of her eyes, she brought up the call log.

ARLEN OLSEN-DORMER, MOBILE, 13 MIN. AGO.

ARLEN OLSEN-DORMER, MOBILE, 19 MIN. AGO.

ARLEN OLSEN-DORMER, MOBILE, 22 MIN. AGO.

Her eldest sister's photo smiled out at her from a list of previously made and received calls: a high and messy ponytail, a stretched-out Reebok tank with a faded graphic of a pink ocean sunset, Arlen posing with a group of strangers in what looked to be a yoga studio. Maggie had snagged that photo off her sister's Facebook page years ago, mesmerized by the visage of a woman she felt she hardly knew, secretly delighted to see Arlen looking like a real honest-to-God sweaty human being rather than the uptight perfectionist Maggie had grown to know. *Real Housewives of Savannah*, Brynn, Maggie's middle sister, had snorted. *Stepford Wives two-point-oh*.

"Important?" Dillon asked.

"Maybe," Maggie said. But *certainly* was more like it, because a text every now and again was as close to communication as she and Arlen ever came. Neither one blamed the other for lack of trying. Maggie and Brynn had been close as kids, but Maggie and Arlen? Never. A nine-year difference was as good as kryptonite to a sisterly bond.

Seeing those missed middle-of-the-night calls made Maggie's heart twist in her chest. She vacillated for half a second—she could leave it until after her test; that damn ecology class had given her hell all summer.

*Just turn it off, avoid whatever's going on.*

But her gut instinct overrode her desire for a stress-free morning. She dialed into her voicemail. The message was breathless, heaving, aggravated, straight out of Georgia.

"Goddammit, Maggie . . ." Arlen's Southern drawl. "I know it's late, but answer your phone!"

No explanation. No assurance of not needing to panic. Just a demand, and then an angry hang-up.

Maggie sat motionless, her cell in her hand, the wind heaving another blustering roar. The broken shutter vibrated against the gale, threatening to come loose once again. If this storm—they were calling it Florence—turned into a full-blown hurricane, she'd have to nail a board across the outside to keep it in place—*you want feex, you feex*—and even then, she doubted class would be canceled. Her professor was relentless. It was a summer course, and if she didn't pass, she'd be shy of graduating by three measly credits. All those applications she'd put in for grad school would be rendered useless. A total waste of time. But . . .

"Hey." Dillon. "You okay?"

"Sure." *No.*

She looked back to the now-sleeping phone in her hand. Maggie hadn't texted her oldest sister in at least half a year—Christmas, she thought, or had it been New Year's Eve? But actually spoken? More than three years ago, the day Maggie's niece Hayden had been born. That day, she and Arlen had exchanged pleasantries and congratulations. *I bet she's adorable*, Maggie had said, and even *that* had been awkward, because Arlen knew: Maggie wasn't a fan. She had made a point of letting the world know she would never have a snot-nosed kid of her own. And yet, there she was, trying to scrounge up at least *some* enthusiasm for her sister's thirdborn child.

Another gust blasted against the side of the building. The broken shutter escaped its latch, flew open, and slammed hard against the exterior wall. Maggie winced at the crash, then nearly jumped out of bed when the phone lit up bioluminescent blue. Her big sister smiled out from its screen. Arlen-Olsen-Dormer, glistening with sweat, perfectly imperfect.

A lump formed in Maggie's throat. Something was very wrong.

“What the hell!” Dillon scrambled out of bed and pulled on a T-shirt as he made a beeline for the window. “You need to call your super, Maggie. This is bullshit.” His footfalls were a little too aggravated, loud enough to rouse the neighbors if they weren’t already awake from all the noise. But she said nothing, too preoccupied with the memory of the midnight call she had gotten from Brynn years before.

*She’s gone, Mags.*

*She* meaning their mother. Brynn hadn’t been crying, but Maggie heard the ragged edge to her otherwise stoic sister’s voice.

But this time it was Arlen, the sister who wouldn’t call unless it was an emergency. Unless it was something devastating.

The room suddenly felt devoid of air. Dillon pulled open the window and yanked the shutter back toward its ruined latch. She almost yelled for him to leave it open, nearly tossed the phone aside and bolted out of bed toward the wind, the rain, and the thunder that was inside her apartment rather than outside where it should have been. This place had always felt safe, an asylum from her otherwise grim and mournful past. A salvation to her pain. Except, now, that sense of safety was gone. Her phone was still ringing.

*It’s bad. So bad. It’s happening again.*

Maggie’s jaw tensed. Her fingers tightened around the rubber case that protected her cell.

“Maggie . . . ? You getting that?” Dillon was watching, concerned, suddenly striking her as ridiculous in his wrinkled white T-shirt with a roaring T-rex riding a Segway printed across the front. If she didn’t answer the call, he’d ask what was wrong. She’d be left floundering, suffocating, squelching the emotions she worked so hard to ignore. *I don’t want to talk about it, okay?* It would lead to an argument. Angry, Dillon would do what

he always did when he was pissed—stomp off into the tiny living room and stream another round of *Cosmos* until Maggie was ready to relent. Way too much drama for a casual relationship. Hell, they didn't even live together. Dillon only slept over whenever he had an early morning because his apartment was miles away. This was more convenient. Maybe that's why he was sticking around.

She tapped the green answer button, then pressed the phone to her ear.

"Arlen?"

There was no reply, at least not for a while, but she could hear people in the background. The blip of what sounded like a walkie-talkie. She clutched the phone. Began to tremble despite the apartment's muggy heat.

Finally, Arlen spoke. "Maggie." She paused, as if carefully considering her next few words. Maggie looked up from the pattern of her bedsheets—tiny cartoon dolphins that, upon purchase, had struck her as adorable but now only made her feel sick. She thought about hanging up, but it was too late to deny the inevitable.

She knew.

On the line, Arlen pulled in a breath, and Maggie braced herself for what was coming.

"There's been an accident."

She wanted to scream.

"I'm sorry, Maggie . . . but you have to come home. Right now."



## TWO

---

BY THE TIME Arlen pulled up to the arriving flights area, Maggie had fielded a dozen texts from Dillon—HOW DO YOU FEEL? HOW WAS THE FLIGHT? DO YOU WANT TO TALK? MAYBE YOU CAN GET A RETEST. She had sweated halfway through her T-shirt despite the storm clouds overhead, and had streamed the entirety of Depeche Mode's *Violator* on her phone, trying to keep her mind off the exam she had surely failed—if only Dillon would stop bringing it up. She glanced up from her phone when a new red Chrysler Pacifica pulled up along the curb, the minivan's side door slid open, and the nerve-rattling screech of children poured out onto the pavement.

GOTTA GO. She typed out the message rapid-fire and hit send. She could only handle one thing at a time, and Arlen was—and always would be—an undivided-attention kind of gal.

Out in the van, two kids whined at each other, seemingly at the tail end of a bitter argument. A toddler screamed in the background. And there, in all her perfect Southern glory, was Arlen: pink chino capris, a white silk pussy-bow blouse, her blond hair done up in a bouffant. If there ever was a spitting image of Maggie's mother before she'd gone off the deep end, it was that woman's firstborn child. Maggie only hoped that Arlen would never see such a bad end. Pills strewn everywhere. A bathroom rug tangled around bare feet. An overflowing bathtub washing the blood away.

Arlen carried herself as though her minivan were a limousine. She flashed Maggie a dazzling smile—one that was far too wide, all things considered.

“Maggie.” She came in for a hug, hesitated upon noticing the glisten of sweat across her baby sister’s arms and neck, but eventually offered a curt embrace regardless, leaving her youngest sibling enrobed in a wave of sweet perfume. Arlen had always been the girly one, the prom queen, the stereotype every girl who wasn’t head cheerleader loved to hate. And nobody had hated a Mean Girl more than Brynn.

“Hey,” Maggie greeted, returning Arlen’s half-hearted embrace.

“Sorry I’m late,” Arlen twanged, then took a step back and gave Maggie a bereaved look: *Jesus, why did I have so many kids?* “It never stops,” she said, tossing a look over her shoulder at the cacophony behind her. “But God bless them, they’re mine.”

Maggie forced a smile toward the car. There, inside its confines, were a boy and two girls. Harrison was the firstborn son and pride and joy of Savannah’s own Howie Dormer, quarterback extraordinaire. Maggie didn’t know a damn thing about football—hell, she hardly knew anything about Howie, come to think of it—but from what she’d heard, he’d been Mr. Incredible on the college gridiron, so good he should have gone to the NFL but didn’t, because wasn’t that always the case?

Hope—Arlen’s second child, born halfway through Maggie’s last year of high school—had been a running gag among the boys in Maggie’s senior high school class. She never heard the end of it.

*Hey, Maggie, say hi to my baby mama for me.*

*Hey, Maggie, tell your sister I miss her.*

Only once did she lose her temper. *Hey, pervert, are you getting arthritis in that right hand yet?* Cruel irony: Maggie had spat the question just as the assistant principal had passed her in the hall. After-school detention, two days. Arlen hadn't found it the least bit funny. Brynn, on the other hand . . .

*It's like the goddamn Breakfast Club*, she had cackled. *Except you'd be the nerd who brought the flare gun to school.* Brynn, of course, would have been the girl sitting at the back of the room, eating Pixy Stix for lunch and setting books on fire.

The screaming toddler was Hayden, and a niece Maggie had yet to meet. Arlen could have pushed harder for Maggie to come home for the holidays, and Maggie certainly could have made more of an effort. But neither of them did. Brynn had been the one to plead. *Just come home, Maggie, please.* For a weekend. For some turkey. For presents under the tree. Maggie turned down all open invitations despite her middle sister's appeals. Three years gone, and it didn't feel like nearly long enough. It was, Maggie supposed, appropriate that had it not been for Brynn, she wouldn't have been standing next to Arlen right now.

"Harry, Hope . . . come say hi to your Aunt Maggie." It wasn't a request. Arlen gave the command and, within an instant, a boy and girl leapt onto the curb and fell in line next to their mother, *Sound of Music*-style. Harry, once nothing but a tiny child, was now a premonition of his future self. Tall. Handsome. Light-brown hair grown out like a hotshot surfer, his hairstyle perfectly coupled with a bright Billabong T-shirt and scuffed-up Vans—the kind of guy Maggie imagined herself falling head over heels for in San Diego despite Dillon's broken heart. That was, if she was accepted into the grad program there. Fat chance of that now, though. The thought of those goddamn phytoplankton made her want to cry.

Hope hadn't yet turned two when Maggie had seen her last. Now, the five-year-old stood lean and graceful beside her brother, her blond hair pulled up in a bun, her stick-skinny frame encased in a pink dance leotard, pink tights, and matching ballet shoes—a Southern cupcake, already on her way to becoming a clone of her mom. Arlen offered up an apologetic smile, as if embarrassed by her kid's getup. "I just swept her up from dance class," she explained. "No time to change, right, sugar?" She extended an arm, dragged a thumb across Hope's cheek as if to wipe away invisible dirt. "I'm trying my best to keep things normal around here, but . . ." Her words trailed to nothing, but Maggie understood. She'd been trying to keep things normal for the past decade herself. There would be no mention of that struggle, however, of that awful inescapable guilt, especially not in front of the kids.

"Heya, Harry," Maggie said, stepping up to give her nephew a hug.

"Hi, Aunt Maggie," Harrison murmured beneath his breath—already in the throes of preteen angst at the tender age of eight. She released him, and could sense his relief as soon as her arms fell back to her sides.

Hope watched the exchange with curiosity, her expression flickering between interest and gravitas. And then she stepped up to the aunt she hardly knew, leaned in, and spoke with a solemnness beyond her years. "Auntie Magdalene, I'm sorry for your loss. But we're trying to keep things normal around here." And then, as if having planned it all out in advance, she wrapped her arms around Maggie's waist in a viselike embrace and whispered, "I missed you."

This from a child Maggie didn't know at all. And all she could do was whisper back, "I missed you, too."

. . .

The Pacifica was so new it still smelled like plastic and glue. Blasting the air-conditioning on high and pushing fifty down a rural highway that suggested half that speed, Arlen said nothing about the unfolding events that had clearly thrown a wrench in the schedule of a busy working mom. The airport wasn't exactly close to home—roughly thirty minutes northwest of where they had grown up, which Brynn had lovingly called *the middle of fucking nowhere*, and Arlen hadn't moved away from because the schools were good and the crime was low. *That, and she knew that as soon as Mom kicked off, the house was for the taking*, Brynn had said during one of their many conversations, full of vitriol. *I swear, Mags, among the three of us, you got all the brains. With my luck, Len will keep poppin' 'em out and I'll end up a fucking wet nurse in my own home.*

At the time, Maggie had laughed. Brynn, born too weird for words, completely bizarre by the time she was fifteen; Brynn, with her box-dyed black hair and blunt-cut bangs, her skin powdered to a ghostly white and lips painted a gory maroon; Brynn, who had lived alone in that giant house for a good three months after their mom had died right there in the master bathroom, growing comfortable with the solitude, until Arlen swept in with Howie, the kids, and a newborn baby to make the house their own. *That Brynn—a creepy Mary Poppins to her sister's kids. Just a spoonful of arsenic.* It was a ridiculous notion. Hilarious. Insane.

But Arlen had every right to move in. Their mother's will left the house to all three of the girls, and not because she loved them all equally. No. Toward the end of her life, Stella Olsen had been the type of woman to throw a scrap of meat to the wolves and watch them fight. The house had been granted to all her children not because she was being magnanimous,

but because not choosing was far more dramatic. And oh, the quarrel it had caused . . .

Maggie sold off her share to Arlen without a second thought. All that money would afford her a comfortable lifestyle in Wilmington—close to the UNC campus, not an hour's worth of gridlock away. Not a cheap option. And after Maggie graduated and it came to her master's degree, that cash would grant her the opportunity to go to any school she wanted, *hopefully* on the West Coast, if they would have her. Selling had been a no-brainer. She didn't need much motivation to avoid setting foot anywhere near their childhood backyard swimming pool. That late-night memory was still vivid, still crippling in its pain. The pool tarp, nothing but a jumble of plastic floating upon the surface of the water. The pool light, still on, as if to suggest that Maggie had just missed the action.

Brynn, on the other hand, had been home, and yet she was the one to stubbornly hold on to her share of the house. As a result, Arlen and Brynn butted heads more often than not, and Arlen's kids ended up with an overgrown goth girl as a live-in aunt.

Brynn bitched and moaned about the house being monopolized by Arlen and her brood every chance she got, but Maggie had been the only one to leave Georgia. She hadn't bothered to consider the Skidaway Institute of Oceanography, no matter how close to home it might have been. She packed up her things and left for North Carolina the summer she'd graduated high school, no longer willing to share space with their stumbling, slurring drunk of a matriarch. But it was only a few weeks into freshman year that Maggie was forced back to Savannah. A result of Brynn's midnight call.



Maggie chewed a fingernail as Arlen drove. Meanwhile, Dillon continued to text: DID YOU GET THERE OKAY? Maggie left his queries unanswered. A response would only encourage another question, and another after that. Responding would prompt Arlen to ask who she was texting, or what was so important, or shoot off their mom's favorite barb: *I bet that can't wait*. Maggie couldn't handle that. Not now. Not while stuck here in the car.

"Florence is fixing to be a real problem." Arlen tried for conversation over the blast of the A/C. "The wind is going to pick up this afternoon. One more day and they would have probably delayed flights, shut the whole airport down." Maggie's outbound flight had been stuck on the tarmac for more than an hour, giving Maggie hope that Florence would, perhaps, make an emergency trip home next to impossible. After all, it was stronger in Savannah. But no such luck.

Maggie said nothing as she stared at the fifty-foot cross made of white painted pipe that loomed over the highway. At its foot, a marquee warned drivers that THE \_EVIL IS \_ \_ON\_ US, SAVE YOU\_ SO\_ \_. That cross had been there for as long as Maggie remembered. Every time they passed it as kids, Brynn would spin stories of a towering Jesus figure, sacrificed on that very spot.

*He died for your sins*, she had said. *He spilled blood enough to fill Daddy's pool*.

*I ain't got no sins*, Maggie had scoffed. She couldn't have been more than six or seven years old.

*"I don't have any sins,"* their mother had corrected from the front seat. *Ain't isn't a word. And cool it with the stories back there.*

But Brynn had rolled her eyes and whispered into Maggie's ear. *Everyone's got sins, dummy. Even little kids like you. Maybe I'll tell you about it one day, when she ain't listenin'.* Brynn had made good on her promise, and she'd done it with her typical dramatic flair.

With Arlen's Chrysler leaving that cross in the rearview, Maggie wondered if sitting through an occasional Sunday service would have restored some semblance of normalcy to her and Brynn's oddly dark childhoods. If they had prayed the way their mother had taught them rather than faking it, if Maggie had turned to God, perhaps things would have been different. Better. Not like they were now.

Arlen cleared her throat against the relative silence. The kids were busy with their tablets; the backseat sounded like an arcade. "Anyway, as for the service . . . I left most of it up to Father John. You remember him. He organized for Mom. I just, I—I mean . . ." Arlen stammered, the first crack in her pristine facade.

Brynn would have wanted Maggie to protest. *Father John? That old pedophile?* If she could have reached out from beyond the veil, she'd have slid her hand down Maggie's throat to coax out the words: *A church service? Over my dead body. Oh, wait.* But what alternative would Brynn—a girl who was never satisfied with anything—be happy with? A black-clad procession down the cobblestone streets of medieval Bruges? A boys' choir echoing through the empty chambers of Dracula's Transylvanian castle? Jackals pulling her rotting corpse onto an English hillside before devouring her beneath a full moon?

Maggie covered her mouth and snorted out a laugh.

"What?" Arlen perked, immediately defensive.

“Sorry, nothing,” Maggie said. She dropped her hand to her lap and looked out the window.

“I don’t see what’s funny about any of this,” Arlen protested. “Do you know how hard it’s been? How stressful? And to top it off, this damn storm . . .”

“Nothing’s funny,” Maggie said. “Father John, he’s great.” She pictured nothing but strangers clad in various ensembles, none of them morose enough for Brynn’s taste—*cry harder*; a bunch of people Brynn never knew or gave a shit about filling up pews and pretending to care while Florence brought a cyclone down atop the church, tearing off its roof, sending the steeple careening into the earth like the devil’s arrow. Maybe if Florence made landfall at just the right time, the service wouldn’t be so bad.

Maggie’s phone vibrated in her messenger bag. Another text from Dillon, no doubt. Hell, if Arlen was fine with inviting strangers to the funeral, Maggie should have invited Dillon to tag along. It would have made it easy to wriggle out of staying at the house, at least. Aunt Maggie shacking up in her old room with a random guy? Not a snowflake’s chance in Georgia.

A defunct gas station came up on the right, an old black Cadillac facing the highway parked out front. A FOR SALE sign sat propped against the inside of the windshield, so sun-bleached it was hardly readable anymore. It was a giant boat of a vehicle. Brynn would have loved it: a dead man’s hearse.

“What about her friends?” Maggie asked, looking back to her sister.

Arlen scoffed—a reflex—then corrected herself with a long sigh, as if realizing how insensitive her initial reaction was. “There’s going to be an obituary. It’s not like I know who those people are, Maggie.”

*Those people.* That's what their mom used to call them. Maggie recalled their mother's face when Brynn had brought Simon, her first boyfriend, over for the first time. Clad in all black, and with an unspiked Mohawk lying dormant atop an otherwise shaven head, he was immediately deemed one of *those people*. If you asked Stella Olsen, it was a damn tragedy to have someone like Simon wandering around her pristine estate. Maggie caught her snorting at his discarded combat boots next to the front door, limp and unlaced, scuffed and well-loved. *Disgusting*, she had snarled, not once stopping to consider that he could have just left them on his feet—that he'd taken them off to be courteous, and all his thoughtfulness got him was an ugly behind-the-back jab. But those types of things hardly blipped on Mrs. Olsen's radar, just as they failed to register on Arlen's now.

"Isn't her phone upstairs?" Maggie asked.

"Mom!" A whine from the backseat, cutting through the conversation, momentarily obliterating the electronic calliope of educational apps that were nothing more than glorified video games. *F is for Friend, Family, Fun . . .*

"Her what?" Arlen asked, ignoring Hayden's outburst.

"Her cell phone," Maggie said. "Isn't it upstairs in her room?"

"Mo-om!" *G is for Girl, Game, Ghost . . .*

Maggie closed her eyes against the sound. She took a breath, trying to keep her agitation in check.

Arlen shook her head, not getting Maggie's point. "I guess . . . ? I don't know. I was only in there for a second."

"Because if it is, we could call—"

"You think I'd stay in there for longer than a second?" Arlen asked, cutting Maggie off. "Do you really think that's something I would have

wanted to do?”

“Mom-*eeeeee!*!”

“Jesus, Hay, *cool it!*” Arlen snapped, and for half a second Maggie was overtaken by the sudden urge to vomit into the footwell of the front seat. In Arlen’s flash of impatience, her voice sounded exactly like their mom’s, as though the woman had clawed her way out of the grave, having risen from the dead. *His for . . .*

“But I’m hungr-*eeeeee*,” Hayden squealed. “I want Donald’s!”

“Yeah, can we go to McDonald’s?” Hope chimed in, jumping to her little sister’s aid. “Mom? Can we? I’m hungry, too. I can’t remember the last time I ate. Can we?”

“I wanna see the Ronalds!” Hayden.

“No.” Refusal. Flat. Unaffected by the abrupt onset of backseat famine.

“But I’m *starving!*” Hope. “It’s still forever till home!”

“I want chickens!” Hayden.

“Mom?” Harry, even-toned and leaning between the two front seats like some sort of child trauma mediator; channeling Sally Struthers, imploring Arlen to please remember the children.

“I want catch-ups!” Hayden’s tone was reaching optimum pitch. “I wanna play in the jungle!”

“Oh my God.” Maggie, but a mere whisper. Suddenly, replying to texts didn’t seem half bad. She reached into her bag.

“Stop *yelling*, Hay!” Hope roared at her sister. “It’s not gonna help!”

Phone out.

“You’re going to cause an accident,” Arlen announced, as if subtly threatening the lives of her offspring would somehow calm them down.

Screen on.

“You’re gonna cause an accident!” Hope yelled while Hayden continued to screech. “And you’re bugging Auntie Magdalene!”

“You aren’t bugging me—” Maggie said, unsure of why she was about to deny such a self-evident truth. But nobody was listening anyway. She blasted out a message. *I is for . . .*

I’VE MADE A HUGE MISTAKE.

“*Hope.*” Arlen. An edge of warning in her tone.

“There,” Harry said, pointing to an off-ramp, a highway sign announcing food, gas, and a creepy motel only child-smugglers would have used ahead.

Maggie bit her bottom lip, almost afraid to look in Arlen’s direction, imagining her sister’s face replaced by their mother’s sallow skin, her distant bag-eyed stare.

“I want French eyes!” Hayden exploded in a fit of three-year-old insistence, tired of being silenced, refusing to be ignored. “I want *French eyes!*” she screamed, her legs kicking in a torrent of fury, as though kicking hard enough would send her Lecter-like child restraints flying from the car seat, allowing her to murder every person in that minivan for denying her the one thing, the *only* thing, she’d ever asked for in her whole entire life. “*I want French eyes!*” The rampage continued. Hope’s quiet murmur of *jeez* was but a soft underscore to her little sister’s blind outrage.

Maggie couldn’t help herself. She laughed. Because Arlen’s life was nuts.

SAVE ME! Fingers flying over the QWERTY keyboard.

“Mom?” Harry, staring pointedly at the quickly oncoming turnoff, his expression that of stoic desperation. *Take the easy way out*, it said. *Make it stop.*

WHAT? WHAT’S GOING ON? Dillon responding.



Maggie opened her mouth, about to offer to cover the cost, ready to admit that she was a little hungry herself even though queasiness was still clinging to the back of her throat like thin plastic film, like a wet tarp freshly pulled from a pool. But Arlen jerked the wheel to the right before Maggie could speak. The Chrysler hit the off-ramp way too fast. For a flash of a second, Maggie imagined the car flying off the road and into an embankment of trees, the branches hissing with summer cicadas and slumbering fireflies, the car slamming into an immovable trunk of an ancient oak, leaves and insects and birds exploding out and away from the tree like green fireworks. The Olsens' final hurrah. One last tragedy to wipe the entire brood out for good. And it would be Maggie's fault, because had she not required a ride from the airport, Arlen wouldn't have been pushed to the brink. *M is for Mommy, Madness, Massacre . . .*

Arlen eased off the gas, her expression taut, her eyes narrowed, angry at herself for giving in. The minivan cruised up a slight incline and came to a full stop. A road sign pointed them right. Arlen breathed in and out. In and out. Just like how they taught her in yoga class, no doubt. Trying to keep her cool.

In the minivan's stunned silence, Maggie's phone buzzed in her hand.

MAGS?

"Mom?" Hayden, calm, as though sensing her mother's bubbling rage. "I'm gonna have Donald's now?"

Arlen didn't answer. Instead, she spoke toward the steering wheel, as if speaking to herself. "I'm glad you're here, Maggie," she said. "Because *this*?" She lifted a hand, made a sweeping gesture toward the backseat. "My plate is full."

Maggie wasn't sure how to respond.

“Brynn knew that,” Arlen said. “But she did it anyway, didn’t she? She saved herself and left us to pick up the pieces, because in the end, everything is always about her.”

Maggie swallowed against the lump that had formed in her throat. She couldn’t deny that Arlen was speaking the truth. Brynn always did have a penchant for theatrics. Maggie suspected it was why she had refused to relinquish her share of the house. Not because Brynn *wanted* to live there, but because not selling was histrionic. A standoff. Something to keep her occupied because she didn’t have all that much going on in her life. But Arlen resenting Brynn for committing suicide? That was cold.

Maggie furrowed her eyebrows, searching for something to say. *You shouldn’t hold it against her* or *Where the hell were you when she needed help?* Except that finger was pointing right back at her, because where was Maggie, after all? In Wilmington. Refusing to come home no matter how many times Brynn had asked. Maggie looked down to her lap, frowning at her phone and the fraying knees of her jeans.

I’M FINE. She shot out the text and shoved her phone back into her bag, the sting of tears suddenly threatening to breach the stoicism and strength she was so desperately trying to keep intact. But just as she was sure she’d start bawling right there, another distraction came from over her shoulder.

Hope slid her skinny arms between the two front seats and coiled them around Maggie’s left limb. And then, pressing her cheek against Maggie’s shoulder, she gazed up at her aunt and echoed her mother’s words. “I’m glad you’re here.”

## THREE

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WHEN MAGGIE SHOWED Dillon a picture of her childhood home, he called her crazy for giving up her share of the seven-thousand-square-foot pie. But the beauty of that white colonial was as false a front as Maggie's steady nerves. Sitting in Arlen's van, she found herself staring out the windshield at the place where she grew up, its banistered wraparound porch dotted with hanging ferns that now swung in the wind, three dormer windows protruding like sentries from a high-sloping roof. It sat lazily on its three-acre plot, beating the Georgia heat beneath a sweeping canopy of oak branches and swaths of old man's beard.

Maggie swallowed against the ball of nerves that had wormed its way up her windpipe, her right hand involuntarily rising to rub at the back of her neck. Her left continued to clutch her cell phone—a security blanket, her only tether to the life she'd created outside this place.

She didn't make a move to exit the vehicle, but no one else shared in her hesitation. Harry and Hope noisily climbed out of the car while Arlen struggled with the buckle of Hayden's car seat, all the kids now tangy with the scent of ketchup and fryer grease. With Hayden finally released from her restraints, she ran after her siblings across a pristine, freshly mowed lawn. Not mowed by Howie, of course, but by a service. That was, after all, the upper-crust Southern way.

Arlen lingered in the backseat while Maggie stared ahead, unsure of how to proceed. The place was appealing with its lovely dark-painted window shutters and white rocking chairs on the front porch—the grouping of rockers once referred to by their still-sober mother as the South Savannah Chapter of the Porch Sitters Union. All of it innocuous. Inviting. All of it a lie.

She nearly jumped when Arlen sighed, then spoke from behind her. “Look,” she said. “I’m sorry. I know I’m being a bitch about all of this, but I’m just so angry.”

Maggie looked away from the house and to the tree that had once been home to a swing. After their father’s accident, Maggie had locked herself in her room, sitting cross-legged on the floor, staring down at an object Brynn had insisted had been nothing but a game. Brynn, on the other hand, spent a lot of time outside. She’d sat out there on that swing, completely clad in black, for hours at a time. One afternoon, she had pumped her legs hard, pushed herself as fast and high as she could, the branch overhead groaning against the strain. And then, at the apex of that arc, one of the ropes unraveled. Years of humidity, rain, and heat had Brynn flying toward the lawn with a garbled scream. Maggie, who happened to have been spying on her sister through her open bedroom window, watched Brynn soar through the air before landing hard against the ground. She twisted her ankle and dislocated her left shoulder attempting to catch herself on the grass. But it could have been worse. She’d hit the ground less than a few inches away from one of their mother’s many flowerbeds, the concrete garden edging jutting upward in anticipation of lethal contact. It could have ended her right then, seven years ago.

“I guess it’s just . . . despite all of her ridiculous death stuff, I never thought she’d take it this far,” Arlen said. “How was I supposed to know that she was depressed even *more* than usual?” She paused, as though considering her own words, searching for their truth. But she was right. Maggie couldn’t remember a time when Brynn hadn’t prided herself on being weird and impossible to decipher. After Dad was gone, Brynn’s black band T-shirts and slashed-up jeans graduated to caked-on makeup and pale contact lenses. And what had once been their mother’s outright horror over her daughter’s goth phase then shifted from quips and nags to radio silence. Maggie, on the other hand, had nearly lost touch with her lifelong love for the ocean. The fact that she had been out on Hilton Head Island when the accident had happened, that she’d been enjoying a sunset while looking out onto an endless expanse of water while her father—less than an hour away—was living out the last few moments of his life . . . it had nearly been too much to bear. And as for their mom? Once Dad was out of the picture, all three of the girls became invisible, as though they had perished right along with him. Alive, but dead. Ghosts unto themselves.

Maggie pulled her gaze away from where that swing used to be, nothing left but a piece of jute tied high up on the bough, like someone had hanged a body there, cut it down, and not bothered to cover their tracks.

“You’re going to blame me for this, aren’t you?” Arlen said. “I mean, we weren’t close . . . but Brynn wasn’t close with anyone, you know? You of all people know that she’d always been that way. She never liked me to begin with . . . so just how was I supposed to influence her, *help* her? What could I have possibly done?”

“It’s not your fault,” Maggie finally spoke, half expecting Arlen to breathe a sigh of relief. It wasn’t Arlen’s fault because Maggie was the one to

blame. But rather than soothing her big sister's nerves, Maggie's attempt at compassion seemed only to ignite Arlen's anger.

"Well, of *course* it's not my fault!" She huffed, sweeping crumbs out of the cracks of Hayden's car seat with the palm of her hand. "I invited her to join us for dinner every night, Maggie. *Every night*, at least up until a few months ago."

"What happened a few months ago?" Maggie rubbed her phone screen against a patch of her jeans, cleaning off the smudges, if only to give herself something to do.

"She stopped coming down. I'd make enough for everyone, and her plate would go cold on the table. So I stopped offering. A waste of food. You try not to take offense, but . . ."

"Did you ask her what was going on?"

"No," Arlen murmured. "I figured it was just Brynn being Brynn."

Maggie winced. *Brynn being Brynn*. Their mother's words, but rather than a drunken slur, they were annunciated with a distinct Southern drawl.

"You two talked every now and again, isn't that right?" Arlen asked. "Did she strike *you* as upset about something? Did she *say* anything?"

That was the problem with Brynn. Suicide had always been the hazy overlay of every conversation, a fashionably subtle suggestion coloring her every word. Maggie couldn't count the times her middle sister had thrown herself down onto the couch or into an armchair like a distressed damsel, exhaling an exasperated *I'm going to kill myself* or *I wish I were dead*. Brynn being Brynn. And Brynn was always upset about something. Lately, it had been about Maggie's refusal to come home. About politics. About the fact that Arlen was a staunch conservative and had almost certainly voted Republican. *You know she did, Mags. Ugh, I could just die!* But that was



Brynn's typical stagecraft. Suggesting that she was *genuinely* suicidal? Maggie shook her head. "No." At least not that she had known.

"You're sure?" Arlen said, pressing. Maggie shifted her weight in the front seat to meet her big sister's gaze, but as soon as she did, Arlen looked away. She plucked Hayden's sippy cup off the backseat. "I'm just glad the kids were asleep when it happened. I mean . . ." Her words trailed off, but it was too late; Maggie couldn't help but imagine it.

Harry and Hope decked out in their swim gear. Hayden toddling behind them, her floaties forcing her arms outward like the straw arms of a cornfield scarecrow. And there, between the house and the pool, Auntie Bee. Neck broken. Arms and legs ragdoll akimbo. Shattered glass catching the light like jagged diamonds in the sun. Music slithering out the broken window and up into a pristine summer sky. She pictured Hope and Harry parting just in time for Hayden to catch sight of the body, a toddler's laughing face skipping like a record, flickering like bad reception, hesitating before finally twisting into a mask of fear. A scream bubbling up her esophagus—one her siblings would hear faint traces of for the rest of their lives. *T is for Trauma* . . .

"No, you're right," Maggie said, pushing the thought away. "It wasn't right of her to do it the way she did." Brynn had done it after dark, but Harry could have gone downstairs for a glass of water. He could have seen. Yet if it hadn't been the pool at midnight, it would have been Brynn's room some other time—a place where she might not have been discovered for days. Maybe one of the kids would have found themselves wondering where their aunt was, knocking on her door, pushing it open to discover . . .

"I suppose it's silly to expect someone to consider such things at a time like that," Arlen mused. "I'm just sorry that I couldn't have . . ." A pause. A

frown. “Anyway.” She discarded her own remorse. “Don’t sit out here all afternoon.”

“Len . . .” The old nickname came tumbling past Maggie’s lips before she could stop it. Arlen paused midretreat, palms against the seat and half out of the car, waiting for Maggie to speak. “I don’t know if I can go in there.”

Arlen pulled in a breath, as if preparing for a record-setting deep-sea dive. Maggie chewed the inside of her bottom lip, waiting for Arlen to spout off reason after definitive reason as to why Maggie would not be allowed to waver. The funeral. Arlen’s need of assistance in dealing with this whole crazy screwed-up thing. No, this time there would be no ducking out. But rather than launching into a laundry list of why-nots, she exhaled the air she’d drawn in so deeply in a smooth and steady stream. “I’ll see you inside,” she said, and slipped out of the car.

Maggie listened to the sliding door of the minivan hiss closed, then watched her sister make a brisk line through the whipping wind toward the open garage door. Inside that garage, two bikes were propped against one of the walls. Not Harry and Hope’s, but Maggie and Brynn’s. Childhood relics their dad had wanted to keep, that their mom hadn’t bothered to get rid of, and that Arlen was too busy to bother with. Streamers of black and silver hung from Brynn’s handlebars. Maggie could still vividly remember how they fluttered as she rode, streamers that Maggie used to stare at as she trailed her sister—onward, to the cemetery gates.

## FOUR

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THE FIRST TIME Brynn had ushered Maggie to the neighborhood cemetery, Maggie had been nine years old. She had pedaled ferociously behind her older sister in hopes of keeping up. When they arrived at the gates, Maggie only blinked at the massive wrought ironwork before riding through its wide-open leaves. The overhead arc was adorned with the name of the graveyard in coiling, intricate script: FRIENDSHIP PARK.

“Do you know why they call this place Friendship Park?” Brynn asked after they snaked along the gravel paths, eventually reaching a particularly shady corner of the lot. When Maggie didn’t respond, Brynn jumped off her bike and let it fall on its side with a crash. “Because all of these ghosts wanna be your friend. It’s lonely as heck being dead.”

It was warm in the sunshine, but Maggie’s bare arms sprouted goose bumps under the branches of a grouping of oaks. Brynn motioned for Maggie to follow, and Maggie did—leaving her bike next to her big sister’s, though she propped hers against a tree. Maggie liked her bike too much to let it lie on the ground like that.

Brynn’s steps came to a stop when she reached a peculiar set of plots. Her knee-high purple-and-black-striped socks and new boots—a pair of Dr. Martens she’d been pining over for months, finally purchased by their father as an early birthday gift—looked spooky next to the headstones. Each marker had a little fence around it, not more than a foot or two high. Some

were made of wood: tiny picket fences for fairy gardens made up of plastic flowers and occasional sun-bleached toys. Most, however, were made of wrought iron like the main gate the girls had passed through only minutes before.

But there was one grave site that was different from the rest—not a headstone, but a tomb with the name and date worn away, the epitaph nothing more than a faint impression of what it had once been. The top was cracked and slightly caving in, seemingly as ancient as the trees that surrounded it. And there, atop the waist-height stone box that held death inside, was a doll. It didn't look particularly antiquated; the doll's frilly white dress and matching bonnet looked clean, in perfect shape. But that didn't make the doll's pallid and expressionless face any less creepy. Its eyes were wide-open, staring out at anyone who dared to meet its gaze.

"You know who's the loneliest after they die?" Brynn asked, not swayed by her younger sister's backward shimmy away from the vault before her. "Kids. Because most people who die are old and boring. *Really* old, like that cranky guy down the street who gives us dirty looks when we ride by his house." The neighbor in question always seemed to be watering his lawn, bent over at a painful angle, one hand clamped down on the trigger of the hose nozzle, the other at the small of his back. And his looks *were* dirty. Glares, really. Anytime Maggie and Brynn rode by his place—which they did often—Maggie pedaled as hard as she could.

"And you know what old people hate?" Brynn continued.

"Grass?" Maggie was distracted by the doll atop that tomb. Perhaps the old guy wasn't watering his lawn to make it grow. Maybe he did it so often because he was trying to drown it instead.

“What? No, dummy. *Kids*.” Brynn delivered the news matter-of-factly, as though anyone who knew anything knew that single detail to be true.

“Really?” Maggie squinted at her big sister. “But what about Gram and Gramps?”

“Gram and Gramps don’t count,” Brynn explained. “Besides, even if they liked kids while they’re alive, they’re gonna hate ‘em after they’re dead. You know why?”

Maggie blinked away from that strange sarcophagus just beyond Brynn’s shoulder. She imagined Brynn jumping on top of it, causing that fractured slab of limestone to collapse in on itself. And what would be inside? A coffin, or just the skeleton of what had once been a little girl? Maggie stared at her sister, finally managing to shake her head no in reply to Brynn’s question, holding fast to her silence.

“Because dead kids remind dead adults of what it used to be like to be young, and they don’t wanna remember that stuff. It makes ‘em mad. That’s why even alive adults bury kids in the corners of graveyards, like they did here.” Brynn turned, motioning to the plots of smaller-than-usual headstones and tiny fenced-in rectangles of land like a fancy lady presenting the Showcase Showdown. Their gram loved *The Price Is Right*. “All of these are kids, see? And they’re way back here to keep all the adult ghosts happy. Except . . . you know what?”

“What?” Maggie asked, looking back to that doll. It seemed impossible for it to have been sitting there for long, undisturbed. Wouldn’t someone have taken it? Wouldn’t the rain and wind have knocked it over? Wouldn’t it have been moldy and rotten and falling apart by now?

“Dead kids are *never* happy because nobody wants to play with ‘em. And *this* kid in particular?” Brynn kicked the box with the toe of her boot. “Just

look at her grave, rotting away. You can't even read her name. Nobody wants to take care of her now, just like nobody wanted to play with her when she was alive."

"Why?" Maggie asked, though she wasn't sure she really wanted to know. Regardless, Brynn would tell her anyway. That was Brynn's way; if she had a story to tell, Maggie was going to hear it whether she wanted to or not.

"Because she was *evil*." Brynn's mouth curled up in a smile. "Born bad. She ended up killing her little sister—"

"Oh, *shut up*, Bee! What a load of baloney!"

"Baloney? You wanna bet?"

"Yeah!" Maggie scoffed. "You're just trying to freak me out again."

But Brynn's smile shifted to something far more serious—stern enough to give Maggie pause. "I'm not lyin', Mags. She killed her little sister. Poisoned her dead."

"With what?" If Maggie was going to be forced to listen to this dumb story, she wasn't going to make it easy to tell.

"With old-timey stuff in a bottle, like a potion."

"A potion." Maggie rolled her eyes. "That's the dumbest."

"Yeah, dummy, like cyanide. Betcha never heard of *that* stuff before."

Maggie shrugged. What did it matter if she had or hadn't? Brynn was still making it up. But Brynn wasn't swayed by her kid sister's skepticism. She never was.

"So, she poisoned her little sister, and then her mom found out about it, and you know what *she* did?"

"Probably called the cops? Duh!" Maggie was trying her damndest to play it off. She wasn't scared of some stupid story. Brynn was full of them,

every day something new. But that doll? Maggie couldn't keep her eyes off it.

"Cops?" Brynn snorted. "There weren't any cops back then, dork. This was olden days, remember? They had, like, a sheriff and that was it. Nah, her mom found out, and she snuck into the little girl's room late at night, and *then* do you know what she did?"

Maggie's mouth was starting to go dry. She shook her head again, her eyes still fixed upon the porcelain doll's face.

"She tied the girl to her bed and lit the sheets on fire. She left her daughter there, screaming." Brynn widened her eyes for effect. "Crying." She bleated out a wail, like one that could have possibly eked out of a dying girl. "Burning up!" She lurched at Maggie, her arms extended, her fingers twisted up like spooky five-legged spiders. Maggie squeaked and shuffled back. "And because the girl was so evil, the adults put her in a big limestone box so she'd be trapped forever. Except she *wasn't* trapped forever. She was way too powerful for that."

Maggie glanced back to her bike, suddenly sure it wouldn't be there anymore—magically vanished, made invisible by the demon child of Brynn's own making.

"One day, a girl came here to visit her gram at the cemetery all by herself. I can show you the grave if you want, since you probably don't believe me. It's just down there." Brynn motioned to some faraway plot, waiting to be challenged, but Maggie didn't dare. She knew it would be there. Brynn was meticulous about details, always prepared to be called out, to prove that what she was saying was true.

Once, at the dinner table, Brynn had muttered something about having a dream about their great-grandmother writhing in pain in a large canopy bed.

Their mother had gone positively white, but had said nothing to prove or disprove her middle child's claims. Another time, Brynn had pointed to a spot along the highway while she and Maggie rode in the backseat to do some shopping in Savannah's downtown. *A boy and his family died there*, Brynn had said, only to be chastised for making up such a gruesome thing. Not a week later, a small cross had been erected in that very place, prompting their mom to pull the car over and demand the girls stay in the backseat. They watched her march up the soft shoulder, then stoop over the marker for what seemed like an awfully long time. She came back pale and silent. Maggie didn't know how Brynn did it, but there was truth to her stories. And this one right now, she could only assume, was no different.

"So, this girl who was visiting her gram, she heard weeping coming from this corner, right where we're standing now." Brynn whimpered, pulling her face into a mask of despair. "And the kid, feeling sorry for the weeping ghost, brought the dead girl a gift. A doll." Brynn looked back to the tomb, as did Maggie. "And now, that doll is the dead girl's only friend. And anyone who touches it is doomed to be cursed."

Maggie peeked back at the creepy glass-faced toy. The more she looked at it, the more that doll seemed strangely familiar—like maybe she'd seen it somewhere before. But Brynn wasn't done. Reaching out to grab Maggie's hand, she tightened her grip and took a few forward steps, forcing Maggie to creep closer to the crypt despite having backpedaled from that blank glass-eyed stare.

"Hey, cut it out, Bee!" Maggie tried to free herself from her sister's grasp, but she didn't have a chance, especially when Brynn used her free hand to give Maggie a forward shove. Maggie's bare knees hit the side of the tomb. The tips of her sneakers kicked its rough stone side. The doll stared ahead.



"See that thing?" Brynn asked.

"I'm gonna tell Mom," Maggie whined, trying to wriggle away.

"It's evil, too," Brynn hissed into her ear. "Just like the dead girl."

*Evil.* The word twisted around inside Maggie's head like a snake.

"I came here by myself yesterday," Brynn said. "And she threatened me . . . so I made her a promise."

Maggie stood frozen. Speechless. Her muscles tensed. The thudding of her heart insisted she look somewhere else, anywhere else but into that wicked marionette's eyes.

"I promised her that I'd bring her a friend, so she'd never be lonely again. I hope you both like one another." And then, all at once, Brynn spun around and fell into a full sprint across a headstone-dotted lawn with a gleeful laugh.

Maggie's mind screamed, *Turn around, stupid! You're being abandoned!* She could hear Brynn running toward her bike. But she couldn't stop staring at the effigy poised atop that box. The idea of that doll being wicked had her mind reeling at the possibilities.

The doll sliding off that tomb.

Finding its way out of Friendship Park, down the street, into the house through a window or unlocked door.

Climbing the stairs in the dead of night, its fluttery dress whispering across each riser.

Little laced-up boots tap-tap-tapping across the hardwood floor.

The fingers of a tiny hand slipping through the crack of Maggie's door.

"Mags!"

Maggie started when Brynn yelled her name. She veered around, spotted her big sister on her bike, already a good distance away. Twelve-year-old

Brynn's sandy-brown hair shone in the sunshine, Jack Skellington smiling out from the center of her T-shirt, her stripy socks and heavy boots looking ridiculous with the purple shorts she wore.

"It's gonna get you!" Brynn bellowed. "Stand there long enough and it's gonna follow you home!" Her sister laughed and pedaled toward the front of the cemetery.

It was then that Maggie bolted toward her own bike, unable to help glancing over her shoulder . . . just once, to make sure she wasn't being chased.

. . .

And yet, despite being thoroughly spooked by her sister's story, Maggie followed Brynn back to Friendship Park only days later. They wandered the stones, read the names, and tried to calculate how old the skeletons beneath their feet were by counting on their fingers rather than inside their heads. Sometimes, Brynn would purposefully walk right on the graves, as if daring the dead to punch their hands through the soil and chase her away. She'd crawl up onto the headstones in her clomping boots, then leap off them and onto the grass. Maggie wasn't brave enough to do those things. Their dad said that stepping on a grave meant upsetting the person who owned it, and the last thing Maggie wanted was to draw attention to herself, especially with the promise Brynn had supposedly made to the girl in the limestone tomb.

That summer was boring, and so they continued to visit Friendship Park for a couple of weeks, Brynn's story refusing to fade from the forefront of Maggie's thoughts. She hated the idea of her loyalty being promised to that evil girl, but she was pretty sure *that* part of Brynn's story was a load of bull. That, however, didn't negate the idea of dead kids being lonely and

abandoned—it was the one detail Maggie couldn't manage to shake. And so, while Brynn hopscotched across grave sites, Maggie collected bouquets of fading silk flowers from the grown-up plots and arranged them on the burial sites of those sad, forsaken kids. Maggie even went so far as to create such a bouquet for her mother, which, to Brynn's glee, had sent their mom reeling. *Oh my God, Brynn!* Their mother positively glowered at her middle daughter. *You take your sister to that cemetery one more time, and you'll find yourself spending a heck of a lot more time there yourself, and not because you want to, you understand?*

Oddly, their mother's threat was enough to persuade Brynn to lose interest; there was only so much fun you could have in a graveyard, after all, even for a girl like her. Soon enough, Brynn was sucked into some TV show. Unable to shake the routine so easily, Maggie was left to sneak into the garage, climb onto her bike, and ride to Friendship Park alone. And the more she visited, the more that doll beckoned her. Eventually, all of Maggie's gathered flowers were for the stone mausoleum and what sat upon its top.

It was an offering: *Please don't be sad or angry.*

It was also, in a sense, a proposal, despite Maggie thinking better of it. Sitting next to the tomb, hiding from the sun, she picked dandelions from the grass and murmured an impromptu promise. "I don't care what Brynn says. As long as you promise to be nice, I *can* be your friend."

## FIVE

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MAGGIE CONTINUED TO visit Friendship Park despite Brynn's loss of interest, because not visiting made her feel guilty. That, and she had never been one for hours in front of the TV. Beyond splashing around in her father's backyard pool and reading books about dolphins and sharks, she resolved to keep up her fake-flower ritual—gathering plastic blooms from the adult graves and passing them on to the kids, equally distributed, with one extra for the dolly that sat upon that ill-boding tomb.

After a few weeks, the effectiveness of Brynn's story had started to dissipate, and Maggie was no longer afraid, especially after she had put two and two together. That doll didn't look like an antique because it wasn't old. With Brynn downstairs, Maggie had snuck into her big sister's room to snoop around, and there they were at the back of her closet: a trio of porcelain dolls nearly identical to the one in Friendship Park, all of them propped up on their metal doll stands. Brynn had put the doll in the cemetery herself: merely a prop for her ghost story. She'd left it there because—not one for girly things—she had never liked the dolls Gram kept giving her for Christmas. At least one of them could be put to a good and creepy use.

And yet, despite the story losing its resonance, Maggie didn't dare tell her sister about her secret sojourns. She stopped by the grave site every day except for when the weather was bad, and those were the days when Maggie felt the worst. Because, even though she knew the doll was Brynn's,

Maggie associated it with the little girl locked away in that ominous box. Two blocks from home, Dolly was sitting out in the wind and rain. Something about that felt wrong, especially when Maggie was safely tucked inside her home. Friends took care of one another, and Dolly deserved better. Leaving her out there like that—it just wasn't right.

It was during one of those very storms that Maggie's dad paused his channel surfing on the forecast, and Maggie overheard the newscaster talking about a storm called Katrina. A hurricane was coming, and while it was predicted to miss Georgia, the newscaster urged caution.

Always one for blowing things out of proportion, Maggie's mom was already freaking out, squawking about how they needed to go to the grocery store, how it was probably already being ransacked, how she needed bread and milk and eggs, and what if the electricity went out? They should have bought that generator they'd been talking about, regardless of its cost. What about her freshly cleaned windows? She'd just spent a fortune on a cleaning service, not to mention all the landscaping she had done. What about the oak trees in the yard? They were ancient. They'd never make it. She had to call Gram and Gramps, who lived out in Florida. They were still reeling from the effects of Hurricane Dennis. "They should have never moved out there," Maggie's mother exclaimed, all but weeping at the thought of her parents sitting out in their mega-fancy mobile home park. Maggie loved it out in Pensacola. Gramps let her drive his golf cart. They had a tennis court and everything.

Brynn, who was lazily curled up in an armchair with a Neil Gaiman novel in her hands, frowned at their mother's growing panic while Maggie stood frozen in the center of the living room, too young to decipher whether abject terror was the correct response.

"Time to batten down the hatches!" Maggie's dad announced. "Brynn, honey, get the shutters. I have to close up the pool."

"Peter, *please*, you need to come with me." Maggie's mother exhaled an exasperated sigh. "I have to call my mother!"

"You go, Stella," he said. "The sooner the better. I'll call."

"Go *alone*?" Maggie couldn't decide whether the suggestion to go to the supermarket had left her mom stunned or just plain annoyed. "You heard Chuck." Chuck was the weatherman; their mother was on a first-name basis with the guy, as though he came over for cookouts and beer rather than predicted the weather for the entire Georgia coast. "The parking lot will be a *nightmare*."

"You'll be fine." Dad.

"The lines are going to be backed up to the milk coolers. God, I need to call Arlen." She stomped off toward the foyer to gather her purse. "She and Howie should come over. They have Harrison to worry about. If their power goes out . . ."

"Dad?" Maggie frowned, tugging on her father's pants pocket as she watched her mother shuffle toward the door that led out to the garage. Peter Olsen turned his attention to his youngest. "What about me?" she asked. "What should I do?"

He smiled. "You? How about making sure you and your sister's bikes are safe and sound? You don't want to lose your wheels, do you?"

Lose her bike? That would have been a nightmare. Maggie shook her head in the negative, only to receive a get-going swat on the back from her father. A moment later, he was making a beeline for the backyard.

Maggie remained still for a moment, listening to Brynn hop up the stairs, taking them two by two in those clunky boots while Chuck continued on

about the danger. *Severe threat. Possible category five. Unpredictable path.* Only when Maggie was sure that Brynn was out of sight did she skitter off to the garage.

The garage door was wide-open—Mom had a bad habit of leaving it gaping whenever she left the house. The oaks in the front yard were already groaning and bending against the growing wind. Leaves were tearing free of their branches. Sometimes, the storms were bad enough to strip those trees half-naked. This time, Maggie wondered if all their foliage would be gone, like an old man losing his hair. Twisting where she stood, she located her bicycle, safe and sound, propped against the wall next to Brynn's.

Brynn didn't ride much anymore. Sometimes she'd pedal a few blocks with Maggie to get a snowball covered in electric-green sour apple syrup. Maggie liked blue raspberry, because it reminded her of the ocean. Every now and again, their mom would send Brynn to the little convenience store a mile away, or to the garden center down the road to grab bottles of magic pellets that turned her blue hydrangeas pink. Sometimes, Maggie would tag along, especially to the store. York Peppermint Patties were her favorite, and that place sold them two for a buck. But otherwise, Brynn's bike sat around unused, collecting dust.

Maggie, on the other hand, rode almost every day despite Brynn's homebody ways, and she'd gotten fast. She could do a loop from here to Friendship Park in less than a few minutes, no joke. She'd timed herself on her dad's stopwatch one day. One minute, forty-five seconds. She'd almost collapsed from the effort, but it was a new record. Taking that into consideration, if it was safe enough for her mom to go to Publix on her own, it was certainly safe enough for a ride. She'd make it quick.

She shot a look over her shoulder, as if to ask the old oaks their opinion. The leaves kept tearing free, but most of them were holding fast. *It's not so bad.* Before Maggie could change her mind, she grabbed her bike by the handlebars and threw her leg over the frame.

Because friends didn't let friends suffer through hurricanes alone. Friends didn't let big sisters spook them out of lending a little kindness. Dolly had no one—all alone out there, abandoned and scared. There was nothing evil about that girl, and nothing wicked about that doll. It couldn't do anything to her because it was just a toy. And even if there had been an inkling of truth to Brynn's tale, even if by some chance Maggie was wrong and Brynn *hadn't* left that doll out there to creep her out, why would it hurt her? Maggie was being a friend. She was just being nice.

. . .

By the time Maggie returned from Friendship Park, the wind was so fierce she was hardly able to pedal against it. She careened into the garage, for once letting her bicycle carelessly fall against the floor rather than leaning it up against the wall. Her mother's car was still gone—she was still at the Publix, probably fighting local neighborhood ladies for the last gallon of sweet tea. That was good. It meant Maggie only had to dodge two people rather than three. She tucked the doll beneath her arm, then reconsidered, cramming the toy beneath the thin cotton of her Georgia Aquarium T-shirt.

With half the doll's skirt and booted feet hanging out from beneath her shirt, she dashed through the kitchen and into the hall, throwing herself onto the stairs that would lead her up to her room. She took them two by two, her anxiety growing sevenfold as she neared Brynn's room. If Brynn spotted what Maggie was doing, she'd be pissed. Not only was Maggie screwing up her spooky story, but she was taking possession of something that didn't



belong to her. It was Brynn's doll—a gift from Gram. If Brynn wanted to leave it out in the cemetery to get destroyed by the rain, that was none of her kid sister's business. Those were the rules.

But the thing was, that doll was no longer Brynn's. Her sister had given it to the dead girl in Friendship Park, and it was up to Maggie to keep it from getting ruined by the storm. The doll went beneath Maggie's bed. Maggie's guilt was filed away under *what Brynn doesn't know won't hurt her*. Besides, what difference did it make? Honestly, why would Brynn care?

That night, the storm raged. Their electricity went out, and their mom was losing it, unable to get through to Gram and Gramps's place in Pensacola. She was nearly inconsolable, which was why their father shooed both Brynn and Maggie upstairs.

"Time for bed," he told them.

"But the storm!" Maggie protested.

"It's just rain here," Dad said. "And your mom needs some space."

Brynn didn't argue—she'd spend the rest of the night on her phone until the battery died. But Maggie didn't have a phone, and the inability to flip on the light at any given moment freaked her out.

"What about Gram and Gramps?" She was near tears when her father folded back the sheets for her to slide into bed. "How come Mom can't get them on the phone?"

"Because Gram and Gramps only have a landline, Crazy," Dad explained. "The lines are down. Their power is out, too."

"But what if it's really, really bad this time?" She crawled onto her mattress and stuffed her legs beneath the covers.

"Then they'll go to the elementary school, remember?" Maggie did. Gramps had explained it to Maggie's mom, once. *If the storms hit hard, they*

*evacuate us into the gym. It's not a block from the house and it's at a higher elevation. We'll be fine.* Maggie had found the idea of it pretty funny: her grandma and grandpa shooting hoops with a bunch of old folks, their orthopedic shoes squeaking on the court, waiting for the hurricane to pass.

"Are you sure they're gonna be okay?" Maggie asked, still skeptical. "How will they get there if it's really bad, Dad? Gram's walker . . ." Gram recently had had both of her hips replaced. She couldn't walk on her own if the pain got too bad. And Gramps would never leave her. Not on his life.

"They have that zippy golf cart, remember? I promise, they're going to be okay. Now, try to get some sleep, would you? I need to deal with your mother."

"Is *Mom* gonna be okay?" Maggie blinked at her father. He gave her a goofy look, like, *Mom is too nuts to ever be okay.* Maggie couldn't help it; she cracked a smile. "Wait, *wait!*" She stopped her dad as soon as he turned to go. "What about the lights?" On the way upstairs, her dad had brought two emergency candles along—one for Brynn's room, and one for Maggie.

"Can't help you there, kiddo," he said. "You're just going to have to act your age. You're twenty-seven, right?"

"Da-ad." Maggie huffed.

"Sorry." He held up his hands. "You don't look a day over twenty-four."

"I'm almost *ten!*" She was pretty sure her father knew that, but she couldn't help stressing that fact. Sure, she wasn't a baby anymore, but the wind was howling. What if the windows exploded? Didn't stuff like that happen during really bad hurricanes? She'd seen it happen in movies, so . . .

"Yeah, almost ten," he said. "Which, really, it's kind of embarrassing. I'm surprised you allowed yourself to get so old." Maggie was trying not to

crack up again. Her dad had the art of making her feel at ease down to a science. Brynn was a tougher audience, but he could make her laugh, too, if he really tried. “Now, seriously, Crazy. Sleep. Or at least try to.”

But she couldn’t. Whether it was the hurricane—which the Olsens dealt with by shuttering the windows, making sure they had plenty of batteries for flashlights, and buying up half the Publix canned soup aisle—the idea of her grandparents cowering in a corner of their house out in Florida while their windows blew up around them like bombs, or the marionette that was looming beneath her mattress, she didn’t know. But she was scared, which was dumb. After all, her dad was a native Savannahian. He knew how to handle the weather, and the same went for Gramps. Heck, *he* used to be in the marines, which meant he wasn’t afraid of anything.

And that thing beneath her bed? Maggie knew it was innocuous, just a fancy toy. But Maggie couldn’t help but wonder exactly why Brynn had hidden the remaining dolls toward the back of her closet like that. Did she just not like them, or was there some other reason for their exile?

*Don’t be stupid*, she thought. *If dolls like that were really evil, they would have killed her by now.* She chuckled to herself at the idea of it. Brynn, being chopped up by tiny knives held by tiny doll hands. But her amusement was insincere. The more she thought about those things being able to come to life, the more creeped out she felt.

Eventually losing her nerve, she slid out of bed and dragged the blank-eyed girl out from beneath her mattress by the leg, carrying her to her own closet instead. Once there, she paused. She *could* set up Dolly outside of Brynn’s room, pretend she had risen up and walked herself to the Olsen place under her own “evil” power. Brynn would positively freak out. But

however fun it would be to prank her big sis, using the doll as the butt of a joke felt off. Brynn deserved it, sure, but Dolly didn't.

She cleared a space amid an array of stuffed animals and placed the doll among them. "There," she whispered. "You'll be safe in here." That, and Maggie would feel safer with a door between them. She shut it tight, and eventually, the howl of the wind lulled her to sleep.

. . .

Katrina brought heavy wind and rain to Savannah, but the Olsens escaped relatively unscathed. One of Maggie's mother's favorite oaks went down in the front yard, and tree branches littered the property. Men with chain saws arrived a few days later to haul the mess away. Mom finally got through to Gram and Gramps. Pensacola had gotten clobbered, and their house was under half an inch of water—the entire mobile home park was. But Gramps wouldn't hear of abandoning ship. They had insurance, and he was determined to get started on the cleanup as soon as possible. Mom flew down a few weeks after the storm to survey the damage and help make her parents' temporary home at an extended-stay motel more comfortable.

And by the time all of that happened, the school year was in full swing. Maggie intended to take Dolly back to her rightful spot but there was always something—homework, a TV show, the occasional fight with Brynn—that kept her from making the trek back to those cemetery gates. Besides, leaving Dolly on top of that tomb felt like a betrayal. And so the doll stayed in Maggie's closet, tucked away among her other toys.

By the second month of school, Maggie was head over heels for her new friend, Cheryl Polley. Cheryl had moved to Savannah from Atlanta, and they had struck up a conversation over one of Maggie's Georgia Aquarium T-

shirts. "I've been there," Cheryl had said. "Like, a ton of times. The starfish are my favorite." That's all it took. Maggie was smitten.

Theirs was an obsessive devotion. They ate lunch together, spent weekends at each other's houses whenever they could, even ended up buying matching necklaces with a few bucks they pooled together during a trip to the mall; BEST FRIENDS was stamped across both pieces of a bisected silver heart. Maggie cast a glance out toward Friendship Park every time she passed it on the bus, but its allure had faded. She was busy with homework and trying to master the art of tetherball. Then there was the pipe dream: rumor had it Kelly Clarkson was going on tour, and Atlanta would be one of her stops. Maggie and Cheryl spent weekends plotting how to talk Cheryl's mom into driving them to the city, and how the heck they'd be able to afford it if their mothers refused to buy them the tickets.

Meanwhile, somewhere in the back of her closet, buried beneath dirty laundry that missed the hamper, was Brynn's doll. Maggie didn't bother returning it to the cemetery. With Cheryl in the picture, it seemed far less pressing than before.

## SIX

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THE MOMENT MAGGIE stepped inside her childhood home, she instinctively reached for her phone, ready to text Dillon about how coming back was too much, how staying in her old place was beyond her limit. But before she could type out a message, she was shot through with that familiar twinge of pain. Not sadness or nostalgia for her lost parents or dearly departed sister, but literal pain.

The agony Maggie had felt in her neck and shoulders had led to thousands of dollars' worth of chiropractor visits, hundreds of spinal adjustments, and hours of physical therapy. Year after year, she closed her eyes while doctors cracked her neck, wiggling her toes after each pop of vertebrae, making sure she still could. The possibility of a freak accident had never been far from her thoughts: paralysis by way of a professional. And yet nothing alleviated the crippling knot rooted deep at the base of her skull.

Now, standing in the open front door of the home her mother had designed to reflect an issue of *Southern Living*, Maggie reached around to the back of her neck, pressed her fingers against the bumps in her spine, and sucked air in through her teeth. She hadn't felt that pain in so long, and yet there it was, that all-too-familiar tension collecting at the top of her spine. Strange, but she supposed it was befitting of the circumstance. It was all the stress. Besides, she deserved the discomfort. After her dad had

passed, she had grown numb. After her mother's death, the emotional part of her brain had, for the most part, closed up shop. And now, with Brynn gone, Maggie *wanted* to cry, *wanted* to mourn the loss of the person she had been closest to in life, and yet the tears refused to come. At least the pain that was settling into the muscles of her upper back was just that: suffering, a cheap stand-in for the biting anguish she couldn't manage to feel.

She dropped her duffel bag in the foyer next to the stairs, hesitated at the base step, and finally allowed herself to meander down the house's main hall. A gallery of photographs lined the area, ending at double French doors. Those pictures had once been of her, Arlen, and Brynn, but were now replaced by Harrison, Hayden, and Hope. She stopped just shy of the French doors, her fingers flexing and relaxing at her sides like twin hearts. Had it not been so overcast, the watery iridescence of the swimming pool beyond the doors would have splashed dancing light onto the ceiling overhead. But now, it simply looked like an angry ocean, disturbed by the intensifying wind. She thought about going out there, daring to graze the flagstones with the soles of her shoes. But why? To remember the awful night Uncle Leon had roused her from sleep during what should have been a fun summer adventure at Hilton Head with her cousins? To recall the drive back to an empty house, the pool cover torn away from its rails? To see if Brynn's shadow was lying there, like a stain refusing to come clean, so much like her father that it was as though history were repeating itself? She turned away, moved toward the kitchen, and stepped into the room with a wince.

"You're still having trouble with that neck?" Arlen glanced up from a laptop upon the kitchen island. A large digital SLR camera sat next to it.

Next to that, Arlen's phone, the same one she'd used to call Maggie two days before. *There's been an accident. You have to come home.*

"I didn't think so, but . . ." Maggie continued to rub, but the more she jabbed her fingers into the tight muscle, the more it hurt. "Stress, I guess."

It occurred to her that she hadn't texted Dillon back. She would, though, just as soon as she settled in.

"Or the plane. They'll do that," Arlen said. "Those neck doughnuts look ridiculous, but they're worth the humiliation. You don't have one, do you?" She jabbed the enter key on the keyboard, giving flight to a freshly composed email.

Maggie tried to shake her head, but only managed another cringe.

"You should know better," Arlen said. "The last thing you need is another picture-perfect CT scan. Even with insurance, it'll cost you a small fortune."

The scan, along with a spinal tap, had been done when Maggie was just shy of fifteen. It had been the chiropractor's idea—one that had triggered the strangest emotional response from their mother. Stella Olsen, a woman who approached child rearing with what could only be described as a lackadaisical hand, was positively horror-struck at the mere mention of such a test, let alone the idea of there being something genuinely wrong with her youngest child. She started throwing around theories as fast as a coked-up med school dropout. WebMD became her obsession, and by the time Maggie's appointment for the scan arrived, her mother was sure of her armchair diagnosis: brain cancer, maybe spinal meningitis, possibly both. But Maggie's tests came up clean.

"Anyway, I've got some photos I need to edit or the client is going to lose her damn mind." Arlen raised a hand, waved it over her head like an injured



bird. “Total bridezilla. Absolute nightmare.”

“You’re working?” Maggie looked to the computer. A photo stared out at her from the screen. The bridezilla in question was wearing a crazy-eyed expression, trying to hold a near-manic smile. *I’m so very happy right now!*

Maggie hadn’t managed to complete more than a quarter of her exam the morning she had received Arlen’s call; the questions she *had* answered, she’d probably flubbed. With her head down and her shoulders slumped, she had walked her test to the front of the lecture hall—all eyes on her because she was the first—and slipped it onto her professor’s desk without a word. She managed to make it to the restroom before bursting into tears. Maybe she had been weeping for Brynn, but at that moment, it had felt more like frustration than grief.

“I don’t have a *choice*, Maggie.” Arlen exhaled a dramatic sigh, falling short of a full explanation. Maggie didn’t need one. Ask a wedding photographer about the worst possible time of year for sibling suicide, and each one would scream: *Wedding season!* “Brynn’s car is in the garage,” Arlen said, sliding over a bundle of keys. “I don’t know if it’s filled up, and I don’t know what she left in there, so proceed with caution. Maybe you can clean it out if it’s full of junk. I don’t know what we’re going to do with it; probably get the title changed over and sell it . . . unless *you* want to drive it up to Wilmington.”

Maggie shook her head that she didn’t. She already had a car. Having two made no sense.

Arlen yanked open a kitchen drawer, tossed out a Post-it pad, and scribbled a name and address. “This is the mortuary we’re using.” It was the same one they had used for both parents. “And this is Father John’s number. You can call him anytime. He remembers you.” Odd, considering Maggie

only remembered Father John from officiating Olsen family funerals. Even after all that death, Maggie never was one for praising the Lord or shouting *Amen*. Science had overridden her faith. “I’ve taken care of most of the details, but just swing by, okay?” Arlen gave Maggie a pleading look.

“Swing by?” Maggie offered Arlen a blank stare.

“The mortuary,” Arlen clarified. Yes, *that* place, where men in snappy suits attempted to look sympathetic while trying to upsell caskets that cost as much as Cadillacs. Nothing quite says *I love you* like satin lining and high-gloss veneer.

“Can’t you come with me?” There was something about that place—the pressure, the options, the memory of their mother sitting zombielike and unblinking as the funeral director turned his attention from the unresponsive adult to her three children, searching their faces for signs of life. Arlen, who had been twenty-two at the time, scribbled her signature where their mother’s should have gone. She’d handled their mom’s funeral, too. And here she was again, at death number three.

“No, Maggie, I can’t. That’s why I needed you here, to help me deal with this. We talked about this . . .”

“But I don’t even know the budget,” Maggie protested, and that was true. Hours after she had bombed her test and regained her composure, she had called Arlen to ask about arrangements. She had offered to pay for some of the expenses, but Arlen had declined the help. *Just get here*, she had said. *That’s all I ask*. And so Maggie had paid a small fortune for a next-day flight and come home, despite it being the last thing in the world she had wanted to do.

“They have the budget,” Arlen assured her. “And if you really need me, I’ve got my cell.”

Another zing of pain. Another wince. Maggie hissed through her teeth as she leaned against the island, jabbing her fingers against muscle and bone. Arlen pulled open another kitchen drawer and placed a bottle of Tylenol onto the counter in an unspoken admonishment. *I don't have time for this.*

"Should I take the kids?" That was desperation talking. The last thing Maggie wanted was to shuttle a trio of children around town for any reason, for any amount of time. But at least she wouldn't be alone in a room full of empty coffins, wondering which one Brynn would have hated the least.

". . . to the *mortuary*?" Arlen widened her eyes, as though the mere suggestion was as good as a slap across the face.

"Right," Maggie murmured. "Dumb idea."

"There are fresh towels in the upstairs bathroom, as well as some shampoo and stuff I picked up at the store, in case you want a shower before you go."

Maggie watched her sister from across the island, Arlen's eyes fixed on her computer screen, her maternal instincts so strong she no longer had to think about the things that came out of her mouth as she spoke them. Autopilot mothering, an inherited trait.

She wondered how Brynn had felt about losing a maternal figure only to have another one immediately take her place. Brynn would have been happier if she had moved out; God knows Arlen had asked her to do so more than half a dozen times. *I mean, honestly*, Arlen had complained. *I have kids, a family. Brynn continuing to live with us, it's just . . . weird.* The money would have been good for her: the girl who couldn't keep a steady job to save her life, claiming she didn't like humanity enough to cope with a nine-to-five; the girl who had to wear all black all the time as though any

other color would result in her breaking out in an aggressive form of hives. She could have taken the cash, moved out of Savannah—a town where she had never fit in, would *never* fit in. Unfit to be a country-club debutante sipping mimosas with her girlfriends every weekday afternoon. Hell, unfit to be the girl *serving* the mimosas. Where they came from—unless Starbucks or McDonald’s was looking for help—Brynn Olsen was virtually unhireable, and her doom-and-gloom outlook didn’t help. Not around these parts.

And yet, even with Arlen’s harping and Maggie’s gentle suggestions of leaving the place behind, Brynn had stayed. *I can’t*, she had said. *I just . . . I can’t*. Maggie couldn’t grasp her sister’s motive. Brynn, it seemed, was as determined to remain in their childhood home as Maggie was committed to never return. But after years of fighting, it seemed that Brynn’s refusal wasn’t something for Maggie to understand. If Brynn wanted Maggie to get it, she would have surely explained—something she never got the chance to do.

Pulling Brynn’s keys into her hand, Maggie stepped back into the foyer and paused at the base of the stairs.

ARLEN IS SENDING ME OUT TO BUY A COFFIN. Send.

ARE YOU SERIOUS? Immediate response.

DEAD SERIOUS. Send. And then a follow-up emoji—the one that was laughing so hard it was in tears.

NOT FUNNY! Dillon, always the serious one. Maggie cracked a smile at her screen, slid her phone into her back pocket, and grabbed the strap of her duffel bag before hefting it onto her shoulder.

. . . but she didn’t make it up the stairs. Hesitating for yet another beat, she paused to gaze at the doors that led out to the pool for a second time.

Her heart fluttered to a standstill, her eyes catching what looked to be something running across the flagstones and out of sight. Were the girls out there? Maggie looked back to the kitchen, considered asking Arlen if that wasn't a bit morbid. Unsafe. Kids around an open pool. The wind. Inevitable rain. And then, was there a stain on the stonework where Brynn had fallen? Who had scrubbed it clean if it was gone? How could Arlen ever allow her kids out there again, and why had they ever been allowed out there at all?

She couldn't bring herself to approach the doors. But she also couldn't, in good conscience, not let Arlen know that her kids were out there on their own. Because what if one of them fell in? How would Maggie forgive herself for that?

"Len?" Maggie started to move back toward the kitchen, but she paused when she heard both Hayden and Hope charging down the upstairs hallway.

*But . . .* Her attention shifted to the double doors once more. *Maybe I should . . .* No. She looked away with a shudder, readjusted her grip on her bag, and slowly began to ascend the stairs to her old room.

She knew: it was still here. That thing still lurked within those rooms.

## SEVEN

---

IT WAS STRANGE to hear laughter echo down the upstairs hallway. It felt sacrilegious—something that would anger Brynn's spirit if only she could hear. But mourning wasn't meant for children. It was doubtful that Maggie's gleefully squealing three-year-old niece knew what death was, or understood that after the ambulance that had parked outside the house had driven away, she'd never see her Auntie Bee again. But that was Hayden. Hope, on the other hand, appeared to understand that Aunt Brynn was forever gone; she simply didn't seem to care.

With laughter continuing to reverberate through the stairwell, Maggie found herself staring at Brynn's closed bedroom door. Her duffel bag hung heavy off her left shoulder as her fingers extended toward the knob, both wanting and dreading to see the mess that her sister had left. It had been a few days, and while it was possible that Arlen had replaced the shattered window to keep the house secure, it was doubtful there had been time to fix the carpet. It was almost certain that there would be spatter, if not dried pools of rust dotting the rug.

Maggie jerked her hand away from the knob when Hayden came barreling down the hall in a flurry of giggles. She was a burst of sparkles and bright green tulle, swinging a ribbon-adorned Tinker Bell wand back and forth like a hatchet without a blade. Chased by Hope—who was still decked out in her dance leotard—little Hayden was blinded by the joy of

her big sister's pursuit. She didn't seem to notice Maggie standing there. The toddler ran by in a rush—still smelling of French eyes and chickens—and let out a gleeful twitter at the end of the hall, then disappeared through an open door that must have led into her room.

Hope, however, was more observant. Her laughter stalled and her smile faded as soon as her aunt Maggie came into view. Slowing her steps, Hope approached her aunt with a mixture of hesitation and suspicion. She paused a few feet from Maggie before allowing her brown eyes to flick to Brynn's closed bedroom door.

"Are you going in there, Aunt Magdalene?" Hope's question felt ominous, as though the answer should have been a resounding *no*. And yet Maggie slowly nodded in the affirmative. "Uh-oh," Hope said, responding to Maggie's gesture.

"What?" Maggie asked.

"Mom said to stay out." The girl shifted her weight from one ballet shoe to the other, back and forth in a half-hearted *temps lié*.

That meant Maggie was correct in her assumption, however dark: there were still signs of suicide in there. But she posed the question anyway. "Did your mom say why?"

Then again, maybe it *had* been cleaned up. Perhaps Arlen had warned the kids to stay away simply to keep them from rifling through Brynn's stuff. It was a matter of respect. But there was something in Hope's expression that suggested otherwise, something that assured Maggie that stories had been told, the kind of dark tales Brynn used to tell at the dinner table, about bad guys and boogeymen, of shadows and phantoms.

"You shouldn't play in there." Hope twisted her fingers in front of her, as though trying to wrench them free of her hands. "Bad things are inside. It's

why Auntie Bee got sick.”

Maggie furrowed her eyebrows. “Sick?”

“Yuh-huh.”

“Sick how?” Maggie asked. It was only then that she caught a whiff of something strange: smoke, or a freshly extinguished candlewick—faint but undeniably there. It smelled like Brynn’s room, but out in the hall.

Hope shrugged. “I dunno.”

“What—is something burning?” Maggie’s gaze roved the hall, searching for the source of the scent. But she was distracted a moment later.

“I gotta go watch Hay,” Hope said.

“Hold on—” Maggie reached out to her niece, but Hope skittered away, too quick to catch. “Hope, *wait* . . .”

But Hope disappeared into the same room Hayden had. A beat later, the door slammed shut behind both kids, assuring Aunt Maggie that their conversation was over. No grown-ups allowed.

From downstairs, an aggravated yell. “No slamming!”

Maggie looked back to Brynn’s door. Arlen hadn’t mentioned anything about Brynn being sick. And during their phone conversations, neither had Brynn. Maybe *sick* had been the only way Arlen knew how to explain suicide to such young kids. Because didn’t you have to be heartsick to take your own life?

But for Arlen to tell them that bad things were in there was a total Brynn move. Bad things, like contagious depression, like a communicable alternative lifestyle. Maggie couldn’t help it. She snorted, imagining Arlen’s reaction if, years from now, Harrison came home with dyed-purple hair, or Hope showed up from college with a ring through her nose and a combat-boot-wearing boyfriend at her elbow.



She reached out to Brynn's door again, gave it a few light taps. *Knock knock*. "Did you hear that, Bee?" she murmured into the empty hallway. "Bad things—" She stopped midsentence, her attention diverted to where her own room used to be. And while the hallway was empty, she could swear she'd seen something skitter across the backdrop of the farthest wall. "What . . . ?"

And then, a *tap tap tap* resounded from inside Brynn's locked-up room.

Maggie staggered backward. She gawked at the door before her. Had she really just heard that, or was this house playing tricks on her already? *Just a loose screw, Crazy*.

"Shit." She whispered the word to herself, though it was unclear whether she was cursing the possibility of her imagination running wild or the fact that the house was still what it used to be: visited. "Shit, shit, *shit*."

She turned away from Brynn's door and fled, just as the girls had, walking just a little too quickly to where her bedroom had once been.

. . .

With her nerves rattled, Maggie was more than happy to leave the house, even if it was to visit the mortuary. For the third time in her life, she found herself surrounded by caskets. A tall, sad-looking twig of a man in a three-piece suit ushered her into the showroom at the back of the funeral home, every other footfall accented by the softest squeak of his leather shoes. "I'll give you some time," he said, not once raising his voice above a hushed murmur. He smelled like coffee and the faintest twinge of cigarettes. When he tried to smile, it made him look pained, like he had a bad stomachache. Finally, he gave up on niceties and left her alone in the showroom of the dead.

The room was mood-lit, which felt both fitting and grossly inappropriate all at once. In the dimness that was probably meant to be soothing but simply came off as bizarre, coffins were lined up in perfect rows of two. In the center, upon raised and dramatically illuminated platforms, the showpieces: funerary boxes gleaming with lacquer and silver-plated finishings, propped open to boast quilted velvet interiors, matching pillows, and memorial plaques. There should have been a sign: SHOW THE DECEASED YOU LOVE THEM! SHOW THEM (WITH YOUR WALLET) THAT THEY WILL BE FOREVER MISSED!

There was a backlit display case with urns of all shapes and materials centered upon the back wall: hardwood boxes carved with praying hands and crosses; brass lidded canisters featuring doves and flowers, one sporting an eagle flying across an etched American flag. Brynn would have *loved* that one. Patriotism at its best. All the display pieces were spotless and free of fingerprints. The room was so silent, so torpid, it might as well have been six feet beneath the ground.

If it had been up to Maggie, Brynn would have been cremated. Her ashes would have been placed in a simple wooden box until half of them could be spread in Bonaventure Cemetery, while the remainder would be sprinkled beneath the oaks of Forsyth Park—two of Brynn's favorite places in their hometown. But Arlen had taken it upon herself to make the arrangements, and because Maggie wasn't bearing any of the financial burden, it felt wrong to put up a fight. Burying a sibling was hard enough as it was. Disagreement would only make it worse. Maggie refused to make this any harder, and so she selected a simple black casket with white satin trim. Elegant and understated, unlike the pink-and-gold nightmare she'd

now spotted at the far end of the room. Brynn would have been gleeful had she seen it. Hell, she would have climbed in and taken a selfie.

After Maggie placed a signature on the solemn man's clipboard, and after he'd expressed his whispered condolences another half dozen times, she stepped out of the building and slipped into Brynn's black Toyota Camry. She sat motionless in the driver's seat for a long while, staring at the selection of pendants that hung from the rearview mirror: a cameo of a skeleton bride and a tiny bird skull attached to wooden rosary beads. The dash was swathed in a black velvet cover—a custom job Brynn had commissioned on Etsy, if Maggie had to guess. Vinyl stickers of bands, most of which Maggie had never heard of, decorated the back window. She'd only noticed the bumper sticker after she'd pulled into the mortuary's parking lot. MY OTHER CAR IS A HEARSE. It would have been funny had the circumstances been different, but now, all it made Maggie want to do was cry.

Distraction came in the form of a soft chime from the depths of her messenger bag. A text. Maggie let her head fall back against the headrest and closed her eyes. Dillon. Oh God, she still hadn't responded to any of his countless messages. She was an asshole, and she owed him an apology. Hopefully, he'd say it wasn't a big deal. There would be tension, but neither one of them would dare bring it up. She breathed out into the windswept heat of the car. Despite Florence crawling toward the coast, it was still in the midnineties. These summer storms rarely brought relief. Jutting her arm into her bag, she fished out her cell.

But it wasn't Dillon. It was Cheryl.

ARE YOU STANDING ME UP?

It would be nice to see her again. Maggie only wished the occasion hadn't been so sad. A wedding. A random Wilmington encounter. Hell, even an awkward run-in at a high school reunion would have been better, as if Maggie would ever attend such an event. Brynn, though? She'd been patiently awaiting her ten-year homecoming, looking forward to walking the halls, busting into her old locker, graffitiing the bathroom stalls, and making up her crazy stories around the punch bowl she'd just spiked.

*Me?* Brynn had said. *I can't wait to see all those losers again. Prim little bitches, empty-headed jocks—they'll all believe me when I tell them I've founded my own chapter of the Church of Satan.*

*Right,* Maggie had replied; it had been during one of their last calls. *Because that's totally plausible.*

*Yeah, you may be right. I'll go more subtle, draining cadavers of their juices at the morgue or heading a hazmat crew that removes dead bodies from, like, those houses on Hoarders or something.*

*Proceed with caution,* Maggie had warned. *People love that show.*

*Yeah. You're right. Digging bodies out of piles of their own garbage will probably get me voted onto reunion prom court. Back to the drawing board.*

*Or maybe you want to be on prom court. Like Carrie.*

There had been a long silence on the line, and then, after a beat: *Would it be weird if I brought my own bucket of pigs' blood?* And then, both girls had cackled together like a tiny coven of witches.

Brynn would miss it, now. There would be no *Carrie* reenactment at their old high school. And Maggie would miss Brynn.

"I'm sorry, Bee," she whispered. "I should have come home like you'd asked." The tears started to well up. She squinted them away, her phone blipping in her hand.

CAN'T STAY LONG, JUST SO YOU KNOW.

She texted Cheryl back.

ON MY WAY NOW.

She didn't text Dillon, but she would. Later. After she met with Cheryl, after she got some things off her chest.

. . .

Impresso Espresso had once been one of Maggie's favorite places, with an old fireplace in the corner that crackled with the burning of real pine logs during winters that were never actually cold. She had spent countless afternoons upon the cushions of those cozy couches and armchairs—sometimes laughing with friends; sometimes alone and upset, lamenting. That fireplace was currently dormant, and while the doors were typically propped open in the summer, the wind was too vicious for that now. Some storms passed quickly, but Florence refused to let up.

When Maggie pulled the door open to step inside, Cheryl Polley's ruddy brown hair blew across the curve of a bare shoulder like something out of a shampoo commercial. But she looked nervous, unhappy to be there, as though meeting up with her former best friend for the first time in years was the last thing she wanted to do. It was disappointing to so readily recognize Cheryl's lack of enthusiasm, but Maggie understood the source of her old friend's frown. What happened in the house hadn't just destroyed Maggie's family. It had mauled her most cherished friendship as well.

"Cher?" Maggie paused next to the little table Cheryl had selected, close to a window and away from the line of coffee drinkers who came and went despite Florence's onslaught.

"Hey." Cheryl rose from her seat and gave Maggie a slightly awkward hug. Cheryl's white tank top—faded from one too many washes—sporting a

cross in front of a row of stylized pines. SAINT MICHAEL'S YOUTH CAMP was scrawled around the design. Cheryl had been into religion when they had been younger, but she'd really gone gung ho after the two had fallen out. Now, she was a full-time camp counselor when she wasn't taking classes at the seminary. Maggie wondered if Brynn knew what path Cheryl had taken in life, and whether, when she had learned it, her eyes had rolled right out of her head.

"You look great," Maggie said, taking a backward step when Cheryl released her from their embrace "How are you?" She knew the answer to that question before Cheryl had a chance to retake her seat.

"I *was* fine." Blunt. To the point. "Until you called."

She deserved that, but it still stung to hear it.

Sitting down, Maggie peered at the scarred tabletop, unsure of what to say. "I'm sorry," was the only thing that came out.

"Are you?"

"Yes, I am, Cher." Maggie tipped her chin upward to meet her old friend's eyes. She liked to think that the strength of their former bond couldn't altogether fade, but Cheryl was making it clear: that was a long time ago. She had moved on.

"Anyway . . ." Cheryl looked away. "This is just a lot to handle. I don't really know what to say other than *I'm sorry for your loss*, but I know how much you love that."

This was true. After Maggie's dad had his accident, all that free-flowing sympathy had desensitized her. After her mom went, the condolences just felt flat-out strange. But Brynn—well . . . both Maggie and Cher had grown up hearing the whispers. People were almost certainly saying suicide

was no surprise. If anything, they were likely shocked that Brynn had waited as long as she had.

“How did you find out?” Maggie finally asked. Were their inner circles already talking? Was Brynn’s demise starring local gossip, too hot to keep quiet?

“Arlen was the source,” Cher said. “She spoke to Father John about the funeral, Father John mentioned it to someone at the rectory, that someone else told someone else. It got back to me, since I’m working at the camp and people know we were close.” *Were*. “You know how things go around here.” She shifted her weight in her seat, narrowed her eyes at the sweating plastic cup of iced coffee next to her elbow. “But I suppose it’s better that you hear it from me than from someone else.”

“Hear what from you?” Maggie’s attention shifted from Cheryl’s hands to her face. “That my sister is dead? Or that you finally believe me?” A moment later, she was glaring at the tabletop again. What kind of family had so much tragedy? Three deaths in less than a decade, all under the same roof. It was unheard of, like one of Brynn’s weird stories brought to life. Had what Maggie done been so bad? Had she incited something unthinkable?

Cheryl’s fingers snaked across the table, catching Maggie’s hand. “No,” she said. “You know that’s crazy, Maggie.” *Just a loose screw . . .*

“Then why are you so pissed at me?” Maggie pulled her hand away. “If you think it’s all bullshit, why did I practically have to beg you to meet me here?”

“Because I know what you want to talk about,” Cheryl fired back. “And I don’t want to talk about it. What’s wrong with that?”

"You're scared," Maggie said flatly. Cheryl belted out a laugh, setting Maggie's already frayed nerves on a razor's edge. "What? Why is that funny?"

"Because it's nonsense," Cheryl said. "We've been through this before. First with your dad, then with—"

"Yeah, thanks for the recap, Cher. *I know.*"

Their friendship had deteriorated more than a year before Maggie's father had died, but to Cheryl's credit, when she had heard the news, she had come running. Maggie had bawled her eyes out on Cheryl's shoulder; she had blubbered about how it had been her fault, how if she hadn't gone to the beach with her cousins, maybe she could have saved her father from such a tragic fate. *It told me not to go, but I went, and now . . .* Back then, at thirteen, Cheryl hadn't been of the mind to rebuke Maggie's belief that she had somehow cursed her father. By the time Maggie came back to Savannah for her mother's funeral, Cheryl had firmly placed one foot upon the neck of logical explanation and the other in the hands of God.

"Look." Cheryl breathed out a sigh, then leaned back in her seat. "I don't want to come off as unfeeling or anything, but Brynn had issues. She always did. When I said *hear it from me*, what I meant was that people *are* talking. And they're saying some crazy stuff."

Maggie glanced up again. Cheryl's cinnamon-colored hair was glowing in the sunshine. For a blip of a second, Maggie saw the girl she used to love more fiercely than anyone in the world. Her closest friend—the one who used to help her catch lightning bugs in empty pickle jars; the girl she used to walk with along the train tracks, placing pennies upon the rails; the companion who had allowed Maggie to place a stupid board across her knees, who had put her hands upon a planchette, not knowing what the



future would hold; the friend who, after what had happened in Maggie's room, refused to ever come over again. The one who had torn her side of their best-friend necklace from her neck and thrown it onto Maggie's carpet so many years before.

"Like what?" Maggie asked.

"Just crazy stuff." Cheryl rolled her eyes. "Like how Brynn had been into witchcraft and voodoo. Personally, I think that's ridiculous. There's a rumor that she was a Satanist or whatever . . ."

Maggie would have laughed had she not been on the verge of throwing up, if Cheryl herself hadn't once suggested that Brynn was into *weird stuff* because she didn't look like everyone else. Or maybe Brynn had gone through with the Church of Satan story after all, and all of Bible-thumping Savannah had bought the lie.

"But someone said they saw her hanging out at Friendship Park in the middle of the night just a few days before all of this happened, lingering next to the kids' graves," Cheryl continued. "Just like she used to when we were kids."

Maggie tensed. Okay, Brynn hadn't mentioned anything about Friendship Park in years. After their dad's accident, she hadn't breathed the word *ghost* in Maggie's presence, as though afraid of waking a slumbering beast, and she certainly hadn't gone to the graveyard unless it was with the family, in broad daylight, to place flowers onto their father's headstone.

"That particular detail," Cher said, looking down to her hands. "Well, it's a little hard to rebuff, you know?"

"She was probably just visiting our parents," Maggie protested.

"Okay, I'll give you that. But then she showed up at Saint Michael's . . ."

“Wait, *what?*” Now this was making no sense. The idea of Brynn attending church was ludicrous—unless, of course, she had gone there to burn it to the ground.

“I know, right?” Cher gave Maggie a look: *Yeah, weird.* “I wasn’t there. Camp has been nuts this year. We’ve got, like, fifty kids running around. But my gran never misses a service. She saw Brynn sitting in the last pew . . . and Maggie, she said that Brynn looked *bad.*”

“Bad how?”

“Sad, exhausted . . . sick, I guess.”

*Sick.*

“And less than a week after my gran brings up Brynn Olsen, I get a call from her little sister, as though you had somehow overheard Gran ask, *How is that friend Maggie of yours, anyhow?*”

Maggie’s stomach pitched. She stared down at her lap, the buzz of people coming and going nothing but muffled cotton in her ears. It didn’t make sense. Why hadn’t Arlen mentioned Brynn being sick? Maybe Arlen hadn’t noticed it with how scarce Brynn had made herself in the end, but that theory was blown apart by Hope’s warning Maggie to stay out of Brynn’s room. If the *kids* knew that Brynn had been ill, Arlen did, too. She should have at least texted Maggie to let her know. Or at least brought it up on their drive from the airport.

And then there was the church. The *church*. Why in the world would Brynn have—

“Sanctuary.” Maggie whispered the word beneath the noise of the café, the revelation lighting up each and every nerve.

*It’s the only thing churches are good for, Mags,* Brynn had explained during one of their cemetery visits. *If you’re scared, you go to church and the evil can’t*

*get you, because evil things can't go inside there.*

*How come?* Maggie had asked.

*Because evil is superstitious, Brynn had said. It's like walking under a ladder or breaking a mirror. You know nothing bad is gonna happen, but you aren't gonna go out of your way to do those things, either. Evil stuff doesn't believe in God. But it's not gonna go marching into a church to find out if God is real, either. Evil stuff is a coward. So, if you're ever really scared, you go to church.*

Brynn had been running from something. She was seeking protection.

"She was scared," Maggie said. "It's why she kept asking me to come home, but I didn't. I could have, but I—"

"Maggie." Cheryl reached out again, placing her hand on top of Maggie's own. "I wish you'd stop this," she said softly, her words muddled by the hiss of an espresso machine, the whir of a burr grinder. "You *have* to stop this. You're going to drive yourself insane."

"So, how do I stop it?" Maggie asked, genuinely wanting to know the solution. Because as far as she was concerned, there was no way. This was her life. It was her fault. It was who she'd become.

"I don't know, I just . . . I wish there was some way to prove . . ." Cheryl paused, then straightened in her seat.

Maggie looked up at her friend. "What?"

Cheryl's expression went dark. Her features shifted from soft to determined. "You know I'm training to become ordained," she said. "I'm not official yet, but maybe if I was there, with my knowledge. I don't know. Maybe it would help."

"Where's *there*? Help with what?" Maggie shook her head. "What are you talking about?"

"Let's just do it again."

“Do it again . . .” Maggie swallowed against the lump that had lodged itself in her throat, dry like a pill. It was pointless to play dumb. Neither one of them had forgotten their final night together, the evening they had started to grow apart. “But you said—”

“I know what I said. But my beliefs don’t have any influence over yours, right? You aren’t just going to believe me if I say *it’s not real*. But if I can *show* you . . . I think it would help.”

*Help.* Hearing that word come out of Cheryl’s mouth made Maggie want to jump out of her seat and march across the parking lot toward Brynn’s car, just get in and haul ass out of there. *What would Jesus do?* Brynn would have thrown her head back and howled: *Run, Forrest! Run for your life!*

Maggie pulled away from Cheryl’s touch. “I don’t know . . .”

“Look, you’re studying oceanography, right?” Cheryl asked. “That’s what I’ve heard, anyway. Forget me and all the religious stuff. You’re a scientist. If you believe in logic over old wives’ tales, it doesn’t make *sense* for you to have any issues. So, let’s just do it. *Nothing* will happen,” she pressed. “And when we find ourselves sitting there like a couple of idiots, it’ll prove that this has all been in your head.”

Except Cheryl didn’t know the whole story. Nobody did. After Dad, there was no way in the world Maggie dared breathe a word of it to anyone.

*Don’t go.*

She’d promised to be a friend to whatever was living inside her house.

*Don’t go.*

She’d spent countless nights with that board—the same device that had destroyed her and Cheryl’s friendship—but, rather than Cheryl sitting across from her, there was no one. Not even Brynn.

*Don’t go.*

It was Maggie's fault, all of it; it had been her reality for so long. If Cheryl was right, though . . . if she somehow proved that Maggie's role in the deaths of her parents was nonexistent? How would that feel? Who would she become, then? If this tragedy wasn't of her making, who did that make her? Who was she?

Maggie's bottom lip trembled.

"Maggie." Cheryl's tone was steady. "I know we've gone our separate ways. Things aren't the way they used to be. That's just life, you know? But I just . . . I'm sorry how things turned out between us. I feel bad. I've *felt* bad. I owe you this."

"I don't know . . ." She echoed her doubt, barely a whisper this time around.

"Hey, I don't really want to do this, either. I don't know what they'd say if they found out at seminary. But I just . . ." She hesitated. "Maybe I want to make sure, too. Maybe it's something that's been bothering me, that question of *what if*. I mean, you said it wasn't you, right? That night, when we . . ."

Maggie shook her head. No, it hadn't been her. She hadn't spelled out those words. Her fingers had been on the planchette, but her hands had been guided by an invisible force.

"So, let's just do this," Cheryl said, making the decision for them both. "If only to prove to us both that this has nothing to do with you. Okay?"

Maggie squeezed her eyes shut, but she managed a nod. "Okay," she whispered. Because at least Cheryl *wanted* to help. Beyond that, she was on her own.

## EIGHT

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BRYNN'S INFLUENCE OVER her youngest sister came into its own on Maggie's twelfth birthday. Armed with a pocket full of celebratory cash, Maggie wandered the aisles of the local Toys R Us without adult supervision. Her mom was next door at the Barnes & Noble, having a coffee and thumbing through magazines. No matter, though. That birthday cash was burning a hole in Maggie's pocket, begging to be spent.

She didn't know what she was going to buy, but despite officially being a tween, she couldn't quite shake the childish need to leave the store with *something*. The Barbies were immediately passed up; Maggie never was into those, and besides, Arlen had left boxes upon boxes of them up in the attic when she moved out. Maggie considered the stuffed animals, but decided against them—too babyish and boring as far as she was concerned. A selection of art supplies was perused. Maggie loved art, but her desk drawers and half her closet were stuffed full of Crayola markers, sticker books, reams of construction paper, and tubes of glitter glue. Anything she bought would just be a repeat of what she already had. A new bike would have been nice—hers was starting to show some wear and tear, and she didn't even have streamers like Brynn's for her handlebars—but she only had forty bucks. Sure, she could buy streamers now, but putting them on her beat-up old bike seemed lame, and a brand-new bike was way out of her league. Maybe she'd get lucky next year, for her big one-three.

But for now, she aimed herself toward the board games at the back of the store. If she couldn't find something that she'd enjoy on her own, she could at least pick up a game that she and Cheryl could play during their upcoming sleepover. Heck, if she got something good, perhaps Brynn would skip out on talking to her boyfriend all night and want to play, too.

The selection was vast. Floor-to-ceiling game boxes had turned an entire wall of the store into a colorful checkerboard. But none of them sparked Maggie's imagination. That was, until she spied something simpler and far less vibrant than the rest. Tucked into the corner of a shelf like an exile among its more dazzling brethren was a white box bearing a picture of two pairs of hands. They were candlelit, basking in the glow of mystery. One of the pairs bore heavy rings—a fortune-teller gazing not into a crystal ball, but into an off-white plastic heart with a hole in its center; some sort of wooden board lying beneath it, decorated by a smiling sun and discontented moon.

OUIJA, the box announced. MYSTIFYING ORACLE.

Maggie took a step closer, pulled it from the shelf, and flipped it over to see what the game was all about. Except the back of the box was blank—nothing but white cardboard, as if to suggest that what rested inside defied explanation. It was, after all, mystifying. Only the oracle could accurately illustrate its power.

Maggie vacillated over the decision for a few minutes. The Mouse Trap game *did* look fun, and she'd lost a lot of her plastic Hungry Hungry Hippos balls when she had overturned the box in the attic, white marbles spilling everywhere, lost forever among Gram and her mother's useless old junk.

There was, of course, the grown-up option: buy nothing and save the money. But it was her *birthday*. Spending her cash on a game she knew nothing about was risky, but the idea of going home empty-handed was too

lame for words. Besides, those glowing hands were alluring, beckoning her to dare. She glanced over her shoulder. Was a dawdling store employee watching her from behind the shelves, wondering if she had the guts? She didn't see anyone as she tucked the box beneath her arm. If it was awful, she could always return it. At least, if she could get her mom to drive her down here again.

Maggie's mom was waiting for her next door at the bookstore. Sipping a latte from the B&N café and reading a freshly purchased copy of *Southern Living*, she never saw her daughter's purchase or asked for specifics. Stella Olsen wasn't one to pry. Besides, what could Toys R Us possibly stock that Maggie wouldn't be allowed to have?

"Got what you wanted?" was the only question she posed, tossing her paper coffee cup into the trash bin as they walked out to the car. Beyond the magazine, she was clutching a new Nora Roberts novel, more than likely itching to get home, grab a glass of Riesling, and read.

"Yep." Maggie held the bagged board game close to her chest, an anxious tingle assuring her that she was getting away with something she shouldn't have, that she was somehow getting in way over her head. Those mysterious hands on the box didn't seem like they were meant for kids, and there was something ominous about those rings, something foreboding about the blankness of that white cardboard back. Even the cashier, who looked like she was about Brynn's age, had eyeballed Maggie's selection, as if considering warning the twelve-year-old against taking it home. And yet there it had been, next to Operation and Apples to Apples. That in itself was proof enough: she had nothing to worry about, and she couldn't wait to show her sister.



Brynn regarded her little sister's birthday purchase with more skepticism than Maggie had expected.

The fifteen-year-old high-school sophomore peered at the box as she stood in the center of her room, the walls plastered with posters of bands their dad found infinitely amusing—Depeche Mode, the Cure, the Smiths, and a group that called themselves the Police. Maggie thought that was a pretty peculiar name, because who the heck named a band after cops? When Maggie had posed the question a while back, Brynn had shrugged and showed Maggie an old record their dad had given her by the same group. *I guess he grew up listening to them, too*, she had said, wearing the faintest shadow of distaste. It was never cool to be into your old man's music, but that record had somehow found its way onto Brynn's wall—a keystone to a menagerie of glossy paper, all of it radiating outward from a black record sleeve with bright red digital gibberish at its center: GHOST IN THE MACHINE.

"You don't think it's cool?" Maggie asked, disappointed in her sister's nonreaction to the game box Brynn now held in her hands.

"No," Brynn said, flipping the box over for the umpteenth time, as if not believing that it was completely blank. "I've seen these before. They're just a bunch of crap. Too bad, too, because it's not like Mom is gonna drive you all the way back there to return it."

"Well, what's it supposed to do anyway?" Maggie asked.

Brynn gave her kid sister an *Are you serious?* look.

"I mean, it doesn't *say* anything," Maggie reminded her. "The back is blank. I couldn't just open it to see . . ."

"It's supposed to let you talk to the dead," Brynn said.

Maggie felt her eyes widen, big as her mother's fancy teacup saucers—the ones she only used on special occasions, and sometimes not even then. *I don't want the girls damaging them, Peter. They're heirlooms, for heaven's sake.*

"I told you, it's fake," Brynn said. "It's for, like, parties and stuff."

"Oh." Maggie's wide eyes narrowed with subtle disappointment. This impulse purchase was clearly a mistake. "Have *you* played before?"

Brynn shrugged, not committing to an answer.

"Well, can we try it anyway?" Maggie asked. "Since I spent my birthday money?"

"Not now." Brynn dropped the box to her feet and casually toed it beneath her bed.

"Why not?" Maggie asked, looking to the bed skirt that was obscuring her birthday gift from view. "It's my birthday. If it's a party game, let's have a party. And how come it's going under *your* bed and not mine?"

"Because you can't have a proper séance in the middle of the day, dummy," Brynn said. "And because if Mom catches you with that thing, you're gonna have a lot of explaining to do, and you totally suck at excuses. I'm surprised she didn't see it when you bought it."

That was because Maggie had a sneaking suspicion her mother would make her take it back, and now Brynn was confirming her wariness. She didn't ask Brynn why getting caught in possession of the board would have been bad, but the thought of getting in trouble for playing that thing only made her want to try it out more.

"Can we do it tonight?" she asked.

Brynn shrugged, seemingly uninterested. That in itself was weird, because here it was, a chance to speak to spirits beyond the grave, and

Brynn was acting like it was the most boring suggestion ever. Brynn, the girl who couldn't stop telling ghost stories to save her life. Brynn, who once fashioned broken-down cardboard boxes she had painted black around her bed to make it look like a coffin. Brynn, the girl who couldn't stop watching horror movies and claimed one of her favorite songs was a tune by the Smiths called "Pretty Girls Make Graves."

"But Brynn, it's my *birthday*!" Maggie couldn't help it: she whined. Because it wasn't fair. Birthdays only came once a year.

"Fine," Brynn said, relenting. "Whatever. But don't blame me if—" She cut herself off.

"If what?" Maggie asked.

"Nothing," Brynn said, then gave her sister an impatient look. "I'll see you later." That was code for *get out*.

"Okay, see you later," Maggie echoed, too excited by the prospect of an honest-to-goodness birthday séance to complain.

. . .

That night, Maggie wolfed down her birthday dinner—meat loaf and mashed potatoes, which her mom insisted was Maggie's favorite but wasn't (*You love my meat loaf, Maggie*)—and hurriedly cleared the table of plates and glasses. "Where's the fire?" her dad asked, and for the first time in as long as she could remember, Maggie flat-out lied.

"Brynn and I are gonna watch a movie in her room."

"What movie?" Dad asked. "And what about the cake?"

"I don't remember the title," she told him, a pang of guilt twisting up her insides for half a breath, but it wasn't enough to keep her from covering her tracks. She turned away from her father and continued loading the dishwasher. "Besides, I'm too full for cake. Can't we wait a little?"

"Maybe because you devoured your food like a bear," Dad said.

"We can wait," Maggie's mother chimed in. "But it's ice cream cake. Brynn, you're going to have to remember to pull it out of the freezer and let it sit for a while when Maggie is ready."

Brynn didn't respond. She was too busy messing with her flip phone, probably playing Snake or Tetris. Maggie wondered if she'd ever have a phone as cool as her sister's. Maybe she'd ask for one next year, when she'd be thirteen. Then again, what she really wanted was her own computer. Now, she had to use AOL on her dad's machine in his home office downstairs. She wasn't even allowed to have her own screen name, unlike Brynn, who had spent a whole week thinking up the perfect username.

"I was looking forward to that cake," Dad murmured. "I guess I'll wait it out while watching a movie, too. Want to guess what it's called?"

Maggie rolled her eyes. "Da-ad . . ."

"I'll take what's behind door number one, Monty," Brynn said, not looking up. "Oh, that's the *only* door? Such options. I do declare."

"It's a little something called *Die Hard*," their dad announced, always triumphant at the mention of his most beloved film. "Maybe you've heard of it?"

"*Yippee-ki-yay, mother—*"

"Brynn!" Mom.

"*I'm just a fly in the ointment*," Brynn quoted, then snapped closed her phone, got up from the table, and ducked out of the room.

*Just a monkey in the wrench.* Maggie couldn't count how many times her dad had watched that film. Probably at least a hundred thousand, maybe even more. She was convinced her father wanted to be like that cop guy,

John McClane. He probably had dreams of crawling through ventilation systems and dodging bullets and everything. Boys were such wackos.

But *Die Hard* would earn Maggie and Brynn a good two-hour window. Their dad would be absorbed, and their mom had that new novel to pore over. She was a sucker for romance. Her bookshelves were chock-full of the stuff.

When Maggie finally made it up to Brynn's room, the place smelled of melted wax. She wasn't sure where Brynn had gotten all those candles, but there were at least a dozen of them casting odd shadows across the walls. Brynn was playing another one of Simon's borrowed CDs. Last time, it had been a band called Echo and the Bunnymen, which Maggie had thought was cute. This time, it was a soundtrack to a movie called *The Lost Boys*. A guy was singing about crying for his little sister. There was a choir of kids harmonizing something that sounded like the commandments behind him. It gave Maggie the creeps.

"It's like a fire in here," Maggie said, distracting herself from Brynn's music selection.

"Hurry up, get in." Brynn motioned her forward. "Shut the door, before Mom smells it."

"She's reading in Dad's office." Maggie paused, suddenly nervous at the sight of the unboxed board lying on her big sister's bed. It almost looked as though it were glowing, beckoning her toward it, urging her to give in to its mystery, its potential for magic.

"This is *your* idea, you know," Brynn said. "I don't even want to do this . . ."

But Maggie wasn't going to chicken out. There was nothing to fear anyway, right? Brynn had said it was fake. Nothing but a party game. A big

fat hoax.

“Sit.” Brynn pointed to the rug on her floor, then turned down the music. “Cross your legs pretzel-style.” Maggie did as she was told, and Brynn placed the board between them so that it balanced upon their knees. “Now, if you want this to work, don’t screw around. No laughing.”

Maggie nodded again and dropped her fingers on the planchette.

“Lightly,” Brynn said. “Barely touching it. Like this.” She gingerly held her hands above the pointer, as though invisible wires were holding up her wrists.

Maggie lifted her fingers a little, trying to mimic her sister’s position. This was more complicated than she had thought.

“Who do you want to talk to?” Brynn asked, which was surprising; Brynn hardly ever asked Maggie her opinion on anything. Perhaps it was because it was Maggie’s board or her birthday—whatever the reason, Brynn’s graciousness left Maggie blank-brained.

“Umm . . .” She blinked, trying to think above the song slithering from the speakers. Brynn had set that creepy song to repeat. Finally, Maggie blurted out the first dead person she could think of. “Elvis.”

“Oh *God*.” Brynn’s head fell backward, as though the agony of having a kid sister was suddenly too much to bear.

“What? Gram *loves* Elvis,” Maggie insisted.

“Gram also loves Grape Nuts. If we’re going to talk to a dead guy, we may as well talk to someone cool, like Kurt Cobain.”

“Who’s that?” Maggie asked.

Brynn’s head rolled forward again. She looked serious, and a little disgusted. Maggie glanced down to the board, then back to her sister.

“Okay,” Maggie said. “Kirk Cobain.”

*"Kurt."*

"Whatever. So, what do we do?"

"You have to call him to the board," Brynn said. "Say his name, and then say, *I call upon thee.*"

Maggie sucked her lips into her mouth and looked to the heart-shaped pointer between them, the flickering candlelight casting dancing shadows across the plastic.

"How come you don't just do it?" Maggie asked. If Brynn knew how to play, why was she making Maggie run the game?

"Because it's your birthday, remember?" Brynn flashed one of her fake smiles—the kind their dad referred to as *the teenage sneer*. Those smiles drove their mom up the wall. *Why does she have to smile at me like that? Arlen never smiled at me like that!*

"Um, Mr. Kirk Cobain . . ." Did Maggie *really* want to do this?

"Kurt," Brynn corrected for the second time. "It's *Kurt*."

"Jeez, okay. Sorry! *Kurt* Cobain, I call . . . What was it again?"

Brynn groaned. "I call upon thee," she said.

"Oh. Oh yeah." Maggie squared her shoulders. "Mr. Kurt, I call upon thee!"

The planchette stayed where it was, unmoving. Maggie looked up at her sister. "Did I say it right? Are we supposed to move it or something?"

"Shhh!" Brynn hissed, then shut her eyes and breathed in deep. "I'm calling upon the spirit of Kurt Cobain." A pause. "Of Nirvana." Another pause as she peeked at her sister. "Which is a band, for those who are way too lame to know. Probably one of the best bands *ever*, in case you were wondering. Except for Depeche Mode, because Depeche Mode is *the* greatest band of all time."

Maggie rolled her eyes. This was dumb.

"Hey." Brynn narrowed her eyes. "I told you, be *serious*."

"Sorry," Maggie murmured. "I thought it was supposed to be fake, anyway."

"Is there *anyone* here?" Brynn asked, apparently giving up on Kurt. "We call upon the spirits that live inside this house."

". . . Why would there be spirits living inside this house?" Maggie whispered. Nobody had died there, had they? "I thought Mom and Dad built this place from scratch."

"I don't know, Mags!" Brynn huffed. "Maybe if we actually waited for an answer . . ."

"Maybe the house is built on a graveyard," Maggie suggested, gaping at her own suggestion. "Like that one movie we watched about the girl and the TV static. Remember? The one where they put real dead bodies in the swimming pool? That was *so gross*!"

"Ugh, you know what?" Brynn pushed the board off her knees. "I've got stuff to do."

Maggie frowned. "Awh, come on, Bee. Let's try again. I'll be serious this time, I swear."

"I don't feel like it anymore. Besides, I still have homework. And I want to call Simon." Brynn moved to the stereo, popped the CD out of the player, and grabbed her old standby: *Violator. The greatest*.

The mention of Simon sealed the deal. Maggie sighed, because Brynn was *obsessed* with Simon, and if she was thinking about a call, Maggie's quality time with her older sister was officially up, birthday or not.

Maggie reluctantly rose to her feet, then pulled the board game box off the bed and opened it up. "You really think this *never* works?" Maggie



asked, placing the board in its rightful spot. "Even if you're super serious and don't laugh or anything? What if you played it at a cemetery? Wouldn't something have to happen then?"

Brynn grabbed the top of the box off her comforter. "See this?" she asked, tapping a chipped fingernail next to a name. "These guys make toys, Mags. Like Nerf and Sorry! It's meant for entertainment purposes."

"Then why'd you set all this up?" Maggie motioned to the candles, to the ambience of the place. Even the song had been spooky. It seemed like an awful lot of effort if Brynn didn't believe the board could work.

Brynn hesitated for a second, then shrugged. "Because it's your birthday." Her answer rang hollow, not quite right. "I don't know, whatever. Forget I even bothered, okay? Just go."

Maggie frowned down at the board again. Leave it to her to screw it all up.

"But leave the board," Brynn said.

"Huh?"

"Just leave it." She paused, as if considering her own reasoning. "It's safer in here." Except that didn't make sense. If it was just from the toy store, what danger was there? "In case Mom looks," Brynn said, clarifying.

"I'll just hide it," Maggie said. "She won't find it."

That only seemed to irk Brynn even more. "Fine, whatever." She was suddenly hostile. "Just get out, already."

Maggie didn't take offense to Brynn's mood swing. They were standard procedure. *Teen angst* is what their dad liked to say. It paired well with her teenage sneer. But that didn't mean Maggie was happy with being kicked out of Brynn's room so fast. She stared down at the box in her hands, the smell of fire crawling up her nose. The fortune-teller's fancy rings were still

calling to her, still convincing her that, had Brynn only been more patient, something *would* have happened. If Maggie only had faith in the power of the oracle, it was sure to work. Because that was the thing about magic. You had to believe.

An hour before bedtime, Maggie was called down for birthday cake. Brynn didn't come down, too busy yammering with her boyfriend.

"What happened to watching a movie with your sister?" her dad asked. He'd cut a massive piece of ice cream cake for himself and was happily eating it while watching the tail end of his film.

Maggie shrugged, half-heartedly stabbing at her own piece with the tines of her fork. Her mom had bought vanilla. Maggie didn't even like vanilla, just like she'd never been nuts about meat loaf. Everyone knew her favorite was cookies and cream, but her mom never did make a big deal out of that kind of stuff.

"Simon," Maggie murmured.

"Ah." Dad nodded, as if that name explained everything. "Well, you can finish watching this with me, right?"

Another shrug. She didn't much feel like *Die Hard* tonight. "I'm just gonna go upstairs and read," she said.

"You sure, Crazy?" Dad asked.

"Yeah." She'd take her cake with her. Maybe she really would read, or maybe she'd do something else.

Once upstairs, she shut her door behind her and, despite the rule of no locked doors, twisted the lock button to engage the bolt. She abandoned her cake plate atop her desk. It would melt there, nothing but a pool of cream and soggy cake until her mom found it in the morning. Maggie didn't have any candles like Brynn, so she turned on the closet light instead, leaving the

door open a crack while the rest of the room was left dark. It was there, in the glowing long rectangle of light, that Maggie took a seat upon her floor, placed the board upon her knees, and rested her fingers upon the planchette the way Brynn had shown her.

“I call upon thee,” she whispered. “Is there anybody here?”

She waited. Chewed her bottom lip. Her nerves roiled around her stomach. But nothing happened. She began to slide the pointer’s three felt-covered feet around to spell out random things. MAGS. BIRTHDAY. SIMON. DUMB. And then, just as she was about to give up and place the board back in its box, the planchette jerked toward the upper-left-hand side of the board.

YES.

Startled, Maggie pulled her hands away. A second later, she was shoving the board, the empty box, and the pointer beneath her bed before crawling onto her mattress, spooked. “Whatever,” she whispered, coiling her arms around her knees. “It’s just for parties,” she told herself. “It’s a hoax, like Bee said.”

Except that didn’t feel true.

And the soft rustling that came from her closet later that night only convinced her more.

## NINE

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THE LAST TIME Maggie had come home—three years ago—her bedroom had been untouched since she had left. Her mother, as though in unspoken apology, had left it just as it had looked the day Maggie had left Savannah. But what Arlen had referred to as Maggie's room was now unrecognizable; its only familiarity was its location—still at the end of the hall, on the right, across from the bathroom that Maggie and Brynn had fought over while growing up.

She hadn't bothered taking a good look around before heading off to the mortuary, but now she was faced with the full impact of her room's transformation. The walls, which had once been painted a vibrant ocean blue, were now a pedestrian beige. The gallery wall she had created with a mishmash of wildlife posters, framed photographs, and water-themed watercolors was gone. In its place was a mirror flanked by a trio of small canvases—black-and-white landscapes that Maggie had seen at a Wilmington Target while shopping for apartment essentials. Surprisingly, her furniture remained, albeit unrecognizable beneath a face-lift of white paint.

Maggie slid her hands into the back pockets of her jeans and spun around, her gaze falling onto the closed closet door. She'd left a lot of stuff in there when she'd taken off for college. Arlen hadn't called to ask about whether Maggie wanted to keep any of the clothes she'd left behind, or

asked if she wanted the novels she had alphabetically organized along her bookshelves, either. Those books, now missing, had been replaced by bric-a-brac that gave the room a staged Pottery Barn feel. “Probably tossed it all up into the attic,” she muttered, imagining a tower of disorganized boxes awaiting her return among both her mother’s and grandmother’s things. Poor Gram. She had passed away due to complications after yet another surgery. Gramps had followed her shortly after. *Probably for the better*, Maggie thought. It would have been hard for them to deal with their daughter’s passing, but the death of a grandchild? Impossible.

She took a tentative step toward the closet, a door that had been a constant source of anxiety, one that never seemed to want to stay closed, that emanated weird noises from within. Scratching, like there might have been a mouse in the walls. Stuff falling off hangers and shelves. Things that, when she complained about them to her parents, had been written off with perfectly logical explanations. *It’s just your imagination, kiddo*. Her father’s insistence failed to help her sleep at night. She had loathed that closet up until her very last day in that house. But now, with the room redone, it felt safer to approach.

She expected to see nothing but emptiness—maybe a couple of towels thrown over the bar, some hangers for guests. But when she pulled open the door, she was taken aback. Arlen might have tossed some of Maggie’s stuff upstairs, but it looked as though she’d tried to cram the majority of it right here into the walk-in. Confronted with the things of her past, Maggie’s initial reaction was to recoil. She didn’t want to dredge up the unease with which she’d lived for so long. It’s why she had left, why she did everything in her power not to come back. The heavy burden of responsibility was too

much to bear, here. At least out in Wilmington, she could distract herself with Dillon, with school.

But again, a sense of calm pulled at the corners of her heart. *It's just stuff.* Something to keep her occupied while she was here. Because if she had no interest in keeping any of it, she could at least do Arlen a favor and liquidate the stuff. It was something to keep Maggie busy, to keep her from sitting in the hall across from Brynn's bedroom door, staring at the knob, willing her still-to-be-interred sister to pull it open and give her that signature teenage sneer she'd never quite shaken off. *Hey, dummy.*

Maggie moved the stack of book boxes out of the closet to make space, then confronted the racks of clothes she hadn't worn in years. That, paired with all of her abandoned shoes, would fill up at least a half dozen trash bags. They'd be tumbled down the stairs, tossed into the back of Brynn's Camry, and driven to the Salvation Army before Maggie's return flight three days from now. All that stuff had been left behind because her apartment in Wilmington was small—less than six hundred square feet with two tiny closets; at least, that's what she had told herself while packing hardly anything for her first semester away. But part of Maggie had been glad to get rid of the possessions that had made her who she had been in the past. The whole point of going to Wilmington was to get out of town, to start over, to forget all the bullshit with her mom, to erase what had happened with that goddamn board.

She juttet an arm between a couple of hanging shirts and shoved them aside before surveying her shoes. A perfectly decent pair of runners sat among a menagerie of otherwise worn-out sneakers. She'd stuff those into her duffel bag. Running along The Loop always helped clear her head.

Now, after what happened to Brynn, Maggie might very well have to pound the pavement every morning to keep herself from going mad.

She plucked up the sneakers to place them aside, then glanced to the overhead shelf. It was stacked with plastic tubs full of more clothes. Various shoe boxes were stockpiled in the upper corner, stuffed with pictures and high school memories. But there was an oddity as well. Just behind those boxes, there was an old sweater—not folded or hung like the rest, but thrown, as if in an attempt to hide something from view.

Maggie furrowed her eyebrows, tossed the sneakers onto the bed behind her, and rose up on her tiptoes to snag the sweater by its hem. But she hesitated as soon as her fingers touched the cording.

*Tap tap tap.* The sound came from behind her.

Maggie's pulse skipped like a needle on a dusty record.

Standing among the things that had made up her previous life, her right arm still held aloft, she felt something brush up against her; something waist-height and featherlight, just enough to electrify the skin. The light in the room shifted, as though someone—or something—had snuck up behind her.

Maggie didn't move. Didn't breathe. She squeezed her eyes shut and waited for that all-too-familiar sense of not being alone to pass, as it always had; to pass, but to never quite leave her, because it was always there. Always radiating from shadowed corners. Stopping her in her tracks as she walked through the house, warm one second, cold the next. *Drafts*, her dad had explained. *Brynn's stories*, her mother had scoffed. *Maybe a little of both*, Maggie had told herself, purposefully forgetting the fact that Brynn's stories consistently held a strange sort of truth.

But now, rather than that feeling of not being alone fading, she felt small fingers coil around her left hand instead.

She jumped at the sensation, her right arm jackknifing away from the closet's upper shelf. Still clinging to the hem of that discarded sweater, she inadvertently yanked it down from its resting place. Something heavy tumbled along with it, hitting the carpet with a hard thud.

"Jeezy creezy, Auntie M!"

Maggie exhaled a yelp, both hands fluttering protectively to her chest. She stared at Hope, who had somehow soundlessly snuck into the room.

Hope squinted her eyes as she studied her aunt, much the way a kid would inspect an interesting insect—perhaps just before tearing off its wings. "Are you *okay*?"

"Yeah," Maggie said, trying to play it off. "Yeah, I'm fine. You just scared me, that's all. What's up?"

And what the hell was that smell? It was the second time she'd caught a whiff of smoke since coming home. It must have been Hope—the scent was coming from her clothes, as though she'd stood in front of a charcoal barbeque a few days prior. Dillon smelled like that often. *It's manly*, he said in his best-but-still-terrible Dexter Morgan impersonation. *It smells like testosterone and red meat. Like Cro-Magnon.* Perhaps Howie had been grilling something for dinner a few days past? Maggie remembered from her own childhood, the scent of burning charcoal could take days to fade if you didn't wash the clothes.

"I just wanted to see if you want an Otter Pop. We've got a bunch in the—hey." Hope's attention wavered. She furrowed her eyebrows, then pushed down against the billowing tulle of her tutu to look at the sweater that lay



between them both. “What’s this?” She leaned down, plucked up the woolen fabric, and moved it aside.

And there, lying faceup, was porcelain-faced Dolly.

Maggie’s heart launched itself into her throat. She was suddenly scrambling out of the closet, pushing Hope along with her before slamming the door shut.

“It’s nothing,” she said. “Just some old junk. Let’s go get that Otter Pop.”

Hope peered at her aunt’s peculiar reaction. “That’s not—”

“Downstairs.” Maggie’s tone was clipped, more forceful. She needed to get out of that room. Her hand fell upon Hope’s shoulder, guiding the girl toward the open door. “I hope you have cherry,” she said. “That’s the only kind of Otter Pop I’ll eat.”

Small talk. Optimism that she’d be able to steady her trembling breath by the time they reached the kitchen. Because, while that doll had in fact been Brynn’s, Maggie could swear that Dolly’s face had changed.

What had once been a blank expression was now more of a smile. As though welcoming Maggie home.

. . .

“Shit!” An involuntary curse tumbled from Maggie’s throat and into the gale. A trash bag fell from her fingers and into the garbage bin along the curb. Her hands groped at her shoulders and neck, as though touch alone could exorcise her worsening pain. But countless sick days, a handful of hospital stays, CT scans and X-rays, a spinal tap, and an MRI had long extinguished that sort of wishful thinking. By Maggie’s senior year, four different doctors had been left stumped, all four exhaling sighs of exasperation and declaring that her phantom pain was spawned by grief.

*It may be psychological*, one had suggested.

*Might just be that you're still growing,* another had murmured around the cap of his pen.

*If this was the old days, you'd be put in a mental ward as a hysteric,* Brynn had joked, but Maggie hadn't found it funny, probably because it was true.

She jabbed her fingers into the meat of her shoulders and glared at the bag inside the bin. Hope had been mistaken about the Otter Pops. There hadn't been any in the freezer, and so Maggie had gone upstairs to take care of . . . that thing. Hidden among an assortment of threadbare T-shirts and items that weren't suitable for donation, and wrapped in that old sweater like a mummy twirled in gauze, was the doll. She couldn't stand looking at it. It reminded her too much of the visits to Friendship Park, both with and without Brynn. It coaxed the memory of sleepless nights to the forefront of her mind, all those evenings she'd slept on the couch even as a teen, only to be teased by Brynn for being afraid of the dark.

Pivoting on the soles of her sneakers, she tried to fend off what felt like a million pounds pressing down onto her bones. *It may be psychological.* That doll wasn't the problem. It never had been. It was this house. It was making her sick, too laden with sorrow and guilt, with memories too terrible to recall.

"Auntie Magdalene!"

Maggie started at the sound of Hope's squeaky little-girl voice carried upon the wind, exhaling a soft mew when the motion sent an electric jolt of pain down the side of her neck. The kid positively refused to leave her alone. It was as though the house had assigned Maggie a watcher, and Hope had been selected for the job.

Hope stopped in her tracks upon the driveway, as if spooked by her aunt's suffering. Her hair whipped across her face as she held a bright red

Otter Pop in her right hand. "Auntie Magdalene?"

"Can you call me Maggie?" she asked.

"But I like *Magdalene*," Hope protested. "It's like the lady from the Bible."

That was precisely why Maggie *didn't* like her full name. A once-possessed woman who had watched Jesus die, who'd gained her sainthood by way of repentance. If all of this was somehow supposed to turn Maggie into a martyr, she wasn't sure how much more lamentation she could take.

"They were in the garage fridge, not the kitchen one." Hope thrust the Otter Pop in Maggie's direction. "What were you throwing away? And what's wrong with your neck?"

"Just cleaning out my old room," Maggie said, "and I'm fine. I just pulled a muscle. You shouldn't be out here . . ."

"You mean the stuff in the closet?" Hope glared at the trash can, looking awfully serious for someone her age.

"Yeah." Maggie plucked the ice pop from Hope's fingers and motioned for the girl to follow her up the front porch steps. Florence's roiling clouds weren't letting up anytime soon. Maggie had lived through some lengthy storms, but this one was taking the cake.

"Come on," she told the girl. "Let's get back inside. It's going to pour."

Hope turned to follow her aunt up to the house, latching on to her arm as they both hit the porch. "But why are you cleaning out your room when you're going to stay?" Hope asked. "Now that Auntie Bee is gone, you *gotta* stay. Isn't that why you came back?"

Maggie froze upon the porch planks. She slowly turned her head to look at her elder niece. Save for the dance wear, it was like looking through a

wormhole twenty years deep. Grown-up Maggie on one side. Young Maggie just a foot away.

“What were you throwing away, Auntie Magdalene?” Hope asked again, but this time something dark flickered across her face. Something knowing, as though she’d seen what Maggie had done with the doll. Maggie pulled her arm free of Hope’s grasp.

“Nothing,” she said. “Just trash.” She took a single step away from the child.

Hope’s gaze narrowed faintly, as if reading the lie. “The lady from the Bible,” she said, “had seven devils inside her, Auntie M. I learned that at Sunday school. You don’t want devils crawling inside your stomach, do you, Auntie M? If you tell fibs, the devils can get inside.”

And then, as if to punctuate the kid’s point, pain shot through Maggie’s neck once again. Maggie hissed through her teeth, her hand clamping down against the ache.

“You should always stretch before dancing,” Hope continued. “My teacher says muscles are like rubber bands. You can hurt yourself real bad if you don’t.”

Arlen stepped outside through the open front door. “Maggie? What are you two doing out here? It’s positively hideous. Hope: inside, now. Go play with your sister.” Hope exhaled a huff and stomped her bare feet as she disappeared into the foyer, exiled to watch over a boisterous toddler who could be heard from somewhere deep inside the house.

“Sorry.” Arlen issued the apology only when Hope was out of earshot. Arlen’s attention paused upon the cherry ice pop in Maggie’s grasp, then trailed back to her sister’s face. “She’s a bit of a hanger-on. When she heard you were coming, she got really excited.”

“Kind of weird, don’t you think?” Maggie asked. Arlen shook her head, not understanding what could possibly be weird about a niece being clingy and enthralled by a woman she knew nothing about. Then again, kids were strange. Indecipherable. Precisely why Maggie didn’t want one of her own.

“Did you take that Tylenol?” Arlen asked, changing the subject.

“I forgot,” Maggie murmured. “Hey, Len? Why didn’t you tell me Bee was sick?”

“What?” Arlen tried to feign innocence, but Maggie wasn’t about to let her off that easily. She shifted the ice pop from one hand to the other, using the coldness of her empty palm to at least somewhat soothe the ache.

“Hope told me not to go inside Bee’s room because it’s what made her sick.”

Arlen tipped her head toward the slowly rotating porch fan overhead—off, but pushed by the wind. “Oh Lord,” she murmured.

“I thought that maybe that’s how you had explained her depression to them,” Maggie continued. “*Sick*, because depression is an illness. You wouldn’t have been wrong. But then I met Cheryl for coffee—”

“Cheryl Polley?”

“—and she said the same thing. That Brynn had looked sick. That her grandmother had mentioned it after she saw Bee at Saint Michael’s. She was at church, Len. Brynn. *At church.*”

Arlen lifted a hand to rub between her eyebrows, avoiding eye contact, staring at the floorboards, her perfectly pedicured toenails peeking out of her strappy sandals. Arlen had been keeping secrets, and now she’d been found out.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Maggie asked, her own hand still working the painful knot that had stiffened the muscles of her neck. “You could have

called or texted. I could have asked her what was wrong.” Maybe a single simple question would have changed everything: *Brynn, how do you feel? Brynn, are you okay?* Perhaps that tiny inquiry would have meant the difference between life and death. If Maggie had just chosen the right words, had told her sister she loved her before hanging up, perhaps things would have been different. If she had only invited Brynn to hang out in North Carolina, to get away from Arlen and the kids, or had finally caved and revealed her secret: she’d played that board alone. She’d played it for years, up until the day their father had died. *It’s my fault. My fault . . .* Had Maggie done that, maybe Brynn would still be here now.

“And what would that have accomplished?” Arlen’s attention shifted to Maggie’s face. “Don’t stand here and suggest that knowing all the details of what went on here would have somehow changed what Brynn decided to do, okay?”

“I just—”

“You just want to blame someone,” Arlen said coolly. “But the truth of it is that you haven’t been home, Maggie. Not for the holidays, not for birthdays, not at all. But you would have been her savior, right? You would have made it better if you had only known.”

Maggie was stung by her sister’s implication that she couldn’t have helped. It was a hurtful, ugly thing to say. She wanted to yell, *This isn’t my fault*, but that would have let the devils in, according to Hope. “Why was she at church, Len? Can you at least tell me that?”

Arlen squared her shoulders, staring defiantly into her little sister’s face. “Why does anyone go to church, Maggie? She was looking for answers.”

Maggie shook her head. Yes, people filled up pews in the hope of basking in some sort of soul-affirming confirmation. They were desperate to

know that this wasn't it, that this thing called life wasn't all that they had to work with. They wanted to find God. But Brynn wasn't people. Arlen had said so herself, Brynn was Brynn, a girl who had never been scared of death, had never voiced the need for some far-fetched assurance that there was a heaven or that her sins would be forgiven. Those ideals were as bizarre to Brynn Olsen as her outward appearance had been strange.

"She was scared," Maggie said.

"Scared of *what*?" Arlen asked.

"Of what's here," Maggie said, nearly inaudible. Something had happened—something Brynn hadn't mentioned during their phone calls, something that had her asking Maggie even more urgently than before to *please come home. I need to see you. What will it take?* What Brynn didn't know, however, was that fear was exactly what was keeping Maggie away.

"Maggie?"

With cold fingers pressed across her mouth, Maggie stared at her big sister. "Something's wrong, Len," she said. "Something's *been* wrong ever since Dad . . ."

Arlen's gaze slingshotted away, as though the mere mention of their father was a slap across the face.

"You can't live here." The words slithered from Maggie's throat—secret thoughts she hadn't dared bring up finally finding their voice. "It's not safe. It hasn't been safe for years."

When she looked back to her sister's face, Arlen was peering at her with incredulous alarm. But it wasn't a look of worry. Rather, her expression was tense with a concern Maggie had only seen her wear once before—the day she had spent all afternoon on the phone with receptionists and doctors,

desperate to pull their mother out of her hole. Now, that anxiousness was pointed squarely in Maggie's direction.

"Mags . . . I think that maybe you should . . ." Hesitation. "I'm sorry, but you need help."

*Bullshit*, she wanted to say. If this was all in her head, why the hell had Brynn sought sanctuary? If Arlen didn't suspect anything, why were her kids going to Sunday school? The Olsens had never been religious, and yet there was Hope, telling Maggie who Mary Magdalene had been. Talking about devils.

"She was scared, Len." Perhaps if she repeated it, Arlen would come to the same realization Maggie had: this wasn't Maggie's imagination. It wasn't just unshakable guilt. This was real.

But rather than being overtaken by revelation, Arlen shut her eyes instead. She looked ready to speak, but rather than responding, she reached out and placed her hand upon Maggie's left shoulder. And then, as though at a loss for words, she gave that shoulder a squeeze before turning and stepping into the foyer, just as Hope had done.

Maggie was left staring at the open door, Arlen's touch tingling upon her skin. She swallowed against the desert of her mouth, breathed heavy, the familiar twist of anxiety snarling up her guts.

Her phone buzzed in the back pocket of her jeans.

Dillon.

She began to reach for it, only to stop short.

Because wafting from inside and drifting upon the wind was that familiar scent. Smoke. The smolder of a candlewick, blown out by a nonexistent breath.



## TEN

---

ARLEN WAS LESS than pleased when the doorbell chimed, but she stopped short of asking Cheryl Polley to leave. Maggie had forgotten to mention Cheryl's visit. The thing about Brynn going to church still had her reeling. And then there was the doll.

By the time Cheryl arrived, Maggie was ready to call it a day and forget the whole thing. But Cheryl had made the drive, and it would have been rude to send her away, almost as rude as not telling Arlen they were going to have company. And for that, she felt like an ass, but what was done was done. All she could do was murmur a soft-spoken *sorry* and give her sister an imploring look—*please don't hold it against me*—as she ushered Cheryl through the living room. Arlen and Howie watched from the couch, their viewing of *The Blacklist* interrupted as the two old friends shuffled upstairs.

The kids were already in their rooms, the girls most likely sleeping while their older brother was reading comic books or playing video games.

"She's pissed at me," Maggie told Cheryl as they began their climb. "I questioned her about Bee."

"Grief is hard," was all Cheryl said, but Maggie could tell she wanted to say more. Only a few seconds downstairs, and Cheryl had caught the off-putting vibe. Arlen was keeping things eerily normal. There was hardly any talk of Brynn. The kids didn't seem to be bothered by the passing of their live-in aunt. And when Howie had come home from work, he had given

Maggie a *How the hell are ya?* as though she were visiting for visitation's sake. Just dropping in. No big deal.

All the normalcy was jarring. But then again, Maggie hadn't bawled her eyes out when Brynn had found their mother dead in the bathroom, either—pills strewn everywhere, the tub overflowing, their mom's temple caved in from crashing against the edge of the sink, pink water making a slow creep beneath the door. Even Maggie's freshman-year roommate, Anessa, had found her lack of reaction odd. Anessa—a psych major—had been a fixer just like Dillon. *Are you sure you're all right?* She asked that same question over and over, as if waiting for Maggie's calm exterior to crack, for the ugly emotions of realizing herself an orphan to turn her into a weeping, inconsolable mess; almost eager for it to happen, if only to be given the chance to tinker with an anguish-stricken mind. Is that why Dillon was texting so often? Was he waiting for her to fall apart? Was he *needing* her to lose it so that he could put her back together again?

The collapse hadn't happened after Maggie's mom died. And the tears weren't flowing in regard to Brynn's death, either. Maggie could only muster the profound sadness of having lost both Brynn and her mother years before they were truly gone. With her mom's funeral, Maggie had spent the days leading up to her trip home looking through the handful of old photographs she had brought with her to school. All of them featured her dad. The Olsens: one big happy family untouched by calamity, alcohol, pills, or pain. In them, Maggie's mom was always cheerful, her smile as constant as Brynn's black clothes and perturbed *I hate taking pictures* scowl.

Losing her mother wasn't something that had happened without a wrenching of the heart, but their final blowup had left Maggie bruised. The way she had jerked Maggie backward by the arm just after Maggie had

flushed her meds; the ear-splitting way she had screamed before shoving her youngest daughter against the wall, hissing declarations of what a mistake it had been to have her. *I should have stopped with Arlen!* And then there was the slap, so hard it made Maggie see stars. Stella Olsen's diamond ring had been rotated with the stone facing her palm—a habit she had adopted to keep that princess cut from getting caught on jambs. That afternoon, it caught Maggie's left cheek, leaving a jagged scratch nearly two inches long in its wake. Maggie's dad had given her that ring. Maggie had been at the jewelry store with him when he'd bought it. *I don't know about this stuff, Crazy. You pick it out. You know what she'll like.*

Only a few hours after that ring had slashed across her face, Maggie started packing for Wilmington, thanking her lucky stars that she hadn't caved to her mother's insistence that she go to school across the river. The Skidaway Institute of Oceanography was so close, Maggie could have lived at home for four more years. But now, Maggie was sure she'd be happy to never see her mother's sloppy, drugged-out face again. She'd wished it before, when the fights had started to get bad: *It should have been her, not Dad.* But now—

"Maggie?" Cheryl gave her an encouraging smile. "That's what we're here to do, right? Deal with grief?"

"Shit." Maggie paused in front of her bedroom door. "The board. I don't even know where it is." She'd meant to look for it, but the doll, and then Hope . . .

Cheryl looked dubious. It was a convenient hiccup, one that would keep them from doing what Maggie had, earlier that afternoon, somehow convinced herself was a good idea. The only way out. *Repent.* But now, with

Cheryl here, she couldn't rightfully throw up her hands and declare it a bust. Not without at least *appearing* as though she was giving it a shot.

"Arlen tossed a lot of my crap into the closet, but I didn't see it there," Maggie explained. "There's probably more up in the attic."

"Then I guess that's where we'll start." Cheryl shrugged, as though the task couldn't possibly be that difficult to tackle. After all, how much stuff had Maggie left behind?

Apparently, a lot. The girls searched the attic for a better part of half an hour before returning to what had once been Maggie's room. Together, they went through the remainder of the bedroom closet, but there was no sign of the board.

"Maybe Arlen found it and threw it away," Maggie suggested. Perhaps, for once, this was a bit of good luck. Not finding the board meant no séance, and quite frankly, that was the last thing Maggie felt like doing tonight.

Except, back in the furthest reaches of her mind, she was still that mystified kid. Despite everything that she knew, there was an inexplicable pull. *Because what if you can talk to Brynn?* a little voice whispered. *You can ask her about the fear, about why she was so afraid.* And if Maggie could contact Brynn, she could also reach out to her dad. *Dad.* She missed him. She'd have done just about anything to hear one of his silly jokes again.

"Earth to Maggie." Cheryl raised an eyebrow. "You okay?"

"Yeah, sorry," Maggie said. "Maybe we missed it. I'll look in Brynn's room." They hadn't missed it, but Brynn's bedroom was one place Maggie had yet to look, and it was certainly a place she wanted to go alone. "Just give me a minute."

And yet, as soon as she moved down the hall toward Brynn's room, Maggie was certain that a minute wouldn't nearly be enough.

Brynn's room had always been dark, all deep purples and hazy grays. But in the three years that Maggie hadn't been home, that room had taken a turn from darkly benign toward . . . something else. Perhaps it was the new plum-colored wallpaper, its damask pattern reminiscent of haunted Victorian homes. Maybe it was all of that fabric—velvet tapestries so heavy they were bending the curtain rod beneath the bulk of their weight, pooled upon the floor. But more than likely, it was the menagerie of bedsheets that had been thrown over every reflective surface in the room, and there were many.

She could make out a mirrored chest of drawers against one of the walls, its silver exterior gleaming just beneath the skewed hem of a thin white sheet. A wall of mirrors of all different shapes and sizes had been carefully arranged into a mysterious gallery upon the bedroom's farthest wall. Those same white sheets hung limp across their frames, like a gallery of mounted ghosts. Only one was left exposed.

Maggie's breath caught in her throat. She pawed at the wall, searching for the light switch, which, when flipped, caused an ornate chandelier to blaze overhead. Shards of fractured light bounced throughout the room like a sea spray of stars. That light brought attention to another sheet, almost certainly having been pulled away from that single uncovered mirror. The sheet, puddled upon the floor, had seemed harmless until Maggie caught a glimpse of what it obscured: broken glass. The carpet hadn't been replaced. And while Maggie couldn't see behind that thick velvet curtain, she was sure it was hiding a plywood board nailed to the windowsill. It would be a wonder if Florence didn't blow it into the room by morning.

She struggled to swallow as she took in the view. Maybe this was why Arlen had warned her children against venturing inside. Those sheets captured the essence of a morgue without a body. She rubbed a palm against her arm, trying to snuff out the goose bumps that were breaking out across her skin. She didn't want to shrink back, didn't want to be one of the people Brynn would have snorted at—*you're just like the rest*—but the eeriness of that wall of mirrors, the hidden window, the tiny glass shards catching the light like snowflakes . . . it was nearly too much to bear. These were the things Brynn had seen in the last few seconds of her life. These were the walls she had stared at as her timeline ticked down to nothing. These were the images she had been so desperate to shut out that she'd done the unthinkable: an act she herself had once deemed as cowardly, selfish, and weak. But why? What had she been looking for at Saint Michael's? Why hadn't she simply told Maggie that she was afraid?

Maggie's gaze darted to the massive four-poster bed, to what looked like etchings upon one of the posts as crude as school-desk graffiti. She faltered, almost afraid to move. *Don't, don't, don't.* The air felt thick, alive with a static charge. "Brynn?" The name was a mere whisper, just enough to break the tension of that taut, unnerving silence. If her sister's spirit were still there, perhaps she'd give Maggie a sign. But Maggie couldn't stand there forever. Cheryl was waiting. She pushed past her reluctance and stepped farther inside.

The carvings on the bedpost looked like they had been made with the tip of a knife or, more likely in Brynn's case, a nail file. The possible culprit lay atop a sheeted dresser, next to a few bottles of nail polish, hair spray, and Brynn's makeup bag. Maggie approached the rough engravings with measured steps, her chest tight, the feeling of not belonging in that room

sweeping over her in a rush of newfound anxiety. And still, those crude symbols coaxed her forward, inviting her to discover what it was that had truly pushed her sister over the edge. The entire post was covered in those crooked ciphers, creating a spiral pattern that was as beautiful as it was unsettling: a madwoman's epitaph.

Except those letters didn't form Brynn's last words. Maggie's steps hitched and stalled, bringing her to petrified stillness. Her mouth fell open in soundless disbelief. Her heart pounded hard enough to send a rush of heat to her face. And then, there was that scent again—the redolence of a just-snuffed-out wick, the lingering aura of soot.

Paralyzed, all Maggie could do was stare, her gaze fixed on the letters that coiled upward in a whorl of alphabet. A B C D . . . on it went. X Y Z. And then three solitary, disjointed words that made Maggie want to scream.

YES. NO. GOOD-BYE.

Tears stung her eyes. The ache of her neck intensified, like bony fingers pressing hard into flesh. And then, as if wanting to see the terror that had inevitably come to rest upon her own face, her attention snapped to the uncovered mirror beside her. Something shifted in its reflection; a darkness darted away from her, as if something had been standing behind her, grinning as Maggie discovered Brynn's terrible secret. An involuntary gasp tumbled from Maggie's throat as she spun around to look behind her. And there, in the corner of the room, was a blot of darkness, half obscured by a velvet panel that flanked the window of Brynn's last leap.

*Don't, don't, don't.*

And yet, against all reason, Maggie forced herself forward. With arms extended, she shoved aside the curtain, only to find herself stumbling backward. That shadow failed to disappear the way she expected it to, the

way it always had when she'd been brave enough to approach it as a child. This time, it didn't vanish, didn't reassure her that her dad was right—that all of this was just her imagination spawned by her middle sister's love of horror movies and Edgar Allan Poe. This time, the chimera slithered across the wall, slow at first, before blasting past her in a rush, leaving a burning stink behind it, scorching Brynn's wallpaper with an arcing scar of black.

She tried to cry out, but found herself unable to breathe. What the fuck was *that*? What had she just seen? She couldn't seem to take her eyes off the singed trail that now decorated the wall—at least, not until she heard that noise. *Tap, tap, tap*. Her attention jumped across the room, only to fix itself upon the sheet on the floor. Because it was no longer lying flat, hiding the bloodstains her sister had left behind. There was a shape beneath it. A body. *Brynn*.

Finally, her fear knocked her free of her stasis. A cry tore itself free of her throat as she barreled out of the room, leaving Brynn's door wide-open in her wake. Throwing herself into the guest room that had once been her personal space, she found it impossible to squelch her own trembling. Half swallowed by the closet, Cheryl started at Maggie's sudden reappearance.

"Whoa!" Cheryl began to rise from the floor. ". . . Are you— Maggie, what happened?"

"Brynn." She couldn't stop shaking. "*Brynn*." She knew it was impossible, and yet she'd seen the lump beneath that sheet with her own eyes. And that shadow. She'd lived with those strange shifts of light since she'd been twelve years old, but she'd never seen it up close before. Not like that. *Never* like that.

"Brynn what?" Cheryl was standing now, her hands lightly clasped around Maggie's arms.



"I . . ." *I saw her. Impossible. Just a loose screw, Crazy.* "I did this," she whispered. "All of this is my fault." And then she started to bawl.

Cheryl pulled Maggie in for a hug.

"I'm fine," Maggie whispered into Cheryl's shoulder, but her words rang hollow. "I'll be fine."

"Maggie?" Arlen appeared in the hall, having been alerted by her outcry. Now, clad in a pair of yoga pants and a loose-fitting top, she looked in on Maggie and Cheryl as they embraced. "What's going on?"

"Nothing." Maggie shook her head, unable to meet her sister's gaze. She'd left Brynn's door wide-open. Surely Arlen had looked inside before pulling it shut. She'd mention the wallpaper, the way it was burned.

"It's just hitting her, I think. She needs some time," Cheryl said. "She'll be okay."

Maggie continued to hide against her former best friend's side, waiting for Arlen to ask: *What happened to the wall? What were you doing in there?* But, nothing. *Because it's gone,* Maggie thought. *If it was ever there at all.* She finally heard Arlen sigh and wander out of the room.

"Wait." Cheryl took a backward step, giving Maggie a stern once-over. "You'd gone in there before now, right? Into Brynn's room?"

Maggie slowly shook her head in the negative.

". . . Oh God, Maggie . . ."

"Forget it," she said, wiping at her eyes. "Really, it's fine. I'm just freaking out." The anguish had arrived. Brynn was forever gone.

"Are you sure? Do you want me to leave?" Cheryl asked.

"No, no . . ." It was good to have Cheryl here. She didn't want to be alone.

“Okay, because . . .” Cheryl took a few steps toward the closet behind them, reached inside, and held up the board for Maggie to see.

Maggie was dumbfounded. Save for looking through the clothes, she’d gone through everything in that closet. The majority of the boxes were stacked against the bedroom wall now. There were no hiding spots, no place to miss something as conspicuous as a board game box.

“I guess you were right,” Cheryl said. “We must have missed it the first time.”

No, they hadn’t. The damn thing hadn’t been there when she had looked on her own, let alone when she and Cheryl had investigated together. And yet there it was in Cheryl’s hands. A whisper of a voice told her to calm herself, to take a seat, to open the box and place it across her knees. *Reach out to Brynn. Reach out to Dad.*

“But it’s probably not a good time,” Cheryl said. “Maybe we should just talk?”

Talk about what, the fact that Maggie had just seen a twisting shadow lurking in Brynn’s room? That Brynn had carved up her bedpost, as though that board had infected her blood? That Maggie hadn’t listened to whatever existed inside that board when it had told her not to go, and the next thing she knew, her father was dead?

“No.” *Repent.* “Let’s just get this over with.”

She sank to the floor, sitting just like Brynn had taught her—legs crisscrossed—while Cheryl towered over her, box in hand, looking unsure. Eventually, Cheryl joined her on the carpet. She gave Maggie an attempt at a reassuring smile, and then pulled open the lid.

“Let’s prove this isn’t what you think it is,” Cheryl said.

Maggie didn't look up, but she wanted to ask, *Prove what? That what I just saw wasn't real?*

Cheryl placed the board between them both. "This"—she tapped the board—"has no power, Maggie. None of this is your fault. Only God has that kind of power, and He protects us. He does no harm."

But all Maggie could think of at that moment was that she didn't feel safe. That this didn't feel right. She was afraid and, like Brynn, needed sanctuary. Because this was the last place in the world she should have been. The pain in her shoulders was back, biting, drilling hard into her muscles. And that smell of smoke? It was strong again. Either it had followed her in, or she had followed it here.

## ELEVEN

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DESPITE CHERYL'S INSISTENCE that she wanted to help, Maggie could tell her old friend was less than comfortable being back in Maggie's old room. She could almost see the memories flooding Cheryl's thoughts, her eyes darting from wall to wall, searching for signs of what had once been.

After their falling-out, it had taken a couple of weeks for Cheryl to talk to Maggie again, let alone sit with her in the cafeteria. It was there that Maggie started to share stories of the scratching in the walls, the strange sensation of being watched, and the oppressive heaviness she felt every time she opened her closet door. *So, your house is haunted now?* Cheryl had asked. *I guess I better not go over, then.* As if she had been planning on going over ever again. Maggie knew what she meant, and it hurt.

She supposed that was part of why she hadn't told Cheryl the whole truth; why she had left out the part that, despite the knocks, Maggie had pulled the board out of its hiding place and placed it across her knees. She knew it was freaky, knew it didn't make sense, knew that after what happened with Cheryl, she should have been terrified to ever touch that thing again. Any other kid would have stuffed it in the trash, pronto. Off to the dump, out of her life forever. And yet she found herself compelled to place it across her lap as her loneliness caught up to her. Because Cheryl had abandoned Maggie, but the board was always there.

And then there was the betrayal. Despite Maggie telling Cheryl her stories in confidence, Cher told her mom *everything*. Mrs. Polley was quick to blame it on the devils that must have been residing in the Olsen home. She even called Maggie's mom to complain. *You really should keep a closer eye on your kids, Stella. I'm sorry, but that older girl of yours? I've seen her in the cemetery. Everyone's seen her, hanging around with that boy . . .*

Their mother got angry, though it was unclear whether she was raging against Brynn or Claire Polley, who from that day forward was regarded as Pissy Mrs. Prissy. In turn, Cheryl became Little Miss Priss, and Maggie's mom began to insist that Maggie was better off without friends like her.

And yet, despite her mother's opinion, Maggie kept trying to win Cheryl back. But after what felt like months of failure, Maggie's despondency began to fade. Perhaps, just as her mom kept saying, it was better that Cheryl was gone. Maybe Maggie didn't need her. Perhaps all she needed was what she had upstairs, hiding beneath her bed. Because whenever she played alone, she felt better, as though she and that little girl from the cemetery really had become friends.

But now, years later, Maggie found herself staring at the board upon Cheryl's lap, and a sense of unease unspooled in the pit of her stomach like a coiled snake shedding its skin. Protest was on the tip of her tongue; she vividly remembered how Cheryl had rolled her eyes at the tales Maggie had told over lunch-line tater tots and applesauce cups. *You're such a freak*. The knocking. The scratching. Cheryl had discarded it all as nonsense, regardless of how hurtful that shirking had been. She hadn't been an ally, which is why, over ten years later, Maggie already knew what Cheryl would say if she mentioned the tapping that was most certainly back, if she brought up the shadow that had darted across Brynn's room: *There's a logical*

*explanation for everything.* And the board having been missing, only to magically reappear? A simple oversight, like searching for a pair of glasses when they were right there, poised upon the tip of your nose.

But Maggie couldn't allow past bitterness to interfere with the fact that Cheryl was here now, wanting to help, and that perhaps she was right. Maybe facing her fear was exactly what Maggie needed to break out of this vicious cycle of guilt. She could spend the rest of her life believing that she was responsible for the deaths of her parents and sister, or she could get over this ridiculous theory once and for all. Ghosts? Curses? Please.

And yet, sitting across from her former best friend, mimicking the actions that had come just before their relationship had collapsed, was reassurance that no matter what Maggie tried to convince herself of, she would never escape the truth. Reality—no matter how insurmountable—would be heeded, just as the pulsating pain in her neck and shoulders would not be ignored.

Maggie rubbed at the knot of muscle at the top of her spine. Every minute that passed, the pain was getting worse.

"I can't," she finally said. Her anxiety, her sorrow over Brynn, the sadness that had crept back into her heart just seeing Cheryl in her old room again—all of it was perched upon her shoulders like a thirty-pound weight. "I'm sorry, this all just feels . . . off."

"Maggie . . ."

"You're right," Maggie cut in. "This needs to end. But this—" The board, repeating the past. "It won't fix anything."

"How can you know that?" Cheryl asked. "Look, I'm not comfortable doing this, either. Trust me, after that night . . ." Her words tapered off, but she didn't have to finish. The memory had scarred them both.

Regardless, Maggie kept her eyes fixed upon the board between them, her stomach churning, every muscle tense. Eventually, Cheryl exhaled in what sounded like defeat, and for half a second Maggie let herself relax. But rather than pulling the board from their knees, Cheryl spoke again, giving the whole idea one last try.

“I’m worried about you.” Cheryl rubbed her hands against the knees of her jeans. “I guess, up until your phone call, I had hoped that you were happy, wherever you were.” She plucked the planchette up off the board, flipped it over, idly inspecting the seemingly harmless piece of plastic. “I wish we could go back, you know? Erase that cemetery girl from our lives. Make that night vanish. Have stayed best friends.”

All at once, Maggie could smell it—the scent of electricity, a static charge primed to ignite. The hairs on her arms rose on end. A chill scurried up her spine and into the base of her ponytail. She could see it on Cheryl’s face—Cher was feeling it, too.

And then, before either one could acknowledge the disturbance in the atmosphere around them, a scream sounded from down the hall.

Maggie instinctively leapt to her feet. “What . . . ?!” The board tumbled to the carpet as she abandoned Cheryl, rushing for the bedroom door. Yanking it open, she could already hear footsteps bounding up the stairs—either Howie or Arlen dashing to their little girl’s aid.

“Hope? *Hope!*” Arlen’s voice was panicked, already on the verge of a breakdown.

Maggie skidded to a stop when she hit the upstairs hall, not because Arlen was already halfway up the stairs, but because something dodged into Hope’s bedroom just as Maggie turned her attention to her niece’s open

door. It was *that thing*. The darkness that she swore had scorched Brynn's bedroom wall.

"Hope?!" Arlen beat Howie up the stairs. Howie followed shortly, pausing to regard Maggie with a glance. There was something dark in his gaze, as though Arlen had told him about all the tragedy in their past, as if she had said the words so plainly that they had been undeniable: *This is Maggie's doing. She's behind it all*. Howie ducked into Hope's room a second later, and Maggie found herself moving toward her niece's bedroom despite that nasty look. Some deep-seated maternal instinct was pushing her to make sure everything was fine. What if that shadow really was in there? What if, finally, someone besides her would be there to see it? But her trajectory was thrown off by another yell, this one from behind her, from inside the room that had once been her own.

"Cher?" Maggie veered around and rushed back from where she had come. The two collided as they both came to the door at once—Maggie running in to see what was wrong, Cheryl wide-eyed and determined to leave the room as quickly as she could. Cheryl's right hand—which had been clasped across her neck—was jostled free, revealing what looked to be a bleeding abrasion just above her collarbone that hadn't been there ten seconds before. It nearly looked like the shape of half a heart. "Oh my God, what—"

"I have to go." Cheryl's words were clipped, breathless. Politeness be damned, she shoved Maggie aside and moved fast down the hall.

"Wait, what happened?" Maggie pursued her, bounding down the stairs, beating Cheryl to the front door. "Cher, tell me," she demanded, blocking the exit, but Cheryl wasn't having it.



“Get out of my way, Maggie,” she said, trying to yank Maggie away from the door’s handle. “I shouldn’t have ever come here.” Her voice warbled. She was on the verge of panic, ready to burst into hysterical sobs. “I should have known better. Goddammit, I should have followed my gut.”

“Please, just tell me. Cher, I need to know.” But Cheryl overpowered her, pushed Maggie aside, and pulled open the door to rush across the covered porch. She nearly tripped down the front steps as she went.

Maggie bolted after her. “Stop! Cheryl, *please!*”

Cheryl unlocked her car with a push of a button on her key fob and quickly ducked inside. Maggie found herself holding the top edge of her old friend’s door, keeping it from slamming closed, stopping Cheryl from screeching away. “Just wait, okay? What—”

But Cheryl’s expression brought her to a midsentence halt. It was a look of undiluted terror. Everything Cheryl had come to believe had—in the few seconds Maggie had left her alone in that room—been challenged. Or threatened. Or both.

Cheryl had seen something. She’d been attacked by it.

That thing, it remembered exactly who Cheryl was.

Maggie swallowed against the sudden dryness of her throat, seeing herself reflected in Cheryl’s twisted expression of dread. Her, just after learning of her father’s death; her, learning of her mother’s death, despite the bitterness she still felt; her, the night Arlen had called, the storm howling outside her apartment, that broken shutter slamming against the exterior wall in warning: *It’s happening again. All over again. It’s real. This is all so very real.*

She took a backward step and let her hand fall from Cheryl’s door. But rather than speeding away, Cheryl gave Maggie an imploring look. “You

shouldn't be here," she said. "You need to get out. Now."

Maggie then watched her drive off. She waited for the red glow of Cheryl's taillights to disappear down the street before she turned back toward that house—the windows warm with yellow light, the board and batten gleaming in the moonlight, everything about it simultaneously perfect and wrong. Suddenly, Maggie wasn't sure whether she'd be able to go back inside. And yet, a moment later, she was locking the front door behind her—locking herself in—and climbing the stairs to the second floor.

She stopped at Hope's door. Howie was missing—probably checking in on either Harry or Hay—but Arlen was sitting upon her eldest daughter's bed. "What happened?" Arlen asked. "Was that Cheryl who was screaming?"

Maggie faintly shook her head, unsure of her own response. Was she saying *no* because she was in denial, or because she didn't want to talk about it? "Is Hope okay?" was all she could manage.

"Just a nightmare," Arlen said. "She gets them every now and again, especially these past few days. But everything is fine." She brushed a strand of hair from Hope's small round face and gave her kid a smile.

"Did your friend leave, Auntie Magdalene?" Hope asked. "Did I scare her away?"

"Yeah." Maggie tried to suppress the wince that now accompanied her every move. "I mean, no, you . . . I—"

"Good," Hope said flatly, cutting Maggie off. "I didn't like her."

Maggie stared at her niece.

"*Excuse me.*" Arlen's words were sharp. "I don't think that's a very nice thing to say, do you?"

Hope gave her mother a grievous look. “She’s not really Aunt Maggie’s friend, Mom. Right, Aunt Magdalene? The only friend that lady’s got is *God*.” The five-year-old rolled her eyes, leaving both her mother and aunt stunned.

Arlen gaped.

Maggie opened her mouth to speak, but no words came. And so, instead of responding, she simply turned and went back to her room.

Quietly shutting her door behind her, she leaned against it and closed her eyes. It was only when she reopened them a moment later that she saw the planchette on the floor, its tip pointing at her. *You*.

And there, where Cheryl had sat only minutes ago, was Dolly. Blank-eyed but smiling.

A real friend.

*Hello.*

## TWELVE

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AFTER THAT PLANCHETTE had pointed to YES, it took Maggie days to find the nerve to touch it again.

She had stashed it under her bed, sure it would stay hidden there forever. Whether the Ouija was meant for parties or not, it had done a heck of a job creeping her out. Yet, during a particularly drab sleepover, when all the Chex Mix had been eaten, Kelly Clarkson's latest CD had been karaoked to, and hours of *Gilmore Girls* had been watched, Cheryl issued a dramatic sigh as she sprawled out across Maggie's bedroom carpet.

"I'm *so* bored," she mused. "And I'm totally not even tired yet. I wish we had more stuff to do. Did you hear? Jenny got a new puppy. She showed me a picture and it's *so* cute. I just wanna squeeze its face." Jenny was Cheryl's friend, not Maggie's. And while Maggie supposed she could be a friend to them both, there was something about Jenny that turned Maggie off. Firstly, Jenny had made it clear that she thought ocean stuff was lame. *Sharks? Gross.* And second, Maggie got the sneaking suspicion that Jenny wanted Cheryl to be *her* best friend exclusively, a feeling that Jenny didn't want Maggie around. "Next time," Cheryl said, "we should sleep over at her place instead."

"We can find stuff to do," Maggie protested. "Wanna go swim?"

"Swim again? In the middle of the night?" Cheryl looked dubious, and it was true, Maggie *would* get in trouble for swimming without an adult to

keep an eye out. But it was the first thing that came to mind. "I don't really feel like swimming, Mags. It makes me smell gross," Cheryl said. "Besides, there's mosquitoes."

"Should we look up Justin's concert stuff again?" Maggie didn't have her own computer yet, but her dad let her use his laptop anytime she wanted, just as long as she didn't download anything or take it off his desk. That, and they never did talk their mothers into driving them up to Atlanta for that Kelly Clarkson concert. But that was okay, because they were into Justin Timberlake now. Brynn had a car, and Maggie had a plan. She and Cher just had to find the money.

"What's the point? I bet the tickets are all sold out by now, anyway. We're just wasting our time."

"Well, um . . . we can go hunting for junk in the attic?" Maggie was running out of options. "Arlen put all kinds of things up there when she moved out. I bet there's loads of cool stuff."

"Yeah." Cheryl sighed again. "Or loads of hairy spiders with gigantic fangs. No way."

Maggie chewed her bottom lip as she looked around her room, searching for a solution to Cheryl's waning interest. She wasn't making it easy. What the heck was left?

"Hey, wanna see something scary?"

"Scary?" Cheryl finally twisted her head around to make eye contact. "Scary like what?"

This was probably a bad idea, but it was too late to back out now. Maggie slid off her bed and reached under the bed skirt, drawing the board and its planchette out into the open. She'd sworn to herself that she would never use it again, not after how the pointer had jerked away from her touch. But

this was important. If Cheryl grew bored of Maggie, where would that leave her? Forgotten: a lonely girl abandoned by her best friend.

“What the heck is that?” Cheryl asked, giving the board a once-over.

“Sit.” Maggie patted the carpet. Both girls took up the position—legs folded, the board balanced between them. “Want to talk to some ghosts?”

And rather than recoiling or looking at Maggie as though she’d lost her ever-loving mind, Cheryl simply shrugged her shoulders and said “I guess?” like it was the most arbitrary question in all the world.

“Okay.” Maggie placed the planchette in the center of the Ouija. “You gotta put your fingers on this, real light-like. You can’t press down, otherwise it can’t slide.”

Cheryl did as she was told, but almost immediately pulled her hands away. “Wait,” she said. “Maybe this isn’t a good idea. I mean, can’t some ghosts be bad?”

Maggie considered this, but ended up dismissing the idea. “Sure, but only the ghosts you actually call to the board will show up. As long as you don’t call anyone bad, it’s okay. At least that’s what Brynn said.” Except Brynn had said no such thing.

Cheryl hesitated, but eventually bought Maggie’s explanation. She returned her hands to the planchette. “Have you done this before?” she asked.

“Sure,” Maggie said.

“And it worked?” Again, Cheryl was skeptical.

Maggie stared down at the YES at the corner of the board. “Nah,” she said. “Brynn says it’s just for parties, but it’s fun. Who should we talk to?” When Cheryl did nothing but shrug with indifference, Maggie slumped where she sat and peered at the plastic pointer—silly to think such a thing

could be used to communicate between worlds. And to think she'd been sure this dumb pointer had moved on its own. More than likely, she'd just bumped the board with her knee.

"Brynn would know," Maggie said. "We should see if she wants to play."

Cheryl shifted her weight almost uncomfortably, then gave Maggie an unsure glance. "No way, Mags. She'd for sure talk to someone bad."

"What is *that* supposed to mean?"

Another shrug. Clearly, Cheryl didn't want to take responsibility for the gossip that was going around about Maggie's sister, but Maggie had heard it, too. Brynn was always seen hanging out with combat-booted Mohawk-spiked Misfits-jacket-wearing Simon, always messing around with her new group of high school friends. Rumor had it they believed themselves to be real-life vampires. Some kids said that sometimes Brynn's group would wander around Friendship Park after dark and do devil stuff. These stories eventually reached their mother, and were brought up at the dinner table in exasperated tones.

*Do you know what they're saying, Brynn? Do you have any idea? It's embarrassing. I can't go anywhere without people looking at me like . . . like I've raised a monster.*

*Oh, for God's sake, Stella.* Their father dropped his fork onto his plate and tossed his napkin onto the table. *If they're looking at you like that, then maybe you should stop filling those spaces.*

*Filling spaces?* she asked. *You mean, stop going to the salon? The Publix? Perhaps next you'll suggest that we stop eating, is that it? Should I stop buying groceries? Feeding the family?*

*She's just a kid,* their dad insisted. *If your hairdresser is too dense to understand that, you should find a new one before your hair goes up in*

*flames.*

Brynn took their father's defense as an invitation to up the ante. She spent less time at home because, as she once told Maggie, *I'd rather kill myself than spend another second anywhere near that bitch*. Their mother had no desire to accept Brynn for who she was and, in turn, Brynn hated her for it.

"I don't think she'd talk to someone bad," Maggie told Cheryl, defending her sister, determined to not follow in her mother's judgmental footsteps. "Those stories are lies. Brynn's just different."

"Yeah, but she and her friends go to the cemetery, right?" Cheryl asked. "Why would you do something creepy like that if you aren't doing something weird? My mom says that unless you're going to the graveyard to pray for someone, you've got no business being there."

"Well, I've gone there a bunch of times, and I wasn't praying," Maggie confessed. "Does that mean that I was doing something wrong?" Granted, some would frown upon Maggie robbing graves of their fake flowers, but that wasn't a crime, was it? She wasn't stealing them, just spreading them around so nobody would feel left out. And yeah, she'd grabbed Dolly off that old tomb, but it was Brynn's, and she'd only done it to protect it from getting ruined in the storm. Dolly was still hidden away in the closet. She needed to return her to her rightful spot . . . if she didn't forget.

"You went to the graveyard with Brynn and her friends?" Cheryl didn't buy it. Boys like Simon didn't hang out with tweens like them.

Maggie shook her head no. "Just with Bee, and it was a long time ago." A pause. "She told me this dumb story." She got up, moved to the closet, and dug through the various miscellany upon her closet floor until she



located the porcelain doll that had sat out in the graveyard for weeks. "She left this to freak me out."

Cheryl frowned, clearly not liking the look of that thing. "You should have left it there."

"I couldn't. A storm was coming."

"So? She was the one who put it there. Who cares if it got ruined?"

Maggie looked at the toy in her hands. *She* had cared. The idea of the doll getting ruined, regardless of whether it was a prank, had bothered her too much to let it happen.

"Besides, *that's* creepy, too," Cheryl said, staring at the doll. "What if they did something to it, like hexed it or something?"

"Hexed it?"

"Yeah, why not?"

"Because that's stupid," Maggie said. "So, Brynn's a witch now?" She gave the doll a final glance before returning it to the closet, making sure to shut the door tightly behind her.

"Maybe not Brynn, but her friends might be. Or maybe she is, because she got sucked into it. That's how people in cults get other people to join. I watched a documentary about it."

Maggie frowned at that.

"You know what it says in the Bible, don't you?"

Maggie nearly rolled her eyes. It was always the Bible these days. Heck, as far as Maggie was concerned, it was Cheryl who was going to turn out weird, judging by how often she went to church. Maggie, on the other hand, went two or three times a year.

"It says that you don't have to be bad if you're hanging out with bad people. Those bad people can bring the devil into your life. You could be the

nicest person, but hanging out with bad people is contagious. Like a disease.”

Maggie didn’t want to believe that. Brynn’s friends were definitely strange, but she’d met Simon a couple of times, and he had seemed nice, more interested in Maggie than Brynn ever was. And sure, maybe he was just being polite to his girlfriend’s kid sister, asking questions like what television shows Maggie liked and whether she listened to a lot of music—she didn’t dare bring up Justin or Kelly to a guy like him—but Maggie liked to think that he was genuine, a sincerely cool guy who just happened to have a crazy haircut.

“You know what we should do? Talk to someone from the graveyard,” Cheryl suggested.

Maggie retook her seat upon the floor. “Why?”

“Because if Brynn is doing something creepy, they’d know about it.”

Cheryl had a point. There were hundreds of ghosts lying in wait in Friendship Park. If Maggie wanted to clear up the rumors about her sister, what better way than to go to the source?

“But we’d have to know who to ask, I guess,” Cheryl said. “We’d have to go over there and get a name or something. Off one of the gravestones. And I’m not going out there, *especially* not in the middle of the night. You’d have to pay me a million bucks.”

That wouldn’t be necessary. Maggie inhaled a steady breath and spoke. “I know someone. A little girl . . .” She didn’t know the girl’s name; the limestone atop that fractured tomb was far too weathered to make out. But Maggie was confident she could summon her. After all, she’d visited so many times. She placed her hands on the planchette and spoke in a low

voice: "Little girl from Friendship Park, the one with the dolly on top of the box . . . are you there?"

"You mean Brynn's doll?" Cheryl asked, but Maggie shushed her, focusing on the planchette beneath their fingertips, waiting for it to do something wild. Spin around in circles. Levitate. Spontaneously combust. But it did nothing.

"Dolly?" Maggie said. "Remember me?"

Nothing.

"Maybe you're doing it wrong," Cheryl said.

"Shhh!" Maggie hissed just as Brynn had. "We've got to concentrate or it won't work. Don't talk!"

"Jeez, sorry!" Cheryl looked a little perturbed, not appreciating being snapped at. But she had a point—Maggie was doing it wrong. She was forgetting the most important part.

"Little girl of Friendship Park, I call you . . ."

No. That wasn't right.

"I call onto you . . ."

Nothing. Cheryl shifted her weight, growing impatient.

"Crap, umm, I call upon you . . . ?"

"Ugh." Cheryl rolled her eyes.

"*I call upon thee!*" That was it.

"Magic words?" Cheryl asked, unimpressed. "*There's no place like h—*"

The planchette moved.

Both girls yelped and jerked their hands away.

"Mags!" Cheryl yelled.

"I didn't do it!"

"Yeah right!"

"I swear, I didn't . . ."

"You're such a liar. You're just as weird as Brynn, I swear," Cheryl said, quite serious. "I keep telling my mom she's wrong, but maybe not."

"Your mom's a jerk," Maggie said.

"She is not! Take it back."

But all Maggie managed was a muttered "I'm not weird."

Except, now, Maggie was wondering if her fate truly was sealed. What if she grew up to be just like Brynn and, in the end, her own mother hated her? She pushed the board away. It thunked against the ground, still half propped up against one of Cheryl's knees.

"I'm *not* weird," she whispered again. Except . . . who was the girl who kept sneaking off to the cemetery despite Brynn having lost interest long ago? Who was the girl who had bought a Ouija board with her birthday money and had requested a séance instead of a party? Who was sitting with that board next to her feet right now? Was this her destiny, to follow in her sister's footsteps? Would she argue with her mom the way Brynn did now?

"Hey." Cheryl frowned. "*Hey*, don't get upset, Mags. I didn't mean it. Let's not fight, okay? Here." Cheryl placed the board back on Maggie's legs. "I'll be serious, okay?"

Maggie sucked in her bottom lip, but eventually relented. She didn't want to fight, either, regardless of whether Cheryl's last comment had hurt her feelings. She *did* want to know what Brynn was up to, because she missed the way she and her sister had once been: inseparable, almost best friends. An answer from the board wouldn't just be useful in stopping all those nasty rumors; it would also help Maggie get close to Brynn again.

"Hey, Dolly?" Cheryl, this time. "We have a question."

No movement.

Maggie shook her head. "We probably scared her away."

"Scared a *ghost*? That's a laugh. Dolly . . . if you're here, do you know Maggie's sister Brynn?"

"Let's just forget it, Cher," Maggie murmured. "I'm kinda tired anyw—"

The planchette began to crawl.

Both girls gaped at each other again.

"Are you—" Cheryl.

Maggie shook her head. *No*.

It stopped.

"Ghost!" Cheryl's eyes were wide, glittering with a newfound sense of excitement. "Hey, ghost, do you know Brynn?"

One second. Two. Five seconds.

The planchette reversed direction.

Again, bewildered stares from both girls.

H.

Maggie watched the pointer swirl across the board, her own fingers hardly touching it at all.

I.

"Oh my gosh," Cheryl whispered despite herself.

M.

"*Him*?" Maggie asked. "Him who? Simon?"

"Who's Simon?" Cheryl asked.

"Brynn's boyfriend."

"That weird guy? It's gotta be," Cheryl said, her excitement continuing to grow. "The ghost is talking about Simon!"

A.

G.

It stopped there.

*"Him A G."* Cheryl wrinkled her nose, not getting it.

*"Who's A G?"* Maggie asked the board. Arlen's name started with *A*. But *G*?

U.

"This is weird," she said softly. "I don't feel right, Cher. Maybe we shouldn't be . . ."

"Oh, don't be such a drag, Mags."

Their wrists started to bend, the planchette slowly spinning in place rather than weaving across the letters.

*"Him A G U,"* Cheryl said. "How is anyone supposed to understand this thing without a dumb decoder pin?"

"Brynn said it doesn't work, remember?" Maggie murmured. "She said it's just a game." But when she looked up, Cheryl was staring at her with a disturbed look across her face. "What? What's wrong?"

*"It's not Him A G U,"* Cheryl said. *"It's Hi, Mag. You."*

Maggie blinked, then looked down at the board. And that's when she saw in what position the planchette had stopped. The tip of the plastic pointer was aimed right at her.

"I don't want to play anymore," Maggie said, and shoved the board away, once again hiding it beneath her bed.

"But don't you want to know about what Brynn's up to?" Cheryl asked. Maggie did, very much so. But it seemed to her that Cheryl was the one who was really intrigued now. Maggie, on the other hand, was nothing short of reluctant.

Cheryl wasn't deterred by Maggie's change of heart. She jutted her arm beneath Maggie's bed and retrieved the board, repositioning it upon their

laps. "Hands," Cheryl said, nodding at the pointer, her own fingers already in place.

"Cher . . ."

"*Hands!*"

If Maggie didn't do it, Cheryl always had Jenny. And sure, Maggie had other friends at school, too, but she and Cheryl shared a special bond. It was less than a year before they would both be eighth graders. After that, they'd be at a new school, changing classes every hour, learning how to navigate the halls, trying not to be outcasts amid all the cool kids in some massive cafeteria. Brynn would be there, but Brynn didn't ever want to hang out anymore. For all Maggie knew, by the time she was a freshman, Brynn—who would be a senior—would pretend they were strangers. *Maggie? Maggie who?* Sulking, Maggie dropped her fingers onto the planchette. Because she didn't want to lose Cheryl, not to something as stupid as this.

This time, the planchette didn't hesitate. It began to trace circles across the center of the board before settling upon an H, and then an I.

"It's talking to you," Cheryl said. "Say *hi* back, Mags."

"Hi," Maggie said softly, frightened. "Do you remember me? From the . . ." *The cemetery*. She didn't want to say the word, didn't want to remind the little girl speaking to them through the board that she wasn't the same as they were, that she was dead. Because if Brynn was right, that would make Dolly's owner angry. It would make her rage.

The planchette circled, then stopped on YES.

"Do you remember Brynn?" Cheryl asked.

YES.

Maggie didn't want to do this anymore. But she forced herself to keep her fingers on the pointer. She needed to prove herself. She didn't want to

be the boring fraidy-cat friend.

"Do you know what she does out there with her weirdo friends? Is she doing creepy stuff?" Cheryl was really getting into it now.

NO.

"See?" Maggie whispered across the board at her friend. "Let's stop, now."

"You *made* it say no," Cheryl suggested. "You're pushing the thing around."

"I'm not pushing anything around," Maggie said. "How am I supposed to know *you're* not pushing it?"

Cheryl narrowed her eyes, annoyed by the insinuation. "Because *I'm* not. I already told you. And if I *was* pushing it, I'd have made it say *yes*."

The planchette circled.

NO.

"Whatever." Maggie frowned. This wasn't fun anymore.

L.

I.

"You're making it mad." Cheryl.

K.

E.

"I thought you said I was just pushing it around." Maggie.

NO.

"Well, you probably *are*."

LIKE.

"Hey, ghost." Cheryl. "Prove that you're real."

The planchette increased speed.



"Do something. Slam a door. Push something over. Make a sound. Pull Maggie's hair."

"Pull my—*hey*." That hadn't been nice.

NO LIKE.

"*No like*—no like what?" Cheryl asked.

"Cher, let's stop, okay?"

NO LIKE.

It spelled it out again.

NO LIKE.

"I don't want to stop," Cheryl insisted. "We're having fun, right?"

And then, it settled upon a single letter.

NO LIKE U.

Maggie slowly looked up at Cheryl, and when their eyes met, Cheryl lost her nerve. She lifted her fingers from the pointer. "Yeah, okay, fine," she said. "Whatever. Let's do something else. Something *boring*." Leaning back on her hands, she exhaled a sigh, trying to play off her rattled nerves as casually as she could. "I guess we can watch *American Idol*."

But Maggie couldn't get her hands off the planchette. She tried to lift them, but they were cemented there.

"Maggie, come *on*," Cheryl whined, impatient. "I thought you didn't want to play this stupid thing anymore."

The planchette glided across the board.

FRIEND.

MAG.

YES.

"I'll just call my mom, then," she murmured. "Since *you're* the one being creepy."

FRIEND.

MAG.

YES.

Maggie could feel the words at the back of her throat, but they were getting stuck there, like water held back by a dam. *I'm not doing this. Cher, it isn't me.*

FRIEND.

Over and over, like a mantra.

FRIEND.

Cheryl rolled her eyes. "*Weird*," she said. "Like you-know-who."

CHER.

"Um, *yeah*?" Cheryl arched both eyebrows, as if unsure whether to be annoyed or amused.

BITCH.

Maggie's mouth dropped open.

HATE.

She shook her head. No, this wasn't her. No, no, *no*.

". . . What?" Cheryl blinked in disbelief. "*What?*" But rather than storming out, she snatched up the pointer, tearing it away from Maggie's hands. "You think that's *funny*?!"

"Cher . . ." Maggie's voice returned, as though that planchette had temporarily stolen her ability to speak. Her right hand leapt to her collarbone, pressing against her half of their mutual best-friend necklace.

Cheryl threw the plastic pointer across the room. It hit the wall with a crack.

"It wasn't me," Maggie said weakly, knowing how ridiculous it sounded. "Cher, I promise, it . . ."

“Forget it!” Cheryl was crying now, gathering up her stuff. “You know what? It doesn’t matter. I don’t even care.”

“But . . .”

“But nothing.” She veered around, giving Maggie a hard glare. “You know what, Maggie? *You’re* the bitch!” The curse made Maggie wince, but Cheryl wasn’t deterred. “You should go hang out in the graveyard with your sicko sister,” she spit out. “Go join a devil cult, Mags. Then you can talk to the dead people *all* the time! And, and . . .” She noticed the placement of Maggie’s hand, then reached up to her own necklace and tore it free of her neck. “You can keep this. Find someone else.” She threw the necklace down onto the carpet and stormed out, leaving Maggie alone with the board across her lap.

. . .

Maggie was devastated. She tried calling Cheryl the next day, but Cheryl’s mom insisted she wasn’t home. When she called the day after that, Cheryl happened to be out with her dad. After a week of trying, Maggie’s mom rested a hand upon her youngest daughter’s shoulder and gave her kid a sad sort of smile. “Honey, Cheryl doesn’t feel like talking. Let’s stop calling her house, okay?”

That afternoon, Maggie sat down with her school pencils and stationery set and began to write a note of apology—*Dear Cheri, I’m so sorry*—but she couldn’t think beyond the light tapping on her bedroom window. At first, her heart soared at the sound. Maybe Cheryl was outside, tossing pebbles at the glass. That seemed like a Cheryl sort of thing to do, something they’d both laugh at because it was hokey and lame. But when Maggie abandoned her desk chair and pushed the curtains aside—her heart thudding in her ears with eager anticipation to see her best friend standing on the lawn—

there was no one in the yard, and with no tree branches anywhere near the window, it was impossible to decipher where the noise originated.

*Squirrels*, she thought. *Squirrels on the roof*. They drove Maggie's mom crazy. Surely that's where the tapping was coming from.

That night, with her note only half-finished—*I promise on our whole friendship, it wasn't me*—the tapping on the window graduated to a knock.

*Squirrels*? Not unless they were inside the walls, banging on two-by-fours with their tiny fists. She hit pause on the DVD she was watching—*Panic Room*, borrowed from Brynn, and most certainly not approved by their mother—and followed the knocking to a spot behind her bed.

*Tap tap tap.*

Maybe a mouse skittering behind the plaster? But when she put her ear up to the wall, the knock seemed to come from the back of the headboard, as though an invisible hand were reaching out from beneath the mattress and rapping its knuckles against the wood.

"What the heck?" She went downstairs and reported the knocking to her father, who—a few minutes later—came into her room with a ratchet set to tighten the bolts of Maggie's frame.

"What're you watching, Crazy?" He peered at the TV. "It looks scary."

"It's not," Maggie said.

"Oh yeah?" Dad gave his youngest daughter a look. "Doesn't look like it's Mom Approved, and it sure as heck looks like it might make a little girl hallucinate some strange knocks in her poorly lit room."

"I'm not *hallucinating*," Maggie crossed her arms over her chest. "And I'm not a little girl," she muttered beneath her breath.

Dad didn't bother to counter her argument. He checked the headboard. "Loose screws," he said, tapping Maggie's forehead with a finger. "Get it

together. Either that, or stop watching scary movies.” Maggie stuck her tongue out at him, but she couldn’t stay mad for long. Besides, he was right; it *was* nuts. There was no such thing as ghosts. Just her imagination. Her newfound resolve, however, didn’t keep her from tossing that Ouija board into the steamer trunk at the foot of her bed and latching it tight.

In case the knocking came back. Which it did.

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

Always in threes.

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

Now, from inside the trunk.

As if to say:

*Let. Me. Out.*

## THIRTEEN

---

MAGGIE FOUND HERSELF sitting next to Brynn on the couch, waiting for Simon to arrive. It was New Year's Eve, and their parents had gotten snazzed up to attend some sort of fancy gala downtown.

"Hey, Bee?" Maggie squinted at the TV.

"Hey, what?"

"I don't get it," she said. "You know how you said that board doesn't work?"

"Oh my God, are you *still* going on about that?"

"I just want to know something," Maggie said, trying to come off as casual.

"Fine. What?"

"Well, if it *doesn't* work, then how does the pointer move and stuff? How do the words appear the way they do?"

Brynn looked up from her phone with a raised eyebrow. "You think they just *appear*?" she asked. "Like, a ghost is really doing it, huh?"

Maggie lifted her shoulders up to her ears.

"Like, ghosts just sit around waiting for dipshits to break out their stupid Ouija boards that they bought at Toys R Us so they can spell out stupid crap like *I like big boobs* and *Let's order pizza*?" Brynn paused, suddenly looking thoughtful. "I should have ordered pizza."

"Or bad stuff," Maggie said, only to immediately regret it. Because now her sister was looking at her with flat-out suspicion.

"*Bad* stuff? Are you screwing around with that thing?"

"No!"

"Bullshit, yes, you are."

"No, I mean, not anymore." Maggie frowned. Another lie. Before the board had been around, she hadn't had to cover her tracks. But since she'd brought it home, she'd lied to her dad on her birthday, and now she was lying to Brynn. "But I played with Cheryl—"

"Little Miss Priss."

"—and it spelled out awful stuff, Brynn. Stuff I'd never say to Cheri, like, ever. And that's why she left and hasn't come back. That's why she doesn't want to be my friend anymore."

Brynn appeared to consider this. She sat silent and motionless for a time, as if thinking something over. Then again, she might have been back to thinking about pizza. There was still time. Their dad had given them twenty bucks before heading out the door.

"And now there's knocks in my room," Maggie added, albeit quietly.

"Knocks," Brynn echoed.

"Yeah, and scratchy sounds."

Brynn gave her sister a look. *You're bullshitting me*, it said.

"You've got to believe me, Bee," Maggie pleaded with her sister. "Are you *sure* the board really doesn't work?"

"I guess it *could*," she murmured. "But . . ."

"But what?"

"You ever heard of the subconscious?"

Maggie shrugged.

"It's, like, stuff you do or say without knowing you're doing or saying them. It's your mind acting out on your innermost thoughts."

"Yeah?"

"So, maybe you actually *did* want to say those things to Little Miss Priss, but you couldn't bring yourself to do it, so you had the board do it instead."

"No." Maggie shook her head, vehemently denying the possibility. That was ridiculous. Maggie was hurt, sure. And she'd been jealous of Cheryl and Jenny's budding friendship. Maggie had felt left out because Cheryl had changed. She'd become more distant, distracted. But for Maggie to call her a bitch? "No way," she said. "Cher's my best friend. Or . . ." She frowned, realizing the inaccuracy of her word choice. "... was ..."

"Yeah, well . . ." Brynn lifted a single shoulder up toward her ear. "Sometimes best friends suck a big one, so get used to it."

But Maggie couldn't bring herself to believe it. Because even if it had been her unconscious mind, why hadn't she been able to stand up, to throw the board off her knees and chuck the pointer across the room? None of it made sense.

"But—"

The doorbell chimed.

"But nothing," Brynn said, leaping off the couch to answer the door. "Don't be a drag, okay?" She shot a look over her shoulder, as if to say: *Do not embarrass me in front of Simon.*

Maggie bit her bottom lip and moved to her father's armchair. A few minutes later, she was happy she had. Brynn and Simon were cozying up on the couch, neither one of them able to stop touching each other for more than half a second. It was gross, which was why Maggie decided to focus all her attention on the movie Simon had brought with him. The opening



credits began to roll, and all three of them immediately began gorging themselves on Orville Redenbacher's buttered popcorn, Diet Cokes, and red Twizzlers that Maggie didn't much like but couldn't seem to stop eating.

The movie was boring at first, something about an archeologist and a mysterious artifact—*Indiana Jones* without the rolling boulders and monkey soup. She considered ditching out and going upstairs to watch *Dick Clark's New Year's Rockin' Eve* on her own TV, same as the Olsens usually did as a family every year. Or maybe she'd pull the board out again. It might be fun to ring in the new year by talking to the undead. It sure as heck would trump Simon's taste in films.

Except, by the time Maggie had gathered up the nerve to excuse herself, the film cut away from the archeologist to the story of a little girl instead. And when that little girl's mother discovered a Ouija board in the basement? Well, Maggie was riveted. And absolutely terrified.

A handful of scenes later, that same little girl peed herself during a party in front of all her mother's fancy friends. At that point, Maggie pressed a decorative pillow to her chest and gaped. Because what the hell *was* this? What had Simon brought into their home?

"Gross." Brynn pelted popcorn at the TV screen. She and Simon couldn't manage to keep quiet for more than a few minutes at a time, laying down witty quips after what seemed like every line of dialogue. But Maggie's attention was fixed, her eyes glued to the tube, and by the time Regan MacNeil was thrashing in her bed, Maggie was struggling to keep her own scream at bay. Stuffing a corner of that pillow into her mouth, she kept herself from revealing just how scared she was, worried that maybe Brynn would make her go upstairs or turn off the movie completely, which Maggie

both wanted to happen and knew she would challenge if it did. Because she *had* to know how it ended. She had to know what her own future held.

Every now and again, her eyes would dart toward the staircase leading up to the second floor. There was a sensation of something standing at the top of the stairs, just out of view, like a kid hiding out, watching the TV through the slats of the balustrade. Except the feeling coming from upstairs wasn't curiosity; it wasn't a sense of inclusion. It was heavy. Black. Swirling with menace. And the more Regan transformed into a snarling demon on screen, the more Maggie wanted to run from room to room, flipping on every light.

Even Brynn and Simon fell silent when the flick went off the rails. The story spiraled toward madness, and Maggie could tell that they, too, were disturbed by the things they saw. Brynn was probably regretting having shut off all the lights; she was more than likely considering another movie right after this one—something funny to break the tension. That was Maggie's go-to technique whenever Brynn scared her just before bed. Cartoons, or the Farrelly brothers. *Dumb and Dumber* was one of her favorites. She couldn't count the times Lloyd Christmas and Harry Dunne had put her at ease with their snorts of laughter, assuring her that the world was stupid and hilarious rather than a terrible, festering wound.

When this movie ended, though, Maggie wasn't sure she could move. Her body had petrified within its protective pillow-clinging huddle. The anxiety that had grown inside her chest was coiled up tight, promising to rouse with the slightest of shifts, to suffocate her beneath its crushing weight.

Brynn and Simon fell back into their usual teasing. Simon collapsed against the couch like a tired prince, his black T-shirt and jeans nothing

more than pronounced shadows against the beige upholstery. He began to convulse while Brynn laughed next to him. Then he fake-vomited all over the floor before attacking Brynn, pretending to puke into her mouth and onto her hair. She parried him with flailing hands and uncontrollable laughter.

Meanwhile, Maggie sat motionless, staring at the TV as the credits rolled and that creepy music played, waiting for something evil to crawl out of the screen. It was only after a few seconds of goofing off that Brynn realized her little sister was too quiet, too still.

“Mags?” she asked. “Hey. Oh man. Are you totally freaking out?”

Maggie didn’t respond. She continued to hug that oversized pillow to her chest like a soul shield. There was a terrible feeling in the room—one that neither Simon nor Brynn seemed to register. Whatever had been lurking at the top of the stairs had now descended—backward and in reverse, having crab-walked down the risers just as Regan had. Maggie was certain it was standing directly behind her, leering. She could feel electricity upon her skin. She could smell it. Something was burning. Going up in smoke.

“Shit, Maggie?” Brynn sounded concerned this time. “Dude, if you’re freaking out, you better not say anything to Mom.” Because if Maggie did, Brynn would be in a world of trouble. Maggie wasn’t even sure Simon was allowed to be there. Brynn would be grounded for life, and Maggie would never hear the end of it from her disgruntled sister.

Maggie managed to blink out of her stupor, but rather than releasing the pillow, she only clung to it more. “I’m okay,” she whispered. “I’m okay.” An echo, as though saying it over and over would make a falsehood true.

“Hey, didn’t you say you guys have a board?” Simon’s question made the hairs on the back of Maggie’s neck stand on end.

*No.* She wanted to scream it at him. *No, no, NO.*

"Yeah, Mags does . . ." Brynn said, still watching her kid sister.

"Well, bring it out!" Simon said, beaming, pushing his fingers through that floppy black Mohawk. "Let's talk to some fuckin' demons."

"Ehhh, probably not the best idea right now," Brynn said.

Simon sat up from his sprawl across the couch and raised both eyebrows at Maggie. Secretly, she found him painfully pretty, like one of the all-black-wearing bad guys in an anime movie. But now, in the darkness, his pale face and odd expression made him look disconcerting, like a ventriloquist's dummy. If he made like he was going to come after her, she was sure she'd burst into tears.

"You afraid something's gonna steal your soul, little sister?" he asked. "That stuff really happens, you know. There are documented cases . . ."

Maggie held her breath. Those tears were coming, their sting creeping across the backs of her eyes.

"This movie, it's based on a true story, you know. There's even a book written about it. And it's not just people they can get into, either," Simon continued. "It's *things*, too."

"Hey, Si, don't," Brynn said, taking a seat next to Maggie. And yet, when the cushion of the armchair compressed beneath her weight, rather than being comforted by her big sister's presence, Maggie jumped up and off the furniture like a startled cat. Brynn stared at her with surprise. "What the hell, Mags?"

"Nothing!" The word came out as a yell, though she didn't know why. She looked down to the pillow she was now wrenching with both hands. It felt like the only pure thing in that room, so she hugged it again, refusing to release it from her grasp.

“Dude, okay, now you’re freaking me out!” Brynn yelled back, then got up to cross the distance between the couch and the wall. She flipped a light switch. A small table lamp burst to life, cutting through the malicious darkness of the living room. But the shadow the light should have blotted out stayed exactly where it wanted to be, cemented in the material world. She imagined it swirling. Huddled. Clinging to the walls. The furniture. Grinning. *Grinning . . .*

“I’m going to bed,” Maggie whispered into the fringe of the pillow. She didn’t want to go upstairs by herself, but she couldn’t beg Brynn to go upstairs with her while Simon was there. And she certainly didn’t want to stay downstairs, where that shadow lurked.

“But it’s not even midnight,” Brynn protested.

“You’re gonna miss the ball drop,” Simon said.

Who cared about the dumb ball drop? To all the people who froze their butts off out in Times Square, the new year meant new possibilities, a fresh start, a clean slate. The night felt exciting, full of mystery and potential. But not to Maggie. Not now. Not after what she’d just sat through. Not with how twisted up she felt.

Now, the future felt nothing but ominous.

Bad things lingered on the horizon, she was sure of it. Very bad things.

. . .

That night, Maggie couldn’t sleep. Even with the desk lamp on and the TV muted, every time she shut her eyes, the same sensation swept over her like a fog: the feeling of someone sneaking up on her, tiptoeing through her bedroom in that high-stepping cartoonish sort of way. Demons flashed against the backs of her eyes—perfect replicas of the awful monster the movie had invoked. Pulling her blankets up beneath her chin, she buried her

face in her pillow. If she managed to fall asleep, she was sure her apprehension would wane. But sleep seemed next to impossible. The knocking that was coming from the back of her headboard wouldn't stop—a light *tap, tap, tap*, always in threes. *Just a loose screw, Crazy.* Yeah, right. There was no way she was imagining it this time.

Her heart thudded to a stop when she heard the opening and closing of a door—*What was that?*—only to realize it was her mom and dad, back from their party. They were talking downstairs. She could hear the jingle of her father's car keys. Her mother laughed, then laughed again, but more quietly the second time around. Maggie imagined that they were both a little drunk. At least, that's how couples in the movies came home after a long night of fancy parties.

Despite her shot nerves, the fact that her parents were home gave Maggie more confidence to keep her eyes closed. Nothing bad could happen when they were home, right? That, and the repetitive nature of that tapping eventually lulled her in a trance.

*Tap, tap, tap.*

She squeezed her eyes shut. *Just don't look.* If she didn't see the shadow, she could pretend it didn't exist.

It might have been an hour, or a minute, or just a few seconds of slipping away, but it felt like she'd been sleeping for days when her unconsciousness started to lighten around its otherwise dark edges. She shifted her weight, unable to feel the bed beneath her. She groped for the mattress, for her blankets, but there was nothing but air. In her mind—in real life?—she was floating, equidistantly suspended between the mattress and the ceiling, her hair cascading down toward the floor as hungry, twitching figures filled every corner of her room.

Maggie struggled against that still-clinging sleep, fighting to open her eyes. *It's coming!* Somehow, she was sure that the moment they blinked open, she'd hit the mattress with a heavy thump. But that was impossible. It was that movie, that scary levitation scene. Things like that were nothing but Hollywood. They couldn't happen in real life.

But her skepticism offered no comfort. *Wake up!* She bolted upright, miraculously seated upon her bed. With heaving breaths, she searched the walls of her room, pausing to stare into corners that were a little too dark despite the lamplight. The shadows felt alive, and the longer she gazed at them, the more it seemed like they were biding their time, waiting for her to look away.

The television threw out reassuring images that the world was as she had left it. Normal. Clearly lacking in the demonic department. But that closet door . . . she was sure there was something behind it. That wicked, lurking thing. The creature that smelled like smoke.

*Go get Dad,* she thought. But her mother would be annoyed. It would only prove that Brynn had been up to her usual tricks again, and that would inevitably lead to trouble. Maggie didn't want that to happen. After all, it was Simon who had brought over that awful film. Bee had just wanted to impress him. She had protected Maggie when Simon had wanted to bring out the board.

With her teeth clenched, Maggie lay back down and tried to force herself to sleep, but it kept happening. Every time she managed to drift off, she was overcome by a sensation of rising upward like a helium balloon. Each time, she gasped awake, only to find the room just the way she'd left it. Untouched by the supernatural. Except for that light tapping. Incessant. Never wavering. *Loose screw.*

She could go sleep on the couch. Except that would give away her fear just the same. Their mom would know. Brynn would be held responsible.

And then, the mattress rumbled beneath her.

Her fingers dug into the sheets. She tried to scream, but the yell got stuck in her throat—nothing but an air bubble of panic as she scrambled off the bed. Except, when she hit the floor, she came to discover that it wasn't the bed frame that was moving. It was her. She was shaking, as though in the midst of an epileptic fit. Maggie lifted a hand to look at it, crying out when she couldn't get it to stop jerking back and forth. The tremors kept her from standing upright. A whimper escaped her as she began to crawl toward her bedroom door, unable to keep herself from picturing it: a long arm reaching out from beneath her bed, catching her ankle, and yanking her into the abyss.

*GO GET DAD!*

She wormed down the upstairs hallway to her parents' bedroom door. And yet, even though she was trembling, she paused just before pushing it open, struck by the very real childhood fear of rousing her parents from their sleep. Her mom would demand to know what was going on, why Maggie was so scared. She'd find out about the movie, about Simon coming over. There was no doubt Brynn would be barred from seeing him for the rest of winter break, and Brynn would positively *hate* Maggie for ruining her life.

But Maggie couldn't remain in the hall. The shock of not being able to walk was freaking her out. What if, somehow, she'd become paralyzed? What if she really *was* possessed? She had to go to the hospital. Or to a church, where the demons couldn't get her, just like Brynn had said.

Maggie pushed her parents' bedroom door open and crawled into darkness. She made it to her dad's side of the bed, hesitated, and eventually



placed her trembling hand on her father's exposed arm.

"Dad," she whispered, not wanting to wake her mother. Maybe if she was quiet, her dad would keep a secret. "*Dad.*" But it was her mother who stirred, then opened her eyes and gasped. For half a second, Maggie was sure her own face was no longer there, replaced by the bloated and cracking visage of the devil himself. It was why her mom looked so afraid.

"Oh my God, *what are you doing?*" Maggie's mom hissed, clearly startled by the fact that there, in her nearly pitch-black room, her daughter was writhing around on the floor.

"I can't . . ." Maggie lifted a hand to illustrate what she was about to say. "I can't stop shaking." And then, the fear that had built up inside her became too much to bear. She began to cry. "There's something in my room. My bed . . . I . . . I keep floating . . . I can't—"

"Oh Jesus *Christ.*" Stella Olsen threw the sheets off herself, marched around the bed, and caught her daughter by the arm before yanking her up to her feet—pissed, but determined to be quiet. "Hush!" she whispered. "You're going to wake your father."

And just like that, Maggie was escorted out of her parents' bedroom and back down the hall. There was no mention of her tremors, as though her mother hadn't noticed she was in the middle of a seizure, and there certainly was no regard given to Maggie's claims that her room was haunted.

"Back in bed," her mom commanded. "*Now.*"

"But . . ."

"Enough," she snapped. "I've had it with this stuff, Magdalene." She stomped across the room and turned off the TV.

"No!" Maggie whimpered. "*Please.*"

Her mother gave her a stern look—*You're too old for this*—but jammed her finger against the television's power button regardless. The TV screen came back on.

"I'll expect an explanation in the morning," she said. "You better start working on it now, young lady, because I expect it to be good." And then, she left Maggie alone in her room.

Somehow, her mother's unadulterated annoyance wiped out Maggie's fear. Whatever that shadow was, it was gone now, no match for the ferociousness of Stella Olsen, furious over being roused from her sleep.

The next time Maggie woke, it was morning, and the only terror she felt was for the retribution that would inevitably be handed down, the thousands of questions she knew she'd have to answer, all before breakfast.

. . .

When Maggie finally came downstairs, Brynn and their dad were sitting at the kitchen table while Maggie's mother banged pots and pans next to the sink. When Maggie stepped inside, the air was sucked out of the room, as though she had been the subject of intense discussion and now that conversation had come to a screeching halt. Dad raised a curious eyebrow, as though already having heard the tale of the incredible crawling girl, weeping about seizures and paralysis and floating above her bed. The cookware settled into silence as Maggie's mother turned to give her youngest daughter a pointed stare. Brynn—her hair a rat's nest of tangled black—glared at Maggie from behind a plate of half-eaten pancakes. It was a look Maggie knew well. Brynn had been interrogated and was, perhaps, being handed her conviction.

Their father broke the tension. "Happy New Year, kiddo. You hungry?"

“Happy New Year, Dad.” Maggie shuffled toward the breakfast table with her head down and took her regular seat.

“So, what’s your excuse for last night?” Maggie’s mother leaned against the kitchen counter, awaiting a sufficient answer as to why she’d been woken.

Rather than making eye contact with anyone in the room, Maggie swallowed and focused her attention on the half-empty carafe of orange juice in the center of the table. She reached over, caught it by its tapered neck, and poured herself a tumblerful. Maybe if she acted normal, her mom would huff and get tired of being mad.

But it seemed that, at times, Stella Olsen thrived off anger, and this morning was one of those times. “Your sister believes she can convince us that nothing stupid went on while she was in charge,” she said. “Though why I trusted such an immature child with the task of babysitting you, I can’t fathom. An immature child who’s *supposed* to be a young woman, by the way.”

Maggie’s eyes inched their way toward her unhappy sister. When their mom was fuming, she’d pelt them with endless underhanded comments, all of them actively suggesting that the child she was discussing was nowhere within earshot.

“Well?” Mom gave Maggie an expectant look. “Out with it, or you’ll *both* be grounded.”

That was it, then. Brynn had been sentenced.

Maggie swallowed a mouthful of juice. Her attention shifted to her dad, searching for backup. He wasn’t offering any. This time, she was on her own.

"I just . . ." Maggie hesitated, her fingers working the hem of her sleep shirt. She could tell them everything, and maybe they'd believe her. Except, at this point, Maggie wasn't sure what *she* believed. Had she been floating above her bed, or was it just her imagination? Had she *really* been shaking so terribly that she couldn't manage to walk? The memory of crawling down the hall was vivid, and yet, as soon as her mom threw back the sheets and grabbed her by the arm, Maggie had miraculously recovered the use of her legs. Didn't that prove it was all in her head; that it was, as Brynn would have insisted, her subconscious?

"You just what?" Mom was losing her patience. When she asked questions, she wanted answers, and fast.

Maggie glanced back to Brynn, who was now frozen in midchew. Brynn stared back at her with a look that transcended spoken words. *Keep your stupid mouth shut.* If Maggie spilled about Simon, Brynn wouldn't just be grounded; she'd be dead and buried.

"I just didn't feel good," Maggie said. "I think I ate too much junk food."

Brynn looked down to her plate. After a beat, she continued her breakfast.

"That'll do it," Dad chimed in. "My grandma always used to tell me, if you eat a bunch of crap before bed—"

"*Gross, Dad,*" Brynn cut in.

"Okay, we've heard it," Mom said at the same time.

"—you'll wake up with bugs in your butt," Dad finished.

Maggie couldn't help herself. She smiled, then chuckled, loving that nonsense belief. Her dad grinned back at her, then reached across the separating distance to ruffle her hair. That's when Maggie decided that, no,

none of that stuff last night had been real. It couldn't have been. That movie had scared the hell out of her, but that was all it had been.

Except Maggie's smile faded as she looked down to her empty plate. Because she could feel it again, that presence. The thing that had lingered in her room last night had now slipped into a sunny corner of their kitchen. The scent she had assumed was nothing more than a burnt pancake now smelled sharper, more pronounced, despite the stove being off and all the pans soaking in the sink.

And when she glanced over to her mother, she saw it. Nothing more than a blip of darkness, ducking around a door jamb to hide itself just as Maggie looked its way.

## FOURTEEN

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MAGGIE'S PHONE KEPT buzzing in her hand.

I'M GOING TO TALK TO YOUR PROF TOMORROW.

HOPE YOU DON'T MIND.

I KNOW YOU'RE UPSET.

TEXT ME WHEN YOU CAN, OKAY?

Dillon.

But she didn't feel like talking. Not after what she'd seen in Brynn's room.

She closed her fingers over her phone and pressed it to her chest as she lay in bed, unsure of why she was still in that house, of why in the world she would close herself up in that room again. Maybe it was an honest attempt at reliving the past, of getting back to a time when things had been okay. *Repent.* But all it got her was the inability to close her eyes the very same way she hadn't been able to as a girl.

Lying on her side, she stared into the corner nearest to the closet door—the corner that had always seemed darkest, that *still* felt dangerous despite the time that had passed and all the renovations that had been made.

That doll, the way it had appeared back in her room after she'd tossed it out. She had heard the garbage truck rumble up the street, unless it had been the storm. She had been certain it was gone, and yet . . .

*It was just the storm.*

It was a prank. Someone was screwing with her. It had to have been Hope. She had asked what Maggie was throwing away, had snuck out there before the truck had come, dragged the trash bag out of the bin, and then brought that doll back into the house.

But what about that shadow? And that fucking *board*, the way Cheryl had found it in the closet despite Maggie having gone through all the junk before Cheryl had arrived? Was it possible that Maggie really hadn't seen it?

"No way," she whispered to herself.

Those letters carved into Brynn's bedpost. The mirrors, all shielded but one. A white sheet on the carpet. The glitter of glass. The remains of her sister's lifeblood nothing but a stain waiting to be torn out and incinerated. No, the board *hadn't* been in the closet. She was nearly certain that Brynn had, at one point, found it and taken it with her down the hall. Maybe that's what Arlen had meant when she said that Brynn had been sick; perhaps that's why Brynn had stopped going downstairs for meals. She'd been holed up like a hermit, her fingers upon that planchette, watching that plastic pointer glide over a board. She had been doing exactly what Maggie had done. It had become an addiction. A calling. An all-encompassing desire that could not be denied.

And now, it was starting all over again—boards vanishing and reappearing out of nowhere; the doll, tossed in the trash, only to be back in its place. All repeat performances of when she was a kid: pencils, school notebooks, once her entire backpack full of homework gone without a trace. She'd spend hours looking for them, eventually blaming Brynn for playing her dumb tricks. Their mother would yell. Their father would give Brynn the look: *Be a grown-up*. Brynn would scream: *What do you want me to do, pull it out of thin air? I didn't take it!* Maggie would cry, in a panic because

she hadn't finished her assignments and there was a quiz on her missing notes the next day. Sometimes, during the drama, Maggie's mom would burst into Brynn's room with the intention of finding the missing items, only to discover them in Maggie's room instead, exactly where they should have been. Those were the days Maggie got in serious trouble. And while the grounding was bad, her big sister's resentment was worse.

Then there was that closet door, having a penchant for not staying latched. Maggie *never* left it open; she was afraid to, always making sure it was closed by pulling on the handle thrice before going to bed. And yet she'd wake to it wide-open. That, or she'd leave her room only to return to the closet door ajar. She'd complained to her dad about that the same as she had about the tapping, and there went her father with one of his tools, with his sound logic. *Just a bad latch*, he'd say. *No monsters. Just a big chicken sitting on her bed.*

That shadow, though? She'd never told her dad about that. It felt off-limits, like maybe, if she told him that much, he'd genuinely start to worry; like maybe, if he thought she was seeing ghosts, she'd get sent away. She'd watched enough scary movies to know that sometimes, when kids were crazy enough, they had to go to big hospitals out in the middle of nowhere. And those hospitals? Those places were even more haunted than her house.

That shadow continued to creep into her periphery. Reflections in the bathroom mirror, in the giant wood-framed heirloom in the hallway; sometimes the mere reflection in the turned-off television screen. There was something lingering beyond those twin images, something deeper than reality. Back then, she'd been sure it had all been an illusion, that constant buzz of nerves playing tricks on her. *Just a loose screw . . .*

But now . . .



Maggie sat up.

Had Brynn felt that same sensation? Was *that* why she had so many reflective surfaces in her room?

She shoved the sheets aside.

Had Brynn's initial fascination turned into terror? Was that why she had covered the mirrors, why she had sought sanctuary within a church?

About to swing her feet over the edge of the mattress, Maggie was suddenly gripped by childish fear. Her eyes darted back to the closet door. Still closed, but refusing to offer solace. The moment her toes brushed across the carpet, that shadow would grab her ankles. It would drag her down, lurching into the room from inside that closet to finally swallow her whole.

She nearly shrieked when her cell phone vibrated against the palm of her hand. The screen lit up, illuminating the darkness in an eerie blue glow. *Goddammit!* Couldn't he leave her alone for a few hours, at least? She flipped the phone over and squinted against the glare of the LCD screen, ready to ask Dillon to give her some space.

Except . . .

Maggie stared wide-eyed at the phone, her head registering miniscule shakes of denial.

*No.*

Her breath escaping in tiny gasps.

*No.*

Brynn's raccoon eyes and purple-smeared mouth smirking at her, as if amused. The teenage sneer.

*No.*

HI MAGGIE HI, it said.

MAGGIE HI. Again.

FRIEND WELCOME HOME.

She threw the phone onto the mattress, leapt off the bed, and darted toward the door before stumbling into an equally dark hallway—one that felt far longer than it should have. And as she stood there, swathed by night, she wondered what, exactly, she intended to do now that she was out of that room. Leave? Abandon her sister, her sister's children, in the house that was haunted by her own doing?

She shot a look back through her open bedroom door, her throat clicking dryly as she swallowed against the lump that had formed there. Her phone was buzzing every few seconds, phantom messages blipping onto the screen.

And there, across the room, the closet door was slowly creeping open.

She couldn't see it, but she knew it was there. A shadow in the darkness, darker than the night that surrounded it. Watching her. Waiting.

An ever-present nightmare.

Her inescapable, preordained, self-prophesized truth.

. . .

Screaming.

Someone was screaming.

Maggie's muscles spasmed, jerking her into full consciousness. She'd been up all night, wide-eyed and curled into the corner of the sofa. But as soon as the sun started to rise, exhaustion hit her hard. She'd drifted in and out of wakefulness all morning, but now, sleep was stripped away with the roughness of a Band-Aid pull. A zing of pain speared through the base of her skull. Her heart clamored up her windpipe. For a moment, she couldn't remember where the hell she was. All she knew was that she had fled the terror she felt last night, turned on the living room lights, and hunkered

down on the couch like a terrified child, and now, someone was screaming the way she had wanted to just hours before.

“I don’t want appo, I want *oh-ange!*”

Maggie blinked at her surroundings. Her mother’s living room, but not her mother’s things. One of Arlen’s Pottery Barn pillows was crushed against her chest. She winced as she pushed herself up to sit, the vertebrae in her neck feeling as though they’d fused together overnight. The pain was worse than ever now. Yeah, the couch—that had been a *splendid* idea.

A whimper tripped across her tongue. She grabbed at her neck in a feeble attempt at relief. But this wasn’t just a crick from sleeping in a fear-induced huddle. This was the very agony that had kept her out of school and landed her in doctors’ offices, a pain that had hit her head-on after speeding home from what was supposed to be a fun-filled week on the beach.

*Don’t go. Friend, don’t go.*

Another scream. High-pitched. A tiny soprano. “I want oh-ange! Not this juice! Momma, *noooo!*”

“*Hayden!*” Arlen’s tone snapped like a rubber band. Even from clear across the house, her aggravation was clear. It had seemed odd that Arlen wasn’t mourning, that she hadn’t processed the fact that Brynn was gone, but now, Maggie could hardly blame her. Because who in the world could think, let alone grieve, with a three-year-old screaming into your goddamn ear all day?

Maggie squeezed her eyes shut, rubbed at the bridge of her nose. “Jesus fucking Christ,” she whispered, trying her best to ease the tension that was now quite literally making her neck pop every time she moved.

She had two more days in Savannah. Today, all details for Brynn had to be in order. Tomorrow, the funeral. That was, if Florence allowed it to happen at all. And at this rate, Maggie doubted she'd be able to make it without an emergency chiropractor adjustment, if she could even find a place that was open in the middle of a goddamn storm. But she was quickly inching up to her threshold; once she crossed it, moving around—let alone thinking straight—would become next to impossible. And leaving Savannah? How was she supposed to leave now, after what had happened last night?

“Did you sleep down here?”

Startled, Maggie blinked her eyes open, then dropped her hands to her lap. Hope stood not three feet from her, her hair a tornado of golden candy floss. The Caribbean blue of her pajamas was bright enough to force Maggie into a squint. Elsa the Snow Queen smiled at her from the center of Hope's sleep shirt. Its bottom hem was snagged on the pink tulle of her tutu. Hope lifted a piece of Nutella-smeared toast to her mouth and took a giant bite, leaving chocolate track marks across both cheeks like a clown's gruesomely wide smile.

“Hey, Hope.” Maggie needed a drink, and not just juice. A screwdriver. But judging by Hayden's skin-flaying screech, they were fresh out of OJ. A crying shame.

Maggie tried to roll her neck, winced, and stopped midway.

“Did you hurt yourself again?” Hope asked, her chocolate breath cutting through the distance, twisting Maggie's already knotted stomach into a tighter snare.

“Just sore,” she murmured. “Why's Hay screaming her head off?”

“Oh.” Hope’s attention shifted in the direction of the kitchen, then returned to her aunt a moment later. “She always does this.”

*Maybe this is why Brynn killed herself.* Maggie considered the possibility, then immediately hated herself for such a nasty thought.

“I heard what you said,” Hope announced.

“What I said?” Maggie asked.

“Yeah. You shouldn’t use the Lord’s name in vain.” Hope spoke around a mouthful of bread and hazelnut spread. “And you shouldn’t curse. Especially the F-word. *Especially* if you’re a girl. My mom says.”

“Sorry.” Maggie detached herself from Arlen’s now misshapen throw pillow. She propped it against the arm of the couch, not bothering to fluff it back into shape. That would drive Arlen nuts, no doubt. She needed a shower. The scorch of hot water would at least ease some of that stiffness from her shoulders. Her phone was still upstairs.

*Hi, Maggie, hi.*

Instant nausea.

She had to show Cheryl the messages that had come in from Brynn’s number; maybe *then* Cheryl would understand how much Maggie needed help. Or maybe Maggie would finally crack and call Dillon, tell him everything, ask him what she was supposed to do. *See a psychiatrist*, he’d probably say, because this sort of narrative didn’t fit into Dillon’s scientific world. Back in Wilmington, she and Dillon believed in logic and reason. Here in Savannah, none of that seemed to exist.

Another wince as she got to her feet.

“I told you not to go in there,” Hope said, her tone flat, stopping Maggie in her tracks.

She stared at her niece—five years old but somehow ancient. Somehow *knowing*. Maggie felt her throat constrict, as if threatening to close up in anaphylactic shock.

“Hey, Hope?” The words felt gooey, coated in phlegm. Any second now, she’d be tripping over herself to get to the bathroom. The queasiness was getting worse the longer she stood there, as if standing so close to her niece was intensifying the sensation. “Do you remember how I threw something in the trash yesterday, when the bin was out by the curb?”

Hope furrowed her eyebrows as she chewed, but she didn’t respond.

“Did you take out what I put in there?” Maggie asked.

Her niece continued to devour her toast. Hope looked completely unconcerned, and her nonchalance only made Maggie that much more anxious. Had the kid gone cagey, the answer would have been clear: yes, she’d gone digging through the garbage; don’t tell her mom, don’t get her in trouble. But the way she stood there, so lackadaisical in her tutu and pajamas, so utterly torpid—it made Maggie want to join Hayden’s screaming fit.

“Hope?” Maggie swallowed, watching the kid. “Can you answer me?” With the last bite of toast packed into her cheek, Hope’s gaze slowly drifted upward to meet her aunt’s eyes. “Did you bring that trash back inside?”

The inquiry caused Hope’s eyes to darken a shade, but Maggie refused to be deterred.

“Maybe I should ask your mom, then,” Maggie suggested. “Since you don’t want to tell me yourself.”

Hope pursed her chocolate-smeared mouth, then took a step forward to lessen the distance between herself and her aunt. The scratchy edging of her tutu brushed across Maggie’s bare knees. Being so close was the last thing

Maggie wanted, but being afraid of a five-year-old, of her *family* . . . it was beyond ridiculous. And so she stood her ground.

“You aren’t always very nice, Auntie Magdalene,” Hope said.

“What? How am I not nice?” Maggie straightened to her full height.

“You call your friends bad names. And you curse. And you throw away stuff that doesn’t belong to you,” Hope said. “That’s like stealing. That doll isn’t yours, and you know it.”

Another scream, as though little Hayden were somehow personifying the wails trapped inside Maggie’s head.

“But I won’t tell my mom,” she said. “Because I love you.” Flat. Affectless. “No matter what.” And then, with a few backward steps, she wandered off, leaving Maggie frozen in front of the couch, tumbling toward panic.

*You call your friends awful names.*

Hope was talking about Cheryl. About something that happened a decade before. As if Hope had somehow been there to see it happen herself.

## FIFTEEN

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MAGGIE SLAMMED THE trunk of Brynn's Camry closed and climbed into the driver's seat. With all the windows rolled down and the wind whipping through the interior, she blasted the stereo in the driveway. It was a feeble attempt at soothing her rattled nerves, but at least it brought her back to the days when Brynn would do this very thing—sit in the car when she was particularly pissed, listening to darkwave and smoking clove cigarettes while Maggie spied on her from the upstairs window.

By then, the fights between Brynn and their mother were out of control. Their mom was hardly ever sober, and when she *did* have momentary blips of lucidity, they were brought on not by a clear mind but by the rare lulls in her seemingly permanent high. That respite, however, was always accompanied by an emergency doctor's appointment, another prescription, their mother's tires squealing down the road as she booked it to the pharmacy. By then, sobriety would have meant full-blown withdrawal. Dangerous depression. Anger and constant crying. A complete mental break.

Both Maggie and Brynn had tried to help, lending encouragement while Arlen attempted to get their mother to see a shrink. *I already have a therapist*, was their mom's go-to response. And she was right, she did indeed have one. Unfortunately, that quack—along with Mom's collection of other



doctors—continued to prescribe the very drugs that were robbing the girls of their remaining parent.

Eventually, even typically coolheaded Arlen reached her breaking point. Rifling through their mother's things and calling the numbers she found on every orange pill bottle she discovered, Arlen demanded to talk to each prescribing physician while Maggie and Brynn watched on in muted fascination. Naturally, none of the doctors would breathe a word about their patient without power of attorney. Arlen yelled a menagerie of colorful swears into the phone that afternoon. *Fucking drug dealer!* and *Soul-sucking asshole!* had been among her favorite insults. After eight attempts, Arlen had all but thrown her cell phone across the room. It was the first time Maggie had seen her eldest sister get so emotional. And yet she couldn't quite pinpoint the source of Arlen's anger. Was it their mother's downward spiral, or was Arlen pissed because she wasn't used to being denied her way?

Regardless, the girls' efforts got them nowhere. Their mother continued visiting the same doctors who kept giving her the addictive snake oil. Pills came from a variety of places around town—each doctor having their own designated go-to spot because Stella was smart. The pharmacists on duty couldn't be allowed to catch on. She paid cash rather than relying on insurance to foot the bill, and no one was the wiser. No one but her daughters, who frequently found ATM receipts on the kitchen island for hundreds of dollars' worth of withdrawals. But they couldn't do a goddamn thing about it because it was Stella Olsen's money. Their mother was an adult.

Maggie had been out the afternoon Brynn's first panicked call came in, sitting on the floor at her Advanced Placement English teacher's house, working on her graduation speech, with a calico cat curled up in her lap.

She ignored the ringing of her cell phone from the depths of her backpack, but when it rang for the third time in less than two minutes, Mrs. Miller gave Maggie a stern yet thoughtful look. *It might be an emergency.* And so Maggie answered the call.

*You have to get over here!* Brynn had nearly screamed the words, and that's what had scared Maggie the most—her sister's tone. The panic in her voice. Maggie sat cemented in place as she listened to Brynn cry on the line. She sounded as though she were on a boat, or in a swimming pool, or at the lake they used to visit with their father when the Georgia heat got too oppressive to stand. Water sloshing. Heavy thuds against something hard. Wet limbs hitting porcelain and tile.

During Maggie's rush home, an ambulance blasted past her, lights on, siren blaring. She pulled over as it passed, watching its reflection in her rearview as it turned onto a street a few blocks down, pointing itself toward the closest hospital. When her attention finally drifted from the mirror to the world outside her car window, she found herself parked in front of a wrought iron fence, the headstones of Friendship Park just beyond.

Stella Olsen didn't die that afternoon. Oh, hell no. She had her stomach pumped and was back on the couch, popping pills like candy less than twenty-four hours later.

It's what pushed Maggie over the edge.

With her arms loaded up with prescription bottles, Maggie marched to the downstairs guest bathroom. Bottle caps bounced against the floor. A rainbow of colorful pills splashed into the toilet bowl. Every bottle she emptied was chucked across the room and against the wall—an angry *fuck you* directed at every opiate, every depressant, every doctor who undeniably

knew Mom had a problem. The bottles ricocheted against the sink counter, the mirror, the open bathroom door.

Brynn had materialized during this spectacle, watching, incredulous, knowing that the repercussions would be severe. She called Arlen. *Um, you might want to come over*, she suggested. *I think Mags may have just started World War III.*

An understatement, to be sure. A few minutes later, Brynn was pressing a dish towel to Maggie's wounded cheek, both girls weeping, their life pure and utter chaos. Arlen arrived after the attack. She drove Maggie to the hospital for stitches. Before she left that night, she looked her little sister in the eyes and sighed. *It's good that you're leaving*, she said. *Just get out of here. She's toxic. Make a better life somewhere else.*

The scar on Maggie's cheek had all but faded when, a few months later, Stella Olsen performed an encore, this time with a permanent end.

And for her first few hours as an orphan, Maggie couldn't help but feel nothing but anger. Their mom had broken beneath the weight of tragedy. She had loved their dad so deeply that she had been destroyed by his loss. *Surely*, people had more than likely thought, *the girls must understand how terribly sad that is*. And yes, it was. But the real tragedy wasn't that she had suffocated on her own mourning, but that the love she claimed to have had for her children hadn't been enough to convince her to live.

Maggie now looked up from Brynn's steering wheel and toward the house they'd all grown up in, and a twinge of resentment tightened into a calcified stone at the very center of her chest. Perhaps if Stella Olsen had possessed any decency, she would have spared her children years of pain. Maybe, had the girls not grown up under the thumb of an addict, Brynn's life wouldn't have ended this way.

Or maybe Maggie was just kidding herself. Perhaps fate really was at play, and she herself had set it into motion—a stupid kid with too much curiosity, a girl who hadn't known when to quit. It was easy to blame their mother, but the truth of it was, none of this would have happened if it hadn't been for what Maggie had done.

She pulled out of the driveway and guided the car down the road. The oaks were ragged from their endless beating. They waved their ancient and now mostly leafless limbs at her as she passed, as though trying to warn her to stay back.

But Maggie didn't stop until she rolled up to Friendship Park. Only then did she hit the brakes, and rather than regarding the headstones with sympathy, she glared at them instead. It hadn't crossed her mind to visit their father's plot during her visit, because buried right next to him was their mom. And somewhere, apart from them, would be Brynn.

Maggie pictured her favorite sister placed in the children's section of the graveyard—no room for her next to their parents. Brynn, twenty-five yet still a child.

*Dead kids are never happy because nobody wants to play with them.*

Except the Olsen girls had been unhappy long before any of them had died.

Maggie guided the Camry through the cemetery gates faster than she should have. Gravel popped beneath the tires as she rolled toward the corner of the graveyard she hadn't dared visit in a decade. Brynn's rosary beads and tiny bird skull bounced along as she went.

Thunder rumbled in the distance. Florence was getting ready to finally make landfall, to ravage all of Savannah with wind and heavy rain, but Maggie didn't let the danger of it keep her away.

Slamming on the brakes when that all-too-familiar stone sarcophagus came into view, she threw the car into park, shoved the driver's door open, and marched around to the back.

There, in the trunk, was that goddamn doll. This time, she'd get rid of it for good. She'd put it back in its place, where it should have stayed. But Simon's warning rang in her ears: *It's not just people they can get into . . . It's things, too.* Yes, the doll had started out as belonging to Brynn, but it had ceased being hers the moment she had left it on that tomb. And stupid Maggie had brought it home. Stupid, gullible Maggie had offered to be its friend.

She grabbed the doll by one booted foot, slammed the trunk closed, and marched toward the grave site she'd rescued it from so long ago. And as she approached the tomb, she felt herself grow that much more vengeful. Her father. Her mother. Now Brynn. With whom would this end?

Her fingers tightened around the doll's leg, and rather than carefully placing it upon the grave where she had found it, she tossed it instead. The doll swept through the air in a wide arc, landing hard against the top of the limestone box. There was a crack, like the pop of a lightbulb. One of its small porcelain hands exploded against the monument's top, mimicking the shards of broken glass hidden beneath a sheet upon her sister's floor.

"There," she said. "Have it back." Perhaps this was all that was needed—the relinquishment of something she should have never taken, a half-hearted apology to make amends.

She marched back to the car, slammed the door shut, and peeled out of there with narrowed eyes and a tightened grip. When she reached the front gate, her foot twitched against the gas pedal, ready to drive away without a

final glance. No more Friendship Park. Never again. But rather than careening onto the road, she found herself robbed of breath.

Because there, half a block ahead and pedaling toward the open cemetery gates, was a little girl on a bike. For a moment, Maggie was certain she was hallucinating, seeing herself over a decade in the past. Maggie, the little girl who would visit the dead on sunny afternoons. Maggie, who had once collected a bouquet of silk flowers for her mother, only to watch her recoil from them as though they had been covered in blood. Maggie, rushing toward the graveyard with Katrina at her back.

She closed her eyes, then opened them again, hoping that the action would clear her vision and make the little girl she was sure wasn't there disappear. But rather than vanishing, the girl became that much more vivid. Not a figment. She was, in fact, very real.

As Maggie rolled past—her foot barely grazing the gas—the little girl looked up from her furious into-the-wind pedaling. And through that gale-whipped veil of hair, Maggie recognized her.

Hope.

She was headed to Friendship Park.

Alone. On Maggie's bike.

. . .

Maggie put her niece in the rearview mirror. Too stunned to think straight, she didn't stop the car or offer to drive Hope back home. But rather than booking it back to the house, she found herself in Impresso Espresso's parking lot, staring over the curve of the steering wheel, her mouth dry, her stomach twisted into a fist, her fingers coiled tight against her lips.

*Don't go.*

She'd promised she'd be back. But she had broken her promise.

She had left, first to go to the beach. As punishment, her father was taken.

Maggie left to go to college, and her mother wound up dead.

She came home for the service, left again to go back to Wilmington . . . and Brynn had started to grow distant, eventually pleading for Maggie's return. And, as if in retribution for Maggie's refusal, she had killed herself.

And now, what would happen after tomorrow? When Maggie got on the plane to fly back to North Carolina, what would happen to Arlen and the kids? What would happen to Hope?

Her cell buzzed against the side of the car's cup holder. She hadn't paid attention to it all morning, afraid to look at her received texts, not wanting to see more of them coming from Brynn's phone. But now, something compelled Maggie to reach out and snatch that cell up. Part of her hoped it was whatever had been sending messages the night before—an affirmation that it was time to do something drastic, that all of this had to end. Now.

But it was Dillon, offering nothing short of a promise that things were going to be okay.

TALKED TO YOUR PROF YOU HAVE A RETEST NEXT WEEK! CALL ME!

Dillon, doing everything he could to make Maggie's life a little easier. He was straining to prove himself, to be a good boyfriend. If only the message had come a day or even an hour earlier; if only she hadn't seen Hope out there, riding through the wind on Maggie's old bike toward those lonely graves.

. . .

Arlen looked surprised when Maggie rushed back into the house. She almost yelped when Maggie grabbed her by the arm and pulled her down to sit on the living room couch.

“I have to tell you something.” Maggie spit out the words before she could think better of it. Exhaling, she let her hands fall to her knees. “I did something bad.”

“What?” Arlen shook her head, not understanding.

“When I was a kid,” Maggie clarified. “When we were all still living here together. I mean, you were already living with Howie, but Mom and Dad and Brynn . . .” It suddenly hit her that, of the people she’d just mentioned, three were dead. Her entire family, on the brink of extinction.

Arlen said nothing. She only stared, a veil of bewilderment resting uneasily across her face.

“On my twelfth birthday, I brought home a Ouija board.” Maggie felt Arlen tense beside her.

“What?”

“I kept it a secret. Mom didn’t know. And Brynn kept saying that she’d be pissed, so I never said anything.” That pain was back, biting at her neck. Involuntarily, her right hand flew back, trying to squelch the ache with her palm.

The wind was howling. Suddenly, a bang sounded from outside. A shutter flapped in the gust. All that was missing was Dillon, jumping at the noise.

“I . . .” Arlen faltered. Surely she’d been in Brynn’s room after the suicide. She had to have seen the letters carved into Brynn’s bedpost. Brynn’s death was connected to that board, whether she had sworn the Ouija was a bunch of bullshit or not. But if she had been a skeptic, all signs pointed to Brynn having become a believer in the end.

Arlen rose from the couch and rushed across the room to the window in question. “This damn shutter,” she complained, yanking the window open.



*You want feex, you feex.* Maggie watched her from a distance, sickened by a thought: an endless loop of torment, that's what this was. History was repeating itself. The shutter. The storm. The bike ride to Friendship Park.

"I know why Brynn didn't want to move out," Maggie said. "There's something living in this house." She almost whispered the words—like the beginnings of a spooky story that would have thrilled Brynn to bits. "I've seen it. It's been here since I was a kid. And she was . . . she was protecting you . . ."

"Maggie, I swear." Arlen rolled her eyes as she returned. "Florence is about to barrel headlong into this house, Howie's still out there because he's an idiot who doesn't know when to say when at work, I've got the kids to deal with, the funeral is tomorrow, and you're telling me crazy stories? I don't have time for this, okay?" She was about to walk by, dismiss the whole thing as nonsense, but Maggie caught her by the arm and yanked her down. "Jesus, Maggie, what—"

"You *have* to have time for this. I've tried to convince myself that it's all been in my head, but . . ." But the phone. "I got texts, Len. Texts from Brynn. Last night."

Arlen opened her mouth to speak, but all she did was gape.

"Except it wasn't her. How *could* it be her? Don't you get it? It was . . ." What, the shadow? The little girl from Friendship Park? The doll? She knew she sounded insane, and to top it off, she had no proof, having left her phone in the car.

Arlen stared at her, mystified. Could it be that mental illness ran in their family? Maybe Brynn hadn't been the only crazy one. Perhaps Maggie was right there with her.

“I know it sounds nuts, Len. At one point, even Brynn didn’t believe. When I brought that board home, she said it was bullshit.”

“That’s because it *is* bullshit,” Arlen said, wrenching her arm free of Maggie’s grasp. But Maggie could hear the hesitancy in her sister’s voice. If it was powerful enough to lead Brynn down a path of lunacy, that thing was imperious. There was no telling what it could make someone do.

“But she never really believed it didn’t work,” Maggie said. “She tried to keep it in her room so that I wouldn’t mess around with it. She told me that if Mom found it, I’d get into a ton of trouble. But I think she wanted to keep it because she was drawn to it, just like I was.” Even at twelve years old, Maggie had seen something in Brynn’s eyes—a morose sort of hunger for the afterlife.

“And I *know* it works, Len,” Maggie continued. “Because I played it with Cheryl and she stopped coming over. I played it myself for months. And then . . .” She paused, casting a glance her big sister’s way. She could read the warning across Arlen’s face. *Don’t tell me what I think you’re going to tell me. Don’t you even dare.*

Back then, playing alone hadn’t seemed like that big of a deal. Making a promise to something invisible seemed harmless. But after that New Year’s Eve with Simon and Brynn, Maggie started to understand: the human mind was vulnerable; a *child’s* mind was only that much more volatile. If there ever was a perfect scenario for a spirit to use someone as a portal to the living, it was a solitary kid screwing around with a spirit board, oblivious to the dangers. Because it was just a little bit of spooky fun, right?

“And then that shadow thing showed up.”

Maggie waited for Arlen to recoil, to act as though Maggie were infected with some deadly contagion. But rather than pulling away, Arlen simply

frowned. “Oh, come on. There *is* no shadow thing, Maggie. I’ve been living here for years—”

Out of the corner of her eye, a shift of light. Maggie’s attention snapped to look down the hall toward the kitchen. Something was slithering along the wall, too quick to make out. Linging. *I’m here.*

“—and I have yet to dodge flying plates, hear moaning ghouls, or see a goddamn ghost, okay?”

“But the wallpaper in Brynn’s room,” Maggie said. “Didn’t you see it?”

“See what?”

So the scorch mark was gone, then. Maggie shut her eyes and squeezed the bridge of her nose. Was she really losing it?

“Maggie, see—”

“Then what about Cheryl?” Maggie asked, deciding to forget the wallpaper. Pressing the point would only make her look like a lunatic. She let her hand fall to her lap and looked back to her sister’s face. “Cheryl, last night, she stormed out of here . . .”

Arlen had no response. She hadn’t seen what had happened, had no idea what they’d been doing in Maggie’s room when Cheryl had screamed. She hadn’t seen the abrasion on Cheryl’s chest.

“She was scared, Len. I followed her out to the car, I tried to keep her from leaving. And you know what she told me?”

“To repent for your sins and join the Jesus camp?” *Repent.* Arlen snorted, but all that snide comment did was make Maggie miss Brynn all the more. “If you ask me, that girl has always been off. Little Miss Priss, wasn’t it? Mom was right about her . . .”

“She told me that I needed to get out of here, that I shouldn’t be here,” Maggie said.

“Oh *God*.” Arlen waved a hand, casting aside those ridiculous notions. “Echoes of her nutcase mother, no doubt. That woman is an absolute *lunatic*—”

“Just listen!” Maggie was on the verge of tears, now. Arlen had always thought herself smarter than everyone; she’d never been good at shutting up or sitting still. And then, as if to derail Maggie’s story, that scent returned. “Do you smell that?”

Arlen raised her hands in surrender. “I *am* listening,” she said. “But you have to admit, you sound—”

“It’s smoke,” Maggie said.

“I don’t—”

“I keep smelling it.”

“I don’t smell anything,” Arlen said.

“Len, listen . . .”

“Listen to *what*?”

“I started talking to this kid in the cemetery.” Maggie looked down to her lap, then caught her bottom lip between her teeth. “I told her I’d be her friend. And then . . . that one summer . . .” Suddenly, she was regretting ever bringing it up. Because how was she supposed to admit to this? *It’s your fault*. Her heart twisted inside her chest. *All your fault*.

“You mean, when Dad . . . ?” Arlen hesitated. She couldn’t bear to say more.

Maggie mutely nodded. “It was my fault,” she then whispered. “The girl, she begged me not to go, but I left anyway. She just kept saying, *Don’t go, don’t go*. But I didn’t listen, because the board was a fake. I kept thinking about how Brynn had said it was just a game, how maybe it had been my subconscious. I should have never been playing it, I should have left it

locked up, but it's like . . . it's like I couldn't stop. So, I told myself, *Go to the beach*. I told myself, *Have a good time. Forget the board. It's time to move on*. I made up all these excuses as to why it would be okay. Because it was fake. Brynn *swore* it was fake."

"Jesus, Maggie . . ."

"So, I shoved the board under my bed, and before I knew what was happening, Uncle Leon was driving me home. And then I got here, and the pool cover was pulled from its rails, and you showed up with Howie, and I . . ."

"*Maggie . . .*" Arlen squeezed Maggie's wrist, as if trying to snap her little sister out of it, but Maggie refused to give in to the temptation; she wouldn't clam up. Maybe if she purged herself of this poisonous secret, things would get better. Perhaps this was the way to break free of the curse.

"Brynn said it," Maggie confessed. "She *blamed* me. And then Mom . . ."

"Brynn was in shock," Arlen interrupted, her tone clipped and embittered. "Just like we all were. And Mom was a drug addict. We tried everything. *You* were the brave one, remember? You stood up to her the way no one else had. What happened to her was nobody's fault, *especially* not yours."

"But Brynn . . ."

"Brynn was clinically depressed, Maggie. Just like Mom was."

"And that's why they died?" Maggie asked. "That's why Mom took all those pills and Brynn jumped out her window? Because they were depressed? Not because of me?"

"*Yes*." Arlen scooted a little closer. "Maggie, of *course* not because of you. Brynn idolized you. She thought you were the most incredible person on God's green earth."

Maggie's bottom lip began to tremble.

"When she was still coming down for dinner, she'd talk about you all the time. She would brag to the kids about their super-smart auntie working out on the coast, about how you were going to figure out how to clean up all the trash in the oceans and save the coral reefs. Hope was riveted. It's why she clings to you the way she does. Her favorite movie is *Finding Nemo*—not because she's crazy about Dory, but because of all the stories Brynn told her about *you*."

Maggie pressed her hands to her face and breathed out a sob.

"Maggie, stop." Arlen rubbed a circle across Maggie's back. "Have you been blaming yourself all this time?"

A nod. Another staggered breath.

"Oh, Mags. None of this is your fault, okay? None of it is true."

"But Dad . . ." Maggie whimpered. "He could have swum across the ocean. How could he drown like that? How could the pool cover just—"

"It was an *accident*," Arlen assured her.

"Then where's Hope?" Maggie wept, a jab of pain stabbing her right between the shoulder blades.

"What? She's upstairs with Harry."

Maggie shook her head. "No." Because no matter how much Maggie wanted to believe she was free of responsibility, Arlen was wrong about it all. It *was* Maggie's fault, and what she had seen just that morning had been proof.

"She's not," Maggie said. "I saw her, Len. She was riding my bike."

Again, tension from her big sister. Suddenly, that comforting hand disappeared from Maggie's back. Arlen stiffened beside her, and when

Maggie looked up, Arlen's expression had gone from comforting her baby sister to trying not to panic at the silly crap pouring out of Maggie's mouth.

"What are you talking about?" The question was clipped, no nonsense. "She's upstairs with her brother."

"Go check," Maggie whispered. The scent of smoke was nearly overwhelming now, but Arlen didn't seem to notice it. She was too busy scrambling off the couch, nearly tripping over the coffee table as she backed away.

"Where is she?" Arlen demanded. "Harry . . . !" The name came out as a startled bleat. A moment later, there were footsteps overhead.

"Yeah?" Harrison replied from upstairs, unseen. Maggie watched Arlen's face twist beneath the weight of startled realization. Again, a shift of light. Again, another blip of darkness too quick to catch. It was getting impatient.

"Where's your sister?" Arlen was moving fast across the room, stopping a few feet from the couch to look up at the boy Maggie couldn't see. "Where's Hope? You're supposed to be with her!"

Hesitation. ". . . I am?"

Arlen spun around, shooting Maggie a glare. "Where is she?!"

Maggie knew this would be the last real conversation they ever had, knew that this moment would seal their fates. They wouldn't speak again. Not as siblings. Not like this.

"Jesus, Maggie, what is *wrong* with you?" Arlen demanded. "Have you bothered to look outside? Do you know how *dangerous* it is out there? If you saw her, why didn't you *grab* her?"

"Because I was scared, okay?" Maggie said softly, then looked away from Arlen, unable to keep her sister's furious gaze. "I saw her riding to

Friendship Park, just like I used to. Riding through the storm to the dead girl. *That's* how I know all of this is true.”



## SIXTEEN

---

WHEN ARLEN RUSHED out of the house to look for Hope, Maggie openly sobbed for the first time in years. She didn't bother hiding her emotions when she felt Harrison lingering just beyond her line of sight, not even when little Hayden toddled up and placed a sausage-fingered hand upon her knee.

"There, there," Hayden said, patting Maggie like one would pet a house cat, a child's attempt at comfort in a situation she couldn't possibly understand.

And yet, despite Maggie's momentary meltdown, she couldn't shake the knowledge that it would be a matter of minutes before Arlen came back, and Maggie didn't want to be there when the duo returned. There would be anger, barbed and demanding questions. If Arlen sentenced Maggie to an immediate silent treatment, the punishment would be peppered with accusatory glares; narrowed eyes reminiscent of Brynn's resentment, shot across the breakfast table when things went missing, when the innocent had been blamed.

Poor, weirdly beautiful Brynn. She hadn't just jumped out her bedroom window and onto the paving stones surrounding the very place their father had perished—she would have survived such a fall with a twisted ankle or a few broken bones. But Brynn had been dead by the time paramedics arrived. Dead, because she'd smashed her window with a desk chair,

collected a shard of broken glass in the palm of her hand, and inexplicably stabbed that razored fragment not only into her neck and shoulders, but into her face, inflicting dozens of vicious cuts before finally leaping from the window's ledge. Her stereo had been blaring Dead Can Dance when Arlen had discovered the body, like a punch line to a morbid, self-deprecating joke. Meanwhile, a channel of blood did a snail's-crawl across the stonework into the water, dark red turning to swirls of diluted pink like an artist's paintbrush staining turpentine.

There had been no mention of the Ouija board during Maggie and Brynn's long-distance conversations, just as there had been no talk of avoiding Arlen's dinner table, or depression, or churches and seeking out safety from the unknown; no mention of carving letters into bedposts the way a scribe would have fashioned ancient runes into stone. But their phone calls had been punctuated with that same recurring question that Maggie was certain would haunt her forever: *When are you going to visit? Please, why don't you come home?* And Maggie's answer, steadfast: she was too busy with school, too involved with her internship, she and Dillon had something coming up, the timing was bad, she couldn't make it work.

Meanwhile, that shadow had been lurking in the background, listening all these years. It had heard every excuse; had grown tired, embittered, and rancorous, taking umbrage at every untruth. Each one of Maggie's refusals had brought deeper insult.

Maggie had broken her promise. She had left this place and refused to return.

Brynn was left to suffer for Maggie's sins.

And now, with Brynn gone, that darkness would turn its attention to someone Maggie wouldn't be able to so easily ignore.

Because Hope was innocent. Just a kid. A perfect victim for the evil Brynn had so casually described as a girl, that Maggie had been sure had just been another spooky story too far from the truth to heed.

It wouldn't be long now, and Arlen would be furious—an anger that would be too reminiscent of their mother's rage to bear. All Maggie wanted was to hurry and pack her bag, take Brynn's car to the airport, abandon it in short-term, and let the damn thing get impounded. Except all she'd do would be to sit there, staring out the airport windows as rain pelted the tarmac. If the shadow thing couldn't keep her here, Florence wouldn't let her leave.

*Now that Auntie Bee is gone, you gotta stay.*

For a second that felt like an hour, she couldn't find air. She pictured Arlen's van flying off the road—the kids in the back—all four wheels off the pavement as it sailed across an embankment and into a tree. A lake. The oncoming grille of a semitruck doing eighty on the freeway just outside of town. Vivid. So real she could hear the metal of Arlen's van buckle and twist. The boom of igniting gasoline. Arlen screaming as she tried to pry her seat belt out of the latch. All three children flailing against the orange lick of flames. The kids, wailing. Hayden's high-pitched toddler cry, undiluted innocence piercing through the chaos.

The yelling in her head turned real. Hayden was screaming again, but rather than being consumed by fire, she was in the throes of another tantrum somewhere down the hall. Her words were shrill and indecipherable, angered by the fact that life wasn't as simple as it should have been. No orange juice when you wanted it. The last of the French eyes devoured by a cantankerous sibling. Her mother, having fled the house in

search of her older sister, leaving Hayden to battle her crippling emotions alone.

That tantrum was the fulcrum. It veered Maggie's own emotional state away from panic and toward response. She gave in to her instinct and ran out the door, leaving two underage children alone, just as she had abandoned Hope outside the cemetery gates. But staying would mean facing Arlen's wrath, and to save the last of her tribe, she had to avoid Arlen's demand for Maggie to pack up her shit and go. *Forget the funeral. I want you out!* Maggie had to fix this before she was forced to leave, before tragedy found them once again.

She climbed into Brynn's car and drove, stopping in front of Friendship Park to stare down its center lane. She tried to imagine what her sarcastic sister would tell her to do, what strange and dark suggestion Brynn would make to appease the ghost Maggie had released unto the world. *Just kick it in the ass, Mags. Exorcise that shit.*

Spotting movement, she found herself blinking at Arlen's van. A few more seconds and it would turn down that center road. Maggie shoved her foot against the gas and sped away.

Fuck it. She needed to find Cheryl. Perhaps if they held another séance, if she could just get through to whatever it was that was living in the corners of those walls, maybe *then* she could fix what she'd broken. If a broken promise could ever be repaired.

. . .

She knew Cheryl wouldn't meet up with her again—not after how she had fled from Maggie's house. When they were kids, Maggie had eventually backed off, dissuaded by Cheryl's fear. But that wasn't going to be enough

for Maggie to stay away this time. Back then, it was a matter of hurt feelings. Now, Hope needed help.

She grabbed her phone off the passenger's seat and Googled the number for Saint Michael's Church, then asked the receptionist where their youth camp counselor could be found. "It's an emergency," she explained. "I'm a friend of Father John." The woman on the line didn't question it. Instead, she handed over Cheryl's location and wished Maggie the best of luck.

*If only luck could help me*, she thought, then disconnected the call.

*Hell, if only God could help me, maybe things would still be okay . . .*

Perhaps Brynn hadn't been searching for a safe haven. Arlen had said it herself: Brynn had been seeking answers. Perhaps, then, *this* was the question she was looking to resolve: *How do I save my family? How do I stop this thing?* Could it have been that *that* was why Brynn had been so adamantly pleading with Maggie to come home? Had she been desperate for help, for someone to listen who would actually believe?

She found herself pushing eighty down a winding stretch of road just outside of town: Southern coastal lowcountry dotted with swamps, swallowed by the drooping branches of live oak heavy with long tangles of witch's hair. Florence snarled overhead—dark and angry, ready to crack open and re-create Noah's flood. Maggie slammed on the brakes at the last second, nearly missing the turn, and whipped the car onto a narrow and unpaved road that guided her through a rusted steel utility gate. PRIVATE PROPERTY. That sign shuddered in the wind, threatening to come off its screws. After a minute of bouncing down a washboard road, what looked to be a working farm came into view. There was a barn, the Saint Michael's Youth Camp logo fading against the wood. Long rows of picnic tables were lined up beneath a wide awning that jutted out from what looked to be a

stable of some sort. Most of the tables were empty, but some still donned plastic tablecloths, which were held down by grapefruit-sized rocks, the vinyl flapping like ghosts struggling to get free.

In the distance, a handful of older kids were running around in a rush. Some carried buckets and gardening tools. Others were tending to animals, trying to herd them to the safety of a big red barn.

Cheryl wouldn't be happy to see her. At all. And talking about what had happened at the house would almost certainly have found a firm place on her list of conversations to avoid—especially right now, with her charges running around like a manic mob of sheep. No matter. Maggie stepped out of Brynn's Camry and made her way toward the barn, only to stop short when she heard her name spoken into the wind.

"Maggie . . . ?"

She turned and squinted against the gale. Cheryl had stepped out of the stable, embroiled in the struggle of keeping her hair at bay. "What are you doing here?" Maggie had half expected her to start screaming that her space was being invaded, that Maggie had to go. But rather than raging, Cheryl looked concerned.

"Cher, I . . ." What series of words would convince her old friend to come back home with her, to return to the place Cheryl had told Maggie to leave? She faltered, unsure of how to proceed.

"Oh. Wow. You took my advice," Cheryl said, derailing Maggie's spiraling thoughts. "You left." Maggie opened her mouth to speak, but no words came. "Um . . . hey, if you need a place to stay, just until after the funeral, there's a room in the rectory. It's tiny, but it's a bed."

"Cher, no." Maggie looked down at the tips of her sneakers, the bluster stealing away her words. A particularly heavy gust threw off her balance.

Maggie braced herself against it with a few sideways steps. Cheryl watched her in silence, and Maggie could feel her mood shift from accepting to on guard. “Look, I already know what you’re going to say—” Maggie began, but Cheryl cut in before she could continue.

“So, you didn’t leave.”

“No.”

“Then don’t ask. I told you, I’m done. I shouldn’t have let myself get sucked into this stuff again.”

More thunder overhead. Florence was no longer coming. She had officially arrived.

Maggie drew in a breath, ready to protest, but Cheryl beat her to the punch.

“I *know* it was my idea, Maggie. Nobody likes seeing a friend blame themselves for things beyond their control. Nobody with a conscience, at least.”

“But now?” Maggie asked.

“Now . . . I think that maybe you’re right. Maybe you’ve been right all this time.”

Maggie’s eyes paused upon the abrasion on Cheryl’s collarbone. Its half-heart shape made her want to scream, *Can’t you see what it looks like? The necklace . . .* A coincidence, no doubt. It had nothing to do with friendship, nothing to do with wiping out the competition, rendering Maggie lonely, pushing her toward that board day after day.

“Cher, *please*. I can’t do this alone. I need your help.”

“Why?” That single syllable fell flat, unrelenting. If Maggie couldn’t come up with a good enough answer, the conversation was over.

“Because I think it’s gotten to Hope,” she said, shoving strands of loose hair behind her ears. “I think that if I leave—” She swallowed the spit that had collected at the back of her throat, the mere thought of something happening to her niece, the thought of it being Maggie’s fault all over again . . . “Don’t you get it? This is why Brynn wanted me to come home. She needed help, too. It’s why she went to church. And now she’s gone.”

When she glanced back to Cheryl, Maggie noticed her gaze was distant, focused on the kids rushing around the barn a dozen yards away. She was a woman who didn’t belong anywhere in Maggie’s world, a girl who shouldn’t have ever heard Brynn’s weird stories or placed her fingers on Maggie’s plastic planchette. A person who, now that Maggie was giving her a good hard look, wouldn’t sacrifice any more of herself than she already had, not for a long-dormant friendship. At least not now, not after this.

“I need help, Cher,” Maggie repeated. “I don’t know what to do.”

“I don’t know what you should do, either,” Cheryl said. “But I can’t . . .” She hesitated, fumbling for the right words. “I’m sorry, Maggie, but I should have never gotten involved.”

Maggie bit her bottom lip, nodded despite herself. Had she been in Cheryl’s shoes, she wouldn’t have wanted to be part of it, either. And the fact that Cheryl had experienced something malicious enough to have her running for her life—it meant that whatever Maggie had invited to live inside that house was able to reach out, to lay hands on anyone who dared get in the way of its ultimate goal. Like Cheryl had said once upon a time, it was contagious. It could infect, damage, destroy.

“All I know,” Cheryl said, “is that whoever you’ve been talking to . . . I don’t think it’s who you think it is.”

“The girl from the cemetery,” Maggie said.



“Yeah, that. I don’t think so.” Cheryl frowned. “You know what the Bible says? *And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.* The most dangerous spirits disguise themselves as innocent. Why would a little girl do what’s been done to you, Maggie?” Cheryl asked. “If what you say is true, if it’s all linked, why would a *child* do those terrible things?”

*Because she was evil,* Brynn had said. *She was born bad.*

And then there was Maggie’s broken promise. Children threw tantrums when they didn’t get what they wanted. Hayden was perfect proof of that. This spirit, if it *was* a child, would have turned Arlen’s house into a hub of poltergeist activity. It would have knocked over picture frames, slammed doors, pushed dishes off counters, and spilled glasses of milk.

But Maggie’s ghost did none of those things. It worked in far darker shades.

Except that was crazy, wasn’t it? More demented than Maggie believing that she was responsible for the deaths of her parents and big sister. No, Cheryl’s theory was nuts; too left-field.

“I don’t believe that,” Maggie said. “It’s not—”

“What, a demon? Are you sure about that?” Cheryl’s fingers grazed the abrasion upon her skin.

Maggie’s fingers trailed to her own chest, recalling the way Cheryl had torn her side of their best-friend necklace from around her neck. That hand drew backward to press into the knot of muscles that, for the first time since her return, seemed to have relaxed. That sense of being watched, the feeling of balancing upon the edge of calamity, she’d felt it again last night. And maybe she *was* going nuts, but it had felt stronger than before, as though Brynn’s suicide had somehow lent it fortitude. But now, at the camp, it was gone.

*Because it lives in the house, she thought. It's waiting there, just as it always has. I have to go back.*

Cheryl looked away again, back toward the gaggle of kids in matching T-shirts, all of them scrambling, some laughing, others looking up at the sky, freaked out, because maybe this was it. The sky was falling. It was the end of the world.

"These types of things, they can attach to other people," Cheryl said. "I'm sorry about Brynn, Maggie. I really am. But I can't do this. There's just too much on the line." A pause, a searching glance. "I don't know," she finally said, giving up on the calculation. "I wanted to help, and now I . . ."

"I'm *begging* you." Maggie tried again, because if Cheryl wasn't going to help her, who would? "One friend to another. Please don't abandon me again, Cher. She's just a kid."

Cheryl's tense features softened, if only a little.

But Maggie wouldn't accept the refusal she knew was inevitably coming. First Arlen and now Cheryl—they were leaving her with no option but to give up, and how was she supposed to do that when she knew that Hope, Harrison, and Hayden were in harm's way? Didn't they understand that she was trying to make things right?

"You're part of this, now," Maggie said. "You invited yourself over. You wanted to try again, and now it feels like it's stronger. I trusted you, Cher."

Maggie's assertion sparked a change in Cheryl's expression. The muscles in her neck went rigid. Her lips pressed into a tight line. Another gust of wind blasted them both, each woman momentarily struggling to keep her footing.

"How do you know it hasn't already attached itself to you?" Maggie asked. "How do you know that this thing, whatever it is, isn't going to

target you if I leave this undone?”

Cheryl’s cool exterior began to crack, her face twisting into a mask of something between aggravation and fear. She glared at the kids in the distance. To Maggie, it was all about Hope; to Cheryl, those kids were what mattered. “You need to go now, Maggie,” she said, her tone steady. “You can put the blame on me all you want, but you know better than anyone: *you* did this. This is *your* fault.”

The response struck Maggie in the chest like a full-fisted punch. The night Maggie’s father died; Brynn’s accusation coming out of Cheryl’s mouth.

But Cheryl was right. Whatever was lurking in the corners of Maggie’s room, whatever it was that she’d pulled from the other side, Maggie was the one who had ushered it into the world of the living. And rather than dealing with it head-on, she had run away, allowing it to stay exactly where it wanted to be. And that’s where it had festered. Where it had grown.

“I’m sorry,” Cheryl said. “Please leave. Right now. And don’t come back.” She turned away, walking back toward the stable, adding finality to her demand.

Maggie struggled not to cry. She stared at Cheryl’s back, hoping that maybe, at the last minute, she’d change her mind—maybe she’d turn and offer some parting words of encouragement. *It’s going to be okay*. But Cheryl disappeared into the building, and Maggie was left standing in the wind, the first patters of hard rain like needles against her cheeks.

. . .

Maggie drove back into town, but she couldn’t bring herself to return home. Lingered in Friendship Park, she disregarded the weather as she walked among the headstones, just as she had when she was a child. She nearly

scooped up a bouquet of weather-beaten silk flowers from beside a grave, the petals soaked and drooping with rain, but resisted the temptation. It was one thing to retrace her steps, to try to gather her thoughts and figure out how to make this work. It was another to continue giving the dead the wrong impression. She was no longer the little girl inviting ghosts to her home. It was time to reject that part of her life . . . and she was certain that one spirit in particular would rage in response.

She stopped at the tomb she had visited just that morning. The shattered doll was gone. Because of course it was. It's why Hope had ridden Maggie's bike to the cemetery in the first place. Whatever it was hiding in the shadows wanted back what Brynn had gifted so long ago. Except Brynn hadn't just bestowed that doll upon it. No, she'd promised more, hadn't she?

She'd pledged her own little sister.

And, perhaps, at any other time, Maggie would have been angry with Brynn for doing such a stupid thing. Because this was just as much Brynn's fault as it was Maggie's. But Brynn was gone.

It was left up to Maggie now, and she had to take it full circle to where it had begun.

In her room. Alone. Just her and the darkness, and that board in between.

## SEVENTEEN

---

PETER OLSEN HAD spent his high school career on the swim team, his senior year as captain, went to college on an athletic scholarship, and found his way onto the national team in the spring of 1986. But rather than attending the games in Seoul, he watched them on TV while bouncing baby Arlen on his knee. *That's just life*, he'd say when it came up. *You roll with the punches, and I love my girls more than I love being a fish*. Having kids did not, however, negate the man's love of water.

Having a pool in the backyard was Peter's only demand when he and Stella bought three acres of land and set off to build their dream home. Having hung up his swim cap in the name of family, he tossed aside his hopes of gold medals and busted his ass as a financial manager instead. That hard work earned him a swimming hole deep enough to dive into, measuring forty-one feet long from end to end—exactly a quarter of the length of the standard Olympic size. Maggie spent summers watching her dad butterfly back and forth, ticking off his laps in a little notebook and keeping time on a stopwatch like a pint-sized coach. Peter Olsen was skilled enough to have crossed the English Channel. He could have planned Alcatraz escapes.

And yet, somehow, he drowned.

It happened the summer before Maggie's freshman year of high school, on a day just like any other. Hot. Humid. Maggie had hidden from the

mugginess of the outside world in her room, closed up behind a door that was locked more and more often. *Symptoms of becoming a teen*, her dad had diagnosed. Maggie's parents had, after all, gone through the very same thing with both Arlen and Brynn.

Except Maggie's lock wasn't turned out of anger or angst. It was turned out of necessity, to keep her secret from being revealed. That day had been just like any other. Maggie sat on her bed, legs pretzeled together, that board upon her knees.

"I'm going away for a few days," she said, compelled to explain her absence to an invisible presence that, it seemed, only she could feel. The board hadn't been happy.

*Don't go.*

"It's not going to be long."

*Don't go.*

"Well, I already told everyone that I was going, and I *want* to go. I haven't done anything fun all summer."

*Friend. Don't go.*

She rolled her eyes at herself. *What am I doing?* Explaining herself to something invisible, to something that, every now and again, she still questioned could really exist. *Just a loose screw. Subconscious. A hoax.*

"I'm losing it," she murmured, then tossed the board into the steamer trunk at the foot of her bed. Cheryl had been right, Maggie *had* gotten weird. She needed to disconnect from that thing, to find a new hobby. A trip to Hilton Head with her aunt, uncle, and cousins couldn't have come at a better time.

Brynn—forever the antisocial loner—had refused the invite and decided to stay home, listening to music and playing *World of Warcraft* in her room.

*Yeah, because I need a tan like I need an asshole on my elbow,* she had scoffed. Typical Brynn. Flippant. Snide. Maggie had shrugged and left with her extended family that afternoon.

The drive hadn't been long, but after a stop for an early dinner and shopping with her aunt for a new bathing suit, Maggie had only gotten to see the beach for a few minutes before sunset. No big deal, though. She decided to wake up bright and early the next morning so she could spend the entire day basking on a towel and swimming in the surf. That, and she'd borrowed *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* from Brynn. She couldn't wait to read it.

But she never got the chance.

Maggie was nudged awake and ushered out of bed by her uncle Leon—a man of large girth but few words. He murmured for her to get her things, explained that he needed to drive her home. When Maggie questioned why they were leaving, why they had to drive back to Savannah at a little past two a.m., he only shook his head, his face pale against the glow of the dashboard, his fingers wrapped tight around the steering wheel.

The house was empty when they arrived. Maggie called her mom via the house phone, but she wasn't answering her cell. Brynn had left her own cell phone upstairs next to her computer, *World of Warcraft* logged out after a stretch of inactivity. Both of those things sent a shock wave of terror through Maggie's chest. Because Brynn never went anywhere without her phone, and she would have never left *World of Warcraft* running like that, not unless she'd been too distracted to log herself out.

Maggie stood at the double French doors leading out to the yard, staring at the pool cover that was now crumpled and floating in the water, wondering what could have caused it to have been torn from its tracks like

that. Arlen was the one who finally showed up at the house, red-eyed as though she'd spent the night sobbing. Howie was with her, but Harrison—still just a baby—was not. Arlen looked startled to see their uncle sitting silently upon their couch; Maggie had told him he could leave, but Uncle Leon wouldn't hear of it. *I'll stay until someone comes*, he had said, and then paced the house, back and forth.

Arlen's bottom lip quivered as she spoke. "It's Dad." But that was all that she said.

Sitting in the backseat of Arlen's car—Uncle Leon following close behind in his own vehicle—Maggie expected to be driven to the hospital. It was clear there had been an accident. Maybe their father had caught his hand in the pool cover's motor. Was that why it had been torn from its rails? But instead of heading to the ER, Arlen turned down a familiar residential street and pulled into the driveway of a familiar house. Auntie CeeCee and Uncle Dee weren't really Maggie's aunt and uncle, but she'd regarded them as such for as long as she could remember. They lived in a hundred-year-old farmhouse that they'd spent what seemed like their entire lives renovating. Maggie loved it, from the massive carved newel post at the base of the stairs to the antique freestanding range Auntie CeeCee had custom-painted a beautiful pastel yellow to match her kitchen's decor. This visit, however, was less than cheerful.

Inside, sitting upon Aunt CeeCee's midcentury couch, Maggie's mother was weeping. Brynn sat next to her, stone-faced, her eyes fixed on Maggie as soon as she followed Arlen, Howie, and Uncle Leon inside. Brynn got up, marched across a '50s-inspired living room, and grabbed Maggie by the arm, escorting her to the darkened front yard.



"Ow, Brynn! What's going on?" Maggie asked as her sister shoved her along. "Where's Dad?" She hadn't seen him inside, but if he was at the hospital, why was everyone here?

"This is *your* fault," Brynn hissed, giving Maggie a shove. "*You* did this. I told you I didn't want to . . ."

Maggie stumbled backward, shaking her head, not understanding. "Didn't want to what? Brynn, *where's Dad?*"

"You got that board, and I . . ." Brynn's eyes were narrowed, her eyeliner smudged. "Admit it . . . you brought something into the house. You screwed around with that thing and you *invited* it. I should have taken it from you. I should have—"

Maggie blinked at her raccoon-eyed older sister. While Maggie had gone off to the beach, Brynn had gone toe-to-toe with some sort of grim reality, and reality had won with what looked to be a total knockout.

"Bee . . ." Maggie heaved the nickname onto the lawn between them, trying to keep her breathing steady, doing her best to keep her anxiety from spiraling out of control. "What are you talking about? I haven't used it since . . . since Cheryl stopped coming over last year."

Brynn didn't look at her, and Maggie was glad. If she had, she'd have read the lie.

"Please," she said, reaching for Brynn's hand. "Where's Dad, Brynn?" But she knew. "Why's Mom crying?" It had to be. "Why are we here?" There could only be one reason.

Brynn's countenance twisted up with more emotion than Maggie had ever seen rush across her sister's face. "Dad's dead, Mags," she said, jerking her hand away from Maggie's touch.

The world tilted on its axis.

“... Wh-what ...?”

She'd suspected, but hearing those words spoken aloud made the ground shift, like tectonic plates during an earthquake.

“He's dead,” Brynn repeated. “And I just . . .” She pressed her hands over her face. “I should have never let you . . .”

And then, the girl who never cried broke down and wept.

## EIGHTEEN

---

MAGGIE SAT IN Brynn's car outside the cemetery until well after dark, hoping that if Arlen, Howie, and the kids hadn't been sleeping due to the storm, they'd at least all be gathered in a room together, waiting it out, and nobody would see Maggie arrive. Florence was rumbling loud enough to shake the windows, now. The rain was falling at an impossible horizontal angle, slamming itself into only one side of Brynn's old Camry. The lightning was a dangerously spectacular light show. Every few seconds, a flash of bright white caught the wrought iron curves of the cemetery gates, stenciling dark curlicues against the night sky. The storm had finally caught up to her, and it was one that she wasn't the least bit prepared to face.

Her phone, still lying on the passenger's seat, blinked with an unread message.

MAGGIE, I'M WORRIED. BAD NEWS ABOUT THE WEATHER. NOT TOO BAD HERE, BUT THEY SAY SAVANNAH IS GETTING HIT HARD. YOU OKAY?

Dillon. He deserved an answer. She grabbed up her cell, exhaled.

I'M OKAY. Send.

WHY HAVEN'T YOU BEEN RESPONDING TO ME? DID YOU GET MY TEXT ABOUT YOUR RETEST?

YES. Send. BUT I HAVE TO STAY. I'M SORRY.

A moment later: STAY? WHAT? HOW LONG?!

He wouldn't get an answer to his question because Maggie hadn't a clue. If her plan worked, it would be only long enough to make sure that shadow figure was gone, long enough to wait out the storm. If the plan went awry, well . . .

*It won't. It'll be okay. It has to be okay.*

She pulled her hair back in a messy ponytail, slid Brynn's key into the ignition, and drove slowly through the deluge of rain.

The house was dark. No doubt the electricity was out. The storm shutters were closed up tight save for one—the one Arlen had to struggle with during Maggie's confession earlier that day. It flapped in the wind, mangled by the merciless beating it had taken throughout the day. The giant oak Brynn had swung from after their father's death was half destroyed. A massive, leafless branch lay upon the lawn, lengths of jute still tied around its middle, as if in reminder: *I wiped out your sister, I can wipe you out, too.*

Maggie parked along the curb. It was an instinctual move, one Brynn had taught her when Maggie had first started to drive. *Don't wake the witch.* Not wanting to rouse anyone with the sound of the engine or the slamming of a door, she only realized how ridiculous that was after she bailed out of the car. The storm was raging. It would have been impossible for any of the Olsens to have heard a thing.

The garage door didn't budge when she pushed the button on Brynn's key ring remote. The entry pad affixed to the house next to the garage didn't work, either. *No power, dummy.* She struggled with the door, which luckily rolled upward—Howie must have gotten home after the electricity had gone; he'd pulled the emergency latch and hadn't engaged it again. Arlen's van, Howie's sedan, and a pair of what she had thought had been long-abandoned bikes sat in the dark. Brynn and Maggie's bicycles leaned against

the wall, side by side, their handlebars tangled together, as if forever bound, but her bike was unlike Brynn's. Just like in her own childhood, it was being used while Brynn's stood forgotten. Hope was reliving Maggie's past, and Maggie had to stop it. She ducked inside, out of the rain.

After Katrina, her father would stay up all night to make sure all was well anytime these storms hit Savannah; because out in Pensacola, Gram and Gramps had been okay, but things had gotten scary. Their place had flooded, and all the windows had been blown out. Gas stations' awnings had been torn to shreds, leaving twisted metal in the streets. There was talk of them moving back to Savannah, where the storms weren't quite as brutal, but they never did. Maggie wondered if Howie was the type to stay up the way her father had. Her fingers were crossed that the answer was no.

Inside the house, there was no movement, no flicker of emergency candles, no family huddled on the couch listening to the howl of the wind. It was dark—so dark that, had Maggie not known its layout by heart, she would have never found her way to the second floor. Upstairs, she closed her bedroom door and pressed her back against it, waiting for her eyes to adjust. And then she fixed her attention first on the dark inkblot of shadow beneath her bed and then onto the closed closet door. She wanted nothing more than to reach out her hand and slide it against the wall, to feel for the light switch and flip it upward—desperate for the safety offered by way of a blazing bulb. But even if she gave in to her fear, the light wouldn't come this time. Florence would make sure of that. This time, Maggie couldn't run from her fear.

Outside, the lightning lit up the world like a strobe; inside, only faint slashes of that brightness found their way through the shutter slats. Despite every nerve in Maggie's body attempting to revolt, she forced herself to

slide down to the floor. Rain-wet palms pressed against the carpet. She rocked forward onto her knees.

Thunder rumbled as she crawled across the room in the very same way she had as a girl. But rather than shimmying away from her room as quickly as possible, she now inched toward the pitch-black shadow that lingered beneath her bed. It was impossible to not recall the shaking. The scratching. The soft tapping from behind the headboard. Her childhood nyctophobia hadn't been misguided, and it certainly wasn't unbecoming now. Because there was something inside that room with her. Something watching, reducing the confident young woman Maggie had become to the scared and shivering child she had once been.

She reached the edge of the bed, the shadows beneath it so dark they seemed to pulsate with every hitch of her breath. She trembled as she reached toward the darkness's edge, her fingers lighting up ghostly pale in another bright electric flash.

"It's a hoax," she whispered. "A party game." A stupid toy she'd bought because the box had been mysterious, those soothsayer's hands beckoning her to place her fingers on the planchette, to see what the mystifying oracle could predict.

Maggie's fingertips brushed the hem of the bed skirt, but she pulled away. The valance shivered in a breeze that didn't exist. She braced herself and shoved her hand beneath the bed, but felt nothing but carpet. The board was gone again, vanished from the spot it should have occupied, unregulated by reality's rules.

And then, the closet emitted a soft click.

The scent of smoke coiled around her as the air left the room.

With her eyes having adjusted to the darkness, Maggie could just make out the closet door swinging open ever so slowly. Her body vibrated with a scream that was desperate to wrench itself from her throat. But there was nothing but silence beneath the muffled sound of the storm.

Nothing but the wind, the rain, and the faint *tap, tap, tap* that, despite the downpour, she still managed to hear from behind the headboard just beyond her shoulder.

*Oh yes, I'm here. I've waited for you so long.*

Maggie didn't dare look away from the closet. The door was still creeping open, and there was something hiding beyond the threshold—something peeking through the blackness, obscured by the jamb. The sound of another lock clicking open had Maggie veering around. Her bedroom door slowly crept inward, allowing the faint whisper of music to drift in from the direction of Brynn's abandoned room. Hymnal. Archaic. Undoubtedly the same track that had been playing when Arlen had found their sister upon the flagstones downstairs.

Rising to her feet, she felt detached from her own movements. Certainly, she was controlling her limbs, and yet each step felt guided, forced by an invisible hand. Her eyes darted back to the closet, to the shadow she knew was waiting there, but that blot of darkness was gone. *Just a loose screw, Crazy.* Except, no. It had always been true. She had tried to deny its existence, so it reached out, as if taking up Cheryl's challenge: *Hey, ghost. Prove that you're real.*

Maggie moved through her open door and stopped in front of Brynn's room. The door was now wide-open despite being shut only minutes before. The familiar scent of melting wax invited her inside.

Stepping into that room was the last thing Maggie wanted to do. Its interior was pregnant with a static charge as strong as the lightning outside; a sense of pent-up energy, of wicked intent. Her attention snapped to the wall that had been singed by that thing—*What, a demon?*—but no longer held proof of what she had witnessed. Except there, just peeking out from beneath the sheet that had been tossed over broken glass and bloodstains, was the corner of the Ouija board that should have been in Maggie's room, but was now in Brynn's instead.

She faltered, unsure whether she could take another forward step. A moment later, the step was taken for her. What felt like a child's hand pressed hard against the small of her back and pushed, forcing her to the edge of the sheet that kept the final traces of her big sister hidden from view.

"What do you want?" Maggie's words trembled, a mere whisper beneath the music nobody in the house but her seemed to be hearing. As if in response, a spike of pain skittered up her spine and settled between her shoulder blades. Her hands flew backward, palms clasping at her neck. She exhaled a muffled cry, only to feel it again, like claws biting into the flesh just above her collarbone. The intensity brought her crashing to her knees.

"Okay," she gasped. "*Okay.*" Reaching out, she pulled the board free of the sheet, drawing it to herself despite every fiber of her being telling her, *Don't, don't, don't.*

But this was not a matter of choice. She'd made that years ago.

Crossing her legs lotus-style, she placed the board upon her knees. "I—I call upon thee." She half wept the words. But before the planchette could move, Maggie found herself gasping at the onset of sudden, inexplicable silence.



The blare of the storm was gone.

No wind.

No rain.

It was a different sound now, a splashing from beyond Brynn's window. A sound so familiar it had Maggie pushing through the pain, shoving away the board, and scrambling to her feet. "Dad?"

She threw back Brynn's heavy drapes and discovered the window unboarded, unbroken, unshuttered. One story below, the pool shimmered with bright underwater lights. The wind was gone. The rain had ceased. Nothing but a figure—her father—swimming back and forth, executing a perfect fly, while a little girl sat on the edge of the shallow end, her bare feet kicking against the lapping waves.

"Dad . . ." The word left Maggie's throat in a breathless whisper. This was impossible. "Dad!" Louder, attempting to get her father's attention. But all it rendered was the upward snap of the small girl's head. Their eyes met.

*That should be me.*

But it wasn't Maggie, and it wasn't Hope. It was a different child altogether, donning a dress that looked nearly identical to that of the doll's; she was kicking her feet and grinning, but the smile wasn't friendly. It was forewarning.

*Hi, Mags, hi.*

Spinning away, Maggie ran for Brynn's open door and bolted for the stairs. If she could get to the pool, maybe she could see her father again. Perhaps, even if he was just an illusion, she could tell him she loved him. She missed him. She was sorry. *Please, forgive me . . .* But a scream brought her to a startled standstill, a repeat performance of the night before. But it wasn't Hope.

A voice called out: “Mom?”

Maggie felt herself go faint, her fingers clutching the newel post.

“Oh my God, Mom?!”

That voice. It was Brynn.

The yelling was coming from beyond the master bedroom door. Brynn, discovering their mother’s body, limp and bleeding upon the bathroom floor.

A wave of nausea hit Maggie head-on. For a second, she was sure she was about to fall headlong down the staircase: another tragedy at the Olsen house. Poor Maggie, neck broken only a few days after her sister had passed. But she somehow managed to change course, throwing herself toward her mother’s old bedroom. Her destination was, however, denied again, by the sound of shattering glass coming from Brynn’s room.

*What’s happening?*

Maggie veered around, her breathing coming in uneven heaves.

*What the hell is happening?!*

Not knowing where to look, she cried out when she noticed the tremors in her arms, reminded of the night she’d crawled down that very hall to the door she was standing at now. The scent of smoke grew heavy, almost suffocating as she tried to draw in breath. And as if determined to make that memory as vivid as possible, the thing that had been living in her closet all these years scurried out from her bedroom and into the hall on its hands and knees. Rather than being a blot of darkness, this time that thing had taken shape.

It was small. Black. Its skinny, spiderlike limbs feathering like burnt paper, like wood that had turned to coal. It ducked into Brynn’s bedroom so quickly it seemed like nothing short of a hallucination, a blur.

Maggie stood petrified, unsure of how to continue or where to go. Her mouth worked against the air, trying to draw in enough breath to cry out. *Wake someone. Anyone.* Arlen or Howie, even one of the kids would have been better than the solitude that surrounded her. But something told her that they wouldn't hear her; something assured her that right then, she wasn't in the same house as them. It's why the rain was gone. Why the wind had stopped. She was somewhere else, somewhere beyond what should have been possible. In between worlds, where screaming wasn't allowed.

Not afforded a yell, she felt her breath stolen once again. Brynn's voice came from beyond her sister's open bedroom door.

"Why won't you come home, Maggie?"

Her heart tripped over itself.

"I miss you. Why won't you come home?"

That voice sent her into an involuntary forward stumble, desperate to see her beloved Brynn one last time. *Bee, I'm sorry.* But when she tripped into the room, Brynn wasn't there. But the spirit board she had abandoned moments before was surrounded by dozens of flickering candles, lit just as they had been on Maggie's twelfth birthday, the night Brynn had taught her little sister how to summon the dead.

The window, which had been unbroken, was now but a jagged glass-rimmed portal to the outside world. Maggie dashed across the room, remembering her father. Downstairs, the little girl was gone. Two figures, however, remained.

The wind returned, blasting into Maggie's face.

Another crack of lightning illuminated her father, half tangled in a tarp, floating facedown in the center of the pool.

The rain returned, nothing short of a torrent. Water crashed into the pool, turning that iridescent, glowing liquid into a raging sea.

And there was Brynn, unmoving upon the flagstones, like a shattered doll fallen from a shelf.

“Oh God.” Maggie careened backward, searching for the thing she had seen scurry into the room mere seconds before. “Where are you?” She turned in circles, scanning the corners. “*Where the hell are you?*” Another vindictive response: the pain in her neck and shoulders gripping her like a vise.

Maggie’s eyes went wide with surprise, shocked by its intensity, by its pitiless unrestraint. She stood motionless, paralyzed with both anguish and dismay, staring at the wall of mirrors Brynn had left behind, gaping as the sheets that covered them were all simultaneously torn away by the frenzied gale.

And there, in half a dozen identical reflections, perched atop Maggie’s shoulders, was that *thing*. Charred and long-limbed with an almost oversized head attached to its frame, that skeletal figure. A *child*. Its blackened feet and bony fingers digging hard into Maggie’s skin.

Maggie bellowed out a cry. Reflexively, her arms swung high, hands flying around her head and neck like trapped moths against a bell jar’s curve. She screamed again, spinning like a top, stumbling into Brynn’s cloth-covered dresser, which was stacked with makeup, hair brushes, blazing tea lights, and creams. The collection tumbled off the dresser’s top and onto the floor. Candles splashed melted wax across the baseboard and the corner of an old afghan rug.

Maggie stood frozen in place for a moment, her arms stretched outward as if to keep herself steady on her own two feet. Maybe she’d scared it off.

Maybe it was gone. She swallowed hard, afraid to look anywhere but at the sheet covering the top of Brynn's mirrored dresser. "I imagined it," she whispered. Perhaps if she spoke the words aloud, they'd somehow become the truth.

Except, no. As soon as that denial crossed her lips, the pain came back, this time more vicious than before. Maggie yowled and crumpled to the floor. "Stop!" She intended it to be a yell, but was too breathless to project the demand, too overcome to be strong-willed.

*But you can't give in this time. You can't let it win.*

Pushing through the anguish, she snatched Brynn's nail file off the floor.

*Get up.* She imagined Brynn making the command. Narrowed eyes. Looking mean. *Get the fuck up, Maggie. I tried to fix this for you, but—*

Maggie forced herself to her feet, back in front of the mirrors. Regardless of whether she wanted to see that thing again or not, this was her fight. She had started it. It had to end with her. If it was still perched on her shoulders, she'd stab at it over and over until it was gone. She'd kill it so it couldn't hurt anyone else. She'd kill herself before she let this madness continue.

*Your fault.*

Her arm trembled as she lifted it upward, that file pointed at her own face.

*All your fault.*

She shimmied sideways, just enough to see the curve of her shoulder, the slope of her neck.

*You did this.*

She squeezed her eyes shut and exhaled a muffled mew. She didn't want to see it. Didn't want to see it. Didn't want to see it sitting there, leering like

a snake.

“I’m *sorry!*” She screamed the words as her eyes shot open and she took in her reflection—an apology to her sister, to her mother, her dad. Hell, to the thing that she’d just seen, singed and smoldering. *I’m sorry that I brought you into this world. I’m sorry that I didn’t know how to put you back.* But it was gone, nothing but the reflection of a wild-eyed girl left in its wake. She hardly recognized herself—a woman on the brink of mania, clutching a weapon, ready to kill herself, to fight an invisible foe.

Had Maggie scared that spiderlike creature off, or was it merely hiding, lying in wait? No. That smoky scent was only growing stronger. Maggie coughed, twisted around again, searching the corners of Brynn’s room for what felt like the thousandth time, only to be left gasping at a new discovery.

The bottom hem of Brynn’s drapes was starting to smolder. A few of the candles she’d toppled were still alight, sending curlicues of smoke up from burning velvet. She fell to her hands and knees, grabbing a handful of white sheet from the floor, and began to choke the flames. But her attention snagged on what she’d uncovered: a massive stain the color of rust, so much bigger than she had imagined it to be. It was the spot where Brynn had stood and bled, broken glass cutting into the palm of her hand, wounds weeping blood from the damage she’d done to her face and neck—a result of what she’d undeniably seen in the single mirror that had been left exposed.

Brynn had seen that burnt figure.

It’s why she’d covered all of those mirrors up.

It’s why she had stabbed herself.

She had seen it, poised there upon her neck.

And now, Maggie was seeing it as well—not on her shoulders, but in the corner of the room. It hadn't rushed out to hide. Rather, it was curled up between a bedside table and a wall of framed baroque art, as though transfixed by the growing fire licking up the drapes and the wall.

It was afraid.

*Her mom lit the sheets on fire and left her there, screaming . . .*

Maggie found herself nearly choking, either on the smoke or on the sudden onset of realization. Because Brynn's story, however impossible, had been true.

*I came here by myself yesterday and she threatened me, so I made her a promise.*

Brynn and Maggie in Friendship Park. Brynn shoving Maggie toward that tomb.

*I promised her that I'd bring her a friend, so she'd never be lonely again.*

"Oh God," Maggie whispered, her gaze snapping to the board just shy of her sister's blood.

*Why won't you come back, Mags? How many times do I have to ask?*

"It used you to get me to come home."

That thing . . . Brynn's death had been by design. It had killed her, knowing that Maggie would rush home for the funeral. It had scared her to death, sure that the Olsen sister it *really* wanted would return.

Rage. It wasn't a spark but an explosion, right there in the center of Maggie's chest. All of this had been a test. A game. Maggie left to go to the beach; her father was taken from her. Maggie left to go to school; her mother was pushed to the brink. Maggie left Savannah again, refusing to let tragedy cement her in place, and the force she had released had decided the

game had lasted long enough. Checkmate. Brynn had been its sacrificial queen.

“You son of a bitch.” Maggie gritted her teeth, her eyes fixed on the board on the floor. “You think you’re going to win this?” It was then that she grabbed a blazing candle in one hand and a fallen can of Brynn’s hair spray in the other. If this thing was afraid of fire, she’d either scare it out of the house or burn the damn place to the ground.

With a flick of her thumb, she popped the top off the can. Her finger on the trigger, she glared at that goddamn ghost. “This is for my sister,” she hissed through her teeth, and pressed down, releasing a rope of flame through the air. It ignited the board and the carpet around it within a blink. The cowering figure in the corner screeched as Maggie pointed her makeshift flamethrower its way. It dodged, leaving a fresh scar of soot across Brynn’s wallpaper. A moment later, Brynn’s four-poster bed was engulfed in flame.

Brynn had known all along: there was something wrong with this house. It’s why she had stayed—not because she wanted to live in Savannah, not because she had some inexplicable connection to the place they had grown up, but to protect her nieces and nephew. But Arlen would never leave voluntarily, which was why it had to be destroyed.

“Fuck this place,” Maggie murmured, tossing the can of hair spray to the floor.

This would leave her remaining sister with no choice. The Olsens would have to leave.

The flames were high, now, halfway to the ceiling. The heat was burning Maggie’s cheeks, threatening to ignite her hair. Satisfied that there was far



too much fire for Howie to extinguish in a bold attempt to save the place, she raced out of the room and down the hall.

*Why isn't the fire alarm going off?*

Because this was its last attempt.

It wanted them all.

If they all burned together, the Olsen family line would be no more.

Maggie banged on the walls as she flew down the hall, then threw open the master bedroom door and yelled, "Wake up! Fire! We have to go!" She found the entire family holed up in Arlen and Howie's bed. The adults scrambled to sit upright. And, as if seeing the shadow standing directly behind her aunt, Hayden's eyes went wide. A second later, she pealed out a scream.

. . .

In the time it took them all to get onto the front lawn, half the second floor had been consumed. Windows exploded one after the other, just like Maggie imagined they had at Gram and Gramps's place so many years ago. Harry looked on, dumbfounded, as fire trucks rolled onto the property. Hayden wailed for her favorite stuffed bear, which had been abandoned inside her parents' room. Arlen cried right along with her while Howie held them both, trying to comfort them during one final misfortune. Florence had no mercy. The wind continued to blow, fanning the flames, setting nearby trees alight, tossing fiery debris onto the rain-soaked lawn.

Hope stood motionless, staring at the burning monolith before her. Eventually, she turned to Maggie, and taking her aunt's hand in her own, she leaned in and whispered into Maggie's ear, "I'm scared, Auntie Magdalene. But at least you're here."

## NINETEEN

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BRYNN'S CAMRY SURVIVED the fire, having been parked along the curb.

Maggie sat in silence in the backseat as the car rolled toward the funeral home. It had been too late to postpone.

Howie drove while Arlen sat next to him with Hayden in her lap. Dazed and exhausted, they looked like a grouping of lunatics, everyone in their pajamas but Maggie, who was wearing the same thing she'd worn the day before. Aunt CeeCee would meet them in the parking lot with clothes bought at Target. Arlen hadn't argued. They had nothing left, so there hadn't been a point.

Sitting in the front seat, Arlen looked just as their mother had after their father had died. Her expression was blank, her eyes glazed over, a zombie personified. Howie directed the car without a word, more than likely stunned at the cruel irony that, not more than a handful of hours after losing it all, they were expected to mourn something different. But there was no avoiding it. Interments weren't events that could be easily put off. Brynn was waiting, and Florence would not be attending. The storm was over. It had left them behind.

And yet, despite the somberness of the morning and the joylessness that would follow them throughout the day, Maggie couldn't help but feel hopeful. For the first time during her visit, little Hayden wasn't screaming.

With no car seat, she was fast asleep in Arlen's arms, as though sensing that the thing she'd grown up with had finally been expunged.

"Auntie Magdalene?" Hope now placed her small hand upon Maggie's own as they sat together in the backseat. Harrison pressed himself against the door, staring out the window, not speaking or listening, in his own world.

"Yeah, kid?" Maggie gave her niece a thoughtful glance.

"Does this mean that you aren't going to live with us after all, because the house is gone?"

Maggie frowned at Hope's expression. The little girl looked positively wrecked, as though the thought of losing her aunt was far worse than losing all of her things. "I'll stay for a little while," Maggie told her, drawing her close. "At least until everything gets sorted out, until you guys have a new place to go." Until she was sure it was over, that it was finally safe.

Hope nodded, seemingly satisfied with that answer. She went quiet for a bit, studying Maggie's hands before speaking again. "Don't you think that Auntie Bee should be burned instead of buried?" There was an audible intake of breath from both of Hope's parents. Maggie found herself stammering, unsure of how to respond. "It just seems like she should be burned," Hope said, either unaware of the sudden tension she'd created or simply not caring that she had. "Like the house. Like the girl in the graveyard," she said, looking to Maggie for approval.

"The girl . . . ?" Maggie suddenly felt sick. She needed to get out. She needed air.

"Yeah, like the girl in the graveyard," Hope repeated. "You know, the girl who's your friend."

Arlen slowly turned to look at Maggie from the front seat, her face nothing short of aghast.

Maggie said nothing. She looked out the window instead, trying not to scream.

. . .

When they pulled up to the mortuary, the double doors were open. A few people fiddled with umbrellas they no longer needed. There were still a few clouds overhead, but by afternoon, the sky would be a bright and pristine blue.

“Will you put this in the trunk?” Arlen asked, handing Maggie Hayden’s blanket from the front seat, crumpled and smelling of smoke. “It stinks. I don’t want to take it in.”

Howie parked the car and the family climbed out. Maggie stayed behind, clutching Hayden’s blanket to her chest as she peered at the clouds that were now a faint gray rather than an ominous black. Finally, she turned back to the car and moved around to the trunk, popping it open, only to stop short.

Because there was Brynn’s old porcelain doll—one hand shattered, its glass faced cracked.

“Hey, you found it,” Hope said, nearly making Maggie jump. “Sorry I said it didn’t belong to you before, Auntie. I was wrong.”

“Wrong?” Maggie choked on the word, her eyes never wavering from the doll that stared dead-eyed up at her from the trunk of the car.

“I said it wasn’t yours. But the little girl told me the truth.”

“The truth,” Maggie whispered.

“Uh-huh.”

“And . . . what’s the truth?” Maggie asked, feeling the tremor in her hands start to quake, suppressing the shrieking that was inching its way up her throat.

“That it’s always been yours to begin with,” Hope said. “Ever since you brought it home with you. You promised, remember? You said you’d be her friend.”

Hope ran away then, skipping across the parking lot as though her house hadn’t just vanished, as though her aunt hadn’t died.

It was then that Maggie felt it, the pain making its return. Except this time, the dull anguish in her neck was punctuated by something new, something sharp and digging in. Her gaze jumped to the side-view mirror of Brynn’s old car. And then she saw it.

Soot-black.

Clawing into her shoulder’s curve.

Five bony fingers, refusing to ever let her go.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

When I was a girl, about eleven years old, I walked into a Toys R Us with a twenty-dollar bill crushed into the palm of my hand. I found myself in front of a wall of board games, and out of all those games, I chose one that I would never forget; or, perhaps, the one that would never let me forget I chose it.

The real-life Ouija board that haunted me through my childhood is gone. I don't know where it went or how in the world it could have been misplaced. But the furniture of my childhood room, where I had used the board, remained long after the board had disappeared. Once I was ready to move on to something more adult in my teenage years, my mother decided not to get rid of my canopy bed or dresser, or even my desk or the white steamer trunk that sat at the foot of my bed. Instead, she transported it to a cabin my father had built in the woods, resolving to use it for guests whenever they might arrive. I loved that cabin, but I hated walking down that upstairs hallway. The room that held my old furniture was at the hallway's end, and there was always a feeling . . . like something was off. I stepped inside that room only once and immediately left. It felt cooler than the rest of the house, almost damp somehow. There was a smell, too; one I couldn't place.

That house burned down, engulfed in a fire that left much of the land surrounding it strangely untouched. The fire wasn't paranormal, and yet, despite knowing all the details, I still think back to that room, that furniture, the fact that its energy, post-board, had always felt dangerous somehow. I still think back to the ghost of my childhood and wonder, had

the board somehow made it up to the woods? Had it been in that room? Had I abandoned it, and was it angry? Is it possible to haunt yourself, and what would happen if you did?

*I Call Upon Thee* is a work of fiction, but it's the closest thing I'll get to an autobiography of how my "strangeness" came to be. The board was real. The cemetery, real. The night I watched *The Exorcist*, real as well. And the part where twelve-year-old Maggie suddenly realizes she's in over her head? Yeah, that too. Of course, there's embellishment and exaggeration, but it's cobbled together from true events, odd memories, and the occasional nightmare.

And that, my friends, is why I'll never contact the dead again.

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ANIA AHLBORN is the bestselling author of the acclaimed horror thrillers *The Devil Crept In*, *Brother*, *The Pretty Ones*, *Within These Walls*, *The Bird Eater*, *The Shuddering*, *The Neighbors*, and *Seed*. Born in Ciechanów, Poland, she lives in South Carolina with her husband and their dog. Visit [www.aniaahlborn](http://www.aniaahlborn.com)

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