

BLOOD FAMILY



# BLOOD FAMILY

A NOVEL

BRENT WINTER

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FIRST EDITION

*Cover design by Alyson Plante*

This book is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogue are drawn from the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

*To the Dragon Lady, for everything you did—all of it*



I want to speak about bodies changed into new forms.

—Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*

The really terrible thing is that everyone has his reasons.

—Jean Renoir



## *PART I: SPIRIT*

*I am extremely desirous therefore to know your sentiments concerning spectres, whether you believe they actually exist and have their own proper shapes and a measure of divinity, or are only the false impressions of a terrified imagination?*

*What particularly inclines me to give credit to their existence is a story I heard. . . . There was at Athens a large and spacious but ill-reputed and pestilential house. In the dead of the night a noise resembling the clashing of iron was frequently heard, which, if you listened more attentively, sounded like the rattling of fetters. At first it seemed at a distance, but approached nearer by degrees. Immediately afterward a phantom appeared in the form of an old man, extremely meagre and squalid, with a long beard and bristling hair, rattling the shackles on his feet and hands. The poor inhabitants consequently passed sleepless nights under the most dismal terrors imaginable. This, as it broke their rest, threw them into distempers, which, as their horrors of mind increased, proved in the end fatal to their lives. For even in the daytime, though the spectre did not appear, yet the remembrance of it made such a strong impression on their imaginations that it still seemed before their eyes, and their terror remained when the cause of it was gone.*

—Pliny the Younger (62-113 CE), *Letters*



## *Chapter 1*

If Alex Whitfield had stopped to think about it, he would have been proud of himself for almost making it through the entire day without remembering that it was the one-year anniversary of his father's suicide.

He'd had a normal day at work, with no sense that the day was different from any other Tuesday. He'd had a decent evening at home, drinking beer and watching TV on the sofa, like most nights of the week. But then he made the mistake of checking his email before he got up to go to bed. That was when he saw a new message from his Aunt Vicky, who hardly ever sent him email, with the ominous subject line "One year ago"; and then he remembered, and a shadow fell across his heart. He wished he could delete the message unread and claim he'd never gotten it, but this was Vicky: of his few remaining relatives, she was the one he liked best. Lying to Vicky would feel too much like lying. So he sighed and opened the message:

Dear Alex,

I guess you know what today is. It's hard to believe it's already been a year. I've been thinking about Alexander all day, missing him, and thinking about you, too; thinking about the whole family, all day long.

Have you been in touch with your Uncle Lenny lately? I sent him a card a few days ago, but with Lenny that doesn't count as being "in touch" because he never writes me back. You'd think that someone in prison might want to answer his correspondence now and then, if only to pass the time. But Lenny's never been much of a people person (to put it mildly), and I guess he's not about to start now.

Is your mom gone on another one of her research trips? Next time you talk to her, please tell her I said hi. I miss hearing those hilarious stories she used to tell about the latest boneheaded things Alexander had done. And he would always say, "Give me a break! That plaque on my wall says *Salesman* of the Year, not *Husband* of the Year." And then he had the gall to be surprised when she left him. No one loved my brother as much as he did.

Any word on April? Nothing on my end. I guess I've gotten used to this horrible not-knowing feeling. At least with Alexander we know what happened; we can shed our tears and move on. But with April there's just a void that opened up the day she disappeared, and I feel it every time I think about her, like a draft that follows you from room to room.

Anyway, you take care of yourself, and please call me sometime soon, all right?

Hugs and love,  
Aunt Vicky

Alex tossed his phone aside with another sigh. Vicky meant well, and she was one of the best people he knew, but he wished she would have pointed her good intentions somewhere else tonight. He didn't want to be reminded that his father had committed suicide a year ago today. And he especially didn't want to be reminded that his half-sister, April, had disappeared shortly thereafter.

He chided himself for using the term *disappeared* to describe what had happened to April. She'd *dropped out*, was what she'd done. Right after their dad died—but before his funeral—April had called her modeling agency and told them she was taking some time off. She set up her bills to be automatically paid out of her well-stocked checking account. She had a long-term hold put on her mail. She did everything you would do if you were taking an extended vacation, except for telling people where she was going. That was why the police wouldn't put out a missing-person bulletin for her, even after she didn't show up at the funeral, and none of her friends or family could find her. That was why Alex insisted on saying *dropped out*. Wherever she'd gone, whatever she'd done, she'd clearly done it on purpose.

Alex couldn't blame April for wanting to skip their dad's funeral. When your father gets committed to a psych ward, stays there for a year, and then kills himself, the funeral at the end of that chain of events is not an occasion to look forward to. But there were ways to avoid an unwanted social obligation without dropping out of your whole life. You dropped out of your whole life when something larger was at work. Alex worried that April had fallen off the wagon and was lost on a drug-fueled bender, cavorting with her demons in a place where no one could find her. She'd been clean for years, ever since a stay in rehab, but maybe their dad's suicide had toppled a precarious balance, plunging her back into the chemical undertow.

Alex shook his head and stood up. His dad was gone. There was nothing he could do about that. April was gone too, in her own way. He couldn't do anything about that either. Did Vicky

expect him to sit around and mope about it? He had decided long ago that if members of his family wanted to ruin their own lives, that was up to them, but he wasn't going to let them ruin his life too. April knew where to find him if she needed his help. And that email of Vicky's could cool its heels in his inbox until he got around to answering it.

Alex stretched and yawned with a satisfying shouty moan before turning off the lights. The streetlight outside his apartment made his miniblinds glow a soft, pinkish orange in the dark, giving him enough ambient light to grope his way to the bedroom in short, shuffling steps. When he first moved into this unit, the brightness of that artificial glow had made it hard for him to get to sleep at night. He'd been accustomed to the tomblike darkness of his and Helene's bedroom: heavy velvet drapes, closed bedroom door, no nightlight. Helene had wanted it that way, and Alex had gotten used to it. A few years later came the divorce and the bachelor apartment with the streetlight nearby. He'd gotten used to those things too. The secret to getting through life, he'd decided, was not to sweat the externals. The externals could change—the externals *would* change, despite your efforts to the contrary—but that was okay as long as *you* didn't change.

In the bedroom he pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it in the corner, shucked off his pants and kicked them aside, and climbed into his unmade bed. The gritty sheets needed changing, but he only had one set, and Alex had a policy of not doing laundry until he ran out of clean underwear. He set the alarm on his ancient clock radio—a long-ago gift from his dad, the only useful thing Alexander Senior had ever given him—burrowed into the sheets, closed his eyes, and waited for sleep to come.

A year. Vicky was right; it really was hard to believe that a whole year had gone by since his dad's abrupt exit from this world. Which meant it had been a year and a day since April flew down from New York to visit their dad in the hospital. She'd tried to get Alex to go with her.

*He'll be sad, she'd said. It's been a year since Grandma Esther died. They say anniversaries are hard when you lose someone. We should be there for him.*

*When has he ever been there for us?* Alex replied. April couldn't argue with that, so she went to see their dad alone. Alex congratulated himself for drawing good boundaries, the way his and Helene's marriage counselor had said to do.

The next day, while April was flying home to New York, a tearful Aunt Vicky called Alex to let him know his dad had hung himself in the hospital that morning.

Alex's first reaction to this news wasn't sadness or grief; it was guilt, for not having visited his father in the hospital even once before he died. Alex's second reaction was to excoriate himself for feeling guilty, because of course Alexander was not in the category of people one should feel guilty about. His third reaction was fear. Alexander's suicide meant that his weaknesses and psychic deformities were more than just character flaws he inflicted on everyone around him; they were also a set of maladaptive personality traits, probably with a genetic component, and any child of his was in danger of inheriting—

—Alex's train of thought was derailed by a strange noise that sounded as if it was coming from somewhere inside his apartment.

His eyes flew open, and his heart started pounding. He lifted his head off his pillow and looked around. Vague shapes of deeper and lighter shadow approximated the known outlines of nightstand, doorway, chest of drawers. Nothing was moving. Nothing was out of place. He lowered his head and listened to the silence while he waited for his heart to settle down. This was one of those moments when he heard a noise at night and his first thought was, *Someone's in the house*, even though no one had ever broken into Alex's house.

Although . . . theoretically speaking . . . someone *could* have broken into his apartment during the day while he was at work and could now be hiding somewhere, waiting for him to fall asleep.

Hiding somewhere. But where? His unit was so tiny. There were only so many places—

There it was again. The noise sounded like a muffled flap, together with a muted clink. The sound had an echoey quality that suggested it might be coming from the bathroom. Was it the shower curtain? Alex's heart accelerated again as he sat up, slowly and quietly, trying to listen above the drumbeat in his ears. The sheets rustled as they slid along his moving body. Again the apartment had fallen silent. He sat propped on one arm and took stock of his situation: no weapons, other than the dull, infrequently used chef knives in the kitchen. No landline, so the only phone was the cell, on the sofa in the living room. His keys were on the coffee table, waiting for him to snatch them up on the way out the door in the morning. And he was alone in the apartment (except perhaps for an intruder), so no one was here to help him.

Alex generally preferred being alone; always had, ever since he was a little kid who didn't like playing outside because that's where all the other kids were. Yet even he had to admit that right now it would be nice to have someone else—

The noise again! It had definitely come from the bathroom, and now Alex no longer had any doubt that someone or something was moving his shower curtain around. His heart beat so hard that he thought he could feel the bedclothes vibrating against his thighs with every thunderous clap.

Okay. Cell phone. Got to get the cell phone, if only for the flashlight function, and also to call 911 if need be. But his cell phone was out in the living room, and he would have to walk right past the bathroom to get to it. The thought made his flesh crawl with dread. Maybe the thing to do instead was to shut and lock the bedroom door, and climb out the window to the parking lot—but then what would he do with no phone, no wallet, no keys? He couldn't see himself knocking on a neighbor's door in his underwear and saying, *I think I heard someone fondling my shower curtain, will you please call the cops?* Alex had been living in this apartment complex for three and a half years, and in that time he

hadn't met a single person who lived there. That was fine with him, because it meant nobody bothered him. But it also meant that in this little artificial village of a few hundred people, there wasn't a single friendly face he could turn to for help.

Okay. Forget about the phone. The thing to do was to venture into the bathroom and see what was really happening. What were the chances that a robber had actually broken into the apartment and was just standing in the tub, bumping into the shower curtain now and then? Maybe a stray air current was making the shower curtain move. Maybe an enormous sewer rat had crawled out of the toilet and was shredding the shower curtain into nesting material. Maybe there was some other explanation, some perfectly ordinary reason why a shower curtain would move and its rings would clink against the rod in the middle of the night. There had to be.

So, into the bathroom. Just go. It's a normal bathroom in a normal apartment on a normal night. You're a normal guy. Stand up and take normal steps.

Alex gingerly lifted the covers off his body and swung his feet to the floor. When he stood up his knees cracked as loudly as pencils being snapped in two. He winced, gritted his teeth, and started walking as stealthily as he could. His feet still made soft whispers on the carpet as he crept out of his bedroom and entered the tiny hallway. Directly across the hall was the bathroom. To Alex's left, the hallway was a dead end; to his right, it led into the living room, where he saw nothing unusual in the dim, miniblind-refracted streetlight.

He took another step across the hallway and set his foot on the cold metal strip at the bathroom's threshold. Unfortunately, the bathroom was windowless, a well of deep murk in the middle of the night. He tried not to disturb the air around him as he stepped into the bathroom, leaned forward, and peered to his left, toward the tub, straining to discern details in the gloom.

The sound came again. This time Alex saw the shower curtain move, a silvery oscillation of sheeted plastic, barely visible

in the traces of light that filtered into the bathroom from the rest of the apartment. The curtain made the same sound as before: muffled flap, muted clink.

Well, not entirely the same. There was an additional sound now: a little thump. Like something hitting the curtain. Making it move.

The curtain had fallen still. In full light it would be a translucent blue, but in this darkness it might as well have been made of lead. The only way to know what was behind it was to look. Alex strategized his movements. If he positioned himself correctly between the tub and the doorway, he could use his left hand to turn on the light one millisecond before using his right hand to yank the shower curtain aside. Alex got into place, planted his feet, put his left forefinger on the light switch, stretched his right arm out toward the curtain—and hesitated an inch away from it, his fingers trembling in the dark.

A sudden reluctance seized him, making his limbs heavy, turning his blood to sludge. Did he really have to look behind the curtain? Maybe not. Maybe he could just go back to bed and turn some white noise on and shut and lock his bedroom door, and fall asleep, and dream about something pleasant, like—

Before Alex could think of anything pleasant to dream about, the curtain thumped and moved again, and this time it touched his outstretched fingertips, and an electric charge of terror shot into his fingers and ran through his entire body, galvanizing him to hit the light switch and drag the shower curtain aside with a rippling clank of rings.

He squinted against the light. No one was standing in the tub.

There was, however, someone lying in the tub. It was April. She was naked. The tub was full of bloody water.

Alex's eyes ricocheted from one sight to the next: the multiple precise slashes down the insides of April's forearms, gaping like longitudinal mouths; the clouds of red braceleting her wrists below the water's surface; the way her long, slim legs were stretched out straight and her head was propped up at the far end of the

tub, as if she was taking a relaxing bath at the end of the day; the bluish, bruised cast of her closed eyelids; her wet brown hair, dragging the water at the ends; her breasts, which he had never seen before, their aureoles startlingly dark against the grayish white of her bloodless skin; her magazine-cover face, now drawn and gaunt with misery.

April's head moved, and her eyelids fluttered upward. Her eyes trawled slowly around until they found Alex's face.

Alex looked into her dark eyes and whispered, "April?"

Her eyes opened wider, and she said, "Alex?" Her voice shook. Alex said, "April, how . . ."

He could say no more, because he had too much to say. How had she gotten into his apartment—650 square feet, windows shut and locked, the only access a single door with a deadbolt and a chain on it—without leaving a trace of her entry? Had she been lying in his tub since before he got home from work? Surely that wasn't possible; surely he would have noticed her there when he came in to pee during commercial breaks. And her wrists! Alex scanned the ledge of the tub for what she might have used to cut herself. Nothing was there but soap, shampoo, conditioner, stray hairs. There was nothing in the water next to her; nor was there anything in the bathroom she could have used. His chef knives could have done the trick if she'd cut herself in the kitchen, so he looked down at the white bathroom floor and the cream-colored carpet in the hallway. They bore no trace of the blood that would have trailed her in here.

Alex looked at April's body, her blood, her wrists, and found himself idiotically trying to remember how long it had been since he'd last seen her in person. Was it a year and a half? Longer?

April lifted her arms out of the water. Alex's mind supplied the expected liquid roiling sound as her arms broke the water's surface, but for some reason his ears heard nothing. The room was absolutely silent as April lifted her trembling arms out of the water and spread them out toward him. Her left arm hit the shower curtain where it was bunched up beside her, and only

then did he hear something: little thump. Muffled flap. Muted clink. Those were the sounds he'd been hearing. It was April, lying in his tub, reaching out toward him.

April raised her slashed wrists and said, "Help me."

Alex's arm twitched at his side, but he quelled the impulse to take her hand. He said, "How could you do this to yourself? Where have you been? We've been worried sick—"

A brief convulsion knotted her face, something like pain or fear or anger, or a mixture of all three, and before Alex knew what was happening April sat up—in total silence—and put her hand on his leg.

Where she touched him, he didn't feel the wet, wrinkled skin of her fingertips; all he felt was a piercing cold. Everything he saw—April, the tub, even his bathroom—disappeared.

For a crystallized instant he was in another place. This, too, was a bathroom, bigger than his, with no light on. The only illumination was a cross-hatched rectangle of moonlight draped across a claw-foot tub with a woman's naked body in it. There was no water in the tub; just the body, every inch of skin darkly mottled, head and face hidden in shadow. Long incisions ran down the insides of the woman's forearms.

Alex jerked backward, stepping away from the gruesome sight. The cold spot left his leg, and his own bathroom came back—but it had changed. Now the tub was empty. No water, no blood, no sister; just a dry expanse of beige plastic. April had vanished.

Alex turned and ran out of the bathroom and into the bedroom, where he snatched his pants off the floor before he dashed into the living room, turned on the light, grabbed his keys and phone, and ran to the front door so fast that he bumped into it. He fumbled frantically at the deadbolt and the chain until he got them undone, and then he opened the door and ran out of the apartment, almost forgetting to slam the front door shut behind him.

He sprinted barefoot down the sidewalk to his car, got in, shut and locked the door, and started the engine. He gripped the steering wheel and saw that his hands were shaking, which scared him more, so he folded his hands in his lap. His panting breaths scared him too, but he couldn't do anything about that right now. He leaned forward and stared at his apartment's front door, grateful now for the bright streetlight nearby. What if the door opened? He put one hand on the steering wheel and the other on the gear shift, thinking Reverse, reverse, reverse. Be ready.

He listened to himself pant, and he thought, Hold on now. Calm down. Get ahold of yourself. Why did you run out the door like that? There's nothing to be afraid of. You're sitting in your car, and the doors are locked, and the engine is running, and you're safe. You're safe. At least put your pants on before someone sees you in your underwear.

He awkwardly struggled into his pants in the driver's seat, knocking his thighs against the steering wheel, and he thought, Is April bleeding out in my tub right now? Should I call 911? Does she need my help?

Of course she doesn't need my help, because there's no way she could have broken into my apartment and run a tub full of water and slit her wrists without me hearing or seeing some sign of it. And besides, she's not bleeding out in my tub anymore, is she? Even if I thought she was at first. The tub is empty now. April's not there at all. Which can only mean one thing.

It took Alex a long time to summon the nerve to complete the thought:

I'm going crazy. Just like Dad.

Alex wanted to close his eyes, put his head down on the steering wheel, and scream. He wanted to scream and scream and scream until his throat hurt, until his ears hurt, until he woke up the whole apartment complex. Wasn't that what crazy people did? Then he would hit the car windows again and again until they broke, or his hands broke, and blood would be smeared all

over the broken windows and the dashboard and himself; a pretty sight to greet the first responders. They'd say, *Look at this guy. He's crazy.* And they'd be right. Alex had tried so hard to disavow his father—the craziness, of course, and everything else about the man too—and he'd failed. In the long-running war between father and son, the father had struck the final blow, and he had struck it from within the coils of their shared DNA, where it could not be avoided. And now Alex could quit trying so hard. Now he could just give up and let go.

And if his madness had taken any other form, Alex surely would be letting go at that very moment. The screaming and the hitting would already have begun. It would be a relief to know his fate, to no longer have to wonder how he was going to turn out. Yet even as he contemplated a future lived out in a Thorazine haze behind locked doors, he was pulled back by the thought of April. He realized with a jolt that it had been two full years since he'd last seen her, at their grandmother Esther's funeral. He didn't even remember what his final words to her had been; something inane, no doubt, something rushed and superficial as he tried to get away from their dad, whose descent into madness had just begun. Alex would have said a better, longer goodbye to April if he had known how long it would be until he saw her again.

Well, but wait a minute. Let's get clear on one thing: you didn't actually see April again tonight. You didn't see *April*. You saw a hallucination, a delusion. Heck, maybe you dreamed it. But you haven't suddenly run into your missing sister.

Yet Alex couldn't shake the feeling that he had indeed run into April tonight. The complex stew of love and guilt and fear in his heart felt exactly as if he had really seen her lying in his tub with her wrists slashed.

Look. What's happening is, you feel guilty about letting your sister fall out of your life—you've felt guilty about this ever since she went missing, just admit it—and Vicky's email brought all that up for you. So you've conjured up this little psychodrama as

a way to punish yourself for being a bad brother. *You let her drift away, and now look. She's gone and hurt herself.* That's the story you're telling yourself.

God, what if she *had* hurt herself? Just like Dad. They say it runs in families—

Stop it! It was a hallucination. Or a dream. But it wasn't real. So why don't you just turn off the car, get out, and go back inside, okay? Nothing to be afraid of. Just turn the key.

Alex looked at the key in the ignition—but only for half a second. He looked at the front door again. It was still shut.

He sat in his car, eyes fixed on the front door, until he dozed off with his head leaned back against the headrest. He stayed there until dawn woke him.

Then, bolstered by the daylight, he scraped together what little courage he possessed and went back inside.

*Chapter 2*

First Alex turned on all the lights in the living room and opened the blinds. He was heartened by the morning sun flowing in through the windows, lighting up the everyday scene of his cluttered coffee table, the end tables with countless drink rings on them, the low bookcase sagging beneath the window.

Next he turned on the lights in the kitchen and the hallway. All clear. The bathroom light was still on, but he averted his eyes from that room and went in the bedroom. He turned on the light. Everything looked right. He slid open the closet door. Nothing there but his scanty collection of much-worn clothes and shoes, his guitar case gathering dust in the corner, and a box of his dad's stuff that he hadn't gone through yet. He raised the bedroom blinds and enjoyed the ratcheting sound of the plastic slats rising up to reveal the day.

He walked with halting steps around his bed and across the hallway. An unappetizing sight greeted him in the bathroom mirror: pouchy eyes, pale stomach, a mouth tight with anxiety.

Heart pounding, he stepped across the threshold. Turning his head to the left felt like pulling against fifty g's of force.

The shower curtain was still pulled back, revealing a completely empty tub.

Alex squatted on shaking legs to take a closer look. There were no droplets of pinkish water, no long hairs that couldn't be his. Nothing in that shower stall but soap, shampoo, and mildew, like always.

Alex remained squatting, looking at the blankness, as the implications of it all loomed up before him; but then he thought, Work. It's time to go to work. It's a normal Wednesday morning. I'm a normal guy with a normal job. Time to take a normal shower.

While he washed himself, he tried not to think about April lying in a tub full of bloody water where he was standing. His elbow bumped the shower curtain as he turned to rinse off, and the curtain made the same noise it had made last night. He tried not to think about that either.

Quit worrying so much. You're taking a normal shower.

Except he wasn't. Not fully. He kept looking down as if he expected April to reappear between his feet.

Once Alex was dressed, a profound weariness overtook him, and he considered calling in sick and going back to bed; but he wasn't ready to lie down and close his eyes in that apartment just yet. Last night was still too near him.

On his way to work, he took bitter comfort in having to negotiate yet another morning of metro Atlanta rush-hour traffic. At least the crawling legions of SUVs and minivans were mundane, tangible, indisputably real. He tried to forget about last night as he drove, but everywhere he looked—the ranks of billboards marching beside the street, the stylized peaches on license tags all around him—he saw flashes of last night, like a grotesque transparent overlay: Slashed arms. Bloody water. The misery on April's face.

That last image brought up a pricking sensation in the corners of his eyes. He bit down on his tongue and reminded himself that he hadn't actually seen any misery on April's face, because

he hadn't seen April's face. He must have dreamed it. It was the most vivid nightmare he'd ever had. But it wasn't real.

No, Alex, don't lie to yourself. You didn't dream it because you weren't asleep. You were lying in bed awake, waiting to fall asleep, when you heard the noise. Then you went in the bathroom and turned the light on and pulled the shower curtain back and saw April, and then you ran out of the house and hid in your car until sunrise. That's why, when you came back inside this morning, the shower curtain was *still pulled back* and the bathroom light was *still on*. Unless you sleepwalked last night? And then woke up so seamlessly you couldn't tell the difference?

That was too many leaps of speculation for a pragmatist like Alex. He hadn't dreamed it. He hadn't dreamed any of it.

Once again Alex was confronted by the only possible explanation for what had happened last night, and once again he wanted to put his head down on the steering wheel and start screaming, right there in the middle of Peachtree Street; but he didn't. He kept negotiating rush-hour traffic and thought about his father, who had seemed fully sane until the last year of his life. Not that Alexander Whitfield Senior had been a paragon of enlightenment. He'd been a macho bully, a casual racist, a genial sexist, an unapologetic homophobe; irresponsible with money, terrible credit, a wild-eyed entrepreneur whose business schemes always failed just before the huge payoff; a man who had been spoiled by his mother and who refused to extend the same largesse to his own children; who perpetually expected more from his son and was perpetually disappointed by him; but, through it all, sane. Alexander's lies to creditors had been rational, plausible lies. He'd always showered and shaved, always kept his teeth brushed. He had to impress the customers, or the loan officers, or the women he was hitting on. Alexander's dreams had been the petty yet grandiose dreams of avarice. He'd never heard voices.

Then his mother died of cancer, and he started going off his rocker the very next day. Alex knew that wasn't the P.C. way to put it, but god, what else could you call it when Esther wasn't

even in the ground before Alexander started telling people she wasn't really dead? He stood right next to his mother's coffin in the cemetery and told whoever would listen that she hadn't died; no, Esther wasn't dead because she *couldn't* die. In fact, she was going to live forever. Her body was gone, but that was all right because she lived inside Alexander now. She talked to him all the time. She would never leave him. He stated these beliefs calmly until someone dared to contradict him, whereupon he would fly into an ungovernable rage. Alex's Aunt Vicky had no choice but to have him committed. The medication helped with the rage, but drugs and therapy couldn't touch his delusion, so he stayed in the locked ward, and the months ticked by; and eventually April came down to visit him on the anniversary of Esther's death. And before one more day elapsed, Alexander proved April right about the anniversary of his mother's death being hard for him.

But that was the very part Alex couldn't understand. People lost their mothers every day in this world. Most of them did not respond by going crazy and killing themselves. Alex chalked it up to his father's well-documented lack of character. A stronger person would have been able to withstand their mother's death, but Alexander coped by retreating into a wish-fulfillment fantasy, which was a logical extension of the way he'd lived his entire life.

Alex's office building came into view, tugging him out of his reverie. His office: gray hallways, white fluorescent lighting, gray cubicle walls; co-workers, bosses, benefits. Benefits. He should look up his company's mental-health benefit as soon as he got to his desk—no, scratch that, not on a company machine, and not around his co-workers, either. On his phone, then, on his lunch break. He would leave the building and go outside so he could do it unobserved. He would look for a therapist covered by his insurance, and he would make an appointment with the first one he found—while he still had a choice in the matter.

Alex pulled into his office parking lot, and that boring, routine sight—the blandness of concrete, steel, glass, lampposts, rows

and rows of cars—reassured him. He parked the car and looked at his hands on the steering wheel. No shaking. He looked at himself in the rearview mirror. Does this man look insane? No, just tired: bloodshot eyes, the shallow wrinkles around them a little deeper today. He sighed and got out.

Alex walked into his cubicle, grabbed his coffee mug, and threaded the hallways to the break room. He avoided people's eyes so he wouldn't have to make any of the required banal pleasantries. The break room—a linoleum-tiled space with a few round tables, a sink, a fridge, a snack machine—was mercifully devoid of humanity when Alex walked in. He poured coffee into his mug and studied the shining mahogany stream and thought, This is what I do every day. I'm having a normal day at my normal job. I am in the very belly of normalcy.

Yet he couldn't help noticing the small purring sound the coffee made as it collected in the bottom of his mug. The sound made him think of the oddly silent water in his tub last night. Why hadn't the water made a noise when April raised her arms out of it, or when she sat up and grabbed his leg? If he was going to hallucinate the sound of her hand hitting the shower curtain, why wouldn't he also hallucinate the sound of her body lifting out of water?

Alex heard the chock of boot heels on the floor, and he looked up and saw that Martha, his only work friend, had entered the room. Martha was one of his unit's designers, and she dressed like it: vivid leggings and high boots one day, vintage dress the next, all accessorized with an eclectic assortment of scarves and a rotating selection of artistic eyeglasses. Today Martha's scarf was a butterscotch gold that she seemed to have chosen for the way it perfectly accented her dark complexion. Her perky medium-length 'fro seemed to have achieved a new level of vivacity this morning; or maybe Alex just didn't have the bandwidth today to deal with a full blast of Martha.

Martha said, "Hey, Alex. Uh-oh. What's wrong?" That was classic Martha, the amateur psychologist, diagnosing malaise in

two seconds flat. Alex liked Martha, but he hated it when she sized him up like that. It didn't help that her diagnoses tended to be accurate.

"Oh, nothing," Alex said. "Just feeling like butt."

Martha took a mug from the cabinet, dropped a tea bag in it, and filled it from the hot water spigot on the side of the coffee maker. "Yeah, you're not looking too chipper," she said. "You sick?"

Alex glanced around the room. The round tables were still empty; the snack machines stood unpatronized. They were alone. He lowered his voice and said, "Had a nightmare last night."

Martha sucked a hiss of dismay through her teeth. "What about?"

The long, dark slits in April's white arms. "Family stuff."

Martha looked at him with wide eyes, waiting for him to say more. Perhaps she thought he was still dealing with emotional fallout from Alexander's death. She'd be wrong, but again her amateur diagnosis would be close to the mark. Alex's troubles this morning had nothing to do with Alexander's death and everything to do with Alexander's insanity, and there was no way Alex could tell Martha that. He knew it would probably be a relief to talk to someone about last night, but there was an eager quality to Martha's concern, an interest in Alex's affairs that bordered on the unseemly and gave him a squirmy feeling. It was as if her own life wasn't enough for her; she had to get in on his life too. That was why, when they went out for their occasional workday lunches, Alex never took the obvious next step of suggesting that they go out for dinner sometime. Dinner would push them too close to dating, and Alex didn't want to date someone who seemed to always be lying in wait for him, pawing at him, beseeching him. Martha was a good person, and she was going to make somebody very happy one day. But not Alex.

"Well, I better get to work," he said. "Copy that boring won't just write itself, you know." He gave Martha a pained smile and left. He thought her answering smile looked a little pained in re-

turn: another rebuff from Alex. Sorry, but I'm not doing the openness thing today. Today I'm doing the pleasant-yet-guarded thing.

The rest of Alex's morning passed in a blur of fatigue, punctuated by a mind-numbing meeting about deliverables in Q3. He had wanted to have a typical boring day at work, but he hadn't counted on just how hard it would be to stay awake when the boredom swamped everything else and he'd had so little sleep the night before. Only by viciously pinching himself under the conference table did he keep his eyes open for the full excruciating hour. Between the pinching and the coffee, he made it to 12:00.

Precisely at 12:01 he was already leaving the building through the ground-floor entrance, which opened onto a cool, shaded, red-brick courtyard enclosed by the four buildings of Alex's office complex. At the courtyard's center was a circular fountain, its jets of water rising up and falling down in a constant rush. The courtyard was girdled by a ring of trees and bushes and shrubs bedecked with the fresh new leaves and bright flowers of early May. Everything was green and growing and alive. Everything smelled good.

Alex crossed to the fountain and sat on the low brick wall encircling it. The soothing hush of the water invited him to relax, but he forced himself to take his phone out and get online. Within a couple of minutes he found an in-network shrink a few miles from his house. He wondered if it was a bad idea to choose a mental health provider based solely on insurance coverage and geographical proximity. Yes, it probably was. This was probably not going to be the highest-quality decision he had ever made. But what other choice did he have?

Well, if he was going to be brutally factual about it, the other choice Alex had was to let himself deteriorate until Aunt Vicky had to have him committed too. He might wind up on the same locked ward where Alexander used to live. Maybe he'd even get his dad's old room. And if the drugs they gave him didn't work, there would always be a bed sheet with his name on it.

He hovered his thumb over the therapist's phone number. Just make the call, he told himself.

But he didn't want to make the call. He didn't want to tell a total stranger about the events of last night, and about his psycho father and his missing sister and his convicted-felon uncle and his dead grandmother. He would rather crawl in a hole and cover himself with dirt and never come out again.

"Who's the lucky girl?"

Alex jumped and turned and saw Martha standing right next to him, purse slung over her shoulder, smiling at him.

"Oh hey," he said, sounding much more glad to see her than he actually was. He turned his phone face down. "What's up?"

"Just going out for lunch," she said.

Lunch. Of course. It was now blindingly apparent to Alex that sitting in front of the building's entrance at lunchtime was not a smart plan for trying to make a call in private—at least not with Martha around.

"How about you?" she said. "You looked like you were trying to work up the nerve to ask a girl out on a date."

"No, just . . ." He waved the phone but could find no words to say what he was going to do with it.

She leaned forward and peered at him. "You sure you're not getting sick?"

Alex said, "Well, actually . . ." He intended to dissemble: *Actually, I am getting sick. Gotta call the doctor.* But he couldn't force himself to say *I am getting sick*. It was too close to the truth. He looked away from Martha, down at the red bricks of the courtyard, and tried to think of something to say.

She sighed and sat down on the low brick wall next to him. "Listen. I know it's none of my business, but you look like you're suffering."

Alex emitted a mirthless chuckle. He wanted to add something sarcastic or ironic after the chuckle. Nothing came to mind.

"So," Martha said, "if you want to talk about anything . . ."

Again Alex felt Martha trying to get at him, but this time her concern felt like a balm on something parched and raw. And the truth was, he wished he could tell her what was going on. But self-disclosure did not come easily to Alex. Even if it did, this was not the kind of thing you told to just anyone. He took a deep breath and exhaled hugely, staring into the middle distance, feeling vacant and tired and old. Martha set her purse on the wall beside her and said nothing. They looked around at the birds flittering from bush to bush at the edge of the courtyard. The water in the fountain rose up and fell down, going nowhere. Alex's eyelids slid closed as he let himself be lulled by the smooth, steady flow of sound . . .

That darn water sound again! His eyes snapped open.

"I had a dream last night," Alex heard himself say. "I mean a nightmare. Unless it wasn't. I mean, unless I wasn't sleeping when it happened."

"I don't understand," Martha said.

So Alex began telling her, or trying to tell her, what was happening to him. The story came out slowly, reluctantly, with confusing gaps that she had to ask him about, irrelevant observations and omitted details. Every sentence felt like he was hawking up a lump of concrete. But after a while he got it all out, or enough so that she understood.

Alex stopped talking. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, fingers interlaced. His armpits were hot and damp. The fountain continued its ceaseless, senseless song.

Martha put one hand on his forearm. He wanted to snatch his arm away from her; he didn't want to be comforted or pitied. Yet her hand calmed him, not kneading his flesh or rubbing his skin; just being still; just touching him through his shirt.

She drew breath to speak, and this time he twitched, on the very edge of yanking his arm out from under her hand. Here it comes, the big speech: *You don't have to go through this alone* and *Medications can help* and *Have you thought about hurting yourself?* If she came out with any of that, he honestly didn't know what he would do. He locked his jaw, looked at the hairs on his wrist, and waited.

Martha said, "You might want to wait to call your therapist. At least for a day or two."

He hadn't expected her to say that. "Why?"

She let go of his arm and folded her hands in her lap. "I think you might not be . . . you know. Having mental-health issues."

He snorted. "Really. Well. How else do you explain it?"

Martha's hands began to pick at each other. She looked down at them and said, "Have you ever been to D Street?"

"Uh . . . I've heard of it. Is it like a record store?"

"It's a street. A few blocks long. Downtown. It's a weird little neighborhood. Hard to find, unless you've been there before."

"If it's hard to find unless you've been there before, then how does anybody find it?"

"The first time you go, someone who's already been there has to take you."

"Yeah, but how did the first—"

"I don't know. So you haven't been."

"No. Why?"

"I know someone there who might be able to help you."

"A shrink?"

"No . . ." Martha kept her eyes on her hands in her lap. Apparently she was having a hard time saying whatever was on her mind. "Like I said, I don't think you're going crazy."

"Well, what do you think?"

"Well . . . have you considered the possibility that maybe your sister . . . has died?"

"Died?"

"Yeah. That maybe, you know, what you're seeing . . . it looks a lot like suicide, right?"

"Yeah, but what does that have to do with anything?" Alex thought he knew what Martha was getting at, but he wasn't going to let her hide behind innuendo. He was going to make her come out and say it.

Martha dragged her eyes up to his and said, almost angrily, "I think you may have seen your sister's ghost, all right?"

*Chapter 3*

Beneath his tiredness, Alex felt a dull surprise.

“Ghost,” he said.

Martha nodded.

He said, “You mean, like . . . a *metaphorical* ghost. ‘Ghost of the past’ kind of thing.”

“No,” she said. “A ghost.”

“Or, like, a mental projection of your own anxieties. Like, you have these feelings, but you don’t want to deal with them, so you project them outward—”

“No, Alex, I mean an actual ghost. The spirit of a person who’s dead.”

Alex made his sludgy mind work through it all. Martha thought Alex had seen April’s ghost—her “actual” ghost. That meant Martha thought April was dead. And given the way April’s arms had looked, if she was dead then she must have committed suicide.

Alex swiftly backpedaled away from that thought and refocused himself. “Hold on a second,” he said. “For one thing—not for *one* thing, for the *only* thing—ghosts aren’t real. So I couldn’t have seen April’s ghost.” Alex had never believed in ghosts, and

he wasn't going to start now. And he was disappointed in Martha for buying into that nonsense. He'd thought she was smarter than that.

"Okay," Martha said, "so where's your sister now?"

Alex clenched his jaw and looked away. "I haven't talked to her in a while."

"So call her. Text her."

"Her phone doesn't work anymore. She sort of dropped out of life last year. No one's heard from her or been able to find her ever since."

"Well, I'm sorry, but . . . have you considered the possibility that the reason she's been out of touch for so long is that she's dead?"

Alex had considered the possibility that such a turn of events might come to pass, if he and April stayed out of touch for long enough; but he had never allowed himself to think that it had already happened, that she was already dead and he had already seen her for the last time. And now that he considered the possibility, he found it unbearable to contemplate. He looked down at the red bricks and clenched his jaw over and over.

Martha put a hand on his arm again. "Look. Come with me today after work. I got no major plans for tonight. I can take you down to D Street. I'll introduce you to this nice woman I know. She's helped me before. Maybe she'll be able to help you. And if she can't, then you can call your therapist first thing in the morning. Okay?"

Alex knew that if he agreed to go on this fool's errand, it would be a waste of time that only delayed the inevitable. She was, in effect, offering him a nice, cool hole in the sand where his head would fit perfectly. But as he considered putting off the call to the therapist for at least another day, a wash of relief poured over him.

"Okay," he said.

Alex knew he was in denial. The thing about denial was that it felt good. He'd learned that from his father.

After work that evening, Martha followed Alex to his apartment. They dropped his car off, and she drove them downtown. Alex was surprised—and oddly pleased—to find himself becoming a little nervous as the downtown skyscrapers rose ever higher ahead of them. He supposed he was looking forward to the absurd experience he was about to have. Perhaps this, too, was a sign of his illness. Maybe you had to be insane to go to a magic shop—“a *real* one,” Martha said emphatically—to talk to a “witch.”

But that would mean Martha was insane, and Alex knew that wasn’t true. She was just credulous. Alex had a cousin named Kathleen who was the same way, with her crystals and her psychics and her talk of moon signs and planetary influences. His private nickname for Kathleen was “Cousin Woo-Woo.” Belief in the occult was only one of the many opiates of the masses. So now Alex would go and take his own hit off the opium pipe. It was the perfect time for it.

“Help me find parking,” Martha said. They were crawling through the warren of one-way streets and loading zones that was downtown Atlanta.

Alex said, “Parking. Now that’s what we could use a psychic for.”

Martha ignored him and continued to scan the curbs. Traffic was a choked debacle of brake lights and car horns. She said, “You ever wonder why we live in Atlanta? Putting up with the traffic and everything?”

Alex shrugged. “I left for a while, but I didn’t like Orlando. Something pulled me back.”

“You got family here?”

“Yeah, but that wasn’t it. My family . . . we’re not too close.”

Alex prepared himself to fend off a more personal question about his family, but Martha said, “A-ha. The parking gods have smiled upon us.” They were in a little alleyway Alex had never noticed before in his infrequent journeys downtown. She parallel-parked between a tombstone-gray panel truck and a white Mustang from the sixties. They got out, and Martha led him across

the alley to a three-way intersection with a narrow street. A waist-high concrete post leaned aslant at the intersection of alley and street, with two rusty street signs affixed to the top of it. In black letters on white—not the white-on-green of every other street sign Alex had seen in Atlanta—the signs indicated that they had just walked across Sherman’s Alley and were about to enter D Street.

Alex pointed to the sign. “That can’t be *General* Sherman’s Alley.”

Martha looked at the sign and nodded. “Yup. When Sherman came and torched the city, this was one of the few places that didn’t burn. Most people say it was just luck, the winds shifted or whatever. But some folks on D Street say there was a slave down here who was a hoodoo worker, and she was the one who turned the fire aside.”

Alex had never heard the term *hoodoo worker* before and had no idea what it meant, but he decided to keep that to himself. He said, “Why would a slave try to prevent Sherman’s army from destroying Atlanta?”

Martha looked at him as if he was an idiot. “Why do you think? She was someone else’s property, and her owner put a gun to her head.” She shook her head and stepped onto D Street. Alex, blushing, followed her.

The street was paved in red, rounded cobblestones, the kind that would rumble under your tires, but there were no cars visible anywhere. People walked freely in the road. The mix was eclectic—black girls who looked like they went to Spelman College, aging white gay couples, khaki-clad yuppie escapees from Buckhead—with one exception: no one looked like a tourist, which surely qualified as a miracle this close to the World of Coke and the Georgia Aquarium. The buildings on either side of the street were short for this part of town, two or three or four stories instead of ten or twenty. They were a mix of the old, the older, and the new; brick and cinderblock and wood butted up against concrete and steel. Alex and Martha walked past an impossibly overstuffed bookshop called Alexandria; an austere art

gallery named Marinetti's Future; a dim, candlelit cafe called the Oracle; and then Martha said, "Here it is."

She had brought them to a storefront with a sign over the sidewalk that said SIMON MAGVS in imposing Latinate letters. Behind the plate-glass window a low altar had been set up, draped in black satin and arrayed with candles, crystals, a metal goblet, and a dagger. Alex looked at the dagger, steeled himself, and followed Martha inside.

They walked into a thick aroma of incense, musky and spicy, quite different from the intensely floral smell he remembered from the house of a college friend. Hardwood flooring creaked beneath their feet. The shop was a bewildering assortment of figurines, candles, posters, tapestries, books; buddhas and dragons, cloaks and scarves, silver and jade. World music played softly, something with wooden flutes and an abundance of drums. A few people were browsing the goods with what appeared to be great interest. Alex felt walled off from all this, as if he was wearing a banner flying from his head with the word SKEPTIC emblazoned on it in foot-tall letters.

Martha walked up to a glass display case featuring cheap-looking rings and earrings and bracelets. Behind the case, a plush, dark-haired woman in a long black dress was talking to a younger woman with curly blond hair. The dark-haired woman had a tracery of curving lines tattooed in black ink on her upper chest, making a sharp contrast against her pale skin. The blond woman was wearing ripped, faded, tight jeans and an even tighter t-shirt with a stylized crescent moon on the front. Alex tried not to stare at the moon as he and Martha approached the counter.

"Well *he-ey*," the woman said, speaking in a rich Southern accent. She came around the counter and gave Martha a warm hug. "It's so good to see you. It's been too long."

"I know," Martha said. "I need to come down here and get you to read my cards for me. Got some man issues I need to work out."

The black-haired woman's eye flicked at Alex, and he resisted the urge to wave her off: *Not me, I swear.*

Martha said, "This is Alex, my friend I told you about on the phone. Alex, this is Eva."

Alex and Eva shook hands. He briefly took her measure: friendly, smart-looking, self-possessed. Pretty, too, if curvy, tattooed witches were your type.

Eva said, "Why don't you come on in the back, Alex. Sky, you got this?"

The blond woman nodded with the slow, calm gravity of the stoned. Alex followed Eva to the back of the shop and down a hallway into a small, lamplit room furnished with a low wooden cabinet, a round table with a black cloth draped over it, and two chairs. Posters adorned the walls: dolphins over here, fairies over there, and on a third wall was an illustration of something called the "Chakra System," which seemed to involve a series of colorful insignias arranged along the length of the human spinal column. Well, gosh, Alex thought he would have noticed those running up and down his torso last time he took his shirt off. But wait: maybe they existed in *another dimension*. That would explain why you couldn't see them! He was glad he was doing this. It was the closest thing to fun he could experience right now.

Eva closed the door behind them. She sat at the table and said, "Why are you smiling?"

Alex said, "Was I smiling?" He sat down and tried to compose his face.

Eva looked as if she knew perfectly well why Alex was smiling, but she said no more about it. She put her hands on the table, palms up. "I'd like to start things off with some silent communication. We'll hold hands and close our eyes and just be together for a little while."

How nice. We're going to hold hands and just be together. After that, a stirring rendition of "Kumbaya." Alex said, "Uh . . . do we have to?"

"It's helpful," Eva said. She proffered her hands. Alex reluctantly put his hands in hers. She closed her eyes. He looked at her closed lids for a second. Eye shadow. Then he closed his eyes.

Well, at least her hands felt nice: soft and full and gentle. He waited for something remarkable to happen. He waited, and he waited some more. He was still waiting when she squeezed his hands and let go. He opened his eyes.

Eva said, "I saw a clear night sky; no moon, but filled with stars. Is that where you've come from, or where you're going?"

"Uh . . ." Where I'm going? What could that possibly mean? I'm not an astronaut, for god's sake.

Then a memory occurred to him, or a whole set of them, actually, from the four-year period when he'd lived with Alexander and his new wife and their kid, April. Alex had been forced to move in with them at age fourteen when his mom started traveling overseas on her long marine biology research trips. He found that he liked his new stepmom well enough, but the boorish Alexander was intolerable, and at first Alex couldn't stand April either, this little half-sister he had never known and never wanted to know, following him around like a puppy dog, trying to get him to play with her. Yet after a while Alex discovered common cause with April in their efforts to avoid Alexander during his manic phases. Sometimes Alexander's natural ebullience took on a belligerent edge that drove everyone away. His wife, Beth, would go to a friend's house, and April and Alex would retreat to their bedrooms, where they could still hear Alexander's voice echoing down the hallway as he shouted into the phone or yelled at the TV. Eventually they hit upon the idea of slipping out of the house through their bedroom windows during these episodes. There was virtually no risk involved; Alexander would never notice they were gone. After a while, they didn't even need to talk about it. When Alexander was "like that," one of them would catch the other's eye and incline a head toward the nearest window.

They would make their escape and then spend hours walking around the nighttime neighborhood. They'd talk about people at school, or they'd spy on their neighbors, or they'd go down to the creek to throw rocks into the drainpipe and listen to the water in the darkness. And sometimes, when the opportunity arose, they had a little game they liked to play. First they'd find a house where all the lights were off and everyone seemed to be either gone or asleep. Then they'd sneak into the backyard, lie down on the grass, and look up at the stars sprinkled across the night sky, and they'd whisper back and forth about how the yard and the house and the garage might belong to someone else, but the night itself, with all its shadows and its pinpricks of light, belonged to Alex and April. It was an odd sensation, lying in a stranger's yard at night without permission and looking up at the stars; a feeling both criminal and holy, as if they'd broken into a church to steal a glimpse of an angel.

Eva was looking at him with clear green eyes.

"Sorry," Alex said with a shrug. "I got nothing."

Eva shrugged too. She tucked her wavy black hair behind her ears. "Okay. So. Why don't you tell me why you're here?"

Alex sighed and asked himself if he was really going to go through with this. All he wanted was a distraction, a diversion, a delay. He didn't want yet another woman asking him to bare his soul yet another time. But if he didn't go through with it, what would he do? Go home? And what then? What if something happened again after he went to bed tonight?

Okay, he thought. I'll go through with it. Maybe whatever she sells me will be the placebo that cures me.

Alex told Eva his tale: the sounds he'd heard, the sights he'd seen. It was a little easier now that he'd told Martha. Eva asked him about his family and his relationship with April, and he filled her in there too, mostly. After Alex was done talking, Eva sat and thought, her head tilted downward as she stared at the candle flame. Alex stared at the candle too. He felt hollowed out, a husk with no grain inside.

Eva looked at him. “Do you believe in ghosts?”

Alex blinked at her directness. “No. I do believe in UFOs, though. Not too sure about Sasquatch.”

Eva smiled wryly. “I’m not talking about aliens or Bigfoot. I’m talking about the soul of a dead person, returned to haunt the living. You don’t believe in that.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Well, I . . .” He was going to say, *I haven’t seen any evidence that it’s true*, but he knew how strange that would sound under the circumstances. What did he really believe? “I think I might be going crazy.” The words came out of their own accord. He heard the way his voice broke on the word *crazy*, and he loathed himself for being weak.

Eva reached across the table and took his hand. The inked lines on her chest twisted into new shapes as she leaned toward him. “Alex, listen to me. You’re not going crazy.”

“I have a *family history*.” His voice cracked again.

“Yes, but you have to remember one thing: history is not destiny.”

History is not destiny, he repeated to himself. History is not destiny. He said, “Isn’t it?”

“It isn’t. That’s the good news. But the bad news—and I’m afraid it’s very bad news—is that this sounds like a genuine haunting. The real thing.” Her hand gripped his a little more tightly. “And that would mean your sister must be gone. I’m very sorry, Alex.”

April gone. Dead. Could it be? Certainly it could be. She could have been dead for months now. She also could have been sipping margaritas in the Caribbean this whole time. Alex said, “Look, even if she *is* dead, why would April want to haunt me? We’ve never had any problems between us. I mean, nothing major. Just, you know, sibling stuff.”

Eva let go of his hand. “She’s not trying to punish you or hurt you, Alex. She obviously loves you.”

"Well, she's got a heck of a way of showing it." In the back of his mind, a voice said, *You're talking about this as if it was real.*

Eva said, "She's a ghost. She comes from the other world, and the other world scares us. That's normal."

"But why is she *doing* this to me?" That's *if* she's doing it, he added to himself.

Eva said, "She's asking for your help."

"Help with what? If she's dead, she's dead. How can I help her now?" He hated the callousness of his tone—this is April you're talking about! she can't be dead! don't say that!—but he felt bullied into a corner where he had to say and do callous things.

"Well," Eva said, "most of the time, when a person dies, their soul automatically moves right along to wherever it's supposed to go. But—"

"Which is where?" Alex said.

Eva smiled. "Well, what do *you* believe?"

"I'm an atheist."

"Ah. So in your worldview, a haunting isn't even possible."

"Right. There's no soul, no afterlife, no ghosts."

"Okay. That's one theory. If you do believe in a soul, other theories tell what happens to it after death. The Hindus and Buddhists say reincarnation, the Christians say heaven or hell, and so on. But no matter where you think souls ultimately go, there's always a transition involved between this world and the next; and sometimes a soul will get stuck during that transition. When that happens, the soul wanders in a netherworld, popping in and out of our plane of existence. It's not fully here, but it's not fully gone, either."

"What makes a soul get stuck?" Alex asked this question with the same attitude he would have used when asking a child what makes their doll magic. He didn't believe dolls could be magic or souls could get stuck. He just wanted to get a coherent account out of Eva so he could know what she thought about it all.

"Well," she said, "the standard answer in this line of work is 'unfinished business': settling an old grudge, righting an old

wrong, something like that. Souls usually get stuck because they don't want to leave. But a soul is just a person without a body, and people have all kinds of reasons for doing the things they do. What do you think April's reason might be?"

"I honestly don't know. I mean, we haven't talked in a while, obviously. And before she disappeared . . ." An upwelling of guilt made it harder to say what came next. "We weren't that close. Not since I moved out."

Eva chewed at her lip and nodded. "Well, I'm not a medium, but we could call one in to help. Probe a little deeper. Talk directly to April and find out what she wants."

"Deeper? No, look, I don't want to go *deeper* into anything. I just want this—disturbance, whatever it is, to stop. I want it to go away. Okay? Can you help me with that?"

"I can," Eva said, nodding. "I can do that." Alex thought he saw disappointment in the purse of her lips, the hunch of her shoulders. Well, too bad. The next time she got haunted, she could handle it however she wanted to. But this was his haunting (*if* ghosts were real and *if* April was dead and *if* she was haunting him), and he was going to handle it his way.

Eva laced her hands on the table. "So. What I'll do is, I'll create a charm of warding against haunting. The charm will be contained inside a little cloth packet, tied off with a piece of twine and sealed with wax. Once I activate that charm, no ghost—meaning no disembodied spirit of a deceased human being—will be able to manifest in its presence. Now, do keep in mind that other noncorporeal entities may still be able to pester you. Keeping them off requires a different charm. You follow me?"

Alex didn't like the sound of this. "Other . . . noncorporeal entities? Like what?"

"Poltergeists, for one." She shrugged and looked at her hands on the table. "There are others." She seemed to be glossing over something for his benefit. He wanted to press her on it, but he reminded himself that none of this was real anyway. He was here to get his placebo and go.

Eva said, "There's one more decision you have to make. I can create this charm in two strengths: regular and heavy duty. Which do you want?"

"Heavy duty, of course. But what's the catch? Does it cost more?"

"It does, but not just in money. To make the regular charm, I need your saliva. To make the heavy-duty one, I need your blood."

Alex didn't like the sound of that either. "How much blood?"

"Not much. We use an over-the-counter home cholesterol test. I've got them right here." She indicated the cabinet. "It's got a little fingersticker in it. Sterile and everything. We've got alcohol and gauze too. You do it yourself: clean your fingertip, give yourself a prick, squeeze a little bit into a bowl, I give you a Band-Aid, and you're on your way."

"What do you do with the blood?"

"I'll stir it into the other charm ingredients during the ritual."

He should have known this little farce wouldn't be complete without some sort of cheesy ritual. His attitude must have shown on his face, because Eva said, "Look, Alex, I know you don't believe in any of this stuff. That's okay. You don't have to believe in magic for it to work."

"I don't?"

"No. Magic is like a . . . it's like a lamp. You don't have to believe in electricity for a lamp to work. You just flip the switch. That's what I'm going to do. I'm going to make the charm, flip the switch, and give it to you. If you still want it."

Get with the program, Alex. No one's asking you to put on a robe and be an altar boy. You don't have to convert to anything or believe in anything. You're only donating a little blood. Leave the mumbo-jumbo to the expert.

"Okay," Alex said. "Let's do it."

Alex cleaned his fingertip with the alcohol. The sharp smell and cold feeling brought back every shot he'd gotten in a doctor's office. The witch doctor is in. Ooga-booga. He allowed himself a

small, discreet grin as he picked up the fingersticker and pricked his fingertip. It hurt more than he thought it would. He watched the dark red blood slowly drip from his finger into the little blue bowl Eva set before him, and he thought, This is not normal. I am doing something that is definitely not normal.

Soon she said, “That should do it,” and slid a Band-Aid toward him across the table. “I’ll get to work on the charm. It should take about an hour, so why don’t you go get dinner or something? When you come back, the charm will be ready.” She got up and started rummaging around in the cabinet. Alex worked the wrapper off the Band-Aid and awkwardly wound it around his stuck fingertip before he stood and walked out.

He was halfway down the hallway when Eva called to him, “Oh, hey, could you shut the door for me?”

Alex came back to the doorway. Eva was lighting a candle in a wall sconce he hadn’t noticed before. He now saw that there were four sconces with candles in them, one on each wall of the room. Eva’s face had taken on a somber, inward focus. She stared at the candle flame and muttered something beneath her breath.

He shut the door. When he turned to go, the nape of his neck prickled.