

CHAPTER 1

The medicine cabinet mirror—dotted with rust and turning gray—made the powder foundation on Jackie’s face look ashen and her jet-black hair, blurry. She looked like a shadow of a girl. She smeared black lipstick on her lips and shook out her shoulder-length hair. Her straight-cut bangs veiled her mascara-lined eyes, and the layered ends of her hair stuck out in defiant wisps.

Some of the kids at school—the ones she didn’t hang out with—called her Goth Girl. Some, whose memories wouldn’t die, called her VQ for Virgin Queen.

Jackie preferred Goth Girl, to be one of the living dead, to be numb to the emotions that plagued her. But this was what she *wanted*, not what she got.

Goth Girl or Virgin Queen, she was a freak, absorbing the emotions around her like a sponge. Sometimes the emotions made her sick. Sometimes they made her see things.

Because of this, she kept to a tight-knit group of friends—Jason, Zeta, and Trish—and avoided social activities. She attended Ravenwood High only because Mom wouldn’t let her homeschool. Mom was afraid she’d hang with Babu all day, making piroshki and doing needlepoint instead of studying. Jackie, afraid of what life offered a freak like her beyond high school, had to admit that hanging with Babu all day was tempting.

Typically, Fridays were movie nights for her best friend, Jason, and her, but tonight would be different. Tonight, she’d subject herself to a hodgepodge of emotions from crowds and rides and the very ground she’d walk on to protect him. For this, she would need physical and spiritual strength, which she sought these days from Babu.

Babu’s door was cracked, and Jackie slowly pushed the door open. “Babu?” She had quit calling her great-grandmother “Prababulya” years ago, and instead shortened her name to Babu.

The room smelled of beeswax and down. A candle burned on the shrine on the dresser. The flickering flame animated the icon of the Virgin of Vladimir and cast shadows across the picture of Babu, Grandma, Mom, and Jackie. Although Babu didn’t

she didn't speak English, and Jackie didn't understand much Russian, Jackie knew Babu kept that picture on her shrine to pray for Grandma, who passed away several years ago; for Mom, who divorced Dad; and for the girl who saw the Virgin when she was twelve—for the girl she had become as a teen.

Babu sat in bed, a country quilt spread over her legs, her thumb pressed against a knot of her prayer rope, her head bowed sleepily, and her lips wording prayers.

"I wanted to say good-bye," Jackie whispered.

Babu crossed herself and then smiled at Jackie, her gold eyetooth shining from the light of the bed-stand lamp. She patted the empty space beside her. "*Sadis.*"

Jackie sat down beside Babu at the edge of the bed and took Babu's hand in hers. Babu's hand was warm and knotted with arthritis. Jackie rubbed her thumb over the bumps on Babu's knuckles. Her black fingernails were a sharp contrast to Babu's pale skin.

She wasn't afraid to touch Babu's hands and absorb her emotions. Jackie got a good feeling from her. Babu filled Jackie's inner vision with white light. She renewed her spirit. And this is what Jackie needed for the commitment she had made for tonight.

"*Kuda idosh'?*" Babu asked.

"I'm going out, with Jason," Jackie said as if Babu understood her. This is how they communicated—Babu telling her stuff she couldn't understand and Jackie telling Babu stuff she couldn't understand. Somehow they carried on fine this way.

"*Vsevo kharoshevo,*" Babu said in a comforting tone. She cupped her hands around Jackie's face and pulled her forehead to her lips. Jackie imagined Babu's kiss imprinted on her forehead and carrying Babu's blessings and love with her tonight.

In the front room, Mom was watching an old horror movie on TV and eating tortilla chips and guacamole.

Jackie unhooked her black trench coat from the coat rack.

"Jesus, Jackie," Mom said, her mouth full. "Do you have to go out like that?"

Jackie stopped, one arm in a coat sleeve, and gave Mom a look like she had to be kidding.

"My friend at work keeps asking if you're in a cult or something," Mom said.

"My friends keep asking if you're crazy or something. I mean, who rollerblades

anymore?"

"I'm just worried about you."

Jackie could say anything to Mom. It was one of Mom's good qualities.

"You're not on drugs, are you?" Mom asked.

"Would I be pulling a 4.0 GPA if I were?"

"Maybe on coke."

Jackie rolled her eyes as she buttoned her coat. "If I were doing coke, I'd be rollerblading against traffic, like you."

"I'm not on coke."

"How do I know?"

"Sorry, I never know what's going on with you. You're always so... to yourself. Hey, where're you going anyway? It's the weekend. Shouldn't you be in your room socializing via text?"

Jackie shrugged. "I'm going to the Oktoberfest."

Mom's brow creased. "That's *this* weekend?"

"Yeah. Where've *you* been?"

Mom's eyes narrowed like she was thinking seriously about something.

What was up with her? "You okay?"

"Yeah," she said, her voice higher pitched, retreating. "I'm fine."

Jackie fished her keys out of her satchel and then hung her camera around her neck. The camera was a secret she had discovered in Photography 101 last year. Looking through its lens was the only way she could truly look at people without feeling what they felt. She was counting on it and the light she absorbed from Babu to get her through the night without passing out.

"Be careful," Mom said, which sounded odd coming from a person who rollerbladed like a runaway shopping cart.

Jackie stepped outside and into the cool, damp air. The evening sky had turned light gray.

Her Oldsmobile was parked in front of the house. It used to be Grandma's, which was hard to keep secret because of how old the car was and the *Pray the chotki every day* bumper sticker. Jackie had been trying to remove it, but it was one of those papery

stickers that just didn't want to come loose. She had managed to scrape off most of the letters. The only ones visible were the *the*, the *o* from *chotki*, and *ry* from *every*. So now, it read "theory," underlined with a string of prayer-rope beads.

She drove slowly down the block as she headed toward Main Street. Soggy leaves carpeted the sidewalks and curbs, and the small-town Victorian homes were decorated for Halloween—Indian corn bound to lampposts, plastic tombstones studding yards, and paper witch heads and scary Halloween cats taped to windows. All but Dad's house—her old house. His front lawn was packed with autumn leaves, and a rain-beaten newspaper was caught in the prickly branches of the rosebush by the front porch steps.

That rosebush had been in bloom when people from nearby churches gathered on the front lawn, holding candles, singing, praying, begging for Jackie to come outside to pray for them, touch them.

She pressed on the gas pedal. The circus was over, and she swore it would never come to town again. Still, her stomach churned and squealed as she followed Main Street out to Route 6, toward Jason's house. She didn't know why she even looked at her old house. The memories were too painful. Maybe she worried about Dad. She hadn't talked to him since her birthday last March, and even then, they didn't say much. Crazy, isn't it? But she really didn't think he wanted to talk to her. She was his past, something he needed to get over and forget.

Jason's driveway was two tire tracks with grass in-between. She parked behind his shitty truck and honked the horn.

Doh! She forgot it pissed off his dad. She really shouldn't have to do anything but keep this clunky motor running. The car had what Jason called a rough idle—coughing and wheezing like Babu with bronchitis.

Jason came down the front porch steps, angled bangs curtaining half his face, a black, leather jacket zipped to his chin, black jeans, and combat boots. He had a special way of climbing up and down steps, always forward on the same foot. It was kind of like he was unsure of himself, like maybe he fell once on a flight of stairs.

The passenger door squeaked when he opened it. He slid onto the front seat. "You forgot."

She glanced at him. "Sorry." She never looked Jason directly in the eyes, at least

not for longer than a second or two. He carried a lot of baggage, and she preferred not to share his load.

“You should have heard what my dad said he wanted to do with that horn.”

She winced.

Driving to the Oktoberfest, Jackie focused on the road. Sometimes she looked at Jason but focused only on his mouth or his jacket. When he was around her, his aura turned from black to reddish purple, almost like his spirit had been bruised. She interpreted it as a mixture of pain and love—the love he felt for her pouring over his pain like salve. Yes. She sensed Jason was in love with her. But this relationship worked out well for the both of them, she supposed. Jason liked to suffer. It made him feel alive. Though, she knew he’d never admit it. And she was comfortable being around him, not just because he allowed her space, but because he accepted her as she was. He made the guilt she carried more bearable.

Jason fidgeted with his wallet chain. “Dad didn’t give me my allowance yet. All I got’s a fiver... I’ll pay you back.”

“Hmm. So is this why you wanted me to come to the fest? ’Cause I’m the only one with funds?”

“That’s not true. It’s just that—”

“Jason, I know, and I know you’ll pay me back. You always do.” She shook her head. “But I tell you, I gotta take care of you like my own child.”

He pounded her thigh with his fist. “I’m not a child. I’m seventeen and just two months younger than you.”

“I’m teasing. And I completely understand why you’re afraid to be alone with Trish. Once she gets it in her head she wants something, she doesn’t let up.”

She pictured herself being squeezed between Trish and Jason.

“Just be easy on me. This body needs space.” She wasn’t so much worried about Trish and Jason as she was the thousands of other people and emotions that would be packed around her.

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At the Ravenwood Oktoberfest, music came at Jackie from all directions—hip-hop from the roller coaster, rock from the Tilt-a-Whirl, pop from the Himalaya. Red,

blue, and yellow bulbs blinked in rhythmic patterns; rides spun and jetted outward; and voices screamed and boomed over loudspeakers. The contrasting movements and sounds clashed in midair. She wanted to close her eyes and press her palms to her ears.

Relax, Jackie.

But she couldn't.

As they walked down the main path of the carnival, surrounded by a drove of people, emotions swirled around her and she couldn't distinguish one from the other. It was one huge cauldron of sensations churning inside her.

The camera strap tugged at her neck, and the camera bounced against her stomach. She wanted to hold the lens to her eye and shield herself, but she figured she'd trip.

Jason reached for her, like he wanted to put his arm around her shoulder. But then he hesitated. "You okay?" he asked.

She nodded and sucked in a deep breath.

Zeta waved at her from behind a group of boys in baggy pants and hoodies. "VQ," she called. Zeta was the only person who could call Jackie *VQ* without making Jackie cringe. Trish was with her. The two of them looked like total freaks: Zeta in black tights, pointy-toed boots, and a red-and-black striped sweater, a fuzzy scarf tied around her neck; Trish in a black tutu over her jeans, a short, black leather jacket, and multiple ponytails sticking out all over her head.

Nearing the two, Jackie stumbled and grabbed Zeta's arm for support. Stung by raw emotion, Jackie pulled her hand away like she'd touched a hot burner. Zeta was pure electric, switching on and off sporadically and so fast that she was neither happy nor sad, but energetically sassy. Trish was usually cool to the touch, her predominant mood: melancholy. Her mind was like a snowy TV station, the images faint and ghostly.

People stared at the four of them. Though, usually, not many people ever recognized Jackie with her makeup and black hair—not many people outside of school, that is. She no longer had to worry about them tugging on her or touching her. She only had to worry about what she touched and where she stood.

Every time Trish started to walk in front of Jackie to get close to Jason, Jackie stepped up her pace and casually blocked her. When Trish bumped into her, Jackie was

stung by Trish's anger and unquenched desire.

"Let's go on the Ferris wheel," Zeta said. "Maybe we'll get stuck on top."

"Not me," Jackie said. "I'll probably barf. I'm just getting used to being here."

"I'm hungry," Jason said.

"Chow sounds good." Trish caught Jackie off guard. She crossed in front of Jackie and squeezed next to Jason.

Jason's eyes widened in terror. He moved behind Jackie and to the other side so that Jackie was in the middle again.

Before anyone could make another move, a woman, with red hair wrapped loosely in a cornflower blue scarf, stepped in front of them and locked her boney hands around Jackie's.

"What the..." Jackie tried to slip her hands free, but the woman tightened her grip.

The woman was tiny, yet overpowering. Her face was narrow and fox-like. "I know who you are," she whispered.

Jackie knew who the stranger was too, and she couldn't pull away. It was like a magnetic force had bound their hands together.

The woman's beady eyes looked straight into Jackie's. "Interesting."

What was weird was, Jackie couldn't read her, but she knew the woman was reading her.

Zeta shoved the woman's shoulder. "Leave her alone, you psycho."

The woman's eyes darted toward Zeta, allowing Jackie to yank her hands free.

Jason and Trish gathered on each side of Zeta. The three of them glared at the intruder like guard dogs.

The woman smiled, as if satisfied that she had gotten what she wanted. She walked away and sat down at a table in front of a tent with a sign that read, "Psychic Reading \$20."

"Just great," Trish said. "That's Madam Sophie. We're all cursed now."

"What do you think is brewing in her psycho brain?" Zeta asked.

"Maybe she just wanted to read your fortune," Jason said calmly.

"Against Jackie's will?" Trish rubbed her hands front and back against her tutu as

if Madam Sophie had locked hands with her.

Dizzied, Jackie dropped down onto a picnic table bench in the food tent. “I don’t feel good. I need a sugar fix.” The thick smell of fried onions and grease gave her something solid to breathe in.

“Jackie?” Jason asked.

She handed him her satchel. “Just take it.”

A sheepish look covered his face. “I’ll pay you back.”

“I know, Jas.”

“I have money,” Trish said.

“I’m good.” Jason set Jackie’s satchel on the picnic table and dug into it.

Trish pursed her lips and turned abruptly. As she marched to the food stands with Zeta, her multiple ponytails wiggled like the snakes of Medusa.

Zeta brought Jackie a sugary elephant ear with a half-inch topping of powdered sugar, just how Jackie liked it.

“Maybe she was testing the competition.” Zeta sat across from Jackie, a green basket containing a fat gyro and a wad of napkins in front of her. “Who?” Jackie asked.

“Madam Sophie.”

“I’m not psychic, well, not like her.”

“Yes, you are,” Jason said. “You predicted—”

“Trust me,” she said, intentionally cutting him off. “I’m just really sensitive to everyone’s emotions. All I do is piece together the impressions I pick up... kind of like working a jigsaw puzzle. The images tell me things about a person’s past and about the present.”

“Uh, because you’re psychic?” Zeta bit into her gyro. Cucumber sauce rolled down the side of her mouth. She grabbed the wad of napkins and dabbed her face.

Trish’s lips turned upward into a devilish smile. “Will and Sandra are here,” she sang.

Zeta reached across the table for Jackie’s hand, but Jackie recoiled. “You going to be okay?”

“Yeah,” she said, but already, her insides were burning. Not that she still had feelings for Will, it was just that he and Sandra were the perfect pair in their varsity

jackets—Will, the class president, and Sandra, the head cheerleader. Gag!

Sandra had one tiny taco in a paper wrap. Will had a plate full of chicken and vegetables. Jackie feared her black lips were powdered white from devouring the elephant ear. She self-consciously patted her mouth with a napkin.

“Well, if it isn’t VQ and her circus crew.” Sandra slapped her thigh. “O-M-G, that rhymes.”

Will tugged Sandra’s arm. “Come on.”

Somehow, Jackie always freaked Will out. She thought it was because he was afraid she was going to throw a curse on him for dumping her.

“VQ, I’m surprised you’re not working your own booth,” Sandra said. “Give Madam Sophie a little competition.”

“Maybe you should set up a booth yourself,” Zeta said. “I hear you’re a pro.”

Will angrily looked at Sandra, as if she’d been keeping her promiscuity a secret from him.

“A-building, boys’ room, second stall,” Zeta said.

Sandra appeared all huffy and glowered at Jackie like she was the one reading all her dirty secrets. “Weirdo,” she called her. “Come on, Will, we don’t need to watch this freak show.”

As they walked away, Will questioned Sandra.

“It’s written in black marker,” Zeta yelled. “You’ll never get it off—but then, maybe you will.”

Jackie leaned forward and eyed Zeta. “Did you make that up?”

“Make what up?”

“You know.”

“Hell, no. Last basketball game I sneaked under the bleachers to smoke a cigarette, and I caught her with Sean Perry. Then, I added a little advertisement in the boys’ bathroom in A-building—no charge, of course.”

“No shit,” Jason whispered. He looked really interested.

“Looking to take a number?” Jackie teased.

Jason blushed.

Trish glared at Jackie and then switched to sulk mode.

After they ate, they dumped their garbage in a blue barrel and walked the grounds. Together, they were one. A freak show maybe, but this show drove everyone away from them—well almost everyone.

Carnival lights swirled around Jackie, dizzying her as emotions rose through her feet. She stopped and pressed her eye to the camera lens. The lens washed the emotions away, stilled and silenced the mayhem. She could see everything like a normal person. Maybe if she had camera lens contacts she could be normal.

She shot pictures of the Viking boat, the merry-go-round, and even Madam Sophie. She was still shaken over their encounter. She was certain Madam Sophie hated her. She couldn't blame her, though, not after what had happened. And she wouldn't be surprised if Madam Sophie knew the truth.

For Jason's sake, Jackie went on the Ferris wheel, the Himalaya, and the Tilt-a-Whirl, absorbing the emotions from the people who previously sat in the rides, which made her sicker than the spinning and twirling. She was physically and emotionally sapped and wanted to wrap her arm around Jason and lean on him, but she couldn't. She was all alone with this disease.

As they walked down the main path of the carnival, heading to the parking lot, the lights dimmed and the rides slowed. Motors hummed and drained of power. The four of them stopped walking, and everyone around them stopped in the middle of what they were doing.

The carnival fell silent.

After a few seconds, the power resurged. Transformers buzzed, the lights illuminated and blinked in rhythmic patterns, and music boomed. Carnies restarted rides, and people went about what they had been doing—the carnival once again filled with sound and movement.

“Would you look at that?” Zeta pointed to the sky.

But it was the ground and the minute vibrations surging through the soles of her boots and up her legs that Jackie was focused on. Her shins ached and tickled—the same feeling as hitting a funny bone—and they were too weak to support her. She dropped to the damp ground, onto the mud-dried hay.

“Jackie, you okay?” Zeta knelt beside her.

Jackie rubbed her shins. "Did you feel that?" The nerve endings throughout her body tingled, and blue washed over her eyes and faded to black.