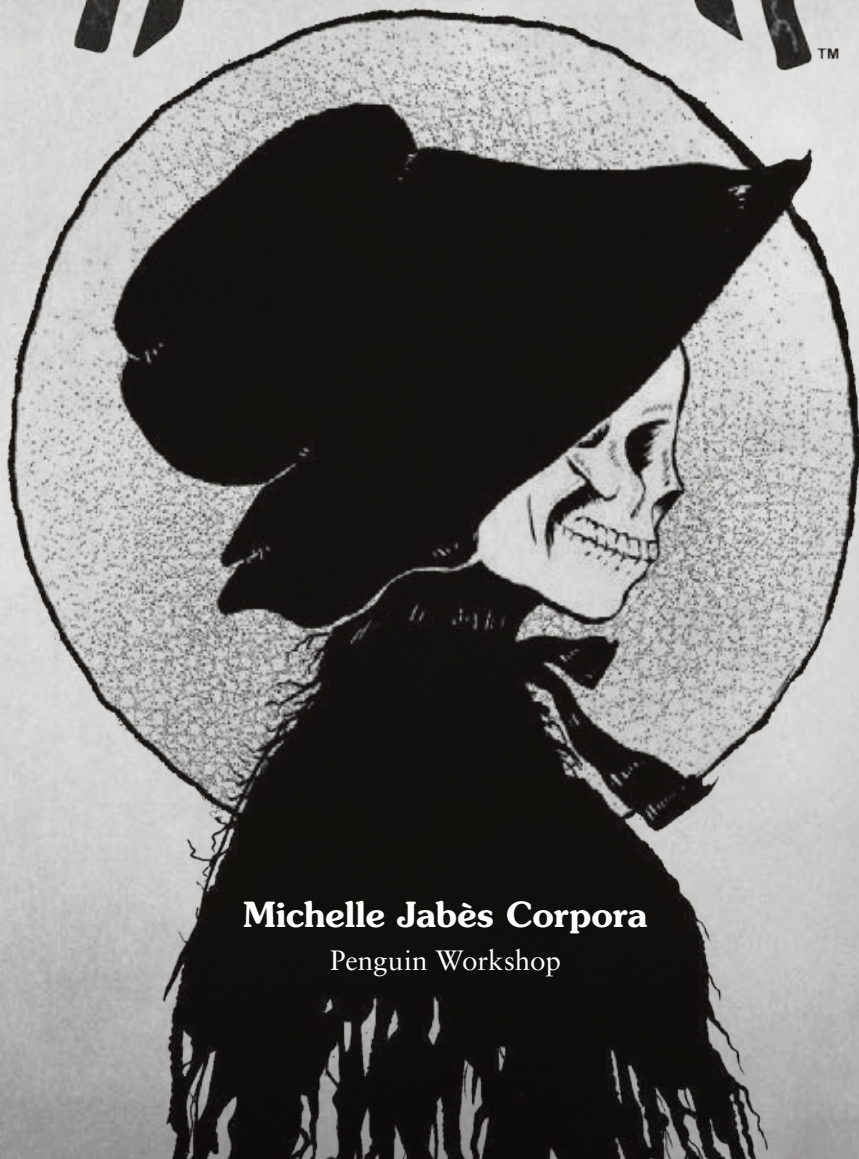


Holly HORROR™



Michelle Jabès Corpora

Penguin Workshop



PENGUIN WORKSHOP

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To my mother.
Who always came when I called,
Even in the darkest hour,
To chase the nightmares away.



*e boundaries which divide Life from Death are
at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where
the one ends, and where the other begins?*

—Edgar Allan Poe



The little silver car darted down the country roads like a minnow, cresting the hills and dipping low into the valleys, carrying three new souls into western Massachusetts. Evie Archer sat in the passenger seat, watching the first few rust- and honey-colored leaves begin to fall. Beyond, the sun was low on the horizon, setting the mountaintops ablaze with golden light. Evie knew she should have appreciated the sight of a sky unbroken by apartment buildings and skyscrapers, but all it did was make her feel small.

She fingered the cream-colored lace of her favorite shirt—an old maroon cotton tee that she'd found thrifting and upcycled into something more fashionable. She'd cut off the sleeves and snipped the bottom into a wavy asymmetrical line, then sewed about a foot of vintage lace to the bottom to create a dramatic hem. A bit more lace around the neckline completed the look. She'd laid it out on her bed with a pair of comfortable jeans last night as her traveling outfit.

“So listen,” her mother, Lynne, was saying as she took another tight turn. “You guys know that Hobbie House needs a lot of work, and I can’t afford to have the whole place professionally cleaned right now, so we should start by fixing up the rooms we’ll need right away.”

“Sure, Mom,” Evie said, wondering what her friends back home in New York were doing right now. Were they thinking about her? She checked her phone for messages, but there were none. She reasoned that it was still a school day; they were probably just busy. She put the phone facedown on her lap and tried not to think about it.

In the back seat, huddled among the duffel bags and suitcases, her younger brother, Stan, said nothing. Evie glanced back to see him hidden deep inside his black hoodie, playing some stupid game on his phone.

“Stan, honey, are you listening?” Mom said.

Stan grunted, just loud enough to be audible by human ears.

“Anyway,” her mother continued as they approached another hairpin curve, “we’ll tackle the bedrooms first, then the kitchen—oh, probably a bathroom we can all share, and—”

There was something in the road. Some lumbering, dark thing. Mom didn’t see it because she was too busy talking about the house, but Evie saw it.

“Mom! Watch out!” Evie shouted.

“What?” her mother gasped, wrenching the steering wheel and slamming on the brakes. The little silver car swerved wildly, skidding to the side of the road. Evie shrieked as a rock was thrown up and hit the windshield like a bullet. The car came to a stop, and for a moment there was no sound inside except ragged breaths.

“What’s wrong?” Mom exclaimed.

Evie turned to look behind them, certain she would see a small, bloodied corpse.

But there was nothing.

“I saw an animal in the road,” Evie said, suddenly uncertain. “Like a small dog, or a cat or something. I thought we were going to hit it.”

Mom eyed the tiny crack in the windshield where the rock had hit and sighed heavily. Evie noticed that despite the hours of packing, loading, traffic, and nearly crashing the car just now, her mother’s wavy, caramel-colored hair still looked perfect. “Evie, I was *watching* the road. I didn’t see any animal. You’re lucky we didn’t hit a tree or something. That wouldn’t be a great way to start our new life here, now, would it?” She put the car back into gear and started driving again without another word.

“Sorry,” Evie said after a moment. She ran her fingers through her hair. It was a little greasy.

“It’s fine,” Mom replied, in a tone that clearly said it wasn’t. “Look! We’re almost there.” She pointed to a green road sign that read Ravengl ass, 2 mil es. “Are you excited?”

Evie nodded, pasting on a smile. In the back seat, Stan hadn’t moved. *Incredible . . .* she thought.

“Sometimes your eyes can play tricks on you, you know,” Mom said, her voice softer now. “Sometimes we think we see things that aren’t really there. Like a mirage in the desert.”

“I guess so,” Evie said, not wanting an argument.

But I did see it, she thought. She had seen it walk, seen its fur, seen its flashing eyes as it looked up at the car speeding toward it.

Didn't I?

Her mouth was dry, so she grabbed the Big Gulp of Coke that they'd picked up at a gas station and took a long drink. Something was stuck to the sweaty bottom of the plastic cup. Evie peeled it off and peered at it. A small yellow sticky note with four words written in pen: keys, cell phone, wallet. It was her father's handwriting. It must have been inside the cup holder when she'd set the Big Gulp down. He was always forgetting things—his lunch, his wallet, his children's birthdays—so he'd often write them down to remind himself. Artists were forgetful like that, he'd always said. Like that made up for everything.

Evie stared at the note for a moment before crumpling it up in her hand, opening the window, and throwing it out.

As they crested the next hill, an old wooden sign with gold letters came into view.

Wel come t o Ravengl ass, Massac huset ts

Est. 1856

The local road they were on dropped them right at the center of Main Street, in the middle of a town that looked like the cover of an old *Saturday Evening Post* come to life—pure Americana, stars and stripes, and apple pie. A neat line of colonial-style buildings—cream and pale yellow with shutters painted in red and green—nestled under the far-reaching boughs of black oak trees, resplendent in their autumn colors. There were a few little shops and cafés, a redbrick church with a real bell in its belfry, an inn, a fancy restaurant, and a little place right at the edge of town called Birdie's Diner.

Evie sniffed the air, which smelled like a combination of fried chicken and something spicy. Her stomach growled. They hadn't eaten since leaving the city. "I'm hungry," she said.

"Have a granola bar," her mother said. "We'll pick something up after we get everything inside and settle in. Isn't the town lovely? It's just so . . ."

Evie went ahead and supplied the correct word. "Quaint."

She pulled a couple of bars from their snack bag and tossed one into the back seat, feeling a little bit satisfied when it bounced off Stan's head. It must have momentarily roused him from his phone coma, because a moment later, she could hear him munching.

"We're going to live *here*?" Stan asked, pressing his face against the window. "In the Land That Time Forgot? If they don't have Wi-Fi, I'm hitching a ride back home. Seriously."

"They have Wi-Fi, Stan," Mom replied smoothly. "And you can't hitchhike back home. This is our home now."

Evie swallowed a lump of granola and chocolate as the full impact of those words hit her. Everything she knew—her entire loud, crowded, messy life back in New York—was gone. Divorce had snuck up on her life last year and swallowed it whole, like a snake, leaving nothing behind but pain and memory.

After the settlement, her mother realized that they had a big problem. Mom's old job at the Hyatt didn't pay anywhere near enough for their three-bedroom apartment, not even with the child support payments, and especially not after all the legal fees. She had about two months' rent left in her savings, and then they were going to be living hand-to-mouth. Things looked grim until the night Evie overheard Mom call her sister, Martha Hobbie, and ask her a question that changed everything.

“Martha, do you think we could move to Hobbie House?”

Hobbie House.

Those words had been spoken in hushed tones throughout Evie’s life, like a curse. The house, a place that had been in her mother’s family for about fifty years, was up in a small town in the Berkshires called Ravenglass. Aunt Martha lived in an apartment in town there—and was the official caretaker for the house. Evie always wondered why her aunt didn’t just live at Hobbie House. After having spent her whole life in cramped apartments, Evie could hardly imagine what it would be like to have all that *space*. Why would anyone choose some tiny apartment over an entire *house*?

Then again, Aunt Martha was a superstitious sort of person, and Hobbie House did have a certain . . . reputation.

Evie shivered, the breeze suddenly chilling her. She closed the window and pulled her dusky pink cardigan close around her shoulders. Regardless of the house’s history, her mother saw it as their salvation. “A fresh start, a big bedroom for each of us, and best of all: *It’s free!*” Mom had announced this to Evie and Stan after hanging up with Aunt Martha. Stan had immediately made it clear how much he hated this idea by going on a hunger strike and slamming doors, but Evie had just nodded and smiled. “That’s great, Mom,” she’d said.

“Isn’t it?” Mom had replied. “Just what we needed. Some good news.”

That night was the first time Evie let herself cry.

But now, surrounded by the stunning beauty and tranquility of Ravenglass, a tiny ray of hope pierced through her inner gloom.

Maybe life will be good here, she allowed herself to think.
Maybe it will be okay.

The GPS on her mother's phone started to act funny once they left the town behind and went in search of Hobbie House. Because it was nearly two hundred years old, the house wasn't on Main Street, and it wasn't part of either of the two planned communities built in Ravenglass over the past sixty years. They followed the GPS down a one-lane street called Knickerbocker Road that dead-ended at an overgrown field, where a single, tumble-down shack stood, its broken windows glinting in the setting sun like jagged teeth.

"Well," Mom said, putting the car in reverse. "It's been forty years since I've been here, but I'm pretty sure that isn't the house."

"God, I hope not," Stan said, peeking through the space between the front seats to stare at the shack.

"We passed a mailbox a little while back," Evie said. "It was kind of hidden by some bushes. Maybe that was it?"

Once Mom turned the car around, she went along the little road slowly, and all three of them peered through the thick trees on both sides, looking for an opening.

"There!" Evie exclaimed, pointing. Sure enough, there was a rusty white mailbox, almost completely engulfed by creeper vines, next to a clearing in the trees and a narrow lane, leading up.

Mom rolled the car to a stop next to the mailbox, and Evie stuck her head out of the window to study it. Along the side, written in cracked black paint, were the letters *HH*. There was something else, too, something scribbled in faded red ink above the two letters. It looked like someone had tried to wash it off, with

little success. Evie squinted. What did it say? After a moment, the words became clear.

Horror House.

“This is it,” she said, her voice dry. “We’re here.”

Her mother pulled the car into the narrow, winding lane and started to climb. A row of elm trees stood like sentinels alongside them, and once or twice Evie could have sworn she saw the flash of a white-tailed deer darting away at the sound of their approach. It wasn’t until they’d reached the top of the hill that the trees cleared and they got their first glimpse of the house.

The house had two faces. One faced them, and the other looked away, as if staring into the distance back toward town. It had been white once, but time had erased all that, leaving most of it gray and rutted. Burgundy shutters framed the windows, which covered both faces and all sides of the octagonal tower that made up the left part of the house. Both sides boasted a wide porch, leading to doors painted blue. The place looked untouched by any living thing, aside from the bittersweet vines that grew everywhere, strangling porch posts and creeping like spiderwebs up as far as the two brickwork chimneys. Next to the house, a large apple tree stood alone, its trunk thick and twisted, its branches heavy with fruit.

“Look at that,” Mom breathed. She glanced over at Evie. “What do you think?”

Evie stared at the house. For some reason, she was reminded of the scene where Pinocchio went deep into the ocean to save his father and was swallowed by the whale. A huge, ancient thing that had lived for centuries past, and would live on centuries more.

“Everything comes in,” said Geppetto. “Nothing goes out.”
“Evie?”

She was being ridiculous. It was just an old house that needed a few coats of paint and some pruning shears. Nothing more.

“It’s amazing,” she finally said. “I wonder what it looks like inside.”

“Probably wall-to-wall rats,” Stan said. “Black mold, *definitely* ghosts—”

“Shut *up*, Stan,” Evie muttered, elbowing him in the chest.

“Ow! Mommm, she’s hurting me!” He poked Evie in the ribs.

“Stan, stop annoying your sister. Oh! Look, there’s Martha.”

Up ahead, in a circular paved area in front of the house, a woman in a deep purple shawl stood watching them pull in. Next to her, a rickety hatchback sat idling, its engine burbling with effort.

Mom parked the car in front of the house and jumped out. “Sis,” she said, opening her arms. “It’s good to see you.”

Evie hadn’t seen her aunt in years, not since the last time she’d come to visit them in New York. She was like a Wonderland version of her mother. Instead of Mom’s neat, wavy bob, Aunt Martha wore her hair long and silver gray. They were both thin, but Aunt Martha was gaunt, whereas Mom was slender. Next to her mother in her tan capris and tasteful turquoise blouse, Aunt Martha looked like a fairy-tale witch in her shawl, long black skirt, and tall leather boots. Mom wore only simple silver hoop earrings, but Aunt Martha looked as if she were wearing every piece of jewelry she owned. Gold bangles jingled on both wrists, rings studded with semiprecious stones adorned every finger, and around

her neck hung a glass blue amulet of the evil eye. Despite the past year of trouble, Mom still looked vibrant, whereas Aunt Martha looked as if she had seen things she would rather not repeat. She had a certain feral wildness about her that was as different from her mother as Evie could imagine.

Aunt Martha smiled and embraced Mom, but Evie noticed that the smile did not reach her eyes. “Have a good trip?” she asked.

“Getting out of the city was a nightmare, obviously—but other than that, smooth sailing,” Mom replied.

Aunt Martha turned her eyes to Evie and Stan, who had gotten out of the car and stood a little distance away. “Hey, kids,” she said. Stan offered an awkward, one-armed hug. Evie, on the other hand, wrapped both her arms around her aunt and squeezed. She smelled like a smoky mixture of sandalwood and clove, and when she pulled away, Aunt Martha looked at her with a mixture of affection and something else that Evie couldn’t decipher. “Well, I’m sure you’re all tired from your journey and have a lot to do,” she said, pulling away. She rummaged in the brown leather purse at her side and handed Mom a set of keys she found there. “Here you go. Those should open both front doors and the shed in the back. If you need anything, you can just—”

Mom blinked down at the keys that Aunt Martha had given her. She laughed. “You—you’re not thinking of *leaving*, are you?”

Aunt Martha stood as rigid as the elm trees that surrounded them. She took one step back toward her rumbling car. “Well, yes. I have some clients coming in this afternoon, and I thought you’d want your space—”

Mom’s nostrils flared. “Oh, I see. You have *clients*.”

“Yes, I do.”

Evie looked away. She knew that her mother's relationship with Aunt Martha was tense, at best, but Evie had hoped that things would be different now that they were moving to Ravenglass.

"I thought you'd at least come inside, catch up—"

Aunt Martha's face turned to stone. "I don't go inside, Lynne."

Mom stared at her. "What do you mean, you don't go inside? You've been the caretaker for this place for years."

"I hire people to keep up the place, just basic stuff. I don't go in there."

"But—why?" Mom sputtered.

"You know why."

Mom laughed, a harsh, humorless laugh. "Are you serious?"

Aunt Martha said nothing.

Mom shook her head. "You are unbelievable. You know that?"

Aunt Martha turned back to her car and stopped with her hand on the door. "I'm sorry, kids," she said to Evie and Stan. "Come and visit me in town after you get settled, okay? My door is always open."

Evie nodded and raised a hand in farewell as the old hatchback struggled back down the narrow lane.

"Unbelievable," Mom muttered, shaking her head with a sigh as she walked back to the car and popped the trunk open.

"Which way is the front?" Stan asked, staring at the two faces.

"I don't think it matters," Mom replied. "Looks like the movers used the north entrance, so we will, too. Here, honey." She tossed the keys to Evie. "Go ahead and open the door. Stan and I will start bringing things in."

Evie nodded and turned to the house. The western face was bright with sunlight, while the north face that she approached

was in deep shadow. The porch groaned under her feet as she tried a couple of keys until one slid into the lock smoothly.

When she opened the door, the house seemed to exhale, as if it had been holding its breath, waiting for them to come.


Evie stepped into the gloom of a large farmhouse kitchen. A heavy wooden table dominated the middle of the room, which was lined with open shelving weighed down with piles of plates and bowls. A large, old-fashioned stove skulked in the corner, and everything in view was covered in a thick layer of dust. Against one wall, and trailing out into the hallway beyond, were neat piles of moving boxes, left behind along with a pink invoice by the moving company. A yellowing plastic telephone sat on the countertop next to her, its coiled cord sagging limply by its side like a sleeping snake.

“Hey!” Evie looked up to see her mother stumbling through the door, carrying two bulging duffel bags. “What are you doing standing around? Come outside and help!”


Nodding, Evie went back out to the car to grab whatever was left in the trunk. After three more trips, they had brought everything into the house. Mom stood in the center of the kitchen, hands on hips, surveying her new home. “Well,” she said crisply. “The place needs a lot of work, but it’s got good bones. Don’t you think?”

“It sure is big enough,” Stan said, pulling off his hoodie to look around. His dark hair was messy and hung over his eyes. “Our entire apartment could fit in this kitchen.” He glanced down the hallway. “Looks like the other door leads into a living room. There’s stairs over here going up.”

Evie had an odd sense that the house had gotten stuck in time—not once, but twice. Remnants of the 1980s—thick yellow phone books, copies of the *TV Guide*, and a grimy radio-cassette player with a bent antenna—were strewn throughout a room that looked like it had been designed in the 1800s. In one corner, hanging over a wooden butter churn, Evie saw a framed needlework sampler dated 1851. Colorful flowers and trees surrounded a quote stitched in careful lettering:



*The year rolls round, and steals away
The breath that first it gave;
What e'er we do, where e'er we be,
We're trav'ling to the grave.*



Evie felt her mother behind her, also reading. “Not exactly my taste,” she said. “But it is very *authentic*.” She coughed. “Whoo! I’d better start airing this place out and cleaning up so we can unpack. Why don’t you kids go up and pick your rooms?”

Stan was pounding up the stairs before Evie could even pick up her duffel. “I call first dibs!” he shouted.

“Stan! Wait!” Evie shouted back, grinding her teeth in annoyance. She shouldered her bag and went through the hallway into the living room. Rays of sunlight pouring through the windows illuminated legions of dust motes floating through the air in Stan’s wake. With only a cursory glance at the squashy armchairs and fireplace that dominated the room, Evie climbed the staircase to reach the second-floor landing. Stan poked his head out of one of the doorways to look at her.

"This one's mine," he said. "It's the biggest. Mom's going to want the one at the end of the hall that has its own bathroom."

"And why do you get—?"

"Bye now," he said, and slammed the door in her face.

Evie stifled the hot rush of irritation rising inside her. "Fine," she said through gritted teeth. She continued down the hallway to the last door and pushed it open.

If Stan got the biggest bedroom, it must be huge, Evie thought. Because the room she was looking at was anything but small. Two large windows dominated the back wall, and a double bed with a delicate gold frame sat between them. The floor, like the rest of the house, was hardwood, except for a dingy Oriental rug that must once have been green. The furniture was painted cream, with gold scalloped edges. A few pictures in tiny frames hung on the walls, but mostly they were papered over with pages from *Seventeen* magazine and *Tiger Beat*. Advertisements for Maybelline Kissing Potions, and photos of teenaged heartthrobs with mop haircuts, so sun faded that their faces were ghostly white.

Evie touched the bloom of a mummified rose on the dresser, felt it crumble under her fingertips. Next to it lay an old photograph, its corners brown and curling. It was a picture of a girl she'd seen many times before, with a serious face and long, ginger hair. She was sitting in this very room, gazing out one of the windows to the woods beyond.

Evie felt a strange tingling in her stomach as she realized:

This was Holly's room.

The bedroom of a lost girl.



Holly Hobbie. *The Lost Girl of Ravenglass.*

Evie had first heard the story when she was a little girl, just old enough to be curious about the things her mother talked about behind closed doors. Holly was Mom's and Aunt Martha's cousin—her mother, Elizabeth Hobbie, was their aunt, and Holly her only child. When they were young, Martha and Lynne had sometimes come to Ravenglass for Christmas. Aunt Martha was older by five years, but Lynne and Holly had been close in age.

But that all ended forty years ago, when Holly was just fifteen years old.

Since then, Mom had never returned to this place. Not once.

Eventually, after Great-Aunt Elizabeth and Great-Uncle Dan moved away, Aunt Martha came and never left.

Evie looked at the room with new eyes.

In all the years of her life, the few times Holly had come up in conversation between Aunt Martha and her mother, or anyone else, no one ever referred to Holly in the past tense. Since she was

never found, and a body never recovered, Holly seemed to exist in a nebulous place between life and death.

Like Schrödinger's cat, she thought. It was something that her science teacher had told her about once—a thought experiment about a cat inside a box that is simultaneously alive and dead.

She set her duffel down on the bed and was about to head back downstairs when she heard something.

A soft, rhythmic sound.

It was coming from the closet.

Evie's heart thrummed, but she moved toward the door. It was already ajar. She pulled it open with a jerk and stepped back. A pair of flashing eyes looked out at her from the darkness within.

Evie sighed with relief. It was just a cat. "Hello, you. Come on out now. Oh, what have you got there?"

After a moment, the cat padded out of the closet. It was an orange tabby, its long fur matted in parts, a notch missing from one ear. When it saw Evie, it dropped something small and wet at her feet.

It was a dead mole, eyeless and torn almost in two. The cat, its mouth covered in blood, sat with its tail curled primly, and began to bathe itself with its neat pink tongue.

Evie drew back, repulsed. But the cat only purred, winding around her ankles. "Gross," she said, looking around for something to pick up the bloody bundle. But all the cleaning supplies were still packed. "Don't go anywhere," she told the cat.

Downstairs, Mom had finished wiping down the table and countertops and had started to separate the boxes into piles for each room. "These are yours," she told Evie, pointing to a small mountain. "You can start taking them up."

Evie opened her mouth to say that there was a stray cat living in her room but decided against it. Her mother had never let them have pets in New York, and Evie wasn't about to let her kick this one out on day one. "Okay," Evie said, reaching for a roll of paper towels. "I just need to—"

"On second thought, don't worry about the boxes right now. The sun's going down and none of us have eaten dinner yet. Can you pick something up for us from that little place down the street? I think it's only, like, half a mile away or so."

Evie shrugged. "Sure," she said. The best thing about growing up in New York was that parents got used to the idea of sending their kids out into the world without supervision. Evie had started riding the subway alone when she was only twelve. Walking down the street in a small town was nothing compared with downtown Manhattan during rush hour.

"Take your phone with you," her mother said, pressing two twenty-dollar bills into her hand. "And don't get me anything spicy."



The neon sign for Birdie's Diner glowed like a beacon at the edge of town. Above the name, written in curling red letters, the outline of a yellow bird flicked back and forth—first at rest, and then with its wings outstretched, ready to fly.

The diner reminded Evie of a boxcar, abandoned by some old freight train, left to sink its wheels into the earth and never move again. The golden stripes above and below its windows were

freshly painted, but its silver roof was tarnished like an old spoon. Half a dozen cars were parked in front, and Evie was greeted by a wave of heat and friendly noise as she walked inside.

Above the red vinyl booths brimming with customers, a froth of multicolored paper lanterns hung, illuminating the diner with a warm, muted light. A long white counter dominated the place, with little silver-and-red stools lined up in front of it. Alongside the chatter, an oldies radio station played on unseen speakers, adding to the sense of bygone nostalgia. Behind the counter, a stout, pink-cheeked woman in a sauce-spattered apron bustled about, calling out orders to the cooks in the kitchen and the waitresses flitting from table to table in canary-yellow uniforms. Her raven-black hair was pulled into a bun at the nape of her neck with a pencil stuck in it. The little name tag pinned to her apron said *Bir die*.

“Order up!” Birdie called, slinging two bowls of steaming food onto a tray. “Two kimchi bokkeumbap for table four!”

The savory, spicy smell that wafted past Evie’s nose as the waitress carried it away made her mouth water. She walked up to the woman a little timidly, and said, “Excuse me.”

Birdie turned her dark eyes on Evie and cocked her head to the side. “You’re new,” she said. It wasn’t a question.

“Oh, yes. I’m Evelyn Archer—Evie. My family just moved into Hobbie House this afternoon. We’re starved, so we thought—”

“Hobbie House?” Birdie said, her eyebrows rising. She turned toward the end of the counter, where Evie realized an elderly woman was sitting at a small table next to the kitchen. She wore a floral housedress and cardigan, and looked like a smaller, older version

of Birdie herself. “Umma!” Birdie shouted, followed by a string of Korean that Evie didn’t understand.

The elderly woman glanced over somewhat vaguely and nodded before turning back to stare out the window in front of her.

“Mama Bird used to know the people who lived there,” Birdie said to Evie. “They would come here to eat back when she ran this place.” A pained look passed over her face. “She won’t remember that, though. Dementia.” The clatter of a plate landing behind her on the pass broke her out of her thoughts. “So, you want to eat? How many people?”

“Three . . .”

“Ten minutes,” Birdie said. She scribbled something on a little notepad and slapped it on the pass between her and the kitchen.

“B-but don’t I have to order?” Evie stammered. “Isn’t there a menu?”

“No menu,” Birdie said, waving her hand as if swatting a fly. “I’ll give you something, you’ll like it. Okay?” Before Evie could reply, Birdie had already turned away to grab takeout bags for another customer who had just walked in.

“Um . . . okay,” Evie said to no one in particular, and moved over to lean against one of the stools at the counter. She looked around. Most of the customers were couples or families, all except for one girl who sat in a booth by herself, typing furiously on her laptop. She looked about Evie’s age and was the kind of girl she expected to see back in New York, not here. She wore a black knitted cap, and the short, curly hair that spilled out from under it was seafoam green. She seemed to be oblivious to everything

around her. After a moment, she stopped and turned her face until she was looking straight at Evie with large, round eyes.

Evie looked away quickly—she'd been staring. She was studying some interesting-looking wooden masks on the wall when she felt someone slip next to her.

"Hey," a voice said. "Farmgirl."

Evie turned to see the girl standing next to her, sipping at a glass of some kind of pink milkshake from a straw. "What?" Evie said.

"New here, huh?" the girl said.

Evie rolled her eyes. "I know this is a small town, but you've got to have some random people show up sometimes, don't you?"

The girl shook her head. "Not in the fall. Summer people, yes. But they stop coming after Labor Day."

"Well, I'm not a farmgirl, anyway. We just moved here from New York City."

"Nah," the girl replied. "You look like you should be holding a newborn lamb or standing in a field of wheat."

Evie glanced down at her chunky brown sweater and floral blouse and sighed. "It's the freckles, isn't it?"

"Hey, it's not a bad thing. Who doesn't love lambs?" She took a long sip from her drink.

"What are you drinking?"

"It's Korean strawberry milk. Want some?" She held it out for Evie.

Evie laughed awkwardly. "You don't even know me."

The girl shrugged and stuck out her hand. "Tina Sánchez, and you?"

Evie shook it. "Evie Archer. Nice to meet you."

Tina pointed the drink toward her again. "How about now?"

Who is this girl? Evie thought, but she couldn't help but smile. She leaned forward and took a sip of the drink. It was sweet and creamy, touched with the tartness of fresh strawberries. "Wow, it's really good," she said.

"I'm addicted to them," Tina said, staring into the glass. "Be careful or you will be, too. So, where's your new place? Edgewood? The Glade?"

"No," Evie said, still relishing the taste in her mouth. "We just moved into Hobbie House."

Tina froze midsip. She set the glass down on the counter and stared at Evie in a way that made her squirm. "No way," she breathed. "You moved into Horror House?"

Evie winced.

"Wait—the psychic, right? Madame Martha. Are you her niece?"

"I am," Evie said warily. "You know Aunt Martha?"

Tina raised an eyebrow. "I'm the police chief's daughter. I know *everybody*. And all their skeletons." She took Evie by the wrist and pulled her back to the empty booth.

"But, I have to—" Evie protested.

"Sit," Tina commanded.

Evie sat.

"You know about that house, right?" Tina asked in a low voice.

"About Holly? Yeah, I mean, I know what my mom told me, which isn't much. Just that Holly disappeared from her bedroom back in the eighties and was never found."

Tina's jaw dropped. "Are you seriously telling me you never did a deep internet search on this? You *are* a farmgirl." She pulled her laptop toward her.

What if I don't want to know? Evie thought, but she said nothing.

A minute later, Tina turned the laptop to face Evie. "There, it was right in the *Boston Globe* archives."

Warily, Evie lowered her eyes to the screen and began to read. It was a scanned copy of the front page of the paper from December 19, 1982. A single headline dominated the front page: "Hope Fades as Months Pass since Teen's Mysterious Disappearance."

Ravenglass, Mass. It has been more than eight weeks since fifteen-year-old Holly Hobbie—known by many as the Lost Girl of Ravenglass—vanished from inside her home, a story that has captivated the nation ever since. What could have been a standard missing-person case quickly garnered national attention when details of Holly's disappearance and the history surrounding her house were revealed.

Holly's parents, Elizabeth and Daniel Hobbie, who had reported a disturbance in their home that evening, told authorities that their daughter had been in her bedroom when she screamed. When they reached the bedroom, they added, Holly was not there, nor was she anywhere in the house. Despite claims from Mr. and Mrs. Hobbie that Holly could not have left the house without their knowledge, Ravenglass police chief Richard Dixon told reporters at the time that they were exploring all possible avenues, including the possibility that Holly ran away from home. Many expected her to reappear within twenty-four hours. However, those hopes faded quickly as days passed with no sign of the missing girl.

Holly's parents were under investigation for a brief time, dragging the two into the national spotlight, but without evidence, the investigation was dropped.

Holly Hobbie's disappearance raised suspicions, and a touch of fear, for some residents of Ravenglass who are familiar with the local legend tied to that very house. First built in the mid-nineteenth century, the house is a historic landmark that had a story of its own long before the Hobbies lived there.

According to legend, the original occupant of the home in the 1850s was discovered inside the home, dead from a shotgun wound. His murder was never solved, and his only child—a young girl colloquially called the Patchwork Girl for the dress she had always worn—disappeared the same day, never to be found.

There has been no further investigation into Holly's whereabouts. She is remembered by her family and friends as an Honor Roll student who loved animals and considered herself an amateur local historian . . .

“Order up for Evie Archer!” Birdie called from the counter.

“I’ve got to go,” Evie said to Tina, standing. “My mom is waiting.”

Tina sighed. “Fine, but you’re not getting away from me that easily. Will you be going to RHS on Monday?”

“Yeah, sophomore year.” Evie wasn’t thrilled to be starting at Ravenglass High nearly a month after the school year had started—being the “new girl” was hard enough without it being so obvious.

“Oh, awesome!” Tina replied. “I’ll see you there. We have a lot to talk about.”

Evie turned away, her happiness at already having a friend in Ravenglass tempered by what she’d read about Hobbie House. *Does it really matter what happened there forty years ago?* she wondered. Evie didn’t think so. The past was dead and gone. Evie had no interest in looking back.

She was making her way to the counter when a hand grabbed her by the arm. Evie turned to see Birdie’s elderly mother looking up at her from her chair, her eyes cloudy with cataracts.

“Holly,” she said, her voice a harsh rasp. “I haven’t seen you in so long.” Her grip was remarkably strong.

Evie blinked down at her. “What? No, I’m not—”

“Come closer,” Mama Bird said, motioning.

Evie swallowed and bent down until her ear was next to the old woman’s lips. “I want to tell you a secret, Holly. Can you keep a secret?”

Suddenly the air inside the diner felt hot and close, the friendly chatter too loud. “Yes,” Evie whispered, despite herself.

“Evie Archer!” Birdie’s voice cut through the moment, and Evie stood up straight, her heart pounding.

“I’m sorry,” Evie said to the older woman, pulling away. But Mama Bird would not let go. Her gnarled fingers dug into the meat of Evie’s arm.

“Oh, Umma . . . ,” Birdie said when she caught sight of them. She hurried out from behind the counter and laid a smooth white hand over her mother’s wizened one, whispering in Mama Bird’s ear until the grip on Evie’s arm relaxed. “She doesn’t mean any harm,” Birdie said, patting her mother on the shoulder. “Just gets

confused sometimes.” She walked back to the front counter and grabbed a bulging yellow plastic bag. “Better take your food before it gets cold. Gamja hot dogs are best piping hot!”

“Gamja—?” Evie started to say.

“Hot dogs on sticks covered in French fries.” She handed the bag to Evie. “I dare you to eat just one.”

Evie took the bag with a smile. The smell coming from it was making her mouth water. “Thanks,” she said, paying the bill. “I can’t wait to try it.”

“Hurry home now,” Birdie said. “I don’t know what it’s like where you came from, but here in Ravenglass, when night falls—it falls fast.”



Outside, the day was dying. The last few rays of light burned like embers on the horizon, and a chill wind blew through the trees, making Evie quickly regret leaving the warmth of the diner. She walked briskly back up the street toward the narrow lane to Hobbie House, the heavy bag of food bouncing against her leg.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket, and she pulled it out quickly, hoping it was a message from one of her friends. But it was just her mother, texting to ask if Evie was on her way home. Evie replied, stuck the phone back in her pocket, and sighed.

She could hardly believe that just this morning, she had been saying goodbye to her home in New York, her voice echoing in the once cluttered apartment that was now empty. It was as if a knife

had come down and severed her old life, leaving her to stumble into this new one.

Tina's reaction to the fact that she'd moved into Hobbie House worried her. She'd thought that after forty years, no one would care about the checkered history of the house, but clearly at least some people still did.

More than anything, Evie wanted to be anonymous. To dive under the surface of the world, let the waves pass over her and crash against someone else's shore. She didn't want to be *that girl*.

The girl who lives in the Horror House.

The wind picked up, rushing through the trees like a roll of thunder, sending a maelstrom of leaves across her path, along with the heavy smell of flowers and rot. The night had deepened so softly that Evie hadn't noticed how dark it had become. In New York, it was never dark or quiet. There were always the sounds of cars passing, of people in the street, and the low rumble of the subway passing deep beneath the earth. But here, the darkness was so thick she could almost touch it, the shadows so impenetrable that they could hide almost anything within them. Here, she could hear her every breath, and every snapping twig made her wonder what might be out there, watching her.

She started to walk a little faster.

Finally, she reached the end of the lane and saw Hobbie House, lights blazing in every window. It looked so different lit up in the night, like some ancient creature awoken after a century of slumber.

I'm home, she thought, and the word was strange, like an ill-fitting coat. Her mother opened the kitchen door, and light spilled out from inside to meet her.



"What's wrong with you?"

His voice was bigger than the world. It echoed, the words repeating again and again and again as everything shattered and rained down in a million tiny pieces, each one sharp enough to cut.

Evie woke up to the sound of her alarm. She reached for it, knocking her phone off the nightstand in the process, and scrambled on the hardwood floor until she was able to turn the thing off. She lay on her back in the tangle of blankets, staring at the spider-web cracks in the ceiling. The residue of the dream clung to her like a cold veil. She'd had it many times before, each time the same.

I don't have time for that today, she thought, rubbing her eyes and the images from her mind.

It was her first day of school at Ravenglass High, and she didn't want to be late.

The walk from Hobbie House to RHS was about a mile, although Evie believed there was probably a shortcut through the

woods. She made a mental note to herself to do some exploring one day soon and find it.

She didn't mind the walking. In fact, the idea of not walking for miles every day was totally alien to her after growing up in the city. It gave her time to think, and to calm her nerves.

Just blend in, she told herself, brushing a leaf from the hem of her long olive skirt. Another one of her handmade pieces—this one a reimagining of an A-line Victorian walking skirt. *Blend in, and everything will be fine.*



Evie joined the steady stream of students flowing into the redbrick high-school building with fifteen minutes to spare. On the walls of the hallway inside, the words *Home of the Fighting Miners!* were painted in blue lettering, along with a logo of a man wearing a headlamp over two crossed pickaxes. After checking in with the front office and receiving her schedule and locker assignment, Evie made her way to her first class: Family Consumer Science.

“Do you really need to take this class?” her mother had said when she'd seen Evie's choice of electives. “Wouldn't you be better off with languages or programming or something? *I can teach you how to cook.*”

But it wasn't cooking Evie was interested in. And when she stepped into the classroom and saw the neat, white sewing machines lined up on tables, she knew she'd made the right decision. She sat down at one of the machines, letting her bag slip from her

shoulder to the floor. They were all Singer machines, which was all right—but nothing like her vintage Brother 151. These were plasticky with only a few basic stitches, unlike her machine, which was built like a World War II tank and could stitch circles around anything in that room. She'd found it at a Brooklyn flea market a few years ago and used her entire savings to buy it. She liked to say it was the only Brother in her house that she enjoyed spending time with.

Evie could feel eyes on her as she sat, her fingers exploring the new machine. She tried to ignore the glances and the whispers as the room filled up and the teacher stood, ready to start class as soon as the bell rang. Just before it did, one last student came through the doorway.

“Hurry up, Mr. King, you’re dangerously close to being late,” the teacher said.

He was tall and broad shouldered, the light pink of his fitted T-shirt a stark contrast to his black skin. He gave the teacher an easy, disarming smile. “Yes, ma’am,” he said, and slipped into the room with such speed and elegance that it took Evie a second to realize that he had sat right next to her.

She risked a sidelong glance at him as the teacher took attendance. In profile, his face reminded her of the ancient Egyptian statues she’d seen at the Met—the high cheekbones, the full lips. After a moment, she saw his eyes flit over to her, and she quickly looked away. She could feel a flush creeping up her neck as she studied the teacher’s tight black curls intently, trying desperately not to look again. But she couldn’t help it. When her eyes flicked back to him, he had his eyes crossed, and the very tip of his pink tongue poking out the side of his mouth.

She snorted, covering her smile, and the teacher's face turned to her. "Ah! Yes, our new student. Please stand up, Miss Archer."

Kill me now, she thought as she stood, digging her fingernails into her palms when all eyes turned to her.

"Okay, students, this is your new classmate, Evelyn Archer—she just moved to Ravenglass from New York City. Please make her feel welcome."

"Hi," Evie said, scanning their faces—some curious, others bored—before abruptly sitting back down.

"Today we'll be continuing our sewing unit," the teacher said. "I expect you all to finish up your practice stitching today or tomorrow at the latest. You'll need to get moving on the patterns for your final project if you're going to have it finished by the end of the quarter." As the rest of the class broke into busy chatter, the teacher walked over to Evie's table. "Now, Desmond," she said, leaning in and giving the boy a pointed look. "If you can get our new student caught up on what we've learned over the past two weeks, that would go a long way in improving your grade in this class . . ."

"Of course, Ms. Jackson," Desmond replied smoothly. "I'd be happy to."

When she'd walked away, Desmond sighed. "Here's the thing, Evelyn," he started to say.

"Evie," she corrected.

"Here's the thing, Evie," he went on, leaning close. He smelled like the woods. "I am good at a lot of things, but sewing isn't one of them."

Evie chuckled, and picked up a spool of red thread from the table. Within a minute, she had switched the Singer on, filled the

bobbin, and threaded the machine. “That’s okay,” she whispered back. “Because I am good at it.”

“Oh, thank god,” he said with a grin. “So, you’re going to tell Ms. Jackson what an excellent teacher I am, right?”

“Right,” she said.

Evie picked up the practice fabric and started sewing, following the looping patterns with a straight stitch, then adjusting the machine to do a zigzag stitch and an overlook on the hem. Just when she was starting to get into the zone, she heard a *crunch* from the machine next to her.

“Ugh, not again.” Desmond was hunched over his machine, staring at a nest of blue thread in the middle of his fabric.

“Jammed up?” Evie asked.

Desmond sighed as she scooped over to untangle his machine. “You know, I only took this class because I thought it would be an easy credit. I got football season, Honors Chemistry, *and* AP Anatomy and Physiology—I don’t have time for this.”

“Sewing isn’t easy,” Evie said. “I mean, nothing is easy if you want to do it well.”

“You make it look easy,” he said, watching her.

Evie smiled, fumbling with the thread. “I’ve just had a lot of practice. I make a lot of my clothes myself.”

“Did you make what you’re wearing now?” he asked.

“The skirt, yeah.” She paused and then said, “I like the way it makes me feel, wearing the things I make. Like I’m . . . more myself.” She looked down shyly.

He didn’t say anything for a moment, and she could feel his gaze on her. She felt it as clearly as a touch. “So, what’s it like

living in the Horror House? Little different from city life in New York, I bet.”

Evie looked at him. “How did you know?” she asked.

Desmond shrugged. “Word travels fast around here. Especially when it has to do with that place.”

Now it was her turn to sigh. “I don’t know. It’s a house. What else is there to say?”

He held his hands up in surrender. “Hey, you can’t blame me for asking. You’d have to be dead not to be curious.”

“I don’t blame you,” she said. “I mean, it’s big and filthy, although a lot cleaner now that my mom has had a few days to tackle it. Other than that, it’s kind of like living in a museum. There’s all these, like, artifacts lying around, untouched for all these years. It feels . . . unfinished somehow.”

“Unfinished,” Desmond echoed.

“Yes,” she said, suddenly feeling like she’d said too much. “Your machine should work now, let me just test it out.” She slipped his practice fabric under the presser foot and softly pushed on the foot pedal to get the machine going. It hummed gently under her fingertips, stitching a line of blue across the rough muslin.

Then, a flash of movement caught her eye from the window in front of her. It looked out onto a wide lawn where a single hemlock stood. Tall grass gone to seed waved lazily in the breeze. And although the sun was shining brightly that morning, something dark and formless was walking there, like a shadow.

As Evie watched, it stopped next to the tree, and as if feeling her gaze upon it, began to turn to look toward her. “Hey, what’s that?” Evie said softly.

“What’s what?” Desmond asked, glancing out the window where she was looking.

“You don’t see that?” Evie said. She stared at the shadow, transfixed, until a lightning bolt of pain brought her back.

“Oh god,” she said, looking down to see blood fountaining from the tip of her pointer finger, spreading across the white fabric with frightening speed.

“The needle went straight through your fingernail,” Desmond said, pulling her hand from the machine.

“I—I got distracted by . . .,” she stammered, glancing back out the window. There was nothing but the grass and the hemlock tree. “Nothing. I guess it was nothing.”

“No worries,” Desmond said smoothly. He was wrapping a tissue around her finger and holding it firmly. Within moments the tissue was soaked through with blood.

“Oh,” Evie said, feeling dizzy, finger throbbing.

Desmond wrapped another tissue around the last one and held her hand up at eye level, almost as if they were about to step out onto the dance floor in some fairy-tale ballroom. His hand was warm. “Holding it above your heart will help stop the bleeding,” he said. “Just breathe.”

She breathed. Around her, some of the other students had noticed the commotion and watched them with interest.

So much for blending in, Evie thought.

“What’s going on here?” Now Ms. Jackson had noticed, too. Her eyes widened when she saw the bloody tissues. “Evelyn, what happened?”

“It’s my fault,” Evie said quickly. “I wasn’t looking, and the needle just—”

“Desmond, please accompany her to the nurse’s office immediately.” She shot him a look that said, *You can say goodbye to that extra credit, young man.*



Evie couldn’t look at Desmond as they walked down the long hallway toward the nurse. “I’m so sorry,” she finally said.

“Sorry? For what?” he asked. “You’re the one with the open wound, not me.”

“I just—I made a scene, and made you look bad . . .”

“Girl,” he said, leveling a look at her. “You’re going to have to work a lot harder to make *me* look bad, you know what I’m saying?”

She smiled. He was trying to put her at ease, and she was surprised to find that it was working. “Well, anyway, I feel pretty stupid, considering I told you how good I was at sewing and then immediately put a hole in my finger.”

“You can make it up to me by making sure I get at least a B in that class, how about that?”

Evie nodded. “Deal.” She looked down at her finger, swaddled in tissue. It still hurt, but it seemed like the bleeding had stopped. “You may not know how to sew, but it seems like you know your way around minor injuries.”

Desmond gave a little shrug. “I’m looking at nursing schools. Maybe Duke or UNC—if they give me some football money.”

They’d arrived at the door to the nurse’s office. Evie put her hand on the doorknob and hesitated. “You know,” she said. “If

you're going to be sewing people up one day, you should really know your way around a needle and thread. Maybe this class is worth your time after all."

"Yeah," Desmond said. His brown eyes wandered over her hair, her face. "Maybe it is."

Inside, the nurse carefully peeled off the bloody tissues and then washed the neat little hole with rubbing alcohol. It should have stung like crazy, but Evie didn't feel a thing.



The rest of the day passed without incident, a blur of textbooks and assignments and teachers announcing her name. Evie was standing at her locker after the final bell when Tina passed by, chatting with another girl. When her gaze fell on Evie, she stopped.

“I’ll catch you later, Kitty, okay?” Tina said to the girl.

Kitty glanced up at Evie, her eyes curious behind a pair of oversize tortoiseshell glasses. She was short—even shorter than she looked, given the size of her wedge heels. She brushed the thick, dark brown fringe from her face and nodded.

“Text me,” she said to Tina, and walked on.

Evie slammed her locker shut and slung her bag over her shoulder.

“So,” Tina said as they joined the stream of students heading home, “how was your first day?”

“I wish I could say I made it out in one piece, but that would be a lie,” Evie replied, and held up her bandaged finger.

Tina's eyebrows shot up. "Oh my god, what happened?"

As they made their way outside, Evie filled her in on the events of the morning. She could see that Tina was doing her best to appear sympathetic but failing miserably at concealing her glee.

"Oh, just go ahead and laugh," Evie said with a wave. "I can see you want to."

"I'm sorry!" Tina said, giggling. "It's just the most gruesome meet-cute I've ever heard, that's all."

"It wasn't a meet-cute," Evie said in the most unconvincing way possible. Tina leveled a sidelong glance at her as they reached Main Street. "So . . . what's he like, anyway? Desmond, I mean. He's probably dated half the girls in school."

"Nah," Tina said. "Desmond is heir to the throne of King Quarry, so he's always been pretty careful to keep his nose clean. His parents keep him on a tight leash."

"King Quarry?" Evie asked.

"His family's business, just up the mountain. Been around since the late fifties. The quarry probably single-handedly kept Ravenglass afloat for decades before the tourists found this place. Still does. Lot of folks who live here work for King Quarry in some way. And when Mr. King retires, it will all pass to Desmond."

"I thought he wanted to be a nurse," Evie muttered to herself.

"What's that?" Tina asked.

"Oh, nothing. Well, I've got to go." Evie pointed up the lonely road that led to Hobbie House.

"You know, I'd love it if you showed me around one day—the house, I mean," Tina said. Her voice was hopeful.

Evie swallowed, and made her voice bright. “Sure, maybe once we get things unpacked. The place is still a mess, and it will probably take a few weeks before things are cleaned up and all.”

“A few weeks,” Tina repeated. She nodded and looked away. “Yeah, okay. I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

“See you!” Evie said, and hurried up the road.



The wind pushed Evie’s copper hair across her face as she made her way up the narrow lane alone. As she passed the mailbox, she noticed that her mother had already gone over the words *Horror House* with a coat of fresh white paint. *She doesn’t waste a minute, does she?* Evie thought. She reached up to tuck the loose locks behind her ear and pressed forward up the hill.

She felt bad turning Tina down, but Evie still wasn’t convinced the girl’s friendliness was genuine, and not just curiosity about Hobbie House. Evie just wasn’t quite ready to let her—or anyone—inside.

“Oh, great! You’re home,” Mom said when she saw Evie walk in. She looked smart in a mint-colored blouse and blazer, and was finishing off leftovers from Birdie’s. “God, this is even good cold,” she said through a mouthful of food.

The house was virtually transformed. All the dust and old bits of things had been taken away, and there were only half a dozen boxes still waiting to be unpacked. Everything shone and smelled a little of oranges from the cleaning spray her mother loved.

“Wow,” Evie said. “You’ve been busy.”

“Very,” Mom said, dumping the empty food containers in the trash. She walked over to one of the remaining boxes and set it on the table. “I only have a few things left to put out—just knick-knacks, mostly.” She rummaged around inside the box and pulled out a newspaper-wrapped parcel. Nested inside was a small glass bluebird. Evie saw her mother’s face tighten as she held it in her hand. “Here,” she said, handing it to Evie as if it were a hot potato. “Put it wherever you like.”

Evie cradled it in her palm, like she would a real baby bird. It felt cool, and heavier than it looked. “Okay,” she said. She ran her fingertips along the base of it, feeling the initials engraved there. RA.

Mom took out the other items from the box and set them on the table in neat rows. A set of votive candleholders, a couple of stone lion bookends, some framed photographs of the family. “Your father is in Paris for the rest of the month,” Mom said, not looking up, “but if you want to text him, he’ll be able to receive it. I think he’s got some international plan or something.”

“I don’t really want to text him,” Evie said, picking up one of the framed pictures. Her parents at Coney Island, grinning at the camera. Evie in pigtails, barely six, holding a dripping ice-cream cone, and Stan just a babe in her mother’s arms. The image was taken at an angle, making it look like the whole world behind them was off-balance, like they were already on a carnival ride. Evie went over to the baker’s rack in the corner of the kitchen and set both the bluebird and the picture down on one of the shelves.

“Up to you,” Mom replied. Then she looked up and smiled, effectively banishing the seriousness from the moment. “Well! Stan texted to say he’s staying after school with some new friends,

and I have to be at the Blue River Inn in fifteen minutes for a job interview,” she went on. “It’s that pretty place on Main Street we saw on the drive, remember? I found out the owner is looking for an assistant manager, and I just thought, *How perfect*. Right?” She didn’t wait for Evie to answer. “I’ll be back for dinner, but if you could take these boxes up to the attic while I’m gone, that would be very helpful. It’s just stuff from the storage unit we don’t need right now. I’d rather not put anything in the cellar until I’m able to get someone down there to check for mold. Great-Aunt Liz always kept the door shut—something about ‘bad air.’ It’s old. Older than the house—maybe even the town itself, so who knows if there’s any ventilation down there. Anyway, better safe than sorry. The attic’s dusty, but at least it’s dry.”

“Okay, Mom,” Evie said.

Mom plopped the empty box in the trash, grabbed her purse, and was out the door. “Bye, honey!” she called.

Evie dropped her bookbag to the ground and sat in one of the old wooden chairs. “My day was fine, Mom, thanks for asking,” she said to the empty kitchen. “I met a boy, got a new hole in my finger . . .” She grabbed an apple from a bowl on the table and took a few bites. Pulling her phone from her bag, she glanced through it. Her heart leaped when she saw that one of her friends from the city had sent her a picture of herself with a few other people from their group. Miss u! the text read, along with three hug emojis.

A lump rose in her throat. She had thought a message from her friends would make her feel good, but it was having the opposite effect. Instead, seeing the picture made her feel painfully alone. She considered how she might reply, thought about telling

her friend about sewing class, about Desmond, about shadows, and secrets—

Mama Bird's wizened face appeared in her mind. *I want to tell you a secret, Holly*, the old woman had said. *Can you keep a secret?*

Evie deleted the picture, put the phone down on the table, and took another bite of apple. There was no time for texting now, she had things to do. Hoisting one of the cardboard boxes into her arms, she slowly made her way up the creaky stairway to the second floor.

The entrance to the attic was at the end of the hall, accessible by a thin rope hanging down from the panel in the ceiling. She put down the box and pulled the rope, causing a cascade of dust to rain down on her when it opened. After unfolding the ladder, Evie tucked the box under one arm and slowly made her way up.

Definitely a mistake not bringing my phone up here, she thought as she blinked into the darkness. *A flashlight would have come in handy right about now . . .* She placed the box on the floor and then stood up, groping for a light. Her hand finally struck a swinging string, and when she pulled it, a single bare bulb stuttered to life above her.

The attic was large and airy, with the exposed rafters of the roof high enough above her that she could stand at her full height without stooping. The front window had been boarded up—Evie wondered if it had been broken at some point and blocked to prevent wildlife from coming in.

Like that cat . . . she remembered. She hadn't seen it again since that first day, and wondered where it had gotten to.

There was a surprising amount of *stuff* in the attic—things had been left behind downstairs here and there, but it was nothing like this. There were more than a dozen boxes of various sizes piled up, along with at least two dozen bolts of old fabric wrapped in plastic.

“No way,” Evie whispered. She pulled off the plastic to get a closer look. Other than smelling faintly of mothballs, the fabric was in perfect condition. Soft cottons and linens in white ditsy prints, brown gingham, and blue paisley. Evie felt a thrill just touching them. A treasure trove of authentic vintage fabric! And so much of it! Maybe she could even use it for her final project in sewing class.

Is there more? she wondered. She began peeking into boxes, but only found some old crockery wrapped in newspaper and boxes of moldy-smelling books. Behind a pile of boxes, tucked into the corner of the attic, she found an old steamer trunk sitting next to a white full-length mirror that seemed to match the furniture in her bedroom. She kneeled in front of the trunk and unlatched the clasp to push it open.

A face peered out at her from inside, its eyes unblinking.

Evie shrieked and recoiled from the trunk, nearly toppling the pile of boxes onto her head.

Then she looked closer and sighed. “Idiot,” she scolded herself, her heart still hammering.

A doll sat upright inside the trunk. A hunk of its auburn hair was missing, and there were little tears all along its red, white, and blue sailor suit. It was just one of the dozens of items inside the trunk—old cassette tapes and a silver Walkman, piles of teen magazines, and two other dolls, one a Raggedy Ann whose innards were

spilling out of a broken seam, and the other a doll with a porcelain face, dressed in lace and velvet.

This is all Holly's stuff, Evie realized.

She thought about Holly's parents, Evie's great-aunt Elizabeth and great-uncle Dan. Her mother had told her years ago that they'd moved to California the year after Holly disappeared and hadn't had much contact with the family ever since. The last time her mother had spoken to Great-Uncle Dan was last year when he called to say that Elizabeth had died. "The cancer is what took her," Mom had told Evie the day it happened. "But she'd been gone for a long, long time."

Evie imagined being surrounded by all the things that reminded you of someone you had lost. Someone who was there one moment and gone the next, like a cruel magic trick. To walk through life in a house and a town where every detail made fresh the pain of that person's absence.

Some memories were too painful to keep. Some needed to be packed away in the dark and forgotten. Evie could understand that.

She reached into the trunk and lifted the doll. It was nearly two feet long and heavier than she expected. Instead of the blank smiles that Evie was used to seeing on lifelike dolls, this one had a crafty grin, and a sidelong glance that made it seem like the doll was looking at something over Evie's shoulder. Evie turned it around and saw that it had a drawstring in its back.

It must be one of those old talking dolls. No way it still works . . . But she pulled the string, anyway.

A small voice dragged to life from inside the doll, slow and distorted as if the mechanism wasn't quite right.

"I feel so very, very sick," the doll said.

Evie felt a prickle at the back of her neck. She pulled the string again.

“I’m always cross when I’m sick,” the voice slurred.

Again.

“I hope I get some flowers.”

Again.

“Will you take care of me?”

It must be for some kind of doctor game, Evie thought. She remembered seeing another old doll once where you could change out the little record inside for different games. But when she pulled it again, the doll began to sing in a slow, toneless voice.

Playmate, come out and play with me,
and bring your dollies three.

Climb up my apple tree,
look down my rain barrel,
slide down my cellar door,
and we’ll be jolly friends forevermore.

Evie swallowed. Odd . . . The song had nothing to do with doctors. She turned the doll over and tried the string again, but it had stopped working altogether.

“Huh,” she said, and set the doll down beside her. She rummaged through the rest of the trunk, seeing what else she might find. Beneath the magazines she found a little diary clasped with a tiny silver lock. *Holly’s diary*, she thought, her curiosity piqued. She’d told herself she didn’t want to know anything about what had happened in this house all those years ago. But a diary . . . How could she resist?

She couldn't find the key anywhere in the trunk, but figured she'd be able to break the lock if she wanted to. She set the diary next to the dolls and kept pulling more items out of the trunk. At the bottom she found some clothes, a stained white scarf edged with lace, a dress with pearl buttons, and a blue bonnet that looked almost as old as the house itself.

Evie brushed the dust off the bonnet and held it up to the light. Could it have been something that Holly had found in the house when her family moved in? The bonnet certainly looked like it could be more than a hundred years old—although it was in surprisingly good shape if it was.

On a whim, she turned to the mirror and pulled the bonnet onto her head, tying the ribbons in a loose bow at her throat. She studied her reflection. Her long copper hair that flowed down in waves under the bonnet, and the freckles sprinkled over her nose and cheeks. *With this on I definitely look like a farmgirl*, she thought, remembering what Tina had said in the diner.

A long, eerie sound came from the talking doll, like a sigh.

Evie's eyes flicked toward it, but it was silent now. *The draw-string must not have fully retracted the last time I pulled it*. When she looked back at her reflection in the mirror, she froze.

Had her hair been exactly that color before? It looked more red than copper, but perhaps that was an illusion of the dim light. But then, there were other things, too. Her eyes were a darker shade of green, and her face seemed thinner, her cheekbones more pronounced.

Her lips in the mirror began to move, mouthing something.

Four words.

Staring at her reflection, having not moved at all, terror bloomed

in Evie's chest like a flower, wrapping its tendrils around her heart and turning her blood to ice.

She scrambled to her feet, and the bonnet slipped off her head as she backed out of the attic and nearly fell down the rungs of the ladder, folding it up and slamming the ceiling panel closed. She knew she had left the light on up there, but Evie didn't care. She ran into her bedroom, slamming the door behind her, and sat on the bed, her whole body trembling and slick with sweat. She gasped, taking in great lungfuls of air as she remembered to breathe.

She knew exactly what the reflection had said. It was her own lips saying them, after all. Or at least, she thought they were. Four innocent little words.

Come play with me.