

the trouble with dead
people



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the trouble with dead people

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To all my caving buddies out there, and everyone else nutty enough to enjoy crawling through dark places.

one

There's a strange boy sitting on the edge of my bed.

My eyes snap open after a god-awful dream about a snarling lady with flaming demon hair. The dream was so freaky I'm sure it'll be etched in my brain until the day I die, but seeing a kid I don't know perched cross legged on my comforter sure tops it. My heart thumps so loud, I'm positive it'd drown out any scream I could possibly force out of my dry throat.

Next to me, Snookums growls, every hair on his sleek body bristling. He's a huge Doberman and could rip the throat out of anyone who rubs his fur the wrong way, but Snookums *never* growls. He's too much of a wuss. He's scared of everything. Loud noises, crying babies—he's even freaked out by the stupid herd of bleating goats that live at the end of our street. So Snookum's growling is a big deal, and my stomach clenches as the sound reaches my ears.

The boy stares at me through thick, greasy bangs. I grab hold of my growling dog, shoving him between us. There's no *way*

the trouble with dead people

a kid dressed all in black with a silver skull hanging from his ear can have any *good* intentions.

“Who the hell are you, and what do you want?” My question is supposed to blast out fierce like a lion, but sounds more like a squeaking mouse.

Crooked yellow teeth poke through his open lips as he smiles. “You scared of me?”

What a stupid question. Of *course* I’m scared. I’m petrified. But...now the icy chunk of fear lodged in my stomach melts into a simmering rage. Why should I be scared? I’ve got Snookums who, hopefully, won’t chicken out if I need him to attack, and Dad is downstairs. He’ll hear me if I scream.

I face the boy and stare into his weird, flat eyes.

“No, I’m *not* afraid of you. Get out of my bedroom.”

He doesn’t budge. This is when I *should* scream in terror and hot-foot it for the door, but well, when fear creeps in, my anger takes over. Dad says it’s how I defend myself. Plus, I have three years of karate lessons under my belt. I jump off the bed and get into a good karate-kicking stance. *Now* who’s got the upper hand here?

“You’d better leave. Now.”

The kid uncrosses his legs, but doesn’t get up. His eyes follow me, a ghost of a smile on his lips.

My eyes flit to the mirror. It reflects a lanky girl with mousy brown hair hanging in tangled knots, and scared brown eyes. That girl is wearing nothing but underpants and a tank top. Shameful heat trickles up my neck, and I grab my clothes, but the boy isn’t looking at me anymore. He blinks at Snookums, scratches a pimple, and yawns. So while he’s otherwise pre-occupied, common sense takes over and I hightail it from the room. Snookums scrambles behind me.

I slam the door, spin around, and crash into Seneca as she trips out of the bathroom. Her toothbrush still hangs from her

mouth. She's always sucking on toothbrushes. She loves the taste of toothpaste. I've got the weirdest little sister on the planet.

Seneca regains her balance. "Geez, Harper. What's your problem? Seen a ghost or something?"

"Seneca, there's a boy in my room."

Seneca's buggy green eyes widen. "Harper, Dad is gonna kill you."

"No, damn it, I didn't invite him in. He's just *there*."

"Really?" My way too inquisitive sister bounds past me and flings the door open.

"Geez, Seneca, don't!"

"Why? And where is he? I don't see anyone."

"He's right there on the bed. Can't you..."

My voice trails off. Where'd he go?

"Ha, ha, Harper." Seneca rolls her eyes, sticks the toothbrush back in her mouth, and shuffles off.

I poke my head into the room and peer around. A heap of caving gear—helmet, knee pads, my dirty rappelling harness—lies on my dresser, blocking the window. No way did he have enough time to move all *that* junk, unlock the window, *and* escape.

The closet door is wide open. He's not hiding in there, not with the junk I've got stuffed in it. He could be cowering under the bed...

"Snookums!" I snap my fingers, hoping my dog will check the room out for me. But the wussiest Doberman ever born has already hightailed it down the stairs. *He's* got the right idea. I follow his lead.

In the light and airy kitchen, Dad flips pancakes for breakfast. He's splattered pancake batter all over the place: on the counter, in his scraggly beard, some even managed to hit the griddle. What Dad lacks in culinary expertise, he sure makes up for with enthusiasm. He looks so normal, standing there

the trouble with dead people

with Mom's old, frilly apron strapped around his bulky body that I wonder if I dreamt that boy up after all. Maybe he was part of the weird dream I'd had about the demon lady, and I hadn't actually woken up until I left the room and bumped into Seneca. I've heard about people walking in their sleep, but it's never happened to me before.

As far as I know, anyway.

Seneca trips into the kitchen dressed in one of her kooky homemade tie-dye creations. The colors all ran together so they're just blotchy shades of brown. She's also got a plastic tiara on her head for some stupid reason.

Dad stares at her getup. "A little festive for Saturday breakfast. What's up, Seneca?"

"That's Queen Seneca to you, servant." Seneca flips her long auburn hair over one shoulder and sticks her nose in the air. "See the tiara?"

"The purpose of wearing it being?"

"I'm Queen this morning. Everything I say, goes."

Dad grins. "Queen, huh? Well, what would Your Majesty like on her pancakes? Syrup or more blueberries?"

"Both," Seneca says.

"Boy, do you ever have a weird sister."

The voice is right behind me. I spin around so fast I fall out of my chair and conk my knee on the floor.

"Damn!"

"Language, Monkey. You okay?"

I barely hear Dad. My hammering heart drowns him out as it tries its darndest to pound right through my chest. Under the table, Snookums growls.

The boy sits on the counter, not six inches from Dad's pancake batter. He pokes a long, white finger in the batter, but it doesn't stick to his skin. Dad stands next to him like nothing out of the ordinary is happening.

Seneca stares at me like I've got ants crawling out my nose. "Harper, what is your *deal*? And what's wrong with Snookums? Why's he growling?"

She doesn't see the boy. He's sitting right *there* swinging his legs against the counter, and she doesn't see him at all. Neither does Dad. What in blue blazes is going on?

I take a deep breath. "'Scuse me for a minute."

I scramble to my feet, motion to the kid, and hobble into the hallway, wondering if he'll follow. I turn around, and...

"Geez! Don't stand so fricking close."

"Sorry," the boy says, not looking sorry at all.

"Listen. Guy. Kid. Whoever you are. What are you doing here? Who the *hell* are you?"

The kid frowns. "I'm Jake Talcott. Dunno what I'm doing here, 'cept I'm supposed to stay with you."

"*Why*? And why can't Seneca or Dad see you?"

The kid licks his lips nervously.

"I think I'm dead."

"*What*?"

"They can't see me 'cause I'm dead."

Oh no, no, no, *no*, this isn't happening. I'm dreaming this, I've gotta be. I'm having one weird and super-realistic dream.

"Harper, who on Earth are you talking to?" Dad yells.

"Nobody!" I lower my voice. "Listen...Jake. What happened to you? Why are you...why do you *think* you're dead?"

Jake moves towards me and I shrink back. If he's dead, I don't want him near me, and if he's alive, well, he'd better stay away from me then too. He gives me a weird smile, turns around, and walks right through the wall.

Oh. My. God.

"Jake, where'd you go?" I'm whispering now, but at least my heart has slowed to a normal rate. My brain reaches a new conclusion. Since this can't be happening, it isn't. It's all one wacko dream.

the trouble with dead people

"I'm here." Jake pops into the hallway. "I can't go anywhere else. I'm stuck here, I think."

"Why?"

"Dunno."

"How long have you've been...you know...deceased?"

Jake stands so close, if he were alive I'd feel his breath or smell his aftershave, or *something*. But all I smell is the vanilla potpourri Seneca insists we keep in every room. I wonder. If I touch him, will my hand pop through to the other side? No, I don't want to know.

Jake opens his mouth.

"The last day I remember is May twenty-ninth. My birthday."

May 29th. There goes the last hankering for Dad's special Saturday pancakes.

If it's true, this kid died yesterday. His family probably hasn't dropped his body into the cold earth and his ghost is already here, haunting me.

"Why? Why are you here?"

The boy blinks his disinterested eyes and shrugs again. He either doesn't know or doesn't care. He goes back to scratching his pimple. I give up and limp to the kitchen.

"You okay?" Dad says.

No. I am not okay. I plop onto my chair, rub my knee, and spear a piece of pancake. I twirl it on my fork and stare out the window.

Dad frowns. "It's a perfectly good pancake, Harper. I even made it with that funky flour you like...the organic barley or whatever. And I didn't put any extra sugar in."

"Bleh," Seneca says. "No sugar in pancakes? That's blasphemy."

I put my fork down. "Sorry, Dad. I've lost my appetite."

Dad sighs. It's not his fault. He tries. His pancakes aren't anywhere near as good as the ones Mom made, but he's getting better. I pop the piece into my mouth and somehow manage to gulp it down my dry throat.

“Your cold has made you loopy,” Seneca says. “They say when your nose gets all stuffed, you can’t smell anything right. So you lose your sense of taste. Although, how you could lose your taste for pancakes beats the heck out of me.”

“Language, Seneca,” Dad says.

“I’m hardly sniffing at all now,” I say. “This doesn’t have anything to do with the stupid cold.”

“Harper, maybe you should take another day off,” Dad says. “Rest up. You can attend vertical practice next week.”

“I’m fine.” I glare daggers at Jake, who followed me back into the kitchen and now makes faces at Snookums. I’m not sure if Snookums *sees* the dead kid or just feels Jake’s presence, but he’s growling. “Maybe we should let Snooky outside for a bit.”

“He sure is acting wacko today,” Seneca says. “Just like you, Harper. What’s up?”

She gives me an inquiring stare with her buggy eyes, and I get this rush of guilt, like holding back the truth is the wrong thing to do. But I’m not going to tell her a dead kid has stuck his pimple-scratching finger into the pancake she’s now eating. That won’t do at all.

So I lie.

“Nothing’s wrong,” I say, a sinking feeling filling my stomach as the words spill out. “Nothing at all.”

two

“Harper, what’s up?” Holly’s sane voice echoes through my phone. If anyone can help me with this, she can. I take a deep breath and hope I don’t sound completely nuts-o.

“Holls, something super-weird is going on.”

“Oh good. My Saturday has been dull as dirt so far. How can I help ya?”

I take a deep breath. Geez, how do I explain this?

“I think I’m cursed.”

Holly snickers. Some best friend, laughing at my pain. My stomach curls into anxious knots, but I guess I can’t blame her. It does sound pretty stupid. Well, it would if I weren’t right now staring at a dead kid wandering around my room and peering at the photos on my wall.

“Seriously, Holls. It all started when I kicked one of Sarah Miller’s goats.”

“You messed around with the Witch’s goats?”

Sarah Miller is this totally evil lady who lives at the end of our street. Every kid in town (and most adults) knows she’s

a witch. She keeps these three goats in her weedy backyard, and those smelly devils annoy the whole neighborhood with their baaing and horn-thumping. Everyone hates them, but the town allows people to own a certain amount of livestock, so we can't do anything about it.

"Okay, so you remember last week? When I was all upset because those stupid goats broke through that flimsy thing Sarah Miller calls a fence?"

"Yeah, I remember," Holly says. "You chewed my ear off about it for a full hour."

"They ripped Mrs. Jenkins's prized roses to ribbons and ate every piece of mail in Mr. Mellon's mailbox, and then those little demons came over here and tore into my vegetable garden."

"Yeah, yeah, I *know* Harper. You've been complaining about your garden all week. Your point being?"

"Well, I'm not a violent person, especially to animals, you know that. I mean, Snookums would totally swear I'm the greatest owner on the planet if he could talk, but Holls, when I caught that goat rooting up my tomato plants, I couldn't stop myself. I yelled and kicked. And old Witch Miller saw me do it."

"Uh-oh. What'd she say?"

"She said: '*Harper Dillon, you'll pay for that, you wicked girl!*'"

"Oh, *so* not good. Definitely sounds like a curse to me."

"I know, right?"

I mean, as soon as she yelled at me, I ran straight into the house and slammed the door. You don't live to the age of fifteen in this town without developing a deep-rooted terror of Sarah Miller. New kids may scoff at the idea, but we townies know better. The last person we want to piss off is the Witch. The fear blooms when we're little, as she hisses at us from across her fence, and it grows into a thorny bush of horror by the time we hit puberty. Heck, Sarah Miller even scares Dad.

the trouble with dead people

“So anyway, I figured the smartest action was to duck and cover. And pray to God nothing would come from my little... um...lapse of judgment.”

“But...?”

“But, I think something did.”

I’ve got her full attention now. “What? What happened?”

“Holls, there’s a dead kid in my room.”

Utter silence. I *thought* I set up the explanation well. Maybe not.

“Holls? Still there?”

“Harper,” Holly says slowly, “you wanna repeat that?”

“I know it sounds completely crazy, but he’s some weird ghost, except he looks so real I thought he *was* real at first. But nobody else sees him and he walks through walls.”

Nuttier and nuttier. She’d better not hang up on me.

“You *sure* you’re over your cold? You sound like an absolute wacko.”

“Oh God don’t I know it, but I’m looking right at him, Holly. What do I do?”

“Geez, Harper, you’ve stumped *me*. You want me to look up the website of an exorcist for ya?”

I can’t tell if she’s being sarcastic or not. Holly’s *always* researching stuff on the web. It’s her favorite pastime.

“I’m not possessed with some wacky demon, Holls. I don’t need an exorcist. I need to get rid of this dead kid.”

“Is he cute?”

Is she *serious*? “Who cares if he’s cute, he’s dead. Deceased. Bit the Big One. Pushing up daisies...”

“Okay, okay, I get it. Are you sure?”

Oh, I’m sure. I tried slapping myself, flinging cold water in my face, rubbing my eyes until my eyeballs hurt. I am *definitely* awake. This is not a dream.

“Holls, what do I do?”

"Ignore him."

"That's your grand advice? Ignore him?"

"Not sure what else to tell you, Harper. Maybe if you ignore him, he'll go away. If he hasn't gone away by first period on Monday, we'll decide what else to do."

"Can you look up 'crazy witch curses' for me? See if you can find an anti-curse or something?"

"You've got a computer. Look it up yourself."

Ugh. "I'm no good at looking up things. That's your forte."

"Harper, why are you so sure any of this has to do with Sarah Miller's goats?"

"What else *could* it be? She's a witch and she cursed me, now I've got a dead guy following me around."

"Is he mean? Is he spooky?"

"No, he's...well," I lower my voice. "He's pretty dull, Holls. One of those Goth-type dudes, you know?"

"Why are you whispering?"

"Oh, geez. 'Cause I don't want to hurt his feelings. See, I'm going all cuckoo. Help."

Holly laughs. "Okay, I'll look around and see what I can find out. Until then, keep your cool. Oh, and, Harper?"

"Yeah?"

"You're a total nutcase, you do realize that, right?"

I frown at the phone, but I can't get mad at her for saying so. Because now...well, now I'm not so sure.

three

The world makes more sense when I'm hanging from a tree.

Dangling ten feet off the ground, I focus on one task: rappelling past the big knot Dad has tied in my rope. I can't think about the dead kid while I'm grappling with this problem. Nope, gotta concentrate.

Seneca swings next to me on the other forty-foot rope looped over a huge branch in our big oak tree. She's rappelled right into her knot.

"Dang it! Dad, help."

Dad stands next to Snookums and contemplates Seneca, hanging above him and kicking her feet in impatience.

"Nope. You got yourself stuck. You figure it out."

Seneca yanks her ponytail in frustration. "*You* tied the knot."

"Yes, and what if you ran into a problem like this halfway into a cave? There you are, zipping down your rope and suddenly you hit a snag and you're stuck. If you don't figure out how to *unstick* yourself, you'll hang in your harness until your legs fall asleep and your blood stops circulating and you die."

Seneca snorts. "That won't happen."

"It can and it does. People who die on rope do so because they haven't practiced the skills to get out of sticky situations. Figure out how to get past the knot."

Seneca rolls her eyes and groans. She's a caver by default. Dad loves caving and I love caving, so Seneca has always caved too. She doesn't enjoy it the way we do. Even when she was little, she didn't like getting muddy and wet. Since she grew up crawling through holes in the ground, it never occurred to her *not* to do it, but now she's hit her eleventh year on the planet and she's starting to rebel.

"You know, if I never rappel into a cave to begin with, I'll never get stuck," she says.

Dad frowns. "That's your choice, I guess. But I'm still not helping you get past that knot."

Seneca huffs, takes her hands off the rope, and crosses her arms in defiance. "If I hang here long enough, I'll die. You said so. So you'll have to help me at some point."

"Watch how Harper does it," Dad says. "It's easy, it's all technique. Once you figure that out, it'll be a piece of cake. Show her how it's done, Monkey."

Dad can't tie a knot I can't figure out. I attach my ascending gear to the rope and detach my rappelling rack. I hang, swinging a bit as I reattach the rack under the knot, threading the rope through the rolling bars controlling my descent. I detach my ascenders and continue my rappel. Easy peasy.

Seneca sticks her tongue out as my feet touch the ground and resumes her wrestling match with Dad's knot.

"I'm going back up," I say.

Dad raises his eyes to the sky. "Okay, but make it fast. I don't like the look of those clouds."

I glance up too. Looks like we're in for our first summer thunder-boomer.

the trouble with dead people

“You know, two thousand people die every year from lightning strikes,” my encyclopedia of a sister says. “If you don’t want to be one of those two thousand, I suggest you *don’t* climb the rope. And Dad should let me down before I turn into smoking bacon.”

“Those clouds aren’t near us yet,” Dad says. He unties the knot in my rope. “Harper’s got enough time for one climb.”

“They’ll get here faster than I can get off this thing,” Seneca says.

I laugh at my frustrated sibling and attach my ascenders to my knot-free rope. The ascenders will slide up the rope, but they won’t slide back down, so once they’re attached, there’s no way I’ll fall unless the rope breaks. One ascender clips to my harness with a short piece of rope, the other’s rope runs through the harness and attaches to a loop where I place my feet. Every time I push the ascenders up the rope, the loop rises too. All I have to do is stand in the loop and slide my ascenders up another few inches. By sitting and standing, I can scoot up the rope without much effort.

Thirty feet into my climb, I glance down. Seneca has defeated her knot and now rolls on the ground groaning while Snookums whines and licks her face. He doesn’t understand my overdramatic sister isn’t in trouble. He actually thinks she’s in pain. Goofy dog. Even goofier sister.

I glance to the branch above me. Holy jeezum crackers! The scream busts out of my mouth before I can stop it.

“You okay up there, Monkey?” Dad yells.

I gulp, hoping my hummingbird heart calms down before it explodes.

“I’m okay! Just saw a spider on the branch.”

Not my best lie. Dad knows I’m not afraid of creepy-crawlies. And I’m sure not staring at a bug.

Jake’s black boots dangle off the branch. Next to them hang two sparkly sandals strapped around pink toenails attached to fat feet.

I let my gaze travel upwards. Fat feet, chubby legs, a chocolate denim skirt. Above the skirt, two blue eyes twinkle at me.

I grab the rope to steady myself, even though there's no way I can fall with my ascenders attached. But grabbing something steadies the shakes radiating from my pounding heart through the rest of my body.

"Jake? Who's that sitting next to you?"

Jake shrugs. "Dunno."

"Is she...dead too?"

"I *can* speak for myself, dear."

The thick lips below those twinkly eyes are colored pink, matching the toenails. The lips curl into a vibrant smile.

"Yes, I am dead, I'm afraid. I must be if I'm up here, don't you think?" She chuckles.

Two dead people. *Two* dead people sitting in my tree.

I gulp, not liking this new ghost much. Jake at least *acts* like a dead person, all morose and dressed in black. Meeting a deceased woman at best is disconcerting, meeting a *cheerful* deceased woman is downright terrifying.

"Why are you in my tree?"

"Because you're climbing it," the lady says, "and so, here I am."

I take a couple of deep breaths. Nope, not helping. I'm surprised the entire tree isn't vibrating, I'm shaking so hard.

"Why are you here? Why are there now two of you? And who *are* you?"

"Oh, sorry." The fat lady laughs. If she were alive, I'd describe the laugh as infectious and happy, but since she's dead, it sounds morbid. "My name is Corrine. Corrine Wright."

"Um, hi?" Boy do I sound stupid. "I'm...Harper Dillon."

"Oh dearie, I already know your name." Corrine leans forward, flashing crooked teeth as she grins, and those dead eyes twinkle away. "You don't forget the name of the person you were sent to haunt."

the trouble with dead people

I've never hyperventilated in my life, but something like that overwhelms me now; a deep need to get some oxygen in my lungs, but the air seems void of it. I barely hear the gasp escaping my mouth or Snookums barking like crazy below me. The buzzing in my ears drowns everything out.

The lady above me pushes her curly hair aside and sends me a cheerful smile.

That's all it takes. A crazy darkness blocks her from my sight as everything goes black.

four

Holly picks at her spaghetti as I wolf my sandwich down. In the history of the world, I doubt two friends so opposite ever existed: tall, unfashionable me and petite, perfect Holly. In kindergarten, she played with dolls and I made mud pies. When we first started growing boobs, I covered mine in mortification while Holly made her mom buy her the frilliest bra on the market. Now at the end of our freshman year, Holly's gone out with at least ten guys and I've had one kiss. And it wasn't a good one.

"So what's the scoop now?" Holly says. "Still got the dead people following you around?"

"You don't believe me, do you?"

"No." She gives me a smile. "I mean, it *is* kinda hard to swallow, Harper."

I sigh. Did I expect anybody to believe me? I don't quite believe myself. Especially since the tree incident.

"I haven't seen them since I fainted two days ago. So maybe they're gone."

the trouble with dead people

"You *fainted*?"

Holly stares at me like I'm a weird alien specimen. I shove the rest of my PB&J (Seneca made the lunches today) into my mouth.

"I di'n't 'ell 'ou?"

"No, you didn't. Geez, you like keeping secrets from me, don't you, Harper?"

I gulp the mouthful down. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, what about your moonlight tryst with Erik? You didn't tell me about *that* either."

Brother, does Holly make everything sound so dramatic. "What's to tell? We took a walk in the woods during the caving trip last weekend."

"Bully. He *kissed* you and you didn't tell me."

She's a four-foot ten, black-haired Sherlock Holmes. "How'd you find *that* out?"

"Totally beside the point. Why didn't you tell me? That's the sort of juicy stuff best friends are *supposed* to blab about to each other."

"It was no big deal, Holls. It just happened."

"Yeah, but was it any *good*?"

"Holls, can we drop this and get back to my real problem?"

"No. Spill."

I sigh. "I'd rather forget about it."

"Why? Did the kiss suck?"

"Kinda. I mean, Erik is cute as anything, but it happened the day my horrible Cold-from-Hell started."

"So?"

"Well, it wasn't very romantic. Okay, so we were on a trip to Sykes..."

"To what?"

"Sykes Cave. That's where our caving club takes beginners, like Erik and his mom, so they can decide if squirming through dark tunnels is their thing or not."

Holly grimaces. "Ugh. Caves. And was it? Erik's thing?"

"Yeah, he likes caving a lot, I think."

"Well, then you two were made for each other."

"You'd think, but let me finish. Okay, so the cave is all flat and sandy inside, no breakdown or deep drops or anything. On a normal day, I'd skip right through it. But that day, Sykes kicked the shit out of me. I mean, by the time I crawled out of there, my throat felt like I'd rubbed it with a roll of sandpaper and my nose was running so hard, you'd think it was trying out for the Olympic sprint team."

Holly laughs. "Okay...so? What about the kiss?"

"I'm getting there. So, that night, everyone else was sitting around the campfire and I decided I had to use the bathroom. I got up and Erik asked if he could come with me, so I said okay. I thought he wanted me to show him where the latrines were. But when we got there, he out-of-the-blue kissed me."

"He did?"

"Yeah, and I sneezed in his face."

Holly laughs so hard, milk runs out of her nose.

"It totally wasn't funny, Holls. It was humiliating. My first kiss and I couldn't even enjoy it."

Holly wipes her nose and coughs. "Bully if it was your first kiss."

"It *was*, swear. Boys don't like me like they like you."

"That's 'cause you're too shy. And they're scared of you. You're too much of a karate-kicking, rock-climbing tomboy. Guys like girls who act more...girly. You know, flirty and stuff."

I can't help bristling at her comment. "Geez, Holly, this isn't the Middle Ages. I'm not gonna bat my eyes and put on all that makeup and stuff, and act all helpless, just to get a guy. Anyway, Erik liked me fine, I guess, but I bet he doesn't now. He hasn't talked to me at all. Not even a text. I think he learned his lesson."

the trouble with dead people

"Which is?"

I shrug. "Never get romantic around port-a-johns with a sniffly girl?"

Holly rolls her eyes. "I bet he still likes you, Harper."

"Holls, let's change the subject, please?"

"Fine. So, what happened when you fainted?"

"I was at the top of the tree. That's where I saw the second dead person and fainted dead away. Dad climbed up and saved me from imminent death. He's all into that rescue stuff, you know. I bet he was happy I passed out. It gave him an opportunity to finally save somebody. I was only out for a minute or two. I was awake by the time we got to the ground. Anyway, about the dead people..."

Holly finally finds something she likes on her lunch tray and pops a meatball in her mouth.

"Fine. Dead people. Go on."

"The new one...the lady...she said she was sent to haunt me."

"Did she tell you why?"

I shake my head. "No, she didn't explain herself, and I haven't seen either her or Jake since."

"You sure maybe you aren't hallucinating or something? Maybe it's all the organic crap you always insist on eating. You should have a hot dog, something with a lot of chemicals in it. That might straighten you out."

"Stop it, Holls. I'm serious. I've been totally freaking out about what that lady said, that *someone* had sent her to haunt me. Was it Sarah Miller? She's the only person I can think of, but geez, her goat had it coming. I'd say it got as good as it gave. There was no reason to sock two ghosts on me."

"Of course there wasn't."

"So what should I do?"

Holly shrugs. "Seems to me, since they both disappeared, I wouldn't worry about it. Put it down to stress."

"Thanks. That helps a lot. What do I have to be stressed over?"

"I dunno. Exams?" Holly grins. "Or, maybe you're stressed 'cause you so *badly* want to talk to Erik again."

I can't help it, I roll my eyes.

"You need to confront him, or you'll go all nuts with worry," Holly says. "And whaddya know? There he is now. Hey, Erik! Over here!"

Ooh, I could throttle her. Erik's nose is red and chapped, but he's ridiculously cute anyway. He isn't buff like the jock kids, he's lithe, *like a cat*, as Holly would say. He sits next to me, gives me a shy smile, and snuffles. Did he get my cold, I wonder?

"Hey, Harper."

"Hi." Man, I'm not sure *what* to say now. Erik opens a pack of toaster pastries and shoves one in his mouth. "That's not healthy, you know."

Oh *geez*. Way to say something stupid, Harper. Erik shrugs. He gazes at me with his huge, brown eyes. They're like Bambi eyes, they're so big and sweet.

"So what's been going on with you?" he says. "Got over your cold okay?"

"Yeah. Sounds like you've got one now, though."

"Getting over it." He snuffles again and sucks down some more pastry.

Holly gives me a grin. "Harper's sorry she got you sick."

I try to kick her under the table but miss.

"That's okay," Erik says, smiling at me. "It was worth it."

Wow. Even though Erik's grin is kinda gross (he's got pieces of pastry stuck between his teeth) my stomach flip-flops. Now *that* I needed to hear.

"Heard you almost got into a fender bender the other day," the all-knowing Holly says.

Erik gulps down his mouthful. "Oh yeah. I wasn't feeling so good on Thursday so I drove home from school. Got so

the trouble with dead people

woozy I almost ran off the road. Missed hitting a deer by like an inch."

"Glad you're okay," I say, giving him a weak smile. What is *wrong* with me? Last time I talked to Erik, I blabbered on like a chattering chipmunk on five cups of coffee. Now I sound like a tongue-tied idiot.

Erik stuffs the last of his pastry into his mouth. "Yeah, I'm all better now. Well, mostly. Anything new going on?"

"Harper is talking to dead people," Holly says. Erik coughs so hard half his masticated pastry spews onto the table, and this time my foot *does* connect with Holly's leg. She winces and shuts up.

"I had a *dream* I was talking to dead people," I say, trying to cover it up so I don't come across so wacko. "That's all."

I avoid his gaze, then wish I hadn't. Because what my eyes fall on instead of Erik's brown pools of—dang, all I can think of to compare brown to is mud, but that isn't romantic—anyway, his *eyes*, is a smiling, waving, dead Corrine Wright.

I gulp. "She's back."

Holly peers over her shoulder. "Who's back?"

My clammy hands grasp the table—*God don't let me pass out here, or if you do, at least let Erik catch me*—and I mumble, "Scuse me for a minute."

Before Holly or Erik can say anything, I bolt from the cafeteria and sprint down the hall.

The janitor's closet door is wide open. It's a tight fit, but nobody spots me ducking in. I don't want Holly or Erik figuring out where I got to. I need to be alone, collect my thoughts. I switch on the light and shut the door.

"Awfully cramped in here."

Corrine has one foot in a mop bucket and the other on a stack of paper towels. Behind her, Jake huddles in the deep sink.

"What the hell?" I blurt out. "Why can't you freaks stay away?"

"We can't help it, dear. You're stuck with us."

"Why?"

Corrine smiles at me like she's my long-lost aunt or something. "Well, best I can figure out is, it's your fault we're dead."

"What?!"

Corrine giggles. "I'm sorry, dearie, but it's true."

Jake nods. "You killed us, Harper."

I stare at them. The ridiculousness of this whole thing smacks me like a cold wave hitting the sand.

"Are you both serious? Listen, you people have the wrong girl. Jake, you said you died a couple days ago. I haven't been out of my house practically all week. I've been *sick*. So I'm sorry you're dead and all, but FYI: *not* my fault."

"Well, not directly your fault, dear," Corrine says with a girlish giggle. "But indirectly, now *that's* a different story."

"What do you mean indirectly? And what's so funny? This is *not* a laughing matter."

"I'm sorry, I can't help it." Rolls of fat jiggle over her skirt as she tries to hold it in. She takes a couple of deep breaths. "I died when I was happy."

"So?"

"So, I can't be anything but cheerful now, thanks to you."

Her vibrant smile sends shivers down my spine. I turn to Jake. "And you? Died in a pissy mood, or what?"

Jake drops his eyes to study the sink drain. "Whatever."

Corrine belts out a boisterous laugh. "He's sixteen. It's the age, you know?"

"No, I do *not* know. I'm gonna be sixteen soon and I don't get all moody and depressed."

"Well, it happens to some kids," Corrine says. "Anyway, he died in a funk so he'll remain in a funk. That's how it works."

The sound of a zillion kids stampeding down the hall like elephants lets me know lunch break has ended. I lower my voice.

the trouble with dead people

“Listen. What exactly do you mean when you say I...*indirectly*...killed you?”

Jake frowns. Corrine opens her mouth to answer as the door flies open. Mr. Washington, our Older-than-Moses janitor, sticks his bulbous nose into my hidey-hole and snarls.

“What the...? Get outta my closet, kid, and get to class. Now!”

“Fine.” I scoot out, glancing over my shoulder. Mr. Washington’s arms poke right through Jake’s stomach as he washes his hands in the sink. Can’t he *feel* that? Corrine Wright gives me a jaunty wave. Ugh. I turn away, my heart set back on hummingbird mode.

Indirectly. How on Earth do you *indirectly* kill someone?

five

Snookums lies next to me as I dig my hands into the dirt. Why does dirt feel so good against the skin? I should bottle it and sell it as a beauty product. I'd make a fortune if people weren't so squeamy about mud. Like Seneca, who sits at the picnic table slurping on a chocolate milkshake and frowning at me like I'm dousing my hands in vomit instead of good, clean soil.

"Yuck," she says between slurps. "Why do you want to do that?"

"If nobody ever weeded," I say as I yank on an obstinate vine, "you'd never get to eat anything. Vegetables don't grow themselves, you know."

"Sure they do," Seneca says. "They've been growing way before people showed up on this planet."

"Not in nice, neat rows they didn't. I swear, I'm convinced more and more that you're adopted. Nobody from this family could possibly hate dirt. I don't, Dad doesn't, even Mom liked to get messy."

"I'm not adopted," Seneca says. "I'm an alien."

the trouble with dead people

"I'll believe that too."

"I'm an alien from the Planet Vanet. And on Planet Vanet, everything is neat. No dirt."

"Then how does the grass grow?"

"It's all hydraulic. All the grass grows hydraulically."

"You mean hydroponic, dummy."

"Okay, hydroponic. Whatever the word is for 'with water, not dirt.'" She swings her legs over the picnic bench and stands.

"What kind of plant is that anyway?"

"You're Miss Know-Everything and don't know something as simple as that?"

Seneca tosses her hair. "I don't bother learning day-to-day stuff. If it isn't a weird or useless fact, it's not worth my time."

"It's asparagus, you goofball. One of the few Old Witch Miller's goats didn't uproot." I pat the dirt around the precious plant.

"Geez, don't say her name." Seneca crosses her fingers and peers over the fence.

I can't help it, I glance over my shoulder too. Saying Sarah Miller's name is comparable to calling down a plague of locusts. But old Sarah is nowhere to be seen.

Someone else tromps up the street, though. He hesitates for a minute at our front gate before he walks right through it.

Through it. Snookums whines and scrambles for his "safe zone" under the picnic table.

"What is it, boy?" Seneca asks.

I don't have to ask my dog what *it* is, I can see *it* for myself. A tall dark-skinned man in a crisp gray suit strides up the driveway.

Correct that. A tall dark-skinned *dead* man in a crisp gray suit. He must be since Seneca isn't acknowledging him at all, and she's always Miss Gregarious whenever she meets anybody.

The dead guy stomps up to my vegetable garden and stares at his wrist.

“Where are they? They’re late.” He speaks in a clipped voice and glares at me through bushy eyebrows.

“Did you die angry?” I ask.

“Did who die *what*?” Seneca, who’s half under the picnic bench trying to calm Snookums, says.

The man frowns. “I don’t get angry. But I don’t like it when people are late.” He digs in his pants pocket, pulls out a little black thing, and talks into it. “Note to self. The rest are late. This shouldn’t be tolerated.”

“Are you talking into a tape recorder? Do they still *make* those things? And what do you mean by ‘the rest?’ There’s only two others and there sure as hell better not be any more.”

Boy, I hope I’m right. “There *aren’t* any more, are there?”

The man glares at me. “How would I know? All I know is that I’m supposed to meet the others here and you are still living, so you aren’t one of them.”

“Here we are!” Corrine waddles through the gate and gives a cheerful wave. Jake slumps behind her, looking for the world like a morose Shaggy following a fat Scooby Doo. I wonder where they disappear to when they aren’t bugging me.

“So, I guess I killed you too.”

The dead guy frowns. “If you say so.”

I scrutinize this new ghost. He’s busy smoothing out a wrinkle in his immaculate suit. God, when is this going to stop? Are new ghosts going to pop up every day?

“So who are you?”

“Pardon me. Oliver Crane. Head CEO at Crane Enterprises. We specialize in—”

“She doesn’t care about any of that,” Corrine says. “You’re dead, Oliver. You aren’t head of anything anymore.”

“Doesn’t mean I can’t introduce myself properly.” Oliver stands as stiff as a poker. He sticks out his hand.

the trouble with dead people

I reach out to shake it. And discover the obvious. You can't shake the hand of a ghost. There's nothing there. Just...nothing. No tingling sensation like they talk about in books, no prickly feeling of dread.

Nothing.

"I can see you and I can hear you. But I can't feel you at all." I pull my hand away. "Can you do anything to me?"

Oliver scratches his head. "Do anything to you?"

"Yeah, like in a harmful way. I mean, you can't move that brick over there with your mind and fling it into my face or anything, can you?"

Oliver seems lost with my question, but Corrine, who has more experience in ghostly things, steps in. "No, sweetie. We can't do anything to you. We're just here."

"So can I ignore you then? If you can't do anything physical to me and you can't manipulate me in any way, I can pretend you aren't here. And maybe you'll go away."

Corrine laughs in her creepy, boisterous way. "Well, you can try. But it isn't that simple."

"But you can't touch me."

A cold hand pushes my lower back. My heart leaps right through my mouth and skips off down the road.

"Holy...Seneca! Don't *ever* sneak up on me like that again!"

"Sorry, but who on Earth are you babbling to?"

Geez, I totally forgot she'd been there under the picnic table with Snookums, who finds a rare burst of courage and crawls into the sunshine. He doesn't growl, though. He whines and stares at the dead people.

"I'm...I'm not talking to anybody."

"Sure you are. You're having a full-fledged conversation. Who is it?"

Now, if I saw my sister gabbling on to nobody, I'd be hunting down the nearest loony-bin worker and dragging him over

here to cart her away. But Seneca isn't giving me the freak-eye or running to find Dad. She stares at me with her buggy eyes and waits for an answer.

"Seneca," I say as levelly as I can, "I think I'm cursed."

Seneca gives me a solemn nod, like she's known all along and was waiting for me to say it.

"You pissed off Sarah Miller."

"You think?"

"You shouldn't have kicked her goat. Those goats are her kids." Seneca notes my obvious confusion at this statement and grins. "Not *real* kids. But the way she gets all gushy over 'em, she's gotta think of those goats like you think of Snookums."

Okay, I get that. She loves her goats. But now I've got two things to ponder. One: Sarah Miller, the Witch of Wagnerville, might have feelings? Actual humany-maternal feelings? Even if they are aimed at a bunch of smelly goats? That's a hard one to swallow.

And still niggling in the back of my brain: why are these three dead people—smiling Corrine, frowny Jake, and Oliver, tapping his foot and staring at his watch—so convinced *I* killed them?

I take a leap of faith.

"Seneca. Do you believe in ghosts?"

"Never seen one, but I guess that doesn't prove they *don't* exist. Is this why Snookums has been acting so freaktacular lately? Do we have ghosts?"

I nod. "Three of them. They're all standing in the driveway."

Seneca squints. "I don't see 'em."

"We see you," Corrine says, waving.

I put my hands on her shoulders and stare squarely into her eyes. "Seneca, do you believe me?"

"Sure," Seneca says. Not a bit of hesitation or a hint of fear. Just a weird acceptance. I *definitely* have the oddest sister on

the trouble with dead people

the planet. "Was one of 'em in your room the other day? The boy I couldn't see?"

"Yup."

"Hey, can they do tricks?" she says. "Like levitate things and control your movements, cool stuff like that?"

"I don't think so."

"Bummer. Well, what do they want?"

I take a deep breath. "They want to haunt me, I guess."

"Why?"

"Because I killed them."

Seneca takes a step back and almost trips over Snookums, who has inched out from under the picnic table. "You did? Seriously?"

"No, not seriously. *They* say I killed them. But I've never killed anybody, honest."

"Not directly, dear," Corrine says.

"That's right, not directly. They say I killed them *indirectly*. But what does that mean? They haven't bothered to fill me in yet."

"Why don't you ask them?" Seneca says.

"Dang it, I *have* been asking them. But I always get interrupted." I turn to my three unwanted guests. "*How* did I kill you?"

Oliver and Corrine send nervous glances at each other. Jake clears his throat.

"I'll go first."

"Really?" One-Syllable Jake is going to participate in a discussion? Now I'm doubly intrigued.

"Yeah. I was the first, so it's only fair. But you might want to have a seat on that picnic bench over there. This is gonna take some explaining."

six

I don't ever want to leave my bed. Here, I can't see the ghosts. My face is stuffed in the pillow and I've pulled the blanket over my head. Snookums snuggles next to me, hiding too. Never mind that between the blankets and the dog, I'm sweltering away. I'm in my cocoon and here's where I'll stay.

I hear them, though, shuffling around my room. Snookums has given up growling at the intruders. He's getting used to them, I guess. A permanent fixture in our little world. But I'm nowhere near as accepting as Snooky.

Every so often, Oliver lets out an impatient cough. I see him in my brain—not that I want to, but there he is—checking his watch, staring at my bed, willing me to get up and move. Right now, Jake is probably studying his fingers because he can't think of anything better to do. Corrine has a cheery smile plastered on her chubby face and her twinkling eyes scan the room, hoping I'll get over my mopiness and rejoin their little phantom party.

But I don't want to. I don't want to have a thing more to do with those dead freaks.

the trouble with dead people

A rap on the door permeates the pillow and enters my ears. "It's almost seven, Monkey. You're going to miss the bus if you don't get up."

"You can give me a ride."

"Nope. I have an important meeting this morning with Dean Chalmers and I can't be late."

I moan and peek over the covers. None of the dead people are in my line of sight, just Dad's legs.

"I don't wanna get up."

Dad sighs, strides in, and sits on the edge of my bed.

"What's wrong? You've been acting all gloomy lately."

I pull the covers away from my face. "Dad, have you ever heard of the Butterfly Effect?"

"Sure."

Of course he has. He's a professor. He knows everything.

"Do you think it's real?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, do you think something somebody does, *completely innocently*, by the way, could have disastrous consequences somewhere else? Like say, a kiss."

Dad frowns. "A kiss? You were kissed?"

"Geez, Dad, this is theoretical, okay? Say somebody who had a cold kissed someone else and got them sick. And that person got so sick he swerved his car on the way home and almost hit a deer. And the deer ran off in a different direction from where it was supposed to go, ending up in a parking lot where it kicked some old lady's car. And the old lady had to fill out a police report, so she missed the plane she was supposed to take to San Diego for her grandkid's christening. And because it waited for her an extra *minute*, the plane caught a downdraft wrong and some man's phone slid out of his pocket because of the turbulence, but he didn't know it."

Dad stares at me like I've got snakes exploding out of my skull. "Is this going somewhere?"

"I'm getting to the point, just listen. So the man leaves his phone on the plane and because of that, he goes back to look for it and misses his bus. He takes a cab instead, which, because this *particular* guy got into it, heads in a totally different direction from where it otherwise would have and gets into a car accident. With another car. And the boy in the other car, who wasn't paying attention anyway, because he was fiddling with his radio dials, dies."

"In San Diego," Dad says to clarify a completely irrelevant point.

"Yes. But see, the whole chain of events got started because a girl kissed a boy."

"A sick girl."

"Right."

"So what's your point, Harper? I have no *idea* where you're going with this."

Aargh. Could I make it any simpler? "Because the sick girl kissed the boy, the whole chain of events ended up with another boy getting killed. So do you think it's the girl's fault? Indirectly, of course."

Dad laughs. "Why would it be the girl's fault? Sounds like the fault is with the boy who fiddled with the radio dials when he should have been paying attention to the road."

"Yeah, but if the cab hadn't been coming towards him, he wouldn't have run into it and died."

"Still his fault. Plus, if you're basing it on a sick girl, why isn't it the fault of the person who got the girl sick in the first place? Then she wouldn't have passed her cold to the boy and he wouldn't have swerved the car."

He's got a good point there.

"Thing is, Harper, everything may be connected to each other, sure. Like a butterfly flapping his wings and causing a hurricane

the trouble with dead people

on the other side of the world. But to say anybody has control over *any* of it, or one person is responsible for the outcome, it could never be proved, you see? I think it's a safe bet to assume that the girl who kissed the boy is completely innocent of all wrongdoing. And why, may I ask, is this worrying you?"

I glance at the three dead people sitting on my dresser. "It isn't." I throw him a cheerful smile to prove it and swing out of bed. "Just a question posed to us in class. I've been pondering it, that's all."

"Well, great. And if that's the only problem you're grappling with this morning, there's no need for you to miss the bus." He gives my hair an annoying ruffle and closes the door behind him. I direct my next comment at my unwanted guests.

"See, your logic doesn't make any sense." I nod my head towards Jake. "I didn't kill him. And I didn't kill you, Corrine. *Your* story is even more implausible."

"Then what are we doing here, love?" Corrine asks, flashing her yellow teeth at me. "Answer me that."

I shrug. "Maybe it's a mix-up or something. Dad's right. Jake, go find the person who gave me the cold if you're so upset over your death."

"I'm not upset," Jake says.

"You're not anything. Don't you have any emotions at all?"

Jake shrugs. *Bother* his irritating complacency.

"Look, I've gotta get ready for school. I've got one more day to get through, then we're going caving this weekend, and none of you better show up on that trip. Give me a weekend to enjoy myself and relax."

"I'm not sure if that's possible," Corrine says.

I stop pulling on my socks.

"What do you mean you're 'not sure'? You've disappeared before. You were gone a whole two days before you showed up with another ghost in tow." I jerk my head towards

Oliver. "Where'd you head off to then? And why can't you do it again?"

Corrine frowns. "We went to someplace foggy. I'm not sure why we ended up there, or how we got back. We sure didn't go there by choice."

Jake nods. "That fog was a scary place."

Scary or not, I wish they'd have stayed in it. "What about yesterday afternoon? After Jake told me how he died? You guys disappeared then."

"No," Corrine says, smiling. "We thought you needed some space so we stayed in the other room. We conveniently got out of your way."

"Well, why can't you *stay* out of my way?"

"It's boring in the other rooms," Jake says. "We'd rather be with you."

"But I don't want you here. Don't *I* have any say in this?"

"You don't seem to," Corrine says, a cheerful smile on her face.

Aargh. What could be more exasperating than three pesky ghosts? I pull on my clothes and head downstairs. My insistent shadows traipse after me, followed by Snookums.

Seneca sits at the kitchen table, pouring way too much milk into her cereal. I try to make her a decent breakfast like Mom always insisted on, but sometimes I don't feel like it. Dad keeps up Mom's Saturday breakfast tradition, but pancakes are all he can make. If we want a decent meal that doesn't come out of a box or a take-out bag, I always end up cooking it. Seneca, of course, is perfectly happy with her sugary cereal.

I plunk into a chair next to her. "Hey."

"Mornin'. If you want any cereal, too late. I've got the last of it."

"Thanks for sharing," I say, punching her in the arm.

"I can't share it with you now. It'll get all mushy before you're ready to eat it. Did you know it takes this particular cereal exactly four minutes to get soggy? I timed it."

the trouble with dead people

"I don't care, I'm not hungry anyway."

"Oh." Even though Dad isn't in the room, Seneca leans forward and uses her best conspiratorial whisper. "Ghost trouble?"

"What else? They're driving me nuts. I got absolutely no sleep last night. Look at the circles under my eyes. I'm turning into a raccoon."

Seneca giggles. Lots of help she is.

"Are they here now?"

"No, they're 'conveniently staying out of my way' for breakfast. I wish they'd stay that way. Or disappear altogether. Or at least give me a head's up before they barge back in. It's freaky. I never know when they're going to pop up."

"Any more of 'em, or still just the three?"

"Just the three. Oliver sure is annoying. I'm pretty sure he thinks it's beneath his dignity to be here. Anyway, I talked to Dad about the whole butterfly effect thing. He says it has nothing to do with me, even though I didn't tell him about the ghosts."

"But they're here, following you, so it must."

Seneca's reasoning doesn't make me feel better. I sigh. "Yeah, I think so too. I mean, Dad made a lot of sense. If somebody hadn't given me the cold, I wouldn't have gotten sick."

"Maybe Sarah Miller gave you the cold."

"How? I've never gotten near enough for her to pass something like that on to me."

"Yeah, but I bet she gave it to you anyway. I bet she cursed you with it, for kicking her goat. What about the other two? How'd they wind up deader than doornails?"

"Can we talk about this *after* I've eaten breakfast?"

"I thought you said you weren't hungry."

I stick my tongue out at her and rummage through the fridge. I find the last bran muffin from the batch I baked last week. A little stale and crunchy, but not bad if washed down with a glass of milk.

“So, about the other ghosts,” Seneca says, refusing to let a dead dog lie, “you said the super-happy lady died after her husband gave her a present.”

“Yeah, he gave her diamond earrings. For their thirtieth wedding anniversary. That’s why she died happy.”

“She died on her anniversary? Her poor husband.”

“Poor Corrine, too.”

“So how does that come back to you?”

“Well, he stopped at the jewelry store to pick up the present, then got stuck in traffic because a truck had spilled a load of boards onto the highway. The driver stacked them wrong because he was upset. He had gotten a call from his girlfriend saying she was breaking up with him. The girlfriend—who is from our town, by the way—broke up with him after she met another guy at the convenience store last Friday. The reason she met him in the first place was because I apparently bought the last crappy, lukewarm, half-shrunk hot dog, and she was waiting around for the clerk to put out some fresh ones when this new love of her life walked in.”

“You bought a hot dog?”

“I thought Snookums would like it.” No way would *I* have eaten a chemical-laden hot dog. Even Snookums could barely gulp the gunk down.

Seneca slurps her mushy cereal. “So wait, how did giving his wife diamonds kill her?”

“He surprised her right when she was eating and she choked.”

“She died choking because her husband gave her a present? Boy, that scenario is pretty stupid,” Seneca says.

“It is, but there you go. Somehow, because I bought a crap-o hot dog for Snookums, Corrine’s husband gave her the present *while* she was eating instead of *before*, and now Corrine is pushing up daisies. I looked up her obit. Her funeral was yesterday. I was almost tempted to go to it, except it was eighty miles

the trouble with dead people

away. And could you imagine if her ghost had followed me to her own funeral? How freaky would that have been? Why'd I have to pick up the last hot dog? Why couldn't it have been the second to last?"

Seneca frowns. "Harper, how did the ghosts even find out all this? About how they died and how you were connected to it all?"

"Okay, they told me how, and this is crazy-weird. You ready for this?"

Seneca licks her spoon. "Shoot."

"Those first couple of days, when they disappeared, they said they ended up in this weird fog. And when they were in the fog, something whispered to them and told them what happened."

"Something *what*?"

I shrug. "They couldn't tell me. But Jake and Corrine both heard the whispers."

"What about the new guy? Oliver?"

"He showed up yesterday, Seneca. He died like less than two days ago. He said he hadn't been through the fog yet, so he's clueless. God, it's creepy, Seneca. I am so freaked right now."

Seneca shakes her head. "That's definitely messed up. But Harper, I don't care what your ghosts say. You didn't kill 'em. You know that, right?"

I plop down next to her and take a bite of my stale muffin. "I know, Seneca, but why are they here? And are they really here? Or am I going all loopy? I'm scared, Seneca."

And oh dang, I try to swallow the lump in my throat, but up it comes, all burbling and sad. Hot tears sear my cheeks. Seneca puts her spoon down and gives me a big hug.

"It's okay, Harper," she says. "You aren't nuts. There's gotta be a reason for the ghosts. And if they can't tell us why they're stuck haunting you, we'll have to figure it out ourselves."

seven

I'm smushed with Erik in the back seat (which, even though it's cramped, I sure won't complain about) as Dad bounces the Jeep over a bumpy dirt road. We're on our way to Moone's Cave, my all-time favorite crawl-around-and-get-muddy spot.

Dead people or not, I'm happy today. I refuse to stress out. I'm going caving. There's nothing like getting underground to make me forget all my troubles. And since Erik's now officially part of our caving group, he's here too. To add icing to the cake, I convinced Holly to come along, although she's a lot like Seneca. Dirt isn't her thing.

"So how'd you get the name *Harper*?" Erik says.

"Oh, that." I roll my eyes. "Dad, you wanna field this question?"

Dad laughs. "Harper's mom and I weren't exactly great on picking normal names for our kids, I'm afraid. On our honeymoon, we went to Harper's Ferry. You've been there, right?"

"I haven't lived here long enough," Erik says. "But it sounds familiar. Doesn't it have to do with the Civil War or something?"

the trouble with dead people

“That’s right. John Brown made his famous stand there. Anyway, the states of Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia meet at Harper’s Ferry, along with the convergence of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers.”

“Did you know John Brown had twenty kids?” Seneca says. “No joke.”

“Really?” Erik says.

“Miss Seneca-o-Pedia strikes again,” I say. “There’s some great cliffs at Harper’s Ferry, fantastic for rappelling.”

“Anyway, that’s where Harper was conceived,” Dad finishes. “So, since we couldn’t agree on a normal name, she got stuck with Harper.”

“And Seneca?” Erik asks.

“Named for Seneca Rocks, one of our caving club’s favorite camping areas. You’ll have to join us there some time.”

“Cool,” Erik says, giving me a stomach-flipping smile. Dad glances at us through the rear-view mirror. Even sitting behind him, I can tell he has a frown on his face.

“Erik,” he says, “didn’t you come down with a cold last week?”

Uh-oh. He’s putting two and two together, and I’m not ready for my over-protective dad to finish *that* equation yet.

“Isn’t it cool Holly’s coming with us this trip, Dad?” I say. “Never thought I’d get her into a cave again.”

“Not after the last fiasco,” Holly says. “I still have nightmares about it.”

Dad laughs. “Holly, that happened when you were ten. And it wasn’t so bad.”

“Wasn’t so bad? Are you kidding? Erik, I was so scared of the dark when I was a kid, I slept with a nightlight until I was nine. Then, my inappropriately chosen best friend over here decides I should come caving. You know what’s in caves, Erik?”

“Bats?” Erik guesses.

“Dark. Lots and lots of icky dark. So what happened? I got lost from the others and my headlamp died. It was completely terrifying. I haven’t set foot in a cave since.”

I can’t help snorting at this lame-o sob-story. “You didn’t get lost. We had just turned the corner. As soon as we heard your pitiful screams, we came right back. Geez.”

Holly ignores me and goes on. “You won’t believe what they made me do. They made us all turn off our lights. It was pitch-black in there. I mean so pitch-black, I felt like I’d never even been born. Like a vast void of nothing. *Please* don’t make us do that this time, Harper.”

“Okay, I won’t,” I say. “Even though Light’s Out is always the funnest part, Miss Killjoy.”

We pull into Mrs. Moone’s driveway and park with the other caver cars. Old Mrs. Moone hobbles out of her ramshackle farmhouse, followed by a teeny lamb who tumbles off the porch.

Seneca jumps out of the car and races up the driveway. She scoops up the bleating pile of cuteness. “Ooooh! He’s precious.”

The animal, happy with his new role of lap-lamb, gives Seneca a wet lick on her cheek.

“Good thing we didn’t bring Snookums,” I yell to her as I pull our caving gear out of the Jeep.

Seneca grins. “Yeah, he’d have been scared to death.”

We climb onto the porch and sit in Mrs. Moone’s assortment of rickety chairs. Seneca sits cross-legged on the porch swing, scratching the lamb behind its ears.

Mrs. Moone clucks to the lamb. “His mother died, so I’ve been bottle raising him. Now he’s spoiled silly. He thinks he’s people.”

She hands us a big ledger book, which we all sign. Since the cave is on Mrs. Moone’s property and she’s nice enough to let us crawl around in it, we sit around and chat with her for a bit. Seneca coos to the lamb while Mrs. Moone yaps on. She

the trouble with dead people

must be pretty lonely, living on this mountain all by herself. She always gabs our ears off when we come up here.

Erik falls in step next to me as we hike across Mrs. Moone's sheep pasture to the cave.

"So why is your caving club called HODAG?" he asks. "I don't get it."

"Stands for Heart of Dixie Appalachian Grotto, or HODAG for short. You do know what a hodag is, don't you?"

"No."

"Oh man, they're super creepy. Keep an eye out. This cave has hodags all over the place. Positively teeming with 'em."

"Yeah, but what *are* they?"

I give him a mysterious smile. "You'll see."

"Wait...what?" Holly asks, jogging on her short legs to keep up. "I didn't think anything lived in these caves. Except bats, which are creepy enough."

"Bats aren't creepy," Seneca says. "They're cool. Did you know one bat can eat up to six thousand insects in one single night?"

I nod. "But there won't be many in there now. This is a hibernation cave, so we can't explore it in the winter, 'cause we don't want to disturb the bats when they're sleeping. But in the summer, this cave is pretty bat-free."

"Yeah, so all you have to watch out for are the hodags," Seneca says.

Holly stops in her tracks. "I'm not going."

"Aw, come on Holly," I say, grinning.

"No, I'm not going. Not until you tell me what a hodag is. Is it scary? Is it like a spider?"

I pull Holly away from Erik and Seneca, who keep trudging after the others.

"There's no such thing as hodags, silly. It's just a caver joke. Trying to scare newbies with stories about the big bad Hodag is tradition. Stop getting all fruity on me."

“Well, it’s a stupid tradition,” Holly says, but she shuts up and doesn’t give away the gag to Erik.

Moone’s Cave is chock full of beautiful shimmering stalactites. To get inside the cave though, we have to wade down a stream and follow it into a big hole in the cliff. Outside, insects buzz around in the muggy air, but the instant I step into the darkness, cool air surrounds me. I turn on my headlight and listen to everyone else’s voices echoing off the walls.

“This is slippery,” Holly says, inching behind me.

“Just go slow and keep your hand on the wall. You’ll be okay.”

I love this cave. I’ve come here every year since I was six. June would seem so not-right if I didn’t get my Moone’s Cave fix. I’ve memorized every crook and crevice, every stone in the creek, every crack in the ceiling. I never get tired of it and always feel so relaxed when I’m here.

My favorite spot is a small room way in the back. Shimmery crystals cover the walls and a big column rises right in the middle. To get to the room, you have to Army crawl about ten feet; the tunnel leading to it is only inches high. Holly grumbles the whole crawl, but she makes it. Erik and Seneca slither in after us, while Dad opts out and explores the main room.

We huddle in the small alcove. It barely holds all four of us.

“This is a great room for Lights Out,” I say.

“Oh no,” Holly says. “No, you promised, Harper. No Lights Out.”

“Okay, how about Mostly Lights Out?” I dig through my caving pack and pull out a small tea candle. “I’ll light the candle and we’ll turn out all the other lights.”

“We can tell ghost stories,” Seneca says.

Holly sucks in her breath, but I beat her to the protest.

“No! No ghost stories, Seneca.”

“Oh, right. Sorry, Harper.”

“Why?” Erik says. “Don’t you like ghost stories, Harper?”

the trouble with dead people

“Not in here.” The ghosts haven’t bugged me for at least a day now. I haven’t seen them since the thunderstorm yesterday afternoon and I sure don’t want them popping up in this place.

I light the candle and we turn off our head lights. The flickering candle emits a weak glow; enough to see, but not too far. Something covers my glove and I jump in surprise. Erik gives me a stomach-flipping smile and squeezes my fingers. Wow, was it a good idea to bring him in here and shut off the lights, or what? Now I wish I hadn’t invited Holly and Seneca to join us.

“Tell us about the hodags,” Erik says.

“Okay, let’s see.” I’ve never been asked to describe a hodag and Erik’s guess is as good as mine on what one might look like. “They have eight legs, like Holly said. But they aren’t a spider. They eat bats. Ummm....”

“Don’t forget about the glowing red eyes and the three inch teeth,” Seneca says.

Erik’s laugh reverberates off the walls. “*Three inches?*”

From somewhere in the darkness, somebody hisses, “They like to eat children too.”

My scream reverberates through the small room before I can contain it. An icy numbness grips my heart as I fumble for my headlamp’s ON button.

“Did you see one?” Erik says. He’s still laughing, but all I want to know is: whose voice did I hear? It’s definitely not a familiar voice. The grating sound chills me worse than Gatchey Creek does when we stupidly jump into its frigid waters on New Year’s Day.

It’s a foul voice.

Now Holly starts to freak. She flicks on her light.

Seneca stares at me with her big eyes and tugs on a strand of her hair. “Harper, is a ghost in here now?”

“I’m getting out of here.” Holly scrambles toward the crack leading out and the relative safety of Dad and the big room

beyond it. I don't try to stop her. She's got the right idea. No way do I want to be stuck in here with some insane creep-o either. But I can't move. Something shifts in the corner and I'm too petrified to crawl away.

He leers at me from around the big column, a smirking grin barely covering rotting teeth. Wisps of grey hair frame a sunken, splotchy face. Cold eyes stare at me. What I wouldn't give for Corrine's cheerful laugh right now. She's dead, but she's at least happy dead.

This is not a happy ghost. I don't need anyone to tell me *this* ghost is pure evil.

eight

Okay, so now Erik thinks I'm a complete whack job and Holly swears she's never setting foot into a cave again.

"You'll never get me in another one, Harper," she says as we splash through the creek and up the bank. She's muddy and dripping wet, shaking, and mad as a hornet. "That was a crappy trick to pull."

What can I tell her? I tried the honest "I'm seeing ghosts" approach, but she isn't buying, and now she's even madder because she thinks I'm trying to make her look stupid on purpose.

"It's true," I say. "I've been seeing dead people all week. I *told* you that, but you refuse to believe me. Remember when I ran out of the cafeteria on Monday? Ghosts."

Holly glares at me. "Harper, get real. There's no such things as ghosts."

"That *was* a little weird when you rushed out," Erik says, "but do you really believe dead people are following you around?"

I take a deep breath. "Yes."

"You need to talk to somebody. A psychologist, maybe."

I blink away my frustrated tears. "You think I'm crazy."

"No, not crazy," he says, although his eyes dart around, like if they meet mine, he might go all freakazoid too. Angry prickles stab my gut. The prickles feel suspiciously like my irrational, out-of-sorts time of the month, although it isn't due for another two weeks.

"She's telling the truth," Seneca says. "My sister wouldn't lie."

"Have *you* seen the ghosts?" Erik asks.

"No. But Harper has, and that's good enough for me. What did he say to you, Harper? To make you scream?"

I glance at the old man. He's standing in the creek behind us, grinning. He cackles.

"Your sister looks delish."

"Shut up!" I tell him. "Don't be so...disgusting."

"He's behind me now, isn't he?" Seneca takes a step backwards.

"Seneca, no. Stay away from that creep."

"Why? He's a ghost right? What's he gonna do to me? You already said they can't touch us." She keeps walking backwards. I can't help cringing when she backs right through the old man, who laughs and disappears.

"Geez, Seneca, don't do that again. He's a mean one. Not like the other three. This guy...man, he gives me the heebie-jeebies. I don't like any of 'em, but he scares the crap outta me."

"You know, both of you are freaking me out." Erik flips his eyes from me to Seneca. "There isn't anything there."

"He's right behind you now," I say.

Erik jumps and bolts forward, tripping on a rock and splashing into the creek. The old man behind him cackles.

"Sorry, Erik." I outstretch my hand to help him up, but he doesn't take it.

"Holly's right. You're nuts. And your jokes aren't funny."

"Oh, don't cry about falling into a six inch deep creek," Seneca says. "It's washing the mud off your clothes."

the trouble with dead people

Erik glares at her and stomps off after Holly. What a *jerk*. Why didn't I notice what a jerk he was before this?

Geez, did I really think that? I shake my head, trying to calm the irrational anger flooding through me. I mean, I guess it's warranted. Both my best friend and the boy who's supposed to like me stomped off in huffs, but come *on*. Get a grip, Harper.

"Well, missy, you sure know how to make friends." The dead guy moves closer. Too close. He's wearing tattered clothes and his fingers are covered in grime. Ugh. I direct my anger towards him instead. Feels good to take it out on *somebody*.

"Who the hell *are* you, and what do you want?"

The dead guy yawns. "Names Joe. Joe Johnston. And you're the little lady who did all those nice folks in."

"And I'm guessing now you're gonna tell me I did you in too."

Joe Johnston's mouth curls into a creepy smile. "Well, I'm dead ain't I?"

Maybe I did the world a big favor by inadvertently offing this jerkhole. But it still bugs me. "How'd you die?"

Thank God he's a ghost and I can't smell him. He's so close I want to back right into the creek, just to avoid his creepy nearness. "Wouldn't you like to know, missy. I don't think I'll tell you. But I will tell you, my death interrupted a most *pleasurable* experience."

I so don't want to know what this perv-o considers a pleasurable experience, but I blurt it out before I can stop myself. "And what was that?"

"Well," Joe says, "let's just say you're lucky the man I was busy murderin' isn't stuck following you around too."

Holy crap. A very rational and total fear replaces my irrational anger. I copycat Holly and Erik's moves and hightail it up the bank and through the sheep pasture. Seneca's hot on my tail. Joe Johnston's insane cackle echoes after us.

"What? What'd he say? Slow down!"

“Seneca, that guy is a murderer. He was *killing* someone when he died. And enjoying it.”

I don't stop running until we get to the cars, where everyone else is already stripping down and changing into clean clothes. Cavers aren't much on formality or modesty. Get out of the muddy clothes quick is our motto, and nobody cares who sees what. Holly hides behind a car door, but everyone else flings off their clothes with impunity.

Normally, I don't care who sees me. But I can't strip down in front of Erik. And God help me, but I don't want that creepy ghost seeing me naked either. I wait until my breathing steadies before I approach Holly.

“Scoot over,” I say.

“Why don't you pick another car door?”

She's still mad. Now's not the time to get explosive back. I take a few deep breaths and force my lips into a passable smile.

“C'mon, every other door is exposed to the road. Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you guys, honest. I'm more scared than both of you combined, trust me.”

Holly shakes her head. “I can't believe your story, Harper.”

“Geez, Holly, when have I *ever* had a weird sense of humor? You've known me since nursery school. I'm not one for making up things. I have as much imagination as a pile of bricks. Seneca's the one who always dreams up weird stuff. If *she* were ranting about seeing ghosts, I could understand you telling her to honk off. But *I'm* telling you. Boring, unimaginative me. Why would I make something like this up, especially out of the blue?”

Holly turns to face me. “You're right, about being a boring person,” she says (do I detect a hint of a grin?) “But c'mon, Harper. Dead people? How is that even possible?”

“I dunno. Seneca says Sarah Miller cursed me when I kicked her goat.”

the trouble with dead people

“Oh yeah, I forgot that part. Well there you have it, then.” Now I can’t tell if she’s being sarcastic or what. “Messing with old Miz Miller’s goats is definitely bad jujuub.”

“C’mon, Holls, you’ve gotta believe me. You’re my best friend.”

Holly sighs. “Can you prove it?”

“I don’t see how. Nobody else can see the ghosts, or hear them. I can’t even feel them.”

“What about the internet?” Seneca says.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you told me the ghosts all died because of something you did. And you know their names. So maybe we’ll find information about their deaths on the internet. Obituaries, or news stories, or something.”

Well, duh. Why didn’t I think of that? I guess I’m one of the few kids in the world who avoids computers like the plague, unless I’m looking up cooking recipes or gardening tips. Seneca’s always searching around for useless factoids and Holly’s got a researcher brain, so she spends half her life on-line. Me, I’d rather spend my afternoon at the dentist’s than in front of a computer.

“What were their names?” Holly asks. She’s now in Reporter Holly mode. She grabs a pen out of her purse.

“Umm...Jake Talcott, Corrine Wright, Oliver Crane, and this new guy. Joe Johnston. He might be the easiest person to find, since he said he was in the middle of killing a guy when he died.”

“Seriously, Harper?”

“Dead serious, Holls. See, how would I make that up?”

She gives me a small smile. I wonder if I can convince Erik as easy as I convinced Holly. The difference is, she knows me better.

We don’t talk much on the drive home. I’m glad we aren’t camping out tonight, I couldn’t take a whole evening of Erik avoiding me as if I had rat tails sprouting out of my armpits. He’s squished in the corner, as far as he can get from me.

From the trunk, Joe Johnston cackles.

“He’ll never believe you, missy. Not in a million years.”

Of course, I can’t answer him. That would seal my craziness coffin.

nine

"There he is. Holy cow."

Holly stares at the computer and I cringe. Joe Johnston's ugly mug takes up half the screen.

"He was robbing a convenience store," she says. "He shot the clerk. Then he turned right around and shot himself. They both died. Why would your ghost want to shoot himself after he robbed the place?"

"Maybe he felt sorry he killed the guy," Seneca says.

"Nope," Joe, who's sitting on my dresser and leering at us, says. God, I need to get him out of here. I stare back at him.

"So how'd that have to do with me?"

Joe grins. "Who says it did?"

Guess he hasn't been through the fog yet either.

"Why does it have to have anything to do with you?" Holly asks.

"Well, I'm somehow indirectly involved with the other three ghosts' deaths. I figure I have something to do with this one too, in some weird way, but he won't tell me what it is."

"When did he kick the bucket?" Seneca says.

Holly scrutinizes the screen. "It says he died at about ten this morning."

"About the same time we were entering the cave," Seneca says. "That proves it."

Holly blinks. "Proves what?"

"Proves Harper is telling the truth. She couldn't have read about this and faked it; it didn't happen until about an hour before she saw the ghost. That *is* him, isn't it, Harper."

I peer at the mug shot again. "It sure is."

"Says he spent thirty years in the slammer for murder." Holly gulps. "Wow, he *is* evil."

"Where is he now?" Seneca asks me.

"He's sitting in the corner, making obscene faces. God, he gives me the creeps. He'd better not be in my bedroom when it's time to go to sleep."

"Do the other ghosts hang out here at night?"

"Not usually. They leave me alone when I'm sleeping. And Snookums warns me when any of them come around."

Right now, Snookums is on the bed with his head resting on his paws. He stares at the corner and growls.

"Is that where he is now?" Holly whispers, pointing to the corner.

"Yup."

"Snookums can see him too?"

"I don't know if he can see Joe, or if he just feels him, but he sure knows something's there."

"What about the other...dead people?"

"Haven't seen 'em in a couple of days. Wish this one would disappear too."

"What's he like?"

I lower my voice to a whisper, hoping Joe, who's cackling to himself in the corner, can't hear me.

the trouble with dead people

“Creepy. Happy in a sick way. You know, if what Corrine said is true, about getting stuck with whatever emotion you died with, we’re in trouble. Corrine died happy, Jake died bored, Oliver, I guess died while he was running late for a meeting, and this guy...he kicked the bucket when he was killing someone, Holls. He’s stuck with murderous zeal as his one emotion.”

“But he can’t do anything about it now, can he? He’s dead.”

I shake my head. “He’s dead. I bet he can’t physically hurt anybody. But he can think. And talk. And that’s what scares me. These other ghosts freaked me out and messed with my mind, but not on purpose. They’re okay. Creepy, but okay. But this guy, geez. I’m not gonna get a good night’s sleep if he’s floating around in here. Thank God for Snookums.”

“We need to put a stop to this,” Seneca says.

“Yeah, but how? How do I get rid of these ghosts?”

“I know how.” Joe floats out of his corner and drifts towards us. “I know, little girl.”

“I’m not a little girl and stay away from me.” I can’t contain the fear coating my words. Not good. The worst thing I can do is come across weak in front of this jerkface. That’ll get him even more excited.

Holly shrinks in her chair. “Is he coming this way?”

“Of course he is, who do you think I’m talking to? The dog?”

Seneca doesn’t back away at all. “What did he say?”

“He says he knows how to get rid of the ghosts. Including himself, I’d guess. But I don’t believe him, Seneca. He’s evil. *You* heard me.” I level my gaze at the offensive ghost. “You’re evil.”

“Oh, you don’t have to tell *me*,” Joe grins. “I know already. I know plenty.”

Holly jumps up. “I can’t take it. This is too creepy. Harper, I believe you, but I’m leaving now. And I won’t get any sleep for a week, so thanks a lot.”

When Holly gets scared she gets sarcastic, but who does she think she's talking to? "Don't worry. I'm sure I won't either."

Holly stops mid-stride and turns around. "Geez, Harper, I'm sorry. I sound like a total butthole. Listen, I'll do some more research on the other ghosts, if you want, but I'm gonna do it from my ghost-free house."

I grin at her as she scoots out the door. "Thanks, Holls."

Seneca taps my shoulder. "Listen, I know who we need to talk to."

"Who?"

"Sarah Miller. She started this. And she can end it."

I turn to her. "Why do you think she'll talk to us? And why aren't you afraid of the ghosts like everyone else? Why do you even *believe* me?"

Seneca gives me one of her buggy-eyed stares. "Harper, when we were driving home from Mrs. Moone's, I fell asleep. And I had a dream. A super-vivid one."

"Your dreams are always vivid," I say. "And weird."

"Yeah, but this was extra vivid. And, I'll admit, extra weird."

I nod. "Go on."

"Well, in this dream, I was up in the mountains. Snookums was with me, but nobody else. We were walking through this forest of old, tall trees. Pine needles covered the ground and the whole place was super quiet. You couldn't even hear an insect buzzing."

She stops and twists a strand of hair around one finger. I glance over at Joe. He's quiet and listening with way too much intensity for my liking.

"Right off the road, sitting on a huge moss-covered rock, was this big, green frog. I mean *big*, like almost the size of Snookums. Well, the frog looked at me like he wanted me to follow him and hopped off the rock and took off through

the woods. So I did, and we came to this small cave entrance right next to a creek.

"The frog hopped into the cave and into this open room with nothing but a book lying in the middle of it."

I lean closer. Joe leans in too, licking his shriveled lips.

"Anyway, the book was a photo album. You know, like the kind Mrs. Moone always likes to show us before we go caving. There was a picture on each page. The first was a picture of a boy with a pimply face and greasy black hair and a stud in one ear. He was dressed all in black."

I suck in my breath. "Jake."

"She's making this up," Joe says. He doesn't sound murderously happy like before. His voice comes out flat and cold, and a thousand icicles slam into my skin. Seneca notes my terror, but goes on in her calm voice.

"The second picture had a fat lady in it. Blonde hair, a flowery shirt."

I nod. "Corrine."

"The third picture had a tall, dark guy in a suit."

"Oliver Crane."

"And the fourth...well, we all saw the picture on the internet today. I recognized it. It was the exact same mug shot I saw in that photo album."

"Seneca, are you serious? I mean, *really*? This is getting a little too freaky for me to handle."

"What, you mean it isn't already freaky enough? Listen, I'm not done yet."

"Please don't tell me there are more ghosts."

"Well, I'm not sure. The photo album had two more photos, both on the same page. The other photos were all like mug shots. Joe's might have been a *real* mug shot, come to think of it. But the last two pictures, one was of Sarah Miller. It was a full shot and she was feeding her goats."

“And the last photo?”

Seneca shrugs. “Some old lady in a rocking chair. I wasn’t sure who she was, but she looked kinda familiar.”

Oh man, this gets weirder and weirder.

“Seneca, I had a dream about an old lady in a rocking chair. That first night, when I woke up and found Jake sitting at the foot of my bed.”

“I wonder what it means,” Seneca says, giving the hair wrapped around her finger a pensive yank.

“It don’t mean nothin’,” Joe Johnston says in a cold, murderous voice. “She’s lyin’ to you, girlie.”

So the wrong thing to say. “Don’t you *dare* accuse my sister! C’mon, Seneca. We’re going to have it out with Sarah Miller.”

ten

I peer over the rickety picket fence. From behind the house, goats bleat and a couple of chickens screech back at them. Boy, am I glad we live at least six houses down. The only days we hear or smell the goats at our house are days when the wind travels up the street, which thank God doesn't happen much.

"What are we doing here?"

I spin around. Jake stands behind Joe, who wears a sour expression on his face. He's not too happy to see another ghost.

"Didn't I tell you to stay away from here?" Joe stares daggers at Jake, who gives his traditional shrug.

"Don't remember if you did. Why are we here?"

"To talk to Sarah Miller," I say.

"Wonderful! A house visit!" This from Corrine, who lights up with an ecstatic smile.

"Yeah, but we're not exactly welcome here, I'm guessing," Jake says, opening his heavy eyelids a bit and staring about the place. "Looks creepy."

"You're a ghost and you think it looks *creepy*?" I ask. Huh.

Oliver Crane strides up to the gate, checking his watch. "Let's hurry up and get this interview over with."

"Why? What are you late for? You're dead, Oliver. You don't have to be anywhere." I take a deep breath and push open Sarah Miller's gate.

Seneca gives me a goofy grin. She's almost laughing. This is so *not* the time for the giggles. Somewhere on the other side of this fence, Sarah Miller is probably hunkered over a caldron, murmuring enchantments and casting evil spells.

"What the hell is so funny, Seneca?"

"You. Talking to thin air. You should hear yourself. It's pretty entertaining."

"Erik sure doesn't think so."

"If Erik has any sense, he'll come around. You'll see." She pushes past the gate. I jump after her and grab her shoulder.

"Wait. What are we going to say to her? We can't walk up and say 'Hey, Sarah Miller, what gives with the cursing-with-dead-people thing?' She'll think we're nuts."

"*She's nuts*," Seneca says, "and she's key to all of this. I can't see the dead people like you, Harper, but I'm in on this too, even if it is because of that freaky dream. I *know* that dream is important. And I *know* we have to talk to Sarah Miller."

"Talk to me about what?"

"Holy geez!" I almost fall back through the gate, but a hissing "Nice to see you too, missy," from Joe propels me farther into Sarah Miller's yard.

She's here. How long has she been listening?

Sarah Miller *looks* like a witch. Old and stooped; ratty gray hair; mean, beady eyes. She shuffles on knobby knees when she walks. The only difference between Sarah Miller and your everyday fairytale witch is her clothes. Instead of a pointy hat and black dress, she's wearing a baseball cap and a pair of raggedy overalls cut off at the knees. She holds a pitchfork

the trouble with dead people

in one hand. Well, that's kind of like a broom. A broom with sharp, pointy spikes.

"What are you two doing in my yard? Come to kick another goat, Harper?"

I gulp. My mouth has gone all fuzzy. Why do the ghosts behind me not freak me out half as much as old Sarah Miller?

Snookums lets out a howl and bolts for the backyard.

"Oh crap. Snookums! Stay away from those goats!"

Seneca grins again. Not scared at all, the little pipsqueak. "Sorry, Mrs. Miller. We'll go get him."

She hauls off after Snookums and I stand there, shifting from one foot to the other, not sure what I'm supposed to do next. Sarah Miller's eyes bore holes into my skull, but I can't meet her gaze. What if she hexes me with something worse than the homicidal maniac ghost and his three somewhat less freaky companions?

"Your sister is impertinent," Sarah Miller says, stomping off after Seneca. "Come on, then."

I follow, still tongue-tied and not sure what to do. I glance behind me. The dead people hang by the gate, even Joe.

"Coming?" I hiss at them.

"We're not going in there," Corrine says. "Too scary."

"Plus, we aren't allowed," Oliver says.

"Says who?"

"Says Sarah Miller's goats."

Sarah Miller's goats? "Come again?"

"Those goats are evil," Jake says. Behind him, Joe's creepy grin almost covers his ugly, pockmarked face.

They sure don't have to tell me. Not after the destruction of my beautiful vegetable garden. I hate those cute, bleating goats as much as Snookums hates them. But if they're evil, why is Snookums making a beeline for their pen? He's the world's biggest wuss-dog. Although, he *has* growled at the ghosts,

which is pretty brave. Maybe he's getting over his scardy-cat mentality at last.

Seneca has the new Mighty Dog Snookums by the collar and tries her darndest to keep him from jumping into the goat pen. Through the wires, the goats bleat and glare at my dog. Right now they aren't cute at all. Their eyes are all red and angry. The angriest tries to head-butt the fence and ends up getting his horns stuck in the mesh. This drives Snookums bananas, so I grab on to his collar to avoid him dragging Seneca right through the fence.

"What the hell is wrong with your goats?" I say through gritted teeth.

Sarah Miller leans against a fencepost, smiling. "Nothing's wrong with my goats, girlie." She sounds so much like Joe, I almost do a double-take to make sure he hasn't replaced her. But nope, I'm staring at a real, live Sarah Miller, not some freak-o dead guy. She points her pitchfork towards me and I take a step backwards.

"I'll give you to the count of three to explain why you're trespassing on my property and bothering my animals, before I either use this, or call the cops. Got it?"

I gulp. I open my mouth, but not a peep comes out of it. Seneca lets go of Snookum's collar and straightens up. She stares Sarah Miller dead on. Wow. Brave.

"We want to know why you sent a bunch of dead people to haunt Harper."

Boy, does that sound dumb now that she's said it. But Sarah Miller blinks and lowers her pitchfork, just a smidgen. She narrows her eyes and stares at me.

"How many ghosts do you got?"

I stop yanking at Snookum's collar. Snookums froths at the mouth, but Sarah Miller's question gives me pause.

She knows. My mouth starts working again.

the trouble with dead people

"Four. They say I killed them."

"Did you?"

"No, dammit! If how they say they died is real, then it's all coincidence. It doesn't have anything to do with me."

"Doesn't it?"

"Stop asking me questions. I've had four dead people show up at my house this week. If I killed four people without even realizing it in one week, how many people's lives might I have inadvertently ended since my life began?"

Sarah Miller raises her eyebrows and doesn't answer. I'm glad. I don't want to know.

"I didn't curse you, girl," she says, her voice dropping to a whisper, almost as if she's afraid someone might overhear us. "Although you might've deserved it for kicking Ozzie. *He* cursed you, not me."

"You cursed the goats."

"No." She sighs and stares at the goat pen. The bleating goats have calmed and moved away from the fence. Snookums has quieted down too, although he's still growling. I can't keep my eyes off Sarah Miller. She looks almost sad.

"Tell me about the goats."

"No," Sarah Miller says. "And you need to go. I've told you all I'm going to say. Get that damned dog out of here. If he got through that fence and met up with my goats, I have no doubt on the outcome. And the winner wouldn't be the dog."

"How do we break the curse?"

The old lady fixes her watery eyes on me. The eyes are filled with a mixture of pity, hatred, and terror.

"If I knew, I wouldn't tell you, girl. I'm not that stupid. Now get out of my yard and don't come back here. Ever. Or you'll get worse than you've already got."

She herds us across the yard, her pitchfork held out like a bayonet. Halfway to the gate, she stops.

“Baphomet.”

The word comes out in such a whisper, I almost miss it. I turn around.

“What?”

“Get out of my yard, Harper Dillon.” This she says loud and clear. “And don’t come back here. Ever.”

The ghosts move away from the gate as we exit it. We stomp back up the road. “Well, that didn’t do much good,” I tell Seneca, “except maybe get us in more hot water.”

“She’s afraid of the goats,” Seneca says.

“You think?”

“I know. Didn’t you see her eyes? She’s terrified of ’em. And she whispered to you. She didn’t want the goats to hear what she was saying.”

“If she’s so scared of them, why does she keep them?”

“I dunno. Maybe she has to. What did she say? She said some word. Bufulot? Beepabo? Something goofy.”

“Baphomet, I think. It sounds creepy. Hey, ghosts?”

“Yes, dearie,” Corrine says, giving me an encouraging smile.

“You guys ever heard of Baphomet?”

“Bapho-what?” Jake says.

“Sorry, sweetheart,” Corrine says. “I’ve never heard such a word. But it doesn’t sound nice, whatever it is.”

“Oliver?”

Oliver gives me a stony stare. “I don’t deal with mythological mumbo-jumbo.”

“You think the word comes from mythology?”

“It sounds like a mythological word to me. You should look it up.”

I don’t want to ask Joe if he knows the word. He shuffles behind the others, lost in some evil, manipulative scheme of his own. I have *no* desire to find out what he’s thinking.

eleven

"Here he comes." Holly gives me a nudge as Erik enters the cafeteria. I stare at my lunch tray, not wanting to make eye contact. What if he shoots hate-beams my way?

"What's he doing?"

"He's checking us out. I'm gonna see if he'll sit with us."

"No, don't..." I don't bother finishing the sentence. I can tell from her waving shadow that she's already done it.

"He's moving this way. Look up, you big weenie." Holly jabs me in the shoulder and I force my gaze away from the yucky mac and cheese oozing over my shriveled green beans.

Okay. He doesn't seem too annoyed. And do I detect a hint of a smile? I sure hope so.

Erik slides into the chair across from me. "Hey, Harper."

"Hey."

Holly frowns. "No 'Hey, Holly?'"

"Sorry. Hey, Holly."

"Good. Now, since Harper is once again down to one syllables, I'll ask the question. You over being mad at her?"

Geez. That's being blunt.

"Are *you*?" Erik asks. "Last time I saw you, you were pretty freaked out too."

"Oh sure," Holly says. "I believe everything she says. The info all jives out. Except the Baphomet stuff is kinda confusing."

"The what?"

Oh Lord, here we go. There's no way to talk about this without sounding like a complete wacko. "Baphomet," I say. "Sarah Miller said something about him, so we're trying to figure out if he has anything to do with my ghost problem."

"What's a Baphomet?"

"He's some kind of goat-devil. We've found all sorts of legends about him, but we're not sure which one is right. One legend goes back to the Egyptians, one has something to do with the Knights Templar."

Holly nods. "Then, we found this cool video, a really weird and different explanation than some old mythological creature. *That* video said Baphomet is an alien. Like a monster from another dimension."

Erik frowns. "So which is it? Devil, monster, what?"

Holly shrugs. "I dunno. I'm trying to do more research on it. I'm confused by the whole thing, but whatever Baphomet is, he's freaky as hell."

"And you two believe this...Baphomet...thing has something to do with Harper's ghosts?"

"Do we have any other choice?" I say. "Sarah Miller said the word. And she normally doesn't say anything to anybody, if she can help it."

"Who on Earth is this Sarah Miller you're going on about anyway?"

Geez, I forgot. He's a newbie. Only been here a few months. Nobody's schooled him in the whole Sarah Miller witch thing. We keep assuming he's had the education pounded into his brain already, like the rest of us.

the trouble with dead people

"She's totally evil," Holly says. "Mean as sin. This nice lady named Mrs. Frampton lived next door to Sarah Miller, and that witch drove that poor lady so nuts, she ended up in a mental home somewhere."

I nod. "It's true. Poor Mrs. Frampton's house is still sitting vacant. Getting all run-down and everything. Nobody wants to buy the place, not if it's next to Sarah Miller and her demon goats."

I give Erik my most imploring stare, hoping he buys all this. But the trouble is, Erik hasn't lived in our wacky little town long enough. He hasn't had the full effect of the Sarah Miller scariness. Being exposed in childhood helps to develop the total fear. And he doesn't know Holly or me well enough to tell if we're pulling his leg or dead serious. So I can't blame him for frowning, but I wish he wouldn't. He's sure cute when his brow furls up like that. I take a deep breath and my irritation melts a bit.

"So you think you see dead people," he says to me slowly, like he's trying to make up his mind about whether to believe me or write me off as a complete nut job. I'd better not screw up my answer, but I'm not going to lie.

"Yes."

"And you think they died because of something you did?"

"Well, Dad says it's coincidence. But the dead people...well, they're pretty insistent I somehow did 'em in. Three of 'em don't sound too upset about it, but the last one..."

"The one you say you met in the cave?"

"That's the one. He's different."

"Different how?"

"He's a murderer, Erik," Holly says in her most exasperated voice. "Geez, don't you get it? Haven't you been listening?"

Erik stares at me again. I can't tell if his eyes hold fear, sympathy, or incredulousness. "Is he here now?"

"Who?"

"The dead guy. The murderer."

"He's over on the seniors' table, doing some sort of jig, and, oh..." I turn my head away. "Geez. He's kicking Billy James in the face."

"I guess Billy can't feel it, though," Holly says. "He's still chomping on his pizza."

Erik frowns. "Do you see him all the time? Does he follow you around? That's gotta be miserable."

"So do you believe her now?" Holly asks.

Erik shakes his head. "Maybe. If it is true, what are you going to do about it?"

I slump in my chair and resume my staring contest with the mac n' cheese. "We were hoping Sarah Miller could tell us. But she wouldn't. Or couldn't. I have no idea how to get rid of the ghosts. What if they keep coming? More and more until I'm being followed around by like a hundred dead people? What'll I do then? And how can I stop them from always barging into my personal space? They're driving me batty."

This freaks me out more than anything. I can't control when the ghosts pop up, or when they disappear. They always manage to show up at the most inopportune times, like when I'm holding a cup of tea or walking down the stairs.

The constant surprises are driving me nuts. Half the time, I'm scared to open my eyes in the morning because I know they'll be there. If the others aren't, Joe will be, leering at me with his evil, dead eyes. Sometimes he whispers in my ear, trying to freak me out with lewd comments or outright threats. The other day, he walked right up behind me and whispered, "Hey girlie, ever wondered what it feels like to die?"

God, it's unbearable and I'm going downhill because of it. I've hardly eaten anything since we visited Sarah Miller. I've got bags under my eyes and Seneca says I walk with a

hop to my step, like I'm preparing to run for my life at any minute. I've taken to cranking up my iPod, even at night, so I can drown out Joe's murmurings. But of course that keeps me awake, so I haven't slept much either. I'm turning into a walking, talking zombie.

Erik sighs. "Harper, I'm not sure if I believe you or not, but I still want to be your friend. I'll try to help you out if I can."

Not a complete acceptance, but it'll do. "Thanks, Erik." I force down any remaining annoyance. Holly nudges me, then bats her eyes at Erik.

"Just friends?" she says, sounding all sugary and coy. Ugh. Match-maker Holly is at it again.

Erik grins. "Let's just see if we can figure out how to deal with Harper's dead people problem. Then we'll see."

Holly smiles. "Sounds fair. So what *do* we do about Harper's 'dead people problem'?"

I nod, happy to switch subjects. "Sarah Miller said it has something to do with Baphomet, but who knows what *that* means, or how a devil or alien plays into all this. And Seneca and I both had dreams about an old lady in a rocking chair. I swear she looks familiar. I've been wracking my brain since I dreamt about her, but I can't figure out who she is. Neither can Seneca."

Erik gulps before he speaks, like he can't believe he's asking, "Do you think the dead people might have an idea?"

"No. Well, Joe says he can tell me. But I don't want to hear anything *he* has to say."

"Maybe he's got the answer."

"He's evil. And he's stuck in a murderous frame of mind, so whatever he tells me is gonna be clouded by that. I *can't* trust anything he says."

Even as I say this, I hear a little voice in my brain. It's my own voice, not put there by a dead person. So far, they haven't bored into my thoughts. So this idea is mine and mine alone.

*What if you listened to him? What if he does have the answer?
Don't you want all this to stop?*

Maybe Joe can stop this, or maybe he's full of goat shit. I glance over to the senior table, where Joe now punches Billy James in the face and cackles with glee. Billy James gabs on to his friend, totally unaware that a maniacal ghost is trying to do him in.

No. I'm not desperate enough to ask Joe yet.

twelve

"You okay, Monkey?"

Dad squats next to me as I yank out the weeds surrounding my tomato plants.

"I'm fine."

"No, you're not, sweetheart. You've been crying. You've got dirt streaked all over your face where you've rubbed your eyes. Please tell me what's wrong. I know I can help."

"Not with this."

"What is it? A boy?"

A boy, a woman, a man, and a murderer. "No, Dad. I'm...I'm under a lot of pressure at school. Final exams are this week. I...I haven't studied enough. That's all."

Dad sighs. "I wish your mom was here. She could talk to you better about these things, I'm sure."

Man, way to put the guilt trip on me. Now I feel bad about blowing off his concerned parenting. I reach up and give him a hug.

"You're doing fine, Dad. It's nothing, really."

“You sure?”

I force a smile to my lips. “I’m sure, Dad.”

“Do you want me to cancel my trip? I don’t want to leave you here by yourself if you’re under this much stress.”

“Dad, by the time you leave for the conference, exams’ll be over and we’ll be out for the summer. I’ll be okay by then.”

I sure don’t want to mess up the first chance he’s given me of staying home alone for a whole weekend. Well, not totally alone, if I’m counting Seneca and Snookums. And the four dead people. I *had* been looking forward to this since I talked him into it three weeks ago. Now, the thought of staying alone in the house scares me. Even though Dad’s bedroom is downstairs and he can’t do Jack-poop about the ghosts, I still feel so much more secure knowing he’s here. Might be the last remnants of my childish belief that parents are invincible and can solve any problem.

Well, I learned the hard way they aren’t invincible—five years ago when Mom left us. And I don’t believe Dad can solve my problems, like I once believed.

He still believes it, though.

Still, this is the first chance to prove I’m adult enough to stay on my own for a whole weekend. I’m not about to screw up that chance just because I want Dad to stick around and protect me from a few annoying ghosts.

Annoying isn’t really the right word anymore. The other three ghosts aren’t trying to terrify me on purpose. They’ve always been polite, almost stand-offish. But that vile creep Joe Johnston won’t leave me alone. He dogs me every second and I can’t take much more of it.

“Well, I’ll only be a few hours away. If you need me to come home at any time, you don’t hesitate to call me. Okay?”

“You got it, Dad.”

Dad reaches over and gives me another hug. “I worry about you, Monkey. Please let me know if you need anything from me.”

the trouble with dead people

Oh geez, I'm gonna bawl any second if he doesn't stop acting so paternal. "I'll be okay, Dad. Thanks."

"Okay. I'm going to the store. Need anything?"

"Um...more baking soda. We're almost out."

Dad grins. "You got it, Miss Granola."

Dad thinks it's funny that I use baking soda for almost everything. Holly says I'm wacko. But baking soda is natural. I'm not paying a company to cover me with chemicals if I use it. It's great for washing hair, brushing teeth, even Snookums doesn't mind getting a dry bath with the stuff. He won't get near the bathtub or a garden hose to save his life, so using baking soda is the only way to keep him clean.

Dad heads to the car as Seneca trips out of the house dressed in a tutu.

"Dad! We're out of toothpaste."

"You should use baking soda, like me," I say.

"Ugh. That stuff tastes all salty."

I push aside the image of Joe stomping in the dirt (he's cackling and planting a ghostly foot on each of my asparagus plants, not doing any damage of course, but his whole point is to tick me off) and turn to my little sister.

"Seneca, why are you wearing a tutu?"

"I'm the princess from Swan Lake," she says.

"How can you be so happy and pretending with everything that's going on?"

"Because I'm tired of worrying. And I thought the tutu might make you laugh."

I can't help it, I reach up and wrap my arms around her. Geez, I'm huggy today.

"Thanks, sis."

"You're welcome, but stop it. You're getting dirt all over my tutu. So do you have any more ideas about how to get rid of the dead guys?"

"No."

"I bet it has something to do with the old lady in our dreams. I dreamt about her again last night."

I perk up. "You did?"

"Yeah. She was still rocking, but the chair was dead in the middle of a field of buttercups. It's too late for buttercups now, isn't it?"

"She didn't snarl at you, did she? Like a dog?"

"No. She looked like a nice old lady to me. She rocked and knitted one of those afghans, like what Mrs. Moone's couch is covered with."

I shut my eyes as a rush of excitement almost topples me into my tomato plants. "Seneca! Did that field look anything like Mrs. Moone's sheep pasture? The one we cut through to get to her cave?"

Seneca flops right in the dirt beside me, tutu and all. "You know, the field in my dream *did* have a fence like Mrs. Moone's. But buttercups? I've never seen buttercups there."

"Yes, you have. We've been there when the buttercups were out. Don't you remember? A few years ago...you were pretty young. It was your first time visiting Mrs. Moone. We weren't caving that day because it was too early in the season and the bats were just waking up from hibernation."

"What were we doing there then?"

"Mr. Moone's funeral. He died and she buried him in the sheep field. We pass the marker every time we head to the cave. We passed it the other week."

Seneca blinks. "Well, it *could've* been that field. But why would the old lady have her rocking chair in it?"

"I dunno...it's a dream and they always have weird stuff. Maybe it's a clue. Maybe that field has something to do with the old lady."

"Or," my ever sensible sister says, "maybe Mrs. Moone knows who she is."

the trouble with dead people

This is where I *so* wish I could tell when Joe sneaks up behind me. If I felt his breath on my skin or heard his footsteps, I'd at least have some preparation. But no, I jump five feet in the air when Joe whispers, "She's lying."

"Son of a..."

"She's making it up. All of it. She didn't really have a dream."

"Don't listen to him, Harper."

Jake stands in front of me, speaking with the first real bit of gumption he's ever shown. Corrine huddles behind him, looking frightened. *Frightened*. Wasn't she the one who told me their only emotion was whatever they died feeling?

She's afraid of Joe. Even dead, she's afraid of him.

So is Jake, but he stands his ground. This is why I haven't seen the other ghosts lately. They've been avoiding Joe. Probably hiding out in the next room. Never far from me, but not close enough to incur Joe's wrath.

Joe hisses, "Didn't I tell you to stay away?"

"We're part of this too, Joe. And we're staying." Corrine says this, well, squeaks it anyway. She brushes off her skirt and straightens up.

"We had a deal, Corrine. You want this to end. Our little girlie Harper wants it to end. And so do I. Let me do my job and we'll all be free of this, you'll see." He glares at her before he shifts his eyes towards the sky. A huge lightning bolt streaks from the clouds.

Great. More rain's a-coming.

Corrine gulps. I wonder, what do ghosts gulp? Do they have spit to wet their throats? Now, why am I thinking that right now? I train my ears back to the conversation. Next to me, Seneca stays quiet. She understands that I'm listening to something she can't hear.

"Does he know?" I ask Corrine. "Does he really know how to end this? 'Cause he says he does, but I don't believe him."

Corrine shakes her head and gives a half-hearted laugh. "I don't know either, dear. But we sure are stumped, and this... man told us he knows how we can set you free. We understand you're suffering, sweetie. That's not what we want."

Maybe not you, but Joe's sure enjoying it.

"What *do* you want then?"

"To let you go. To leave ourselves and go to where we belong. We shouldn't be here either, you know. It's miserable, being stuck in this dead body. You have no idea how hard it is to be happy all the time."

"Or not caring," Jake says, which surprises me yet again.

"So this old man here, he said he knows how to stop it. We know what he is, Harper. We understand what he's done. But he's the only lead we've got."

"Except Sarah Miller and the old lady in the rocking chair," I say.

"That old lady ain't real," Joe hisses. "Your sister is making it up, I tell you."

I turn to face him. He's inches away from me, which isn't exactly pleasant, but he can't do anything to me except talk.

"She isn't making it up. I dreamt about that lady too."

"Coincidence." Joe grins an evil sneer. "Nothing more. You listen to me, girly. I'm the only one who can get you out of this. There's only one way." His voice drops to an oily whisper. "Only. One. Way."

I don't want to ask. I really don't.

"And what is the one way?"

"Harper," Seneca says, prodding me with her finger. "Look."

I whip my head around. Erik strides up the driveway. He gives me a smile and a wave. My heart flutters. He's here. He must've decided to believe me after all. His smile fades as huge drops of rain plunk onto the pavement.

Joe hisses in my ear. "That boy is your way out."

the trouble with dead people

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you indirectly killed the others. And now they’re following you around. Dogging your every footstep. Want to know how to get rid of ‘em? And of me? You need to *directly* kill somebody.”

My skin begins to prickle. A rushing sound fills my ears and the breath sticks in my gasping throat. No. That can’t be right.

“That’s the boy,” Joe whispers. “That’s the one. Your sacrificial lamb. Kill him and all this will end. Kill him and set us free.”

I hear the screams, but it isn’t until I’m running full-tilt for the house as fast as I can run, barging past Erik, that I realize the screams are coming out of my own throat. Behind me, Joe laughs a cackling howl that the approaching peals of thunder can’t cover.

“Kill the boy, girlie! It’s you’re only way out of the mess you’ve made!”

thirteen

“Harper, you okay?”

I peek out from under the covers. My poor pillow is now as sopping wet as the world outside. I rub my eyes. “Sorry, Seneca.”

“What happened back there? Erik is super-worried.”

He should be. “Is he still out there?”

“No. I told him it’d be better if he left you alone right now. Besides, it’s raining like crazy and he was riding his bike, so he figured he’d better head home.”

“He must think I’m a complete fruitcake.”

“Well, you did run screaming like your hair was on fire. Why?”

“Seneca, Joe told me the only way out of this curse is to kill Erik.”

“Really?” Seneca frowns. “Why Erik?”

“Beats the hell out of me. I can’t do it, Seneca. It’s bad enough that I still feel like crap about those other people dying—Corrine, Oliver, and Jake. Maybe I did the world a favor by somehow offing Joe. But the others, they were just going about their business and I...I...”

the trouble with dead people

"You didn't do anything," Seneca says. "Harper, I don't care what the ghosts say. You did *not* kill them, any more than I did. Things happen."

"I wish they'd all go away. I wish I knew how to end it. I don't believe Joe, He's trying to get me to do something to satisfy his murder lust. I know it, but what if he *is* right? What if the only way to break the curse is to kill somebody? I can't do that, Seneca."

"Of course you can't. There has to be another way. We just have to find it."

"How? Sarah Miller wouldn't tell us."

"No, she wouldn't. Or couldn't. But maybe I can help. We have to follow my dreams, Harper. My dreams'll lead us to the solution, I'll bet you anything. We just have to listen to 'em."

"And what are they telling us to do?"

Seneca's eyes dart around. "Okay, Dad's not back yet, so I can tell you what I think. We need to go see Mrs. Moone. This weekend."

I sit up. "You mean when Dad is away? Drive there ourselves?"

Seneca nods. "He won't know, he'll be at that conference. It's only a two hour drive to Mrs. Moone's. We can get there and back in one afternoon."

"Yeah, but I don't even have a license yet, Seneca."

"So? He said he was catching a ride with Professor Jenkins to the conference, so he's leaving the Jeep. And you *can* drive it. Geez, you've been driving the dirt roads around Mrs. Moone's since you were twelve. We can make it as long as you don't freak out on the mountain roads."

Ha. I don't usually have an issue with heights, but last summer, when Dad first tried to teach me how to handle a car while driving down steep, twisty-turny roads, I almost careened us into a ditch. I guess I should be grateful that I have a dad who doesn't pay much attention to the legal-

ity of things. Even on those dirt roads, I'm sure he wasn't supposed to let an underage kid drive around. But coming so close to flipping the Jeep sure didn't boost my driving confidence. I've been nervous about driving downhill ever since.

"If you take the roads slow, we'll get there no problem," Seneca says.

"Yeah, if we don't get busted by the cops."

"C'mon, Harper. Be all irresponsible for once. They can't bust you if you don't do anything stupid."

"That's *irresponsible*. And what are we going to do once we get to Mrs. Moone's?"

"We'll find out more about the old lady in the rocking chair. We've both seen her in our dreams. And I saw her in Mrs. Moone's pasture—"

"Well, we're *guessing* it's her pasture."

"Don't interrupt. You're the one who convinced me it was her pasture, so quit second guessing my idea. I also saw a cave in my first dream, and I think the cave has something to do with all of this too."

"Was it Moone's Cave?"

"No, my cave was in the woods, off the dirt road, with the frog, remember? The entrance was lots smaller than Moone's and there wasn't a creek flowing into it. A creek goes *past* the cave, in my dreams. We need to find that cave, Harper."

"Your to-do list is getting longer," I say. "Talk to Mrs. Moone *and* find a cave? We don't even know where it is, and what if it takes longer than a day? We've gotta be back here before Dad gets home."

"We will, trust me."

"Trust you? You're not the one who has to do the driving. I don't trust myself, why should I trust you?" But I say this with a bit of a smile. At least Seneca's trying to think of a way to end

the trouble with dead people

this curse that doesn't involve me offing the boy I like, even if it means breaking some laws in the process.

"We'll need money," Seneca says.

"For what? We're going there and back in a day, remember?"

"For gas," Seneca says. "If Dad comes home and finds we've used all the fuel while he's been gone, he'll think we were joyriding. He'll kill us."

I nod. "Gas, and food too, at least for lunch or something. I've got some money left over from Grandma's birthday gift."

"We'd better bring the caving gear too," Seneca says, "in case we find the cave in my dream."

"Yeah, but there's like over four thousand known caves in West Virginia, never mind all the *unknown* ones. And what if your cave is in some other part of the country? It'd be like searching for a needle in a haystack."

"We'll find it," Seneca says. "I'm absolutely positive-o. Anyway, Dad leaves in three days and we'll be out of school. All you have to do is avoid Erik."

"Why?"

Seneca shrugs. "You can't be tempted to kill him if you're not around him."

"I am *not* tempted to kill him, Seneca. How could you even think that?"

"I dunno. But seems to me that Joe guy, the murdering ghost, has got you all freaked out about it."

She's right. "Y'know, I did want to sock Erik the other day when we went caving." That crazy burst of annoyance, that PMSy-but-much-worse feeling I got that day, it sure came from out of the blue.

"You think maybe Joe's putting ideas into your head?" Seneca says.

"Could be. Oliver said the ghosts can't do anything like that, but maybe he can, Seneca. God, we need to figure out how to

stop this. I can't believe I'd ever even *think* about offing someone, but I'm not sure how long I can live with that maniacal freakazoid dogging my footsteps. If I'm stuck with him for the rest of my life, I'll go nuts-o before I turn twenty. The others aren't so bad. They're trying to give me *some* space. But Joe, he'll torment me until I either kill Erik or myself."

Seneca's face goes white. "Don't say that, Harper. Don't even think it. Where is Joe now?"

"He isn't in here. Neither are the others. Maybe they're still outside. But I guarantee you, they'll pop in here at the most annoying moment. At least if Snookums is around, he'll warn me before they get here. Oh, crap. Snookums."

"What about him?"

"We'll have to take him too. We can't leave him here."

Snookums is not what you'd call an outdoor dog. He's a huge, yawning couch potato, plus everything in the woods scares him. Deer, mice, falling leaves. Once we tried to get him into a cave. He skittered away, howling like we were beating him with wet towels and hid under the car until we coerced him out with a sirloin steak.

"Mrs. Roman will watch him if we ask her to. She loves Snookums," Seneca says.

"We can't leave Snookums with Mrs. Roman. She'll ask us why and we'll have to tell her we're going somewhere, and you know how she gets. She'll snoop around until she finds out what we're doing and she'll rat us out to Dad."

"You're right. We'll have to take him."

As much as I love my dog, I wish we could leave him here. But leaving him with somebody is a dead giveaway that we're taking an illegal trip to somewhere we shouldn't.

fourteen

“Well, that’s it.” I stare at the Jeep. Our caving box with the helmets and lights is crammed in the back, and I’ve stuffed in a cooler full of food. Snookums lounges on the back seat, tongue hanging out. He enjoys car rides, but he won’t enjoy where we’re taking him. Spooky woods and dark holes aren’t his thing.

We crouch next to the car in the pre-dawn darkness, hoping the neighbors aren’t up yet. Will they miss seeing the Jeep parked in the driveway? I sure hope not. Luckily, we aren’t on the greatest terms with our immediate neighbors (they’ve been fighting with Dad over who’s responsible for trimming the tree growing on the boundary line), so I’m sure Dad didn’t ask them to check up on us. But I bet he’s told somebody. Mrs. Roman maybe, but she lives a mile away. Chances are, her checking-up will involve calling our cell phones to make sure we’re still breathing.

I haven’t told Holly about our mission. She wouldn’t have wanted to come anyway, not if squiggling through an unknown

cave is involved, and now, if anyone asks her, she can say she didn't know diddly-squat about it.

And I've avoided Erik like I avoid mushrooms. Just the image of him cramps my stomach and makes my skin break out in a sick sweat. I saw him once in the halls and Joe whispered from behind me, "There he is. That's the one. When are you going to do it, girlie?"

No, I need to keep Erik well away. I can't tell him why. I couldn't even confide the reason to Holly. The whole thing is too freaky, so Seneca and I have decided to keep them in the dark about *that* detail, at least until we get back from our little excursion.

The guilt is killing me, though. Poor Erik got this sweet, forlorn expression the other day when I ignored him. He must think I don't like him at all, but how could I tell him what's really going on? *Sorry, Erik, but I'm afraid if we go out on a date it'll end with your horrific demise?* Nope, better to keep silent and steer clear of the guy.

I try to calm the flibberty-jibbets in my stomach. Since Snookums is taking up the entire back seat, Jake, Oliver, and Corrine are camped out on the Jeep's top. Jake has a goofy grin on his face, like he's almost enjoying himself. Corrine can't help but look happy and Oliver stares around and frowns, probably wondering how he ended up on top of a car when there's important meetings to get to. Joe is nowhere to be seen, thank God.

Oliver glances at his watch. "Let's get moving if we're going to do this, people."

"Yes, sir." I slide into the driver's seat and turn the key.

This is it. We're really going to do this.

Crazy excitement courses through me as the Jeep putters to life. I remember this lecture on adrenaline I heard in health class—how the hormone causes both our sense of fear and excitement. Right now, I've got enough adrenaline pumping

the trouble with dead people

through my system to kill a cow. An hour ago, that adrenaline was pushing my fear button. Now, the excitement has switched on.

Seneca grins. She's always been one for pushing her boundaries, so heading off on a forbidden road trip is right up her alley. She buckles her seat belt as we creep down the driveway.

"Woo hoo, let's go!"

"Keep your voice down. We don't need to attract any adult attention."

"You do remember how to get there, right?" Seneca says.

"Of course I do. We go there all the time. No prob."

Getting to Mrs. Moone's doesn't worry me, as long as I don't do anything stupid like hit another car or careen us into a chasm. Nope, I remember how to get to Moone's Cave. *But please, Mr. Jeep, please drive nice for me. And keep the cops well away from our route.*

We drive with the top down. It's overcast but warm, and the wind caresses my face. The ghosts teeter on the rails, but don't seem to mind their precarious positions. Now, we're past our block and on our way out of town. I'm so overwhelmed by the forbidden excitement of it all. I almost want to whoop, but that'd freak out Snookums.

This might actually turn out to be fun.

"Slow down, you're speeding."

Seneca doesn't say this, she's a speed freak. Oliver shouts it from the roof. I glance at the odometer.

"I'm not speeding at all. I'm five miles under."

"What?" Seneca says.

"Sorry. Oliver is complaining. Hey, Oliver! At least we won't be late."

"The ghosts seem almost friendly, except for Joe," Seneca says. "Am I right?"

“They aren’t so bad. But I wish they were gone. It’s weird to think that their actual bodies are now rotting in the ground somewhere, when they look so real to me.”

“Or cremated and stuffed in a jar on top of someone’s TV,” Seneca says.

I stop the Jeep at a light and turn to the ghosts. “Why don’t you guys ride in the back with Snookums? You could sit on him. He wouldn’t feel it, would he?”

“He wouldn’t,” Corrine says. “But we didn’t want to annoy you.”

“You don’t annoy me, Joe does. Where is he?”

Corrine clears her throat. How a ghost clears her throat I still don’t get. It can’t be like there’s anything down there to clear.

“We told him to leave.”

My heart leaps. Can this day get any better?

“Get outta town. And he did?”

“Oh, he won’t stay away for long, I’ll bet. But we stood up to him.” There’s a ring of confidence I’ve never heard in her bubbly voice before. A bit of anger too.

“He’s not a good person,” Jake says.

“Tell me something I don’t know. Thanks, guys. Hop in back. Snookums won’t mind, he’s used to you. I won’t mind either. It must be a little windy out there.”

“Oh, we can’t feel it,” Corrine says. “But thank you.”

The light turns and I glance in my rear-view mirror. Corrine, Jake, and Oliver are now smushed in the back seat. Snookums lies buried in there somewhere. He lets out one whine and falls silent.

“Well,” Seneca says, “it’s gonna be a long trip. Ask the ghosts something.”

“Like what?”

“Like where they’re from, what they did for a living, that kind of thing. Have you even asked them yet?”

the trouble with dead people

"No. But Holly looked up all their obits for me."

"Pfft," Oliver says. "Obituaries are as dry as the Gobi Desert. When we were born, when we died, what our jobs were. Nothing of real interest in those things."

"Yeah, no juicy tidbits," Jake says.

"All right, ghosts, give us some juicys," I say.

Jake shrugs. "I'm the best on our block when it comes to skateboard tricks."

"I got my MBA when I was only twenty," Oliver chimes in.

"What about you, Corrine?" I ask. "Any interesting factoids?"

Corrine giggles. "I swam the English Channel."

"You didn't," I say.

"Sure did. I wasn't always overweight and middle-aged. When I was young, all I wanted to do was swim. I was fit as a fiddle. Competitive as anything."

"What happened?"

"Got married, had two kids. Then I came down with a thyroid problem and they treated it with steroids. That was the end. I ballooned right up."

I hesitate. "Was it cancer?"

"The thyroid thing? Oh no."

"Is that how your mom died?" Jake asks. "Cancer?"

"Yeah."

An unnerving quietness fills the car. I glance at Seneca. She's at least following my side of the conversation, but Seneca never gets as sad as I do whenever someone brings up Mom. She was only five and doesn't remember Mom as well as I do.

Luckily, right then my cell phone rings, breaking the tension. Seneca answers it.

"It's Holly. She says she's got something important to tell you."

We're winding our way up the mountain, so I manage to pull off at a nice overlook. Lord knows, I don't want drive this road *and* talk to Holly at the same time. That would be disaster.

"So what's up, Holls?"

"Harper, I got the weirdest call a couple of hours ago."

I check my watch. "Holly, it's six in the morning. Who called you? Jason?" Holly dumped that loser a couple of months ago, but he's been pestering her ever since.

"No, not Jason. It was from an unknown number. I'm not sure who it was. But the voice, well, I couldn't place it, although it sounded like a woman, kinda. Anyway, she said four words, Harper. Just four words. Then she hung up."

Holly can never come right out and spill her news, she has to milk it.

"And? What were the words?"

"Knights Templar. Oak Island."

"What?"

"Yeah, that's what I thought, so I looked it up. Remember what we found out about Baphomet? How there were a bunch of myths surrounding it, but one had to do with the Knights Templar?"

"The crusader guys."

"Not just crusader guys. They were the knights who protected all the Christians who took part in the Crusades. They got real rich too and got into banking and all that stuff. And in the 1300s, the French king got all pissy about it and shut them down."

"How'd he do that?"

"Arrested them all. They were getting too 'big for their britches', as my grandma would say. Too rich and stuff, and I guess the king owed them money and convinced the Pope to denounce them all. And they had a whole inquisition thing and charged a lot of the knights as being heretics and stuff—"

"Heretic, what's that?" I say.

"Saying bad things against the Church. Denouncing God, practicing witchcraft...all that stuff. Anyway, the French king executed a bunch of 'em and tortured tons more. It was

the trouble with dead people

a bloody mess. Totally gruesome stuff. But some knights got away."

"O...kay. So where are you going with this? And how does it tie into my little ghost problem? I'm assuming you're calling me because it does."

"Of course it does, Harper, why would I still be up and not asleep at six on a Saturday morning if it didn't? I've spent the last two hours on the internet doing a lot of digging. So shut up and pay attention."

Seneca tugs my arm. "What's she saying?"

"Sorry, Seneca. Holls, I'm putting you on speaker."

I switch her over. "Where are you guys anyway?" Holly asks. "You're up awfully early for a Saturday."

"We're heading to Mrs. Moone's," Seneca says. "Gotta ask her a couple of questions."

"Isn't your dad out of town? Who's driving?"

"Harper is."

"No. Way. Serious, Harper? That is so cool. Why didn't you invite me?"

"Holls, we're gonna whip up there and zip back again. The sooner we can get this over with, the better. So get on with it. Conspiracy. Baphomet. Spill."

"Okay. These knights, they got away with a bunch of ships, apparently along with a bunch of their riches and things. Some say they headed to Scotland, but others say they went across the sea and ended up in Nova Scotia."

"That can't be right. Columbus didn't get to the New World until 1492." Ha. I *can* remember some factoids.

"Yeah, but the Vikings got there way before then, too," Seneca says, ruining my fleeting moment of brainyism.

"So what does this have to do with the ghosts?" I prod.

"Well, Sarah Miller told you the word Baphomet and I got the call about Knights Templar. All gotta be related, right?"

"Who do you think called you?" Seneca asks.

"And why would they call *her*?" Oliver puts in. "If any of this has to do with us, who would know you're cursed and try to warn you through your friend?"

"Sarah Miller," I say. "Holly, I bet Sarah Miller called you. Can you trace the number?"

"No, it just says unregistered. I can't call it back. Anyway, the Knights Templar, when they got to Nova Scotia, there's some whole weird thing about a place called Oak Island. I haven't gotten that far in my research yet, except there's rumors that somebody buried a treasure there. I'll call you with anything else I find out."

I turn to Seneca. "You ever heard anything about Oak Island, oh Knower-of-Useless-Facts?"

Seneca shakes her head. "Nope. New one on me."

Holly hangs up. I stare at the ghosts in the back seat. "Guys, you're tied up in this Baphomet curse somehow. What do you think?"

Jake shrugs. Oliver gives me his typical frown, which I've figured out actually means he's thinking hard about something, not that he's mad.

"We don't have any way of looking up information like you two have," he says. "But maybe we'll learn something the next time we end up in the fog."

"We could help Holly and look up info on it," Seneca says, "but my phone doesn't work so well out here."

I rev up the engine and pull onto the road. "Maybe we can use Mrs. Moone's computer."

"She's like a zillion years old, she probably doesn't even know what a computer is. By the way, did you call her to let her know we're coming?"

"No. I didn't want her calling Dad and blowing our cover. Anyway, as soon as we can get reception, you can try to look up some stuff."

the trouble with dead people

"Will do. So ask them something else. The Jake kid, I know how he died. What about Oliver?"

"He's already told me his story. He was hit on the head by a flying rock when he was waiting for the bus. The bus was late."

"Hence, his constant time-checking," Seneca says, grinning. "What chain of events link you to the rock?"

I sigh. "Okay. The rock came from a dump truck heading to a construction site. The driver was running late and so was speeding and hit a bump, which is why the rock flew out of the truck. And the driver was running late because he forgot to set his alarm clock that morning and overslept. He had gotten a call from his aunt the night before, and she had told him she'd won the lottery. Not a huge lottery, but fifty thousand dollars or something. He was so excited, he forgot to set his alarm."

"O...kay," Seneca says.

"Anyway, the aunt got the winning ticket because the guy in front of her at the convenience store didn't have enough money to buy his usual two tickets, so he bought one. The guy didn't have the money because he had bought a box of toaster pastries for his kid with his remaining change."

"Okay, so?"

"So...the kid was one Erik Henderson."

Seneca's jaw almost hits her knees. "Wow, Erik is somehow involved in this one too? But I don't get it. How is that your fault?"

"Well, Erik's parents apparently have a strict no-sweets policy, which is only lifted when a kid is sick. Erik was sick. With a cold I gave him. So, his father took pity on him and bought him the pastries."

"That is *so* stupid," Seneca says.

"Yeah," I say. "Hear that, Oliver? Even Seneca thinks it's far-fetched."

"But, according to the rules, it works," Oliver says.

“Wait...what rules? *Whose* rules? Is this stuff written down somewhere?”

“I don’t know, Harper,” Oliver says. “I just know that’s why I’m here.”

“This is getting freakier and freakier,” Seneca says. “Not only do these deaths have to do with you, Harper, but two of ‘em are tied up with Erik, too.”

Yeah, and I’ve been stressing over that, ever since Oliver told me. Maybe Erik has more to do with this than I thought. Maybe that’s why Joe wants him dead. Or is this all a weird bucket of coincidences?

I’m not sure if it’s the jumbled thoughts in my head, Holly’s interesting but perplexing news about the Knights Templar, or the rain dripping from the sky, but whatever the reason, I’m not paying attention to the road ahead. But then I see him. Smack in the middle of the road. Somebody is crossing the street and I’m going to smash right into him.

I slam on the brakes. Seneca screams as the Jeep lurches into a slow spin. We twirl right over the poor guy and head straight for the guardrail, the one flimsy thing protecting us from a hundred foot plummet to imminent death in the woods below.

fifteen

“Oh, *shit*.”

I’m not supposed to cuss in front of Seneca. Lord knows Dad has drilled that rule into me, but in this situation, I can be excused. I stare at the dented Jeep, my hand to my mouth. “Oh, *shit*.”

Seneca scrutinizes the crumpled fender. “Lucky that’s all we got, Harper. We could have flipped right over the railing. What on Earth did you slam the brakes on for?”

“The guy in the road. Where did he go?”

From behind me, a cackle echoes down the mountain. Oh great. I’ve heard *that* cackle before.

“It was Joe,” Corrine says. “Playing tricks on you, sweetie. He doesn’t want you to take this trip. Bother, it’s raining. Let’s hope it doesn’t get any harder.”

I peer at the Jeep through the gaps between my fingers. “I’m gonna kill him.”

“Can’t kill him, he’s already dead,” Jake says.

“*Dad* is gonna kill *you*,” Seneca says. “What are we gonna do? Should we go back?”

"We've gotta get out of here before another car comes." I pull Seneca back to the Jeep. "God, if a cop catches us, we'll be in deep poop for sure."

"You might as well say deep shit," Seneca says. "You've already used the word about a zillion times in the last five minutes, why stop now?"

The car starts up. Superficial damage, my dad would say, but he won't forgive *this* superficial damage, that's for sure.

We get back on the road. I inch the Jeep down the pavement. Seneca turns to face me.

"We're *never* gonna get anywhere the rate you're going."

"I'm not going any faster. I've already almost killed us once. Corrine, what did you mean by 'he doesn't want us taking this trip'?"

"He doesn't want you finding out. We've tried to keep him away, and the three of us can keep him out of the car if we put our minds to it, but he's free to roam into your vision if he wants, I guess."

"Finding out what?"

Corrine shrugs. "Whatever it is, it must be important."

"Next time you see a man in the road," Jake says, "you oughtta smack right through him."

"Yeah, and with my luck, it'll be a real man next time."

We reach a crossroads with a gas station.

"Pull over," Seneca says. "I've gotta pee."

"Okay. Snookums needs a walk anyway and the rain's stopped."

"Thank God," Jake mutters.

I'm stressed to the max right now, but I can't help grinning at his statement. "Jake, rain can't hurt you. You're dead."

We pull into the parking lot and I turn to my backseat passengers. "I'm going to walk Snookums a bit. Come with me, will you? Keep Joe away?"

the trouble with dead people

"Of course, sweetie," Corrine says. Jake nods. Oliver frowns and stares at his watch, but gets out of the car anyway.

While Seneca bolts for the bathroom, I take Snookums down a little path in the woods so he can do his business. Once we're out of earshot of any sane person, I ask the question now bugging me.

"Erik is involved in two of these deaths too, just as indirectly as me. Why? And why can't *he* see you too?"

"He wasn't cursed, you were," Oliver says. "I'd guess his involvement is coincidence. You do live in a pretty small town, you know."

"But who cursed me? Sarah Miller? The goats?"

Corrine shakes her head. "I'm guessing the goats, but I could be wrong. We don't know any more about this than you do. But we're supposed to stick with you."

"What about Erik? Joe wants me to kill him. He says if I do, all this will end."

"And are you thinking of going that route?" Oliver says.

I stare at him. "Of course not."

"You hesitated," Jake says.

"No I didn't. I would never do such a thing."

"Not unless Joe makes you so crazy that you can't stand it anymore," Jake says.

"That's just it. You said you couldn't control my thoughts. You couldn't do anything to me. If it's true, how can Joe do it?"

Oliver clears his throat. "Joe isn't like us, Harper. He's... different."

"Tell me about it. He's an ass."

"Not just that. He has different power than us."

"Yeah, but why?"

"I'm not sure. He's separated from us somehow. We see him and we can interact with him, to a certain extent, but he's not the same as us. He's not connected to you in the same way. He

can come and go at will. I can't explain it any more than that. So maybe he can manipulate your thoughts."

"He's trying, that's for sure. I mean, I get this totally crazy, irrational anger every time I see Erik. It doesn't happen when I think about him, just when I see him. It's like I have this crazy desire to punch him in the face."

"That's not good," Corrine says.

"Tell me about it."

"You're fighting Joe well, if that's the case. Keep fighting," Oliver says.

"I wish he'd stay away. You can keep Joe away, right?"

Corrine sighs. "Well, it takes a lot out of us, dearie. He's a strong one. For a while, we were too scared. But then we thought, *why* are we so scared? He can't kill us, we're already dead."

I stare up at the trees. "He needs to come with us."

Corrine laughs. "Who, Joe?"

"No, not Joe. Erik. He's part of this. We need him here."

Corrine peers into my face. She seems so real standing there in front of me, real enough to touch. She gives me a sympathetic look and a great rush of something fills my chest. Affection? Sorrow? Tears are pushing against my eyelid dam and I blink them back.

Mom. She reminds me of Mom. A bigger, more boisterous Mom, but there you go.

The ghosts say they can't read my thoughts, but Corrine guesses anyway. Maybe because she's someone's mother.

"When did she die, dear?" Corrine asks. She sounds so kind.

"When I was ten. Seneca doesn't remember her much, but I do."

"I'm sorry, dear." Corrine pats my shoulder, and although I can't feel it, the gesture calms me down. "A mother's guidance always helps, I think."

"Back to the topic," Oliver says in a clipped tone. "*Why* do you want to involve Erik in all this? Especially since Joe wants him dead?"

the trouble with dead people

I pause. I can't explain why, but the feeling is strong. *Call Erik*. I'm sure he'll come. Erik likes caving, so far, and he's *supposed* to come with us. Yeah, the original idea was to put as much distance between me and him as I could. But now I'm not thinking that way. Not at all.

I pull out my cell phone, hoping I'll get reception.

"You sure you're not doing this because *you* want him here?" Corrine says. "This is a big thing to ask of him. I'm not sure if he even believes you about all this."

"But he likes her," Jake says, "so he'll come."

I turn to him, my heart hammering. "What did you say?"

"He likes you. That's pretty obvious. If I liked a girl and she asked me to help her out, I bet I'd do it. You know, the whole damsel in distress thing."

His statement rankles me a bit. "I'm *not* in distress. I just think he needs to come with us, that's all. He's involved too. Why should I be the only one to suffer?"

Jake grins. It's the first real smile to cross his face since this whole crazy mess began. The smile transforms him from a mopey, greasy dude to a cute kid with dimples. Another great wave of sadness washes over me as I think about the life he could have had.

"You go on trying to delude yourself, Harper," he says. "You want Erik here because you *want* him here. End of story."

"Or Joe wants him here," Oliver says.

No, this doesn't feel like Joe. Although, what the heck do I know? But when Joe tries to put thoughts into my brain, those thoughts revolve around anger, not peace. Right now, I'm yearning for Erik because I'm dying to see his face. So maybe Jake's right.

Either way, I'm calling.

The cell phone doesn't get any signal in the woods, so I head to the Jeep, where Seneca sits on the hood, swinging her legs and chowing down on a candy bar. Ugh.

"That's what you're spending our hard-found money on? Candy?"

Seneca gulps down her mouthful. "This has nuts. Nuts have protein. So this candy bar is good for me."

"It's full of chemical badness. I packed apples and my homemade granola."

"Yeah, well no offense, Harper, but your granola tastes like sawdust. You need to put more sugar in it."

"Sugar isn't good for you."

"According to you, *nothing* yummy is good for me. So I might as well enjoy the badness. Who are you calling?"

"Erik."

"Why?"

"He needs to come with us. Don't ask me why, Seneca," I say, because I can tell she's about to say something, "but he does."

Seneca shakes her head. "Stupid idea."

"No, not stupid."

"What makes you think it's *smart*? And why do you think he'd even come?"

"Maybe he won't, Seneca, but I've got to try. Anyway, the cell phone doesn't work here. I bet it'll work better in the next town. Let's go."

Seneca slides off the hood and we climb into the Jeep. "How are we gonna get him out here?" she says. "I doubt you can call him, say 'hey Erik, meet us in the middle of nowhere West Virginia for no particular reason whatsoever,' and he'll jump in his car and toodle on out."

I turn the key. Nothing happens. I turn again. Holy crap.

"Well, here's our excuse. The Jeep is dead."

"Does it have gas?"

"Yes."

"You got it in park?"

the trouble with dead people

“Yes. It isn’t even turning over, Seneca. It’s completely dead. Listen, I’ll go see if they have a payphone. You stay here with Snookums.”

“Okay,” Seneca says, grinning.

“What’s so amusing?”

Seneca shrugs. “It’s funny, don’t you think? You decide we need Erik and the Jeep conveniently dies. Seems to me, problem solved.”

sixteen

“So let me get this straight,” Erik says. “You believe I’m somehow involved in all these deaths too?”

I nod. “At least two, yes.”

I tell him about Jake and Oliver. Erik doesn’t seem too convinced about all of this after I explain it to him. He stares into his soda can like he might find a more suitable response swirling somewhere in there.

“I want to know why you believe all this crazy stuff, Harper.”

“I want to know how you nabbed a car and got out here without getting in trouble,” Seneca says.

“I told my mom I was going to my friend’s house.”

“How’d you get a car?”

Erik shrugs. “It’s *my* car. I got it for my sixteenth birthday.”

“Man,” Seneca says, “your parents must be loaded. We just have the Jeep.”

“Dad could afford another car if he wanted to,” I say. “He’s just cheap. When I get my license, I won’t have a thing to drive.”

“Doesn’t seem to have stopped you so far,” Erik says, grinning.

the trouble with dead people

I smile too, happy he's sitting next to me. He could've gone home. All we needed was a jumpstart and the Jeep's battery kicked into life. But instead of heading back, we convinced him to come with us. As Seneca pointed out to me on the drive, we didn't have to convince him too hard.

Mrs. Moone isn't home, so we're sitting on her porch, waiting for her to show up. We figure she won't be gone long, since we can hear the little lamb bleating behind the door. Snookums cowers in the Jeep, we're eating snacks, and so far, fingers crossed, no irrational anger has washed over me. I'm sitting next to Erik, perfectly content. Well, as content as I can get, given the strange stuff we're dealing with.

Seneca chews on another candy bar and sends a pitying glance towards the Jeep. "Poor Snooky. It's not so scary out here."

"Not as long as the other ghosts can keep Joe away," I say.

"We'll try," Corrine says. "Boy, does that candy bar look good."

I frown and finish my last handful of granola.

"Want a toaster pastry?" Erik asks. He's got a whole box open and chomps away, washing it down with chemical-laden soda. I shake my head as I crunch.

"Harper doesn't believe in eating anything made commercially," Seneca says.

"Why not?" Erik asks.

I shrug. "They fill those things with chemicals. Why would I want to eat it?"

"Cause it tastes good?"

"Doesn't taste good to me. Not if I don't know where it comes from or what's in it."

"Harper's paranoid," Seneca says. "Mom died of cancer and Harper's afraid she'll get it too."

"Shut up, Seneca. I'm not paranoid. I just don't see why I should take the risk. The crap you buy at the grocery store is loaded with chemicals. Why should I stuff it into my system?"

It's bad enough I have to breathe polluted air and drink God-knows-what in the water. I don't need to deliberately add crap to my body. Plus, the last time I broke down and bought a hot dog, somebody went belly-up because of it."

"Corrine," Seneca whispers, even though Erik already heard the whole Corrine story.

"An eco-conscious person." Erik grins. "I applaud you, Harper. And especially because it means extra pastries for me."

We finish up our snacks. Seneca yawns and hops off the porch.

"Where are you going?" Erik asks.

"I'm bored. Gonna go pet the sheep. Wanna come?"

"No, I'll stay here with Harper."

Seneca grins, gives me a wink, and hops towards the sheep pasture. Now I sit here with Erik. Alone. Well, alone except for the three dead people lounging on Mrs. Moone's plastic chairs and staring at me with dead but alert eyes. Can't they disappear for a while?

No, probably not a good idea. Wacky Joe is tiptoeing around here somewhere, and the only protection from his evil schemes are these three. If they leave, I'm exposed. And even though Joe can't physically do anything to me, he enjoys messing with my mind and I don't need that now. Especially since the kid he wants me to kill is sitting next to me. Far, far away from any help if I decide to lose it.

I peek at Erik. Could I? Would I? No. I could never do in another person just to get rid of a ghost or two. I'd hate myself forever. I'll just have to keep the other ghosts on patrol until I can figure out how to get rid of Mad Man Joe and this insane curse.

Plus, Erik is too dang cute.

"Are we alone?" he whispers.

"No." No point in lying. Corrine gives me a big grin, Jake leers at me (but not in a creepy, Joe-leering way) and Oliver's grimace tells me he certainly doesn't approve of a boy and girl

the trouble with dead people

alone and unchaperoned. Well, we *are* chaperoned. By three annoying ghosts.

"If Mrs. Moone doesn't get here soon," Oliver says, glancing at his watch, "we should go. Wait for a more appropriate time. Like, when your father can bring you up here properly."

"No, we need to figure this out now," I say. "Before anything else stupid happens."

Erik stares at me. "What?"

"Sorry. Talking to the ghosts. I keep forgetting nobody else can see them. Or hear them. They seem so...real. I can't even see through them, they aren't transparent at all. I mean, it's like they're still living. Thinking, breathing, all that stuff. But they're dead."

"Dead as doornails," Corrine says cheerfully.

"This is going to take some getting used to," Erik mumbles.

I sigh. "Yeah, I'm hopeless, right? Totally nuts-o. I keep wondering if I'm dreaming up all of this. The only thing keeping me sane is Seneca. It's like she's the other piece of this puzzle. If she didn't back me up on all this, I'd go completely bonkers."

"I'm apparently a part of it too," Erik says. "But I haven't seen ghosts or had any dreams. I'm not even sure if I believe you."

"Then why are you here?"

He shrugs. "I like you. And you don't *act* nuts. You seem sane. Except when you start talking to thin air, anyway."

Corrine laughs. "Sweetie, if he'll put up with you through this, he's a keeper."

I smile. "Yeah, I guess anybody'd think that's nuts. Thanks again for helping us, Erik." I lean over and give him a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Oooooo," Jake says.

"Shut up. Not you Erik, Jake."

Erik grins, leans over, and kisses me before I can protest. Screw the ghosts. I kiss him back. No cold to catch *this* time.

My cell phone rings. Amazing I can get reception up here, in the middle of freaking nowhere. I pull away from Erik. My heart pounds so hard, I almost can't hear Holly's voice over it.

"Harper, guess what?"

"Holls...now's really not the time."

"Oh, yes it is. Listen, I was freaking out over who called me, so I decided to go over to Sarah Miller's and find out if it was her."

My hand slides off Erik's shoulder. "You *what*? Are you serious? Did she know you were coming?"

"No. I was gonna barge in and interrogate her like a real reporter, only I wussed out when I got near her front gate, so I didn't do it. But she was in the back yard."

"And?"

"And, she was burying a dead goat."

"*And...*"

"I dunno, just thought you'd want to know. She almost seemed happy burying that dead goat. I thought you said she loved those goats like they were her own kids."

"Seneca says she's scared of 'em. Maybe she's *happy* one died."

"If she's so scared of them, why doesn't she get rid of them? Poison their Goat Chow or something?"

"How should I know? Hey, was she doing anything strange? Like mumbling incantations over the grave, or some weird witchy stuff like that?"

"Nope, she was just burying it. Talk to Mrs. Moone yet?"

"She's not in. We're waiting for her."

"She'd better hurry up," Erik says.

"Who's that? Erik? You invited Erik but not me?"

"It's a long story, Holls. I'll tell you when I see you. Listen, I'll fill you in later. I see Mrs. Moone's car."

Mrs. Moone's old rust-bucket splutters to a stop. Even from here, I can tell her eyes are as big as dishpans. She sticks her head out the window.

the trouble with dead people

“What the devil are you three doing here? You aren’t scheduled to cave today. Where’s your father?”

Seneca waves. “Hi, Mrs. Moone! We’re sorry for barging in on you, but we’re looking for an old lady in a rocking chair.”

“*What?*”

Oh brother. I glare at my sister, willing her to shut up. Let’s not freak out the nice old lady all at once.

Mrs. Moone gets out of the car and hobbles over, staring at us like we’re a bunch of alligators lounging on her front porch.

“Ask her about Sarah Miller,” Corrine whispers.

Well, that’s as good a way to start as any. “Mrs. Moone, do you know a lady named Sarah Miller?”

Mrs. Moone’s face goes white. She’s the sweetest, grandmotherly type usually, but now her eyes narrow and she snaps, “Why do you ask?”

“Well, that’s not a no,” Seneca whispers.

“You might as well tell her why you’re here,” Oliver says. “That’ll speed things up, since she already knows.”

I turn around. “She does?”

“Don’t turn your back on me, Harper Dillon. Who are you talking to?”

I take a deep breath. “Mrs. Moone, I’m talking to a ghost.”

Mrs. Moone’s already pasty face fades to complete transparency. She pulls herself onto the porch and fishes in her purse for her keys.

“You three better come in,” she says, “and tell me what this is all about.”

seventeen

I've been in Mrs. Moone's house a zillion times. We'd stop in and have a cup of tea or a cookie after a caving trip, and once or twice we came up to help her tend the garden after her husband passed away. In fact, my love of gardening came from helping Mrs. Moone in hers. So, I'm normally comfortable in this place. It's one of those old fashioned white clapboard houses with a fireplace and wood floors, and Mrs. Moone's bright crocheted afghans cover every couch, bed, and chair in the place. Pictures plaster the walls: sepia-toned photos from the far past, newer snapshots of grandkids with cherubic faces and half-toothed smiles. Yup, Mrs. Moone's house is as warm as they come. Usually.

Today, this house is still like death. Like it's waiting for something. I wonder if it's waiting for us.

"Sit. I'll make some coffee."

"Thanks." I slide into a chair and rest my elbows on the wooden table. Dad never lets us drink coffee. But what Mrs. Moone doesn't know won't kill her.

the trouble with dead people

Seneca shakes her head. "Got anything else?"

"Of course, dear. You're too young for coffee anyway. I'll get you some orange juice. What about the boy?"

"I'm fine, thanks," Erik says. His eyes move to the hanging pictures.

Mrs. Moone comes back from the kitchen and plunks a cup of black coffee in front of me. I'm too nervous to ask for cream and sugar. She hands Seneca a glass of OJ, sits, and takes a big slurp of her coffee.

"Now, Harper. The ghosts. How many?"

I somehow swallow the bitter coffee without spitting it all over Mrs. Moone's crocheted tablecloth. "You *believe* me?"

She nods. "You barge in here asking about Sarah Miller, then you tell me you're seeing ghosts. Doesn't take a brainiac to figure you're telling the truth. How do you know Sarah, anyway?"

"She lives at the end of our street."

"With a bunch of goats?"

"A bunch of smelly, poopy goats," Seneca says.

Mrs. Moone ignores her and keeps her eyes locked on me.

"What did you do to piss off the goats, Harper?"

The coffee almost spurts out my nose. Hearing sweet old Mrs. Moone utter a phrase like "piss off" is almost enough to send me into hysterics. I regain my composure.

"I might've kicked one."

Mrs. Moone rolls her eyes. "That'd do it. So how many ghosts?"

"Four."

"Are they all here?"

I glance around. Jake wanders after Erik, studying the hanging pictures. Corrine makes faces at the lamb, who has his eyes locked with hers. Can he see her? Oliver watches me, an intent expression on his serious face.

"Three are. The other one is around here somewhere, but the other three are trying to keep him away."

"Why?"

"He's bad. He's a murderer. Mrs. Moone, you know something about this, don't you? Can you tell me who the lady in the rocking chair is?"

Mrs. Moone begins to open her mouth to say something, but Erik interrupts her.

"Harper," he says, "Seneca, I think I've found her. She's right here."

I jump up and join Erik at the wall.

Seneca trails her finger along the frame. "Who is she? It's the exact picture in my dream."

I nod. "Same with me. That's the lady."

"She's my sister," Mrs. Moone says. "My older sister Bertha. She passed away, twenty years ago this week."

"How'd she die?"

Mrs. Moone sighs. "It's a mystery. She disappeared one day. We never found a hint of where she'd vanished to. The case went cold long ago."

"Do you think it has something to do with Sarah Miller and the goats?"

Mrs. Moore nods. "Sit down, kids. I'll tell you what I know."

She pours more coffee into my mug. I don't even mind the icky bitterness of the stuff. I'm shaking so bad I'm surprised the coffee doesn't slosh over the cup rim whenever I take a sip. All our eyes are riveted to the small lady at the table's head; even the ghosts hang on her every word.

"My sister Bertha and Sarah were great friends. They grew up together. Sarah's folks lived in a cabin across the road. We were the only families living in these parts then...two small farms surrounded by woodland, and all those girls had were each other. I grew up idolizing both of 'em. My older sister Bertha, she was the smart one, and her beautiful friend Sarah."

"Seriously? That old hag?" Seneca says.

“Shh, Seneca, don’t interrupt.” I put my coffee cup down. “She wasn’t always a hundred years old.”

“Sarah had the most gorgeous long, blond hair and crystal blue eyes. She always laughed. I don’t recall a day when she was sad, not then, anyway. When I turned fifteen, Sarah found her true love, a young man named Sam. My, but he was the looker. Looked an awful lot like your friend there.” She nods toward Erik, who pales.

“Don’t bring me into this, please. I’m in it enough already.”

“Sorry, boy. Anyway, Bertha wanted out of this place, bad. She dreamed of big cities and money and fame. She was one of those types. Sarah would’ve been content on the farm, but her boyfriend, Sam, thought Bertha had the right idea. Oh, I remember the fights my parents had with her. She was so rebellious. When she turned eighteen, she split and took Sarah and Sam with her.

“Well, they were gone for a few years. Bertha would write sometimes, when she remembered, about traveling to San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York. Sometimes I envied her, following her dreams and exploring the world, but mostly I was content here. Then one day, I got a strange letter from Bertha.”

She pauses and takes a sip of coffee. “I felt uneasy when I read it. Bertha had the most beautiful handwriting normally. But this letter, the writing was shaky. And even though Bertha’s letter didn’t contain anything bad, I knew something was wrong. Bertha wrote about meeting a man and how he had convinced her, Sarah, and Sam to travel with him. She said he knew a way for them to get rich and they were heading off to find their fortune.”

“Where’d they go?” Seneca asks.

“Nobody knew. For months, we didn’t hear from her. My parents grew worried. I worried too. But we didn’t call the cops. Life then wasn’t like it is now, with all the social networking

and ways to keep in touch with people. We were used to long spells with no word. But still, something felt wrong. Then, one night, she came back."

"Just like that?"

Mrs. Moone nods. "Sarah came back too, without Sam. The two women came back as meek as lambs. Sarah went back to her parents' goat farm. And Bertha never left this farm again."

"Why?" I ask. "What happened?"

"She never said. Neither did Sarah. But they didn't come back with riches, that's for sure. And Bertha—my strong, spirited sister—walked around here with a fearful look in her eyes. Most days, she sat in that rocking chair over there and stared at nothing." She nods to the rocking chair in the corner.

"Now, here's something you have to understand. Our family raised sheep and Sarah Miller's folks bred goats. The two families were always on good terms. We'd trade wool and meat for milk and cheese, and we all got along fine. Then one day, fire swept through the mountains. We'd had a particularly dry summer and I remember the meadow turning brown and the creek drying to nothing. Somehow, the fire jumped past our house, but engulfed Sarah's. Both her parents died.

"Sarah was distraught. She had not only lost her beau, but her family as well. She lost everything, except the goats. She became a bitter recluse after that. My family tried to help her, but she spurned us. Just as Bertha came back withdrawn and closed, so had Sarah. She built a little shack and stayed on the property with the goats. And that was when things got weird."

Mrs. Moone takes a long sip of coffee. My stomach flip-flops every which way. I wish she'd hurry up and get on with it.

"The goats. Sarah's goats."

I lean in. "What about the goats?"

Mrs. Moone's eyes stare ahead, glazed, like she doesn't remember we're here. "They had dead eyes. They didn't act

the trouble with dead people

like normal goats. They'd stare at you too long if you looked at 'em. Like they knew something you didn't. They looked a little too...intelligent to be just goats. They scared the hell out of me. And when I went over to try and visit Sarah, she'd stare at me with angry eyes and yell at me to get away.

"Bertha wasn't much better. She sat in her rocking chair and refused to leave it. She'd eat, sleep, knit, but she hardly ever left that chair. If we asked her questions, she'd answer, but never completely. She'd get up to wash dishes, help clean, feed the dog. But she never left the house. Not in ten years. Not a doctor in the world could break through her shell...she refused all help. So, she just sat."

Mrs. Moone pulls her eyes from her coffee cup and levels her gaze at me.

"The only thing she talked about were the ghosts."

There goes my mouthful of coffee, spurted all over Mrs. Moone's crocheted tablecloth. "*What?*"

"Mhm. Ghosts. She said she was followed around by a bunch of ghosts. She never stopped talking about the things. I always thought she was mad."

I stare at Corrine who gives me her cheerful smile.

"She wasn't mad," I say.

Mrs. Moone shakes her head. "No, I figured that out. But it took a while. See, I eventually married and moved away. Had kids, lived a pretty normal life. I saw Bertha when we came to visit the family. Then, Dad got sick and Mom died. So my husband and I moved back and we've lived here ever since."

"How long has that been?"

"Well over twenty years now. Anyway, not long after we moved back, Bertha up and walked out the door. Right during dinner. No explanation, no nothing. We didn't chase after her right at first, but when we did head out to find her, we couldn't.

The dogs couldn't track her, she left no footprints. She had just...vanished.

"Old Sarah Miller still lived on the hill, still had her goats. So I tromped on over there the next day and asked if she'd seen Bertha."

"And what'd she say?" I ask.

Mrs. Moone shakes her head. "She came out of the house with the weirdest, wildest expression on her face. Like she had seen a ghost herself. Her hair looked like a rat's nest, like it hadn't been brushed in weeks, and her clothes were dirty. She yammered on about never having seen my sister and I'd better get off her property before she called the cops.

"Well, *I* called the cops, but they never found my sister, and they never could pin anything on Sarah Miller, although I swear she had something to do with it. Then one night, I had a dream."

Seneca sucks in her breath. "You too?"

Mrs. Moone sends a small, almost confidential smile across the table. "I did. I dreamed of a cave. Up on the hill."

Seneca leans forward. "Did your cave have a frog in it?"

"No, but in my dream, Bertha stepped out of the cave. She smiled at me. She was like her old self, happy and confident. She told me not to worry because she sent something to protect me. To protect me from what, I had no idea. I still don't, really. But when I woke up, I believed her about the ghosts. I'm not sure why. And I noticed something about my sheep."

"What was that?" Seneca says.

"They were different. Not all of 'em, just a few. Like Sarah Miller's goats, they had changed somehow. They looked wiser. Gentler. It comforted me to have them around. Anyway, right after that, Sarah Miller moved away. Packed up her goats and left. I haven't seen her since."

"Did you go looking for the cave?" Seneca says.

the trouble with dead people

Mrs. Moone sips the last of her coffee and gives Seneca a puzzled smile. "You know, I never could understand you cavers. Why you'd want to crawl around in the dark. The dark scares the heck out of me. I wouldn't go into a cave if you paid me a million bucks."

Seneca grins. "So the answer is no."

"No. But I can tell you where I think that cave might be."

Seneca stares at me. "We need to find that cave, Harper. I've got a feeling..."

"A feeling about what?"

"A feeling," Seneca says, "that's where Bertha went when she disappeared."

eighteen

"I can't believe she made us take the lamb," Erik says.

He carries it slung over his shoulders, like you sometimes see Jesus do in pictures. Turns out that's the easiest way to carry a lamb. It sure looks content up there. Every once in a while it gives Erik's hair a friendly nibble.

"We should've taken the Doberman instead," Erik says.

"I guarantee you Snookums doesn't have a courageous bone in his big, wussy body," Seneca says. "If we run into any trouble, we'll have a better shot with Boopie protecting us."

"Who?" Erik says, laughing.

"Boopie. That's the lamb's name. Well, it is now, anyway."

I laugh too. "What is it with you and smarmy names? Erik, we let her name the dog too. Anyway, I'm not sure *why* Mrs. Moone insisted on the lamb. We aren't searching for a goat, we're searching for a cave."

"Again, tell me why?" Erik says as we trudge up a steep trail.

"Because Seneca saw it in a dream. Her first hunch was dead-on, and I'll bet you anything she's right about this too."

the trouble with dead people

“Great,” Erik says. “We’re following a little kid’s dreams.”

“Mrs. Moone dreamed about it too,” Seneca says.

I glance up at the clouds gathering over the trees. “We’d better get moving. Those clouds look like they’re about to dump any second.”

“Let’s hope not,” Oliver says. “We can’t stay out here if it rains.”

I whip around and stare at him. “What?”

The three ghosts plod behind us, single file, Oliver in front. “We disappear when it rains. We can’t stay out in it.”

“Why the hell not? You’re ghosts. The rain should run right through you.”

Oliver shrugs. “It took us a while to realize it, but when the rain starts to pour, we leave you and end up in the fog. Sometimes for a day or two at a time. We’ll disappear if the rain really comes down. A little sprinkle is okay. Short spatters, we can withstand. But a good soaker’ll throw us right out of here.”

“Harper,” Seneca says, “come on, let’s get moving.”

“No, hold on a second. I’m curious. Do you guys all go to the fog together?”

Corrine shakes her head. “We’re separated in there, wherever it is. Last time it rained, I walked and walked trying to find my way out of the fog, but it seemed like it took days. And when I finally found a way out, I had no idea where I was. Or where I was supposed to be. It took a while for it all to come back. I remembered I was supposed to be with you. And I finally found you again.”

“What about Joe? Does he disappear too?”

“Yes, but that worries us,” Oliver says. “Joe seems to find his way back quicker than us. The last time it rained, he beat us to you.”

“I don’t remember being out in the rain,” I say. “The last time it rained, I was inside. How’d you get wet and disappear?”

Corrine shakes her head and gives a quiet laugh. "We don't have to be out in the rain to disappear, honey. We can be indoors or outside, it doesn't matter. When the rain starts, we lose our way."

Bother. The clouds above us are the color of soot. Looks like we're in for a doozy of a downpour.

"Well, it can't be helped then, can it? If Joe gets back before you, I'll have to close my mind to him. Somehow. Let's get going."

We traipse on. The path runs up the mountain, and as I climb, I think about what the ghosts have said. An icy numbness creeps into my stomach. I've almost felt normal without Joe hanging around, hissing in my ear. The other ghosts hardly bother me at all now. I'm getting used to them and beginning to think of them as my protectors, not my haunters. Stupid Joe. If it wasn't for him, this whole experience wouldn't be half as freaky.

But, if it wasn't for him, I might not now be traipsing up this mountain, trying to find a way to end this. I might wind up like Bertha Moone instead, blabbering on about ghosts like a wacko, crazy person. And that's *not* what I want.

I wonder, in all the time Mrs. Moone has lived here, has she ever climbed up this path? She dreamt about this cave, too. Did she ever come to the conclusion that the cave was where Bertha went, like Seneca thinks?

Or is she not telling us everything she knows?

Large drips splash into my hair. I glance behind me. The ghosts still plod up the trail, but they're staring at the sky with fear in their eyes. What must it be like to be lost in a fog, unable to find your way out? Even though they're dead, they seem to feel, and right now they sure look nervous.

"Hey, it rained this morning and you didn't disappear," I say.

"That rain was too light, not hard enough. We managed to fight it off. But I don't think we can withstand this," Oliver says as the skies burst open and a torrent pelts us from above.

the trouble with dead people

“Damn!” Erik hobbles off the path, the bleating lamb hanging around his neck. “C’mon! We’ve gotta find a place to squat until this blows over.”

“Woo hoo, a thunder-boomer!” Seneca, who loves rain, says as a crackling bolt lights up the black sky.

We dive for a hollow right off the path. It doesn’t shield us from the rain, but it *feels* safer. I yank my caving pack off my shoulders and fumble through it. There’s an emergency blanket in here somewhere. It’s pretty thin, but it’s made of plastic and should keep the rain off, even though I’m already drenched through.

Seneca has her emergency blanket out and has wrapped herself in it. Erik doesn’t have a caving pack, so I pull him close and wrap both of us in mine. We huddle in the ditch. Erik’s arms slip around my back. Hmm...this rain is turning out to be a blessing in disguise.

“Harper,” he whispers in my ear, “this is crazy.”

“Yeah, but you can’t say you’re bored today. Where’s Boopie?”

“What?”

“The lamb.”

“Seneca took him. She had more room under her blanket. What were the ghosts saying?”

“They disappear when it rains.”

“So, it’s just the two of us in here? No intruders?”

A huge thunder clap shakes the ground. Now, I’m no wussy-crybaby when it comes to thunderstorms, but right now my arms are wrapped tight around him. This is great. And freaky. And scary as hell. And great. I lay against Erik and listen to his steady heartbeat, slightly muffled by the thunder.

“Gosh, Boopie, stop it!”

Seneca’s frantic yelling yanks me out of my cozy cocoon. “What’s the matter, Seneca?”

“He won’t stop squiggling. He was so chill a minute ago, now he’s going all spazzo.”

“Maybe he doesn’t like the thunder,” Erik says.

“He’ll like it less if he’s out in it,” Seneca says.

Even with the blankets, we’re soaked through by the time the rain stops, but at least it’s warm out. Erik lets me go and a little coldness seeps into my skin.

“What do we do now?” he says.

“We keep going. Seneca, does any of this look familiar to you?”

“Nope. But we hadn’t gone far when the rain began. Let’s at least get to the top of the mountain. Boopie’s calmed down a bit.”

“He’d better be calm,” Erik says, slinging the now limp lamb over his shoulders again. “If he kicks me in the face, he’s walking.”

We pack the blankets back in the cave packs and trudge up the path. Gotta admit, I feel almost naked without the ghosts. Like I’ve lost all my protection. The blanket was great to shield me from the rain, but it won’t do much against Joe. And Erik’s arms, as protective as they felt, won’t help with Joe either.

God, I hope the other ghosts get back here before Joe. Now’s not the time for any irrational anger to wash over me.

At the mountain’s crest, the path branches to the left and right.

“Which way, Seneca?” I ask.

Seneca wipes her brow and guzzles some water from her canteen. She stares in both directions. Her eyes get even bug-gier than normal.

“Look!” She points to a huge rock sitting next to the path.

“Son of a gun,” Erik breathes. “Is it the rock from your dream?”

“Well, it doesn’t have a frog on it, but yeah. That’s gotta be it. Come on.”

She sprints forward, stopping at the rock to put down her canteen before veering off the road and plunging into the woods.

“You think this is smart?” Erik asks as we follow. The poor guy gasps like he’s running a marathon. Seneca and I carry

the packs, but he's lugging the bleating lamb. "What if we get lost in the woods?"

"None of this is smart," I say. "We're searching for a cave my nuts-o sister saw in a dream. At this point, I'd say in for a penny, in for a pound."

"What does that mean?"

"I dunno, but Dad says it whenever he decides to commit to something. I guess it means once you start, you can't go back. So we'd better go forward."

The woods are thick and the grade is steep, and after all that rain, the ground is as slick as a water slide. Erik grunts and pulls Boopie from his shoulders.

"I can't balance down this thing carrying a lamb. He's gonna have to walk it."

"You don't think he'll run away?"

"We're in the middle of the woods, where's he gonna go? He'll stay with us."

Erik puts the lamb down and Boopie takes off in a happy bound. He trips over his front legs and tumbles all the way down the hill.

"Oh great," I laugh. "You killed our animal protector."

Erik laughs too and takes my hand. "He's fine, look he's scampering around like he thought it was the funnest thing. There's the creek."

My stomach flips. The flipping isn't caused by Erik's hand holding; we've done that a few times now. I'm getting used to it. But all I can think of is: *if the creek is there, the cave is there too.*

Seneca's high, excited voice calls up to us. I can't see her, she's down near the creek. But her voice carries up the mountainside.

"I've found it! Harper, it's here!"

nineteen

"It's like my dream, Harper. Exactly."

The small hole punctures the creek bank. An earthy smell oozes from it, different than the stale coldness of most caves I've explored. This one smells damper, warmer. Earthier, like an animal's burrow more than a proper cave.

We pull off our packs and get out the helmets.

"Sorry, we don't have one for you," I say to Erik.

Erik shrugs. "I'll be okay."

"Watch your head," Seneca says. She drops to her hands and knees and peers into the darkness. "How long did we tell Mrs. Moone?"

"Eight hours."

"Eight hours for what?" Erik asks.

"If we aren't back in eight hours, she calls the cops. That way if something happens to us in the cave, they can rescue us."

"Yeah, but nobody knows where this cave is," Erik says.

"Mrs. Moone knows," Seneca says. "And I told her I'd leave my canteen on the rock as a marker."

the trouble with dead people

"Smart girl," Erik says.

"Yeah, although now I'm short my water supply. And Dad always says we should never go into a cave unprepared."

"We won't be in long," I say, hoping I'm right. "Let's go." I drop down next to Seneca and crawl in.

The air is so still in here. No breeze blowing out like you sometimes get from the deeper caves. Just heavy, humid air. The layer of damp leaves and sticks makes crawling easy, especially with my knee pads, but the smell...ick.

"Something's been using this as a lair," Seneca says. "See all the bedding and stuff? No wonder it's so warm in here."

"Are we all in?" I glance behind me.

Erik crawls through the entrance, ducking his head. "I'm in."

The few sunrays piercing through the cave opening disappear as another voice says, "And I'm in too."

Joe's leering face fills the doorway. He lets out a loud, crazy laugh.

Seneca screams. Erik's jaw drops. And my entire body chills to the temperature of a Popsicle.

They see him *too*.

"Harper," Erik whispers, "who's that?"

"It's Joe. Seneca, stay behind me."

Seneca frowns. "But, he's a ghost. I'm not supposed to see him, am I?"

"In here, girlie, you can," Joe says. He's grinning like a Cheshire cat. The excitement in his eyes scares the hell out of me. He's got us cornered and he knows it.

Seneca takes a deep breath and regains some of her composure. "You're a ghost," she says. "You can't touch us. We can walk right through you if we want."

If it's possible for Joe's grin to get any freakier, it happens. Rotten teeth peek out at us behind thin, spittle-covered lips.

"Why don't you come and try it, sweetums?"

He reaches down and with deliberate slowness, like he's relishing every bit of fear on our faces, picks up a long stick from the litter covering the cave floor.

"Could he do that before?" Erik whispers.

My mouth has gone as dry as the Sahara Desert, but I manage to get out a "No."

Joe's eyes narrow as he focuses on Erik. "You, boy. Your time is up."

Erik's voice has a note of utter panic now. "Why? What did I do?"

The old man grins. His eyes don't blink. A fleeting thought races through my brain: *we can take him. All he's got is a stick.* But when I try to move my legs, they don't respond. They're stuck to the floor like magnets.

"Let's get a little more cozy in here, shall we?" Joe says, the sounds oozing through the gaps between his teeth like a snake's hiss. "See the passage behind you? Lead the way, Miss Seneca."

Seneca's braver than a fricking Viking. Her legs aren't glued to the floor like mine. She nods, turns around, and crawls into the darkness.

"Erik, you follow," I whisper.

"What?"

"He wants you. I don't know why, but you go next. I'd rather that freak-o is behind me with that stick than behind you."

"What if he—"

"I'm a damn good kicker. Go."

Boy, I'm wishing for Corrine, Jake, and Oliver now. Although, if Joe is real in here, or I guess somewhat real, what good would the others do against him? They aren't stone-cold murderers like the sick-o scraping behind me now. I can't help it. I let out a kick. It connects with something solid. Geez, he really *is* real.

"Doesn't hurt, girlie. Go ahead, if you want," Joe cackles.

the trouble with dead people

"Geez, Harper," Seneca whispers. "Geez, this is the room." The first note of real fear creeps into her words.

This is all Joe's fault. He'd better not lay a finger on my little sister. I kick again. So what if Joe can't feel it? *I can*, and it feels damn good.

My headlight illuminates the mound of bones before I enter the room. I crawl in and grab Seneca, who's shaking a bit.

"What is this place?" she says, locking eyes with Joe.

Joe grins, but doesn't answer. He isn't a big guy, and his spindly frame barely blocks the passage behind him, but unless we do a bum-rush, we aren't getting past. And he's got the only weapon, even if it is just a stick. Having stepped on one with my bare feet when I was six, I understand how owie something as mundane as a stick can be. It took ages for that puncture wound to heal and I've still got a nice scar from that experience.

Nope, we aren't taking on the stick. Or the man wielding it.

But is he really a man? How could he come back to life just by stepping into this cave?

"Are you dead or what?" I say.

"Oh, I'm still dead," Joe whispers, "but that won't help your friend none."

I move in front of Erik, blocking him. Joe's mind tricks don't seem to work in here. All I feel is a crazy protectiveness over the boy cowering behind me. Seneca blocks him too.

Joe smiles. "Brave, both of you. But it won't do you any good."

"Why do you want him dead?" Seneca says. "Why him? What makes Erik so special?"

"Yeah," Erik says. "I don't know anything about...anything."

"You're the key, boy. You can blame your little girlfriend for that."

"What?"

"She kissed you, didn't she? She brought you into all this."

"Not on purpose," I say. I turn to Erik. "Erik, I didn't mean to. I didn't even know about the curse until after you kissed me."

"And she's refused to get rid of you for me, boy. She must like you a lot."

Erik frowns. I can feel the red creep into my face. That's not something I want him to ask about.

"I don't get it," Seneca says. "Brought him into all this how?"

"I'm sure you'd love to know," Joe hisses. "But I'm not going to waste my breath telling you. Step aside, girlie. Let me finish what I came here to do."

Seneca inches forward and says, "How real are you, Joe?"

"Real enough, girl." Joe's eyes glint in the darkness.

"Seneca," I whisper. "Get back here."

"No," she says. "I don't believe he's real."

"That stick is real. Got anything to fend it off?"

"Yeah." Seneca's arm shoots out faster than a striking snake. She grabs a bone from the pile. Ew.

"All right, I've got a bigger stick. Try it now, old man."

Joe doesn't move. His shrewd eyes study Seneca's bone, but he isn't coming any closer. Do I detect a bit of hesitation? I believe I do. I slide past Seneca and grab a bone too. I don't want to look at it, but now we're both armed. And at least I've got gloves on, so the icky bone isn't touching my skin. I slide a bone to Erik. He makes a face but grabs it.

"All right, now there's three of us," I say.

A slow smile spreads across Joe's oily face. "But there's only one murderer in the room. Who, by the way, is already dead, so you can't kill him like he can kill you."

Good point. But if we can beat him off long enough to get out of here, we'll be free. Joe can't do diddly-poo to us if we're outside. He's only got human form in here.

Seneca squints. "Harper," she whispers, "what happened to Boopie?"

the trouble with dead people

"Who?"

"The lamb."

"You really think now's the time to worry about where the lamb got to?"

"Yeah," she says. "I think it is."

From behind Joe's spindly legs, I see a movement. And I hear a bleat. An incredibly un-lamby bleat. A pretty pissed off bleat. Joe's grin fades and finds its way onto Seneca's face.

"Look behind you, Ghost-Man," she says. "Boopie isn't too happy with the current situation."

twenty

Little lambs are the cutest animals on the planet, next to bunnies and kittens. But boy, you don't want to meet a lamb like Boopie. Not on one of his bad days. He's got fire shooting out of his eyes. Not literally, but man, are they glowing in this dim light. I'm sure glad he's on our side.

Boopie puts down his little head and runs full-tilt into Joe's butt. The old man yelps and blinks out of existence. Just like that.

Seneca drops her bone. "Good thing we brought the lamb."

I stare around, half-expecting Joe to pop up behind me. "Where do you think he's gone?"

"Who cares? Let's get out of here while we've got the chance," Erik says, scooting towards the exit.

"No, wait," Seneca says. "We came here for a reason. We can't leave without figuring out why."

From the tunnel, Boopie's fiery eyes return to their normal brown. "It's all right," I say. "The lamb seems content now, anyway. Guess he wouldn't be if Joe was still lurking about."

the trouble with dead people

Seneca smiles and rubs the lamb's head. "I don't get it, though. How'd Mrs. Moone guess we'd need Boopie? And why'd he have so much power over Joe?"

"I dunno." I stare at the heap of bones lying in the dirt. "Those are human bones, aren't they?"

"I think so," Erik says.

"Bertha," Seneca whispers. "I'll bet you anything."

"Harper, why does that ghost want me dead so bad?" Erik says. "I've never done anything bad to anybody. Am I being hunted? I mean, obviously I am by that wacko ghost, and I want to get out of here before he comes back, if you two don't mind. Thank God he's a ghost and can't hurt me outside this cave."

"We need to tell the police about this place," I say. "We need to tell them where Bertha's bones are."

"And I bet Mrs. Moone would like to know too," Seneca says. "But I'm still not sure we've found what we came for. What is this place?"

"I don't care what it is," Erik says. "I think we should go."

"Maybe *you* should go outside," I tell him, "while we try to figure out what we're supposed to do here."

"And leave you all alone and unprotected?"

"Geez, who protected who here?" Seneca says. "Me and Harper grabbed the bones to defend you. And Boopie did all the real dirty work. Go on. We'll be fine as long as the lamb stands guard."

Erik gives me a weird look. "Harper, what did Joe mean, when he said you refused to get rid of me?"

Oh fudge. I wish he'd forgotten about that. "Nothing, Erik. Joe, he's a trickster. Don't listen to a word he says."

Erik keeps staring at me. I wish he'd stop before I say something stupid, like: *yes, Erik, I'm supposed to kill you. It's the only way to end this curse.* Let's see how long he'd hang around me after a confession like that.

Erik stops staring and frowns. He's obviously deciding whether to play the hero and stay, or to get the hell out of here. Get the hell out wins and he crawls away.

"Big baby," Seneca whispers.

"Geez, give him a break. He just had a dead murderer try to do him in. I'd want out of here too, if that happened to me."

"He's still a coward. He hid behind us when that idiot Joe threatened him. Did you see that?"

Yeah, it wasn't brave of Erik. But I can't blame him. Besides, I'm getting the feeling he's the cute but helpless type.

"So, what are we doing here, Seneca? What do we need to find out?"

She shrugs. "Your guess is as good as mine. My dream led us here. But why, I don't know."

"I can tell you."

Seneca jumps so high she almost conks her head on the low ceiling. I spin around, but besides the shock of hearing another voice, I'm not too scared. I can tell who the voice belongs to.

"Corrine. Manage to find your way out of the fog?"

"Finally. Am I the first?"

"Yes. Well, the first of the good ghosts. Joe was already here."

Corrine's face pales. "Is everyone okay?"

"Yeah, the lamb took care of him," Seneca says. She sticks out her hand. "Hi. I'm Seneca."

Corrine gives her a motherly look. "Of course you are, dear. I'm Corrine. I feel I know you already." She holds out her hand too and they touch.

Seneca draws in her breath. "You're real."

A dreamy smile spreads over Corrine's thick lips. "Yes. Yes, I am. Oh, how wonderful. Even if it is just for a moment." She stares around the cave, eyes wide.

"So what is this place?" I ask.

Corrine studies Bertha's bones. "Move them out of the way."

the trouble with dead people

We've already touched them once, but that was when we were defending ourselves. Now we know those bones are Bertha's and I don't want to touch them again. But Seneca nods. She reaches out and pushes the bones aside. Underneath, I glimpse stone. The excitement of discovery overcomes my hesitation and I join Seneca in clearing Bertha's remnants away.

The bones cover a stone tablet etched with two lines of weird symbols. I stare at the symbols, but they don't make much sense. They're kinda like hieroglyphics, but not quite.

"What is this?" I ask.

"Beats me," Corrine says, "but I knew it was there. Something in the fog whispered it to me."

I tug at it. "It's heavy. How are we gonna get it out of here? Corrine, got any ideas what those symbols mean?"

"No, dear. They're nothing like I've ever seen. Maybe a historian could tell you."

"Dad could read it, I bet," Seneca says.

"He's a geology professor, not a historian."

"So? He loves figuring out riddles and things. We should take it back and let him see it."

I try lifting it again. It's stuck to the ground like glue. "It's too heavy. We'll have to leave it here."

"Okay, hold on." Seneca rummages through her cave pack. She pulls out a waterproof baggie with some paper and a graphite pencil. Standard caver equipment; you never know when paper and pencil might come in handy. She grins at me, lays the paper over the symbols, and rubs the graphite over the markings.

Corrine nods her approval. "Good thinking, Seneca."

"We can bring Dad back for it later," Seneca says, placing the pencil and paper in her bag. "Let's go."

We crawl out through the low passage, Boopie bleating and tripping along in front of us. Corrine has to crawl too, being at least half real.

"I'm too big for this tunnel," she grumbles. "This skirt was *not* made for crawling."

"Neither were those sandals," I say. "Where do you think the others are?"

"Probably still trying to get out of the fog. I'm getting better at it. Unfortunately, Joe's a pro already. He was in and out of there faster than the snap of your fingers. Keep that lamb close."

"You betcha," I say. "Boopie is our hero."

We crawl from the gloom into bright sunshine. Erik wades in the creek, splashing his face. Seneca glances around.

"Where's Corrine? She's disappeared."

I pat Seneca's shoulder. "She's sitting on the rock over there. C'mon, let's get back to Mrs. Moone's. I'm starving."

"And I want out of these clothes," Seneca says. "Ick. I hate dirt. And I've got bone stink all over my gloves. That'll *never* wash out."

Erik turns to us and takes a deep breath. "Harper, while you were in there, I've been out here thinking."

Uh-oh. That type of statement never ends in happiness. I fold my arms across my chest. A seed of anger burrows into my stomach lining.

"I need to go home. I can't take this. I don't understand what's going on here and it's all just too freaky."

Mr. Knight-in-Shining-Armor he is not. The anger seed begins to sprout.

"You're gonna leave us?" Seneca says.

"You've got the Jeep, you don't need me." He shoots me an accusing glare, like it's my fault all this has happened. Well, I guess some of it is, but admitting that to myself doesn't stop my anger sprout from exploding into a tree.

"Breathe," Corrine says. "You know it's Joe. Fight it. I'm sorry, I can't keep him away all by myself. I need the others. But you can fight it, Harper. You're stronger than that weasel."

the trouble with dead people

I nod, gulp hard, and chop the tree down before its roots bury in too deep. "Come on, then. Let's go."

We head back up the trail in silence. Erik walks ahead of us. He's got longer legs and he isn't lugging a cave pack. I find I'm walking slower and slower. The more distance I can put between me and him, the better.

"We don't need him," Seneca says to me. "He's a big wuss anyway."

Yeah, but until the anger kicked in, I was beginning to think of him as *my* big wuss. That's the problem.

twenty-one

“So, let me get this straight,” Mrs. Moone says, frowning. “You found Bertha?”

“Well, if we didn’t, we found somebody,” Seneca says. She’s got her arms dunked in Mrs. Moone’s kitchen sink and scrubs her skin so hard, I’m surprised she hasn’t hit bone yet.

“We found something else too,” I say. “A stone tablet with a bunch of symbols chiseled into it.”

Mrs. Moone’s frown gets even deeper. She looks like Oliver when he’s contemplating something. “What kind of symbols?”

“I have no idea. Weird ones.”

“Did you bring the stone with you?”

“No, it was too heavy.”

“The boy couldn’t carry it?” Mrs. Moone peers around. She’s just now realizing Erik isn’t with us. “Where’d he go?”

“Home,” Seneca says. “He was in a hurry to get away from the cave.”

“And me,” I say, sighing.

“Oh dear,” Corrine whispers from behind me. “Harper, don’t beat yourself up about that boy. He’s scared.”

the trouble with dead people

"We're all scared," I say, turning towards her, "but the rest of us aren't running."

Corrine smiles. "Maybe it's not us ghosts he's afraid of, sweetie."

"What should we do about the bones?" Seneca says. "I mean, I guess we should report it, but Harper, I don't want anybody else finding our stone."

Now it's my turn to frown. "Why not?"

"I think it means something. My dream led us to it, so it must have something to do with your ghosts. We need to keep it secret. Mrs. Moone, please don't tell the cops about the cave until we can get our stone out."

Mrs. Moone gives her a sad smile. "Of course, dear. If it is Bertha up there, well, she's been there for twenty years already now. A few more days won't hurt. And you two better be heading home. Before your father finds out you've been gone."

"He'll find out soon enough we've been driving the Jeep," Seneca says, "after he sees that nice, fat dent Harper put in it."

We head out to the car. The sun fades on the horizon and all my strength seems to have drained out of me. Like somebody left a plug open or something. The two hour drive back is gonna be torture.

"Hey, Corrine," I say as we get into the car, "do you think I killed Joe? I mean indirectly, like you three? 'Cause he hasn't explained to me yet how he died, or what I have to do with it."

"Maybe because you didn't," Jake says.

Both Corrine and I jump. And while it seems silly that a ghost would be startled by another ghost, well, all I can say is, these ghosts seem to have all their human freak-out facilities still in place and functioning on high-drive.

"Well, thank God you've made it out of that horrible fog," Corrine says, patting Jake on the back. "You all right?"

Jake's got this flustered, fearful expression in his face. He looks so much younger than when he's all bored and mopey. Definitely a change. Now that I think about it, Corrine's been less cheery since she returned too.

"Are you guys still stuck with the emotion you died with?" I whisper. "Or are you normalizing out a bit?"

Corrine gives me a more genuine smile than the forced one she once wore. "You know, I didn't realize it until you mentioned it. But I'm not feeling particularly happy now. Thank God. My face was beginning to hurt from all the smiling."

"I'd rather be back in my bored state," Jake says. He shoves his black bangs away from his eyes. "That was much more comfortable than this fear."

"What did you see?" Corrine asked. "When you were in the fog?"

"Well, you 'member back in Mrs. Moone's house? When she was talking 'bout her sister Bertha?"

Corrine and I both nod. Jake's voice falls to a whisper. "Bertha was supposed to be the chosen one."

A tingling sensation creeps up my spine. "A chosen one for what?"

"To open the portal for Baphomet."

"What?"

Corrine and I spurt this out at the same time and Seneca stares at me.

"What? What's going on?"

Jake takes a steadying breath. "She was...picked. *Especially* picked. See, the only way a portal can be opened is to have a sacrificial lamb. And not Boopie, if you get my meaning."

"Who picked her? What's a portal? Who the hell exactly is Baphomet?"

Jake shrugs. "He's a creature, I guess, from another dimension. Harper, Joe was part of some secret society. They're all

the trouble with dead people

about opening this portal and letting this Baphomet thing into our world."

"Why?"

"Not sure, but it goes way back. I mean like thousands of years, this society."

I frown. "Like the Knights Templar thing?"

Jake shakes his head. "The Knights Templar wasn't the society Joe was part of. It was something else."

"What?"

Jake shrugs. "Dunno. But Joe is hell-bent on opening that portal. And he needs a sacrifice to do it."

"Erik," I say. "He must want Erik as the sacrifice, since he wants him dead so bad."

"No," Jake says. Boy, does he look nervous. This can't be good. "No, not Erik. See, the person they pick for the sacrifice, well, one side effect is the ghosts."

"Come again?"

"The ghosts. That person is haunted by ghosts. Ghosts connected to them in some way, like we are to you."

Oh Lord, my knees are about to give out. My legs are turning to jelly. This can't be happening.

"You're saying *I'm* supposed to be used as a sacrifice?"

Seneca sucks in her breath. She might not be able to follow the entire conversation, but she's getting the gist, all right.

"That's what I'm saying, Harper. You've been chosen. Like Bertha. Bertha was their first choice. But she died. And when Joe got out of jail and they could put their plan in place, they picked you."

"Who?" I ask. "Who picked me?"

"Who else?" Jake says. "The goats."

The goats. "I thought you said Joe was part of some secret society. You telling me the goats are part of it too?"

Jake nods. "They aren't just goats, Harper. They're possessed. You remember what Mrs. Moone was saying? About her sister

Bertha and Sarah Miller coming back home after their years of wandering, both kinda like zombies? They found something. Something that scared them so bad, they came home to hide. But Sarah Miller brought something back with her. There's spirits in those goats."

An icy chill seeps into my bones. "What kind of spirits?"

"Evil spirits. Bertha had some too, except her spirits were different."

"Different how?"

"Not evil. Harper, there's some weird war going on here, a war between these two spirits. I think the spirits in the goats are trying to get Baphomet into this dimension. And the other spirits, they're fighting against it."

I remember how Boopie kicked Joe's butt. Well, *butted* Joe's butt anyway. "Are the good spirits in the sheep?"

Jake nods. "They stayed here with Mrs. Moone. To protect something."

"The stone tablet we found?"

Jake shrugs. "Maybe. That's all I know."

"Okay, but what about this secret society? What is it? Where is it? Who's in it? Why do they want to release a goat-devil into our world? What about Sarah Miller? Is she part of the society too? And what about Erik? Why does Joe want him dead? And if Joe isn't one of you, who the hell is he?"

Jake shrinks back at my barrage of questions and melts right through Seneca. "I don't know any more, Harper. I'm sorry. That's all I learned in the fog. All this has to do with opening a portal and letting Baphomet in. And you're cursed with us until the portal is open and Baphomet is set free."

twenty-two

“Harper Dillon, where the *hell* have you two been?”

Dad stands in the driveway, arms folded, glaring at us as we inch the banged-up Jeep into the driveway. I slide lower and lower in my seat. Seneca’s hand creeps up to her head and she nervously yanks a strand of hair right out of it.

Behind me, Snookums lets out a happy bark. He’s the only one glad to see Dad right now.

Dad’s mad as a bull seeing red. He never loses it, but boy is he fuming now. Like usual, Seneca regains her composure quicker than me.

“What are you doing home so early?” she says. “The conference was supposed to last all weekend.”

“The main speaker didn’t show up. Missed his plane. We decided to come home.”

“You could’ve called,” Seneca says.

“I *did* call. If you check your phones, you will see I called both of you at least five times over the last three hours. I’ve been worried sick.”

Seneca glances at me. "We must've been out of service."

"Out of service? Where the hell did you two go?"

"Language, Dad," Seneca says.

"Seneca, don't you lecture me about language. That's for me to do to *you*. What the hell is *that*?"

Damn. He found the dent. I'd better come up with an explanation fast.

"Dad, we had to go to Mrs. Moone's. We got into a little wreck, but—"

"Little? Mrs. Moone's? You *had* to go? Harper, I leave you alone for one weekend and this is what happens?"

Maybe cracking a joke might help lighten his mood. "Hey, at least I didn't throw a crazy underage drinking party and trash the house," I say.

"Why the hell did you *have* to go to Mrs. Moone's?"

Geez, I'm getting nowhere with him. Seneca excels at wheeling out of trouble and she comes through now with flying colors.

"Dad, we found something of historical importance today. In a cave."

Dad's ready to let out another barrage of lecturing, but he stops in mid-rant, mouth wide open, and glances at Seneca. That caught his interest.

Seneca grabs her cave pack. "We found a stone. With markings. It means something, Dad, but we aren't sure what."

She pulls out the paper, unfolds it, and hands it over. Dad, mouth still hanging open, glances at the rubbing. He closes his mouth.

"What the hell...?"

Seneca shoots me a *he's buying it* grin.

"Where on Earth did you get this?" Dad asks.

"Told you. We found a stone. I made a rubbing of it, 'cause we couldn't get the stone out of the cave. Can you read what it says?"

the trouble with dead people

Dad gulps. His body shakes like he's about to faint. "Kids, let's get inside."

I glance behind me, at Corrine and Jake.

"You think he knows something?" Corrine asks.

I shrug.

"Harper! Hey, Harper!"

I turn around. Holly bounces up the street, waving. "Did ya just get back?"

"Oh, geez. Holly, shut up and get in here. Dad, in the kitchen. We'll explain everything if you promise not to totally freak out."

Dad frowns. "Holly, now's not a good time for a visit."

"She's in on it too, Dad."

"Yeah, and I got a bunch of cool facts on Oak Island."

I glance at Dad. He's gone as white as a—well, not a ghost, since they don't seem to lose any color—as a sheet.

"Dad, have you heard about Oak Island?" Seneca says.

"Into the kitchen," Dad says. "Everybody."

Dad doesn't offer us a nice cup of coffee, like Mrs. Moone. He doesn't even glance at Seneca or me. As soon as we sit down, he turns to Holly. Seneca sneaks a cookie out of the cookie jar while he's got his attention otherwise focused.

"Now," he says. "What is this about Oak Island? What do you know about it, Holly?"

"Lots. I watched a bunch of videos. They call it the Oak Island Money Pit. It's this place up in Nova Scotia somewhere."

"And?"

"Well, the whole myth about Oak Island is that there's treasure buried down this deep shaft. The shaft was discovered like two hundred years ago, but nobody's ever gotten to the bottom of it to discover the supposed treasure there. Over the last couple of centuries, they've found that the whole island has all these shafts and booby traps and symbols and all sorts of crazy stuff set up by somebody at some point, but nobody knows who or when."

“Cool,” Seneca says. “And they don’t have any clue what’s down there?”

“Nope, nobody has a clue, but people keep digging anyway. And here’s the weird thing. They’ve found stuff like tons of coconut fiber, even though there’s no coconuts in Nova Scotia, and types of rocks only found in Egypt or something, and a stone with weird symbols.”

Seneca almost chokes on her cookie. An electric pulse shoots right down to my toes.

“A what?”

“A stone.”

“Like this?” I nod at Dad and he lays out Seneca’s paper. Holly jumps out of her seat so fast, the chair falls over and Snookums yelps and scuttles across the tiles in fright.

“That’s it! The same markings they showed on the video. Harper, they say the stone has been lost for like a century. You found it?”

“Yeah. We found it when we explored the cave Seneca saw in her dream.”

Dad’s rage has vanished. He stares at me with eyes almost as buggy as Seneca’s. “What cave?”

“It’s near Mrs. Moone’s house, up the ridge, on the old Miller property. Dad, did you know Sarah Miller and Mrs. Moone were neighbors?” I say.

“Seriously?” Holly says. “This is getting wackier by the minute.”

“Dad, what does it say?” Seneca asks. “You know about it, don’t you?”

Dad takes a deep breath. “Of course I know about it. I heard about Oak Island when I was a kid. I always dreamt about going there and finding the treasure. A kid’s dream, of course. A couple of people privately own the island, so there’s no way anyone can go over there with a shovel and dig. Plus, the whole place is too complex. In over two hundred years, nobody’s ever

been able to get to the bottom of that shaft. I doubt anybody ever will."

"What does the writing on the stone say?"

"Well," Dad says, "nobody knows for sure, but most people have interpreted it to read: 'Forty feet below, two million pounds are buried.'"

Seneca nods. "Buried treasure. Hey, if we could find it, we'd be rich."

Dad's eyes are glinting. "Seneca, can you show me the cave? Where the stone is? Would you remember how to get there?"

"Sure," Seneca says. "But Dad, better warn you. There's bones in there. Human bones."

Dad frowns. "Oh my. Are you kids okay?"

Now he's getting all paternal and concerned. Like finding some bones was the worst thing that happened in the cave. Meeting up with a real, live Joe was much worse. Much worse.

"I'm not going back there," I say. "Not a good idea."

"Why?" Seneca's eyes widen. "Oh yeah. The ghosts."

"The *what?*" Dad stares at the three of us.

"Seneca, you and Dad could go. I'm pretty sure the ghosts have to stay with me. If I'm far enough away, like here, they can't follow you. You can get in and out of there, no prob."

"You could stay with me at my house," Holly says.

I nod.

"Then it's settled, right, Dad?" Seneca says. "I'll show you the cave. And Harper'll stay here. And we'll explain to you about the ghosts. It's all crazy, but it gets even crazier, trust me."

twenty-three

Holly sits next to me on her sofa, chomping popcorn. "All right, on to seriously important matters. What's going on with Erik?"

"Let's not talk about Erik."

"Aw, c'mon. What happened up there?"

"He totally wussed out on us and took off. Got chicken feet."

Holly stuffs a handful of popcorn in her mouth. "Bummer," she mumbles. "How 'bout that Joe guy? He been hanging around lately?"

"No. Corrine thinks he's trying a different tactic."

"Which is?"

"Laying low until I get near Erik. Then giving me the full force of his nasty temper so I'll do Erik in."

"Well, that's what I don't get. Why does Joe want Erik dead so bad? Popcorn?"

"Is it that microwave crap or did you fresh pop it?"

Holly rolls her eyes. "Harper, you aren't gonna keel over dead if you have a handful of microwaved popcorn. It doesn't work that way. Here. Just a couple of kernels."

the trouble with dead people

"Fine." I reach over and pop a few kernels into my mouth. Ew.

"So? Whaddya think?"

"Oily. Salty. Where's the butter?"

"It's butter flavored, see? Naturally flavored to boot."

"Holls, you know how they get natural flavors? They use the scent glands of beavers."

"Bully."

"Totally true. They harvest beaver glands and use 'em to flavor our food."

"Bleh." Holly makes a face at the popcorn. Her horror lasts about two seconds before she goes for another handful. "Harper, when are you gonna get over this whole healthy hippie eating thing? Where's the girl who used to pig out on frozen burritos and drink diet soda with me?"

"That girl got smart. Stopped stuffing crap into her system."

"Okay, fine. Think your dad and Seneca have got the stone yet? That's so cool. People have been searching for that thing for ages."

"I guess."

"Geez, you're no fun to talk to." Holly plunks the bowl of popcorn onto the couch and gets up. "I'm gonna get on the computer, see if I can find out any more info on Baphomet, or Oak Island, or something. See if I can link the two together."

She leaves me sitting on the couch. God bless Holly and I love her, but I'm kinda glad to be alone. I don't want to talk about any of this right now. I'm already in information overload. I can't handle anything else. I've got my hands full enough grappling with the other pieces of this puzzle. Like what exactly the connection is between Sarah Miller and her goats, Baphomet, and me.

"Everything okay, sweetie?" Corrine asks.

"Fine. Corrine, do you miss your family at all? I really am sorry you're dead."

Corrine stares at the ceiling. "Well, I missed the kids at first. But now, I have a hard time even focusing any thoughts on them. Mostly, they're getting fuzzy."

"So what do you think of then?"

"I *don't* think, not much. Only when you ask me things, or if I'm trying to help you with something. Mostly, I'm concentrating on keeping Joe away, but ever since the cave, he's been fuzzy too. Far away and not much of a threat."

"What about you, Jake?"

Jake lounges next to Snookums on the floor. Snookums has given up growling at the kid. I wonder about Snookums. Does he see the ghosts, or feel their presence? He always seems to sense them when they're around.

"What about me what?" Jake says, yawning.

"What do you think about all day?"

"I dunno." Jake is back to his usual morose self. "Nothing much. Joe bugs me. I think about him a lot."

"Is there anything else you can tell me about the whole sacrifice thing?"

"Nope. Told you all I know."

"Corrine?"

"Sorry, honey. I didn't see any of that stuff in my fog. I figured out the stone tablet part. But I didn't see anything else."

"I did."

Man, I wish these ghosts would let me *see* them before they speak. I'm never gonna get used to their abruptness. Oliver plunks onto the sofa.

"Hey, Oliver. Glad you're back. What'd you see in your foggy nightmare?"

"And why'd it take you so long?" Jake asks.

"Hmm, didn't *feel* long. Anyway, I learned something about our old friend Joe."

Ugh. "What?"

the trouble with dead people

"Well, for one, Harper, you didn't kill him. You had nothing to do with that greasy snake's death."

I'm still strongly debating the idea I killed *anybody*, but I have to admit, one death off my conscious is a relief. Although, I never did have too much sympathy for Joe. "Go on."

"Joe is part of a secret society."

"The Baphomet Portal Opening Society by chance?"

"That's the one. And here's the really interesting thing. Joe's death was planned."

"By who?"

"By Joe."

No sense. That makes no sense whatsoever. "Why would Joe want to off himself?"

"Apparently, it's all part of the plan."

"What plan?"

"The plan to open up the portal and let Baphomet in. Some of it is still fuzzy to me, but for this plan to work, Erik needs to die."

"Seems to me," Jake said, "it'd have been a hell of a lot easier for Joe to kill Erik if Joe was alive."

That's true. "Yeah, he completely botched the deed as a dead guy. One little lamb was enough to take him out."

"Joe had no intention of killing Erik in that cave," Oliver says. "He was trying to frighten you, Harper."

"Well, he succeeded plenty."

"You have to understand. He's right about one thing. *You* have to kill Erik."

"Geez, you're trying to convince me of this too?"

"No, I'm not saying you *should* kill Erik. But in order for Joe's plan to work, it's vital that *you* kill Erik. Nobody else. You."

My head begins to throb. "Oliver, you'd better start making sense quick. I can't take much more of this."

"Yeah, Oliver, fill us all in," Corrine says. "Why did Joe need to kill himself to scare Harper into killing Erik?"

I nod. "And why is it so important that Erik dies? Why him? *I'm* the sacrifice, so why does Erik have to die?"

Oliver takes a steady, patient breath. "The goats marked you as a sacrifice, Harper. But your blood is too pure."

"Huh?"

"Pure blood won't open the portal. It has to be tainted. With murder."

"Well dammit, why didn't they use Joe as the fucking sacrifice? He's a murderer and apparently enjoys it. They could've used his blood, or whatever they need. If he was willing to die just to come and haunt me, he'd probably have been willing to die as the sacrificial goat."

"That's it, though. He *enjoys* it. There's only a certain way this portal will open. They can't sacrifice someone who took a life of their own accord."

Jake nods. "They want someone who was bullied into murder."

"Oh God, this makes no fucking sense. Stop talking now. What about Bertha? Did she whack someone?"

"Bertha? She was a tough cookie. She never succumbed. And she died before they could use her anyway. That night when she walked out of Mrs. Moone's, she went to check on the stone."

"The one with the symbols? In Seneca's cave?"

Oliver nods. "She put it there years before, to keep it safe."

I almost ask *safe from who?* But the answer is obvious. Joe and his Baphomet-worshipping friends.

Oliver goes on.

"She meant to check on it. Instead, she died in that cave. Natural causes. She was lucky. If she had been used as a sacrifice, well, it isn't the most pleasant way to go."

"Great, thanks. Thanks for making me feel super-jolly about the whole thing."

the trouble with dead people

Oliver gives me a stern stare. "Harper, if you don't break down and kill anybody, you're safe. They can't use you. It's imperative you fight off anything Joe flings at you. Got it?"

"Yeah, yeah, I've got it. Listen, Oliver. When we were in the cave, Joe was real. Corrine too. I could touch her, like she wasn't even dead. How? How'd that work?"

Corrine nods. "I'd sure like to know too."

"I'm not sure, exactly," Oliver says. "They whispered to me in the fog, but some things weren't too clear. I tried to listen as hard as possible. What I can figure out is this: there are certain spots on this planet open to other things. That cave was one such place. It was a portal."

"A portal for Baphomet?"

Oliver shakes his head. "No. For something else."

"The spirits? The ones in the goats and sheep?"

Oliver frowns. "Could be. But whatever it let loose before, the portal is closed. It's dead now. They can't use it anymore."

There's a "but" coming, I can feel it.

"But there are others," Oliver says. "Other portals."

See, there it is.

"Where, Oliver?"

Oliver shrugs. "Beats me, Harper."

God, this keeps getting more and more complicated. I bet Mrs. Moone knows more than she's letting on.

From inside my jeans pocket, my phone buzzes. It's a text from Seneca.

Hrpr. Weird stuf at Moones.

I text her back. *Get stone?*

Gone.

What? I call Seneca's number.

"Geez, Harper," she whispers. "I was texting for a reason, y' know. I don't want her to hear me."

"Who?"

Seneca's voice drops even lower. "Harper, we went to the cave and the stone isn't there. It's disappeared. And Dad got all mad because now he thinks we faked the whole thing as a cover-up for taking the Jeep. So now, he's over here complaining to Mrs. Moone. Who else knew about the stone, Harper? *She was the only one we told.* And now the stone is gone."

twenty-four

“So let me get this straight,” I say. “You think sweet old Mrs. Moone is the bad guy?”

Seneca sits on my bed, all cutesied up in a frilly skirt and a big bow in her hair, and her eyes are huger than dinner plates. “Who else could it have been? We didn’t tell Erik about the stone since he was a wuss and ducked out on us. We only told her.”

“We didn’t tell her about your rubbing, though.”

“No, but if what Dad says is right, half the world knows what the stone says, so it isn’t as if she’s hiding anything by taking it. But the bones were gone too.”

“Bertha’s?”

“Who else? Harper, she said she wasn’t going to move anything until we could come back, and then presto! The next day everything is gone. And we’re back to square one. And we can’t trust Mrs. Moone. She flat out denied to Dad that we’d even been there.”

“Erik can vouch for us.”

“Oh geez, don’t bring him into it. Dad’ll be mad as a hornet if he finds out we had a boy with us. Anyway, we could get every

kid in Wagnerville to vouch for us and he'll still take the word of an old lady over us, even if we *are* his own kids. Why would she lie, Harper, if she wasn't part of that evil society thingy?"

"Maybe she's scared. Maybe she's trying her damndest not to get stuck as the sacrificial lamb."

"So she's willing for some poor innocent kid to take her place? Geez, she's older than Moses. She's lived her life already. Selfish jerk. Anyway, did Oliver tell you why it has to be Erik?"

I shrug. "Because I kissed him. Because he means something to me."

"I mean something to you. And Joe isn't trying to get you to kill me. You'd think if he really wanted to mess with your psyche, he'd try to convince you to do your sister in." Her saucer sized eyes narrow and she winds her finger around a hair strand and gives it a nervous tug. "You *aren't* trying to kill me, are you?"

"Don't be such a goofus. Joe's never tried to stick that in my brain."

Joe's not that stupid. I'd never hurt my sister. But Erik, I sure like him. I don't love him. Not like I love my sister. I'd give my life for her. Would I give my life for Erik? If it came down to either me or him, would I cave in? I remember those crazy bouts of anger and a cold chill tiptoes up my spine.

"Seneca," I say. "We've got to get out of here."

"Okay. Where?"

"Somewhere where Erik isn't. Somewhere where he'd be safe from me."

"That's what we were supposed to do last time," she says, "and it backfired on us. We ended up calling him and getting him to come with us. But, if you're serious, let's get Dad to take us camping."

"Forever?"

Seneca rolls her eyes. "Geez, Harper. We can't keep you away from Erik forever. What about school in the fall?"

the trouble with dead people

“Okay, do you think we could convince Dad to skedaddle out of town for a few weeks? That’ll give me at least enough time to decide what to do. I just want to get away from this place. From Sarah Miller, from Erik, from Mrs. Moone, from everybody.”

“He’ll do it,” Seneca says. “He’s done teaching for the summer and won’t want to stay around here when there’s caves to go find. I bet it wouldn’t be hard to convince him.”

“Except he grounded us for the whole summer.”

“Pfft,” Seneca says. “He won’t stick to it. Not if it means he has to hang around this town all summer. He’ll take us. Anyway, what about the ghosts? Found a way to get rid of them yet?”

I sigh. From across the room, Corrine sends me a sympathetic smile.

“I can’t get rid of the ghosts,” I say. “Not until all this is over.”

“Yeah, but how do we end it? Didn’t Joe tell you the only way you can end it is to kill Erik?”

“Geez, Seneca, haven’t you been listening? If I kill Erik, they can use me to open this portal thing. Killing Erik won’t end the curse. It’ll make it *worse*. I have no idea how to get the ghosts to disappear, Seneca. They don’t know either. Maybe I’ll be stuck with them forever. Like Bertha Moone was stuck with hers.”

“Won’t that drive you...you know, cuckoo?” Seneca spins her finger near her ear, lolls her tongue out of her mouth, and crosses her eyes to stress the point.

“Maybe. But until I find a way to get rid of them, I don’t have much choice.”

“Well, I’m pretty sure we can convince Dad to go on a camping trip. But what will happen to your garden, Harper? If we leave for the summer, everything’ll die.”

“Yeah, well.” I sigh and stare out the window at my happy plants beginning to bloom. Poor things. They’re enjoying their new life and I’m mercilessly cutting it short. Am I destined to kill everything I love?

“Well, they’re just plants, Seneca. They’ll grow back next year.”

“And what about Snookums? He’ll have to come with us and he *hates* camping.”

“You hate camping too, but you’ll come. Won’t you?”

“Of course I’ll come. I’ve always had to go on all your stupid caving and camping trips, so I’m used to the misery. Harper, Dad’ll never believe all this stuff. I mean, he got all excited over the Oak Island thing, but now he thinks we’re making stuff up. He’ll never believe us now.”

“Maybe if we get Mrs. Moone to tell him the truth,” I say.

“She’s not gonna admit to diddly. She used us, Harper. Why else would she flat-out lie to Dad and tell him we were making everything up? She’ll never admit to all this now. Not to him. And I don’t trust her a bit. If she were honest with us, Harper, she’d have told us what’s going on. She’d have tried to help us figure a way out of it.”

“Your sister’s got a point,” Jake, who’s curled up next to Snookums on the floor, says. They’re all buddy-buddy now, Jake and Snookums.

“Fine. But I still think Mrs. Moone doesn’t know everything that’s going on. Maybe she’s a pawn in all this, same as me. And there’s no way I’m gonna give in to Joe and open the portal for this Baphomet monster.”

“Why?” Seneca says. “Why does somebody want to let some weird goat-demon into our world that bad? And how does the stone we found have anything to do with it?”

A chill tap dances down my vertebrae. “Seneca, Oliver said there were other portals. Other ways for Baphomet to get in. Maybe they haven’t found them yet, but that’s what Joe’s wacky society must be looking for. We need to end this. How can we end it?”

Seneca gives me her insistent, buggy-eyed stare. “We go to Florida.”

the trouble with dead people

"What?"

"Harper, I had a dream last night."

I stare at her. "And you didn't think it was important enough to tell me right away because...?"

Seneca shrugs. "I wasn't sure if it had anything to do with all this Baphomet stuff. I thought it might just be a weird dream. I mean, I dream every night, Harper. How am I supposed to know which ones have to do with you and which don't?"

"Geez, Seneca, if you're having weird dreams, what's the chance they *don't* have to do with me?"

"Hmmm...you're right about that. Okay. We were walking through this swamp, me and you. And we came across this flat, woodsy area, and ran into a huge alligator. He had teeth like a mile wide. Anyway, we followed the alligator and it took us into a clearing with a big hole in it. The hole went down and down so far you couldn't even see the bottom, maybe a mile or something. And this glow came out of the hole, like there was red-hot lava at the bottom of it."

"God, why do you have to have such weird visions?" I flop back on the bed and focus on the ceiling. A teeny-tiny spider crawls across it. Boy, what I wouldn't give to be that spider right now. I bet she isn't stressing about much. All she has to think about is where to spin her next web and what species of insect she'd like for dinner.

"So that isn't it, though," Seneca says.

"Of course it isn't. Go on."

"The alligator, he slithers into the hole. And then it gets really weird, 'cause I don't think we actually follow him into the hole, but it's like one of those reality TV cameras is attached to the gator's back or something, 'cause I can see where he's going. He lands all the way down the hole, right onto this huge spider."

"Ew."

“Yeah, it’s one of those freaky tarantula-type spiders with the legs going every which-way, and the spider scuttles off with the alligator riding it, and they end up at a dead end.”

“And?”

“And...that’s it.”

“Fantastic.”

“Yeah, right?”

“Why do you think this hole is down in Florida?”

“I dunno. I just feel like it is. And it wasn’t a cave in my dream, more like a sinkhole. Florida has all those crazy sinkholes, right? The whole state is like floating on a big cave system, all filled with water. It has sinkholes all over the place. Harper, I don’t know why I’m dreaming it, but we need to go there. We need to find that hole.”

“What do you think we’ll find there?”

Seneca shrugs. “Another clue? Like the one we found in Bertha’s cave?”

“That clue didn’t help us much,” I say.

“Maybe the historians got it wrong. Maybe the stone doesn’t say what they think it says. And we have the rubbing, Harper. I’m sure Mrs. Moone took the stone out of the cave so we couldn’t figure out what it said.”

“I’d still like to know how decrepit old Mrs. Moone got up to the cave and lugged the stone out,” I say.

“She’s a mountain woman. She’s probably tougher than both of us put together. She isn’t as weak as she makes herself out to be. And I wish I knew where she fits into all this, Harper. I’ll bet you anything she’s more involved than we even thought.”

twenty-five

Erik sits across from me, all cute and broody. He stares at his hamburger. I'm too nervous to eat. And I'm getting annoyed. I try to fight it, but the deep-rooted, crazy anger is about to bust right through my pores. Damn.

I take a deep breath. Erik's obviously wanting to tell me something. So why doesn't he just say it? I'm totally unsure how to start the conversation and he was the one who asked to meet me at Main Street Diner. I had to sneak out and hope Dad doesn't get home early, or I'm doubly screwed.

I poke my greasy grilled cheese with my fork and try to calm the vampire butterflies chewing through my stomach lining.

"Harper," he says, (*finally!*) "I can't deal with all this weird shit."

"Join the club." I spear the poor grilled cheese with my fork. Man, am I getting rankled. I figure the fork is safer in the grilled cheese than in my hand.

"I mean, how can I believe any of this? I can't believe you're seeing ghosts. Even if Mrs. Moone agrees with you, she's a senile old lady..."

Ooooh. Senile old lady, is she? "What about Joe? You saw him in the cave. Senile old man? *Dead* man, might I add?"

"He wasn't dead. He was some crazy old guy, I'll give you that, and we should go to the police with it. But dead? I don't think so."

"Dude, he disappeared when the lamb head-butted him. Are you nuts?"

Erik raises his eyes to meet mine. The amount of confusion in his eyes is almost heart wrenching. "I'm not nuts, Harper."

Any compassion I've got goes cold. "But you think *I* am."

Wussy-boy's courage is used up. He goes back to studying his hamburger. Man, am I pissed. I stab my thoroughly dead grilled cheese sandwich hard with the fork. Not good enough. I yank the fork out and raise my hand in the air. Erik's expression switches from confusion to alarm.

"Harper, what are you..."

I barely hear him. Everything is going crazy, violent red in my head. It's like some strong force guides my arm forward, fast and hard. Erik jumps to the side. My fork stabs air.

"Harper, what the hell!"

Erik scrambles away from the table. He emerges out of a red fog, reeling backwards. The fork clatters to the floor.

Oh. My. God.

Waves of insane anger still ebb through me, but I grasp the moments of calm between the swells. What did I just do? What happened?

"Oh my God, I'm sorry." My voice comes out in short gasps. "Erik, I didn't mean..."

But that boy runs for it like the hounds of hell are on his heels. He's out the door before the words get past my insane lips.

My eyes flit around. Well, at least nobody's gawking at me like they're about to call the cops and have me hauled away. The other diners must think we had a boyfriend-girlfriend fight. My hands shake as I fumble for my cell phone.

“Holls. I’m at Main Street Diner. Get down here. *Now.*”

“What happened?”

I lower my voice. “I tried to stab him. I swear I don’t know where it came from. But I tried. I’ve got to get away from here.”

“Oh wow, Harper, you serious?” I had filled Holly in on the whole murder thing after I had talked to Seneca about it, but up until now, she didn’t believe me. “Listen, why don’t you leave? You can get home quicker than I can bike over there.”

“Yeah, but Erik’s probably halfway to the moon by now. He bolted out of here so fast, and I’m stuck with the check. I didn’t bring any money, Holls, he was supposed to be buying.”

The line is quiet for a few seconds, then the snickers come through. “You should’ve tried to do him in *after* he paid. What is wrong with you, Harper?”

“Don’t make fun of this right now,” I hiss, although I can feel the hysteria bubbling right up my esophagus. God, I can’t start cackling like a demento, not here, not in such a public place. “Get over here, pronto.”

“Okay, okay. I’ve got some moolah I’ll loan ya, but you better pay me back. Did Erik eat his lunch? If he didn’t, save it for me. I’m starving.”

I hate waiting. The other diner patrons are now shooting me sympathetic looks—*poor jilted girl, stuck eating by herself*—and I sink lower in the booth. Corrine plops her ghostly butt in the seat Erik had occupied.

“What happened there, dearie?”

I cover my mouth with my hand, so I won’t attract any more weird stares. “I completely lost it, Corrine. I couldn’t control it, it happened so fast. It was crazy. I absolutely wanted nothing more than to kill him.”

“Damn Joe,” Oliver says, sitting next to Corrine.

“I still don’t get it. Why can he get into my mind like that? You guys can’t.”

Oliver sighs. "Yes, but Joe's different than us. We're your shadows. But Joe, he died on purpose. He died to spur you on to this horrible goal. And he's got different powers than us."

I must've been feeling everything Joe feels. The rage, the blind desire to kill...I even felt excited about doing it, for a split second anyway. "Is there anything you can do to stop him?"

Oliver shakes his head. "We try. But he's getting stronger, harder to block."

Holly slides into the diner and sits in Oliver's lap, without realizing it of course. "Here's the money. Ooh, a cheeseburger." She grabs the cold lump and takes a bite. "Okay, so listen. It's a good thing we're meeting up, 'cause I've got some more info. Sarah Miller texted me again."

"You really think it's her, sending you these clues?"

"Who else could it be? Anyway, I've been doing loads of research on the Knights Templar. Too bad it's summer. I could get a good school report out of all this. Anyway, I think I've found the connection. Between all of it."

She bites into her cheeseburger again. My anger still hasn't fully ebbed and her slowness irks the hell out of me.

"And?"

Holly swallows her mouthful. "You ever heard of Solomon's Temple?"

"Oh God," I moan. "Can you not throw any more mythological stuff into this? Get to the damn point."

"Hold on. The Knights Templar were originally based in Jerusalem at the Temple Mount. During the Crusades, they guarded Christians in the city against the Muslims, right?"

I don't understand Jack Poop about the Crusades, except they happened a long, long time ago. "If you say so."

"I do. Anyway, their correct name is the Poor Knights of the Temple of King Solomon. You know where the fabled Temple of Solomon was?"

the trouble with dead people

I stare blankly at her. "No."

"On the Temple Mount. In Jerusalem. The Temple of Solomon was supposed to be where they kept the Ark of the Covenant and all that stuff. It was destroyed a zillion years ago by the Babylonians, and there's this rumor that all the real important stuff, like the Ark, was hidden in caves way below the city before the Babylonians could get their greedy mitts on 'em."

"O...kay."

"Yeah, okay. So the other rumor is that the Knights Templar dug down there and found a passage to the caves, and *they* stuffed holy relics in there too. Like the Holy Grail and all that stuff."

"Do you think it's true?"

"It could be. Anyway, I found another website with this wacko conspiracy theory about the Knights Templar. It said that when the Knights Templar dug under the Temple Mount, they found something else."

"What?"

"A map. A map to Oak Island."

"Good grief. Seriously?"

"Yeah. Think about it, Harper." Holly's got a wild, excited look in her eyes. The look she always gets when she thinks she's about to bust open some super-secret conspiracy, although before this, that usually amounted to who was cheating on who at school, or what Mr. Pringle, our science teacher, was going to include on an upcoming test.

"Okay, go on."

"Okay, I'm deducing here, but think about it. The Knights Templar found the map. They kept it secret. Eventually, after a couple hundred years of Crusades, most of the knights ended up going back to France and getting whacked by the king, but a couple escaped and followed the map. They *went* to Oak Island."

"Why?"

Holly grabs my hands and stares into my eyes. “Harper, people have been digging on Oak Island for ages. They think there’s treasure down there in that shaft. The Treasure of the Knights Templar. But I’ll bet you anything that’s not why somebody covered up the shaft with all those booby traps and left the note in the stone. The knights were hiding the spot on purpose. They were making sure nobody could ever get to it. It’s a portal, Harper. A portal for Baphomet.”

twenty-six

I can't decide if I love or hate the rain. On one hand, when it rains I get a few blissful ghost-free hours. On the other hand, the "good" ghosts aren't around to protect me from Joe, who always manages to beat them back from the weird fog. On the last hand (or maybe a foot, since I've only got two hands) every time the ghosts come back from their little fog excursions, they always have more information to give me and one more piece of this crazy puzzle falls into place. And right now, what I want more than anything is to find those pieces.

Holly, Seneca, and I have gone over and over everything to the point where we're sick of arguing about what it all means. Some things we do agree on:

1. Sometime in the past, a super long time ago, even before the Knights Templar bit, something must have come here from another dimension and possessed somebody enough to draw the map of Oak Island, since the map was buried away in the Temple of Sol-

omon until the Knights Templar found it in the early 1200s or so.

2. After the Crusades, a couple of the Knights took the map, escaped in a ship, and went to Nova Scotia, where they effectively sealed off the portal described on the map. They put in the booby traps and also left the stone. We disagree on *why* they left it. Seneca thinks the stone gives the location of another portal. My argument is: why would the Knights spend all the time to seal one portal if they were going to give direction to another one?

3. Skip forward to the late 1700s, when the spot on Oak Island was discovered. Even after 200 years, they haven't gotten to the bottom of it, they can't get past the booby traps. And somewhere along the way, the stone was uncovered and promptly lost, although people have written down the inscription, so over the years people have had a chance to study it.

4. If Mrs. Moone is telling the truth (and we argue about that, too) her sister Bertha, Sarah Miller, and Sarah's boyfriend Sam, headed off in the 1960s, only for the two girls to come back home scared to death. Our theory is that they came back with the stone. And they hid it in the cave. Somehow, while they were in the cave, spirits escaped (we aren't sure how) and possessed Sarah Miller's goats and Mrs. Moone's sheep. Both good and bad spirits? And why'd they bother possessing animals instead of people?

5. Meanwhile, throughout the centuries, there's been a secret society trying to find the portals to set Baphomet free, for some weird reason that we can't fathom at all.

6. Bertha dies. She's got a bunch of ghosts, but apparently doesn't kill anybody and never opens a portal. But she does at least call up the sheep spirits before she kicks the bucket. And Mrs. Moone says she's had a dream like Seneca. But is that what really happened? We argue about this too. Seneca thinks Mrs. Moone was in on the bad side from the beginning and, along with Sarah Miller, is trying to open the portal for Baphomet.

7. Flash forward to a couple of weeks ago, when I kicked Sarah Miller's goat.

"Here's what I don't get," Seneca says. "Holly saw Sarah Miller bury a goat. And from her description, it was the same one that you kicked, Harper. That old, cranky one. If the goat was possessed, what happened to the spirit when the goat died?"

"Easy," Holly says. "It finds another goat. Maybe a baby goat. Like how a spirit got into Boopie. Maybe his mom had the spirit in her and when she died, it went into Boopie. Didn't you say one of Sarah Miller's goats had a couple of babies a few weeks ago?"

"Damn, that's right," I say. "These spirits are like parasites, they just move on to the next victim."

"More like a symbiotic relationship," Seneca says.

"Huh?" I hate it when my little sister uses words my brain hasn't comprehended yet, but should.

"Yeah, symbiotic. I learned that word in science class. Means the host and the tag-along both benefit. Those goats are super healthy and they live forever. The goat who died, Holly said it was the black one. And that goat has been around ever since I can remember."

"So?"

“So, goats only live for about eighteen years or so. I looked it up. But even Dad remembers that goat from when he was young, when Sarah Miller first moved into this town twenty years ago.”

“Okay, so?”

“So, symbiosis. The goat gets extra-long life and the spirit gets a convenient place to hang out.”

“Yeah, but why goats?”

Seneca shrugs. “Dunno.”

I stare out the window, then at my bags stuffed in a corner of my room. I’m almost packed. Out in the pouring rain, taking up the entire driveway, sits a huge RV Dad borrowed for our trip. Seneca had been right, like usual. Once we put the idea of a road trip into Dad’s brain, all his thoughts on grounding us for the summer disappeared.

I sigh. “I hope my poor plants don’t die while we’re gone. Although, if it keeps raining like this, they might survive. The tomatoes won’t be up for a few days yet anyway.”

“As long as Sarah Miller’s goats don’t get loose again, you might be okay,” Holly says, grinning.

Uck. She’s joking, but my head now throbs from thinking about Sarah Miller and her cursed goats.

“You kids almost ready up there?” Dad yells. “Let’s get going already!”

“Coming, Dad!” I glance at Holly and Seneca. “I guess this is it.”

Holly gulps. “I can’t believe I actually begged my mom to let me go with you guys.”

I give her an encouraging smile. “You said it’d be a great ‘reporter opportunity’ if I recall.”

“Yeah, but that was before we were actually ready to head out.” She takes a deep breath. “What do you guys think we’ll find out there?”

the trouble with dead people

Seneca shrugs. "If your idea is right, we'll find a portal."

"Yeah, a portal to let Baphomet *in*. And now I'm thinking about it, maybe this isn't such a good idea. Harper still has Joe dogging her every footstep and I'm sure he'd love nothing more than for us to lead him right to where he wants to go."

"But what can he do once we get there?" Seneca says. "I mean, he's dead. Only Harper can see him. And he can't use Harper to open the portal 'cause she missed Erik with that fork."

Holly laughs, but I don't. Seneca's words have got me thinking.

Am I the only living person who can see Joe? I mean, he killed himself so he could haunt me and spur me on to horrible deeds, but what if there's something else here?

"You guys, I'm wondering. What if I'm not the only one who can see Joe? What if he's reporting everything he sees here to somebody else?"

"That's nuts," Holly says.

"No nuttier than me being able to see him. I can see him 'cause I was cursed by the goats, right? Who's to say he can't talk to other cursed people? Like Sarah Miller? She's lived with the goats forever. She's gotta be cursed too."

Seneca frowns. "Yeah, there might be loads of people out there Joe can talk to."

"And what if," I go on, "he's reporting what we're up to right now to somebody?"

"Kids!" Dad yells. "Hurry up!"

We grab our stuff and head downstairs. Now that I've thought about it, I'm not sure I want to go on this quest of Seneca's either. And when I get downstairs and Dad throws the front door open, I *really* don't want to go.

There, on the doorstep, stands Sarah Miller. My ribs spontaneously decide to play ping-pong with my heart.

"Leaving for somewhere?" she asks.

Even Dad takes a step back. In twenty years, Sarah Miller has never set foot on his doorstep. He stares at her, his mouth hanging open.

I'm not sure what to say either. I glance at Seneca. She meets my gaze. We're both thinking the same thing.

How'd Sarah Miller know?

I mean, apart from the honking big RV sitting in the driveway, why on Earth would she care if we're going on vacation, unless she knew we were heading off to somewhere we shouldn't?

"H-hello, Mrs. Miller," Dad says, clearing his throat. "Um, yes, we're going on vacation. Can I help you? Is there something you need?"

Sarah Miller's eyes scan all of us before they rest on Dad. She looks him straight in the eye.

"Yes. I need you to take me with you."

twenty-seven

We're all strapped in. Dad drives and Sarah Miller sits next to him in the passenger seat. Holly, Seneca, and I sit around the table, buckled in, as the RV rumbles down the road. Snookums cowers in the back bedroom. I can hear his whines from here.

We're all as silent as death. Nobody wants to say anything. Dad stares straight ahead, probably wondering how on God's Green Planet Sarah Miller talked him into this. Holly and I sit as rigid as a set of pokers. We aren't even blinking. We're too damn scared. Seneca is so nervous she's yanked about ten strands of hair out of her head.

The freaky thing is, Sarah Miller hardly had to say anything to convince Dad to let her tag along. It's almost like some important piece of the conversation was skipped over. One minute she shows up on our doorstep, the next we're heading out of town. I still can't figure out how it happened.

Witchcraft. That's gotta be it.

There's no *way* we can talk about our plans when our worst nemesis is two feet away. So we don't say anything at all.

Dad decides to try and break the spell.

"Harper, I'm so happy you decided to give up the garden and go on an adventure instead," he says, shooting me a stiff grin via the rearview mirror.

Yeah, I'm not. Not now. But I'd better say something cheery back.

"I'm glad too, Dad."

"I'll have to admit though, the middle of Florida seems like a bizarre choice. I figured you guys would pick the beach, or the mountains. Why Florida?"

"I want to go to Disney World, at least once," Seneca says.

"We took you when you were three," Dad says. "You just don't remember it." He clears his throat, like his feeble attempt at small talk was the precursor to what he really wants to get the nerve up to discuss. "Mrs. Miller—"

"Go ahead and call me Sarah," the Witch says. "No point in reverting to formality when we're in the same car."

"Um, okay, Sarah. I guess I never did quite get the gist of why you wanted to come too."

"That's 'cause I didn't say," Sarah Miller says. "Your kids know."

Oh geez. We were right. Sarah Miller's been clued in to our little expedition and now we're stuck with her. How the hell did this happen?"

"They do?" Dad says.

"Well, they think they do." She turns her head around and her beady black eyes bore into my skull. "But they're a little off in their assumptions."

"You want to find the portal too," Seneca says.

"Not for the reason you think."

Dad puts on the brake and almost careens us off the road. We stop, half tilted over, cars honking behind us. Dad rolls down the window.

“Go around!” he yells to the irate drivers. He swivels his chair and stares at us.

“All right, all of you. I want answers and I want them now.”

“You should’ve asked *before* Sarah Miller got in the RV,” Seneca says.

“No more lip, Seneca, I’m serious. What the hell is going on?”

“You didn’t believe us the first time, Dad. When I took you up to Mrs. Moone’s.”

Dad’s brow furls and he gives Seneca a chilly look. “Are you going to start on about the Oak Island thing again? I’m warning you, Seneca—”

“You found the stone, didn’t you?” Sarah Miller says. That shuts Dad up.

Seneca nods. No point in hiding it, not if Sarah Miller has guessed already.

“There was nothing there,” Dad says. “Nothing. And Mrs. Moone didn’t know a thing about it.”

“Of course she did,” Sarah says. “If these fools told her, she did.”

Dad’s face turns red and his eyes shrink to slivers. He’s about to blow his top, and while I’d love him to go all ballistic on Sarah Miller’s butt, I jump in before he can say anything.

“Why would she lie? Why would she tell Dad she didn’t know anything, when she did?”

“Why do you think?” Sarah Miller says. “She lied to protect you imbeciles. And to save herself.”

“Explain.”

Sarah Miller sighs. “She knew *nothing* about the stone, not until you told her. Up until that point, Janice Moone was a clueless pawn in all this, same as you.”

“She dreamt about the cave, though,” Seneca says. “Same as me.”

"Yeah, she's not *entirely* clueless," I say. "She has spirits that live in her sheep. Like you have ones in your goats."

Seneca nods. "And like how Harper has ghosts."

"You have *what*?" Dad says.

Seneca gives Dad an exasperated look. "Dad, Harper told you about all her ghosts already. You didn't believe her about that, either."

"Mrs. Miller, tell us about the sheep," Holly says. "And the goats. Harper's ghosts told her they're possessed."

Sarah Miller nods. "All true."

"How?"

"It's a long story. Do you really want to hear this when we're half off the road?"

Dad grimaces and revs the RV back up. "You're right, this is not the place. We'll cause an accident."

Dad threads the RV back down the road. Sarah Miller's eyes are so wide and fearful, I'm finding it way too hard to feel any fear. She's more frightened than all of us put together.

"Those goats have kept me prisoner for the last twenty years," she says.

Holly frowns. "Prisoner? But they're just goats."

"*Possessed* goats," Seneca says.

"Yeah, but couldn't you just leave 'em? Kill 'em and roast 'em on a spit? Something?"

"Geez, Holly, don't be stupid," Seneca says. "You can't get rid of the spirits that way."

Sarah Miller nods. "You're right, you can't. I didn't even think of escaping. I was too damn petrified. Until today."

"And why is today any different?"

"Because I know where you're going."

"Who told you? Joe?"

Sarah Miller's eyes dart around, like she expects him to pop up at any minute. But that's not going to happen. Not now. The rain still slashes down out there.

the trouble with dead people

"Yes," she whispers. "Joe."

"Harper, you were right. He *can* talk to other people." Seneca turns to Sarah. "But why would he talk to you?"

Sarah Miller sighs. "He's the go-between. You see, the story Janice Moone told you was only half of it. Her side of things. Those years Bertha and I wandered around with Sam, we kept that a secret."

"And what happened when you were 'wandering'?"

Sarah Miller takes a deep breath. I see real fear in her eyes, as if she expects Joe, or the goats, to spring on her and rip her apart.

"Bertha and my boyfriend Sam, they were both cut out from same cloth, you can say. They both wanted fame, riches, glory. I didn't care for those things. But I was weak." She stares at the floor. "I was weak then and I'm weak now. I let those two control me, like I've let the goats control me. I was afraid. And instead of fighting back, I went along with their plans."

"What plans?" Seneca says.

Sarah Miller straightens up. "We met a man. He was a lot like Bertha and Sam. They were kindred spirits, you might say. They all wanted power. Except this man, he wanted it a little more, you see. And he used us to try and get it. That man's name was Joe Johnston."

Oh, holy hell.

"A living Joe Johnston." Seneca screws up her face. "Ew."

"Who's Joe Johnston?" Dad says.

"We'll explain it later," Seneca says. "Go on, Mrs. Miller."

"Well, it didn't take long before Joe and Bertha became an item. And once he had her, she convinced Sam and me to follow along. Joe said he knew of a place where a great treasure was buried. People had been searching for it for centuries. He said, and I can't believe we actually fell for this, that he knew how to get it. We'd be rich beyond our wildest dreams."

"This place, was it Oak Island?" Holly says.

Sarah Miller gives her a sad smile. "No. But Oak Island was the starting point."

Holly clears her throat. "Mrs. Miller, was it you who left me those messages?"

"It was. I could've left them with Harper or Seneca, I suppose. But I figured they had enough on their plates already. I wanted you all to know. But I couldn't come right out and say so. *They* were always watching."

Now it's my turn to gulp. "They?"

"The goats. Joe. Sometimes all of 'em. But you've figured it out. Between Harper's ghosts and Seneca's dreams and Holly's digging, you've gotten further than I ever did. Or Mrs. Moone.

"When he was alive, all those years ago, Joe was looking for the stone. The stone from Oak Island. It had been lost years before, but Joe was able to track it down. He told us it would lead us to the treasure."

Seneca interrupts. "It doesn't though, does it? It leads you to a portal."

Sarah Miller shakes her head. "No. The stone, it is the object needed to call spirits into this world."

"Baphomet?"

"Not just Baphomet. It calls up any spirit from that world."

Dad stops the RV again. "Okay, this is getting too freaky for me. It's bad enough driving in this crazy rain, I can't focus on both that and this nutty story."

"It isn't nutty," I say. "Everything is starting to make sense. Mrs. Miller, what happened next?"

Sarah Miller takes a deep breath. She somehow looks twice as old as she did five minutes ago.

"We still didn't understand. Joe told us, of course, that the stone's inscription would lead us to the treasure. He brought us to a cave. He said the words. And *They* came."

the trouble with dead people

She shudders. I don't have to ask what *They* are. They're alive and living in her goats as we speak.

"And then, well, I had never trusted Joe. Up until that moment though, Bertha had. But then, we felt their presence. We saw it in Joe's eyes. I knew this man had used us. And was going to use us again, if we couldn't escape.

"We ran from the cave. Joe came after us. So did the spirits. Bertha and I escaped. Not only that, I had the presence to grab the stone."

"That heavy thing?" Seneca says. "We couldn't even lift it."

Sarah Miller nods. "It's heavy, that stone. But it's light too. If the right person carries it."

Seneca frowns. "What do you mean?"

"I can't explain any further than that, Seneca. I was able to carry it. Anyway, we got away. Sam wasn't so lucky."

"The murder," Holly breathes.

I stare at her. "What?"

"Joe was convicted of murder, remember? He had spent thirty years in the slammer before he was released, did that poor clerk in, and shot himself."

Dad stares at us, his hands gripping the steering wheel so hard his knuckles turn white. Poor guy. It's hard enough to deal with all this when you've had a couple of weeks to adjust. He's getting it all at once.

"Is this true?" he says to Sarah Miller. She nods.

"He killed Sam. Now, of course, we know why. By killing Sam, he had his sacrifice. He could open the portal for Baphomet. When he found the right spot, that is. But, he was nabbed by the police and convicted. He spent the next thirty years behind bars. And Bertha and I returned home. We thought we were alone. But those spirits, they followed us.

"And they took possession of your goats?" Seneca says.

"Yes."

"But why? Why didn't they get Bertha too?"

"She had sheep, I had goats. I guess the spirits felt more comfortable with the goats. Bertha and I, we hid the stone. We never talked about it, but it was too late for me. Every day after that, I had those possessed goats to deal with."

"What did they do to you?" Seneca asks.

"They talked to me. They whispered to me. I've resisted them, to a point, but I was never strong enough to leave them. I guess I thought, if I kept them close to me, they couldn't affect anybody else.

"But then, Bertha disappeared. And Janice Moone confronted me. I knew I had to get away from that place. But I couldn't leave the goats. I took them with me and moved to Wagnerville. This is the first time," she gulps and stares around again, like she expects a goat to bust through the windshield, "the first time I've ever gotten the nerve to get away."

"Did you know what happened to Bertha?"

"I'm guessing she went to the cave. I think somehow, all those years she sat in her rocking chair, she had finally realized what she had to do. She went into the cave and used the stone. She let something loose. Whether they came from Baphomet's dimension or somewhere else, I don't know. But whatever they are, they're here to protect this world from Baphomet's evil. They moved into the sheep and have been guarding the stone ever since."

"And now it's missing," Seneca says. "I wonder who has it."

twenty-eight

Since Dad is now too freaked to drive and nobody else in the car can legally (even Sarah Miller, who let her license expire years ago), we're now smushed into a diner booth with ripped plastic covers. We've got heaps of greasy diner food on the table, but nobody's eating it.

"I don't get it," Holly says. "A zillion people have seen the stone's inscription, it's not like there's anything special about it."

"Not written on paper there isn't," Sarah Miller says. "The stone's the important thing. I can't describe it to you, but that stone holds a strange magic. It opens the portal, if the right person uses it."

"So you hid the stone to keep it away from Joe?"

"Yes. While Joe was stuck in the clink for murder, the stone was safe. I always dreaded the day he'd get out. I thought for sure he'd come looking for it. Maybe capture me and force me to tell him where it was. Instead, he sauntered out of jail and promptly killed himself."

“Yeah, I still don’t get it,” I say. “I mean, you said Joe killed Sam so Joe could open the portal. But the ghosts said his blood wasn’t pure enough. He enjoyed killing too much.”

Sarah Miller picks at her chicken. Her eyes dart around, like she expects Joe to bust through the swinging doors any second. But he can’t. The rain still pours down in buckets.

“He enjoys it *now*,” she says, “now he’s got a taste for it. Maybe he decided he was now too tainted to use the stone. Maybe he figured he had to find somebody else to do it. Joe wanted a fresh victim. A young one. The goats knew it too.”

“Did they bust out of their fence on purpose that day?” I ask. “The day they came to my garden and I kicked Ozzie?”

Sarah Miller nods. She gives me a pitying look. And I get it.

Whether I had kicked her goat or not, it still would’ve cursed me. I was its chosen victim.

Seneca reaches for a greasy French fry and nibbles on it. “What about you, Mrs. Miller? Why couldn’t they use you to open the portal?”

The Witch of Wagnerville shrivels in her seat. She levels her blue eyes at Seneca’s green ones. “Because I’m like you, Seneca.”

Seneca stops chewing. “Like me, how?”

“I have visions like you. But I am not cursed. Not the same way your sister is cursed. The goats need me, you see. I’m their protector. They gave me a special curse. Like the sheep gave you.”

“I’ve got a special curse?”

“When did you start having the visions, Seneca?”

Seneca glances at me. “It was the day we went to Moone’s Cave. The day...” Her eyes widen. “The day I picked up Boopie, the lamb.”

“That’s the day the lambs chose you, girl,” Sarah Miller says with a sad smile. “They chose you so they could tell you things.”

“The things I dream about?”

"Yes."

"Like Mrs. Moone," Seneca says. "We dreamt almost the same thing."

"You were both picked by the spirits in the sheep. It's your job to interpret what they tell you. Consider yourself lucky *they* picked you and not the goats. The goats never have anything nice to say." She shudders.

I take a sip of water. "But what does it mean, Mrs. Miller?"

"It means," Sarah Miller says, "that you can open the portal, Harper. So could Joe and so could Bertha. You all were cursed. You all saw ghosts. But Joe, he missed his chance. When he got out of the clink, the goats gave him a different role. To push *you* into doing the deed."

Dad puts his coffee cup down. "If what all of you are saying is true, and I hate to even admit to believing any of this, but for some crazy reason I do, then the best plan of action is to get the hell away from anything having to do with this curse."

"You can't escape it," Sarah Miller says.

"Oh can't we? What if we get far away from here, I mean really far away? Like Europe, or Asia. You kids have always wanted to see those places, right?"

He's starting to panic and it scares me. Dad is the most rational guy on the planet. I take a steadying breath.

"We can't escape it. I can't escape the ghosts anyway. Unless we go to a place where it rains every damn day."

Sarah Miller nods. "Joe will dog you until the day you die."

I lean forward. "Mrs. Miller, Seneca thinks there's something in Florida we need to find. And you do too. But what? Is it a portal?"

Sarah Miller shakes her head. "Harper, here's the best I've been able to figure out. Joe called the goat demons into existence using the stone. Then Bertha called the sheep spirits here. Somehow, she was able to use the stone to counter-act what Joe had done. So that tells me something."

"What?" Miss Reporter Holly says.

"The stone doesn't necessarily call up Baphomet. It calls up beings from Baphomet's world. Joe wanted the evil ones here, and my guess is that's the first step into unlocking the door for Baphomet. Bertha called the good ones, which has put everything in a bit of a limbo."

"How come Joe didn't call up Baphomet?" Seneca says.

"He hadn't killed anybody yet," I remind her.

Sarah Miller nods. "Opening the portal wide enough to let Baphomet in requires something extra. It requires the sacrifice."

"It's too bad we can't send the bad spirits back to their own place," Holly says.

"That's just it," Sarah Miller says. "I think there is a way."

She stares hard at me. I can't help squirming. As crazy as it sounds, I understand where she's going with this.

"You think the stone can be used both ways. To bring these inter-dimensional wacko spirits here *and* to send them back."

"Yes."

"And if Joe could call the demons *in* with the stone..."

Sarah Miller nods. "You can send them back."

"You want *me* to get rid of the spirits? The ones in the goats?"

"Yes."

"But you left the goats back in Wagnerville," Seneca says. "Didn't you?"

Sarah Miller frowns. "Yes, I escaped the goats. But wait until this rain ends. Those spirits won't stay away for long. They'll leave the goats. They'll track us down."

My stomach twists and the French fry I was about to try and force down my throat ends up back on my plate. Wow. These weird interdimensional whack-job spirits, they're like the ghosts. They can't deal with the rain. God, this gets wackier and wackier.

I stare out at the rain pelting the pavement. There's no *way* this storm will last all the way to Florida. And when it's over,

the trouble with dead people

we'll have to deal with Joe, bat-crazy evil spirits from another dimension, and a passel of well-meaning, but still freaktacular, ghosts.

I turn to Dad. His eyes stare at me, but I'll bet Sarah Miller's crazy Stone of Doom they don't see me at all. Those eyes are taking a nice, long visit to Shockland.

"Dad, I know you want to run," I say, "but we need to do this. We need to get to the sinkhole in Seneca's dream. It's our only hope to stop this, once and for all."

Seneca nods. "Yeah, Dad, it's all up to us. If anyone can send those spirits back, you can, Harper. I wouldn't have dreamed what I did if it wasn't what we're supposed to do."

Sarah Miller nods too. "You can send them back, Harper. I know you can."

The diner door bursts open.

We're all so jumpy at this point that Holly screams, Sarah Miller curses, Dad spits out a huge mouthful of coffee, and my body start to slide under the table. Only Seneca has the guts to sit straight and stare at the newcomer.

Old Mrs. Moone hobbles into the diner dripping wet, hauling a bleating Boopie over one shoulder.

"Hey!" the cook behind the counter yells. "You can't bring that thing in here."

Mrs. Miller glares at him. "It's my seeing-eye lamb, sonny, mind your own beeswax." She stomps over to our table. "What the hell are you people waiting for? Imminent world doom is at hand and you all are sitting around a greasy spoon eating peach cobbler?"

"It's raining out there," Seneca says.

Mrs. Moone glares at Sarah Miller. "Sarah, you haven't got the sense God gave one of your goats. Before they were possessed, I mean. What's all this, letting them lounge around a truck stop when those demons'll be after us in no time?"

“What about the good spirits?” Seneca says. “The ones in your sheep? Are they still in there?”

Mrs. Moone dumps Boopie in Seneca’s lap. “What do you think?”

Seneca tilts the lamb’s head and searches its eyes. “Nope. Dumb as a doorpost.”

“They’ll be back when the rain stops,” Mrs. Moone says. “And so will the spirits in the goats. Now’s the time to make tracks. Explanations can wait for later.”

Sarah Miller sighs and pushes her chair away from the table. “How’d you find us, Janice?”

“Not too hard with that ginormous RV taking up half the parking lot. Let’s go. I’m going with ya.”

Sarah Miller’s eyes narrow. “Got the stone?”

“Course I do. Let’s get going, before they call Animal Welfare on me.”

We head out to her car while Dad pays the check. Two annoyed sheep sit in the back seat, along with the stone.

“How are we gonna fit three sheep, Snookums, and one other person in the RV?” Holly says.

“Yeah, Mrs. Moone, why can’t you drive your own car?” I say.

“That hunk of junk’ll never make it all the way to Florida. Yes, I know where you’re heading, same as Sarah. And look.” She points to the sky.

The rain has slowed and a beam of light bursts through the clouds. “We need to go *now*,” Mrs. Moone says. “Before that lunatic Joe gets back. And we don’t stop until we find that hole.”

twenty-nine

I wake to a weak light shining through the window. "Where are we?"

"We're here," Seneca mumbles as she stretches. "I hope. Me and Mrs. Moone and Sarah Miller all agreed this is the place. We drove most of the night until we found it." She yawns.

We must've all slept piled in a heap, like a pack of puppies. Holly's leg pokes my stomach and I'm lying in a pool of Snookums' drool. Outside, the morning sunlight pokes through the RV's windows.

Corrine grins down at me. "We're getting close," she says.

"Oh good," I say. "You're back."

"We all are."

I'm not sure how they're fitting in, but Corrine, Oliver, and Jake are all now smushed in the RV with the rest of us. Their smiles are way too big.

"What are you three so happy about?" I ask. "And where's Joe?"

"Oh, he won't be showing up," Corrine says. "We've learned a thing or two in that fog."

Jake nods. "We've grown stronger, Harper. We learned who is whispering to us in the fog. It's the sheep spirits. They've taught us how to fight Joe. He can't break past all three of us."

Well, that's a huge relief. "What about the goat spirits?"

"We can keep them away. Especially since you were smart and brought the sheep," Oliver says, nodding his approval.

Mrs. Moone sits up and rubs her eyes.

"Are the sheep spirits back?" I ask her.

She peers at Boopie, who stares back and baas. "Yup, they're back."

"Hear that, Mrs. Miller? The ghosts say they can keep the goat-demons away."

From the front seat, Sarah Miller snorts. "I'll believe it when I see it."

Seneca, who uses Boopie for a pillow, sits up and yawns. Holly groans and rolls over.

"Wake up, Holls," I say. "We're here."

"Wake me up when we leave wherever here is," Holly says.

By the time everyone gets up, Sarah Miller is flipping pancakes on the tiny stove and Mrs. Moone has a huge pot of coffee brewing. She hands Dad a steaming mug.

"Have some coffee, Randy. How're you holding up? I guess this must all be quite a shock for you."

"So how'd you find us at the diner, Mrs. Moone?" Holly says between bites of pancakes. "How'd you follow us?"

Mrs. Moone takes a big gulp of her black coffee. "Well, after Harper and Seneca left last week, I buried my sister proper. And after that, I had a dream."

Seneca grins. "Let me guess. You dreamt about this sinkhole too."

Mrs. Moone nods. "I did. Just like you and Sarah. We all knew it was time. So, I packed up the stone and jumped in the car."

"And the sheep?"

the trouble with dead people

“Oh, they hopped in. They knew. Until it started raining, anyway. Then the spirits left and the sheep started baaing something awful.”

“I still want to know how you were able to lift that stone,” Seneca says. “It must weigh a ton.”

Mrs. Moone motions towards the kitchen counter, where the stone sits. “Try it yourself.”

Seneca sidles over to the stone. She puts her arms around it. She lifts it over her head.

“It doesn’t weigh *anything*.”

Oh, I’ve so gotta try this. “Let me have it.”

Seneca hands it over. I’m able to hang on for about a second before my arms give out. It lands with a thud on the floor. I rub my arm. “Geez, it *does* weigh a ton.”

“Not for me.” Seneca picks up the stone and shoves it back on the counter.”

“Nor me,” Mrs. Moone says.”

“I’ve held it too,” Sarah Miller says. “It’s light as a feather.”

I glance at Corrine, who shrugs.

“They’ve enchanted it, of course,” Oliver says.

“Sorry, what?”

“The spirits. They’ve enchanted it. If you can talk to the spirits—good or bad ones—like your sister, Sarah Miller, and Mrs. Moone can, you can also carry the stone.”

That sounds reasonable. I translate what he’s said to the others.

Seneca nods. “Y’know, that means if I had tried to pick it up when we were in Bertha’s cave, I could’ve. Now I wish I had tried. At least I can carry it into the sinkhole for you, Harper, so you can use it.”

“But it’s too big to fit in your caving pack,” I say. “How are we gonna get it all the way down the sinkhole?”

“Break it,” Sarah Miller says.

“Huh?”

Mrs. Moone nods. "She's right. You don't need the whole thing. You can use a piece of it."

Again, I look to the ghosts. Oliver nods too. "I think that'll work."

"*How* are we gonna break it?" Seneca says.

"I can help you there," Dad says.

Sarah Miller carries the stone outside while Dad, happy to have something manly to do, grabs the little axe he always carries in his caving box and follows her out. A few good whacks later, we have two small pieces of stone instead of a honking huge one.

"I sure hope it still works," I say.

Dad settles back in his chair and grabs his coffee. "The Oak Island Money Pit Society will never forgive me for what I just did."

"Well, if it's a choice between annoying some history buffs or saving the world, I'd say you made the right choice," Mrs. Moone says.

"And now Harper can send the spirits back," Sarah Miller says.

"And the ghosts?" I say. "Will the ghosts disappear when the spirits go away?"

Sarah Miller shrugs. "I'm not sure. The ghosts are from this world, Harper. But maybe, if we get rid of the spirits, the ghosts can go home too."

"That's what we're hoping," Corrine says.

"That's not what Joe wants, though," I say. "He wants us to let Baphomet in through this portal."

"It won't work, though," Seneca says. "There has to be a sacrifice, right? And Harper, well, she tried to kill Erik, but..."

"She *what*?" Dad half rises from his chair and spills his coffee all over his lap.

"Geez, calm down, Dad. She didn't actually do the deed. But that's why we've been steering clear of him and why we

wanted you to take us away for the summer. You think Harper would've let her plants all die because she wanted to traipse around the country with us?"

Dad settles back down. "Well, I *hope* she'd want to spend time with us for no other reason than we're her family. Is this why you've been so moody, Monkey?"

He gives me such a wounded, concerned look. I can't help reaching across the table and giving him a hug. "Yes."

"I'm sorry I didn't believe you," he says. "I'm still not sure *what* to believe here. But what did you all mean when you said 'sacrifice'?"

"The only way you can open the portal for Baphomet is if you kill someone, apparently. I was supposed to kill Erik. Then, if I threw myself into the portal, Baphomet would have his sacrifice and could enter this world."

Dad's got that obstinate frown on his face. He gets that sometimes, when he's decided not to believe what we say.

Mrs. Moone nods. "That's how it works."

Dad's eyes narrow as he fixes his gaze on Mrs. Moone. "And you?"

"I can't open the portal. I can just interpret what the sheep spirits say."

Dad doesn't look like he's so sure. "What about your husband? He died suddenly, as I recollect."

"Dad!" Seneca says.

Mrs. Moone shakes her head. "No, a valid question. Andrew died of a heart attack, Randy, I promise you that. Had nothing to do with me. I loved that man. The bad goat spirits have never cursed me or tried to get me to kill anybody. I've been too well-protected by the spirits in my sheep."

Sarah Miller nods. "Same with me and the goats. I'm their caretaker, so they've never cursed me with the unthinkable. They cursed Joe, though."

"I don't think Joe thought of it so much as a curse, but an honor," Mrs. Moone says.

Sarah Miller nods. "That's true. And their next victim was Harper."

"That's why we've got to end this," Mrs. Moone says. "The goat spirits gave Harper the power to open the portal and use the stone. She doesn't have enough power to use it for Baphomet's entrance, not yet. But she can use it to bring lesser spirits in. And we're betting she can use it to send the goat spirits back."

"What if you're wrong?" I say.

Mrs. Moone looks resolute. "I'm not wrong. I dreamt it."

"Amazingly, so did I," Sarah Miller says. "I don't think the goats put the dream into my head. I think this time, the sheep spirits broke through. They let me know."

Seneca nods. "They let me know too. You can end this, Harper."

Yeah, but that's easier said than done. "How?"

Sarah Miller motions towards my sister. "Seneca knows."

Seneca takes a deep breath and nods. "Well, I know how we need to *start*, anyway."

"How?" I say.

Seneca points a shaky finger at the door. "We go out and find that sinkhole."

thirty

Florida heat sucks. I mean, West Virginia summers are muggy enough, but the second I step out of the RV, I feel like I'm in a weird Indiana Jones jungle. The air is hot and sticky, and crazy-sounding bugs whirl all over the place. Snookums takes one peep outside, lets out a yowl, and scampers back to the bedroom.

"Let him stay," Dad says. "He'll be no use out there anyway."

"I'm staying, too," Holly says. "There's probably snakes out there."

Sarah Miller nods. "We'll all stay. Except Harper, Seneca, and their dad."

"Wait, what?" Seneca says. "We didn't start this. You did, Mrs. Miller, and your sister did, Mrs. Moone. You both should come too."

"Not much good we'd do, dear," Mrs. Moone says, smiling. "If it's a sinkhole, we can't get down it. You three can. We'll stay here with Holly and Snookums."

"We'll come with you," Corrine says. "You'll need us to fend off Joe and those horrible demon-spirits. God, are they ugly. Be glad you can't see 'em."

We head into the heat and push through the vines and muck. "You think there are alligators in here?" Seneca whispers.

"There was in your dream."

"Look, kids." Dad points ahead. "See it?"

It's half-hidden in the bushes. If we weren't paying attention, we'd have stumbled right into it. I peer over the edge. All I can see is black.

"That's one deep hole," I say.

Corrine nods. "This portal has never been used. Not yet."

I shrug off my caving pack. "Well, that's a good thing. So how do we know it's a portal? I mean, why this spot? Why this sinkhole?"

Corrine shrugs, but Oliver says, "I think it might have to do with the proximity to Baphomet's domain."

"What, he lives under the Earth? Like a giant mole?"

"No. He lives in a different dimension, another plane of existence. See, the plane intersects certain spots on Earth. Mostly closer to the Earth's core, but in some spots, it happens nearer to the surface. The hole on Oak Island is one of them. The shallowest intersection was the cave in West Virginia."

"*That* was close to the surface," I say. "We didn't even have to rappel into that cave. Or go down too far."

I turn my attention to Dad, who's studying the drop.

"So what do we have to do here?" Dad says.

Seneca gulps. "We have to go down the hole. Did you bring the long rope?"

"I've got the thousand footer in the bag," Dad says, "but that's it. If the hole is any deeper, we won't make it."

He's getting excited, now a long rappel is attached to this adventure. Crazy goat-demons or not, there's a big hole in front of him in need of exploring.

"Will you come down there, too?" I ask Corrine as Dad rigs the rope on a tree growing close to the hole's edge.

the trouble with dead people

Corrine shudders. "I hate holes. The last cave was spooky enough. But we have to go. We ghosts can get down that hole without all your fancy ropes and harnesses."

"You sure? What if you slip?"

Jake snorts. "What'll it do, kill us?"

"I guess not, since you're already dead, but wouldn't it hurt? Can you feel pain?"

They can sure feel fear. Corrine's eyes are almost the size of basketballs as she stares into the dark hole.

"We'll find a way down, don't worry," Oliver says, giving Corrine's shoulder a pat.

"Okay," Dad says. "The rope's rigged. You kids ready?"

As we get our caving gear on, a few fat raindrops splash against my helmet. "Uh-oh," Seneca whispers, staring at the black clouds hanging low in the sky. "Let's hope nothing bad comes of that."

Corrine glances up too. "Oh dear. I don't like the looks of those clouds one bit."

I finish tightening my harness. "Seneca, check me."

Seneca checks all my buckles to make sure nothing's loose, and I check hers.

"I'm going down first," Dad says. "Slow. You kids wait until I yell up."

Dad hooks his harness on to the rope and begins his descent. I shift my caving pack on my back and wonder what Erik is doing right now.

"He must hate me."

"Who?" Seneca says.

"Erik. He broke up with me and I tried to kill him. What kind of nuts-o girlfriend would do something like that?"

"You *didn't* kill him, though. At least that's something."

"But I tried. Imagine if I had succeeded."

"Like Seneca says, you didn't," Oliver says. He's sitting cross-legged next to the drop, checking his watch from time to time

and staring into the void. Probably wondering why Dad isn't hurrying up.

"So? He'll hate me forever."

"Why are you worried about this now?" Seneca mumbles. She's getting nervous. You can always tell with Seneca because she yanks strands of hair out of her head. If she keeps it up, she'll be bald before we get to the bottom of this thing.

"I just am, Seneca. What if he never talks to me again? I totally muffed it."

"He will," Jake says. "He still likes you. I could tell."

"Think about the big picture here," Oliver says. "You're on the verge of expelling a great evil from this world. You could have succumbed to Joe's pressure and done Erik in. And if you had, you could have been used to open up the portal for Baphomet. The whole world would have ended. It could still happen, but not if you get rid of the demon spirits now and close this portal for good. You can do it."

Corrine nods. "And you didn't muff it with Erik. You saved his live by not giving in. He might not ever see it. But that's what happened, as far as I can tell."

The ghosts' words don't help me. I lost a boy I like. I guess it happens to everyone at least once. But fat chance of ever getting him back. Not after all this.

Oliver pricks his ears. "Hear that?"

I freeze. "What?"

"Nothing bad, silly girl," Corrine says. "Your dad yelled that he was clear."

"Oh. You go next, Seneca. I'll bring up the rear."

Seneca nods and takes a deep breath. She's never rappelled into a cave before. I give her a smile.

"Just go slow. You'll be okay."

With shaking fingers, she threads the rope through the bars on her rack. She holds the rope taut, backs to the edge, and

leans back, letting her body lower perpendicular to the wall. She disappears in the darkness. I wait until I hear her yell "off rope!" before doing the same.

Rappelling into a big hole isn't as easy as sliding down the rope attached to our tree. For one, the hole's crumbling sides keep getting in the way. Keeping my feet on the wall and the rest of my body away from it is tough, uncomfortable, and tiresome. After a bit, I drop my feet and slide a little faster. The shaft is fairly smooth, but every once in a while I bump against the side and get a shower of dirt and pebbles.

My feet finally touch ground. "Off rope," I say, as I unclip my rack. "How long do you guess the descent was?"

"Five hundred feet, give or take," Dad says.

"Thank God it wasn't any longer." Seneca grins at me. As scared as I am, wondering what'll happen next, I can't help grinning back. Seneca always complains about caves and dirt and stuff, but she enjoys it, even if she doesn't want to admit it. And I think she's proud she survived her first cave rappel.

"This has to be the strangest sinkhole on the planet," Dad says, shining his light around. "I mean, here we are, in the middle of swampy Florida, and this place is dry as a bone. And there's a tunnel over that way. Like somebody made it."

I shine my light in the direction Dad's pointing. "Maybe somebody did."

"The ghosts are down here already," Seneca says, nodding to the three dead people standing against the wall. "I can see them again. We must be close, Harper, if I can see your ghosts."

"I don't see anything," Dad says. "Seneca, what on Earth are you talking about?"

"The ghosts, Dad. You can't see 'em?"

"Seneca, I don't care how wacky this whole adventure is, there's no such thing as ghosts."

"How come Dad can't see you?" I ask Corrine.

"Probably 'cause it's so freaking dark in here. I can't see a damn thing either," Corrine says in a clipped voice. This is about the most fearful I've ever heard her sound.

"Stay close, then."

"Where do we go from here?" Jake says.

"If this sinkhole is anything like my dream," Seneca says, "we have to follow the tunnel."

"Okay." I flash my headlight down the narrow passage. "Let's go."

"And just where are we going *to*?" Dad says.

"No idea. Seneca?"

She shakes her head. "I'm not sure either, but whatever it is, it's down this tunnel. Thank God there's not a big spider down here, like there was in my dream."

"Yeah, well, we haven't reached the end yet," I say.

One nice thing about this tunnel: the ground is fairly even. The tunnel slopes up, towards the surface. We keep our hands on the walls and every so often duck our heads to avoid conking them on the low ceiling, but besides that, it's pretty easy going.

Doesn't stop Corrine from complaining, though.

"Damn these sandals. I stubbed my toe again."

"Does it hurt?" Seneca asks. "Do you feel pain?"

"Not really, but I'm worried about chipping my nail polish. Although, hey, these rocks don't seem to have any effect on it."

"That's because you're dead, Corrine," Jake says.

"Yeah, but not totally, not in here."

"Totally enough," Jake says. "If sliding down that drop didn't mess up your nails, these little rocks sure won't."

"I'm not liking this tunnel much," Dad says. "It's not like a regular cave. It's too crumbly. Maybe we should turn back."

"Just a little farther," Seneca says.

"Okay. A little. Then we'll get outta here."

He really is a cool dad. I mean, how many fathers would allow their kids to explore a sinkhole that might cave in at any

the trouble with dead people

moment? Okay, maybe a cool but crazy dad. Thank God mine is one of those.

Dad doesn't understand poop about what's going on, but he's gamely led us down here anyway, for all we know to our imminent doom. He still doesn't quite believe us about the whole Baphomet thing. If he thought we might actually meet up with an evil demon-goat monster, he'd never let us come down here, even if he is cool but crazy. So I guess I should be thankful he's a little skeptical.

Or I should be sorry.

I brace my hands against the walls as the small corridor begins to shake and tiny rocks drop from the ceiling.

"Shit," Dad says. "Earthquake."

"Language, Dad," Seneca says.

"Seneca, don't tell me to watch my language. I'm an adult. I'll cuss if the situation damn well warrants it." He turns around and begins pushing us back the way we came. "We've got to get out of here before this whole place caves in."

"No." Seneca pushes back. "We've gotta go on, Dad. We've gotta get rid of all the evil spirits and shut this portal for good."

"Seneca," Dad says through gritted teeth, "now's not the time to get rebellious."

"Now's the *perfect* time," Seneca says.

"Seneca, don't make me count to threeee...Holy Hell! Who's that?" Dad backs away from Seneca so fast she falls forward. I spin around, my heart stuck in my throat. But nobody's there except the ghosts.

"Who the hell are *they*?"

"Oh good, he can see us now," Corrine says, sending Dad a cheerful smile. "Hello, Harper's dad."

"Dad? Can you see my ghosts?"

"Your haaa..."

I've never seen a grown man faint before. It'd be funny, if it wasn't happening five hundred feet down a haunted, crumbling sinkhole.

Dad crumples to the floor, out cold.

thirty-one

“What do you think caused the earthquake?” Seneca says as I slap Dad’s face, hoping it’ll wake him up.

“That was no earthquake,” Oliver says.

“He’s right,” Jake says. “That was caused by something else.”

I take a stab at the answer. “Something...evil?”

“Something not happy, that’s for sure,” Corrine says. “You think your dad’ll be okay?”

“I hope so.”

“Maybe we should leave him here,” Oliver says. “Keep going.”

“We can’t do that. What if he wakes up and wonders where we’ve gotten to?”

“Well, he’ll have two choices,” Jake says. “He’ll either figure we went farther in or went back the way we came. So far I haven’t seen any other tunnels coming off this one, have you?”

Seneca nods. “I agree with the dead guys. Leave him here.”

“That’s a cold thing to say about your own father,” I say.

“Leave him knocked out in the middle of a sinkhole that might cave in at any second?”

“He wasn’t knocked out, he fainted. He’ll come around and catch up. We need to go *now*.”

I don’t question her again. Sarah Miller said Seneca would know what to do and I have to believe that. Whatever Seneca thinks we should do, that’s what’ll happen.

We leave Dad propped against the wall and move up the tunnel. The air feels much like the cave in West Virginia, stale, still, and sticky. Every few feet, the whole place rumbles, dirt trickles from the ceiling, and we hold our breath and wait. But the tunnel holds.

“So what are we supposed to do when we get to wherever we’re going?” I whisper.

“I dunno. There’s something down here, but it can’t be that Baphomet thing. If he were here, the portal would’ve worked already and we’d be too late.”

“If we somehow manage to close the portal here, what will stop it from opening up somewhere else?”

“How should I know? Stop asking me questions I can’t answer, Harper.”

We move on in silence. My hand trails against the wall. This tunnel is nothing like a cave. In a cave, I’m always comforted by the thought that the rock is stable; it won’t move. Yeah, sometimes you hear about a cave collapsing, but most caves have stood for thousands, maybe millions of years.

This sinkhole isn’t safe. Especially not after all these crazy rumblings. Nope, I feel as insecure as if I were balancing on a swinging tightrope a thousand feet over Niagara Falls.

Another reverberation rocks the tunnel so hard I almost lose my balance. From behind me, I hear a crash.

“Harper! The tunnel’s collapsing!”

I spin around and watch as the ceiling falls in chunks.

“Harper, come on!” Seneca yells, but all I can think of is Dad. Dad is back there. What if he’s under all that debris and we left him?

the trouble with dead people

"I'll go check on your dad." Jake climbs over the pile. "Keep going, Harper."

But I don't want to move forward anymore. I want to get out of here. This tunnel is not safe. Why the hell did Dad even let us climb down here? How are we going to get out?

Seneca disappears around a bend. And a totally alien fear washes over me, the fear of being left alone. The fear of darkness. The fear of getting buried for eternity in this eerie tomb. I can't go back. A ghost like Jake might weasel through all that dirt, but not me. I scramble up the tunnel to keep up with Seneca.

And then the tunnel ends.

It ends in a solid wall. I crumple to the floor. Seneca stares at the wall like she can't believe it. But what did we expect? This is a sinkhole, not a cave. This tunnel isn't going to open up into a huge cavern dripping with stalactites. It isn't going to lead us back to the surface, where we'll tumble into a grassy meadow full of happy deer and twittering birds.

It is just going to end.

A roar fills the tunnel as more ceiling collapses, and when the dust settles, I find myself in a small pocket of uncrushed tunnel.

"What do we do?" Seneca whispers.

All of Dad's good advice kicks in now. I take a deep breath. "We turn off the lights," I say. "And we wait."

"Where are the ghosts?"

Good question. Jake went back to make sure Dad was okay. But the others, they were right behind us. "Do you think they got buried?"

Seneca reaches up and turns off her light. "No," she says. "I think it's raining out there. They're gone."

I flick off my light too and almost laugh at the irony. How many times had we sat in caves, turned off the lights, and told ghost stories trying to frighten each other? Now here we are,

and what I wouldn't give for a friendly ghost or two to pop his or her head through all that rubble and say hello.

"Which ghost will find their way back first, do you think?" Seneca asks. Her voice echoes around the small space.

"Got me. But I do know which ghost I *don't* want back."

Even though I can't see her, I bet Seneca is nodding. "Me too. Our old friend Joe."

We both fall silent and my mind wanders. It's weird what you think about when you're staring death in the face (although if Death *were* sitting right in front of me I couldn't see him in this pitch blackness.) I think about my mother. I don't remember her voice well, but she always laughed a lot. She wasn't pretty in the normal sense, like Seneca is. She was more like me. Gangly with limp, brown hair. What Dad would call outdoorsy and tomboyish. Mom caught garter snakes for us to keep as pets when we were little and she had us exploring caves as soon as we were out of diapers. I remember every family outing consisted of camping and hiking and caving. Rugged, outdoorsy stuff.

Until she got sick.

Dad still took us for weekend getaways. Mom insisted on it, almost until the end. At first, Mom hobbled with us on our hikes. Then she cheerfully told us to head on out while she pattered around the campsite. Those last few times, she sat in a chair around the campfire, gaunt and listless and covered in blankets, a ghost of a smile still lingering on her lips.

The weekend after Mom's funeral, we went camping, None of us were up to it, but doing something so normal helped bump us out of our moods a bit, helped keep us moving forward. It was weird, not seeing Mom's chair perched next to the fire. But it was peaceful too, like we knew she wanted us to be there.

"She'd have never let us down this sinkhole, though," I murmur.

the trouble with dead people

"Who, Mom?"

"How'd you guess?"

Seneca reaches for my hand in the darkness. "I was thinking about her too. Harper, are we going to die in here?"

I let my breath out slowly. "What do you think?"

"I think...no. I don't feel too scared, do you? Wouldn't I feel scared if I were about to die?"

"Not sure, Seneca. When Mom died, she wasn't scared. She was ready somehow. I'm not scared either. Do you think, maybe, it's a protective thing? Like when it comes right down to it, our bodies don't let us *feel* scared anymore?"

Seneca ponders this. "Maybe. But I don't think that's it, Harper. We aren't supposed to die here. I know it, sure as I know the color of my toothpaste. Maybe something evil is trying to kill us in here. But something good is keeping us alive, until we do whatever it is we're supposed to do to end all this. That's what I think."

"In the meantime," I say, "what do we do?"

"We need the ghosts. You know, I was talking to Sarah Miller when we were driving last night, and she told me she didn't understand why the ghosts were here. She thought they were some weird byproduct of the curse, but I don't think so. Someone sent the ghosts. Maybe the sheep sent 'em. To counteract the effect. I wonder how many ghosts Bertha Moone had."

"Why?"

"I dunno. Maybe the more ghosts you have, the more resistant you are."

"Resistant to what?"

Seneca shrugs. "To Joe. To the evil demons."

"How does that help us here?" I ask.

"Well, I've got this crazy thought. You can send the demons back. But we need to close the portal too, so nobody can use it again. And you can't do that."

"So who can?"

"The ghosts, Harper. The ghosts can seal the portal."

"But how?"

She shakes her head. "I'm not sure. I just know they can."

"Where do you think the portal is, though? I mean, this is a pretty small tunnel and we're at the end of it."

"We must be over the portal," Seneca says. "We must be sitting right on top of it."

thirty-two

When Seneca was a little kid, she always wanted to play forts. I'd make her forts by propping the sofa cushions around the bottom of a table, or Mom would take a blanket and drape it over a couple of chairs, making a little tent. Seneca would always pretend those forts were castles, or theaters, or something imaginary and goofy. Sometimes when we went caving, she'd pretend she was in a fairyland or a dungeon.

Now, as we sit in the dark, waiting for something, *anything*, to happen, she says, "I've always wondered what lives in caves, besides the obvious bats and spiders and things. I bet there's bunches of creatures living in caves that we can't even imagine, simply because we've never seen 'em."

"This isn't a cave, it's a sinkhole."

"Yeah, but they could crawl in here too, couldn't they? Weird creatures with big, bulgy eyes or long, snaky tongues, or—"

"Seneca, will you curb your imagination for two seconds? I do not want to think about weird creatures with big, pointy teeth."

"I didn't say anything about pointy teeth. You think Baphomet might have pointy teeth, though? What does a goat-demon look like, anyway?"

"I'd guess it would look like a goat. And I don't want to think of that either."

I can't help shifting around. The thought of some new dimension bubbling right under my feet gives me the heebie-jeebies. What if the portal is like a volcano and bursts open, flinging us into the roof overhead?

"You're getting panicky," Seneca says.

"What?"

"You're fidgeting. Remember what Dad said: don't use up all your resources and wear yourself out. Look, we packed light 'cause we didn't expect to be in here too long, so all we've got are a couple of candy bars and your stupid granola. And two bottles of water each. So chill out."

She's right, but I can't. For the first time in my life, I understand Holly's ongoing feud with the dark. I've always pooh-pooed people who thought caving was scary. Dark can't hurt you. But this dark, it's pressing in on me, smothering me, threatening to cut off my air.

"I'm turning on my light."

"Fine. But you're the one who said we shouldn't waste the batteries."

"Screw what I said. I need light."

I reach for the button on my headlamp and press. The light shines on a frowning, ghostly face dead ahead. The shock is worse than the time Holly dared me to look in the mirror after saying "Bloody Mary" and spinning around three times, and I swore I saw a pasty face staring back at me. This time, I really *do* see a pasty face. Even Seneca screams. We both fly backwards against the wall.

"Sorry, sorry!" Oliver brushes some cave dust off his clothes. "I apologize, I didn't mean to frighten you. It stopped raining,

the trouble with dead people

just a quick thunder-boomer, and I found my way back fairly quick. Are the others back yet?"

I could answer him if my hummingbird heart hadn't leapt into my throat and effectively blocked my tongue.

Seneca squeaks, "You're the first, Oliver."

"Great. I beat Joe."

I manage to get some words out. "He's here?"

"He was lurking around, right outside the fog. I met up with him on my way out. He was searching for us. We had managed to block him from you before, and when we got to this place, he couldn't see us at all. But he knows now, Harper. He knows where you are."

Seneca flicks her light on. "If that jerk is on his way, we're gonna need all the light we can get to see him coming," she says. "I don't want him sneaking up on me like Oliver just did."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you. But I'm here now."

"What about the others?" Seneca says. "We need them here too."

Oliver nods. "To shut the portal. I saw it in the fog." He shivers.

"Are you cold?" Seneca says.

"No," he says. "I'm scared."

"Why?"

"There's only one way to shut the portal," he says. "And I don't want to be the one to do it."

Jake pops up. For once, I see him when he does it and he doesn't startle me a bit.

"Sorry, I got sidetracked. Your dad is okay, by the way. Well, he was okay until I showed up and freaked him out again. I'd never guess your dad to be a fainter."

"Me neither," I say, feeling so relieved I could hug Jake, oily hair and all. Knowing Dad is still alive and breathing (and fainting) gives me strength. "So what did you see in your sojourn through the fog?"

Jake exchanges a look with Oliver. "Something I didn't want to see."

Oliver nods. "I know what you mean, boy."

"What?" Seneca says. "What do you mean?"

Oliver frowns. "Harper can send the spirits back. She can use the stone to do it. But only a ghost can *open* the portal to let the spirits through. And only a ghost can seal the portal for good. And it'll be tricky. The only way to close it is to *open* it first. And there's always a chance Baphomet will bust through in the process."

"Even without a sacrifice?" I say.

"He'll sure try."

The room shakes again. Something under my feet can feel it too. I get this vibe like whatever it is—Baphomet?—is getting restless. It's crouching down there. Waiting. This is *not* a good idea.

"Isn't there any other way to get rid of this Baphomet guy? Do we *have* to do this?"

"We do," Oliver says. "If we succeed, we put an end to Joe's schemes. If we fail...well, the whole world is doomed."

"Great," I say. "Thanks for the instilling of confidence, Oliver."

"There's another problem," Seneca says. "If the portal is right below us and we have to open it before we can close it, what's to say we don't fall right in?"

Damn Seneca. Now I'm wanting to climb the walls to get away from the possibly kid-eating floor.

Oliver studies the ceiling. "Got any rope?"

"Of course we've got rope." I rummage through my caving pack. "What are you thinking?"

"There's a pretty good root jutting from the ceiling there. Not sure if it'll hold you, but it's the best shot we've got. I could attach the rope to it, and you can use those rappelling devices of yours to attach yourself to the rope, right?"

the trouble with dead people

“Ugh,” Seneca says. “So we’ll be hanging over a fiery inter-dimension pit like worms on a fishhook. A tasty couple of morsels for an angry, hungry goat-demon?”

“Better than falling through it,” Jake says.

“Okay, here’s the rope.” I hand it to Oliver. “Think you can get up there?”

“Right now, I’m half human, half ghost. I can pretty much do anything.”

Oliver scrambles up the wall like Spiderman. If the situation weren’t so dire, I’d be laughing my head off, watching such an austere guy in a suit and tie trying his hand at rock climbing.

“Watch it! Coming through!”

Corrine pushes her way into our cramped space, breathing hard. “Damn these lungs. It was easier to get around when I was a full ghost. Harper, Seneca, brace yourself. Joe’s coming. And he’s coming fast.”

thirty-three

You know how they say that right before something life-threatening, like an automobile accident or a super freak-out before an exam, how your life flashes in front of your eyes? Well, I'm in the most life-threatening, freaky-deaky position right now, swinging over a swirling mass of crazy colors so intense I can't even focus on them. I can shut my eyes, but those colors seep in, filling every crevice in my brain.

Seneca, like usual, is a little braver than me. She's able to keep her eyes open while I squeeze mine shut.

"Holy cow! Look at all the colors. Harper, I bet we're the first people ever to look into another dimension."

"You're the first person. I can't look."

"Why not? It's gorgeous."

"It's like a never-ending chasm of death," I say.

There's no bottom to it. An *infinite* swirling universe right under my feet. I have no idea how the ghosts got the portal open. Last thing I knew, Seneca and I attached ourselves to the rope and the ghosts swayed and chanted something I couldn't understand at all.

Then, the floor dropped.

the trouble with dead people

Well, not so much dropped as dissolved into all those swirly colors. Seneca's statement of "like worms on a fishhook" is now stuck in my brain, and a serious Harper Dillon freak-out the likes of which this world has never seen is imminent.

From somewhere that sounds miles away, Corrine says, "Relax, sweetie. Try not to think."

And as stupid as it sounds, it works. The freak-out fades. I take a deep breath. And my thoughts shift away from the swirling mass of rainbow-colored doom to other things.

Like Mom. Her face, her laughter, her cheerful voice comes back so vivid it hurts. Unlike Dad, who's aged over the last five years, Mom is still young and fresh. She could almost be my sister for the amount of innocence and happiness she exudes.

Dad. An expression of complete puppy-dog bewilderment in his eyes as he tries to comprehend what the hell is going on.

Holly. Always skeptical and unbelieving at first, but as a true friend should, she always comes around. She stands by me, even if she has to put up with my tomboyish ways and freaky Miss Granola mentality.

And Erik. So scared of what's happening, the best he can do is backpedal and pretend it *isn't* happening. Do I blame him?

No. But it still hurts, almost like a betrayal, that he doesn't believe me. That he can turn a blind eye to my suffering so he doesn't have to suffer himself. Maybe when all this is over, I can forgive him. Or, maybe not.

A hiss breaks my thoughts and my eyes open before I can will them shut.

The hiss isn't coming from the freak-o pool of molten color below me. I drag my gaze away from the other dimension, to the tunnel now awash with light. Joe pushes past the other ghosts.

"Get down from there, girlie."

"Joe, she hasn't listened to you yet," Corrine says. "What makes you think she'll listen to your craptacular advice now?"

I can almost see the cogs shifting gears in Joe's head. "She'll be Baphomet snack if she stays up there," he says.

"I suggest," Oliver says, "that if Joe wants you down, you'd better stay up there, Harper."

But his voice reaches me through a weird fog. What's happening now? I can barely hear the ghosts, but one voice is loud and clear. Joe fills my head.

"Get down, girlie. Do as you're told."

Seneca grabs my leg, yanking me out of my weird trance. "Harper, don't," she says. "Whatever he wants, don't do it."

I pull my hand away from the root sticking out of the ceiling above me. Geez, I was actually thinking of detaching the rope. And what would have happened if I had done it? I'd have fallen right into the abyss. And taken Seneca with me.

My throat goes drier than sand. I meet Joe's merciless eyes. His mouth breaks into a grin. That skunk. If I had knocked Seneca off the rope with me, I'd have killed her. Killed her *and* sacrificed myself to Baphomet, all in one convenient swoop.

"Seneca," I whisper. "How do we send the spirits back, now that the portal is open?"

"We need the stone. It's in my backpack. Geez, I wish I had gotten it out before we hung ourselves on this stupid rope." She reaches behind her and slides off her caving pack.

"Don't drop it," I hiss.

"I won't. Okay, I've got the stone. I'll have to hold it for you; you'll just drop it. Put your hands on it."

She holds up the stone and I reach down. "Now what?"

If Seneca says anything, I don't hear it. As soon as I touch stone, a beautiful humming fills my ears. I'm saying something, but I can't hear the words falling out of my mouth. White, wispy things swirl around me. And then...

"I dropped it," Seneca says.

Her voice comes back, loud and crisp. I stare at her hands. The stone is gone.

"You dropped it?"

the trouble with dead people

"Yeah, something crazy happened, Harper. I felt it. You spoke in some weird, wacko language. It must've been the incantation. Then these ghost-looking things passed by and went into that crazy, swirly stuff below us. Real ghost-looking things, not like the dead guys following you around. And then the stone got so heavy, I couldn't hold onto it anymore."

"So I did it? I sent the spirits back?"

"Yeah."

I turn to Corrine. "And you guys can shut the portal now?"

Corrine gulps. "I'm sorry, sweetie. But there's only one way for us to shut it. We need a sacrifice."

Oh God, no. After all this, we *still* need a sacrifice? I close my eyes again and a great sense of peace fills me. I remember the talk I had with Seneca, about how when it's time to go, it's amazing how the human body can prepare itself. Is this what's happening? Is this sense of peace letting me know it's okay? That it's time? My hand reaches up for the rope. All I have to do is pull myself up enough to add some slack and I can pop my ascender off, and fall into nothingness.

It must be worth it, if I'm supposed to save the world.

"That's right, girlie," Joe sneers. "The sacrifice is you. Let yourself go. It's the only way to end this."

"No." Corrine's voice comes out more forceful than I've ever heard her. "Dammit, you pesky ghost, shut up. That is *not* what I meant and you know it. Harper, you hang tight up there honey. There has to be a sacrifice, all right. But it isn't gonna be you."

From below me Seneca whispers, "Harper, they need a human sacrifice to let Baphomet *out*."

"And we need a ghost sacrifice to shut the portal and keep him in. It won't be pleasant. Whoever goes down there won't have a happy afterlife, that's for sure," Corrine says.

Oliver nods. "This dimension demands a ghost sacrifice. That's the only way to seal it for good. Give it a human sacrifice, it'll stay open for eternity."

"And this world will become part of that dimension," Jake says, nodding. "Humans can't survive down there."

I wonder, can the ghosts?

From below me, a humming begins. A high-pitched, ear-splitting hum. I shove my fists against both sides of my head. "What the hell is that?"

"It's Baphomet," Joe cackles. "He's a-comin' and there's nothing you can do about it! Go on, fling yourselves in, I dare ya. You'll enjoy a million years of torture, of unimaginable despair, if you throw yourselves in. Do it." He laughs wildly like a hyena, almost blocking out the horrible humming sound.

I don't want to look down. I don't want to see what's coming. But I can't help it. The swirling colors are darkening, solidifying. The ghosts float around the opening, but no one dives in. I can't blame them. A million years of torture and despair isn't something I'd willingly sacrifice myself for.

But wasn't I just about to?

No, that was Joe controlling my thoughts again. Joe made me so angry at Erik I almost did him in, and Joe tried to make me jump now. Thank God for Seneca.

"Harper!" she screams. "Help!"

Joe, half-man, half-ghost, has snuck to the ceiling and wrestles with the rope tied to the jutting root.

Oh shit.

Jake, Oliver, and Corrine shoot after him and yank him away. They aren't murderers, and I guess Joe couldn't kill them even if he wanted to, but he could harm them plenty if he wasn't so outnumbered. I watch as the ghosts spin around and around like a whirly-top spinning in mid-air. They bang into Seneca and me and our rope swings like a pendulum, smacking us

against the wall and pitching back into the mass of swirling bodies. It's like being stuck in a pinball machine.

My headlamp explodes. I hear it pop. Seneca's lamp pops too, pitching the room into an eerie darkness. The crazy swirling colors below us have turned dark too, blacker than night. The ultimate Lights Out experience.

That freaky end-of-the-world darkness only lasts a few terrifying seconds, as two red eyes blink and stare up at me. Eyes the size of fricking automobiles.

"Holy cow," Seneca breathes. "Harper, it's the Hodag from Hell. And it's coming this way."

Oh wow. I'm not sure how far down that beast is, but he seems pretty eager to bust out of his dimension and erupt into ours. "Corrine! Do something!"

But the ghosts don't hear me. They're in a fight of their own, three against one. Baphomet's hum is almost ear-splitting and those red eyes are zooming closer. So close, I can feel the heat bursting from them.

A scream echoes off the walls. It isn't coming from the swirling dimension below me. It's a human scream.

The boiling mass of ghosts has dispersed. Joe stares down at the fast-approaching goat-devil, an expression of sheer terror plastered on his ugly face.

As one, the ghosts get behind Joe and push hard, flinging him into the dark pit below. And just like that, Joe's horrible screams and the terrifying high-pitched hum disappear.

So do all traces of light.

A cold silence fills the room.

We're all alone.

thirty-four

"It's okay. You can get off the rope now."

What? "Corrine? Are you still here?"

"Fraid so, dear. But at least that horrible, horrible Joe isn't around to bother you anymore."

"But I thought...I thought once the portal was closed, you'd all disappear."

"That doesn't seem to be the case," Oliver says. "Unless we had thrown ourselves into the pit after Joe."

"Which we didn't," Jake says. "I was too scared."

"Same here," Corrine says. "That portal was so strong. I figured it would take all of us jumping in there to seal it. But I guess one extra-horrible ghost was enough."

"I don't get it," Seneca says. "Joe wasn't a real ghost. I mean, he was, but he wasn't a part of the curse like you three. You said so. He was something else, wasn't he?"

"He was a man who died," Oliver says. "And even though he died of his own volition, he died as part of this curse. He died to make sure Harper fulfilled her duty."

the trouble with dead people

“What would have happened,” Seneca asks, “if Baphomet had gotten through? Would our world have become part of that dimension? Would everyone have died?”

“I don’t know, honey,” Corrine says.

I don’t know either, and I don’t care. I’m half elated that Joe is gone and the portal is sealed, but half-miserable too. *My* ghosts are still here. And I can’t think of any way to get rid of them.

We detach from the rope. I fumble through my caving pack and find my extra light-source, a candle and a pack of matches. At least we have a little light now. For a while.

A scraping sound pulses through the collapsed ceiling. “Harper! Seneca! Can you hear me?”

“Dad!” His voice sounds so close. I put my ear to the rubble.

“Hold on kids, I’ll get you out.”

“It isn’t thick,” Corrine says. “We can work it from this end too. C’mon, ghosties.”

The ghosts dig into the earth with their partly dead hands.

“I don’t get that either,” Seneca says. “You’re ghosts but you’re not. I can touch you, you can grab things, but you can float and move right through stuff.”

“All mind control,” Corrine says.

“Well, that’s super cool. I want to do that.”

“You’d have to die,” Corrine says, “and trust me, sweetie, you don’t want that. Down here, we have some human powers, that’s true. But once we’re out of here and away from this place, well, being a full-time ghost isn’t any fun, Seneca. It’s pretty darn tedious.”

“Okay, maybe it won’t be so fun.” Seneca holds the candle up, watching the ghosts scoop aside crumbling rock with their hands. “Do you need any help?”

“No,” Oliver says. “This feels good. Touching something solid. Let us enjoy this while we can.”

I don’t offer to help. I sit with my back against the wall and grip the candle. I’m spent. Like I could sleep for a week. Yeah, I

didn't do much except hang around on a rope while an eternal abyss swirled below me, but that's enough to sap anybody's strength. Mentally and physically. I have no clue where Seneca gets her energy from. Ah, to be ten again.

"I'll miss you when I can't see you," Seneca says, touching Corrine's shoulder. "You're kinda like a mom."

Corrine smiles and a tear trickles down her cheek. She gives Seneca's hand a pat. "Thanks, dear. That means a lot."

thirty-five

“So,” Erik says. He shoots me a small smile from across the kitchen table and I get the goose bumps. Why must he have such a cute smile?

I stare out the window at the bright sunshine. Man, why couldn't it be raining today?

“Tell him you're sorry,” Corrine whispers.

Boy, I wish I could communicate with these ghosts without using my voice. Silent communication, so I don't look like an idiot. I want to tell her, “Shut up already, I've told him a dozen times since all this started!” But I keep my mouth shut, block out Corrine's encouraging smile, and focus on Erik's nervous eyes.

“So. I'm sorry about the fork thing, Erik. I was so totally frazzled.”

Crap. Will I ever stop apologizing?

“Harper,” Erik says, “I have to apologize too. When I said I didn't believe you, well, I lied. I do believe you. I was just so scared, and I thought maybe if I pretended none of it was happening, it would all go away.”

"Ah," Jake says. "The ol' Ostrich-Head-in-the-Sand approach."

Shut up, Jake. I try to ignore him and keep my eyes fixed on Erik, although my smile must seem pretty forced at this point.

"You believe me?"

"It's hard not to. I mean, even your dad sat me down and told me what happened. And he's an adult."

"Adults can be loopy too," I say. Boy, am I gonna have to have a sit-down with Dad after this. Talking to Erik behind my back? Well, at least he was gunning for Erik to forgive me instead of warning Erik to stay the hell away from his precious daughter.

"I'm not sure if I can handle the ghosts, though," he says.

Great. Seal the nail in my heartbreak coffin.

"I mean..." Erik's eyes dart around, like he's afraid the ghosts might curse him if he says anything. "I mean, isn't there a way to get rid of them?"

"Only way is to throw ourselves into another dimension, only to be tormented for a thousand years by a raging goat-devil," Oliver mumbles.

"All right, shut-up, all of you! Not you, Erik. Look, I know you guys mean well, but get the hell out. Go to the other room."

The ghosts file out. I'm sure they're listening at the door, though. Their lives are pretty boring, so I guess they can't help it.

"Will they ever leave, do you think?" Erik says.

"Nope. They're here for good, I guess."

"Don't they drive you batty?"

"No. Joe's gone and the others almost seem like family now. But I do like it when it rains."

When it rains, the ghosts disappear. They fall into the fog and I'm free. It's not that I mind them much anymore, but even though they try to give me my space, they still manage to walk in on me at the oddest times. No warning, no nothing. The other day, Jake walked right into my bedroom when I was changing clothes. He acted surprised, but I dunno. I'm thinking maybe

the trouble with dead people

he did it on purpose. Oliver was quick to yell at him and give him a lecture on proper protocol.

But on days when it rains, I can relax. Sometimes, after a particularly vicious thunderstorm, the ghosts are gone for a day or two. After a quick thunder-boomer, they might reappear in a couple of hours. But those moments to myself are beautiful. Precious. Free. Holly suggested once that if I like it so much, I should move to the rainiest spot in America. She even looked it up. Hawaii gets the most rain.

Seneca *loved* that idea. "That would be awesome, wouldn't it? Hawaii. Dad, they have volcanoes in Hawaii. Lava tubes. Have you ever explored a lava tube?"

I couldn't help it, I shuddered. "Lava tubes, great. They'd make a perfect portal."

I think the ghosts would like more rain too, to be honest. Corrine always says falling into the fog is like a new adventure. She says she isn't scared to go there anymore; the sheep spirits always teach her something new and interesting. I guess if you're a ghost stuck trailing after a teenager every day, learning anything new and going any place different would be exciting.

Sometimes, like when Corrine starts giving me motherly advice or Jake laughs at one of my lame jokes, I forget the ghosts aren't real people. Whatever emotion they died with, that disappeared. I guess they're now like their true selves. Corrine acts more normal and even gets snappy sometimes. Jake still gets moody, but he can be fun too. And Oliver, well, he's still pretty uptight. But, whaddya gonna do?

"Sounds like you've gotten pretty well adjusted," Erik says. "For someone with ghosts trailing after them, that is. I'd never get used to it. But I still like you, Harper. I really do."

Oh man, here comes the gooshy, heart-thumping, turning to a puddle of happy goo feeling.

"I can get rid of them when it rains," I say. "We need to plan a get-together when the weatherman says it's gonna pour."

Erik grins. "Okay, Harper. I'll check the weather and call you when the sky looks crappy."

That's the funny, cute Erik I remember. I grin back.

Seneca busts into the kitchen, followed by Boopie. Mrs. Moone had dropped off the little bundle of bleating joy last week, saying "you never know when you might need a good guard-sheep." I have to say, it's nice to have Boopie around. We expelled the goat-spirits out of this world, but the sheep-spirits stayed. Who knows, we might need them again someday.

"Your dad lets that thing in the house?" Erik says.

Seneca frowns. "Dad says he's getting too big and poopy for the house, but I don't buy it. Snookums is ten times bigger than Boopie and *he's* allowed in. Anyway, I'm taking him for a walk. Gonna go visit Sarah Miller and the goats."

"I can't believe she kept the goats," I say.

"Well, they're unpossessed goats now and she *is* kinda attached to 'em. They're nice enough now that they aren't all schitzo. And Boopie likes hanging out with them too. Besides, Mrs. Miller is teaching me how to tie-dye shirts properly today. She's got a big caldron going in the back yard to boil the dye and everything."

Erik raises an eyebrow. "A cauldron?"

"Yeah, well, she's still kinda witchy, you know. But not in a bad way. Anyway, everything okeydokey with you two now?"

"As long as we get a ton of rain in the next couple of weeks," I say, smiling at Erik, "and we can keep the ghosts away, I think everthing'll be just fine."

about the author

Originally from Virginia, Nikki Bennett spent several years living in Japan before moving to the Pacific Northwest. She spent many years caving in West Virginia with her friends, and although caves have managed to feature predominantly in almost all her novels, the cave in *The Trouble with Dead People* represents real places and memories from her caving days.

Nikki is the author of several middle grade and young adult books. She also writes adult books under the pen name of Sandi Penniman. She is also the owner/editor at Firedrake Books, LLC.

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