

MIST AND SHADOW

KAYLIN WISE

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A SHADOW IN THE DARK

Daphne didn't know how she'd ended up in the passenger seat of a car she'd never ridden in before. Or who the girl sitting next to her was. Or where they were, exactly.

The driver, in fact, didn't appear to notice she was no longer alone. She was maybe a year older, nineteen at most, her thick black hair chopped at the chin. Daphne observed her with detached interest, her thoughts as tuneless as the steady whir of the tires on the wet pavement. The girl yawned widely and rubbed an eye, leaving behind a faint smudge of mascara underneath.

Daphne looked out her window for a marker she might recognize. It was difficult to see anything in the moonless dark. They were driving through thick woods that stretched on both sides of the road like an endless, narrow tunnel.

The radio dipped briefly into static.

With nothing interesting to see, Daphne focused instead on her reflection in the wet glass, her dark hair blending in with the night. She frowned. Pale gray eyes squinted back. Behind her in the reflection, the strange girl yawned again.

After several hours, though perhaps it was only minutes, Daphne became aware she was expecting something to happen.

She threw a glance at the nameless driver beside her, bracing for something her mind could not yet perceive before fixing her eyes ahead. The girl, whoever she was, hadn't moved her attention from the road. A cold wave of dread washed over Daphne. Her heart thumped unpleasantly. Waiting.

Bumps rose on her skin from the frigid cold blasting from the car's air vents. Suddenly the darkness was suffocating, looming over them like a giant that could crush the car as easily as an aluminum can. Daphne clasped her hands tightly together, trying to calm down. Everything was fine. She just needed to—

“Look out!” The yell tore out of her.

A shadow flew across the headlights like an overgrown bat, vanishing into the surrounding dark. Daphne whirled around to look out the back window as thunder cracked like a whip across the sky. The creature was gone. A blink would have missed it.

She turned forward slowly, shaking at the near miss, though at the same time unsure why. Daphne glanced sideways again. The girl hadn't reacted to the shout or shown any sign she knew the car had almost hit something—or almost been hit.

Silently, they drove into the night. Every second stretched like an hour. Daphne sat stiffly on the edge of her seat, full of dread as she watched the road in case the shadow returned.

Rain splattered on the windshield. Would it come back? Doubt crept in. Perhaps it was just an animal after all. But no, it wasn't—she was somehow certain of that. It was something dangerous. Daphne anxiously scanned the road, the woods. The radio dissolved into static.

By the time she sensed it again, it was too late.

The car lurched with a deafening *bang* as something hit its left side with the force of a charging rhino. Daphne's head smacked against the passenger window. Pain lanced through her skull. Even in the shock of the moment, the girl steadied the car, shrieking.

Daphne pressed a hand to the growing throb in her head and looked out the window, dazed. A shapeless form made of the densest, most soul-stopping black was soaring toward her.

There was no time to react. Glass shattered. Wet shards cut like fiery needles into Daphne's upthrown hands and nicked her forehead. In what was undoubtedly an instinct to flee, the girl jerked the wheel and floored the gas instead of the brake—

They lurched again just as another force collided with the car near the back. The car spun haphazardly, then, without warning, flipped. Daphne felt weightless and devoid of thought as she tumbled around, not able to scream or yell or do anything in the noise of the crushing metal and the girl's screams—

Stillness.

The car groaned to a final halt. Daphne lay curled on the ceiling, which now served as the floor. Every inch of her body ached. Thick drops of rain thudded dully against the engine above.

Beside her, quietly suspended by a seat belt, was the girl. Daphne felt the pull of her presence in the corner of her eye but did not want to look. She knew, as if the knowledge was already there waiting, that the girl was dead.

She swept aside broken glass with a shaky hand. Static spluttered out of the radio. Willing her trembling limbs to move, Daphne half crawled, half dragged herself out the smashed window and landed with a final thrust of pain on the wet asphalt.

Nausea boiled up in her throat, and blood welled from her glass-bitten hands, but she propped herself up on one of them,

short of breath, and followed the beam from the only surviving headlight toward the woods.

Even as her vision turned to dust, Daphne could have sworn a shadow soared across the trees and melted into the dark.

OMENS

Daphne Cole moved her boot just in time to avoid stepping on the toad. It hopped onto a bright yellow leaf and stopped as if to pose.

“Stay still,” she ordered, lifting a large camera. The toad kept still long enough for her to snap a shot in the dim light before it dived under a fallen tree.

The dark pall over the woods was lifting in the early morning. Daphne stood quietly for a minute, not in any hurry to move on. There was nowhere she needed to be.

A familiar nightmare had forced her awake a few hours earlier. Only when Daphne was suddenly staring at her bedroom ceiling did she remember it was only the dream that had haunted her for well over a month, since August. Unlike other strange nightmares and dreams that always slipped away from memory like sand through fingers, this one still burned into her memory vividly. Broken glass slicing open her hands. A final scream.

Daphne rubbed her hands together, reminding herself she was awake and therefore safe. The woods surrounding her

house were as familiar as a favorite sweater, a place she could always come to after a bad nightmare. It was a better option than simply lying awake in bed, willing her heart to stop beating so fast as she watched the shadows change shape on her bedroom walls. To recover, all Daphne needed to do was pull on her boots and slip into the woods.

The back of her neck tingled. Daphne tensed, two invisible eyes pressing on her skin. She turned and glanced around before making out the cause above her, perched on a branch.

A large white owl with many brown markings and a pale yellow beak stared down at her from a nearby pine, almost perfectly blended in with the tree behind it. Its head glowed from the cloudy light, and its eyes—like black pits—had only the smallest fuzz of light to indicate they were not simply gaping holes.

The owl didn't move or seem bothered by Daphne's presence, as if this were a long-arranged meeting. Its dark eyes gazed intently into her gray ones. Hardly daring to breathe, Daphne slowly readied the camera.

Without warning, the owl leapt silently off its perch and soared across the trees.

Daphne's spirits sank, the weight strangely heavy. The opportunity to photograph a more interesting subject than usual had slipped away, but this was more than just disappointment.

She glanced at the silver bracelet on her left wrist: a simple silver band, connecting the head and feet of a textured owl with scalelike feathers. Two smooth, bulging eyes with dark, furrowed eyebrows. A final gift.

Some leaves rustled to her left. Daphne glanced over, half expecting to see someone emerge from behind the trees, but of course there was no one. She was alone.

An alarm beeped from her jacket pocket. Lost in thought,

she jumped and checked the time on her phone. It was already half past seven.

Daphne made her way back through the woods in a daze, almost tripping over familiar dips in the ground. A two-story white home hidden in the woods came into view, yellow light glowing in the downstairs window. She ran across the yard and leapt onto the porch, stooping briefly to collect the empty thermos of tea deposited earlier, and thrust open the front door.

“Daphne?” The call came from the living room.

“Mom?”

“Okay, just checking!”

Daphne shook off her rain boots on the entryway rug, wishing she could do the same to the strange mood now infecting her, and sprinted up the wooden steps to change her clothes. She narrowly avoided stepping on Mystique, a fluffy black cat who took up most of the top step. When she returned from her bedroom, the cat was batting something invisible with a giant paw. She smiled and long-stepped over her on the way down the stairs, then turned into the empty kitchen.

Thoughts of the owl were swept away. Daphne’s mouth watered as she took in the sight of the cupcake on the table, thickly piled with frosting and garnished with a tiny cookie.

“It’s cookies and cream!” Her mom came up from behind, waving her arms, cropped blonde hair askew. “I bought it on my lunch hour yesterday, from the new bakery downtown. They also sell gift-wrapped toilet paper. I thought about getting that for you instead, but...”

“Thanks.” Daphne tossed the empty thermos in the sink as she went to claim the cupcake, unwrapping its shiny foil with reverence. “What’s it for?”

“It’s your half birthday!” her mom said with another dramatic wave of her arms. “Only six months until you’re an adult!”

“I didn’t know we celebrated half birthdays,” Daphne said as she took a large bite of frosting. Nevertheless, it was a tradition she could appreciate.

“We don’t, I guess.” Her mother took a seat opposite where a binder lay open on the table. “But I wanted an excuse to check the place out without getting anything for myself.”

Daphne recognized this to be a subtle self-gibe by her mother, who was an amiable and upbeat woman but rather touchy about her larger size. They were both silent for a few moments. Daphne, although focusing most of her attention on eating what she had decided to classify as breakfast, detected a slight shift in her mom’s mood.

“So, were you out in the woods all this morning?” Her mom’s tone was a touch too cheery, Daphne recognized. She felt suddenly uneasy.

“Yeah.” She slowly set the cupcake down and swallowed.

“Any good photos?”

“A few,” Daphne said, matching her mom’s casual tone. “I saw an owl, but it flew away before I could get it.”

“Really? What kind?”

“I don’t know.” Daphne rested her elbows on the table, twisting her silver bracelet out of habit. “Its eyes were completely black.”

More than anything, this was the detail that stood out most clearly in her impression of the bird. Daphne was not sure why the encounter had unsettled her so much. It was like the owl had marked an event, some line crossed—but that was stupid. It was just a bird.

“Hmm...” Her mom reverted into thoughtful silence. Daphne, wishing to appear normal, took another bite of the cupcake but couldn’t quite enjoy it as much as before. “So, what time did you get up?”

It was another lead-in, Daphne thought with a twist of the

stomach. A more direct one. The path of the conversation was becoming clearer.

“The same. About three-thirty, but I didn’t go into the woods until five.” She had turned on the bedroom lights and listened to a podcast. Unless a nightmare affected her badly, the woods could wait.

“Hmm...” Her mom’s lips were pursed, the humor in her face descending into worry. Then, gently, but as if steeling herself, she began in a rush, “You know, I ran into a friend at the grocery store the other day—do you know Yvette? Dr. Sow? Anyway, she specializes in sleep disorders, and she was telling me how there’s some treatment options for nightmares—”

“Mom,” Daphne interrupted quietly, looking at a spot past her mom’s elbow. They had arrived at the dreaded point. “I’ve told you before, I don’t need to be treated.”

“But it might help,” her mom plowed on. “There’s some therapies, or maybe you could get a prescription—”

“I don’t need to take anything.” Daphne sighed, but without anger. For the first time that morning, she felt tired. “There’s...nothing wrong with me. I can deal with it. I swear.”

But her mom continued to look at her with such wide and concerned eyes that Daphne felt a rush of guilt for the worry she had caused over the years. She knew the topic of treatment, broached by her mom every so often despite the fact it was always rejected, came from a feeling of helplessness. There were years of her mom bursting into her bedroom to stop the screaming clearly audible down the hall, to hold the thrashing and sobbing figure on the bed and assure her fifty times it was only a dream, a nightmare.

Daphne didn’t quite know why the idea of treatment was always so unappealing, only that her nightmares had been there since she could remember, and the suggestion of getting

rid of them was like admitting there was something intrinsically wrong or embarrassing about herself.

For better or worse, the nightmares were there to stay, and Daphne could deal with that fact.

“Mom, I know you worry about my nightmares, but you really don’t have to,” she said, trying to look reassuring as she met her mom’s worried eyes. “I’m not a kid anymore. They’re not...they’re not as bad as they used to be.” Daphne dropped her gaze to the crumbs on her half-finished plate and began to gather them with a finger. She didn’t like lying.

“Are you sure?”

Daphne paused, tempted for a moment to reveal the contents of her latest nightmare, one that was so terrifyingly realistic. However, she knew the cost of confiding was more worry, more anxious questions, and perhaps silent consent to enter her bedroom in the dead of night to comfort her. That consent had been revoked for the second time at fifteen, when she had decided she was past old enough to deal with the terrors alone.

At this cost, how could she reveal her nightmares were worse than ever? Normally, Daphne could confide in her mother about practically anything, but the issue was beyond her help. It always had been.

“Yes,” she replied, meeting her mother’s eyes again directly. They searched her carefully, but her mom said nothing, evidently deciding the subject was worth dropping for now.

“So. What’s that?” Daphne nodded toward the open binder on the table as she returned to her breakfast.

“This?” Her mother looked down, successfully distracted. “Just a photocopy of Thomas Blakely’s diary.”

“Who?” The name sounded familiar, like a ghost out of an elementary school lesson.

“Oh, just a businessman who used to live in Long Haven

around a hundred years ago. He lived awhile in the mansion you toured in the fourth grade.”

Daphne made a noise of recognition. Although she hadn't set foot in the local historic home since then, she could faintly remember being impressed by its size and old-fashioned elegance. However, she and her classmates had found the house interesting because it was supposed to be haunted, not because of its history.

“You'll see his name around town,” her mother continued. “He invested a lot into Long Haven while he was here.”

“Why are you reading his diary?”

“Because it's important for early local history. Someone found it buried in their attic, so now I'm trying to type it up for the historical society. But, any-hoo, it's been difficult reading his writing.” She flipped through the binder. Pages of cramped cursive flashed before Daphne's eyes. “And there's also the fact there's a lot missing from it, so it's not very cohesive. You can tell he ripped out a lot of pages. Burned them, probably.”

“Really? Why?” Daphne said, now intrigued. What secrets would an early-twentieth-century businessman have to keep?

“Well, I suppose the answer's been burned,” her mom said, taking on the intellectual voice that appeared whenever she discussed her passion, history. “But my guess is he had sensitive information about his business, or probably just gossip about other people he couldn't afford to have read. When you're a prominent person in the community, you can't exactly be vocal about your feelings.”

“I guess,” Daphne said, suppressing a yawn.

“And from what I can *ascertain*,” her mom continued, in a bad British accent, “e was well-known for being *private*.”

“He kind of sounds paranoid.”

“Well, he did leave town just a few years after arriving. He told everyone it was evil.”

Daphne cleared her plate from the table. “Really? Why?”

“Well, his sister had just killed herself, so maybe—” She paused as the plate slipped from Daphne’s fingers and fell noisily into the sink. “—he thought the town got to her.”

“He thought the town *what?*” Daphne said, taken aback by the unexpected morbid turn in the story.

“I don’t know much about it yet. It’s been slow going,” her mother said, flipping through the pages again. “Some of it’s interesting, though. Maybe I’ll do a book!”

“That’d be cool,” Daphne said, though truthfully she did not hold the same passion for history as her mom, or—she glanced at the old photo frame propped on a shelf by the sink—as her dad once had. She suppressed another yawn.

“So, what time is Jessica picking you up?”

“Noon. We’re going to lunch, then shopping.” Daphne’s mood was sinking back into its gloomy state, and she wondered if she should call her best friend and cancel. Maybe by the time Jessica arrived, she would feel better, and she *had* been looking forward to it. She fingered her bracelet. Maybe it *was* just that association.

“That’s right, I was going to give you some money for shopping.” Her mom stood.

Daphne looked at her, surprised. They were not poor, exactly, but it was an unspoken agreement that as a senior in high school, she was old enough to pay for things that weren’t essential, although she’d quit her fast-food job in June without a replacement.

“You don’t have to do that,” Daphne said honestly. “I wasn’t really planning on buying anything—Jessica’s the one who wanted to go shopping.”

“Nonsense!” her mother replied, regaining her comical cheeriness that contrasted with her daughter’s grimness. “It’s your half birthday!”

She disappeared and a minute later returned with a magenta pocketbook, thrusting a few twenties into her daughter's hand.

"Thanks, Mom."

Her mom smiled. "Spend it well."

MADAM MOON

“I love that store, it’s so *cute*.”

Jessica exited the boutique behind Daphne, peering with satisfaction into the tiny plastic bag that held her newest purchase. “This card is *so* perfect for my brother’s birthday.”

“You can’t go wrong with barfing unicorns,” Daphne answered drily.

“He’ll find it funny,” Jessica said, turquoise earrings jangling happily as she tucked the bag into her large purse, to join several new shirts and a necklace. They set off down the sidewalk.

“Do you want to go anywhere else?” Daphne asked, admitting to herself she hoped the answer would be no. Shopping exhausted her at the best of times, especially after nearly two hours of it. In contrast, Jessica, a heavysset Hispanic girl with a pretty face and elegant clothes, never ran out of energy. Though Daphne was trying her best to act normally, the strange mood that had come over her since the woods had returned with a vengeance after lunch. She wanted nothing more than to hole up in her bedroom.

“Mmmm...” Jessica said thoughtfully, glancing at windows as they walked aimlessly past the downtown storefronts. Daphne spotted the colorful-looking bakery where her mom had gotten the half-birthday cupcake and felt an urge to check and see if they really did sell gift-wrapped toilet paper.

“Do you want to get coffee?” her friend suggested as they passed two elderly women chatting over tea at an outdoor table.

“I don’t really drink coffee.” Drinking anything more caffeinated than black tea was like injecting her dreams with steroids; they became more vivid, strange, and frightening. However, Daphne had never shared the extent of her nightmare problem with friends—it felt too private. She had briefly confided in Jessica about her most recent one but suspected her friend didn’t grasp how much it affected her.

“Oh, right...Tea then?”

“That’s okay. You can get a latte or something if you want,” Daphne suggested. She did not want to ruin Jessica’s fun, but it was taking all her energy to appear at least no more serious than usual. Daphne was also mindful of the fact that a cupcake had been her breakfast and did not want to splurge on a sugary drink either.

“That’s okay, I don’t really want anything,” Jessica said cheerfully.

They bypassed the coffee shop and, at Daphne’s suggestion, dipped briefly into her favorite used bookstore. With a twenty still unspent in her pocket, she agonized over a few novels but decided against them and placed them back on a tipsy stack.

Her mood sank lower. Daphne impatiently fought against it and hoped Jessica didn’t notice how quiet she had become. She felt bad, given this was the first time in weeks she’d been able to hang out with her best friend outside of school, just the

two of them. They only shared lunch at school, and even then Jessica's attention was usually divided.

Lost in thought, Daphne opened the door to exit the shop and almost ran into a passerby on the sidewalk.

"Oh—sorry," she said, and looked up to empty air.

There was no one else nearby. Daphne glanced around, perplexed. Hadn't she almost collided with someone—?

"Jessica, did you see—" Turning, she saw Jessica was making her way across the street, evidently distracted by the dresses displayed in the bridal shop on the opposite corner.

"Daphne, look at the green one, isn't it amazing?" Jessica said at Daphne's approach, gazing with longing at a glittering dress on the headless mannequin. "I want to get a new dress for prom."

"Too bad it's only September; you'd have to wait to wear it." Daphne looked over her shoulder again, even though the passerby would be long gone.

"Do you think I'm getting thinner?" Jessica's voice had lost some of its cheeriness. She was frowning darkly at her reflection in the shop window.

"You look really good," Daphne said with what she hoped was supportive-sounding honesty, uncertain what to say that would not make her friend feel worse. "Have you been doing your workout thing?"

"A few times. I only did once this week, though," Jessica admitted.

"That's okay," Daphne said, keeping her voice encouraging. "I mean, I don't really exercise at all."

"You're thin, though."

Daphne shrugged. The cupcake weighed uncomfortably in her stomach. "I mean, it's not like you're obese or anything, and you're really stylish." Truthfully, Jessica possessed a glamour Daphne wished she could imitate.

It was Jessica's turn to shrug.

"So, do you know any other shops around here?" Daphne said. In her concern for getting Jessica's mind off the subject, she had momentarily forgotten her wish to quit shopping.

"What about that place?" Jessica said, after a quick scan of their surroundings. "That looks like some kind of shop?" She pointed down the side street at a sign hanging past the bridal store with an illustration of a sleeping crescent moon next to the words "Madam Moon" in scrawled cursive.

They walked to it and paused underneath the gently swaying sign. A glass door was wedged inconspicuously into the brick with a neon sign that said, "Palm, Crystal, Tarot."

"Ooh, a psychic?" Jessica said curiously. "I've never been to one. We should try it."

Daphne looked at her, alarmed. That had been the opposite reaction to her own. "I don't think—"

"You know what?" her friend continued, warming up, not hearing. The gloom from a minute ago had vanished. "We should get a reading! I've always wanted to see what it was like, but my mom would never let me."

"I think it's all fake, though," Daphne said nervously. Others likely wouldn't hesitate, but seeing a psychic wasn't something her own mom would be impressed with. Once her friend had an idea, though, it was difficult to talk her out of it.

"You don't have to take it seriously. It would just be for fun!" Jessica was growing more enthusiastic by the second. Daphne glanced at the glass door, which advertised the rate.

"It's twenty dollars for a fifteen-minute reading! On special," she added, with greater alarm. Jessica would have to see now how ridiculous the idea was. "That's kind of expensive."

"Use your half-birthday money!" Jessica said with an air of

it being the obvious solution. “You still have money from your mom, right?”

“Yeah, but—”

“So just use that!”

Daphne paused, wishing she had bought a book after all, then had an idea. “Why don’t you just go and I’ll wait outside?”

“Oh.” Jessica glanced at the door with the first hint of fear. There was a long pause. “I don’t want to go in by myself,” she admitted in a low voice.

Daphne refrained from rolling her eyes. “Okay, I’ll go *in* with you, but I won’t get a reading.”

“All right...” But Jessica looked even more frightened. She was faltering.

Indecision built up in Daphne’s chest as she weighed her options. She knew Jessica meant to get a reading, and by the laws of friendship, she could not leave her best friend to do it alone. True, she could probably convince her to abandon the idea altogether, but doing so would mean ending their outing on a sour note. At the same time, Daphne did not want to waste money on something she did not believe in.

Feeling dread at the idea, and though she didn’t want to give in—

“Fine, I’ll do it with you,” she relented.

Jessica beamed, all fear vanishing in an instant. It was much easier to be brave with a friend.

A tiny bell jingled as they opened the door. Jessica went first, and she followed close behind. Daphne’s nose was immediately hit by a strange scent. She suppressed the urge to cough and glanced around.

Her first impression was of a cluttered living room crossed with a pawn shop. In the middle of the small room, two mismatched couches were arranged adjacent to each other around an antique wooden coffee table. It was far less gloomy

than Daphne expected: an overhead fluorescent light brightly lit the burgundy walls. Near the left wall, a long glass case was packed with a strange assortment of small figurines and jewelry. On the opposite end, a grandfather clock ticked next to several tall bookcases stuffed full of books, an ancient CD player, and several glittering geodes.

“Where—” Jessica had just begun to say, when a woman in her sixties walked through a dark curtain that acted as a door in the back corner near the couches. Daphne thought she recognized the psychic’s taste reflected in the living room decoration. She wore a billowy paisley-patterned cardigan, short black pants, and Velcro sandals. Her curly hair just covered her ears and was dyed the color of red wine. A glittering purple rock wound lightly with string hung over her loose shirt.

“Good afternoon,” the woman said in a somewhat stately tone as she stopped before them. Her voice, Daphne noticed, was mildly husky, like a smoker’s. It added to the mystic atmosphere.

“Hi!” Jessica replied breathlessly. Daphne thought her enthusiastic greeting was enough for the both of them and said nothing. “Are you Madam Moon?”

“You may call me Claire,” the psychic said regally. She had a gaudy type of elegance, Daphne observed, but it suited her. “How may I help you today?”

“We both wanted to do a reading,” Jessica said, with a hasty side glance at Daphne. “The fifteen-minute one.”

“Of course. Which one of you girls would like to go first?”

The psychic’s dark eyes slid inquiringly from Jessica, full of suppressed excitement, to Daphne, who stared back impassively. The keen glance jolted her. *She knows*, was Daphne’s first thought. Somehow, the woman could tell Daphne didn’t want to be there at all. The eye contact lasted barely a few seconds, however, before Jessica spoke up.

“I’ll go, I think.”

Claire’s eyes moved belatedly to Jessica. Daphne felt as if she’d been released.

“Follow me to the back,” the psychic said, and turned and disappeared through the curtain. Jessica followed her and paused briefly to smile nervously at Daphne before following the psychic behind the sheet.

Daphne watched the curtain fall into place before settling onto the one couch that wasn’t an ugly floral. There were no magazines on the coffee table, and her phone was almost dead. Therefore, with nothing to do, Daphne took to staring at the room around her from her safe position on the couch.

Madam Moon’s also doubled as a shop—she spotted price stickers on glittering geodes (there seemed to be plenty of rocks) and CDs of music for meditation. The glass case turned out to be mostly full of jewelry. Daphne itched to smell a few of the incense sticks in the display on top of the case, but her desire to have as little as possible to do with all of it was more powerful than her curiosity over which stick smelled the worst.

With each passing minute the clock ticked by, her regret increased. After all, Jessica had only wanted both of them to get a reading because she had been afraid to enter the studio alone. When her friend came out, all Daphne had to do was say she’d changed her mind. A little rude, perhaps, but with luck she’d never see the strange woman again.

The fifteen minutes finally passed. Jessica reentered the room first, her excited smile showing the session had met every expectation. No doubt Daphne would get a full account later. A burst of nerves flashed through her stomach as she stood up. This was it. She’d just have to say she’d decided against it.

“Your turn!” Jessica said cheerily, bouncing toward her.

“Actually—” Daphne began.

“C’mon, Daphne,” Jessica said, giving her a little push. “It’s your turn! No backsies!”

The psychic stood in front of the curtain, waiting without expression and yet imposing. Daphne’s resolve collapsed.

“O-Okay.”

Daphne walked reluctantly toward Claire, who pushed aside the curtain to allow her to go through first. They were now standing in a small, dark hallway leading off to several rooms. One of them, Daphne could see through the half-closed door, was a cluttered office with an overflowing desk.

Claire led the way into an open room, pushing aside strings of red beads. Daphne hovered in the doorway.

This room was far neater than the others and less perfumed, softly lit with floor lamps. The walls were also painted a dark red, like the rest of the studio, but covered in shadows and decorated simply with a gilded, slightly tarnished oval mirror. A house plant stood in one corner, and another was occupied by an ornate white shelf displaying porcelain angels, a cheap box of tissues, and a small wooden box arranged with dried flowers.

“Have a seat,” Claire said, gesturing to the round table covered with a deep blue tablecloth sparkling with silver crescent moons and stars. Electric candles were arranged in the center with a handful of polished stones.

Daphne obeyed silently. The strange reality of what she was doing had suppressed her ability to speak, as well as the irrational thought that the less she said, the less she was a part of it. She wished fervently the session would be over with quickly.

The psychic settled down on the opposite side of the table with a businesslike air and grabbed the pad of paper off the table, pen poised. Daphne stiffened.

“So tell me, what is your name?” the psychic said conversationally, looking down at her paper.

Daphne answered. Underneath the table, she clasped her hands tightly. Claire made a note.

“And what is your age?”

“Seventeen and a half,” Daphne mumbled, then winced at the specificity, brought on by a brief vision of that morning’s cupcake. Claire scribbled *seventeen* on the pad. Daphne glanced at it warily, wondering, as she had with her mother, where these questions would take her.

“So you attend Long Haven High School?” the psychic inquired further.

“Yes.” Daphne shifted in her chair. She was determined to be polite, whatever her reservations about the session, but the questions were making her nervous, like an oral exam she would know soon whether she had passed or failed. The woman gave off the impression of a strict schoolteacher. “I’m a senior,” Daphne added reluctantly, feeling she might as well give the psychic something to work with and move the session along.

“I see, so you are applying to colleges?” the psychic said, looking up for the first time. Her eyes were very dark.

“Yes.”

“UVA? Or somewhere else?”

“I’m starting out at the college here, to get my associate’s degree first,” said Daphne impatiently. Was the psychic simply going to keep asking her questions? She waited with resignation for the rest of the trifecta of college small talk, as she termed it: what her intended major was, and what exactly she planned on doing with it after graduating. Did all psychics work like this?

Claire didn’t bother to make a note, folding her hands together with the pen. A cloudy moonstone glistened on one of her rings. “That’s a wise decision.”

Daphne made the barest nod.

“So tell me, is there anything you would like to focus on in our session, or know?”

“I...don’t know. No, I guess.” The woman must be growing impatient too, Daphne thought. Surely the psychic had sensed by her brief responses how little she wanted to be here.

Claire peered at Daphne impassively, like the owl had in the woods. It took all of Daphne’s effort not to squirm under the gaze as the psychic seemed to study her for signs of deceit. She stared back, determined not to speak first. She could just hear the ticking of the grandfather clock in the other room.

“Has anything been bothering you?” Claire asked in the silence, her voice soft.

Daphne didn’t immediately know what to make of this question. There were any number of things that could bother a person, and this was not a therapy session, after all. Intensely, she wished again she could be anywhere, anywhere else. “Not anything major, I guess,” she began carefully. “I mean, I have a French test on Monday I haven’t studied for, but I don’t think—that’s not really...”

She trailed off, squirming inwardly again, and instead began to study a tiny rip in one of the glittering moons on the cheap tablecloth, twisting the silver bracelet around her wrist underneath the table.

“I see,” the psychic said, then leaned slightly forward, as if she hadn’t heard what she wanted and was determined to do so. “And what about your dreams?”

Daphne looked up instinctively, like a confession. “My dreams?” she said quickly. The sound of crashing metal echoed in her memory. She was not going to tell the psychic about her nightmares. No psychic was going to give her a contrived meaning for her latest dream when it was meaningless.

“Is there a dream you would like to talk about?” the psychic persisted. “Or several?”

Daphne did not know how to answer, but she stared at a star so intently, it was likely to burn with new life.

“Or not dreams, but, perhaps...nightmares?” Claire prodded.

She looked up again, her heart beginning to beat faster. “I... don’t have nightmares,” she lied on impulse, yet she was not sure what she feared. No doubt it was a routine question. Maybe the psychic just liked to interpret dreams. There was nothing to suggest—

The psychic leaned even closer, staring intently at her face as if she knew it was a lie. “Not any? Not even one?”

Daphne stared. Something was off. Why was the psychic acting like she knew the answer? Had Jessica mentioned something about her nightmares, and this woman was taking advantage of that? And was this even how sessions usually went? She had pictured tarot cards, or a palm reading at the very least. *Your heart line shows a concerning lack of romance.*

“Maybe there’s one nightmare you keep having,” Claire said. It didn’t sound like a question. One of the old lamps flickered briefly, casting a shadow across her face. Daphne felt frozen, a fear she didn’t quite comprehend spreading across her heart. The air between them stiffened.

“Perhaps,” the psychic said in the stillness, “in this dream, you see a young woman, and a crashing car.”

Immediately, Daphne’s fear vanished. Understanding hit her heart like a dull blow. She felt angry, mostly at herself. The woman had obviously done her research during Jessica’s session. Daphne shouldn’t have done the session at all. Did the psychic really think she was so easy to fool?

“Jessica told you about that,” Daphne said, keeping her

voice neutral. But instead of looking defensive, Claire's face softened in satisfaction, and something like relief.

"No," she said simply, leaning back as if her interrogation was over. "She didn't need to. When I saw you, I suspected you were like me," Claire explained, looking at Daphne intently, "but it seems you don't know it."

Daphne stared, not having the slightest idea what the old woman was talking about. What did Claire mean, she was like her? What didn't she know?

"I...I'm not a psychic," she said, as if she were reasoning with a madwoman. Which, honestly, she couldn't be sure Claire wasn't.

"True, but that's not what I meant," the psychic said. "Have you ever wondered about your nightmares? Why you have them?"

"I don't...I just have them," Daphne said, overcome by the urge to leave as quickly as possible. "And I—I have somewhere I need to get to, sorry."

She stood up and walked out of the room. Claire followed. Despite herself, Daphne stopped, not looking at the psychic's face.

"When you have seen enough," Claire said quietly in the darkened hallway, "come find me."

Daphne didn't respond but walked away as fast as she could. Entering through the curtain to the main, well-lit room felt like emerging from a dark cave into sunlight. She tried to return Jessica's smile, who had glanced up from her phone upon their entrance.

"Finished already?" she asked, standing up.

"Yeah," Daphne answered, trying to sound normal but aware of Claire's gaze on her back.

"Well, thank you!" Jessica said brightly to the psychic, rummaging in her purse for a twenty. "This was fun!"

Daphne dug into her own pocket and handed her money to Jessica as she passed, then walked to the glass door and waited, feigning interest in the incense sticks.

Jessica joined her. "Bye!" her friend said with a small wave, and walked past Daphne through the open door.

"Goodbye, girls," answered Claire solemnly.

Daphne turned to follow Jessica, but while stepping over the doorframe, she felt the urge to look back. The psychic was still standing where they had left her, watching them go.

For a moment, their eyes met, dark irises boring into pale. Then Daphne closed the door behind her with a jingle, severing the connection.

GLOOM

Her feet flew over ash-colored leaves and mangled tree roots, drawing her farther into the dark. The sky was an eerie red above the spidery tree limbs. Shapeless bodies of mist shuffled out of the way as Daphne tore her way through the endless woods, but she could spare no thought for them, nor the stitch splitting a chasm in her side. Distraction, any slack in her breakneck pace, meant death.

Still, she was not fast enough. At the edge of her awareness, Daphne could sense the presence of the unseen creature that pursued her. It would surely catch up soon. She could not outrun it forever.

Her feet navigated the maze of tree roots and pockmarked trees the texture of black chalk that she dared not touch. The only sound was her heavy breathing and the sound of footfalls crushing leaves into dust as she ran in the dim light. A half-fallen tree appeared suddenly in her path.

Daphne registered it just in time and fell backward to avoid it. Her feet skidded across the ashy ground. Footfalls rippled in

the distance, but she did not immediately get up, entranced by the sight before her.

A giant white owl half her height was perched on the fallen tree. Its deep black eyes were each the size of two fists, staring soulfully at her sprawled figure. There was still hope.

“Help me!” Daphne wheezed, pressing a hand against the roaring stitch.

The ground tremored. Desperation seared through her, for help, for air that was not pale and still. The owl had not moved to help, only stared, beautiful and terrible.

It was also crying. Black liquid ran like congealed ink down the owl’s brown-flecked feathers in a growing stream. The substance was not tears, Daphne realized in a sickening flash. The owl’s eyes were melting, leaving behind two gaping pits.

Out of one came a small, thick black spider.

Daphne scrambled away in revulsion, unable to tell whether the tremor came from the ground or her own body. The spider scuttled along the edge of the hole, then climbed down the owl’s feathers and across its claws before vanishing into the darkness of the fallen tree.

To her horror, another spider emerged from the depths of the giant owl, then another. They came from the deep, moving with military precision to the ground. She made out a line steadily making its way across the gray leaves. Making its way toward her.

Daphne unfroze herself and scrambled to her feet, backing away into a tree.

Its roots sprang to life. Like snakes, they curled around her body, her hands. Daphne screamed and wriggled uselessly against their chalky iron grip.

The spiders poured from the eyes of the owl, crawling all over its stained feathers. She looked down and cried out at the

sight of the first spider as it reached her, as it climbed up over her shoe. Another followed.

Daphne jerked harder than ever but could not move. The roots bound her in place. Her breaths were as short as they had been when she'd been running. Around her, the woods and red sky seemed to close in.

At the first whisper of legs on her neck, Daphne clamped her lips so tightly she almost gagged and screamed silently under the darkness of her eyelids. Spiders were swarming over her neck, her cheek, her mouth. Daphne suppressed a sob. She was covered with spiders, a thousand tiny legs.

A solitary spider found its way into her nose, and Daphne could not help it—she opened her mouth and screamed, a spine-shattering shriek that would surely alert the creature she'd been dodging. The earth beneath her feet shook with heavy footfalls—

Daphne dumped her backpack into the locker and yawned.

Around her, students shuffled with a fatigue that plainly meant it was Monday morning, chatting in groups or lingering alone outside classrooms for the first bell. She spotted Jessica down the hallway, chatting animatedly with Veronica, and grimaced. Gathering her books, Daphne slammed the door shut and steeled herself to approach.

Though she considered Jessica her best friend, Veronica was different altogether—a pretty fellow senior Daphne had only known by sight before Jessica brought her to sit at their lunch table. It hadn't taken long to dislike her, both for the way she dominated Jessica's attention and the group conversation, and her overall cattiness. More often than not, Daphne was silent for most of lunch, forced to listen to Veronica gossip about everything.

It would have been okay, Daphne thought, except for the fact that she and Jessica shared no other class period. Now the only time she was able to spend with her friend without Veronica around was outside of school. That had been the main reason why she had looked forward to Saturday's shopping so much.

"Hey," Daphne said once she'd reached them. Jessica was in the middle of a story.

"She took the card, and I can't remember what it said, but then she was like—"

Too late, Daphne realized her friend was recounting their visit to the psychic on Saturday. She cringed at the thought of sharing any greater details from her own session, especially with Veronica, who would no doubt probe her to death. They were not enemies, exactly, but definitely not friends.

"Hey, Daph—you remember what I said the card said?"

"Something about love?"

"No, that was the other one. Whatever, doesn't matter—so then she asked me if I preferred small dogs or large dogs, and I said—"

Daphne let her attention wander, having heard most of the story on the car ride home. Even from the slanted way her friend had told the story, her impression was that Jessica had done most of the work. She had managed so far to avoid talking in detail about her own session, disturbed by the memory of the psychic's penetrating stare as she recounted the details of a nightmare that came almost every night.

Though Daphne knew psychics had methods of cold-reading their clients, she hadn't asked Jessica anything about the dreams. The likely explanation was Jessica had somehow been prompted to let slip a few details. The psychic had then used that information for dramatic effect.

Although Jessica hadn't been paying too close attention at

the time, Daphne had shared with her at least a little about this latest nightmare. However, most of her friends over the years were never even aware she had bad dreams, that they were the reason she had shunned their childhood sleepovers.

Of course, she could have just asked Jessica for an explanation on the ride home, but that would invite questions into what had happened in those long minutes Daphne had squirmed on the cushioned chair. If anything, Jessica's story of her session only highlighted all the strange things about Daphne's. Claire, from the sound of it, had asked Jessica a bunch of questions and then essentially made up a story with the information. What had Claire asked her? Her name, age, education, and then about her dreams—but as if she'd already known the answer.

"So, do you really think I'll end up living in Connecticut with a Pekingese?" Jessica finished. Daphne wrenched her attention back to the conversation.

"I could see you with a Pekingese," Veronica said thoughtfully. "What about you, Daphne? What dog did *you* get?" It sounded condescending but also friendly enough to make someone doubt it wasn't just a simple question.

"I'm more of a cat person," she said evasively, bracing herself for more questions.

"So what kind of *cat* would you get?"

"I don't know. A black one," she said, thinking of *Mystique*.

"Wait, V, isn't that him?"

"That's him," Veronica said, and flipped her long, highlighted hair over a shoulder. A classmate with dusty brown hair swept in waves off his forehead walked past them, silently following a group of boys Daphne recognized as part of the cross-country team.

"I was right, he *is* in Euro with me," Jessica noted. She was in the nonadvanced version of the class, while Daphne and

Veronica shared an AP class. They watched silently as he disappeared down the hall. “Aw, he’s *cute*.” She nudged her shoulder.

Veronica giggled. “Shut up.”

Though she agreed with Jessica, Daphne noted that Veronica’s crush hadn’t looked all that happy. She suppressed another yawn as the first bell rang.

“...with the Protestant Reformation came social changes...”

The lecture floated around Daphne’s ears and dissolved into the hazy background. Pens wiggled over notebooks, writing down important facts, but her mind had drifted. Instead of listening, she doodled underneath last week’s detailed notes on European history.

“The German princes helped Martin Luther because they could better control the church if it was Protestant, and they also didn’t like Charles the Fifth telling them what to do,” intoned Mr. Burnes, a young and rather skinny teacher with dark sideburns that stretched halfway down his cheek, “which leads us to another important date you’ll need to know for the AP test...”

Daphne scribbled down 1517 and returned to filling in the iris of the eye she was intricately sketching.

The rest of the class, comprising mostly juniors, except for a handful of seniors like Daphne, jotted down notes on the Diet of Worms. Luckily, her middle spot was out of direct sight from where Mr. Burnes was standing. She wondered if he knew students called him “Mr. Sideburns.”

Daphne saw Ashley Zhang was also doodling over her notebook in the front row. Ashley was good at faces...

“So, like, *why* didn’t Luther like the revolt?” said a voice

from the right wall. Daphne didn't have to look over to know it was Veronica's.

"I'm getting to that," Mr. Burnes said, somewhat testily. He hated to be interrupted. "Luther's goal was *religious* reform, not social. Although he was *against* peasants' suppression by the ruling class and *condemned* the massacre, he saw the peasants' revolt as an act of evil."

"Oh," Veronica said.

Thomas Blakely had thought Long Haven was "evil," Daphne thought, gazing unseeingly at a classmate's scribbling pen.

"So, as I was saying, the peasants felt betrayed by Luther..."
Boring, maybe, but not evil...

"...turned to Anabaptism, which was..."

She was drifting...

"Daphne? What are you doing?"

The words didn't register. Daphne had leapt noisily out of her seat, heart thumping. She was standing in the middle of the classroom. There had been—and then there wasn't—

"Daphne," Mr. Burnes said again, in a stiffer tone.

All at once she felt the heat of twenty-three pairs of eyes. Daphne glanced around briefly at the staring class and fought to find a way to break the silence, which was swelling—

"I-I thought I saw—" She cast around wildly and landed on last night's dream. "A spider. There." She pointed at a random spot on the floor. The girl next to the spot peered over in alarm, inspecting the area. A boy in the back laughed.

Daphne looked at Mr. Burnes, who was frowning, but she could tell by his offended air that he was not going to respond.

"Sorry," she said, heat touching her normally pale face, and sat down with as much dignity as she could, keenly aware of the class's amused smirks. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw

Veronica lean back and whisper something behind her hand to the girl sitting by her. They both giggled quietly. A hot surge of anger flared inside her at the sight. Ashley Zhang was still drawing.

“Okay. Let’s continue,” Mr. Burnes drawled pointedly, with a final look at Daphne, but he had evidently decided to let the matter drop. “So, the Münster Rebellion of 1534 you won’t need to know—”

Gradually the awkwardness of the moment settled underneath the steady drone of Mr. Burnes’s voice. Daphne, however, could no longer pretend to take in the lecture. The shock of what had happened now filled every particle of her mind. Of what she had seen.

Someone had been standing over her desk. Then they’d disappeared.

Daphne thought back, trying to remember even as the image faded, and maybe her sanity as well. While drifting off, she had noticed a person standing next to her, looked up in confusion, and—nothing. It had happened too quickly to tell what the person looked like.

Had she been dreaming? It was possible, but she had been daydreaming, not sleeping. There was the fact, too, that no matter how realistic her dreams seemed, upon waking she could always separate them in her mind. Real or dream. The figure had not felt like a dream. It had been *there*.

She tapped her pencil eraser on her notebook. Panic was spreading through her veins like frost, not helped by the exhaustion from the night before. It had not been the first time someone disappeared in front of her—there had been the man she’d almost run into outside the bookstore. Though she had written that off, what if she was starting to hallucinate? Then her mom *would* take her to get treated, for if Daphne was seeing things, that was more concerning than a few nightmares—

When you have seen enough, come find me.

Out of her harried thoughts, the psychic's words floated to the surface. Daphne almost tossed them away. Then, to her own surprise, she stopped.

Whether it was a hallucination or something else, *someone* had been standing over her desk. Yet Daphne recoiled at the thought of telling her story to a doctor. She did not want to be proven insane. The psychic would at least be an alternative, but Daphne didn't want to take this lead.

A large part of her felt her initial opinion of Claire had been right—she was a fraud who'd heard the details of the dream from Jessica, and the rest was just theatrics.

But a hidden doubt came to the surface: why would the psychic take it so far, and ask Daphne to come back? To spook her into paying for more sessions? It didn't make sense. She hadn't done the same to Jessica, who was the more likely target to become a repeat client.

No. If there was the slightest chance there was someone out there in whom Daphne could confide, who could offer an explanation other than insanity, she had to take it, no matter how little she liked it.

With a calming sense of purpose, Daphne refocused her attention to catch the rest of the lesson, but she felt again the sensation of being watched. She turned her head—Ashley was frowning at her. But the moment their eyes met, Ashley quickly looked away.

PERCEPTION

Shortly after school, Daphne found herself standing underneath a sign with a sleeping, cratered quarter moon and looking at a door she had never thought to enter again.

Despite her feverish plan of the last two hours, Daphne had no idea what to expect beyond this point, or what she would say to Claire. But she had at least determined she was not going to hand over any money, as a test of the psychic's honesty: if Claire asked for payment, Daphne would know it was an act once and for all, and she could still get home before her mom came home from work at the public library.

Just get it over with, Daphne thought, steeling herself. She pushed down on the tarnished gold handle and walked into the room to the jingle of bells. Immediately, her nose was assaulted by that strange, heavy scent, which, nervous as she was, felt suffocating. But she was relieved to find the room empty. There was time to think, or to abandon the plan altogether.

An imagined conversation played out in her mind as she walked to the dark curtain separating the main room from the hallway. Maybe Claire was in her office, or with a client? She

gingerly pushed aside the curtain and looked into the gloom. Voices came from the session room, and Daphne hastily withdrew her hand and returned to the couch.

When the grandfather clock had ticked away a full minute, Daphne, unable to sit still, stood up and wandered to the display case. She stole a quick glance at the curtain, then removed a heather-scented incense stick from its cardboard cup and sniffed it. Recoiling at the pungent scent, Daphne returned it to its cup and sat back on the couch.

Several more minutes passed, and with every tick of the clock, her doubt increased. Was she so sure it hadn't been a dream? And Claire wasn't just playing her? Maybe—

“Hello, Daphne.”

Daphne started violently and sprang to her feet. Claire had silently appeared through the curtain, today wearing a shawl with the same glittering amethyst necklace as before, a bill in her hand. She was followed by a tall, unshaven man with flyaway blond hair and overlarge eyes. Daphne took in this scene silently, struck anew by the sharpness of the psychic's gaze, which x-rayed her inquiringly.

“Until next time,” Claire said to the man, who nodded and walked trancelike to the entrance, then disappeared with a violent jingle of the bells, without so much as a glance at Daphne. The door shut.

Daphne's stomach writhed in the expectant silence. Every word from her imagined conversation flew from her mind, but before her mouth had opened a millimeter, Claire spoke first.

“Follow me,” she said, and walked back through the curtain again.

For a second, Daphne paused indecisively, watching the swaying curtain, but then she followed Claire into the hallway. Claire held aside the red strings of beads over the opening to the room where she did readings.

“Have a seat. I’ll be with you in a moment.”

Daphne nodded once, still unsure what to say, and ducked through the created opening. The beads swung back and forth as the psychic released them and retreated into her office. Daphne settled herself in the same cushioned chair as her previous visit and glanced around with a strange sense of unreality. The fake candle flickered. In the dim, lamplit room, it could have been any time of day.

A deck of mystical-looking cards sat neatly on the table, having evidently been used in Claire’s last session. What had Jessica’s cards been? One had been about love, or relationships. How that had led to owning a Pekingese in Connecticut, Daphne could not remember.

Curiosity tugged at her, and she lifted a corner of the top card, but Claire’s footsteps sounded in the hall. Daphne hastily dropped her hands to her lap. The psychic emerged through the clinking beads, holding a folded piece of paper and something else clenched in her fist.

“I believe this is yours,” she said with a smile, pushing a bill across the glittering tablecloth as she settled into the opposite chair. Daphne reached for it automatically and then paused, blinking down at the twenty with bemusement.

“I—thank you,” she said, heat touching her face, and put the money away in her pocket as Claire settled into the chair opposite. Despite her embarrassment, Daphne could not help but recognize the significance of the gesture. Not only was Claire not demanding any payment, but she had refunded the money from Daphne’s last session. Was this a sign of trust, or manipulation? Already the visit was going nothing like her imaginings. Claire didn’t respond but folded her ring-clad fingers on the table with an air of polite expectation.

Daphne untied her tongue.

“Last time,” she began slowly, speaking to a silver moon on

the tablecloth instead of addressing the psychic, “you told me I should see you again when I had seen...enough.”

“Yes,” Claire said with an encouraging nod.

“I—” Daphne stopped. It was more difficult than she’d expected to describe what had happened, but there was no turning back now. She twisted the silver bracelet on her wrist, her gaze now fixed on the plant in the opposite corner. “I was daydreaming in one of my classes, and then I saw...” Daphne closed her eyes, trying to recall what the figure had looked like. “Someone was standing by my desk, and I looked up, but then they weren’t...they weren’t there,” she finished lamely.

“I see,” Claire said. Daphne glanced up. There was nothing there to suggest she was moved at all by this story.

“I mean, I know I could have been dreaming,” Daphne added hastily, hoping to establish herself as someone with some semblance of sanity, if only to herself. The memory of it was almost like a dream, and yet heat touched her cheeks again at the more vivid one of jumping out of her seat, and Veronica’s smirk. Now she had told her story, yet the psychic appeared to be expecting something more.

“Do you think you were dreaming?” Claire asked quietly.

“I...” She considered carefully. “No. I know the difference, and this felt...real.” Daphne felt something in herself resolve, provoked by Claire’s silent gaze. A desire to understand—once and for all.

“Last time, you told me I was like you, but I didn’t know it,” she said, looking directly into the dark eyes of the psychic, which were a direct contrast to Daphne’s own pale gray ones. “What did you mean?”

To Daphne’s surprise, Claire closed her eyes and gave a small sigh, as if resigning herself to an unpleasant task. Then she nodded shortly and stood up straighter, businesslike.

“Last week when you were here,” the psychic began, “I asked whether you had nightmares. Do you?”

“Yes,” Daphne confirmed, deciding to be entirely honest, “but what does that have to do with—”

“Do you ever wonder why?”

It was the second time Claire had asked the question, but Daphne still felt taken aback. What did her nightmares have to do with what she saw in class?

“No. I mean, I’ve had them ever since I could remember, but most of them aren’t—they don’t make any sense.” Briefly, she felt the whisper of a thousand tiny legs on her arms.

“You were upset when I mentioned the dream with the car crash,” Claire said. Daphne squirmed, mildly ashamed. “A dream, I assume, that you have every night.”

The sound of shattering glass seemed to echo through the room. “How do you know about that nightmare?” Daphne asked, afraid of the answer.

“Because,” Claire said shortly, “I have it too.”

Daphne blinked once. “What?”

The psychic smiled unexpectedly. “Yes, every night since August, that dream has been haunting my sleep as well.”

“But how—how can we have the same dream?” Daphne asked skeptically. She didn’t rule out the possibility the psychic was untruthful. This was, after all, technically her living.

As if guessing what she was thinking, Claire grabbed the paper off the table, which Daphne realized was actually two sheets folded together. “Perhaps I should show you this first.” She unfolded the sheets and handed one over. “It will help you begin to understand.”

Daphne took the paper with some hesitation but saw at first glance it was merely a newspaper article printed from the internet. The headline read, “18-Year-Old Woman Dies in Saturday

Car Accident.” It was dated to early August, nearly two months prior.

She glanced at Claire. “What is this?”

“Read it first, and you’ll know,” Claire responded with a nod at the paper, leaning comfortably back in her chair. Daphne turned her attention again to the article, not sure what to feel. So far there were more questions than answers.

Aware of the psychic’s gaze, Daphne forced herself to push her thoughts aside and concentrate on what she was reading. Phrases jumped off the page and swirled into a disorienting picture: *rural road south of Long Haven...rolled car...alcohol not a factor...extensive damage...pronounced dead on scene just after 4 a.m....*

The article led to an idea Daphne was not sure she could comprehend. “Are you trying to tell me,” she said, a sense of unreality descending again over her mind, “this is the car crash I’ve been dreaming about?”

“Yes,” Claire said simply.

“But how do you know?”

“Here, look at this one.”

Daphne took the next sheet, a follow-up article that announced the name of the victim and that she was a recent graduate of the high school. Daphne felt a shock through her skull at the photograph accompanying it.

“That’s...that’s...that’s the girl in my dream.” She looked up at Claire, numb.

Though she had never gotten a full look at the victim’s face, between the girl’s dark bob and sharp chin, the features were enough to match the picture. It was the girl from the nightmare.

“Yes,” Claire said, smiling sadly. “Heather Grey.”

Daphne looked at the picture again. Her mind felt blank, unable to think. She had seen this girl—Heather—die. Her final minutes had been repeated every night like a sick film for

Daphne to watch, helpless. She was real. The nightmare was real. The screams, the blood.

“How can she be real?” Daphne said, staring at the photograph. Heather was smiling shyly, a small gap between her front teeth. Her eyes were a striking hazel, rimmed with long, coated eyelashes. If her nightmare was real, Daphne thought, that meant the old comforting words were gone. It was no longer *just a dream*.

She looked up at Claire. “Why do I see her?”

The psychic leaned forward intently. “Because,” she said, “you can *perceive* what others cannot see.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about what you saw in class,” Claire said, sounding like an impatient tutor. “Pretend, for a moment, someone really was standing there. What do you remember?”

“I don’t know,” Daphne said, growing impatient herself. “I just saw someone. I already said.”

Claire was nodding. “Yes, and then that means...”

“Are you saying it was a ghost?” Daphne answered incredulously.

“A shade, as I call it,” Claire said calmly. “One that knew you could perceive it.”

There was silence. Daphne had sought out the psychic again for an answer, and this was it. Was it the right one? Claire had no motive to lie to her. It was possible the woman was crazy, except for the fact that evidence to the contrary was printed before her. Could it be real?

Daphne had been convinced getting an answer would bring relief, but she felt the opposite. “It was—You’re saying what I saw was—”

“A spirit.” Claire nodded.

“But if I can see spirits,” Daphne said, deciding to play along for the moment, “why did it vanish? I barely saw it.”

“My guess is you are still developing your perception. It seems only when your mind is relaxed and unguarded, like it was in class, are you able to let yourself perceive.”

“Let myself,” Daphne echoed.

“Perception is a strange thing,” Claire said. “Once you are aware of something, once you understand it, you can’t become ignorant again—except, perhaps, through an enormous amount of willpower. You have a logical mind, Daphne. It’s difficult for you to see what’s not there.”

Daphne ignored this accurate assessment of her character to say, “But I haven’t seen anything, not until now.” Even then, she realized it was not quite true. There had been small incidents over the past few weeks she’d dismissed, willed to be normal: vanishing passersby, the strange feeling of being watched in the woods sometimes.

She looked up and saw Claire watching her with a knowing look. “It seems you have, if you think about all the moments you’ve ever tried to explain away. I think you were beginning to perceive anyway, though I’m afraid I gave you a little push up the path. I told you there was something more to your nightmares. That was the trigger. After all, we don’t always see what’s right in front of us until someone points it out—then it’s impossible to stop.”

“And you can see—shades—too?”

“Yes. Everywhere, in fact.”

Daphne breathed deeply, choosing to avoid thinking about this for now. “But what does seeing shades have to do with my nightmares?”

“Like me, you are a perceiver, as I call it. Your mind is more perceptive, sensitive to the world around you, seen and unseen. Stronger dreams are a natural consequence of that,” Claire said.

“So that’s why I have nightmares,” Daphne said. The room

went out of focus as the implications of this hit. Her nightmares, which had haunted her nights since childhood. Her mom's earnest face as she suggested they go to the doctor. Her own refusal and her acceptance of what had always seemed a part of her. It wasn't the nightmares that had been natural. It had been her ability to perceive what went unseen by others.

Daphne waited to feel relief or satisfaction that she had been right not to seek treatment. But the explanation she'd just been given was far more complicated. And it meant there was a reason for her dreams after all.

She realized Claire was looking at her closely, and with a great will of effort, she focused.

"It's partially why. And I should add that most of your nightmares are likely meaningless," the psychic said.

Daphne glanced automatically at the small inset photo of Heather again. Her stomach twisted unpleasantly. "So it's like having a vision," she said. The smile was disconcerting, compared to her strong mental image of the girl hanging upside down, blood in her hair.

Don't think about that.

"But if it was real, then..." The deafening bang echoed in her memory again, Heather's shrill screams. "In my nightmare, something hit the car. Or did I just dream that up?"

"You mean, did she *actually* swerve to avoid hitting an animal?" Claire said wryly, with a nod at the article on the table. "I'm afraid not."

"Then what hit us—her?" Unlike Claire, Daphne could not yet disassociate herself from the dream. She felt almost as much a part of the scene as if she'd actually been there.

The psychic frowned in thought at a spot behind Daphne's shoulder, as if considering what to say. "There is an evil in this world," she began carefully, "an evil most people don't see, because they cannot see as we do. I wish the article were right,

and it was merely an animal Heather tried to avoid that night, but I'm afraid not. What attacked her was far worse and more dangerous than you or anyone will have ever encountered before."

Daphne stared with growing dread, sensing that whatever the psychic was about to reveal would change everything, more than it already had. She glanced at Heather's photo. *What did you come across that night?*

"The thing that hit her," Daphne said, recalling the blur of concentrated darkness that had been no bigger than a small animal yet had inspired so much fear. "It was small."

"Yes, but very strong, as you saw. And I know what it's called, and I'm well aware of what it is," Claire said, now brisk. "What attacked Heather is a spirit of sorts, called a dyszoon."

"Diss-zoon?" Daphne repeated, trying out the odd word on her tongue. "I've never heard of that before."

"No, they're not ever recognized, given they are mistaken for demons. For, like demons, they are strong and evil and even have the ability to possess."

"But what are they?"

"They were once human," Claire said, with a twist of her mouth.

"So they're shades?"

"No, shades are fundamentally good, though a shadow of their living selves, I should add. I suppose dyszoons could be considered to be a kind of spirit, but unlike the spirits you and I have seen—shades—they no longer retain any essence of their humanity. They are like lesser demons—much less powerful, but still entirely evil and very strong, especially when they are fully formed."

Daphne's mind whirled. "They used to be human? But how could they become those...things?"

Claire paused, seemingly to gather her thoughts, or perhaps she was merely used to providing dramatic effect.

“While they lived,” she began, “they were some of the most terrible human beings to walk the earth, committing atrocities and leading godless lives, so when they died, they were damned to the worst punishments in Hell, to be tortured in the flames for all eternity. However, not every soul can become a dyszoon,” Claire continued. “They are recruited based on the amount of evil already in them. Only the most evil would do. I’m sure those souls leapt at the chance to end their agony by exchanging it for what might be considered another, to become soulless entirely and the servants of an evil impossible to imagine.”

Daphne absorbed all this in a horrified trance. The woman’s voice seemed to have an ethereal quality, wrapping around them like smoke and forming unspoken visions in the haze. It was almost as though the psychic had transported them both into the depths of Hell, and Daphne could see the roaring flames and hear the agonized chorus of a multitude of damned souls: desperate, pleading for help.

She shuddered. “They’re recruited? By who? And they’re turned into those—dyszoons?” Daphne added. She could not imagine the process.

“I don’t know.”

“And by Hell, you mean...” She inclined her head meaningfully.

“An actual, literal Hell, yes.”

Daphne nodded once to show she understood. It wasn’t so much that she hadn’t believed there was a Hell—she’d spent her entire life attending a Protestant church—but she had never liked to think about it. It was easier not to.

“How are they changed?”

Daphne realized immediately she had triggered something

painful. Claire's face collapsed in on itself, as if a frame of memory, a ghost of a nightmare, had passed across her eyes, displaying some unseen horror.

"I'm sorry—You don't have to—"

"It's all right," Claire said, giving her head a little shake. Her wrinkles smoothed as the memory faded away. "Some things are better left unknown. I hope that nightmare never comes to haunt you."

Daphne was eager to move forward. "You said only the most terrible humans could become dyszoons. So, someone like Hitler would be a candidate?"

"Perhaps. I imagine dyszoons were those throughout history who fed off evil, were seduced by it and worshipped it, without redemption."

In the contemplative pause that followed, Daphne struggled to imagine what evils someone might have committed to be eligible to become a dyszoon. She was aware she possessed somewhat of a naïveté of the world. Intense grief over losing a parent might have matured her, made her grimmer and more serious than her peers, but that wasn't the same as being worldly, as knowing and experiencing just how terrible people could be to each other.

Claire pursed her lips. "I've met one already."

"You have?" Daphne said, startled out of her thoughts, which were struggling to comprehend the enormity of the information so far. "Where? Did you get rid of it?" Even as she said it, she struggled to imagine Claire, who had to be over sixty, fighting with a demon-like creature from Hell itself.

"Yes. The dyszoon that killed Heather didn't disappear after the accident. I had the nightmare of her for the first time that very night, as I'm sure you did too"—Daphne's memory confirmed the dream had started around that time—"and then I

sensed the dyszoon come out. I drove out to look for it straightaway.”

“And you found it?” Daphne said.

“I did. It was very weak from its attack on Heather. I’m sure in a few days, it would have dissipated on its own, back to Hell, but I couldn’t take the chance it wouldn’t harm anyone else. Even the weakest dyszoon still has some strength. Once I sensed it lurking in the woods and found it, I banished it.

“It put up a little struggle, of course,” Claire said casually, as if it were merely an annoying fly she had once swatted. “But all in all, it was easy to defeat. Luckily, it was very underformed, otherwise it would have been extremely difficult to get rid of, probably beyond my current ability.” She examined her long, fuchsia-colored nails as if remembering power flowing from her fingertips.

Something occurred to Daphne. “But the dyszoon—if it’s from Hell, it can’t have always been here. Someone else would’ve gotten hurt before Heather.”

“I’m glad you brought that up, for it brings me to the most important thing. Have you ever been out on the road where Heather died?”

“I don’t think so,” she said. “Besides the nightmare, anyway. It’s out of the way, isn’t it? I always take one of the main roads out of town.”

“Well, I don’t suppose you’d have been able to see it anyway,” Claire answered thoughtfully. “Maybe you could now.”

“Seen what?” Daphne was growing used to Claire’s roundabout way of getting to a point, but it was still irritating.

“A portal of sorts. A veil between Earth and Hell, through which the dyszoon could enter.”

Daphne stared blankly.

“I’ll explain. First, you should understand, it’s not easy for

evil entities to enter our world. They need a vessel of some sort, a point of entry. This is only possible with human help.”

“But why would anyone—”

“Because people mess with things they do not understand,” Claire said fiercely, though Daphne knew the anger was not directed toward her. “How many of your friends have played with Ouija boards? Most of the time, nothing happens, but maybe at some point, something strange and possibly evil can communicate. A dyszoon, in the right circumstance, could get through this point of entry that was created.”

“So someone used one, and it got through,” Daphne said, trying to follow along.

“No. The portal I’m talking about is different. The link is permanent, not brief,” Claire said. “It’s a kind of veil between our worlds. I don’t know how long it’s been there, or if there are others like it in other parts of the world, but there’s been a Veil in Long Haven as long as I have lived here, so at least nine years.”

“So this...Veil,” Daphne said, thinking hard. “If something like that has been open so long, how come no one else has been hurt? Or have they?”

“As far as I know, and I believe I *would* know, Heather was the first victim,” Claire said. “Since I’ve been here, the Veil *was* too small to let anything through. My purpose in moving up here from Florida was to watch it closely, but it never disappeared or changed in any way.”

“*Was* too small,” Daphne echoed. She was starting to see the edges of a bigger picture.

“Yes, you might have already guessed: it expanded in August, enough to let a dyszoon travel through and attack the first human who happened to be on that road.”

“So Heather’s death was an accident,” Daphne said, feeling angry at the injustice.

“She was in the wrong place at the wrong time, like many victims are,” Claire said with a sad smile.

“But why did it expand *now*? The Veil?”

“The only explanation is someone—someone who had our abilities, that is—deliberately widened it, at least for a moment, to let one get through. But who that person is, or why they did such a thing, we can only guess. There is evil at work in Long Haven.”

They sat in thoughtful silence as the grandfather clock in the other room began to faintly chime four. Once it was done, Daphne spoke.

“But if this portal thing is bigger, doesn’t it mean more dyszoons will come through?”

“Eventually, they will. The Veil widened, yes, but whoever did it has discovered the passageway is still too narrow and difficult for the creatures to get through. The dyszoon that *did* get across was probably already waiting just on the other side, but it had lost much of its strength.” An image flashed in Daphne’s mind of a long, cramped tunnel small creatures were slowly oozing through like worms, diminishing in form as they lost strength along the way.

“But why open it if it wouldn’t work anyway?” Daphne asked.

“Maybe it was only an experiment. Or maybe the Veil can only be widened a little at a time. I don’t know how to control it, or who has found out how to do so, but in the meantime,” Claire continued, “I think we can say no more dyszoons will get through until it is widened further—when *that* will be, I have my guess. If I’m right and someone *is* hoping to continue opening the Veil, then it means more dyszoons *will* come through.”

“Can’t you close it somehow?” Daphne said, feeling this would be the obvious solution.

“No,” Claire said. Daphne’s heart sank. “It’s impossible. A passageway like this, you would need to be connected to it through a blood sacrifice. They would need to do some kind of ritual.”

“So that’s how they widen the Veil too? Through blood rituals?” Daphne shuddered at the thought of what this would entail. The gleaming side of a knife flashed in her mind, followed by the pain of a deep cut and strange, guttural chanting underneath the full moon.

“Yes. But that’s not something I know how to perform—not that I would, in any case. It’s an act of evil, and there’s no guarantee that it would work.”

There was a long pause. Daphne blurted out the question hovering over their conversation, over every explanation. “How do you know all of this?”

“About dyszoons? Mostly through my nightmares,” Claire answered. “For shades, I’ve had almost a lifetime of experience.”

Daphne nodded, then glanced at the beaded doorway. Out there, beyond it, was a world she had navigated but never seen. She had come into this room searching for an explanation, and armed with it, she would venture out into a new world. One that was more complicated than she could have ever imagined. Her head felt heavy, but there was also a weight lifted. For despite it all, Daphne knew the explanation given was the right one. It was as if a knowledge she had long hidden away had revealed itself again.

“If you think whoever is doing this will try again to expand the Veil,” she said, staring at the gently swaying beads that separated them from the hallway, “then more dyszoons will come through.”

“I’m afraid so, and that is why I need your help, Daphne.”

Daphne looked at Claire quickly, but it was without

surprise. Claire could not be telling her all of this for her own sake. “You want me to fight the dyszoons,” she guessed.

“Yes,” Claire answered, and in her eyes was a strange depth. “It will not be easy, I confess. First, you will have to improve your perception, but that will come naturally.”

“But what can I do? You know a lot more than I do,” Daphne said, full of doubt. “I wouldn’t know how to fight these...things.”

“That’s something that can be remedied,” Claire said shortly. “Beginning to enter this world is difficult. But let me explain further: when you first walked into my studio, Daphne, somehow I thought there was the slightest chance you might be perceptive, so I decided to ask about your dreams, to tell for certain—not something you were comfortable with.”

Daphne smiled sheepishly.

“It was understandable. Perhaps I went about it the wrong way, but it was necessary to know for sure and confirm my hopes. I’ve been saddled with this problem for nearly a decade, you realize, and bearing the responsibility of that knowledge alone. But I knew if five dyszoons, let alone an *army* of them, came through the Veil, it would be impossible for me to defeat them by myself. Therefore, I would need another perceiver.”

“So you’re recruiting me,” Daphne said, making sure she understood completely.

“Yes,” Claire said simply. “I wish, of course, shades were the only thing you had to think about, but the circumstances are different. Something evil is at work in Long Haven, and I will need your strength as well as mine if there is to be any hope of matching it.”

“I understand, but I don’t feel very powerful.” Daphne felt it was best to be honest about her shortcomings, even as in her heart, she accepted the challenge.

Claire leaned forward, fixing her with a stern stare that was rapidly becoming familiar.

“No one, not even those with natural ability, can improve without practice. Being perceptive—that’s something you are born with, but it has to be developed, like anything else,” Claire said matter-of-factly. “Once you’ve learned how to let yourself perceive, I have no doubt you’ll become very adept.”

“How will seeing shades make me better at handling dyszoods?”

“Because,” Claire said patiently, “there are both good and evil spirits, and we can interact with both. Being a perceiver is a unique position, Daphne. We can see shades, but seeing shades is just one element of our ability. We are also stewards. There is an invisible evil, and so it is our responsibility to battle that evil, since the world can still be harmed by what it cannot see.”

“And there’s no one else who can help us?” Daphne asked.

Claire laughed. “You’re the first person I’ve met who can perceive like myself. The odds aren’t good I’ll find someone else.”

“You’ve never—”

“No,” Claire answered, shaking her head once. “Not one. I don’t know how many people can perceive the spirit world, but I’ve never knowingly met someone who could see spirits besides myself—and now you.”

Daphne wanted to ask more of the questions unfurling continuously in her mind. But Claire seemed to think she’d imparted all of the essentials, for she sighed and stood up, signaling the end of the meeting. Daphne stood too.

“I would like to meet with you again soon. There are other things you will need to know if we are going to get anywhere.”

“There’s more?” Daphne asked with a little trepidation, wondering if there was some other evil she knew nothing about.

Claire smiled with understanding, as if she knew exactly

what Daphne was feeling and thinking. “I’ve given you more than enough to think about. Soon enough, though it won’t feel like it for a time, all of this will feel normal.”

Daphne doubted this. She felt as if she’d aged twenty years in the course of an hour.

“What will we be doing?”

“Practicing,” Claire answered, but did not elaborate.

Saturday morning was settled on. Daphne entered Claire’s personal number into her phone.

“So,” Claire said, walking her out, “before we meet again, I’d like for you to see the Veil for yourself. I’m sure you will be able to perceive it, as long as you let yourself.”

“Okay,” Daphne promised, but with half a mind. The other half was wondering what she was getting herself into, and if it wasn’t the beginning of a long and difficult journey.