



Ghosts of Bliss Bayou

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Ghosts of Bliss Bayou
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Author's Note



1. That awkward feeling when you wake up and the nightmare is with you in the room

My eyes fly open, and I stare at the clock: 5:13 a.m.

Something is on top of me. It presses down on my shoulder and hip. Cool, slimy breath brushes my ear. I hear my own breathing, loud and frantic, and over it, a whisper: “Abigail Renshaw...we have found you.”

My terror changes to blind panic.

“Get off me!” I mean it for a scream, but it comes out a pathetic whimper. I try to push and struggle, but the bed hardly moves. I feel the thing’s breath on my cheek, a wet, decaying smell like a stagnant pool in a swamp.

The same smell as in the nightmare. I remember it now. Running through dark, muddy woods. Something chasing me. I tripped over a fallen branch, and the something picked me up, carried me, flung me into the water. Then I was sinking into a freezing blackness, my arms and legs paralyzed so I couldn’t struggle.

Paralyzed like now.

“This cannot be happening!” My voice sounds grim, sharpened by outrage. I suck in a deep breath, get both hands under me, and push with all my strength.

I spring up in the bed and turn to look.

The thing is still there.

I see it now, a floating deep, deep blackness with strands of gray mist. It streams across the room to the corner. There it swirls and thickens.

Now a shape hovers in the corner: a blond middle-aged woman. She’s tall and stiff, in a long black dress, a necklace of white pearls. She

has thin lips and proud, glaring eyes. She stares at me with...recognition. Not hate, but a kind of contempt, like I'm some insect she's found in her kitchen.

"No," I whisper. "You can't be here. You are not real."

For several moments we just stare at each other, Abby Renshaw and the woman in pearls. The room is freezing, and I get angrier and angrier. I pull off the covers and climb out of bed, my eyes never leaving her eyes.

"You are not real. Go away!"

I take a step toward her, then another. The woman's expression never changes. I force myself to go closer and closer, afraid, but also furious. This is *my* room, the only place in the universe that belongs to me, where I can be myself without pretending or trying to please everyone else. No crazy hallucination is going to take that away.

I reach toward it, thinking that if I can just touch it, it will disappear.

I touch it, and it disappears.

Now I'm blinking like an idiot, waving my hands in the dark corner. Nothing. The room's no longer cold, but *now* I shiver.

I crawl back to the bed and pull up the covers.

The clock shows 5:20 a.m.

§

I lie with the covers up to my chin, checking every few moments through half-opened eyes in case it comes back. This is the third time in the last week I've had the nightmare about the swamp and drowning. And I've dreamed of that woman before, somewhere in the mix.

But this is the first time she leaked out of the dream world into my room. *My* room. And that thing on top of me, with the slimy breath and creepy voice? Was that her or something else altogether?

This is getting seriously scary.

I've had hallucinations before. Heard voices in my head, saw people and creatures that couldn't possibly be there.

But that was years ago. That was twelve-year-old Abby Renshaw, the geeky, lonely girl with no friends and too much imagination. Too much fear.

I'm supposed to be the new, improved Abby now. I get good grades, I run on the track team, I go to parties. I've kissed a few boys. Okay, I'm a little slow in the boyfriend department, I admit. I'm still shy and weird. But like Franklin, my friend in the drama club, says: where's the line between weird and interesting anyway?

I like to tell myself I'm not weird, just interesting—that I'm not so different from everyone else.

But then why am I so afraid?

The future. It's the first of May, and I turn seventeen in August. One more year at Hudson Heights High, and then...what? College applications. Where should I apply? What should I major in? What am I going to do with the rest of my life? I need to think about my future, Mom keeps telling me. As if I can think of anything else. I feel like I'm running, running, running toward the edge of a cliff, and then...

What?

Running makes me feel better though.

When it's light outside, I climb out of bed and put on my workout clothes. Weekdays I train after school with the team, but weekends I usually go for a run in the morning by myself. The dawns are still chilly here in New Jersey, so I wear leggings under my shorts—bright orange leggings—and my royal blue track team sweatshirt with the Hudson Fighting Eagles logo. Extra thick white socks, and my neon blue and orange Nikes. Nothing's more reassuring than a good pair of running shoes.

I have lingering shakes from the nightmare, so I'm very careful to make no noise as I tiptoe past Mom's room. I still think of it as Mom's, although she's shared it with my stepfather, Jim, since they got married last December. Jim's all right. He tries to be friendly while still respecting my space. No attempts to be "Dad," which is good.

Downstairs I grab a bottle of Dasani from the pantry, then go out the back door. I sip the water as I do my warm-ups in the driveway. The sky's pearly gray, and a cool breeze is shaking the new leaves on the oaks and sycamores. Perfect weather.

I jog down the driveway, then hit my stride at the street. I'll head downtown, then over the highway to the nature preserve on the

Palisades. With the route set, my brain flips into autopilot, and I can think about other stuff.

Like my hallucinations.

I've always been the sensitive, imaginative type. Hyperaware of other people's feelings. Sometimes I can tell what they're going to say before they say it. And I've always been prone to anxiety. But when I started to go through puberty, things got really bad. I was afraid all the time, and then I started to hear voices in my head. Scary voices, telling me I might as well just die, that I had no future, that I was cursed.

Just like my dad.

Then I started seeing things, nightmare things while I was awake: faceless people in black robes, goblins from video games, reptiles that walked upright on short, bowed legs. At first they were just shapes at the edges of my vision, and they skittered away as soon as I looked. Then they stayed longer.

It all got pretty horrible.

I tried to ignore it, to hide it from Mom, to pretend it would go away. But a few months after I turned thirteen, I had a breakdown. I was too scared even to get out of bed. Mom took me to a shrink, who put me on meds and recommended a therapist.

The therapist, Dr. Mark, was actually a good guy. He assured us that hallucinations in a kid my age were not all that unusual. He helped me work through my fears about the future and my feelings about losing my dad when I was seven and Mom moving us up from Florida to New Jersey.

Between the anti-anxiety meds and the sessions with Dr. Mark, the hallucinations faded away.

If they were hallucinations.

Of course they were. Now I'm being stupid.

I've reached downtown, and I'm running along Englewood Boulevard, almost to the one-mile point. There's already some traffic, so I have to wait for the light before crossing Clinton Avenue. It's uphill from here for a half mile, and I concentrate on my stride, trying not to think of anything. At the top of the road is a small park. An asphalt path takes me past the baseball field, and I cross pedestrian bridges over Route 9 and then the Palisades Parkway. I enter the nature preserve, where it's all

quiet and peaceful. I usually love running here, but this morning I'm wary. I check every tree, expecting something to jump out.

Nothing does.

When I reach the end of the path, I stop for a breather. No one's around. I'm alone in the world, gazing down over the eighty-foot cliffs to the Hudson River. Downstream I can see the Washington Bridge, and beyond it the impossible megalopolis of Manhattan. The view is breathtaking, enormous, terrifying.

That's the real world, Abby.

Sometimes I think it's a dying world, that with overpopulation and the threat of environmental collapse, it can't possibly survive another fifty years. Other times I think it will last forever, and it's just me who can't survive, that I'll never find my place in the world.

Mom has. Mom and Jim drive into Manhattan every day. Mom's made a great success of her life, coming up here after Dad died, tugging a lost seven-year-old daughter along. She started in a branch bank and worked her way up. Now's she's a financial analyst and makes a really good living.

I'm proud of my mom. She's smart, and she's a fighter.

And I'm a fighter too. I've shown it in the past, dealing with my "issues." I show it on the track. I'm not going to give in to the fear and run off the edge of the cliff.

Even though the cliff is right here in front of me. Literally.

I think about that for a second. Then I turn and start for home.

§

When I reach the house, Mom and Jim are in the kitchen, having toast and coffee. They're dressed in golf clothes, with their bags of clubs leaning nearby. Since early April they've gone golfing at the country club every Saturday morning. They're not the type to sleep in on the weekends.

"How was your run?" Jim says as I open the fridge and grab a yogurt.

"Fine, thanks."

“Abby,” Mom says, “we’re having dinner tomorrow at Trudi’s. You need to be ready to leave at one.”

Trudi is Jim’s sister. She has an apartment on Park Avenue and two daughters around my age—Julie a year older and Kristen a year younger. They go to an exclusive prep school on the West Side, and they are both beautiful and oh-so-polished. I feel like a nerdy ugly dumpling by comparison. Of course, *they* already know where they want to go to college—Yale and Smith, thank you very much.

I really don’t like visiting them. And it must be showing on my face.

“It’s important that you come with us,” Mom says. “Trudi and the girls are being nice enough to put you up for three weeks. The least you can do is try to be friendly.”

The three weeks are in June, right after school ends. Mom and Jim will be touring Europe on their long-delayed honeymoon, and I’ll be sleeping on a futon in Trudi’s den. This was the last-resort arrangement for little Abby. Mom wanted me to go to a camp in the Catskills for a combination of intensive track training and college prep classes. I just wanted to stay home by myself and chill. No way, not at your age, Mom said. We argued over it until the deadline passed for applying to the camp.

Mom’s parents might have been another option, but they live in an over-55 community and really don’t have the room. So I’m stuck with the futon. I thought I was resigned to it, though now the thought of being trapped in Manhattan for three weeks makes me panicky. What if the hallucinations continue? What if I really start to lose it?

As I’m lifting a spoonful of yogurt to my mouth, something catches my eye. I glance into the dining room and see Julie and Kristen and Trudi, all standing there plain as can be, smiling at me. Behind them is a floating image—the black cloud-thing from my nightmare.

I squinch my eyes tight and look again. Still there.

“Abby, are you okay?”

“Yes. Yes, I’m fine, Mom.” I toss the yogurt in the trash and rush out the other door to the hallway. As I run up the stairs I yell back, “I’ll be ready tomorrow at one. I promise.”

Upstairs, I lock the bathroom door and lean my back against it. Eventually the fear rush passes, and my breathing slows down. I turn on

the shower and strip off my clothes. I step under the hot water and close my eyes.

This. Cannot. Happen.

I wish there were someone I could talk to about it. But Dr. Mark moved out of state sometime after I stopped seeing him, and I certainly don't want to look for another therapist. I don't want to put Mom through that. I don't want her to know I'm in trouble again.

As for my friends at school...no way. They only know smart-student, track-team Abby. The girl who's pretty much like everyone else. Show them crazy psycho Abby? Uh-uh. I can imagine it all over school and the internet: *Abby Renshaw, freak of nature. Her eyesight's so good, she sees things that aren't there.*

No. I've *got* to figure this out by myself.

The hot water feels really good, relaxing. I pour out shampoo and rub it hard into my hair and scalp.

I go back to the techniques Dr. Mark taught me. He saw the hallucinations as messengers from my subconscious, clues to feelings I was repressing. Figure out the clues, confront the feelings, and the creepies will go away.

It worked before, pretty much...

So what do Trudi and her daughters represent to me? They've got their lives together, and I don't. That's simple. Compared with Julie and Kristen, I feel inadequate, and it scares me. But I know this already. These feelings aren't new, although they have grown worse lately.

What about Ghost Woman? There I draw a blank. I don't know who she is. As for the feelings she brings up...just strangeness. I'm not really afraid of her. She's just some dark, impenetrable mystery.

I'm not getting very far, Dr. Mark.

What about the dream of the swamp? That's something. It reminds me of the woods around my Granma's house in Florida, where I used to visit when I was little. It's a place in the boonies: unpaved, sandy roads and weedy lawns and huge trees hung with Spanish moss. And there are springs nearby with fast-flowing crystal-blue water. Except Granma lives on a kind of backwater: Bliss Bayou. I couldn't play near the water because there were snakes and sometimes alligators. Besides, the edges

of the banks changed all the time, depending on how much rain there'd been. They were always slick and muddy, with shallow pools.

Just like in my nightmare.

I'm feeling nervous again, but it's a good nervous, like I'm onto something. I finish rinsing off and step out of the shower. I put on my terry robe and toss my running clothes in the hamper. I don't bother with the blow dryer, just wrap up my hair in a towel.

Back in my room, I close and lock the door—although Mom and Jim have probably left by now. I flop on the bed and think about my Granma.

In my first memory of her, I'm only two or three and I'm sitting on her lap, feeling warm and safe and...loved. When I got a little older, I would often spend whole days at her house. I would follow her around and watch everything she did—gardening, baking cookies, embroidery. She was always so calm and patient, explaining everything to me. Sometimes we'd sit on her porch swing in the afternoon, rocking back and forth and telling each other stories.

Her house was like a hundred years old, Victorian. Tall, arched windows to let in the Florida light, and creaky floors with dark wooden slats. As I picture those floors, another dream fragment sparks in my brain...

I'm standing in a room with high ceilings, like in Granma's house. It's dark, lit only by candles. The floor is painted with a white circle and weird symbols or hieroglyphs. People in white robes are standing around the circle, murmuring and chanting. The air is very cold, and there's this powerful sense of an invisible presence.

I sit up on my bed and shudder.

Well, Dr. Mark. It seems pretty clear the dreams are pointing to my Granma's house in Florida. And not just the house, but the woods around it, and the water.

The town is called Harmony Springs. My dad grew up there, in the big house on the bayou. He met Mom at the University of Florida, where he was studying for an MBA and Mom was an undergrad. After they got married, they moved into a housing development near downtown. Dad became a real estate broker, and Mom helped him in the business. She worked a lot of the time, even after I came along, which is why I spent so many days with Granma.

From early on, I knew there was trouble between Mom and Dad. Lying in bed at night, I would hear them fighting. More and more as I got older, Dad would come home smelling weird and stumbling. Mom told me he was sick, but it didn't take me long to understand that "sick" meant drinking. He was never violent, just morbid and dull. Sometimes he would moan and burst into tears. One night he told Mom that she should just leave him and take the child, that he was cursed. I was old enough to have an idea of what that meant, and it's always stuck with me. So, in a horrible kind of way, it made sense, the way Dad died. Late one night he drove the wrong way on the interstate and smashed his SUV into an oncoming truck.

Remembering all this is getting me depressed, but not any closer to solving my problems.

I stand up and shake it off. I put on some clothes: underwear and yoga pants, T-shirt, thick white socks. I dry my hair with the towel and then brush out the tangles. My legs are aching, and I remember I didn't stretch out after running. Stupid. I do long, gentle stretches, breathing deeply and keeping my eyes closed. I don't want to see any more "visitors."

While I'm relaxing with my eyes shut, a thought occurs to me. After I finish stretching, I open the drawer in my bedside table, reach all the way to the back, and pull out my cards.

The first time I saw Tarot cards was at a party when I was fourteen. One of the girls had a deck, and she showed them to us. We sat around giggling as she told our fortunes.

I was fascinated. Every card had a picture, and every picture seemed like a window into a strange world where everything was sharp and clear in a way the real world never is. The following week I bought my own cards and started studying them. I found all kinds of information online: the history of the Tarot, different decks, multiple ways to lay out the cards and read them. And whole schools of occult philosophy, attributing meanings to the cards way beyond telling fortunes. Most of it goes deeper than I understand. For me, it's mainly about the pictures. I can look at the cards in a spread, and it's like they speak to me, explaining the unseen forces that surround whatever I'm reading about.

I did say I was a little weird, right? The Tarot is part of that, part of the secret Abby, the girl with too much imagination.

I mostly keep her under control. When I started seeing Dr. Mark, I gave up online gaming. I figured it was contributing to my hallucination problems. And this year I've been so involved with school and the track team and making some new friends around the drama club, that I've hardly even touched the Tarot.

But now I'm having black clouds and creepy women in pearls leaking out of my dreams, so I think maybe I'm repressing too much. I decide to give the cards another try.

I shuffle the pack and ask the unseen forces for help. *Why am I having these hallucinations? What can I do about it?*

I lay down a Celtic Cross spread. There are lots of wands and swords, contending forces, pain and sorrow. In the position of my hopes and fears is the Tower Struck by Lightning, utter destruction. But my eyes are drawn to the crown position—the High Priestess. I've read that she's actually a goddess, seated on her throne at the place of balance between the positive and negative polarities of the Universe. I stare at her serene face and her robes. In the picture, the robes turn into a waterfall and then a blue stream that flows away. It flows down through all the other cards that have pictures of water—the Stream of Life that gives birth to everything.

In the outcome position is the Empress. She is another version of the same goddess. She's seated on a bench in a beautiful garden, beside the same blue stream. Looking at her face reminds me of Granma.

The Empress is Granma, and the stream is Bliss Bayou.

That thought comes into my mind with a thud. And suddenly I know what I have to do.

I haven't seen Granma since we moved nine years ago. At first we would talk on the phone every few weeks, but as I grew older we seemed to have less and less to say to each other. The past few years it's been limited to birthday and Christmas cards. We haven't spoken in three or four years.

But I have to go see her. The cards are definitely telling me so. And rationally, it makes sense. If the nightmares are caused by subconscious

stuff from my childhood, going back to where I lived then might be the way to deal with it.

And I think I can. Those three weeks when Mom and Jim are in Europe—instead of being trapped in New York, I could fly down to Florida. I have some money in the bank from working last summer, so I could pay for the trip. Although Mom will probably pay for it, assuming I can convince her.

Assuming I can convince Granma.

I don't know if she'll want me barging in and disrupting her life for three weeks. I flash back to the last time I saw her, just before we moved. I stood on her porch, hugging her, crying and crying. I was seven, but I was acting like a two-year-old. And I could feel Granma sobbing too, although she tried to hide it. She had lost her only son, and now she was losing her granddaughter. Mom promised we would come back and visit often. But that never happened.

Will Granma be mad at me for not calling her more, for losing touch? Will she even want to see me? I don't know, but I've got to find out.

I'm nervous and scared and excited all at the same time. I go scrambling through my desk, looking for her phone number. When I find the old address book, my hands are shaking. I pick up my phone and try to compose myself, to think of what I'll say. But I can't think at all. I just keep seeing the picture of the Empress, kind and reassuring.

I tap in the number and touch the call button. I hold the phone to my ear and listen to the beeps and then the ringing sounds.

No answer. After five rings, a machine kicks in, and I hear Granma's voice. I open my mouth to leave a message, but then I freeze and hang up.

It's ten o'clock on a Saturday morning. I remember that Granma owns an antique shop now. She bought it a few years after we moved. She's probably at the shop, but I don't know the number there, or even the name.

Damn. I'll just have to keep trying.

I call again at noon and one thirty and two thirty. Still no answer. In between I fix myself a huge breakfast of scrambled eggs and toast and jam but end up throwing most of it away, my stomach too nervous for food. I prowl around downstairs, checking the dining room in particular for any sign of Trudi and her daughters. Just in case.

When Jim and Mom come home, I retreat to my room. I boot up my tablet and get online, visiting some Tarot sites and reading the forums. Then I get on Google Earth and look at Harmony Springs. The area around the town has changed some. There are more housing developments and a new shopping plaza mixed in with the cattle ranches and patches of wetland. But the historic downtown looks exactly the same, and it's amazing—a few blocks of old shops and commercial buildings, the streets lined with huge, twisted oak trees draped in moss. And Victorian houses with wraparound porches and pointed turrets. The street-level pictures make me all warm and nostalgic. I feel this ridiculous yearning to be there.

At a quarter after four I call Granma again, and she picks up. When she says, "Hello," my heart jumps into my throat.

"Hello, Granma? This is Abby...your granddaughter."

After what seems a painfully long pause: "Abby? Well, it's been a long time."

"I know, Granma. How are you?"

"Oh, I'm fine. Getting older, you know. How are you?"

"I'm fine. Well, I've been missing you, and...um...here's the thing. School ends on June 12th, and I was wondering if I might come visit you."

"Oh..."

I rush ahead. "See, Mom's going to Europe for three weeks, and, well, I know it's a lot to ask, but I can pay for my own food and stuff."

"Oh, it's not that, Abby. I'm just surprised."

"I know. I haven't been good about keeping in touch with you, Granma. I'm sorry." My voice sounds all wimpy and desperate. *Grimace.*

"Abby. Are you sure you're all right?"

"Oh, yeah. So, what do you think?"

"I'd love to have you visit. I'd be thrilled."

I try to keep wimpy and desperate relief out of my voice. “Thanks, Granma. That’s great.”

“But I want to be sure you know what you’re getting into. It’s pretty quiet here. The town hasn’t changed much.”

“That’s fine. Really.”

“And I don’t have internet at the house. Or cable. But they do have Wi-Fi in the library and the coffee shop downtown, and that’s only a bike ride away. You can borrow my old bike anytime you want.”

She’s still my loving Granma, explaining everything in her calm, patient way.

“It sounds wonderful. Thank you so much.”

We talk a little longer. I tell her I still need to square it with Mom. Or rather, spring it on her. Mom will certainly want to call her to make sure it’s all cool. She asks how Mom is doing, and if I’m getting along okay with the new husband, what’s-his-name. I tell her that’s all good, and that Mom and I will be talking with her soon.

After I hang up I take three long breaths, set my shoulders, and go to find Mom.

§

Downstairs, Jim’s flopped out in the den, watching golf on TV. Mom’s at her desk in the home office, working on her laptop. I might hesitate to interrupt her, except she’s always busy with something. Besides, the more distracted she is, the easier it might be to get this past her.

I knock on the glass-paneled door, then go in and close it behind me. She gives me her vague multitasking look.

“Sorry to bother you, Mom. Can we talk for a second?”

“Sure, hon. What’s up?”

I stand at the edge of her desk. Her eyes have roamed back to the screen. “Here’s the thing: I’ve got a new plan for what to do while you’re in Europe.”

“Not that again. It’s already been settled.”

“No, only by default, remember? Now I’ve got a better idea. I’m going to visit Granma Renshaw in Florida.”

After a second this sinks in, and Mom's eyebrows pop up. Multitasking look switches instantly to laser-burning look. "You can't be serious."

"Yes, I am. I just got off the phone with her. She said she'd be thrilled to have me."

"But Abby, you haven't been there since you were a child. You've forgotten what it's like. It's a stuffy little town in the middle of nowhere. You'll be bored out of your mind."

I'm ready for that one. "No, I won't. I can run, I can go kayaking, I can help Granma in her shop, and I'll have the summer reading list for next year's honors classes. Besides, it's only three weeks."

Mom glances unhappily at her screen. She doesn't have time for this. But that doesn't mean she's ready to surrender. "What would we tell Trudi?"

"That Granma just invited me, which is the truth. Trudi won't mind; she'll be relieved. She was only doing it to be nice."

Mom can't argue with that. She considers for a second, then frowns at me. "Abby, I'm not sure I'm comfortable with this. I know she's your grandmother, but it's been so long—"

"Yes, she's my grandmother. And I love her. And when we moved away, you said we'd go back to visit. But we never have."

Now Mom looks hurt, and I realize I've punched a guilt button.

"Abby, I never meant to separate you from Kathryn. I know you love her."

"I know, Mom. We couldn't afford trips to Florida those first few years. But now it's different, and I have the chance. And it means a lot to me."

I can't tell you how much.

Mom thinks it over. Then she gets up, and I follow her into the den. She tells Jim my plan and asks what he thinks. Jim gives me an appraising stare, but I can tell he's thinking how this will get his sister off the hook. He shrugs. As long as my grandmother's on board with it, he doesn't see a problem.

I love Jim. What a great guy.

Mom suddenly hugs me very tight. "I want you to call me every week. And text me every day so I know you're all right."

“I will, Mom. I promise.”

§

I float upstairs, my stomach full of butterflies. And moths. And maybe one or two hornets. My brain is racing with all kinds of thoughts: plane reservations, what to pack, Granma, Dr. Mark, the ghostly woman in the black dress, the High Priestess in her waterfall clothes.

It’s almost five o’clock, and I’m supposed to go to the movies tonight with Franklin and a few other kids from the drama club. The idea makes me queasy—I imagine hallucinations jumping off the screen into the dark theater. This is not a good plan. I text Franklin my apologies.

I’m still queasy, and then I realize I’m ravenous. I’ve hardly eaten all day.

I go downstairs and offer to fix dinner. I find salmon in the freezer, and I bake it and fix fried rice with veggies and Chinese tea. It’s been a while since I cooked for them, and Mom and Jim both appreciate it. Jim jokes that the trip to Florida seems to agree with me.

I just smile.

After dinner, Mom calls Granma Renshaw, and we both talk to her. Mom stays on the line a long time. She’s strained at first, but they talk a lot about me, and Mom slowly relaxes. When she hangs up, she actually looks satisfied.

§

In the middle of the night, I gasp and sit up in bed. I’m terrified, and I don’t know why.

Then I see it: the black cloud seething with strings of gray mist. It hovers near the foot of my bed. The room is icy cold, and I smell swampy decay.

I jump up on the bed. I’ve had self-defense classes, and I take an attack pose: facing it sideways, my feet spread wide, hands raised and curled into fists. I don’t know if you can punch a hallucination, but if it comes near, I intend to find out.

It seems to read my thoughts and hesitates. Then it starts to roll in on itself and grow smaller. Just before it blinks out of sight, I hear the creepy, slithering voice:

“We will meet you at the springs.”

Instantly the room is warm and normal seeming.

“All right, then,” I answer, “you slimy creep.”

But I feel okay. Because the dark, scary energy is gone. Really gone.

For now.

I take a deep breath, drop down on my bed, and go back to sleep.



2. I'm not the only one with an apparition problem

“Once more unto the breach, dear friends!” Timothy jerks the steering wheel and the van screeches off the highway, heading for a gap in the trees that might or might not be a road.

I'm in the front seat, and the violent turn almost throws me into Timothy's lap. When I regain my balance, I see we've plunged through the low-hanging fronds and are now swerving down a bumpy, unpaved road. The track is lined with ferns and towering trees draped in Spanish moss. It looks like an enchanted forest and brings up memories of the road to Granma's house.

“I think this might finally be the place, Timothy.”

“For Abby, England, and St. George,” Timothy mutters.

Timothy, my shuttle driver, is a heavysset fortyish guy with curly black hair and a thick mustache. He's told me all about himself in the more than two-hours since we left the Orlando airport. He grew up in Belarus, where he learned English watching the BBC on television. He studied Shakespeare at university and seems to have memorized lots of the speeches. He emigrated to the US in the 1990s, then drove a taxi in New York for ten years before concluding he was not going to make it as an actor and that he could drive for a living just as well in Florida. He speaks with an odd blend of accents: Russian, British, and Brooklyn.

I moved to the front seat after Timothy dropped off the last of his other passengers in Lakeland. From there we drove for miles and miles on two-lane rural roads. I got more and more nervous as we neared Harmony Springs, then all gushy-excited as we drove through the historic downtown. But after we passed the cemetery and the last blocks of old wood-frame houses, things started getting weird.

The GPS kept telling Timothy to turn where there were no turns, then to make U-turns. Timothy checked the address with me and found out he had punched it in wrong: Blissful Street instead of Bliss Road. He reset the GPS, and it took us in another direction, back through town and up a county road.

But soon the directions got loopy again. I tried using the map on my phone but couldn't get a reliable signal. (So much for my clever plan of using the phone as a hotspot at Granma's house.) Finally Timothy switched off the GPS in disgust.

So that's how we ended up speeding back and forth on County Road 245, turning into every gap in the trees that looked like it might be a driveway or street. Which is how we found this enchanted forest trail we're on now, which I really hope will lead us to Granma's.

The trail merges onto another, wider road of packed sand, and I start to lose hope again. This looks not at all familiar.

Up ahead a big house appears, steep roofs and gables looming over a line of hedges. Timothy slows down as we round the bend and stops next to the mailbox. Vans and pickup trucks are parked in the front yard. Two shirtless guys are carrying a plank from one of the trucks toward the house, and they give us a "what are you doing here?" look.

"I don't suppose this is the place." Timothy sighs.

But I'm staring up at the tall, broken-down house—Victorian-style, almost a mansion, with boarded-up windows and sagging roofs. Then I look to the right, where a muddy path leads down to a dock on dark, sluggish water.

I feel a tarantula crawling inside my chest. I've seen this place in my nightmares.

"Abby! Are you all right?"

I'm gripping the armrest, knuckles white. "Yes. I'm all right. And no, this isn't the place."

"Well, never fear." Timothy unbuckles his seat belt and pops open the door. "I will go and inquire of yonder swains."

Since that night I threatened to punch out the creepy black cloud, I've not seen any more hallucinations. Even the nightmares went away for a while. But in the last two weeks, as my trip to Florida got closer, they started up again, vivid and weird as ever. I started to remember

more details: people in robes doing strange rituals in painted circles; the blond woman in the black dress and pearls walking around, looking lost and lonely; two girls in long white dresses, standing beside the rushing blue water of the springs. But the dreams always end the same way—me being grabbed from behind and flung into black water to drown. Looking again at the boat dock, I'm sure that's where it happens.

“Good news. I think we have the answer.” Timothy climbs back into the van. “This very street is Bliss Road. We follow it back the other way, and we should find your destination.”

I sit quiet as he backs up the van and sets off the way we came. I suppose it's possible I saw this house and the dock as a young child and incorporated them into the scary dreams. But that idea's not very satisfying, since I have no conscious memory of seeing this place, except in the nightmares.

“Ay, now am I in Arden; the more fool I,” Timothy mutters under his breath. “But travelers must be content.”

I don't answer. The joy and excitement I've been feeling about seeing Granma is all deflated. Now I'm worried, reminded of the reason I had to come here. As we bump along the road, I scan the deep green and gray shadows, watching for hallucinations.

Ten minutes later we've looped around in a half circle, past two more old houses, and then I see the one I know is Granma's. It's in better shape than the nightmare mansion on the other side of the bayou, but still it looks rickety and run-down, and smaller than I remember.

A lot of the houses around here date to the 1890s, when well-to-do Northerners founded a kind of colony around the springs. One of those founders was Thomas Renshaw, my great-great-grandfather, and this house has been in the family ever since. Now it looks sad, overgrown with weeds and vines and in need of a paint job.

We climb out of the van, and Timothy starts to unload my suitcases. Contrary to my arrival fantasy, Granma has not flung open the front door and rushed across the porch to welcome me. Air conditioners are groaning away at two of the windows, so she probably didn't even hear the van pull up.

Timothy plops my luggage on the soft ground and stands there, wearing an expectant smile under his Orlando Magic baseball cap. I realize I need to tip him. I open my backpack and fish out my wallet.

Sometimes I sense people's feelings and even imagine I can hear their thoughts. In this case, I sense how Timothy is hot and tired and feeling pressured to get back to Orlando and pick up his next round of fares. Because this trip took so long, he's thinking he'll probably have to work late and might even get bawled out by his boss.

Despite all this, he's been nothing but kind and cheerful.

Thinking that Mom would not approve such generosity, I hand him a twenty. "I'm sorry to have been so difficult."

Timothy grins and holds up the bill. "If these spirits have offended, I'll think of this, and all is mended!"

I know that one: the ending of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. We read it in tenth grade. It somehow seems appropriate.

§

I watch Timothy drive away, and then I'm standing alone in the enchanted forest. The sky is a silvery overcast, as it has been all day, and the air is humid and shimmering hot. I hear insects chirping and a breeze rustling in the towering trees. So here I am, returned to the place of my childhood, trying to put myself back together so I can turn into a grown-up.

And I have no idea if I can.

The front door swings open, and Granma calls my name. She doesn't move so effortlessly as in my fantasy, but still she hurries across the porch. I break into a run, meet her at the bottom of the steps, and hug her.

It's strange finding that she's shorter than me. Should have been prepared for that. I'm five seven, so I guess Granma's about five foot five. And she feels smaller in other ways, diminished, almost frail, and that's kind of scary. But as she hugs me back, I feel that my strong, caring Granma is still in there, and I touch some of the love and security I've missed so much.

She holds me at arm's length. "Let me look at you. What a glorious young woman you've become! I thought you'd never get here. I expected you earlier."

"I'm sorry. The driver had a really hard time finding this place."

She nods. "We *are* out in the sticks. I did warn you."

"I don't care. I'm just so glad to see you, Granma."

Together we wrangle my luggage up the steps and into the house. We set it in the hallway at the foot of the stairs. Granma leads me into the living room, where it's cooler and one of the window AC units is chugging away.

The ceilings and windows are high, and the room full of the silvery forest light. But I have the same impression I had outside, that the house is sad, forlorn. The furniture and rugs are dingy, and there's a faint moldy smell.

Granma picks up on my thoughts. "It's not much, but I do my best to keep it up. Down here a house requires a lot of maintenance."

The last thing I want is for her to feel defensive. "It's just strange being here after so long."

"Disappointed?"

"No! Really."

"Hungry?"

I haven't eaten since breakfast, and it must be three or four. "Starving."

She brightens. "Come into the kitchen, and we'll see what we can do."

The kitchen's immaculate, with the clean, bakery-like smell I remember. Granma and I spent many, many hours in here when I was a little girl. I sit at the table sipping iced tea while she fixes me a sandwich.

We chat about school, the track team, her shop. She took the afternoon off from the shop so she could be here when I arrived. She didn't have to close it, since it adjoins an old bookstore, and the guy who runs that is watching it for her.

"We've got three businesses sharing an old warehouse space," she explains. "We help each other out, almost like a co-op. Anyway, this is the quiet time of year, so there won't be much activity...Why are you grinning?"

“Things are so laid back here. *So* unlike New Jersey. I think this is just what I need.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it.”

She sets a plate in front of me: tuna on wheat bread, with carrot sticks and chips. I dive in, and everything is delicious.

As she watches me, a fond smile appears. Between mouthfuls I smile back. “God, I missed you, Granma.”

This makes her eyes sparkle, like she could almost cry. “I missed you too, Abby. More than I wanted to admit. I’d pretty much given up on having any part in your life.”

That makes *me* want to cry. And that emotion drags up a whole lot more—all I’ve been through since Dad died, the grief of losing him, the pain of separating from Granma and my home, the nightmares and hallucinations when I got older, my insecurities about the future, my fears of losing my mind.

Before I know it, I’m swallowing hard to keep back the tears.

“I’m sorry,” Granma says. “I didn’t mean to make you sad.”

“That’s okay. I’m fine.”

But she’s staring at me hard. “You were such a sensitive little girl. And I get the feeling you still are. Do you want to talk about it?”

Wow. Where to begin? I take a sip of tea. I wasn’t planning to tell her about the nightmares. She doesn’t even know about my hallucination episodes when I was twelve—unless Mom told her, which I’m sure not.

As I’m trying to think what to say, I realize I’m hearing the faint wail of a siren—an ambulance or police car. For a second I even think it might be a hallucination, but then I see that Granma hears it too. As it gets louder, we stare at each other with growing alarm.

“That’s not usual around here,” she says.

The siren is getting closer and closer. I follow Granma out the back door, where the wraparound porch overlooks the yard and the bayou. Granma looks off to the left, in the direction of the sound. When it seems the siren is almost on top of us, I see spinning blue lights through the trees. Police car.

“That’s the Parkers’ house,” Granma says. “What in god’s name is going on?”

She's not going to wait to find out. She marches down the steps and around the corner of the house. I have to walk pretty fast to keep up.

By the time we reach the stand of trees that separates the two properties, the siren has stopped, but I still see the blue lights flashing through the undergrowth. I follow Granma down a narrow footpath through the ferns and bushes. The path ends near the spot where the police car is parked, at the side of the house. The car doors stand open, and I read "Harmony Springs Police" painted on one of them. Two officers are trotting across the backyard to where an old man is kneeling, propped up on one hand as if trying to catch his breath. Near the house, a white-haired woman in a flower-print dress stands by the back porch. Granma hurries over to her, and I follow.

"Emily," Granma says. "What in the world?"

"Oh, Kathryn! I saw the devil!" She grabs hold of Granma's shoulders. "I know it sounds crazy, but I swear to god. Satan himself. He was standing right there at the edge of our yard, dripping wet, like he'd gone for swim in the bayou."

"It's all right," Granma says. "The police are here now. Everything's going to be all right."

Across the lawn, the police officers are bending down beside the elderly man, helping him to his feet.

"I've never been so scared in my life." Mrs. Parker is breathless, nearly hysterical. "John saw it too, not just me. He said it was just some clown trying to scare us. He told me to call the police, then he went out with his shotgun. But Satan didn't move, just stood there watching our house. Then I heard his voice inside my head. He said, 'Leave this place.' And then I saw my husband collapse."

She breaks down sobbing, and Granma holds her.

I'm wondering what the frick is going on here. And then I'm wondering if it could possibly have something to do with *my* hallucinations.

One of the officers is walking down to the edge of the yard, where Satan was sighted. The other is supporting John Parker as they walk slowly toward us.

"He's all right, Mrs. Parker," the officer says. "We think it was just a dizzy spell. Of course, we'll get an ambulance out here if you want."

“No ambulance!” Mr. Parker growls at him. “I’m not getting stuck with no co-pay!”

“Don’t worry about that, sir. We’ll drive you to the hospital if you want to get checked out. No charge for that, I promise. Why don’t you rest here a few minutes and think it over.”

The police officer helps Mr. Parker sit down on the porch steps.

Only now I’m not sure he is an officer. He’s young, not much older than me. Tall and lanky, more like a high school basketball player than a full-grown man. And although he wears the same blue shirt, black trousers, and sky-blue cap as his partner, he doesn’t have a badge or gun.

He nods politely. “Miss Emily. Miss Kathryn.” He glances at me, and for an instant I think I see that look a boy gives you when he kind of likes what he sees.

He clears his throat. “Miss Emily, can you tell me exactly what you saw?”

Mrs. Parker has sat down next to her husband. It takes a moment before she replies in a hoarse whisper. “I think I saw Satan.”

“No, you didn’t!” Mr. Parker snaps. “What we saw was some jackass playing a prank or trying to scare us. Probably the same jackass who showed up at the Hilton place last week dressed as the skunk ape.”

“You mean this has happened before?” They all turn to me, and I realize that was my outside voice. *Oops*.

Granma inserts introductions: “Emily, John, Ray-Ray, this is my granddaughter, Abigail. She’s down visiting me from New Jersey. These are my neighbors, John and Emily Parker, and this is Ray-Ray Quick, son of our chief of police.”

Ray-Ray Quick? What kind of name is that? (Luckily, this was *not* my outside voice.)

Now here comes the other officer, the full-grown one with the gun. “I didn’t see any tracks or breaks in the grass.” He sets down Mr. Parker’s shotgun, which he’s retrieved from the lawn, and beside it the cartridges, which he has wisely unloaded.

“I understand you saw this intruder also, Mrs. Parker?”

Emily nods, lips pressed thin.

“Do you think you can come over and show me exactly where you saw him?”

She goes white. "I don't think I want to."

"She doesn't have to," Mr. Parker says. "I told you exactly where he was. Standing right next to that cypress. And dripping wet, like he just stepped out of the bayou."

The officer twists his mouth, looking stymied. "Ray-Ray, you want to take another look over there? Maybe I missed something."

"Sure, Dan."

Ray-Ray walks off across the yard. Dan suggests we go inside, where it's cooler, and the Parkers can tell him everything from the beginning. Granma tags along to give Mrs. Parker support. As they're climbing the steps, I hesitate, then decide to follow Ray-Ray.

Sometimes I'm impulsive, and this is one of those times.

When I approach, he is scouting the back of the yard, where the mowed grass gives way to deeper grass and sedges. The ground is soggy under my running shoes, sloping down toward the dark, still waters of Bliss Bayou.

Ray-Ray glances at me, then goes back to his investigation.

"Excuse me, officer. But did I understand correctly? Something like this happened once before?"

He answers without looking up. "Yes. And I'm not an officer, just a summer intern."

Summer intern, son of the police chief. That explains the uniform and the not-carrying-a-gun. "So what exactly happened at the Hilton place? And what is a, uh...skunk ape?"

He flicks me a smile. I'm glad to see he has a sense of humor.

"The skunk ape is the Florida version of Bigfoot. Just a legend that some people claim to have seen and that a few people have made up hoaxes around."

"So you think that's what's happening here? Someone dressing up to spoof people? Or frighten them?"

Ray-Ray shakes his head. "I don't know what to think. But I sure don't see any sign that anyone's walked through here recently. Do you?"

He and Dan have been careful to stay on the edge of the yard and not disturb the deep grass near the cypress. I scan the area and look closely at the spot where the devil was supposed to have appeared.

"No. I don't." *At least no one with a physical body.*

Ray-Ray touches his cap and walks off. “Ma’am.”

Ma’am?

I tag after him, hustling to keep up with his long strides. “So, officially the police have no explanation for this or for what happened at the Hilton place?”

He stops and looks down at me. “*Officially?* What are you, with CNN? You ought to meet my sister.”

“What do you mean?”

“Never mind.” He stalks away again.

“Wait.” I hurry after him. “Listen. I didn’t mean to sound pushy. But I just got here today, and I’m curious. You have to admit this is some weird shit.”

He laughs at that and stops again. “Okay. I’m only an intern. Officially, I can’t speak for the Harmony Springs police force...except that, as I’m sure my dad would tell you, the investigation is ongoing.”

§

Later Granma fills me in on the Parkers’ interview with Officer Dan. We’ve had dinner and washed up, and now we sit together on the back porch swing, just like years ago. The air is cooling off, and crickets are buzzing like crazy in the June twilight.

Mr. and Mrs. Parker both agreed that the figure was black, mucky, and shiny wet, as if it had walked out of the bayou. Mrs. Parker said she saw devil horns, but Mr. Parker saw nothing like that. Mr. Parker said the figure never spoke, and Mrs. Parker did not repeat her statement that she heard a voice in her head saying, “Leave this place.”

Dan took down all the information and verified that Mr. Parker was feeling okay. He and Ray-Ray left after making the Parkers promise that if they were bothered by any more intruders, they would call the police and not try to handle it themselves.

“I don’t know if John will keep that promise,” Granma says. “As you saw, he’s a feisty old bird.”

“What do you know about the other incident, Granma? The one with the skunk ape?”

“Oh, at Laura Hilton’s. Her place is on the other side of the springs. That was also supposed to be a dark figure, but Laura claimed it was seven feet tall. Of course, she saw it in the twilight. It might have been the same person.”

“So you think it’s someone dressing up in costume to frighten people?”

“Not necessarily dressing up. Probably just some vagrant hanging around. We’re in the backwoods here, and we get some weird characters coming through from time to time.”

I mull that over for a bit. “But the police didn’t find any tracks at the Parkers’. The grass was undisturbed.”

“Well, they can miss things. Or the Parkers might have been mistaken about exactly where they saw the guy.”

She doesn’t sound entirely convinced, and I get a prickling sense she’s not telling me everything.

“I don’t want you worrying about this, Abby. We’re safe here.”

“Oh, I’m not scared. More curious.” I guess I’ve been hoping people might actually be seeing something supernatural. Or else some kind of mass hallucination. Because that would make me feel less crazy. Less alone.

“Did the figure at Laura Hilton’s say anything to her?”

“Well...” Granma laughs. “Now that you mention it, she claimed to have heard it tell her to ‘leave this place.’ That’s probably where Emily got the idea. I don’t believe I’ve ever heard of a skunk ape talking before.”

“Hmm.” This is getting weirder and weirder. “Suppose it was a vagrant, like you say. Why would a vagrant say something like that?”

“You are the curious one!” Granma sighs. “Okay, one of the rumors that came up last week—and I think it’s a crackpot rumor—is that the skunk ape incident has to do with the development.”

“What development?”

“There’s a real estate company from Texas that’s trying to buy up land around the springs to build luxury houses and a golf course.”

“Yuck!” I find that thought almost as scary as my nightmares. I want this place to stay the way it is forever. It’s my childhood. It’s sacred.

“I know,” Granma says. “In Florida, there’s always conflicts over development. Out here we’re isolated enough that we’ve mostly been

spared. But this time there's real pressure, and it's creating a rift in the community. Some of the owners want to sell out, poor folks who need the money, a few speculators who bought properties and now see their chance to cash in. The rest of us are against it. We're afraid that once developers get a foothold and put up a few mansions, it will ruin the springs. Then others will want to sell, and it will be like dominoes falling. It's happened before in other places."

"Wow. So someone might be trying to frighten more homeowners into selling?"

"That's the theory. I think it's pretty far-fetched. Don't you?"

"You're not thinking of selling, are you, Granma?"

She peers off across the darkening backyard, toward the bayou. "No. I've lived in this house since I moved in with your grandfather. Over forty years. I'll hang on if I possibly can. I always wanted to pass the place down to you."

"To me?"

"Who else? You're my only heir. Of course, once I'm gone, you can do whatever you want with it."

My brain is whirling. Abby Renshaw, slightly insane girl from New Jersey and backwoods Florida heiress.

I put my hand on her forearm. "I hope you live a long, long time, Granma. And that you never sell this place."

§

Upstairs I have a big, airy bedroom in a corner of the house. Windows face the backyard and the woods to the side. Granma's had one of her downstairs air conditioners brought up so the room will be cool enough for sleeping. It rattles and chugs away as I unpack.

Tired as I am from the trip and the long day, I am way too wired to sleep. Long after Granma has said goodnight, I am up rearranging my clothes in the drawers and closets, checking for a phone signal (without success), and trying to get into one of the honors reading assignment books on my tablet (with very little success).

Finally I dig out my Tarot deck. I ask the cards about the dark figures seen by the Parkers and Laura Hilton. Are they men or hallucinations? Or something else?

The reading is hard to decipher. Swords, wands, pentacles, cups: all the suits are here and seem to tell different stories. In the position of the environment is the Knight of Cups, and he reminds me of Ray-Ray Quick. I stare at him for a while and notice that I'm smiling.

I focus on the crown position, the High Priestess again, the goddess at the point of balance, the source of the waters...the source of the springs. She stares back at me—kind, serene, powerful.

What are you trying to tell me?

Now I feel a presence in the room, a cool, mysterious power, like a breeze lifting me up in a dream. I stand and walk to the window that faces the woods.

On the ground below, at the edge of the trees, a woman is staring up at me. Not the stern blond woman in black I've seen before. This one is young and slender and seems very alive. She wears a long white skirt, a white blouse, and a straw bonnet, like a sun hat. She reminds me of the girls in white dresses I dreamed about, the ones standing beside the springs.

I literally pinch my arm to be sure I'm not dreaming.

I have no fear, like with the other hallucinations. Only this deep sense of wonder. I feel I know her, and that she means me well.

Slowly she raises her right hand in greeting.

I wave back. Then I squeeze my eyes shut and look again.

She's gone. I see only a wall of trees under the black sky.



3. Have you ever heard of a curse on the Renshaws?

Next morning, we're having a late breakfast in the kitchen when I hear knocking on the front door.

"Now what?" Granma sounds flustered. She's had more excitement in the past twenty-four hours than she's used to, for sure.

I go and open the door.

A girl grins at me. Short, curly orange hair and a face full of freckles. She's about my age and height, but curvier.

"Hi, you must be Abigail. I'm Molly Quick. My brother said I should meet you."

"Oh...Ray-Ray?"

"Yeah. Mind if I come in?"

"No...sure." I step back, and she brushes past me.

"Is your grandmother here?"

"Yeah. We're having breakfast. Come on in."

She follows me down the hall.

"Oh, it's you, Molly," Granma says. "Can I get you some breakfast?"

"No, thank you, Miss Kathryn. Well, maybe just coffee, if you can pour it over ice. It's going to be another hot day."

I volunteer to get it so Granma doesn't have to get up. Molly sits down at the table.

"So what brings you out here on a Sunday morning?" Granma asks.

"Research," Molly replies. "I heard about the devil showing up next door."

Granma laughs. "I hope you're not going to write *that* in the *Quick Report*." She explains to me: "Molly is a budding newswoman. She writes a blog about Harmony Springs. Pretty good stuff, too."

“Thank you!” Molly sounds pleased. “But I’m actually starting a new blog. With more of an investigative slant. All these weird events, they’re looking less and less like coincidence.”

“Now, Molly—”

“Seriously, Miss Kathryn. First Pete Hastings is bitten by a cottonmouth, then Laura Hilton is visited by the skunk ape, and now the Parkers see Satan in their backyard.”

I set the iced coffee down in front of Molly. “What’s this about a cottonmouth?”

“That was three weeks ago,” Granma says. “Pete was clearing out some weeds and surprised a snake. It happens around here. Molly, there’s no reason to believe that’s related to these other things.”

“No reason to conclude it’s not,” Molly says, “without investigating. That’s why I rode out this morning, to talk to the Parkers. Unfortunately, they were not very talkative. They seemed pretty upset. They told me everything they have to say is in the police report, which of course I’ve already read.”

She’s added milk and sugar, and now she gulps down half the glass of coffee. “This is delicious, thanks. So, I understand you two went over to the Parkers’ when you heard the siren...”

Granma confirms that we hurried over there, and no, she didn’t see any intruders—natural or supernatural.

“How about you, Abigail? Or is it Abby?”

“Abby. It’s just like Granma said. We arrived after the fact and didn’t really see anything.”

“Ray-Ray told me you went with him to look at the spot where the figure appeared.”

“Well...not *with him*, exactly.”

Molly gives us her grin. “He wouldn’t admit it, of course, but from the way he described you, I’d say he thinks you’re cute.”

Really? That’s nice. I guess he’s not so bad either...

Now both of them are grinning at me. I hope I’m not blushing. I think I am.

“So, what do you think?” Molly asks. “I mean, about these strange reports of intruders?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’m new around here.”

“Yeah. I understand you lived here as a little girl? How does it feel to be back? What are your impressions of the town so far?”

Not sure how many impressions I want to share. Particularly with someone who’s going to post them online. “Well, I just got in yesterday.”

“I can show you around if you like. It’s a quiet little town—apart from these possibly paranormal events, of course. My favorite hangouts are the library and Springs of Coffee. That’s this little coffee shop and bakery on Main Street. They have Wi-Fi.”

“That’s good to know.” I touch the phone in the back pocket of my shorts. “We don’t have a signal out here. And I need to text my mom today.”

“You can ride in with me now if you want. They open at eleven on Sundays.”

“No, thanks. I’m going with Granma to help in her shop today.”

“Oh, you can meet me there if you want,” Granma says. “I won’t open up ’til noon or twelve thirty.”

Well...I don’t want to seem unfriendly. And despite all the nosey questions, I like Molly. Her enthusiasm’s kind of charming.

§

So ten minutes later, with my tablet in my backpack and the backpack slung over my shoulder, I’m climbing onto Molly Quick’s electric bike. The bike seems patched together, with an old, rusty frame and motor but a seat and deep-tread tires that look like new additions.

“Are you sure this is safe for two people?”

“Absolutely! Would the daughter of the chief of police suggest an unsafe ride?”

“I don’t know you well enough to answer that.”

“Ha! Then you’ll just have to hold on and trust me.”

Molly walks the bike in a half circle so it’s pointing away from the house. She instructs me to wrap my arms around her waist. She turns the key, and the motor hums to life. We start off with a jolt. Molly twists the handles to accelerate, and we go streaming down the tree-lined road with the wind in our faces.

I've never ridden on any kind of motorbike before. "Hey! This is really fun."

"I know!" Molly says. "I love the electric motor. Eco-friendly. And quiet, so I can sneak up on people."

"Do you sneak up on people a lot?"

"Oh, I never have. But as an investigative journalist, who knows when I might need to start?"

We ride down Bliss Road in the direction opposite the way I arrived yesterday. The trail curves past three more old houses set back in the trees, then merges onto a narrow blacktop. A short time later, we're on the outskirts of town.

We turn onto Main Street and cruise past houses and shops under the huge oak trees hung with Spanish moss. There's almost no traffic, except in the parking lot of the Presbyterian church.

Molly pulls into the side yard of Springs of Coffee and leaves the bike leaning against the brick wall. Inside, she introduces me to the gay couple who own the place. Benjamin is the baker and Lewis is the barista and "business genius." They seem really nice, and they treat Molly like family. Benjamin insists we sample some pieces of blueberry muffin.

Molly orders a caramel macchiato and I ask for an iced chai. We sit down at a little table in the corner and fire up our computers. While mine is booting, I check my phone: two texts from Mom. The first, from yesterday, tells me they've landed in Paris and are having a grand time, and asks how I'm doing. The second, from this morning, says, "Where R U? U promised to text everyday!"

I thumb in a reply: "I am great. no signal at Granma's. messages may be irregular. stop worrying bout me and enjoy ur vacation!"

After we pick up our drinks, we both get involved with our screens. I've been so charged up with settling in at Granma's and the excitement at the Parkers' house that I've hardly noticed not having internet. Now it hits me hard, and I get a burst of anxiety about catching up. I look at the latest posts from my teammates and add comments and emojis. I check in on Franklin and some of our friends from the drama club.

Franklin is maybe my best friend. I met him three years ago, when we were both patients of Dr. Mark. Like me, he has anxiety disorder and suffers from too much imagination. But since we got to high school, he's

done really well. He's extremely smart, and he's acing all his classes. And getting involved with the drama club has really helped him bloom socially. We talk a lot about books and plays. He's tried to get me to join the club, but it's just not my thing. I do love hanging around with them and watching them all perform. I make a good audience.

So I send Franklin a text to let him know I've arrived safely and that my phone access is limited. Then I think I ought to post something of my own, so I snap a picture of the coffee shop and post that I'm at Springs of Coffee in Harmony Springs. I think of taking one of Molly and adding "with my new friend Molly," but I guess that would be false. I mean, she's not really my friend, is she?

After considering this, I look up to find Molly staring at me with a thoughtful expression.

"About the Parkers," she says. "Dan's report stated there was no sign of disturbance in the grass where they claimed to have seen the intruder. Did you see anything?"

"No."

"But the Parkers were pretty definite about the spot, right?"

"Yes."

"So wouldn't you say that's evidence that this could be an actual paranormal event?"

She would obviously like to think so. I have to admit, so would I. But I fall back on "I really don't know what to say. I can't explain about the grass."

Molly nods. "It's not as far-fetched as it might sound. The history of Harmony Springs is full of paranormal stories."

A wriggle of fear starts in my stomach. "You mean like apparitions and ghosts?"

"Sure. The families who founded the town were spiritualists. The Greenses, the Hollingsworths, the Aldens"—she gestures at me with an open hand—"the Renshaws."

The wriggle turns into a cringe. "I didn't know that."

"Oh yeah. I've read a lot about it. Old newspapers and diaries over at the library. Alden was a rich guy from Boston and Greene was a minister in Indiana, but they were both into the occult. The story is that on the same night in 1882, they were visited in a dream by a spirit named

Lebab. Lebab told them both to come to the springs and build a community. There was no town here then, just a little backwoods settlement.”

Molly pauses to sip her coffee.

“Go on.” I’m staring at her, enthralled. Why have I never heard this before?

“Well, it gets more interesting. The spiritualist community grew and seems to have split into different factions. Some of them practiced magic, I mean, rituals where they conjured spirits and raised powers to do things for them. Others said that this was dangerous and called it sorcery.”

Her eyes focus in on mine. “Did you ever hear anything about a *curse* on the Renshaws?”

I lean back, hunch my shoulders, put my hands under the table and curl them into fists. I know I’m overreacting big-time, but it feels like she’s just punched me between the eyes.

“Abby?”

My voice is choked. “I...that’s sort of a painful subject. My dad said he was cursed. He died in a car wreck.”

Molly looks horrified, then guilty. “Oh, I’m sorry. My big mouth! I ought to just shut up.”

“No, please! Tell me what you know about it.”

She goes on reluctantly. “Well, I don’t know a lot. It’s not the kind of thing that got written up in the newspapers. But I’ve heard a few older folks mention it. And it’s in one old diary I found. There was a young woman named Annie Renshaw in the second generation. She was the daughter of the Renshaw family who moved here from the north. Supposedly, she and some of her friends were very skilled in magic. When they were still teenagers, they got in contact with some powerful spirit or entity, but it turned out to be evil. Eventually Annie Renshaw went insane and drowned herself in Bliss Spring.”

“Bliss Spring? Is that the bayou?”

“Yeah, now it’s the bayou, but it used to be a spring. See, originally there were five springs: Bliss and the other four upstream. But sometime after Annie Renshaw drowned, the source of Bliss Spring closed up, and it became a backwater.”

“But...who put the curse on us?”

Molly shrugs. “The story is that Annie did, just before she drowned. She was possessed by all this evil, and since she was never going to have any children, she put a curse on her brothers and sister and all their descendants.”

“Wow...wow.” This does *not* feel like some quaint horror story from the last century. This feels like the hidden truth of my own past—the cause of my nightmares, the source of *my* mental instability.

“Really, Abby. I’m sorry. I know I talk too much. But it’s just that I’m so curious and interested in things. People around here understand that they can just tell me to back off when I go too far. Please don’t hate me.”

I’m finding it a little hard to breathe. “I don’t hate you...Really, I appreciate your telling me. I’m curious about this myself.”

“Thanks.” Molly looks relieved. “But please, if I ever get too nosey, just tell me to shut up.”



4. Drowning six or seven times an hour

A little past noon, I say good-bye to Molly and walk the few blocks to Granma's shop. While yesterday was overcast and humid, today is hot and dry. Sunlight filters through the oak leaves and casts wavy shadows on the ancient, broken sidewalks. The buildings and overgrown yards all look like they haven't changed in a hundred years—not since the time of Annie Renshaw. But the modern world is also right in my face: cars and pickup trucks driving by, advertisements in the shop windows for the theme parks in Orlando, a road sign about the development issue:

Save Harmony Springs
Community Meeting June 24

Granma's shop is one of three businesses in a brick building. The sidewalk is raised a couple of steps above street level and bordered with an iron rail. The lettering on the front window says "Glenda's Antiques." Granma told me that Glenda was actually three owners ago, but no one's ever seen a good reason to change the name.

Granma is busy with a customer, so I look around. The small space is packed with china, picture frames, glassware and silverware, crystal, even some antique clothes. Not much furniture—just a few small tables and stools, nothing Granma couldn't move herself. Some of it smells a little musty, but there's not a speck of dust. I think how much work it must be for Granma to keep it all tidy.

I'm spacing out, staring into a case of old costume jewelry, when Granma's voice startles me. "So, what do you think of the place?"

"Oh...pretty sweet. I can't believe you manage all this by yourself."

"Well, it keeps me busy." I can feel she's very proud of it. "How was your visit with Molly?"

I try to keep the stress out of my voice. “Fine...She’s an interesting girl.”

Granma smiles. “She comes on a little strong sometimes, but I like her.”

I want to ask what she knows about Annie Renshaw. But then I think how hard it hit me to hear the story from Molly. Any talk of a Renshaw curse is bound to be painful for Granma too, so I leave it alone.

I spend the afternoon learning about the shop. In between customers, Granma shows me the stock and how to use the cash register and credit card device. The side walls have big openings that lead to other shops, and Granma takes me to meet her neighbors.

On one side is Palmer’s Books, a space much bigger than Granma’s, and crammed with all kinds of books—floor to ceiling, in narrow aisles. The owner, Kevin Palmer, is a Black man around Granma’s age. He’s a retired anthropology professor from the University of Florida, and he asks me about my honors reading list. On the other side is the Harmony Gallery, which sells original arts and crafts—pottery, jewelry, paintings, and stained glass. It’s run by a fortyish woman named Jenny Nesheim. She looks Swedish or Norwegian, with short blond hair and very pale skin. She likes to knit, and in the air conditioning she wears a handmade shawl.

Processing all this new information keeps my mind off my anxieties. By the time we’ve closed the shop and are driving home in Granma’s old Honda Odyssey, I’m wondering why the talk with Molly freaked me out so much.

Seriously, the fact that some people a hundred years ago might have been into the occult and that one of them might have come to a bad end has nothing to do me. As for the skunk ape and the devil, they were probably just intruders—vagrants, as Granma said, or somebody dressing up as a hoax.

All this paranormal talk is making my imagination run wild.

That’s what the rational part of me says. That’s what Dr. Mark would tell me.

And yet, as we near Granma’s house and I glimpse the dull water through the trees, fear gnaws at the pit of my stomach.

I haven't run in over two days. No question my body and brain are missing the calming influence. It's about six, and the weather is cooling off. Since it's June, there will still be at least a couple more hours of daylight. So when we pull up into the front yard, I tell Granma not to wait dinner for me, that I'm going for a run. She says okay, but warns me to keep to the roads and not venture into the underbrush.

I change into workout clothes and put on one of the three pairs of running shoes I brought on the trip. Outside, I stretch and take in deep breaths to center myself. I start up Bliss Road in the direction away from town. The hard-packed sand has ruts and potholes, so I have to watch my step. Just as well—concentrating on that keeps my mind off other things.

The road loops around the top end of the bayou and then down toward the houses on the other side. This is the way Timothy drove me yesterday. I come to the fork and run all the way out to the county road. After I double back, I figure I've run about two miles. So I continue down Bliss Road toward the house where Timothy stopped, the house I recognized from the nightmares.

The thought of seeing it again scares me, but also makes me determined. I'm feeling like Abby the athlete, strong and tough, and my rational mind tells me to confront the place. The fear rises as I get closer, but it's nothing I can't handle.

I stop in front of the house and look it over. No workmen are around, and the place is deserted. No sounds but a faint hissing of insects.

The fear is growing.

Face it, Abby. Face it down.

I jog toward the water, where the path twists down the slope, turns onto a little boardwalk, then reaches the old dock. That is where I dreamed of drowning. I wonder if it's where Annie drowned. Somehow, I'm certain it is.

Face it and make it go away.

I walk down the path, setting one foot in front of the other. On my right, something slithers away through the weeds. I sidestep a puddle and keep going.

I place one foot on the boards, then the other.

The world explodes around me, freezing cold and wet.

I've fallen into the water.

It's not possible. I was like thirty feet from the dock.

I'm struggling, thrashing my arms. I know how to swim, but it doesn't matter. Something is dragging me down. I open my mouth to scream, and the water rushes in, down my throat, into my lungs. In terrible pain I look up. The gray light is far overhead, and I'm sinking...

Then I'm coughing and retching, agony in my chest. I'm on my hands and knees on the rough boards.

A hallucination—but so real.

I straighten my back, clutching my chest with both hands. I can hardly believe my skin and clothes are dry. I raise my head. And then I see him.

He stands on the boardwalk, black and dripping wet, framed against the water in the dim light. When I saw him before, he was just a floating cloud. Now he has the form of an ape or slouching man—long arms, bulky shoulders, oval head, no eyes or mouth, no face at all, just a flat, inky blackness. Like some hideous cartoon, a slimy living shadow.

As he reaches for me, I hear his slithery voice. "Little Renshaw, I can save you."

I twist around, jump up, and run.

My legs feel heavy, the muscles almost paralyzed. After a few steps I slip and fall face down into the puddle. Gasping, I swallow a mouthful of filthy water. I lift my head, coughing.

Anger rushes in, wiping out some of the fear. *I will not drown in a mud puddle!*

I get back on my feet and splash through the water.

I've almost reached the road when the earth disappears under me, and I plunge back into the bayou. This time I know it's an illusion. But that doesn't stop my thrashing and sinking, or the suffocating pain in my lungs.

When I come back to myself, I'm bent over, coughing.

And he's there again, standing right in front of me, reaching with long, wet fingers. "You cannot escape this. Not unless you come to me."

I scream and roll away from him.

I stagger to my feet and run.

§

By the time I get back to Granma's house, it's night. An owl is hooting somewhere in the woods.

I drowned twice more along the way. In one of the falls I bruised my knee, and I'm limping. My mouth is swollen from landing on a root, and I've spit out some blood.

I struggle up the porch steps and find the front door locked. I don't want Granma to see me like this, all scared and beaten up. I hope I can make it to my room without being seen, so I limp around to the back door.

But Granma's sitting in the kitchen with a cup of tea. "There you are. I was—" She jumps up. "Abby! What happened to you?"

I raise my hands to keep her away. "I'm all right. I had a fall."

"You weren't attacked?"

"No! No, I'm all right."

She grabs hold of my arms. "Child, you're not all right. Let me see!"

Panicking, I look into her eyes. And then I lose it. I slump against her, and all my fear bursts out in a loud, wailing cry.

"Abby!"

For just a moment I feel her shoulder against my cheek. Then the floor opens, and I fall into the black water...

§

When I come back to reality, we're both on the kitchen floor. Granma is holding me, rocking me like a baby.

"It's all right. It's all right." But she looks terrified.

"Oh, Granma. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry to dump this on you."

"Abby, please tell me. What is the matter?"

Over her shoulder I see the slimy shadow guy slouching in the doorway. "I'm losing my mind."

"What do you mean? Do you want me to call your mother?"

"No! Please. Please don't call her!"

"All right. All right. But you need to calm down. You're not taking drugs, are you?"

“No. I used to be on anxiety meds, but...it’s not that.”

“Then what?”

Panting, sobbing, I try to explain. The nightmares, the real reason I came here...and what happened tonight.

“I had hallucinations before. When I was twelve. They put me on meds. But this is the worst it’s ever been. I keep drowning over and over. I’m so afraid.”

“Abby, this is serious. I think I should take you to the hospital.”

“No! Please, Granma. I’ve always been able to get hold of myself before. Please give me more time.” I’m afraid that if I’m checked into a psychiatric hospital now, I’ll never come out.

“All right,” Granma says. “No one will hurt you. I promise.”

She helps me into the living room, and I sit down on the couch. She brings a wet cloth to wash off some of the mud, and ice for my knee and swollen face. When I’ve calmed down a little, she asks me to describe the hallucinations. I tell her about the goblins and creatures I used to see and the creepy black cloud in my bedroom in New Jersey. I’ve started to tell her how tonight he’s manifested as a shadow man, when the room disappears and I drown again.

When it ends, I’m shaking uncontrollably. “Oh, Granma. I just want to die! I’m cursed. Just like my dad.”

She grips me hard by the arms. “Don’t say that, Abby! Don’t *ever* say that!”

I break down sobbing, and she hugs me and strokes my head. When I’ve settled down some, she asks me about the nightmares—to keep me talking, to keep me *here*.

I tell her everything I can remember: being chased through the woods, the blond woman in black, the girls in white dresses, the circle of people in hooded robes. As Granma listens, her expression changes, like it’s all starting to make some sense.

“And the figure that looks like a shadow. Is he in the nightmares too?”

He’s followed us into the living room, and I look over at him standing in the corner. “I don’t think so. Not that I remember.”

“Do you mean he’s here now? You see him now?”

I nod.

Granma clutches my hand. She stares at the corner, like she's trying to see him too. "Tell me exactly what you see."

I describe the bulky, glistening shape, the long arms, the empty blackness where there should be a face. "He's like the figure the Parkers described, but without the devil horns. Maybe he's the skunk ape too."

Granma's eyes are wide. "Abby, if this keeps up, I'll have to take you to the hospital. There may be no other choice. But there is one thing I can try—if you'll trust me."

"Anything, Granma. I trust you."

"Then wait right here. And don't be afraid."

She crosses the room to the hallway, and I hear her climb the stairs. I sit with my knees tucked, hugging myself, not looking at Shadow Man.

In a little while, Granma comes down. She's wearing a robe of blue velvet with brocaded silver birds, and a silver chain for a belt. She's carrying a knife.

"Is the spirit still here?" she asks.

I break out of my shock enough to answer. "Yes."

"Show me exactly where."

I point to the spot. He seems to be watching Granma now, tense like a cat.

Granma comes over and stands between me and Shadow Man. She points the knife at the ceiling. She takes a deep breath and holds it for a second, and then a tone comes from deep in her chest: "Oooooohhhhhhhhhhh."

I'm stunned and frightened, but I also sense protection rising around us.

Granma repeats the tone twice more. Then she extends the knife in front of her and slowly walks around the couch. Staring at the knife, I see faint blue light coming from the tip. She draws a circle with this light, with her and me inside the circle and Shadow Man outside it.

Then she steps over in front of Shadow Man and points the knife directly at him. She traces a five-pointed star in the air, and when she speaks, her voice is deep and strong.

"I am an initiate of the Circle of Harmony. I have tasted the waters of the Five Springs. In the name of the founders of our order, in the name of the spirit Lebab, in the name of the Great Goddess Who Shapes All

Things, I banish you from my presence and from this place and time. *Go now*, and leave us in peace!”

With these last words, she thrusts the knife and the shadow flickers out—like the dark in a room when a light is switched on.

“Is he gone, Abby?”

Bewildered and amazed, I can only nod.

Granma sinks into a chair, exhausted.

When I’m finally able to speak, I say, “Granma, what just happened? What did you do?”

“Abby, that was magic.”



5. Magic is not what you think

“I haven’t tried anything like that in a long, long time,” Granma says. “I’d forgotten how much energy it takes.”

I just stare at her, speechless.

“I know, Abby. You must be wondering about all this.” She gestures at her robe, the knife still in her hand. “Maybe now you think I’m the one who’s crazy. But the important thing is, it seems to have worked. At least for the moment.”

“I saw blue light coming out of your knife.”

“You saw that? That’s remarkable. I visualized the light when I drew the circle. But the fact you could actually see it—well, not many people are that gifted. Is the light still there?”

“Yes, but dimmer. It seems to be fading.” I’m straining to fit all this into my head. “So, does this mean it’s all real? My hallucinations are real?”

“I don’t know.” Granma sighs. “I’m not an expert...There’s someone I can call. She might be able to help us.” She pushes herself out of the chair.

“Where are you going?”

“Just to the other room, sweetie. Don’t worry. You can come with me if you want.”

I follow her, feeling like a weepy three-year-old who’s gotten hurt and needs to cling to her mother. We go into the little sunroom, which Granma has furnished as a study. She searches through an old phone book and picks up her landline phone.

“Who are you calling, Granma?” I ask as she presses the buttons.

“An old friend. She’s going to be surprised to hear from me.”

After a moment she speaks into the phone. “Hello, Violet? This is Kat Renshaw...Yes, I know it’s been a while. I hope it’s not too late to call you?... Fine. Listen, Vi, I need your help—badly. A spiritual matter... Yeah, that’s right. It’s my granddaughter, Abigail. She’s having visions, horrible, uncontrollable. I think, well, she may be under psychic attack...I don’t know ‘by what.’ She assumed they were hallucinations. She’s had them a long time, but tonight it got really scary. She said it was the worst ever. When I couldn’t calm her down, I tried a banishing, and that seems to have driven it away...Yes...I’m not sure. I don’t know what to do next. That’s why I’m calling you...Yes, we can come right over. Thank you, Vi. I really appreciate this.”

Granma sets down the phone. “We’re going to go see Violet, honey. I think she can help us.”

“All right.” I remember that I’m sweaty and filthy. “Can I take a shower first?”

Granma laughs and glances at her sleeves. “Of course. I’ll need to change out of this too.”

§

We’re driving down Bliss Road in the direction of town. The car windows are open, and the night air is damp and cool. I hear an owl again, hooting over a chorus of frogs.

I glance at myself in the visor mirror—red eyes over dark circles, and the right side of my mouth has a beautiful bruise. I look like some poor, abused waif.

But at least my emotions have quieted—enough that I’m able to think. And ask questions. I look over at Granma. “Tell me about Violet.”

“Well, she’s an old friend. When I first met your grandfather, he and I studied with her.”

“Studied?”

“Yes, magic. You see, Abby, magic is not what you think. It’s not like what you see in the movies. It’s a discipline for...growing yourself mentally and spiritually. Although some of it does involve working with forces outside yourself, and it can give you power over those forces. But the main point is to give you self-knowledge and self-control. People have

been practicing that kind of magic since the early days of Harmony Springs. And Violet probably knows more about it than anyone.”

I’m quiet for a while, taking this in. We’ve turned onto the paved road, and up ahead I see a few lights through the trees, the first houses on the outskirts of town.

“So you told her that my hallucinations were visions. And that you thought I was under psychic attack.”

“Yeah, I’m not sure about that... I suppose there are two ways to look at what happened tonight. One, some spirit or force was attacking you, and the banishing ritual drove it away. Or two, it was a hallucination, all in your head, but the fact that I did something that seemed reassuring and powerful was enough to bring you out of that psychological state. One thing I learned from studying magic is that there is always more than one way to explain things.”

We drive through a neighborhood of old houses built in what they call cracker style—wood-frame cabins with porches on big, wooded lots. Grandma pulls into one of these and parks in the driveway. In front of us is a Toyota RAV, and I notice a Palmer’s Books sign painted on the door.

“Oh, I forgot to mention,” Granma says. “Kevin will be here. You met Kevin at the bookshop today. He and Violet are...domestic partners.”

When Granma knocks, it’s Kevin who opens the door. He’s wearing striped pajamas, slippers, and a blue silk robe. “Come on in. Hope you don’t mind that I didn’t dress.”

“Of course not,” Granma answers. “We appreciate your letting us barge in on short notice.”

We walk into a tiny parlor cluttered with furniture and stacks of books. No air conditioner, just a ceiling fan whirling overhead. The night air flows in through open windows.

“Hello! Welcome!” Violet comes in from the kitchen. She and I lock eyes, and I sway back—like the force of her presence knocked me off balance.

She’s a plump, moon-faced woman, a little taller than me. She looks about ten years older than Granma or Kevin, but she’s beaming and full of life. Her shoulder-length hair is dyed red with purple streaks, and she wears dangling silver earrings.

After hugging Granma, she turns to me. “Abigail, so nice to meet you.” She squeezes both my hands. “Come into the kitchen. Will you take some tea?”

“Thanks,” Granma says. “That would be lovely.”

Violet puts on the kettle, and we all sit down at the kitchen table.

“Let me see your hands,” Violet says.

She holds both my hands and examines the palms. “Oh, very good.” She traces an index finger over some of the lines. “All the talent and sensitivity of the Renshaws—and then some. But you’re also very strong, and tough.”

I feel anything but strong and tough at the moment. I haven’t eaten since lunch, and I’m actually kind of woozy.

Violet can apparently read my mind. She pushes a shiny brown loaf in front of me. “Have some apple bread. Kevie, would you get her a plate?”

Kevin brings a plate and butter knife, and Violet cuts a thick slice for me.

I bite into the apple bread and talk with my mouth full. “Oh, this is so good. Thank you!”

“Poor thing didn’t get any dinner,” Granma says.

“Do you read Tarot cards?” Violet asks me.

Whoa. Violet can *definitely* read my mind. “How did you know that?”

She grins. “I didn’t. Just a question.”

“You read Tarot cards?” Granma asks.

So it occurs to me: I’m sitting in the kitchen of an old wood cabin late at night in the middle of Florida, with my grandmother (who, by the way, does magic) and a sixty-something Black man (who’s a retired anthropology professor) and a seventy-something Caucasian woman with red and purple hair (who can maybe read my mind), eating sweet, doughy apple bread and about to discuss the Tarot.

I wonder how my friends on the track team are spending *their* summer vacations.

I explain how I got started with the cards, and a little of what I’ve read online.

“So you’ve studied some occult philosophy,” Violet says.

I tell her I have, but that I don't really understand most of it.

"What about Astrology? Palmistry? Numerology?"

I shake my head.

"Tell me about when you first started seeing the visions."

The kettle whistles, and Kevin fixes the tea. Violet cuts me a second slice of apple bread. I describe what happened when I was twelve—the voices in my head, the goblins and reptile people. And how I had my breakdown and ended up on meds, and my therapy with Dr. Mark. Then I tell them what's happened the past two months—first the nightmares, then the hallucinations (or visions), the slithering cloud-thing and the woman in black with the pearls. And tonight, Shadow Man and the drowning over and over.

Strangely, I'm not at all ashamed to confess this stuff in front of Violet, Kevin, and Granma. Pouring it all out just brings me a sense of relief. I guess the apple bread and herbal tea are helping too. When I'm done, I feel calmer and safer than I have all evening.

"I think I'll do a reading," Violet says.

She goes into another room and returns with her Tarot cards. She brushes away crumbs, spreads a silk handkerchief on the table, and lays out the cards so I can see them. It's a different deck than I'm used to, and I'm not even sure I've seen it online. Most of the suit cards don't have pictures, just symbols and numbers. The pictures there are look like old-style paintings, Renaissance or medieval. When she hands me the deck to shuffle, the cards seem to tingle with energy.

She lays down a spread, and we all stare at the cards in silence. I can't read much meaning, except that it all feels very serious.

Finally Violet looks into my eyes. "I think you are very psychic, like all the Renshaws. Kevie, my anthropologist friend here, would say you have the gifts of a natural shaman—that is, to see visions, to walk in other worlds, to communicate with spirits. When your father died, it wounded you badly, and then you moved away to a strange place and felt frightened and alone. When your body started changing with puberty, you fell victim to obsessions—which, because you are a natural visionary, manifested as malevolent beings."

"So are you saying they were *real* creatures—spirits? Not hallucinations, like everyone told me?"

Violet takes a deep breath. "This is difficult to understand, Abby. Hallucinations are projections from your unconscious mind. Spirits—and everything else we see and know—are projections from the Great Mind that is the Universe. Ultimately, both of those minds are the same." She leans closer. "So ultimately, visions and hallucinations are just different forms of the same thing."

Wow. I need time to wrap my head around that one. Like a hundred years. And yet inside me, it seems to make a weird kind of sense. "Go on."

"Well, they treated you with psychiatric drugs, which desensitized you. And therapy, which gave your rational mind tools to close down the doorways through which your visions were appearing. So eventually the visions went away."

"What about now?"

Violet clenches her lips. "Now...something else is going on. I'm not sure what. But it definitely has to do with Harmony Springs, and it definitely means you no good. That's obvious from what you went through tonight. And yet..." She points to the Temperance card, a gray angel standing with one foot on land and one in the water. "There is also a protective spirit watching over you."

We're all silent again for some moments. Then Granma says, "So what should we do?"

"Well..." Violet moves to collect the cards. "I like the fact that she responded so well to the banishing rite. I think we three should cast a sphere of protection around her. How does that sound to you, Abby?"

"I'm not sure what it means. But it sounds great."

"Good," Violet says. "Do you trust us?"

That makes me anxious again. I think about my mom and what she would say. And all the "normal" kids back in New Jersey—how crazy all of this would sound to them. It seems my mental instability has taken a sharp left turn, bringing me to a place that feels all kind and supportive but might really be insane. It's like the secret Abby who reads Tarot cards and studies occult stuff on the internet is taking over—and that might not be a good thing.

But then I glance at Granma, and she gives me a slight nod. I know that, as much as anyone in the world, she loves me and wants what's best for me.

“Yes...I trust you.”

Violet smiles. “I like that you thought it over. We’ll cast a protective sphere before you leave. That should help for a while. But like I said, Abby, you are extremely sensitive, extremely *open*. Your openness is both a strength and a weakness. The best thing I can do for you is teach you to protect yourself.”

I nod immediately. “I’m all for that.”

Violet turns to Granma. “You know, Kat, the way to do that is to initiate her.”

Granma’s mouth tenses, like she thought this might be coming but feels uncertain. She looks at me. “It’s up to her, of course.”

Violet takes that as permission to go on. “Abby, we’re talking about initiating you into our magical path, the Circle of Harmony. This path was created by the people who founded the town, including your ancestor, Thomas Renshaw. It consists of beautiful rituals and a large body of occult knowledge. Its purpose is to grow the human mind and soul, to make us *true magicians*—that is, men and women of power.”

Whoa. “What would I have to do?”

“First, you should know that the fortunes of the Circle have fluctuated over the years. It almost died out in the middle of the last century. I was initiated when I was a little older than you by some of the last practicing members at the time. Later I initiated a few others, including your grandmother and grandfather. Most of them have passed on. Your grandmother left the Circle some years ago, although circumstances may now be bringing her back. But that’s for her to decide and to tell you about. Right now, only Kevin and I still actively practice.

“And that means we don’t have the resources to stage the rituals the way they did in the past. But I think with the three of us we can muster the energy for a Rite of Initiation.”

Kevin nods, and then Granma does too.

“But you have to understand, Abby. As an initiate, you would take on certain obligations. You must promise to follow the path faithfully and to the best of your ability. Most importantly, you must swear that you will use any occult powers you gain only to bring good and harmony into the world. That’s the center of our teaching. It may sound easy, but believe me, it’s not. As power grows, it’s more and more tempting to use it for

self-gratification, and easier and easier to be seduced by evil forces. You need to think about all this carefully before you decide.”

Her tone communicates to me how serious this is. It’s a lifelong obligation—the kind of thing only an adult can choose. I don’t know if I’m grown-up enough to decide. It feels really scary.

But then, not as scary as drowning over and over.

“I understand...I’ll need to think about it.” I want my voice to sound firm, but it cracks a little.

“Sure.” Violet stretches. “I’ll give you some stuff to read. Then you can talk it over with me or Kevin or your grandmother when you’re ready.”

§

Afterward I help Kevin do the dishes while Granma and Violet talk in the parlor. When we join them, the ceiling fan is off and the windows closed. Five candles burn at different points in the room, each set next to a white porcelain cup filled with water.

We stand in the center of the parlor. Violet traces a circle in the air, using a wooden wand as long as her forearm, with a crystal fastened on the end. Then she, Kevin, and Granma circle around me and join hands.

They chant—long, deep notes like Granma did earlier. With their three voices, the sound grows so strong that the house seems to vibrate. Violet speaks their intention: to form a sphere of pure, protective light around me, to make it strong and enduring, to repel all evil forces and allow only good to enter in.

Then they just stand, breathing quietly. I sense the sphere of protection forming around me, created by their thoughts, their will. After a while I can see it shining—the pale, crystal-blue color of the springs.

§

On the way home, Granma and I are both quiet. In my lap I hold a small stack of typewritten pages that Violet gave me to read. Granma focuses hard on the road, and I can feel she is really tired. I think of all she’s been through in the last day and a half, so it’s no wonder. I keep my mouth shut and let her concentrate on driving.

As soon as we enter the house, she turns to me in the hallway and asks if I'm okay.

"Yes." I'm actually more than okay—I'm amazed. Like I've climbed a big rock and am looking out over this vast, misty country I didn't know was there. "I've got a lot to think about."

"I know, sweetie. We both need a good night's sleep. But if anything happens during the night, you come and wake me up, okay?"

I hug her. "I will, Granma. Thank you for everything."

§

Up in my room, after I've changed clothes and brushed my teeth, I sit on the bed and read the papers Violet gave me. The first is titled "The Circle of Harmony," and it says:

Lo, this is the manifesto of the Circle of Harmony, which is a Path of Initiation into True Magic, as revealed by the spirit LEBAB. That which is written here is secret and must not be taken lightly.

LEBAB came to certain persons in a dream and showed them a vision of light. And in the light they saw Five Springs of the purest blue water. And LEBAB named the Springs: Love, Endurance, Balance, Amity, and Bliss. And he showed them where these Springs flowed on the Earthly plane, and had done from time immemorial, in the land of Florida.

But these Springs are not merely waters of the Earth, but manifestations of the One Spiritual Source. And each Spring is a Fountain, and each Fountain a waymarker on the Path of True Magic. These things are secret and must not be taken lightly.

And the names of the Springs have these meanings, and each is a Principle of the Path:

Love - Love of the truth, which first inspires the quest of the Magician.

Endurance - The strength and persistence required to follow the Path.

Balance - In all things, body, mind, and soul, required for worthy attainment.

Amity - The will to harmonious relations with all Beings in all Worlds.

Bliss - The prize of Union with All That Is, which is the ultimate goal of the quest.

And it was shown how the first letters of the Five Names of the Springs spell the name LEBAB, who is the True Spirit of the Springs. And it was further shown how the letters reversed spell BABEL, for the evil and confusion that inevitably comes to those who seek Occult knowledge without pure intent and strict adherence to the Principles. These things are secret and must not be taken lightly.

After reading this three times, I turn to the other paper. This one is called "Admonitions to the Candidate." It seems to be what they gave people to prepare them for initiation. It says that anyone who aspires to the path of true magic must leave behind selfishness and lust for power. Only those who pledge themselves heart and soul to the Five Principles may enter the Circle of Harmony.

I glance at the next several pages. By now my eyelids are so heavy, I can barely keep awake. I look around the room, checking for Shadow Man or any other non-hallucinations.

Nothing. I feel totally safe and at peace. I put the pages away, lie down on my side, and pull the sheet up to my chin.

§

When I wake up, it's morning, with silvery light shining through the windows. I remember a dream. I was with the two girls in the old-fashioned dresses. The three of us were walking beside the springs, talking like three friends. One of the girls was tall and willowy, with beautiful black hair in ringlets. I think she was Annie Renshaw. The other one was blond, tall, but with a stronger build. Something about her made me uneasy.

Now I'm lying on my back, staring at the high ceiling. I hear something, and at first I think it's a bird or animal in the woods. But it goes on and on and begins to sound like crying.

I get out of bed. Barefoot, in boxers and a tee, I open the door and listen. The sound is coming from Granma's room. I step over there quietly. The door is partway open, and I peek inside. Granma is lying in bed, sobbing.

"Granma, are you all right?"

“Oh, Abby!...Are *you* all right?”

“Yes. I’m fine.”

I walk over to her bed as she sits up and wipes her eyes. I realize then that she was crying so quietly that I couldn’t possibly have heard it from the other room. Yet somehow, I did.

“Can I do anything?”

“No, sweetie. It’s all right.” She takes her eyeglasses from the bedside table and slips them on. “When you get old...sometimes you think about the past and...grieve over what you’ve lost. But I didn’t mean for you to catch me feeling sorry for myself.”

“Oh, Granma. Please don’t apologize. I put you through so much awful stuff yesterday. You’ll probably think twice before inviting me here again.”

Granma squeezes my wrist. “Don’t even think that, Abby. I am so happy you are here. I feel you are a brave and beautiful young woman with an amazing future. And there is nothing I’d rather do than help you get there.”

This chokes me up, so I don’t answer for a moment. My mind wanders back to last night, to the terror of drowning, and the magic that rescued me. And the papers Violet gave me to read.

“Do you think I should be initiated into the Circle?”

“I think that is entirely up to you.”

“But...there’s so much about it I don’t understand. You were part of it. Can you tell me what it was like, and...”

“And why I left? Yes, of course. You have a right to know all that. But how about some coffee first?”

Downstairs, I fix the coffee while Granma mixes dough for biscuits. After she puts them in the oven, we take our coffee mugs out to the back porch. We sit on the swing, our old favorite place for talking together. We’re still in our night clothes, and the air feels warm and soft. I think again how much I love the laid-back life here—except, of course, for the scary visions and psychic attacks.

“So, I started reading Tarot cards when I was a teenager,” Granma tells me. “Just like you. When I met your grandfather, I would sometimes do readings for him. He found that very interesting and got into studying books on metaphysics. George was a great reader, you know. This was in

the 1960s, and like lots of young people, we were interested in New Age ideas. Around the time George inherited this house and we moved in together, we found out about Violet and her Circle. Violet did a reading for us, and we both liked what she was about. When she invited us, we decided to initiate.”

“What was that like?”

“Oh, it was pretty magical. Like being in a play, everyone dressed up in robes and flowers, and with parts to speak. But on another level it felt really powerful, like—like rearranging your internal furniture in a major way.

“After the initiation, well, there was lots of study and meditation, spiritual exercises. We would meet as a group and practice together...breathing in unison, visualizing, all of it designed to open you up spiritually and build your mental powers. And there were more rituals as you progressed through the stages, one for each of the Five Springs, you know? That’s probably mentioned in what Violet gave you to read.”

I nod. “So, was it worthwhile? Did you feel like it made you a better person? Gave you self-control?”

Granma’s eyes are far away. “Yes, I would say so. I was always more of a follower. Your grandfather was really good at it—the talent of the Renshaws, you know? But I’d say it had a lot of meaning for me too.”

“So why did you stop?”

While I’m waiting for her answer, the buzzer on the oven goes off. Granma goes to take out the biscuits.

When she comes back, she’s moving slowly, and her face is sad. “I was telling you about...after your grandfather died. I felt so lost and hurt. I thought we would have our whole lives together, and it turned out to be only a few years. Your daddy was just a toddler, so I had to keep it together for his sake. I just wasn’t as interested in the Circle anymore. It hurt too much to work on that stuff without George beside me.”

“I’m so sorry, Granma. I didn’t mean to—”

“There’s more. You should hear it all, Abby. I did stay in touch with Violet and the others, and I did sometimes go to their rituals. I never let your father know about it when he was a child. But as he got older and started having problems...in high school, you know, he started drinking and got into drugs for a time. He grew up without a father, you see. I did

my best. I did everything I could think of to help him grow up right. That included working with Violet, doing magic to help him. She said there was a limit to what she could do without his consent, and he didn't want anything to do with it, thought it was all crazy. Still, Violet and I did some concentrated work to protect him. And it seemed to help. For a few years he straightened out. He got through college, used some of the money we'd inherited from his father to open the real estate business. But he was always so sensitive and high-strung. Every little setback threw him off-kilter. The drinking got worse again. Somewhere he'd heard this idea about the curse of the Renshaws, and it became like an obsession. I tried everything to help him, including magic. But this time it did no good. He was too far gone, closed off from any help...you pretty much know the rest."

"I guess so."

"Well, after he died, I put away all my magical stuff. I couldn't bear to take it up again. I felt that if it couldn't save my husband or my son, what good was it? So that's why I stopped working with Violet and her Circle."

Wow. Granma's never talked to me about any of this. I guess no adult has ever talked to me about their deep wounds this way. I don't know what to say to her. I just stare off at the woods, not thinking about magic or my problems at all, just *feeling* the reflection of all Granma's pain. And imagining what it must have been like to carry it all those years.

"Well, now you know the story." Granma leans forward and pushes herself to her feet. "Let's get some breakfast."

§

After breakfast we get dressed and drive into town to open the shop. I bring my tablet, planning to spend part of the day on my summer reading assignments. But after swapping texts with Mom and checking a few things online, I pick up the pages Violet gave me.

I reread the Circle of Harmony manifesto and then read "Admonitions to the Candidate" a couple of times. It's not as complicated as I remember from last night. It mainly talks about purity of intention

and examining your own thoughts and ideas, questioning where they come from. Except for the Victorian writing style, it's actually similar to the things Dr. Mark taught me.

But that doesn't bring me any closer to deciding about Initiation.

Here in the bright daylight, with people coming and going in the shop and cars driving by outside, it all seems so unreal. I start wondering again if it *is* unreal, if I've simply fallen off the sanity table. Maybe I need psychiatric intervention.

That makes me think of Franklin. The shop is quiet, so I send him a text, asking if he has time to talk. He sends me back a smiley face and then calls.

"Abigail Adams!"

"Benjamin Franklin! Thanks for calling me." This riff started when we saw *1776* together. Franklin is fond of musicals.

"Have you started *An American Tragedy* yet? It really sucks." He has the same honors reading list as me.

"Sorry to hear that. I was just about to read it."

"Sure you were. How 'bout this: you read the second half, and I'll read the first. Then we can fill each other in."

"Sounds very efficient. It's a deal."

I ask him how his summer is going so far. He's working in his uncle's clothing store and finds it really boring. But he is going into New York on Tuesday to see a play.

"And how are things in *rural* Florida?" he asks me.

"Well, I can't say boring." I hesitate. I wouldn't risk bringing this up with anyone else, but I've done Tarot readings for Franklin, and he has some idea of my secret side. "There are some people down here who are really into metaphysics and stuff."

"Yessss?"

"It's pretty interesting. I mean, they believe that spirits are real. And that magic is sort of real too."

"Abby. Do we need to up your meds?"

"I'm not on meds anymore."

"Do we need to *put* you back on meds?"

"Don't be snotty. What about 'There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed about in your philosophy, Horatio'?"

“Don’t call me Horatio. And seriously, you need to be careful with that stuff. There’s enough trouble with things that *are* dreamed about in our philosophy. Don’t you think?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” Maybe I just needed to hear him say that.

But I don’t know...

“You need to keep things on track, Abigail. I mean, with your husband, John Adams, spending so much time goofing off at the Continental Congress...”

“I’ll hold down the farm, Mr. Franklin. Don’t worry.”

§

A little later a customer comes in, and I help Granma wait on her. Then I spend some time dusting in the front of the shop. After that, things are quiet, so I pick up my tablet again and try to dive into *An American Tragedy*. Starting at the halfway point leaves me utterly lost, so I guess I’ll have to rethink my deal with Franklin.

I put it down and wander next door to Palmer’s Books. Kevin is waiting on a customer, so I browse the metaphysics section. Astrology, Numerology, Kabbalah...can all of it just be made-up junk? I wonder...

Kevin comes over to say hello. “How’s our distance runner this morning?”

That makes me smile. “Fine. How’s my favorite anthropology professor?”

He grins. “For a washed-up academic, I’m doing all right.” He touches the side of his mouth, indicating the spot where my face is bruised. “No more ill effects from last night?”

“No. Whatever you guys did for me seems to have...driven the bad spirits away. Actually, I was hoping I could talk with you about that.”

“Sure. Step into my office.”

We go over behind the glass counter. Kevin sits on a tall metal stool next to the cash register and points me to an old office chair.

“So, I read the pages Violet gave me, and...well, some of it makes sense, but some of it just sounds so *weird*.”

“Interesting choice of words,” Kevin says. “Do you know the origin of the word *weird*? It comes from an Old English word meaning ‘fate’ or ‘destiny.’ Literally, ‘that which comes.’ So you could say the weird is that which comes to us that’s beyond our ken. Beyond our understanding or control, but real nonetheless.”

“Okay...”

“Sorry. I guess I’m not helping.” Kevin sets his fingertips together, almost like he’s praying. “You can look at it this way: the Universe is vast and incomprehensible. To try to understand it, the human mind creates maps. Science is one big set of maps. Magic is just another set. Both kinds of maps are valid in different ways. But the Universe will always be bigger and stranger than any map. Does that help?”

“I think so. Except that science is *real*, but magic—”

“Is equally real, just in a different way. Our culture, and I mean the mainstream culture, focuses exclusively on science. Science has brought us tremendous benefits and power. But I’ve studied other cultures—so-called primitive cultures—and I can tell you that their magic is also valid. And magic brings those people powers and benefits too, ones that we’ve lost.”

“Like, for example?”

“Well, take you, for example. Around age twelve you started to manifest the talent of a shaman. In our culture, this is seen as a sickness, and it was treated with drugs and therapy to suppress your talent. In another culture, your gift would have been recognized. You would have been trained to cultivate your talent and use it for the good of the community. That would likely have proved a benefit to you and to others.”

I think about that and have to admit it makes sense. I think about the Tarot cards and how I use them as a kind of map for seeing things in a different way. I was drawn to the Tarot, almost by instinct. Maybe I do have a special talent for these things.

A customer has come in, and Kevin chats with her for a while. After she wanders off, I ask him, “So, professor, do you know anything about curses?”

“Ah. The curse of the Renshaws. Yeah, I’ve heard of it. Well, from studying magical cultures, I do believe curses are real. And they *can* be

passed down through generations. But I also know that curses are mainly effective on those who believe in them. Your grandfather, for example. He knew all about the curse, but he refused to believe in it.”

“But he still died young.”

Kevin’s mouth turns down. “Yeah. Leukemia. But even after he got sick and was diagnosed, he never felt sorry for himself and never once talked about it as a curse. He said it was just a bad trip he had to go on.”

“Sounds like you knew him pretty well.”

“Oh, I did. We were friends all the way back to high school. And in those days, for a Black guy and a white guy to be friends was pretty rare. But George was a hell of a good guy, Abby. I think if he had lived, your father would have turned out differently. Your dad was not a bad person, but he was weak. I think he came to believe in the curse, and maybe that’s part of what destroyed him.”

Yeah. That hurts to think about. And where does it leave me? “I guess I need to be careful what I decide to believe in.”

“Exactly,” Kevin says. “You might say that’s the whole theory of magic. What you believe—believe in your inner being—and think about all the time, that’s what you tend to manifest in your life. So the path of the magician is to gain control of that so you can manifest positive things for yourself and for others.”

Well...Kevin’s take on all this certainly sounds reasonable. It’s making me feel that maybe the whole magic thing *is* real. And that maybe I should go ahead with the Initiation. I tell Kevin this.

“It’s not as scary or mysterious as it seems,” he says. “Just think of it as a set of tools for working with your mind. Just a different set of maps.”

Author's Note

I hope you enjoyed this preview of *Ghosts of Bliss Bayou*. The complete novel is available at these retailers:

[Amazon](#) [iBooks](#) [Nook](#) [kobo](#)

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