

THE  
CLACKITY





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An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division  
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020

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Interior design by Karyn Lee

The text for this book was set in Celeste OT.

The illustrations for this book were rendered digitally.

Manufactured in the United States of America

0522 FFG

First Edition

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Senf, Lora, author. | Cáceres, Alfredo, 1983– illustrator.

Title: The Clackity / Lora Senf ; illustrated by Alfredo Cáceres.

Description: First edition. | New York : Atheneum Books for Young Readers, [2022] |

Series: A Blight Harbor novel | Audience: Ages 10–12. | Audience: Grades 4–6. |

Summary: To rescue her aunt from the ghost of a serial killer, twelve-year-old Evie Von Rathe embarks on a journey into a strange world filled with hungry witches, ghosts, and a story thief, all while trying to fulfill her deal with The Clackity.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021049653 | ISBN 9781665902670 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781665902687 (paperback) | ISBN 9781665902694 (ebook)

Subjects: CYAC: Ghosts—Fiction. | Witches—Fiction. | Serial murderers—Fiction. |

LCGFT: Novels. | Thrillers (Fiction)

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.S45 C1 2022 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021049653>

*PART ONE*



Welcome to Blight Harbor



**There was no shortage of otherworldly** concerns in Blight Harbor, mainly because it was the seventh most haunted town in America (per capita).

Nearly everyone had a ghost living in their house or knew someone who did. And we all steered clear of the pair of seats in the movie theater that were always taken, and the streetlight on Derry Road that flickered if you stood under it at night and told a lie. There was the mirror in the town hall foyer that refused to reflect anything, which worked out just fine, because we were all pretty sure the mayor was descended from a long line of vampires on her maternal grandmother's side (although the mayor's husband was a regular guy named Steve). There were a hundred other things about Blight Harbor to worry about if you weren't used to them, but most of them were basically harmless. *Most* of them, anyway.

Which is why it was so strange that the only things bugging me this morning were the ordinary kind—as in (a) how late I was going to be to my summer job

volunteering at the library, and (b) how completely frustrating my aunt Desdemona was acting over breakfast.

It wasn't as if we didn't both have places to be. Aunt Des had ghosts to dispel or poltergeists to ward off or *something*, and I had to get to the library. But she insisted we sit down for eggs and toast, which meant we were both going to be late. Being late was on my list of things that made my hands get all sweaty and my leg bounce like it had a mind of its own. I mean, it was nowhere near heights, but lateness was somewhere between tight spaces and public speaking. Since I didn't like sweaty hands and fidgety legs, I was pretty much never late for anything.

So I sat waiting for the toast to pop, steaming just like my eggs under their fogged-up frying pan lid, and opened Friday's newspaper to the third page of the Community section. There it was: top right-hand corner, like clockwork: Dear Desdemona: It's Not a Ghoul, It's a Gift. Aunt D's advice column had been running for a couple of months, and almost immediately it had expanded from space available to twice weekly. Even after living their whole lives in Blight Harbor, there were still plenty of people who couldn't figure out how to solve their supernatural problems on their own, which meant there were plenty of letters and emails coming in for Aunt D.

Over the top of my newspaper, Aunt D finally handed me toast, soggy eggs, yogurt, and a cup of tea, all balanced on a china plate that felt like it might fall apart if a bell rang too loudly. At the sight of the weak tea, I

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sighed dramatically. “Can I please have coffee?” Not that Des ever actually *let* me drink coffee, but it didn’t stop me from trying.

Aunt D shook her head without even looking at me. “Evelyn, tea is much more interesting than coffee. A good cup of tea makes you more centered. Coffee just jangles your nerves and makes you unpleasant.” Aunt D put a hand on my bouncing knee to calm it and raised a *See what I mean?* eyebrow at me. “Besides, you’re too young.”

“Well, you’re like, fifty, so you shouldn’t drink coffee because it will keep you up past your bedtime.” It wasn’t my best comeback, I know.

Aunt D turned to me in mock horror. “Evelyn Von Rathe! I will have you know I am turning forty-six next month. Which makes me nearly four times your age, which means . . .”

“. . . you are four times wiser, and I should listen to your sage advice,” I finished for her. I’d heard it a million times. I loved my aunt Des for lots of reasons, including how predictable she could be when she was in full-on Responsible-Adult-in-Charge mode. I also loved how easy it was to tease her about it.

“Correct.” Aunt D sat down on the chair to my right. “How’s the paper this morning?” Her big brown eyes actually sparkled in the morning sun. Sometimes she was like a cartoon character—a really annoying one who believed in hearty breakfasts.

“Hold on. I’m getting to the good part.” I pulled the paper up higher so I didn’t have to watch her watch me read.

The day's column went like this:

### THE BLIGHT HARBOR HERALD

Dear Desdemona,

I'm in a bad spot and need your help! When I relocated to Blight Harbor, I was unaware of the town's reputation. Since moving into my new house, I've seen things shifting out of the corner of my eye, but they're gone when I try to look at them. I hear sounds, maybe people, moving in empty rooms. I feel breezes when the windows are closed. Desdemona, I live alone and have no pets, but I think I might have ghosts! I'm convinced my house is haunted. I am so scared I can't sleep, and I'm keeping lights on around the clock. Please help!

Sincerely,

Afraid of the Dark

Dearest Afraid,

All the events you describe are classic signs of a domestic haunting. Without having visited your home, I feel quite comfortable confirming that your house is, in fact, infested. Such signs lead me to believe there is more than one specter, and while I have no reason to assume your

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otherworldly housemates are threatening, I encourage you to research the history of your home and the land beneath it. If more than two murders occurred there, you may have something to be concerned about.

Please know this: there is no reason to fear the dark. Any paranormal being wishing to harm you in the nighttime is just as capable of doing so during the day. And electric lights make absolutely no difference. Night simply heightens our senses, and often our fear, making us more sensitive to the supernatural. Night is not to be dreaded any more, or less, than the day. I suggest a soothing cup of tea before bed, and perhaps leave one or two cups out for your roommates.

I hope this brings you great peace and allows you to sleep more soundly.

Welcome to Blight Harbor.

Kindest regards,

Desdemona Von Rathe

After I finished the column, I rested the paper on the table next to my breakfast. "It's pretty good." I was actually super proud of Des—she never seemed afraid of failing or of what other people might think about her. I kept hoping some of that confidence would rub off on me, but I was too irritated about running late to tell her any of that right then.



Aunt D's carefully shaped eyebrows nearly touched as concern scrunched her face. "Just 'pretty good'? Hm. Did I come off too stuffy or formal? I really wanted to address the seriousness of the concern without overdoing it. People can be so sensitive about their otherworldly conditions. . . ."

"No, no, no." Dang it. Not only had I hurt her feelings, but I was going to be extra late to the library if this kept on. My hands were getting clammy just thinking about it. "No, it was good. It was great, actually!" (I was really trying here.) "I'm sure Afraid feels tons better about moving to Blight Harbor."

"Thank you, Evie." Aunt Desdemona smiled distractedly as she put her long-nailed fingers in my hair. They got stuck as she tried to comb through. "Can we at least brush your mane before you go?"

"No time." I jumped up, shoving toast dipped in strawberry yogurt into my mouth. I washed it all down with most of the tepid tea (secretly hoping D was right and that it *would* settle me). "Gotta get to the library before Lily freaks out." I slung my backpack over my shoulder, kissed my aunt on the top of her mass of dark curls, and headed for the front door.

"Women would kill for that copper hair of yours!" D called after me.

"Let me shave it and then they can have it!"

"No."

"Just underneath—the top can stay long!"

"No! You can be as weird as you want once you're thirteen."

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“*You’re weird,*” I called as I slammed the door behind me.

I stopped in my tracks. Goodbyes were important, and that one was no good. I was already late and a few more seconds wouldn’t make much difference.

I threw the door back open and didn’t bother closing it—I wouldn’t be in the house for long. I ran to Des, who was still sitting at the table, and wrapped my arms around her thin shoulders. “Love you, Aunt D.”

She leaned her head against my cheek. “Love you too, sweet girl.”

That was better.

We never parted without saying *I love you*. It was a rule. My rule. Because you could never know. You always think you’re going to see someone again, but you really, truly never know. And of all the worries on my list, I guess that was the one that scared me the most.

The sky was as blue as a sky could get, and the morning sun was almost white, bleaching everything it touched. It would be a hot day, which was fine with me. I planned to spend most of it in the library, and the library was always the same temperature. I’d been volunteering there for the last year, usually a couple of days a week after school, and I planned to be there a lot more this summer because my best friend Maggie would be away until the end of August, traveling to France with her professor mom to study art. Maggie complained about it a lot—and I knew she’d miss me like I’d miss her—but I also knew she was excited to go. There were some other kids in town I knew,



and a couple I even liked, but honestly, I liked the library better.

The library was less than two miles from home and I was quick on my bike, so I made good time. I passed Maggie's house on the way and gave a quick wave to Florence, Maggie's house ghost, who was at the window, patiently waiting for our friend to come home. Florence had been in the house a lot longer than Maggie's family, and Maggie had been the ghost's favorite since she was born. I'd have to remember to stop by and check on her so she didn't get lonely.

Blight Harbor was extra sleepy this morning, but it was always a quiet town. At least the parts you could see during the day. Trees lined the streets in perfect, orderly rows, and all the redbrick buildings had bright white trim. Shops on the main street were named after Blight

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Harbor residents—Janine’s Hats and Gloves, Michael’s Books, Mrs. Bradbury’s Sweets and Teas—and everyone in town knew the people (or the ghosts of people) they were named for. It was just that kind of place. Which meant that everyone knew my aunt Desdemona and, by association, me. Plus, I was the girl who’d come to town four years ago when her parents died.

But disappearing is different from dying. My parents *disappeared*, and nobody could prove to me they died. I used to tell people that when I was younger, but I didn’t bother anymore. I knew the difference, even if they didn’t.

After my parents disappeared, I kind of freaked out for a while. Even four years later, I still got nervous. Worse than nervous, sometimes. But, mostly, there was a hollow, hurting place in me where my parents used to be. Aunt Des did her best to fill that place up with nice stuff. She was pretty good at it too. She said if I hid all my hurt away inside me, my insides would get moldy like wet laundry left in the washer for too long. Together, we worked hard to hang those things out to dry.

Sometimes I felt bad for feeling happy, like I wasn’t supposed to have a good life until I knew where they were, or what had happened to them. Some days I didn’t even think about my parents at all, and then I would feel bad about *that*. At least people had finally stopped looking at me with that *I’m so sorry for your loss* face. I knew they meant well, but having people pity me all the time was like an extra-heavy blanket I had to carry around everywhere I went.

I sped up on my bike a little, outpacing all the bad thoughts, and got myself back to the summer morning. Everyone I passed generally waved or nodded or called out as I rode by. School had been out for a few days, and since it was barely eight in the morning, I was pretty much the only kid on the street. Which suited me just fine. I wanted to get to the library in time to use the new computers for a few minutes before people started showing up.

At the library, I skidded to a stop and checked behind my bike, hoping I'd left a black trail of tire gunk on the sidewalk. I had, and that meant the day was off to a great start.

With my bike locked up, I took off my helmet and pulled my hair into a messy bun as I leaned against the heavy wooden front door of the Blight Harbor Town Library. Inside, cool air pooled around me and I took just a second to breathe in the library smells. Books and ink and the warm smell of dust—although the head librarian, Ms. Lily Littleknit, would have been put out with me for calling her library dusty.

Goose bumps climbed up my arms and the back of my neck. In my grey tank top and jeans, I was maybe a little underdressed for the chilly building. I pulled a thin black hoodie out of my backpack and zipped it up while looking around for Lily, who was easy to miss. She was all the same shade of tan, from her skin to her hair, and she usually wore clothes to match. I think she did it on purpose, dressing like an invisible person, so she could surprise you with her brains and her giant laugh,

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which was totally inappropriate for the “Shhh . . .” vibe of a library but fit her perfectly.

Lily was Aunt D’s best friend, which made her like a second aunt to me. I loved her almost as much as D, and she made me nearly as crazy. Lily had been the first person in town other than Des to see *me* and not just all the bad stuff that had happened to me. The day I met her, she showed up at our house with a stack of books and some homemade shortbread cookies, which were basically my two favorite things. She’d looked into my eyes through her thick glasses and squeezed my arms gently, and even though we’d just met, I knew that squeeze meant *You’re a strong one. You’re going to be okay. I’m going to help make sure of it.* But she’d never looked at me with pity. Not once.

“Hey! Hey, Lily. Are you here?” I whisper-yelled into the center of the library. My voice got sucked up by the books and couches and carpets, but I imagined it still fluttered around in the highest corners of the pitched ceiling.

“Of course I’m here, Evelyn. And you’re late. And stop yelling!” Lily yelled at me. Her voice was coming from the small periodicals section, right next to the new bank of computers. I followed it and found her sitting at one of eight monitors.

“Whatcha doing?” I dropped my backpack on the floor and sat at the computer next to her. Lily was leaning forward to read the computer screen, the monitor reflected in her glasses. She was wearing at least four shades of beige that day, which made her look like one of her famous baked goods.

“Reading the *Herald*.” She didn’t glance up from the screen but reached out and squeezed my arm. It was her way of saying, *Good morning. Nice to see you. Glad you’re here.*

I looked at the short stack of newspapers waiting to be draped over wooden dowels to replace yesterday’s editions. “Why not just read that one?”

“Easier on the computer. I can enlarge the text.” If it weren’t for her inch-thick glasses, I would forget Lily was half-blind. It seemed unfair that a woman about Aunt D’s age who loved books more than people was slowly losing her eyesight, but she liked to say that she trusted medicine would catch up with her and that her eyes would get fixed before they got too bad. I liked to pretend I believed her, but it worried me all the same.

“Aunt D’s column?”

The librarian turned to me with a bright smile. “Yes. You know, I was thinking. People must definitely believe she’s a witch now. You know, the ones who didn’t already.” The idea seemed to amuse her. It just made me tired. I already stood out because of my parents, and thanks to Aunt D’s sort-of newspaper fame. I really didn’t want another reason.

“Yeah, and I’ll be the witch’s niece.”

“Oh, sweetie.” She patted me on the arm absently. “You already are.”

She was right. Plenty of people in town thought Aunt Des was a witch. Not that it seemed to bother most of them. There were a few people—usually new to town (and who wouldn’t stick around too long)—who would

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cross the street to avoid her, but mostly people were okay with it. Blight Harbor was the kind of town that was supposed to have a witch or two. And it did—it just wasn't Aunt D.

Lily had already powered up the machines, so all I had to do was log on and check some email. Aunt D's email, to be exact. She kept her calendar online as well, and I liked to know where she would be and what she'd be doing. Because sometimes she went weird places, and if she ever disappeared, I wanted to know where she'd headed last. I still had plenty to do in the library, but the work could wait. Tracking Des down came first. I was sure Lily would understand, even if she pretended to be grumpy about it.

Just the thought of Aunt D disappearing made my heart speed up and the place between my shoulder blades bunch into a tight little ball. I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths. I was glad there wasn't anyone around but Lily to see me. Lily didn't count, because she knew me too well—and she knew what those deep, slow breaths meant. I knew she wouldn't say a thing about an *almost* panic attack—to me or Des. After all, almost wasn't the same as actually having one.

After Des, Lily was my second-best person. And honestly, after Des, I was hers, too. Knowing Lily was close by if I needed her made me feel a little calmer. Focusing always helped, so when my heart slowed down, I opened my eyes, fixed them on the computer screen, and got back to spying on Des. I wiped my now-sweaty hands on my jeans before putting them back on the keyboard.



Aunt D didn't have a regular job. She didn't need one. The inheritance she'd received from her own aunt and from my parents when they were declared legally dead wasn't massive, but it was enough for her—us—to live on if she was smart. And Aunt D was lots of things— weird, kind of spooky, and eccentric for sure—but not dumb. So instead of a real job, Aunt Des helped people out with their “otherworldly concerns.” It was her way of describing ghosts and poltergeists and the like. And in Blight Harbor, there was always plenty of work to keep her busy. Moving to Blight Harbor had been a lot like being dropped in the middle of one of my favorite spooky books. The whole thing had taken some getting used to, but even when I was little, I loved living in a haunted town. Besides, most of the ghosts were perfectly nice.

I clicked past D's email and went straight to her calendar. I was surprised to see the whole day was blocked out with a dark purple box. I clicked on it, and there was nothing in the subject line. But the location was all I needed to see: *Abttr*. That was it. Five letters. But I knew exactly what they meant. She *knew* I checked her calendar—did Aunt D really think leaving the vowels out of a word was too tough a code for me to break? Or that I wouldn't want to come with her?

My heart started thumping again, but now it was because I was excited. I sometimes tagged along with Des on her missions, most recently when she was called to solve a haunted lamp problem (the solution was a lot of salt and a very hot oven—don't ask). Most of her jobs involved what she called *benign cases*—basically

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stuff that was more irritating than scary for the people involved. She didn't let me help with cases that could possibly get a tiny bit dangerous (even though they never really were). Which is probably why she didn't tell me about her plans for the day . . . which meant I was absolutely going because (a) I didn't want her being by herself, and (b) it was probably going to be cool (you should have seen what happened with the oven!).

I clicked back to her email, which was filled with the usual junk, plus a few new questions from her readers. There was nothing there that told me why she was going where she was going. But that was fine because I'd broken her terrible code, and I knew what I had to do next.

I signed out of Des's email and stood up, pushing my chair in too hard. The sound was a gunshot in the empty library. Thanks to the un-library-like noise, Lily jumped and scowled at me all at once. I gave her my best *I didn't mean to face*. "Sorry, gotta go."

"Evelyn, you just got here. And last night's books are waiting to be shelved." Lily pushed her heavy glasses up a bit to see me better.

"I know. I'm sorry. Promise I'll do it later. I just—I gotta go find Aunt Des and see what she's up to."

Lily Littleknit sighed. "You two are exactly alike, you know. Go. Find your aunt. Have an adventure. Take pictures of anything that might actually show up in a photograph. And please. You girls stay out of trouble."