

THREE

I will never, ever—no matter how lonesome or tired I get, no matter how pretty the light looks through the trees—return to Starling House. His voice chases me all the way back to the motel, echoing in my ears like a second pulse: *run, run, run.*

It fades only when I step into the soft lamplight of room 12, panting and shaking, my shoes splattering slush across the carpet.

Jasper greets me without taking off his headphones, his attention on the grayscale frames of whatever video he's been editing. "You took forever so I went ahead and ate the last picante chicken ramen. If you snooze you lo—" He glances up. He slides the headphones around his neck, smug expression falling off his face. "What happened to you?"

I lean against the door, hoping I look nonchalant rather than very close to passing out. "Did you really think I would leave the last picante chicken in plain sight? I have my own supply."

“Opal—”

“I’ll never tell you where. Death first.”

“*What happened?*”

“Nothing! I just jogged home.”

“You . . . *jogged* . . . home.” He stretches the word “jogged” into three skeptical syllables. I shrug. He gives me a long, pursed-lip stare, then looks pointedly at the floor beside me. “And I guess that’s ketchup you’re dripping all over the carpet?”

“Nah.” I shove my treacherous left hand in my hoodie pocket and dive for the bathroom. “Sriracha.”

Jasper thumps and hollers and issues vague threats against my person, but I turn on the overhead fan and the shower until he gives up. I sag onto the toilet seat and let the shakes move from my legs to my shoulders to my fingertips. I should probably feel panicky or pissed or at least confused, but all I can summon is the dull, aggrieved sense of having been fucked with and not liking it much.

The effort of actually undressing and getting into the shower overwhelms me, so I skin out of my hoodie and hold my hand under the spray until the water runs mostly clear down the drain. It isn’t as deep as I’d thought, actually: just a ragged line slicing ominously across my life and love lines. (I don’t go in for palmistry, but Mom ate all that shit with a spoon. She couldn’t remember court dates or parent-teacher meetings, but she knew our star charts by heart.)

I dump half a bottle of peroxide over the cut and fish around for a Band-Aid that could conceivably cover it. I wind up tearing strips off an old sheet and wrapping them around my hand, like I did the year Jasper went as a mummy for Halloween.

By the time I open the door the room is dark, the walls tiger-striped by the shine of parking lot lights through the blinds. Jasper is in bed but not actually asleep—his asthma makes him snore—but I creep into my twin as if he were.

I lie listening to him listening to me, trying not to notice the throb of my own pulse in my hand or remember the black of those eyes boring into mine.

“Are you okay?” Jasper’s voice has a wobble to it that makes me want to crawl into his bed and sleep spine-to-spine, the way we used to back when there were still three of us and only two beds. And later, after the dreams started.

I shrug at the ceiling instead. “I’m always okay.”

The polyester sighs as he rolls to face the wall. “You’re a pretty good liar”—I’m a *fantastic* liar—“but that’s for everybody else. Not family.”

The innocence of it makes me want to laugh, or maybe cry. The biggest lies are always for the ones you love the most. *I’ll take care of you. It’ll be fine. Everything’s okay.*

I swallow hard. “Everything’s okay.” His disbelief is palpable, a chill emanating from the other side of the room. “Anyway, it’s over.” I don’t know if he believes it, but I do.

Until the dream.

It isn’t like the others. The others had a soft, sepia light to them, like old home movies or fond memories you’ve half forgotten. This one is like diving into cold water on a hot day, crossing from one world to another.

I’m back at the gates of Starling House, but this time the padlock falls open and the gates swing wide before me. I walk down the dark throat of the drive, thorns tugging at my sleeves, trees tangling their fingers in my hair. Starling House emerges from the dark like a vast animal from its den: a gabled spine, wings of pale stone, a tower with a single amber eye. Steep steps curl like a tail around its feet.

The front door is unlocked, too. I sweep across the threshold into a maze of mirrors and windows, halls that branch and split and switchback, staircases that end in empty walls or closed doors. I walk faster and faster, shoving through each door and rushing to the next as if there is something I want desperately to find.

The air grows colder and wetter as I go deeper. A pale mist seeps up from the floorboards, coiling around my ankles. At some point, I realize I am running.

I stumble through a trapdoor, down the stone stairs, down and down. Roots crawl like veins across the floor, and I have the confused thought that they must belong to the house itself, as if dead lumber and nails could come alive given enough time.

I shouldn’t be able to see anything in the darkness, but I see the stairs end abruptly in a door. A crude stone door crisscrossed with silver chains. Another padlock dangles from the chains. The lock is open. The door is cracked.

Cold fog pours through the gap and I know with the strange fatalism of dreams that I am too late, that something terrible has already happened.

I reach for the door, choked with a grief I don't understand, shouting a name I don't know—

And then I'm awake, and my mouth tastes like tears. I must have clenched my fists in my sleep, because blood has soaked through the bandaging and pooled around my left hand.

It's still dark, but I pull on yesterday's jeans—the cuffs still wet with slush, the pockets full of stolen cash—and slip outside with a spare sleeping bag draped over my shoulders. I sit with my back against the concrete block and let the hellcat climb into my lap, alternately purring and growling, while I wait for the sun to rise and the dream to fade like the others.

Except it doesn't. It lingers like a bad cold, settling deep in my chest. All that day I feel the press of invisible walls against my shoulders, the weight of rafters overhead. The scattered leaves make wallpaper patterns against the pavement, and the scuffed linoleum of Tractor Supply seems to creak beneath my feet, like old wood.

That night I stay up too late reading a Regency romance by the parking lot lights, trying to drive the house out of my head, or at least get rid of that aching, senseless grief. But the dream takes me as soon as I close my eyes, pulling me through the same tangled halls and twisting stairs, ending with the same unlocked door.

Six and a half days after I ran away from it, I return to Starling House. Look: I didn't plan on it. I was going to walk the extra half mile to and from work for the rest of my natural life specifically so that I never had to come within a hundred yards of Starling land again. I was going to bum rides from Lacey, or maybe steal a bike. I'm no coward, but Jasper's made me watch enough horror movies to recognize a red flag when it holds my hand and tells me to run.

But after six nights of wrecked sleep—followed by six and a half days of dodging worried looks from Jasper and taking the long way to work, of mistaking the bathroom mirrors for rows of windows and looking over my shoulder for doorways that don't exist—I fold. I'm tired, and I'm moderately freaked out, and I'm running out of old sheets to rip up into bandages because the cut on my hand won't seem to close.

So here I am, using my Monday lunch break to glare at the gates of Starling House.

The gates glare back at me, the beastly shapes nothing but iron by the cold light of day. I run my tongue over my lips, half scared and half something else. “Open sesame. Or whatever.”

Nothing happens, because of course nothing happens, because I’m not in one of my silly childhood stories and there’s no such thing as magic words or haunted houses, and even if there were they wouldn’t have anything to do with someone like me.

I look down at my left hand, fresh-wrapped this morning, then up and down the road, the way a person does when they’re about to do something ridiculous and don’t want to be seen.

A pickup chugs past me. I give it a cheery, nothing-to-see-here wave and catch a pair of averted eyes in the rearview mirror. This town is good at looking away.

The truck disappears around the bend and I unwind the white cotton bandaging—the cut is still exactly as wide and tattered as it was six days before, still oozing watery blood—and press my palm to the front gates. I feel a thrill of recognition, like when you spot a face you know in a crowded room, and the gates swing open.

My heart does a double-thud. “Okay.” I’m not sure if I’m talking to myself or the gates. “Okay. Sure.”

It’s probably just motion sensors or cameras or rigged pulleys or some other totally rational explanation. But it doesn’t feel totally rational. It feels like the beginning of a mystery novel, when you’re screaming at the plucky protagonist to run but sort of hoping she doesn’t, because you want the story to start.

I take a little breath and step through the gates onto Starling land.

The driveway doesn’t look like it’s ever been paved, or even graveled. It’s just a pair of tire ruts dug into red clay, divided by a scraggled line of dead grass. Pools of rainwater gather in the low places, reflecting the winter-white sky like the scattered shards of a broken mirror. Trees crowd close overhead, as if they’re trying to catch glimpses of themselves. Birds’ eyes glitter at me from the woods, black and wet.

In my dreams the drive is dark and twisting, but in reality I turn a single curve and there it is.⁵

5. Satellite images of the property are notoriously unreliable. If you were to type the address into your phone you would see nothing but slate rooftops and blurry, recalcitrant green, which would never quite come into focus.

Starling House.

The windows are filmy eyes above rotten sills. Empty nests sag from the eaves. The foundation is cracked and slanted, as if the entire thing is sliding into the open mouth of the earth. The stone walls are covered with the bare, twisting tendons of some creeping vine—honeysuckle, I figure, which is only ever a show tune away from gaining sentience and demanding to be fed. The only sign that anyone lives inside is the slow bleed of woodsmoke from a leaning chimney.

The rational half of my brain recognizes that this place is a wreck and an eyesore that should be condemned by the health department and shoved into the nearest sinkhole; the less rational part of me thinks about every haunted house movie I've ever seen, every pulpy book cover with a hot white woman running away from a silhouetted mansion.

An even less rational part of me is curious.

I don't know why—maybe the shape of it reminds me of an E. Starling illustration, all strange angles and deep shadows, like a poorly kept secret. Maybe I just have a soft spot for the neglected and abandoned.

The front steps are slick with matted black leaves. The door is an imperious arch that might once have been red or brown but is now the nothing-color of afternoon rain. The surface is scarred and stained; it's only up close that I see there are tiny shapes carved roughly into the wood. Hundreds of them—horseshoes and crooked crosses and open eyes, spirals and circles and malformed hands that run in long rows like hieroglyphs, or lines of code. Some of them I almost recognize from Mom's tarot decks and astrology charts, but most of them are unfamiliar, like letters from an alphabet I don't know. There's a derangement to them, a desperation that tells me I should leave before I wind up ritually beheaded or sacrificed on a stone altar in the basement.

I step closer instead.

I lift my hand and knock three times at the door to Starling House. I give him a couple of minutes—I figure it'll take a second to finish up his brooding or lurking or whatever it is he does in there—before knocking again. I shuffle through the dead leaves, wondering if he's gone out for a drive, and then if he even has a license. I try and fail to picture him practicing his parallel parking with Mr. Cole in the passenger seat.

I'm about to knock a third time when the door whips open in a rush of heat, and there he is.

The heir to Starling House is even uglier by daylight: his brows flat and heavy over a twisted nose, his eyes like a pair of mine shafts burrowed into a chalk cliff. The eyes widen.

I wait for him to say something normal, like *Hello?* or *Can I help you?*, but he merely stares down at me in mute horror, like a human gargoyle.

I go for a breezy smile. “Morning! Or afternoon, I guess. We met the other night, but I thought I’d come introduce myself properly. My name’s Opal.”

He blinks several times at my outstretched hand. He crosses his arms without shaking it. “I believe,” he grates, “I advised you to run.”

I smile a little harder. “I did.”

“I thought ‘and never come back’ was implied.”

His voice is so dry, so thoroughly harassed, that my smile goes briefly crooked. I iron it straight. “Well, I’m sorry to bother you, but I’m here because”—*your goddamn house is haunting me*—“because I’m taking an architecture class online, and I was hoping to take some pictures for my project?” I don’t even know if the community college offers online classes in architecture, but I figure it’s a good excuse to go poking around, driving the dream-house out of my head and replacing it with the dull facts of dirty wallpaper and creaking stairs.

“You want to take . . . pictures. For your”—his scowl deepens by several degrees—“architecture class.”

“Yep. Can we talk inside?”

“No.”

I give the slightly theatrical shiver that generally compels men to drape their sweaters around my shoulders. “It’s pretty chilly out here.” It’s freezing, actually, one of those mean February days when the sun never quite rises and the wind has white teeth.

“Then,” he says, biting into each word, “you should have worn a coat.”

It’s an effort to keep my voice sweet and stupid. “Look, I just need a couple of pictures. Please?” I gesture at the house, the hall vanishing into cobwebs and shadows behind the line of his shoulders. His eyes follow the arc of my hand and linger on the fresh gleam of blood. I tuck it beneath my apron.

His gaze returns to my face. “No,” he says again, but this time his tone is almost apologetic.

“I’ll come back tomorrow,” I threaten. “And the day after, and the day after that, until you let me in.”

The heir to Starling House gives me another long, ugly stare, as if he

thinks I'll go scampering back down the drive if he's sufficiently unpleasant, as if eight years of retail hasn't given me a spine of sugar and steel.

I count slowly to ten. A loose shutter slaps above us.

He appears to struggle with himself, lips twisting before he says carefully, "It wouldn't . . . help." I wonder if he somehow knows about the dreams, about the way I wake in the night with tears sliding down my temples and someone else's name on my lips. I wonder if this has happened before, to other people.

The hair on my arms stands up. I keep my voice very reasonable. "What *would* help?"

"I don't know." From the sour shape of his mouth I get the impression he dislikes not knowing things. "Perhaps if you gave it time . . ."

I check my phone, a lock of hair sliding out from under my hood. "Well, I have to be back in twenty minutes and I have a double shift tomorrow."

He blinks at me as if he's not sure what a shift is or why one would double it. Then his eyes move somewhere to the left of mine and land on that wayward curl of hair.

The rims of his nostrils go white. Suddenly he's made of still water instead of stone, and I can see a series of emotions rippling across his surface: terrible suspicion, shock, grief, abyssal guilt.

I have the feeling he's about to scream or hiss or tear his hair in a fit of madness, and I don't know whether to run toward him or away—but he merely swallows hard and closes his eyes.

When he opens them his face is perfectly opaque once more. "Or perhaps, Miss . . . ?"

Mom picked her last name according to her mood (Jewell Star, Jewell Calamity, Jewell Lucky). I generally stick with unremarkable Scots-Irish names (McCoy, Boyd, Campbell), to match my hair, but for some reason I say, "Just Opal."

He doesn't seem to like that much. His mouth ripples, reaches a compromise: "Miss Opal." He pauses here for a very long sigh, as if me and my Tractor Supply apron are a burden of unfathomable proportions. "Perhaps I could offer you a job."