

THROUGH THE MIDNIGHT DOOR

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2024

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A NOVEL

KATRINA
MONROE

"Will both break your heart and scare the hell out of you." —JENNIFER McMAHON,
New York Times bestselling author, for *They Drown Our Daughters*



Title: Through the Midnight Door
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Nelson Literary Agency, LLC
Publication date: August 13, 2024
Category: Fiction
Format: Trade Paperback Original
ISBN: 978-1-7282-4826-4
Price: \$16.99 U.S.
Pages: 368 pages

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KATRINA MONROE



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Published by Poisoned Pen Press, an imprint of Sourcebooks

P.O. Box 4410, Naperville, Illinois 60567-4410

(630) 961-3900

sourcebooks.com

Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file with the Library of Congress.

Printed and bound in [Country of Origin—confirm when printer is selected].

XX 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Allison, who always opened the window so I could sneak back in.

And:

For Emily, who makes me laugh hardest.

I love you both.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book contains themes of mental illness and self-harm, as well as suicide and the loss of a young child. Please practice self-care before and after reading.

If you or anyone you know is struggling, call 988 where the folks at the Suicide and Crisis Line are ready to listen.

Fear and guilt are sisters.

—*The Haunting of Hill House*, Shirley Jackson



CHAPTER ONE

MEG

NOW

Rain pummeled Meg's car, dripping onto her shoulder and thigh through the gap in the window that never closed properly. The air was hot and humid, thick as soup. Her car's ancient air conditioner only managed to pump out enough cold, burnt-smelling air to fog up the windshield. Every mile or so, she leaned hard against the steering wheel, the sleeve of her University of Indiana sweatshirt tucked around her hand, and tried to wipe the fog clear. With the pressure of the wheel on her chest, she imagined a car careening through every intersection. It would hit her head-on, driving the wheel into her body. Her ribs would crack like twigs and her head would whip forward into the dash. It'd be a race between choking on her broken teeth and the wheel crushing her heart, and even if neither was enough to kill her right away, the metal shrapnel in her belly—the shrapnel she wouldn't feel until after the shock had worn off—would. Eventually.

But this was Blacklick, a town just big enough and old enough and don't-fuck-with-me enough to not have been absorbed by one of its neighboring cities at the tail end of the industrial age. This time of night, everyone was either in bed or

leaning over some bar at last call, stinking of booze and fryer grease. She hadn't seen headlights for ages, doubted she would at all. Still, she held onto those bleak thoughts, imagined in painful detail the way her body would jerk and fly, a rain-soaked rag doll, to be found by some poor asshole who'd slept it off in the parking lot. Thinking about the blood and the pain was better than thinking about the phone call that put her on the road in the first place.

Cruiser lights flickered in the distance and soon she came upon a cop pulled over to the side of the road behind a dark-colored truck. She couldn't tell if someone was inside. Didn't care. Still, she slowed as she drove past. If she got pulled over, precious time would be wasted. She would be too late.

She slipped her phone, upright, into the cup holder. It'd be sticky with spilled coffee later, but that wasn't important. She kept shooting worried glances at the thing, expecting it to ring, to pick it up and hear a stranger's voice on the other end. *I'm so sorry...*

She shook her head, focused on the road that was barely visible for more than a few feet in front of her. There would be no phone call. No apologetic stranger. Because Meg was on her way. She pressed a little harder on the accelerator, white-knuckling the wheel as she felt her back end fish tail a little.

Come on, old girl, she thought. Keep it together. Almost there.

The call had jerked her out of a dead sleep, her first in ages, and Meg's half-asleep reaction was to stuff the phone under her pillow. Whoever it was, she'd deal with them in the morning. Juggling a handful of gigs meant swinging between day and night shifts with no buffer in between. She slept when she could. It wasn't often. But as she'd pulled her hand away, her thumb slipped across the screen, accepting the call. With the pillow muffling the noise and her mind caught somewhere

between dream and awake, the voice on the other end sounded too close and far away at the same time.

“—wrong. Not *wrong*, but wrong, you know? And it’s—”

Meg had fished the phone out from under the pillow intending to hang up on whoever thought they needed to rant into her ear at two in the morning.

But then she saw Claire’s name on the display.

“It’s just—it was right there. Under our stupid noses.” Claire paused. “Meg?”

“Yeah,” Meg said, voice like a garbage disposal. “I mean—yeah, I’m here.” Then, “What’s going on?”

She sat up. Ran her tongue over fuzzy teeth that tasted like the cigarettes she wasn’t supposed to be smoking anymore. For a long time, all she heard on the other end of the line was Claire’s breath. Calm, but a little ragged, like she’d just been crying.

It made her think of another time her little sister had called her crying in the middle of the night, making promises and threats. Meg stiffened against a shiver.

“Everything okay?” she asked carefully.

“It looks different at night,” Claire said finally.

“What does?”

“The house.”

Meg didn’t need to ask which house. “What are you doing there?”

She could almost hear the shrug. “I had a feeling.”

“Oh yeah?” Wide awake, Meg climbed out of bed and started hunting in the dark for a pair of jeans. Her shoes.

“I couldn’t sleep. Couldn’t stop thinking about that room. What it showed me.”

“When most people can’t sleep they pour a drink. Take an Ambien.” Meg stuffed her phone between her head and shoulder as she wriggled into questionably clean jeans.

“I don’t drink.”

“Warm milk, then.”

Claire chuckled. “You ever actually tried warm milk?”

Meg shoved her feet into her shoes, working her heels in as she made her way to the door. “Nope.”

“Me neither.”

“Good. We can try it together. I’m sure I’ve got some around here.”

“Cookies too or no deal.”

“Obviously.”

Meg heard the brush of fabric through the phone. Keys jangling. She dared to hope it was Claire getting back into her car. Then the line went silent. Meg froze, hand reaching for her own keys, heart pounding.

Finally, Claire sighed. “You ever think about it? What we saw?”

Meg thought about lying. Thought of burying the darkness just a little deeper, beneath more platitudes, and false positivity. It wouldn’t help. “All the time.”

“Me too.” Then, “For a long time I thought it would never go away. But it’s so easy, I don’t know why I didn’t see it before. It’s like with the hornets, remember? That tree in the backyard?”

Meg’s brain glitched, struggling to conjure the memory while staying firmly here, in the moment. “I—hornets? I don’t—”

“I think I know how to make the darkness go away.”

Something in her sister’s tone sent a chill down Meg’s spine. “Let’s talk about it.” Meg started out the door, down the narrow stairs from her third-floor apartment to the parking lot. “We can stay up all night, like we used to.”

“You hated that.”

“Only sometimes.” Meg paused. “Claire?”

“Hmm?”

“What are you really doing up there?”

“It followed me, like it followed you and Esther. I could be wrong. It could... come back. But I have to try, right? We missed it. All of us.”

Meg swallowed. “What do you mean?”

“Nothing. I—nothing.” She sighed again. “Go back to sleep. I’m sorry I woke you up.”

“It’s fine. Just come over, okay? We don’t even have to talk if you don’t want. We can—”

The line went dead.

Meg dove for her car door, choking back a curse.

The rain had picked up, roaring louder than her engine. She almost missed the turn from the main road onto Hill Street, where a single streetlight shone pitifully through the flailing branches of trees left to grow wild for more than a decade.

There were dozens of abandoned properties around Blacklick, but driving along Hill Street was like driving through a graveyard, all black dirt and bones, every sagging porch a gaping maw. She was too busy eyeing the power lines, which snapped and pulled between the poles. She didn’t see the pallet in the road until she was almost on it.

“Shit!”

She pulled too hard on the wheel and sent the car drifting toward the rain-water ditch. She pumped the brakes, but they were almost as bad as her bald tires, practically useless against the pull of water flooding the road. The side of her head hit the window, not hard enough to hurt but enough to scare the shit out of her. Her hands, slick with sweat and rain, slipped off the wheel as the tires caught. When the car finally skidded to a stop, front end hanging at an uncomfortably low angle, she pressed her fist to her chest, willing her heart to slow. The engine still rumbled, but when she tried to turn the wheel, it wouldn’t budge. She glanced over the dashboard and saw nothing but darkness. Smashed headlights

probably, she thought. Great. Still, she forced the gear shift into reverse and hit the gas. The tires whined and the car jerked, but it didn't move. She tried again, stomping on the gas pedal, but only managed to lodge herself deeper in whatever hole she'd landed in.

"Come *on*."

One more time on the gas pedal. The engine roared and she could smell smoke, but she didn't let up. Couldn't. Finally, the car shook with a loud clank, and the engine died.

"No." Meg punched the steering wheel. Pain shot up her arm, but it only made her want to keep hitting things. "No, no, no," punctuated with punches to the wheel, the dash, the radio, until her hand throbbed.

She was still a block away from the house.

Taking deep, measured breaths, she leaned over the center console and groped the floorboards until she found her phone, flung away as the car spun. At least her phone was okay. She scrolled until she found Claire's number and hit Dial as she pulled open the car door.

Thunder rumbled overhead as she jumped out of the car, casting a quick glance back to see the right, front wheel dangling over the side of a ditch, and ran for the sidewalk where the thick canopy of trees shielded her at least partially from the rain. She pulled the collar of her sweatshirt over her head to protect the phone.

It rang and rang and—

You've reached Claire Finch. I'm not around right now, so please leave a message—

"Pick up the phone, Claire."

She hung up. Dialed again.

You've reached Claire Finch—

"Fuck."

She slipped on a patch of mud, nearly dropping the phone. She was already soaked through, but the rain came down harder, making it almost impossible to see.

She tucked her phone in her front pocket and pulled her now sopping sweater low over her waistband to try to protect it.

Lightning lit up the street and the shadows flinched back just long enough for her to make out the chain-link fence surrounding *The House*. She was out of breath—too many cigarettes, too much take-out—but she pushed on, forcing her legs to move faster, push harder, until finally she reached the gate.

Another flash of lightning and she spotted Claire's car: a small, blue hatchback with an *I brake for Free Little Libraries* bumper sticker. Meg pressed her face against the window, but the inside was empty. With her hands shielding her face from the rain, she peered over the top of the car to the house. She'd never been here at night—never wanted to be. The shadows that lurked beneath the eaves and under the porch really spread out at night, greedily covering every inch of the place. It looked like someone had tried to put up a swing, but all that was left on the large oak tree in the yard was a frayed bit of rope that twitched and writhed in the wind. The windows were black holes, the splintered glass like spiderwebs.

She really didn't want to go inside.

She had to.

The chain-link gate swung open, almost in welcome, as she started up the narrow, cracked sidewalk to the porch. The awning at least provided some shelter from the rain, but she could hear the roof rattling above her. It was a miracle the place hadn't collapsed yet.

"Claire!" she called, but her voice was snatched away by the wind and rain. She nudged the door with her foot, already cracked open, and called again. "Claire?"

A mournful groan in the walls followed her to the front room. From the moment she crossed the threshold, an eerie, prickling sensation fingered its way down the back of her neck and over her shoulders. Head on a swivel, she strained to see into the corners of the room, to the hallway and the stairs, feeling both horribly alone and like she was being watched.

It was smaller than she remembered.

“Claire!”

Her voice echoed, startling what sounded like bats somewhere in the house. She suppressed a shudder and made her way deeper into the house, using the flashlight on her phone to navigate. The first hallway was clear. Same with the kitchen. She wrinkled her nose at the moldy wallpaper and drooping cabinets.

She pulled up Claire’s number and hit the Call button. It rang and rang. Just when Meg almost had herself convinced this was all a big misunderstanding, that she needed to do some serious soul-searching—tomorrow, today, whatever—the soft, tinny sound of music pulled her attention upstairs. She stared, unblinking, at the stairwell, and hung up. Immediately, the tinny music stopped.

Her stomach rolled.

“Claire!”

Meg ran for the stairs, taking them two at a time, the light from her phone brushing the floor, the railing, the walls covered in rot. At the top was another hallway, which led to several rooms. There was a landing off to the side with a stained-glass window overlooking the back yard. She absently wondered how it hadn’t been stolen yet. She tried to dial Claire’s number again, but her hands were shaking too hard, and she kept closing out of the screen.

Cursing under her breath, she shoved her phone into her pocket and started kicking in doors. The frames splintered, each one she broke more satisfying than the last. It felt good. She imagined knocking down every door, ripping the railings out of their sockets, and smashing every burned-out bulb until the place was destroyed. But for every room she found empty, a fist closed tighter around her stomach. Where was her sister?

Finally, at the end of the hall was the last room. Claire’s room, she thought, images of that day, so many years ago, flickering through her mind like a film reel sped up too fast. The door was much smaller than the others, its white paint

chipped and stained yellow. Meg touched the place where, a million years ago, the wood thrummed with possibility, promising dangerous secrets.

Shaking, she got down on hands and knees and opened the door.

In the faint glow of her phone light, she saw Claire's shoes first: bright-red sneakers dangling impossibly off the ground. Her gaze lifted, following the light up Claire's legs to her middle—gray cardigan hanging like a shroud—and finally her head, bent sickeningly forward, hair dangling like straw over her front. Meg stopped breathing. She gripped the door handle to pull herself up, standing on shaky legs. It was like the connection between her mind and her body snapped. She trembled so hard she dropped her phone, and the sound of it crashing onto the wood floor finally shoved her forward. Screaming, she wrapped her arms around Claire's knees and lifted.

"Claire! Jesus, fuck, no—Claire! Help!"

Meg's ankle hit something hard, and when she looked down, she saw a small toolbox. It looked like the one Claire kept in her trunk. There were dusty footprints on the top. Struggling to keep Claire aloft and the strain of the rope off her neck, Meg nudged the toolbox closer, but each time she managed to get the tread of her shoe to grip it, her arms slipped, and Claire fell hard. The sound of something cracking made bile rise in her throat.

Tears and snot streamed down her face. She could barely see, but finally she got the toolbox close enough to climb onto it. Draping her sister's limp body over her shoulder, she removed the makeshift noose from her neck and dropped it like it had bitten her. She sank gratefully to the floor just as her arms gave out. Claire fell against Meg, her skin barely warm.

Meg held her tightly and cried into her hair. "Goddamn it, Claire," she muttered.

She gritted her teeth, chest aching with each hitching breath, as a twisted sort of déjà vu took over.

She held Claire until she was cold, and then held on a little longer. She stared

unblinking at the ancient fan in the middle of the ceiling. A fan that should have crumbled like the rest of the damn house, but had clung stubbornly, cruelly, just strong enough to hold Claire's weight.

Finally, her hands quit shaking long enough for her to call for help. The words sounded far away, not her own, and when she hung up, she stroked Claire's face. She closed her eyes, head leaning against the wall. A low thrum came from somewhere in the hallway and she realized she could no longer hear the storm, though the lightning still flashed, casting shadows just outside the open door. She squeezed Claire a little tighter, the need to protect her sister too little, too late.

It was all Meg's fault.



CHAPTER TWO

MEG

NOW

The police threw questions at her while she sat in the back of the police car, feet firmly planted on the street. More than once they reminded her that she wasn't under arrest, she wasn't in any trouble, which only made it sound like she *was* in trouble. Anyway, she should have been—if she'd gotten out of bed faster, if she hadn't skidded out in her shitty car, if she'd just been *better*, Claire might not have had time to lug her toolbox into the house, to tie a rope around the fan. But Meg had, and Claire did, and now Claire was dead and the weight of it hung around Meg's neck, so heavy she could barely look up from the crumbling asphalt.

Her parents stood on the curb, arms wrapped around each other. Her mom was still in her pajamas—sweatpants and a T-shirt from their one Disney vacation, so long ago that even Meg didn't remember it—but her dad had managed to get dressed. She could almost see him getting out of bed, checking the clock, and deciding it was better to dress, to be ready for work. Because of course he would go to work after this. Wasn't Hell or high water that could keep Brian Finch from the Sunshine Plastics plant so long as there was overtime to be got. It wasn't

heartlessness, just a fact. There'd been months, damn near a full year, when the hours were piecemeal. Meg could always see the memory of those extra lean times in the corners of his eyes, even when he smiled. Especially then.

She watched her mom fall into him. They wobbled a little on their feet, but Dad kept them upright. Meg wondered if Claire's death would be the thing to reconcile them for good. Her parents were each other's bad habits, never divorcing despite years of sleeping in separate beds, of living entirely separate lives, tied together only by a mortgage refinanced too many times and a constantly dwindling bank account.

"Ma'am?"

Meg blinked. Looked up at the cop who'd been standing over her for what felt like hours. "Sorry. I was... Did you ask me something?"

The cop was tense, shoulders up around his ears. Young. Well, younger than her anyway. Once she hit thirty-five everyone started to look either like a child or like they had one foot in the grave. This was probably his first suicide. A cynical part of her wanted to tell him to get used to it.

"I asked if you knew whether your sister had made prior arrangements."

"Arrangements?"

"For her...remains." He winced as he said the word. "Sometimes people make plans. We want to make sure she's taken to the right place."

Meg scowled. "She was barely thirty."

"Of course." He scribbled something in his little notebook, cheeks blazing. "Sorry, ma'am."

Remains.

She felt sick all over again.

The cop scuttled away, likely thankful to be done dealing with her, so she pulled out her phone and tried, again, to get Esther to pick up.

Despite it being early in the morning, she knew Esther was awake, which meant

she was screening her calls. What kind of person saw dozens of missed calls and thought, *never mind, if it's important they'll leave a message?*

Esther. That's who. But only because it was Meg's number on the caller ID.

When the calls started going directly to voicemail, Meg decided she'd had enough. Gritting her teeth, she typed out a text.

Claire's dead.

Less than a second after she sent it, her phone rang.

Before Meg could get a word out, Esther started in on the rant.

"It's five in the morning, Meg. I don't answer the phone because I don't want to answer the phone. That doesn't mean you keep calling, and it sure as hell doesn't mean you send me some sick text just to get me to answer. This is low, even for you."

At the sound of her other sister's voice, Meg's throat tightened. Tears streamed soundlessly down her face and neck, soaking the collar of her already damp sweater. She pressed the phone tighter to her ear, taking comfort in the familiar bark of Esther's frustration, in this brief moment of normalcy.

She sniffed, and Esther stopped mid-sentence.

"Meg?" Her voice became guarded. "It was a joke, right? Tell me it was a fucking joke."

"They keep asking me if she had *arrangements*. I don't even know what that *means*."

"Meg—"

"And the police are here and there's this white van and all I can think about is that winter break when she was, like, six, and I got honor roll and you got that stupid attendance trophy and all she wanted was for Mom to be proud of her, too, so she told us she was outside and this guy came up to her out of his big, white van and tried to give her candy but she screamed and ran away, just like Mom had told her to—"

“Meg!”

The next words caught in her throat and she choked and it was like she was dying and—God, is this what it had felt like?

Esther was on the razor edge of hysterical, “Tell me what happened!”

When she could finally speak, Meg told her everything, about the phone call and the house. About the stained-glass window and the fan and toolbox, and at the end of it, she felt eviscerated.

Voice shaking, Esther said, “Is Mom there? Let me talk to Mom.”

Meg stood and walked the phone over to her mom. “Esther,” she said when her mom frowned.

Her dad squeezed her shoulder, but she barely felt it.

The door to the house banged open. Her dad must have seen before she did, because he hustled her mom away from the sidewalk. Then Meg saw the gurney, wheeled carefully out by the police and some guy in blue booties and a surgical mask dangling off one ear. The white sheet covering Claire’s body rustled with the wind, a holdover from the storm. The corner flicked sharply upward and Meg caught a glimpse of Claire’s red sneaker. A wave of nausea rolled over her too quick to swallow back. Bracing herself on her knees, she puked in a patch of dead grass.

Getting the bad out, her dad used to call it.

As she stood, wiping her mouth with her sleeve, the memory of a long-ago conversation moved across the front of her mind.

“It’s *badness*,” Claire had said. “I can feel it clogging my veins like mud.”

The doors slammed on the white van, making Meg jump.

All conversations seemed to stop as the van pulled slowly out of the driveway. Meg tried to see the driver, but the windows were tinted. She waved anyway, a tic she couldn’t help. On the patchy, yellow lawn in front of the house, police officers watched the van leave, their expressions somber. One of the female officers rubbed

her nose with the back of her hand. Meg felt a stab of anger. They didn't know Claire. They didn't get to mourn.

You don't either, a small voice whispered. You saw it, and you didn't stop it. It's your fault.

"Here you go, Peanut."

She turned and her dad stood on the curb holding her phone out.

"Esther's coming," he continued. "Be here in an hour or so."

"Okay," Meg said. "Good."

"I'm gonna take your mom home. She don't need to be standing here with all this..." He nodded at the cops, who'd started poking around in Claire's car. "You'll come too, right?"

It wasn't a request.

Meg nodded. "Yeah. I just, uh, I need to make some calls first."

The corner of his mouth lifted. It made the wrinkles in his cheeks look like caverns. "Sure thing. Don't take too long, though, okay?"

As he walked back to her mom, Meg scrolled through her contacts: people she didn't talk to or couldn't remember, old bosses and girlfriends. There had to be someone here, she thought. Someone who could tell her what to do. Being the eldest, Meg was expected to handle the big stuff. The disasters. Except a lot of the time, it was Meg that was the disaster. Meg that needed handling, and more often than not, it was Claire who'd done it.

In the end, Meg only called Claire's office. She was a social worker with the county, mostly with kids in high-risk environments, and there was no doubt somewhere Claire was supposed to be today. She navigated the automated system at the Human Services office and, gratefully, reached someone's voicemail where she left a stunted message and her phone number and hoped no one would call her back because there were only so many times she was willing to say, out loud, that her baby sister was dead.

She looked up at the house, at the window of the room where she'd found Claire. The shutters were dangling by their top hinges and the glass was clouded with dirt. Movement behind the window made her stop mid-breath. *Cops are still looking around the room*, she told herself, but the figure in the window had long hair and Claire's slight frame. The figure put its hand on the window, the heat of it fogging the rest of the glass. As Meg raised hers as if to meet it, the figure backed away and disappeared into the dark.