

# CHAPTER 1

What in the stupid basement is so important Mom can't even unpack the spoons? Six houses in three years, and every time we move, she spends the first week locked in her secret villain lab, leaving her teenage daughter alone to scavenge from the corpse of yet another abandoned life.

Stomping through the house as loud as I can in mismatched socks, I slam the fridge, the cabinets, the drawers — anything that makes noise, just to illustrate the emptiness. The first claws of sunlight blare through the naked kitchen windows, heating the stack of taped-up moving boxes piled in the bougie breakfast nook. The suburban cardboard pyramid off-gasses a wet paper stink, filling the empty kitchen with must and dust and not much else.

Under the rubble of our last aborted attempt at being normal, I unearth a box labeled *pantry* and spill it out on the floor. Tupperware rolls past the kitchen table. Jar lids escape under the fridge. Why the heck not, right? It's not like Mom cares. If she cared, she would have unpacked four days ago when we moved here. If she cared, she'd actually make breakfast for her kid, not leave me on my own to scavenge — let's see — a half-used bottle of black nail polish, a new loaf of bread, a container of the worst-sounding jam I've ever heard of, and, crucially, not a single spoon.

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I sit back on my haunches, glaring out at the painfully blue October morning, and force myself to breathe. Wednesday is too early for a mental breakdown and seventeen is too young to shuffle off this mortal coil, but here we are—half dressed with a pounding headache, no eating spoons, no mental spoons—getting ready for my third morning at the sixth new school I’ve attended since I hit puberty.

“Anything would be better than this,” I mutter to myself, shoveling garbage back into its boxes. “A tragic school bus accident. An escaped convict with a chain saw. A kidnapping—”

Hunched like a goblin halfway under the table, I spot the man striding around the outside of our new house before he sees me. His cold gray eyes cut through the kitchen, scanning the room. Is he casing the place? Trying to figure out if we’re home before he robs us? He’s dressed like a man who avoids the police for a living: dark hoodie, dark jeans, absolutely nothing about him distinct enough to tell anybody about. I expect to see a hammer any minute. Maybe a brick through the back door?

I lurch to my feet, blood fizzing with adrenaline, the cool emptiness of an impending fight filling up my brain. The man’s eyes meet mine through the glass. He falters. Just a second of hesitation—and it could have been his shoe catching a rock in the path around the house—but something in his face changes. His mouth twitches. His shoulders ball down. He looks away, crosses the narrow patio to the back door, and knocks hard enough to rattle the glass in the windowpanes.

Nice try, I guess, but I’m not dumb enough to open that.

Instead, balancing on the built-in booth seats around the kitchen table, I inch the window down from the top sash.

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“I just watched you walk the whole way around the house. What, you don’t want to be seen from the street? That’s serial killer behavior, you know that?”

The man keeps his hands where I can see them, blowing steam into his cupped palms. He angles his body toward me, even points his head my way. You’d think I had his full attention but something about his face . . . he reminds me of a lighthouse, way off on a broken, rocky shore. The spotlight glances over me, but never lingers long enough to illuminate.

“I came to speak with your mother.”

“Listen, buddy, let me save you some time. Just because we’re new here doesn’t mean we’re new to this. We already talked to the HOA. We don’t want to save money on any of our bills, subscribe to cable, satellite, or the neighborhood watch. Just mark us down as no for whatever and go.”

The lighthouse lamp passes my face again, almost warm this time.

“I’m an associate of hers, smart-ass,” he says, deadpan. “Is she home or not?”

Taken aback, I blink at him. Maybe my vision’ll clear and somebody rational will pop out from the late-morning mist instead.

“Smart-ass? Really? Wow — well, you’ve charmed me. I totally want to let you in now. Only, my mom’s a scientist and kind of old? So I don’t really think she’s stupid enough to fall for this whole” — I splay my hand, gesturing at his gray-salted buzz cut and three-day stubble — “negging, home-invading, soccer dad vibe you’ve got going on right now.”

The corner of his mouth twitches into an actual smile. For the first time, he meets my eyes directly and his cold gray stare feels like a

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graveyard of old mistakes. Haunted. I can practically smell the ghosts on him from here, bitter ozone drifting through the open slit of the window.

“Oh, believe me, Persephone,” he says. “I know exactly what Chloe Green is stupid enough to do.”

A well splits open in my stomach, cold water flooding my chest. How does he know my name? How does he know my mom’s name? Mine—I don’t know, we fight so much, maybe he waited outside until he heard her yelling at me? But Mom doesn’t even use her full name when she can help it. She goes by her middle, avoids giving out her last.

I don’t like this. This is above my pay grade.

“Yeah, okay, I’ll go get her,” I relent begrudgingly. “But you twitch funny and I’m calling the cops.”

Shoving the window back into place, I lock it, check the sash and the dead-bolted back door twice. Watching him the whole time to make sure he sees me do it, I flare two fingers at him, my eyes to his haunted lighthouse. He tips his head, unimpressed. Tips his chin, a silent command: *Go*.

You know, I almost hope he puts a brick through the window? I can’t wait to see what happens to him after.

Retreating across the kitchen, I pound on the basement door, howling for my mom. Nothing. Not even a shuffle down below or a whisper of music so she at least has a decent excuse for ignoring me. I try the handle, but it resists in my hand, internal servos catching, refusing to move without the correct key code.

Of course. Mom doesn’t believe in emergencies worthy of “violating the sanctity of her office.” Heck, even my own *birthday* isn’t worthy

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enough. Last month I got all the usual gifts: a rewrapped “I promise I wouldn’t postpone if it wasn’t important, Persephone;” a secondhand knockoff version of “I’ll make it up to you next week;” with an encore of half-hearted road trip and the lackluster news broken that ta-da! We’re moving! Again.

Clenching my jaw, fingers still fuzzy with adrenaline, I tug my phone from its hiding place in my bra strap.

The stranger stares straight through the house, his eyes a pressure on my spine, watching every move I make. Could she not even have put up a single curtain? I want to climb out of my skin so bad it takes physical effort to scroll open my contacts and shove the phone to my ear.

A bastion of parenting, my mother only hangs up on me once.

“Why are you still here?” she answers the second time, waspish. “The bus comes in five minutes.”

“There’s a strange man outside. I tried yelling for you, but you were too busy to bother. I’m assuming you want me to get abducted?”

Mom pauses long enough that I check the screen to make sure she hasn’t hung up on me again.

“A strange man?”

“Yeah, he wants to talk to you. Says you work together.” I hate the way his gaze moves, a methodical calculation in the way he eyes the yard, the darkened hallway just past the kitchen, the distance between the houses and the street. Still, he stands right where I left him, his hands where I can see them. Safe enough for now, anyway. I can’t resist an opportunity to nettle.

Keeping a wary eye on him, I gasp in fake horror. “Mom, are you dating?”

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She hangs up. A minute later, I hear her exasperated footsteps pounding up the stairs. The door ricochets open.

“I guarantee you we are not dating,” she says, jaw tight.

“You haven’t even seen him.”

“Go catch the bus.”

“And walk outside saying what?” I protest, glaring. “Excuse me, Mr. Kidnapper, my mom says I have to go to school today? No panel vans for me, thanks?”

That earns a sharp inhale. A flicker crosses my mom’s face, a spark about to ignite, but she freezes in the middle of the kitchen, eyes locked on the man framed in the bare lattice window of the back door. Her breathing goes jagged, too quick, like somebody punched her in the chest and she can’t catch her breath. I abandon my quest to annoy her, anxiety squeezing my own chest.

“Mom? Who is he?”

“Don’t worry about it. Go to school.” Slowly, she turns, stares me full in the eyes. She says, “We’ll talk about it later.”

Anger evaporates my worry. Instant and white-hot, it burns my nerves until I can’t feel my arms at all, pins and needles; then numb, gone. I hold myself very still, clamp my fury between my teeth, and force my voice even, so she can’t say I’m emotional and ignore me.

“You’re lying. You only ever bother to look me in the eyes when you lie. Do you think I’m so desperate for attention I’ll believe it better that way?”

“*Persephone,*” my mother says. “This discussion is over. Don’t forget your ghost salt. It’s —”

“Hanging beside the door you’re kicking me out of,” I snarl. “Same

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place it's been in the last six goddamned houses — and God forbid you share a room with me for more than a minute in any of them!”

Snatching my thrift store–carpetbag up from the hall, I storm across the house. I might as well stomp across a tomb. Nothing rattles. Nothing moves. There's nothing *to* move; no pictures on the dead white walls, no souvenir shelves, barely any furniture and what there is of that still in its funerary shrouds. Only my keys make a noise, jangling as I grab them from the hook beside the door, the little blue-glass spray bottle clanking bitterly against the only other key ring hanging on the rack.

That single key on its tattered Mothman key chain beckons me, tempting, singing a siren song about the old RV in the driveway and its full tank of gas. What if I just . . . left? Snatched up that dented little scrap of plastic advertising Mothman Motel, Room 13 and left behind my house key and the rotating never-really-home it belongs to, drove off into anywhere but here? What if I stared down the barrel of that bad decision and finally pulled the trigger?

“Persephone!” my mother bellows from the kitchen. “*Now.*”

“I'm going!” Only my own stupid keys carving lines in my palm, I wrench the door open. At the same time, my mother must open the back. The cold autumn breeze kites through our empty house, a hollow moan so loud I almost miss her icy accusation.

“What are you doing here?”

You know what? Screw the bus. I don't care. I prowl around the side of the house instead, bundled up against the cutting cold, following the stranger's dimpled footsteps in the frost-capped grass. Six houses, six schools, three years — I refuse to let her ignore me and lie anymore. If she wants to treat me like a ghost so bad, I'd rather just *be* one.

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Time for my party trick.

Not that I go to parties.

Slamming my thrifted carpetbag down on the lichen-stained lawn table left behind by the previous owner, I crumple into the nearest chair. My vision shutters. My mind winks out, the gossamer exhale of a soap bubble popping. Like *The Wizard of Oz* coming into Technicolor, I billow into the waking wind, coaxing my spiderweb sticky soul from reluctant flesh until I'm standing metaphysically naked on the garden path beside my own empty bean pod of a body.

Mom hates my party trick. The one time she caught me, she called my left-behind body "catatonic disassociation," and before I could figure out how to stop digging myself a deeper hole with my fumbling, crazy-sounding attempts to reassure her, I was three months deep in painfully awkward Thursday-afternoon mother-daughter tea times. Her homemade attempt at therapy, I guess, because God forbid she ever take me to a real doctor.

Anyway, I'm not doing that again. I diagnosed myself instead with a little help from Dr. Google. I found out the internet calls it astral projection. I way prefer that. It's more accurate than "catatonic disassociation," and less terrifying than my own theory—that the Ghost War bombs that went off when I was born blasted me with enough freaky radiation to cause my ghost to fall out. So yeah, I'll stick with calling it astral projection and just steadily keep on ignoring how . . . *dead* my body looks without me in it. There's something so unsettlingly wrong about the way my left-behind meat sits there, breathing slowed and eyes glassy, staring out into the quickly darkening middle distance of a storm blowing in.

With my weight left behind in my body, my army surplus boots

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make no sound on the broken brick of the overgrown garden path. I circle the house, find the stranger and my mother bent toward each other like springs about to fire, almost nose to nose with the storm door, ready to bite through the thin pane of glass between them.

“This was never a permanent solution,” the stranger growls. “You were supposed to come up with a plan.”

My mother sneers. “And I’m *working* on it.”

“So, nothing? Seventeen years later and you’re still just running? Well, I can’t keep running anymore, Chloe.”

Funny how even though I’m twenty feet away from it, the bottom still drops out of my stomach.

Seventeen years. I’ve never seen this man before in my life, but if something started between him and my mother *seventeen years ago exactly*, the only thing it can possibly be is . . .

Me.

Something deep in my soul creaks and breaks. The clouds follow right behind, adding their drumbeat to my internal discord. The first salvo of yet another autumn deluge pattering unevenly through my intangible ghost, freckling the pavement. Each drop strikes me harder than simple water on flesh, burning cold and raw, answering the distant echo of bone-chill spitting against my empty skin. It matches the sick pressure building in my chest, too vast to contain and too angry to abandon. For a moment, I close my eyes, just breathing, trying to get my bearings. I’ve astral projected lots of times but I’ve never felt so . . . lost.

I don’t know what this feeling is, this pressure, this sensation of toes curling on the lip of a high ledge. I’m not scared anymore. I’m not angry. I’m not even surprised. I’m . . . boiling water, about to pour into a cracked

glass. I'm the moment before the explosive *pop*, the gushing loss, two burnt hands full of quickly cooling shards.

"What choice do you have?" my mother demands, grim and cutting. "What choice do either of us have? You can't stay here, and you know it."

A humorless smile gashes across the stranger's stubbled jaw.

"See, that's just it. I can. It's the only choice I have left."

"No!" Mom's fist rattles the storm door. "Damn it, Cain —"

"You had seventeen years to make a better plan, and you frittered it away playing house!" he snarls through his teeth. "You don't get a say. This is a courtesy, not a discussion." And then the anger passes, tamped down with brutal efficiency. He straightens, checks his corners, the street, the neighboring houses, the lighthouse resuming its haunted vigil. "Anyway, it doesn't matter where either of us go. You've seen the signs. It's getting worse; we can't outrun it. By next year . . ." His eyes pass straight through me, grim as a funeral. "What have you told her?"

Side by side with him, I stare at my mother framed in the storm door, every muscle in her body locked, fists balled, eyes burning, and I don't recognize her.

Concentrating hard — *I'm a ghost, I can go where I want* — I force myself through the wall of the house in a haze of freezing, stinging pinpricks to get a better look at this strange new mother creature, some random TV show character coincidentally sharing my mother's features — but only if you squint, if you take away the fury and the fact that she cares, one hand clenched on the handle of the screen door, ready to kick it open and fight a man.

"My daughter is *my* business," she says, every word a threat. "Now get the hell off my porch."

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My mother swings the door shut hard enough to rattle. Outside, the stranger punches his fist into the door in answer. Mom doesn't flinch. Unafraid, her eyes scroll from the windowpanes, their shuddering frames, the dead bolt, the hinges, tallying up faults and flaws and disappointments.

I should know; she does the same math every time she looks at me.

"This is inevitable, Chloe," the stranger calls through the door. "You can't fight nature!"

Face fixed, my mom marches over to the disarray of cardboard boxes. Ripping one open, she unpacks in chilly silence. She ignores the man's face still framed in the doorway; sets the sugar, flour, and rice canisters up on the counter; unloads silverware—including spoons, fricking *finally*—into a drawer. At last, she unfolds a set of curtains. With mechanical precision, a wind-up toy gone domestic, she pulls down the rod, slots the curtains into place with two swift tugs, and closes them on the stranger's exhausted glare.

Hidden now, her face crumples. She lifts a shaking hand, pressing hard into the sudden downturn twitch of her lips.

"Of course I can, you idiot," she whispers, throat squeezing on the words. "That's what started this whole mess."

I don't know what to do. Don't know what this means. I close my—not eyes exactly. I don't have eyes outside my body—or else I'm only eyes, just a cloud of awareness floating along—but I turn off the movie projector, bring up the house lights.

Out in the overgrown garden, soaked to the bone, I push myself away from the table. I stand on shaking legs, gone cold and clammy in the rain. Algae rubs off the tabletop, staining my palms green. I force

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my rusty fingers to bend around the handle of my bag, joints screaming, frozen stiff. A steady bead of water drips from its sodden belly. I lift it, arms protesting every step of the way, and peek inside.

My stuff looks dry, I think, the carpet thick enough to keep the rain out for now. But I know from experience it'll stay damp all day, exuding a wet animal and thrift store musk.

Great. I love that for me.

On the other side of the house, the garage door grunts open. My mother whips out in her little Prius so fast she almost bashes off the sideview mirror. With a squeal, she races out into the street and I'm home free. I can sneak back inside, play hooky, call it a day. Maybe with whatever blackmail material I just accidentally stumbled into, I can finally convince her to let me homeschool so we can quit this carousel farce of new schools, new states, twice a year.

But I'm not that lucky.

Mom doesn't even look at me — when does she ever look at me? — but the moment the corner of her eye catches me standing soaked in the shriveled, sun-bleached garden, her entire face locks down. She stomps on the brakes, sucks in a deep breath like I'm stealing her oxygen specifically.

Realizing it's too late to escape now, I plod across the yard. Mom spends that whole long thirty seconds very obviously doing math in her head, leaving me standing in the October drizzle, mascara spiderwebbing down my cheeks. After a couple calming calculus equations, when she feels less like killing me, she rolls down the window.

"Persephone," she says. Just that. Just the literal worst name she

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could have saddled me with, all my flaws and nuisance weighing down those four fat syllables.

I walked over here meaning to tell her the bus never came. I had an excuse ready, an argument prepared. But the way she can't even *look* at me, my name in her mouth like a disgusting thing — here it comes — the delayed explosion, the boiling water finally filling up my broken cup. The porcelain inside me pops.

Black-chipped fingernails denting the rubber window seal, I explode.

“Was that my *dad*?”

My mom's beige fingernails leave dents of their own in the steering wheel.

“Get in the car.”