

APRIL HENRY

THE  
LONELY  
DEAD

*Christy Ottaviano Books*

HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY

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*For Wendy Schmalz,  
agent and friend over the course of twenty-five years  
and literally dozens of books*



MONDAY, NOVEMBER 26, 4:15 P.M.

## NOT MAKING SENSE

Would anyone even hear me scream if something bad happened back in this wooded corner of Gabriel Park? Aside from the occasional dog walker, I rarely meet anyone on this path. A couple of months ago I did see a homeless guy crawl out of a dirty tent set up underneath a rhododendron, but I just walked faster and he didn't make eye contact.

It's a bleak fall day, close to sunset. Cutting through the park is the fastest route from the city bus stop to the apartment I share with my grandpa. In Portland, only elementary and middle school kids ride school buses. Once you're in high school, you have to take TriMet, the city transit system. Even if none of the stops are close to where you live.

After crossing the small wooden bridge over the stream, I pick up my pace as I enter the trees. My footfalls

are muffled by the hard-beaten earth of the twisty path, spotted with puddles from yesterday's rain.

This section isn't like the rest of the park. No grass, no basketball courts, no paved paths, no playground equipment. Just towering evergreens, the way Portland must have looked two hundred years ago. The slanted late-afternoon light reveals a million shades of green and brown. Yellow-green ferns spring from the rust-colored needles blanketing the dark brown earth. The tree trunks are covered with velvety emerald moss, and the gray-green-needled branches of the trees slice the darkening sky.

It's hard to believe I'm in the middle of a city. This could be the fairy-tale forest where Little Red Riding Hood met the wolf, or Hansel and Gretel came across the witch's house. Back here, I've seen coyotes slink into the shadows, and once I even spotted a black-tailed deer bounding away into the trees.

As I round a corner, a girl calls out, "Adele?" Even though I can't quite place it, her voice is familiar. I stop. I don't see anyone, but I'm not nervous. I'm afraid of homeless guys, of drunk guys, of guys who might try to drag me into the bushes. Not of some girl who knows my name.

"Adele?" she calls again.

A flash of movement on my left. I squint in the gathering darkness. Through a gap in the branches, I see a girl sitting cross-legged under the green skirts of a tree, her back against the trunk. She lifts her hand and wiggles her fingers.

Tori Rasmussen. And for some reason, she's pretending she's not mad at me.

I start walking again. Whatever Tori wants to say, I don't want to hear it. Especially not after what happened—what I did—Saturday night. I don't want to be anywhere near her.

"No! Don't leave, Adele," she calls. "Please! Talk to me."

Against my better judgment, I turn back and push my way through the branches. One slaps me wetly in the face. I stop about ten feet from her. As usual, I feel hulking next to Tori, who's built like a sprite.

"What." I don't phrase it like a question.

"Adele?" Tori repeats. She looks both surprised and happy. Which doesn't make sense. The last time I saw her, she was screaming at me to get out of her sight.

"What are you doing here, anyway?" Tori lives a couple of miles from here, up in the West Hills in a house that's probably bigger than my whole apartment building. Why is she hanging out at the park? She wasn't even at school today. I know, because I looked, ready to duck out of sight. I couldn't avoid her friends, though. I saw the looks they shot me, the way they whispered behind their hands and rolled their eyes.

Tori isn't dressed like she's been out running or walking a dog. In fact, she isn't dressed for the weather at all. Now that I've stopped moving, I can feel the chilly November air even through my coat. Tori is wearing a peacock-blue halter dress that sets off her red hair and pale shoulders. Just looking at her bare legs and arms makes me shiver.

The thing is, I know that dress. It's the one Tori was wearing Saturday night. Which was nearly forty-eight hours ago. When I left her house, Tori and Luke were still fighting. Maybe they ended up in his car, driving around and arguing, and she eventually got out in a huff. And now she's hiding out to teach him some kind of lesson.

But for nearly two days? And how did she get here? Her bare feet are perfectly clean and white, her toes painted the same iridescent sheen as her dress.

She tilts her head to one side but doesn't answer my question. "You can hear me."

"Yeah," I say slowly. She's not making sense. "Are you okay, Tori? Aren't you cold?"

Her snub nose crinkles in confusion. "No. I'm not feeling much of anything."

So Tori's drunk. Or on drugs. My breath is hanging in a cloud. If it isn't freezing now, it will be as soon as the last light leaves.

"Even though I'm still furious with you, I'm just glad you're talking to me." She presses her lips together and shakes her head. "I've been calling and calling, and no one hears me."

Only then do I see it. A gray rope of mist falls from the back of her head like a braid. The other end disappears into the ground where she's sitting, a small rise of freshly turned earth surrounded by decades of reddish-brown pine needles.

On the nape of my neck, the hair rises. Next to Tori's thigh, a big toe is poking out from the dirt. The toe is

grayish, and the nail is painted a familiar blue-green. The prickling spreads down my arms.

That rise is a grave.

And that grave? It's Tori's.

She's dead. But she doesn't know it.





MONDAY, NOVEMBER 26, 4:28 P.M.

## JUST A LIE

No. I blink, rub my eyes, and look again. The grave is still there.

Only it can't be. That can't be a mound of fresh dirt. And Tori can't be sitting on top of it, talking to me.

Grandpa warned me this would happen. He said if I ever stopped taking my pills, I would go back to being delusional.

In my mind, I hear Dr. Duncan's soothing voice, the kind that invites confessions. The first time we talked, he said, "Adele, have you ever talked to a person no one else can see?" I was so young that I didn't realize it was a terrible idea to say yes.

Seeing things that aren't really there, hearing voices say awful things—the doctors and my grandpa all agree these are signs of my mental illness. I'm schizophrenic, just like my mom and grandma were. Both me and my

mom were prescribed antipsychotics. Unlike her, though, I've been taking my meds. At least until two weeks ago, when I accidentally missed a pill. The next morning, I woke up feeling so *alive*. And then I decided to keep skipping them and see what happened.

The answer is *Tori*. *Tori* happened. And the reality is that she's not dead and I'm not talking to her ghost or spirit or whatever. She's just a lie that my broken brain is telling me. Just because she wasn't at school today doesn't mean she's dead. My mind's trying to make me feel bad, conjuring up a dead *Tori* to punish me for what I did Saturday.

The talking *Tori*, the grave I think contains a dead *Tori*—none of it's real. I make myself turn away from the hallucination. Make myself stop talking. Tell myself to stop listening. By acting as if all this is real, I'm giving it power.

"Adele?" *Tori* says anxiously. "Where are you going?"

Pain pricks behind my right eye. I have to get home before someone sees me talking to no one. If Grandpa ever finds out . . .

With one hand raised to shield my face from branches, I start to push my way back out.

"Wait!" Her voice turns frantic. "Adele! Please help me. Something's wrong. I keep trying to leave, but for some reason I can't."

"Shut up. Please. Just shut up." I pause but don't turn around. "You're just in my mind. You're not real."

I'm breaking Dr. Duncan's rules, the ones I kept until the medication made the hallucinations go away. Don't

interact with them. The more you do, the more you'll fall into the abyss of your own insanity. Remove yourself from the place where you imagine you see the dead. If you can't, ignore them.

"What do you mean I'm not real?" Tori forces a laugh. "I'm right here. Adele. Please." Her voice breaks. "Please, please, please. I know I haven't been that nice to you lately, but—"

Forgetting the rules, I whirl around and cut her off. "What do you mean you haven't been that nice to me *lately*? You haven't been nice to me for years!"

Our friendship began the first day of kindergarten, when we were seated next to each other. When you're little, you can become best friends just because you both like Oreos and SpongeBob.

Back then, it didn't matter that my clothes came from thrift stores and hers from Nordstrom. It didn't matter that with my dad in college, my mom paid for groceries with food stamps while her mom had a housekeeper who did the shopping. For her sixth birthday, I gave her a SpongeBob squirt gun I had gotten from a cereal box, and she said she liked it more than all the expensive toys she received.

But as we got older, we began to pull apart. First there were my secrets, which I learned never to share. And as Tori got older, she got busier. Her parents enrolled her in a million after-school activities, like gymnastics and horseback riding. Things there was no sense in even asking my parents about.

At least back then I still had parents.

Then in second grade, my dad got what he thought was the flu but was really meningitis. That morning he'd been laughing as he gave me a piggyback ride to the bus stop. That night, feverish and nauseated, he went to bed early in the guest room, complaining about a pounding head and stiff neck. When my mom tried to wake him the next morning, she found him cold. I woke to her screams. She was never the same. Two years later, she was killed in a car accident and I had to move in with my grandpa. When he discovered I thought I could talk to dead people, he hustled me off to a psychiatrist. The pills Dr. Duncan prescribed took away my hallucinations but left me slow and anxious, unable to concentrate. Not exactly top-shelf friend material.

When we started middle school, Tori made new friends. She became one of the popular people, and I became the kind of girl no one much notices. Now it's like we were never close.

"You have to admit that you were always a little weird, and you've only gotten weirder." Tori quirks one auburn eyebrow. "Remember how you tried to convince me there was an invisible bird in my basement? You'd even hold out your finger and claim it was landing on it." She rolls her blue eyes. Here in the shadows, I shouldn't be able to see her so clearly. My imagination must be coloring in this hallucination more vibrantly than real life.

Just like it did the parakeet in her basement. It had a sky-blue chest and back, with a white-and-black-striped head and wings. It could flutter four or five feet in any

direction, but the thin tether of mist that ran from the back of its head to the concrete floor prevented it from going too far. A few weeks ago in Western Art, we saw a photo of *The Goldfinch*, a famous painting of a bird chained by its foot to a bird feeder. I gasped. Tori looked over, and I knew she remembered too.

Back then, when I told my mom about the parakeet, she said it must have been buried under the concrete basement floor. And she warned me to stop talking about it, even to Tori. But later Dr. Duncan told me that all the dead and buried things I've seen acting like they're alive—dogs and cats, parakeets, and occasionally people—are all in my head.

But sometimes I wonder. If I had somehow dug down through the basement's concrete floor, would I have discovered a handful of tiny bones? So light you could hold them in your palm and not even tell they were there?

Seeing that painting in art class must be why I'm imagining Tori talking about the bird now.

"Okay," she says. "You think you're imagining me."

I nod. "I *know* that."

"You think you're mentally ill."

"I stopped taking my meds." I rub the spot on my temple that feels like it's being impaled.

"What meds?"

I don't answer her. Tori should know what I'm talking about, since she's really me, or at least a splinter of me. I don't like the way the drugs bleed the color from everything. How they make me feel dizzy and drowsy

and sick to my stomach. I'm seventeen years old. Don't I get to feel alive?

"And for some reason, now you think I'm dead," she continues. "Which is really crazy."

Great. Even my hallucinations are calling me insane.

"You're not real." I close my eyes, put my hands over my ears. But I can still hear her.

"Of course I'm real, Adele. And I'm definitely not dead."

The thing is, even though I know the Tori I'm talking to isn't real, what about the grave she's perched on?

I open my eyes and drop my hands from my ears. For a moment, I decide to act like it's all real, the living girl and the dead one. It's the logic you use in dreams. Like when you suddenly find yourself flying with just your arms, or you can swim underwater without needing to breathe. You just go with it and see where it takes you.

Maybe I could even be dreaming now. The thought fills me with relief.

"Look down," I tell Tori. "I'm pretty sure that's your own self you're sitting on. Check that out." I point at the object sticking up out of the dirt. "What's that?"

"It's a toe," she says slowly, looking back and forth from her own toes to the one emerging from the ground. The nail polish is the same shade.

"Right. *Your* toe. Just like up here someplace is your head." I move to the other end of the mound and begin to scoop and scrape where the tether of mist disappears. Tori gets to her feet and watches, her hand over her

mouth. The jumble of needles and earth is fresh. Someone has tried to tamp it down, but it's still loose, easy to move. In only a few seconds, we both see it: the face of the dead Tori.

Her flesh is waxy and pale. Her eyes aren't completely closed. A rim of bloodshot white shows at the bottom. Dirt rests between her lips, like that time I got her to take a bite of a mud pie by double-dog daring her.

Tori looks down at her dead self and begins to scream.



TWELVE YEARS EARLIER

## IF THE DEAD ARE ALWAYS ALIVE

I was five when I first learned I could see the dead. Even smell and touch and talk to them.

My mom had brought me to her friend Pam's house. She and Pam settled around the kitchen table with cups of coffee and shooed me out to play in the bright June sunshine. Not that there was anything or anyone to play with in the fenced backyard.

I was drawing in the dirt with a stick—I was just learning how to spell my name—when I spotted the black dog. He was asleep between two rosebushes in the far corner of the yard, his nose resting on his paws.

When I walked up to him, he raised his head. His muzzle was white, as was the fur around his rheumy eyes. But when he saw me looking at him, his tail started to thump.

“Good dog.” I held out my free hand, making a fist



the way my mom had taught me. He sniffed, then licked the top of my hand with his warm pink tongue. When I scratched behind his ears, he sighed in pleasure.

He smelled like wet fur and stale dog food, but I didn't mind. Because this was a dog, and he wanted to be my friend! Our apartment didn't allow pets. But just for this moment, I could pretend he belonged to me.

I raised the stick in my hand. He whined, low in his chest, then slowly pushed himself to his feet.

Turning, I threw it as far as I could. Which was only about six feet. But the dog didn't move.

I pointed. "Go get it, boy!"

Even though he whimpered, he stayed where he was.

Maybe he needed more of a challenge. I walked over to the stick, picked it up, and shook it. He let out a little woof. I threw it again. It was now about fifteen feet from him.

This time, the dog gathered himself and started to move toward it. But before he reached it, he stopped with a jerk. A silver-gray rope ran from the base of his skull to the ground, tethering him. It looked filmy, like it was made of fog. He pulled, but it didn't give. With a tired huff, he slowly moved back to his original spot and lay down.

Behind me, my mom called my name through the screen door.

I didn't move. "Can't we stay a little longer?"

"Honey, we don't have time. Sorry."

I squeezed the dog around the neck. His fur was

rough against my cheek. I whispered goodbye before I ran inside.

“They have a doggy, Momma.” I hopped up and down in the kitchen with excitement. “He let me pet him, but he’s tied up, so he can’t play fetch with me.”

Pam’s eyes went wide. “We used to have a dog. But he died two years ago.”

“He’s not dead.” I pointed out the window. The dog raised his head from his paws. “He’s right there.” He let out a yip. “Can’t you hear him?”

“That’s where we buried Oliver.” Pam’s gaze went from me to the window. She took one step back and then another. Her hands came up as if to keep me away. “How does she know that?”

My mom looked past me. Something about how her eyes narrowed told me she saw Oliver, too. She grabbed my upper arm, hard enough it hurt. Her laugh sounded like broken glass. “Oh, Adele’s got such an active imagination. You know, only children.”

I stamped my foot and pointed. “But he’s right there.”

Mom was already dragging me toward the front door. “Adele must have guessed. The earth is probably still disturbed back there.”

Once we were outside, she didn’t even buckle me in my booster seat. She just shoved me in the car, slammed the door, threw herself in the front seat, and started driving. Fast. I could hear her muttering to herself, but I couldn’t make out any words.

After a few blocks, my mom pulled over, turned off

the car, and got in the back seat with me. She cupped my face with her cold hands.

“Listen to me, Adele. This is serious.” Her brown eyes, the same color as mine, drilled into me. “I’ve been hoping I was wrong, but you and I, we have a big secret.”

“What secret?” I liked secrets. Secrets meant things like presents and being allowed to lick the cake bowl even though it was almost dinnertime.

“We can see the dead.”

“What?”

She took her hands away and pressed one to her mouth. “That dog in Pam’s backyard? You might think he’s alive, but he’s not. He’s dead.”

My face got hot. Even at five, I knew what *dead* meant. Dead meant you couldn’t move or play anymore. That it was all over.

But that clearly wasn’t true for Oliver.

“Oliver wasn’t dead. He was just old. He licked me.”

“No, Adele.” Mom shook her head. “The truth is that dog is nothing but buried bones. Even if you and I can still see him.”

“So he’s a ghost?” She wasn’t making sense. And she was starting to scare me.

“I don’t know.” She shook her head, her eyes unfocused. “I don’t know if we make the dead come alive for a little bit or if they’re always alive in some way, but only certain people can see them.” Her eyes pierced me again. “Listen to me. You can never tell anyone you see the dead. It disturbs people. If you think an animal or a person might really be dead, look for that tether from

the back of their head. Or if they look fuzzy or see-through, that's another sign. The longer they've been dead, the fainter they get. The dead are lonely, so terribly lonely. It takes a lot of strength, but you have to ignore them, no matter how much it makes your head hurt. Especially don't talk to them if other people can see you. They'll call you crazy."

"I'm not crazy!" I was a little uncertain as to what *crazy* actually was, except for wrong. I had heard my grandpa call my mom that before she stormed out of his apartment, dragging me by one arm. But maybe he was right. Because what my mom was saying didn't make any sense.

She put her hands on my shoulders and gave me a little shake. "Imagine if Pam had seen you. She's not like you and me—she couldn't see that dog. All she would have seen was you." She shook me again, making her silver locket bounce on her chest. "To her, it would look like you were talking to nothing and patting the empty air."

My lower lip jutted out. "Oliver's not nothing. He's not dead. He was right there! You're lying! He's alive!" I could still feel his fur against my face, hear the sound of his labored breathing.

She shook me harder. "Adele! You have to listen! People like us have been killed because other people were afraid of what we can do. When we can't really *do* anything! We can't make others see what we do. We can't bring the dead back to life. All we can do is talk to them if we're near their bones."

“And pet them,” I said stubbornly, still not wanting to believe her.

She took a ragged breath. “Do you know what a witch is?”

“They have pointed noses, and their skin is green.” I thought some more. “And they fly on brooms. And they’re bad.”

“Well, we’re none of those things, but if you tell people you can see the dead, some of them are going to think you’re a witch.” She gave me another shake. “Or mentally ill. Or a liar.”

“You’re scaring me, Momma.”

She lifted her hands away from my shoulders. I saw they were trembling.

“Good. I’m glad you’re scared. This is serious. You have to keep it a secret. And never even hint about it to your dad—and especially Grandpa. Seeing the dead is the reason your grandma’s gone.”



MONDAY, NOVEMBER 26, 4:39 P.M.

## EVERY TIME I TRY TO LEAVE

“Stop screaming,” I tell Tori now. “It’s hurting my ears.” It’s also not helping the pain in my head.

The shrieks stop, but not the protests. “I’m not dead!” Tori says. “I’m not!” She keeps her gaze fastened on my face, not looking any lower. I’m still on my knees at the head of the makeshift grave.

At this point, I’m not too certain myself what’s true. The Tori who’s screaming and arguing—she’s probably not real. But what about the dead Tori whose face I just uncovered? Is that Tori real?

“This is you, Tori,” I say to myself as much as to her. “Your body, anyway.”

“No it’s not. *I’m* me.” She pokes herself in the chest. “That’s just a thing.” She flicks her hand dismissively. “A mannequin, something made up to look like me. It’s a

sick joke. You know, for a TV show or something.” She squints up at the trees as if searching for hidden cameras.

Tori needs to calm down, but she won’t if she can still see her dead self. I push the dirt back into place. Under my fingers, the dead girl’s face is cold and hard, as inanimate as a metal table. When I graze the tether at the back of her head, it feels like cool, plush fabric.

“I can’t be dead. I can’t,” the other Tori says as I get to my feet. “This is all a dream. I must be asleep.” She extends her bare arm. “Pinch me.”

I pinch her upper arm. Hard. Not just to convince her, but to convince myself. Was my mom right, and Grandpa and Dr. Duncan wrong? I pinch Tori’s skin until she yelps.

“See?” I lift my hand from her unblemished arm. “It doesn’t wake you up, and it doesn’t leave a mark. I might be able to see you and talk to you and even touch you, but I can’t really change what you are now. What you were the second you died.”

Tori grabs my wrist. Her fingernails dig in painfully, but when she lets go, there’s no sign. Just like when that old dog Oliver slobbered on me but left no trace of wetness behind.

When Tori sees my unmarked wrist, she collapses into my arms. I hold her while she cries. She’s warm and pliable, unlike the girl in the grave. This close, I see the dark red line that runs across her throat. She wasn’t choked with hands, but with something like a thin rope. Other, shallower red marks run from just under her chin

to the hollow of her throat. Tori must have clawed her own skin, trying to save herself.

On the back of her neck, the dark line ends in two purple-red oval bruises. I place my thumb on top of one. It's about the same size. My stomach drops as the pain in my head worsens. Even though parts of Saturday night are blurry, surely I would remember if I'd killed Tori. It's just that I have big hands, I tell myself. I'm a big girl, as Tori has pointed out more than once.

Finally she lifts her head. Even though I heard her crying, her face isn't red and blotchy. "If I'm dead, how can you hear me? I tried talking to other people. But no one answered."

"My mom told me it runs in my family. My grandpa and my doctor just say we're schizophrenic." I press on my temple, trying to counteract the pain, but it doesn't help.

She grimaces. "What do other people like me say?"

"I've only actually talked to one other dead person. I can only see the dead where their bones are. Mostly I just see pets buried in the yard by their owners. Like that parakeet in your basement."

Her snub nose wrinkles. "Does this mean I'm in limbo?"

"I think the Catholics did away with that."

"Well, I'm clearly not in heaven." She looks around. "So is this hell? Being stuck here with no one to talk to besides you?"

"Thanks a lot, Tori."



She rolls those baby blues. “You know what I mean. And every time I try to leave, this won’t let me.” She reaches up and grabs the rope of mist fastened to the back of her head. It’s silvery, with milky edges, about a dozen feet long. Tori pulls it so hard her biceps pop up, but the corpse in the ground doesn’t move even a millimeter.

“That looks like the dress you were wearing Saturday,” I say. “So was that when you died?”

“I don’t know. I don’t remember much about Saturday night. We were doing shots, and after that it’s more like a few mental pictures here and there.”

“What’s the last thing you remember?” I brace myself.

“Being at the party. Yelling at you. And at Luke. We broke up.”

“You did?” I can’t name the emotions roiling in me. I have a sudden flash of Luke’s green eyes and then remind myself that probably none of this is true. Tori’s not dead, and she and Luke Wheaten are still together.

Still, what if it is real? “There’s marks on your neck.” I touch my own throat. “I think someone strangled you. So who was it?”

“I have no idea. All I know is when I woke up I was under this stupid tree. And now according to you, I’ll never be able to make up with Luke. I’ll never talk to my friends again.” Her voice breaks. “I want to see my parents.”

It’s full dark now. I have to get back before my grandpa does and get myself calmed down. Act like I’m my old zombie self. If he finds out I haven’t been taking my pills . . .

“Tori, I’m so late. I have to go.”

“Don’t leave me here alone.” While a command is much more Tori’s style, this is a plea.

“I can’t stay. I’m already late.”

Her jaw sets. “Then you have to tell the police I’m here.”

“I can’t do that! First of all, there’s a pretty good chance you’re not. I don’t want to end up in a mental hospital.”

“Please, Adele, I’m the one who’s going crazy here. If you won’t do it for me, then do it for my family. If I’m really dead, they deserve to know where I am.”

“The caller ID will show that I’m the one who called.”

“Isn’t there a 7-Eleven down the street? With one of those old pay phones in front? Just call 9-1-1. Tell them you were in the park and you saw a dog pawing at what looked like a grave. And then hang up. By the time they check it out, you’ll be long gone.”

“Okay.” The word isn’t all the way out of my mouth before she envelops me in a hug. Every bad thing that’s come between us over the years fades a bit under the force of that hug.

I finally pull back. This is the last time we’ll talk. Once I’m back on my meds, this Tori will disappear.

And even if she’s not a hallucination, once her corpse is taken away, this version of her will have to go wherever her body does.

Before I leave, I brush the dirt off the dead girl’s face again, telling Tori that it will make it easier for the police to find the body. After giving her one final hug, I push

my way out of the branches. Only a combination of muscle memory and luck keeps me on the dark path.

Finally I reach the road. When there's a break in the cars, I run across, my pack thumping against my back. In my chest, my heart thumps even faster.

I want nothing more than to be back in my apartment. I'll take a pill tonight and another tomorrow morning, and I'll keep taking them until everything is hazy. Until I forget this ever happened.



MONDAY, NOVEMBER 26, 5:07 P.M.

## DOESN'T DESERVE TO

As I cut across the street, I wonder if putting my turtleneck over my mouth will actually change my voice. Even though people in movies are always doing that kind of thing, does it really work? I decide to pitch my voice lower and rougher. It's already pretty low. Maybe they'll even think I'm a guy.

The 7-Eleven is part of a small strip mall with a windowless bar on one end and a martial arts place on the other. I peer inside through taped-up ads for cigarettes and beer. The clerk is facing away from me, reading a magazine. It's the lady who's nearly as old as grandpa. She's sold me Doritos, Lay's chips, and Fritos of all flavors, as well as the occasional handheld fruit pie.

The scratched and dented pay phone is mounted outside. A call costs fifty cents, but when I check my wallet, I don't have any coins. Maybe I should just take off. But I

remember Tori weeping on my shoulder. Despite everything she's done, everything she's said, if what just happened was real, she doesn't deserve to spend another night out in the open.

My eyes settle on the words printed on the phone. It's free to make an emergency call.

When I pick up the black receiver, it's heavy in my sweaty hand. The shiny metal cord reminds me of the silvery rope of mist running from the back of Tori's head. That tether, Tori, the dead version of her: Any or all of these might or might not be real.

I press 9, 1, and then 1 again.

"Police, fire, or medical?"

"Police." I'm trying so hard to make my voice deep it cracks.

"What is the nature of your emergency?"

"I was just in Gabriel Park, and I found a grave."

"A grave?" Does the dispatcher's voice betray surprise?

I realize I'm going to have to be more specific. "In that wooded part. Past the dog park. She's underneath the biggest tree."

Wait—wasn't I supposed to say something about a dog digging up a grave?

"She?" the dispatcher echoes. "Who's *she*?"

Cursing myself for being an idiot, I hang up.



MONDAY, NOVEMBER 26, 5:17 P.M.

## THIS GAME

Waiting for the light to turn, I check the time on my phone. My grandpa is due home any moment. I don't want him asking questions about where I've been. He's told me more than once that dealing with my grandma's and mom's mental illness almost killed him. And even though I know he loves me, he's also made it clear he couldn't—wouldn't—go through it again.

What will happen if he figures out I've stopped taking my pills? Will he kick me out? Put me in a mental hospital? Either way, my life would be even worse than it is when I'm on the pills.

I hear the cop car before I see it. Red and blue lights flashing, speeding down the street toward me. Cars pull over to let it pass. The WALK sign blinks on, but I have to stay put.

And then the police car turns. Toward the park.

Toward where Tori, in some form or another, might be waiting.

I imagine the cop getting out of the car, flashlight at the ready. Will he—or she—be able to find the biggest tree? And what will be under it? A grave? Or nothing at all?

Shivers chase their way down my spine. The orange DON'T WALK sign is back on. After the lights cycle through again, I'm going to have to run to have any hope of making it home before Grandpa. Run toward my old medicated life, the one I don't want back.

The last two weeks I've felt more alive than I have in the last nearly seven years. In class, I no longer feel the insistent pull of sleep. Teachers keep looking surprised when I raise my hand. I've even lost nine pounds without trying.

If I start taking the pills again, it won't be long until I'm back to being the old Adele. Anxious Adele, who has trouble concentrating. Adele with her gummy mouth and shuffling walk. The pills make me feel like I'm seventy-seven, not seventeen.

On the other hand, if I hadn't started flushing my pills, I wouldn't have done that stupid thing at the party Saturday night.

And today I paid the price. I've slipped back into seeing things that aren't there.

Haven't I?

The light finally changes, and I run across the street. I dart through the parking lot, which doesn't have assigned spaces, scanning for Grandpa's truck, then start

down the walk. I'm so busy checking that I run straight into Charlie Lauderdale.

Or rather, into the laundry basket he's carrying. He loses his grip on one side. It droops, scattering dirty clothes all over the even dirtier walkway.

"Charlie?" I have no idea where Charlie lives, but it's definitely not in my complex. No one else my age lives here. The twelve apartments are mostly occupied by older people or single moms with little kids. Having him appear on my apartment walkway is so weird I wonder if I'm hallucinating again.

"Hey, Adele." Charlie's tall and thin, verging on skinny. The tall part is new, and he doesn't seem comfortable with it. In high school, we've had a few classes together, but that's about it. He went to a different middle school. All I know about him is he's smart and quiet. Maybe even quieter than me. He's the kind of guy who's on the robotics team.

Even though the only light is at the top of the staircase, I can see a flush creeping up his neck. Awkwardly shifting the basket to one hip, he leans down and starts picking up the spilled laundry. I help. His face gets even redder as I add a sock and a sweater to the basket.

"You live here?" I ask. Although why else would he be here with a basket of laundry?

"As of last weekend." The redness has reached his face.

"Welcome to the 'hood." Leaning over, I snag the last item, which reveals itself to be a contraption of white elastic straps, and OMG, is that some kind of pouch? I realize it's a jockstrap.



*I am holding Charlie Lauderdale's jockstrap.*

I fling it into the laundry basket and wipe my hand on my pants as Charlie closes his eyes, his face scarlet.

“Sorry!” As soon as I say it, I wish I hadn’t said anything. Better for both of us to pretend this moment never happened. “Um, I guess I’d better go.” I start to push past him.

Above his shoulder, I see something that makes me freeze. The light is on in our apartment. And a shadow is moving over the curtain, toward the front door.

When my grandpa opens it, he’s going to be wondering why I’m late. What if he figures out I’m off my meds before I have a chance to start taking them again?

I need to stop that thought before it starts. I need to give him something else to worry about.

The door creaks open. Turning, I put my palms on either side of Charlie’s face, my fingertips just under his jaw. I ignore his sucked-in breath. My improvised plan is to cover his mouth with my thumbs and then kiss them. It’s a game kids used to play on the playground when we were in fourth grade. Making out passionately with our thumbs while our onlooking classmates gagged dramatically.

But Charlie doesn’t know this game. His shoulders stiffen as I move in to press my lips on my own thumbs. He suddenly lifts his head so my thumbs are no longer stacked on his lips but just underneath.

And instead of kissing my thumbs, I press my lips against Charlie’s warm, soft ones. He smells like peppermint.

Something light drops on my foot. His basket is spilling again.

“Adele!” Grandpa sounds shocked.

“Coming!” I yell. Then I push past Charlie and run up the stairs.



MONDAY, NOVEMBER 26, 5:22 P.M.

## STILL SHARP ENOUGH TO SLASH

I race up the staircase. Behind me, Charlie makes a soft noise. Of protest? Confusion? Regret?

My mind is whirling. Talking to a hallucination, kissing a boy—what’s *wrong* with me? If I hadn’t stopped taking my pills, none of this would have happened.

And what about tomorrow, when I see Charlie in health class? What exactly am I going to say? *I had to kiss you to cover up how I’d just been talking to a dead girl.*

“Hi!” I hurry past Grandpa and into our overheated apartment, making my voice bright and avoiding eye contact. “Sorry I’m late getting dinner started. I was doing homework.”

As I drop my backpack on the floor next to our old flowered couch, I sneak a peek at Grandpa. His face is nearly as red as Charlie’s was.

“This boy, Adele.” He swallows. “How long have you been—seeing him?”

“He’s just a friend.” I hang my coat on a hook, then walk into the kitchen and grab a pot from the cupboard. The soles of my feet are slick in my shoes. In the bright light of the kitchen, what I thought happened in the park seems ridiculous. How could I have imagined I was talking to Tori? How could I have actually believed she was dead?

I just need to swallow a pill tonight. And then tomorrow I’ll wake up without any hallucinations. Without any delusions.

These past two weeks were a test to see if I could be normal, but I failed. My grandpa and the doctors are right. I’m mentally ill.

Now I need my grandpa to chalk up any weirdness to Charlie. “We were just doing our homework together in the laundry room.” I turn on the water and let it run until it’s hot, then fill the pot and put it on the stove.

“Do you kiss all your friends?” Grandpa’s silvery-gray eyes meet mine for a second. “I don’t want you alone with him.” Looking away, he rubs his twisted hands together. The arthritis means he can’t work as a mechanic anymore. And even though all his friends are retired, he can’t afford to. So he’s stuck behind the counter at AutoZone. Because of me. Not that he ever says that. He’s not much on saying *I love you*, but he shows it in how he acts.

“We’re just friends,” I repeat as I grab a knife and cutting board. “That’s all.” Even that part’s not true. Until

tonight, I haven't said much more than hi to Charlie. He and I are on the same level at high school, the kind of people who can walk down the hall without attracting attention. We're both so good at being nearly invisible that we've barely noticed each other. And even if we did, I bet he wouldn't be interested. I'm a little bit shorter, but I'm sure I outweigh him.

With a thwack, I chop off the root end of an onion. I repeat the move on the other side, then peel off the translucent yellow skin.

As I start to dice the onion, Grandpa lets out a huff and shakes his head. "I trust you, Adele, but you still can't have a boy over when I'm not here." He covers the pot of water so it will boil faster.

What he probably thinks but doesn't say is *I never thought a boy would be interested in you*. Grandpa is good at not saying things. Like: *Never talk about your mom and grandma—my daughter and wife—because it hurts too much*. Or: *Never mention how you used to see things, the same way they did*.

I've been on medication for nearly seven years. Now that I've tasted what life is like when I'm really alive, it's going to hurt so much to go back. Angry tears spring to my eyes. The sharpness of the chopped onion gives me an excuse for my wet eyes, just like Charlie gives me an excuse for my flushed cheeks and the damp half-moons under my arms.

"Okay. I'll never have him over." I sigh like it's a disappointment, then tip the onions into a frying pan and add a little bit of olive oil. "Could you rinse some lettuce

for salad?” It’s one of the few cooking tasks Grandpa can still do. His fine motor skills are shot, especially at the end of the day. But he never complains. Just like he never complains about having to be a parent again when he’s nearly seventy.

“Charlie was a big help with my homework. I just gave him a peck. There’s nothing more to it than that.” I mince garlic while remembering the softness of his lips under mine. He and his family must have moved into Unit D. Mrs. Jimenez lived there forever, at least until her son put her in a nursing home last month.

Grandpa twists his lips in a worried way as he tears the lettuce into a bowl.

I add the garlic to the pan, then hamburger that I break up with a wooden spoon. I rummage around in the fridge. A red pepper still looks pretty good, so it gets diced and added, followed by a couple of zucchini. I add a shake of dried oregano and two of basil.

“That smells real good, Adele,” Grandpa says as he puts the lettuce in a bowl. “You’re turning into a regular chef.” His praise, meant as a peace offering, just makes me want to cry even more. As soon as I’m back on my meds, the nausea and heartburn that normally plague me will come back. And I won’t care about much of anything anymore.

When I lift the lid, the pot of water is boiling. I shake in some salt, then pour in pasta. Grandpa finishes the salad while I add some jarred sauce to the vegetables and meat, then drain the pasta and mix it in.

We eat mostly in silence. As he gets up to put his plate

in the dishwasher, Grandpa says, “You just need to be careful, Adele. You don’t need to be stirring things up.”

What he means is that if I die without ever getting married and having kids, then our family’s curse dies with me. Whether it’s mental illness or the kind of gift no one would want, either way it will be gone.

“Okay. Right.” I don’t bother to hide my sadness. He’ll think it’s about being kept from Charlie, when really it’s about going back to being the half-alive Adele I was two weeks ago.

Before I start back on the pills, there’s one last thing I want to check. “I’m going to take out the garbage.” I pull out the white plastic liner before he can see it’s only half full.

The garbage and recycling bins are in the back of the building, lined up on a concrete pad. It’s also the place where the orange-and-white tabby kitten lives. Or at least its spirit does. It used to watch me from the bushes, so it was a while before I saw the tether and realized it was dead.

“Kitty?” I call. “Kitty?” My eyes scan the hedge where it used to hide. No answer. Finally I open the dumpster’s black rubber lid and toss in the bag.

Behind me, I hear a meow. I turn. It’s the same half-grown cat I used to see, even though almost seven years have passed.

I scratch the cat’s head, run my hand down its body. Under my palm, its back vibrates as it starts to purr. My grandpa acts like only bad things come of seeing the dead, but this one is good. Or at the very least, neutral.

Before I leave, I give the kitten one last scratch behind the ears.

Back in the apartment, I lock the door to the bathroom, then open the medicine cabinet. In the metal back is the slit my grandpa says was for used razor blades. Lost somewhere in between the walls must be a pile of rusty metal, still sharp enough to slash.

The orange pill bottle is light in my hand. Funny how something that weighs so little can make the difference between sane and insane, between alive and something that's only a semblance.

But not taking the pills was like playing with fire. And I got burned.

After I close the cabinet, I stare into my own dark eyes, set off by my pale skin. I look like my mom. Only she was as thin as a knife's edge. Even her eyes could cut you.

I twist off the cap and shake a pill into my hand. In the distance, I hear a siren. And then another. And another.

I put the toilet lid down, then stand on top and push aside the dusty cream-colored curtain. In the park, the flashing red and blue lights of at least a dozen police cars light up the air.

For there to be that many cops, they must have found something. Something real.

They must have found a body.

*Her* body.

Instead of swallowing the pill, I step down off the toilet, lift the lid, and toss in the pill.

And then I flush.





*SEVEN YEARS EARLIER*

## BURY ME DEEP

I tried crossing my legs, but it didn't help. I had to pee. My problem was that the bathrooms weren't even in this section of the End of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center.

If I asked to go, Mrs. Whipple would just tell me to wait until our visit was over. Even with a couple of parent volunteers, her head was on a swivel trying to keep track of our class. Several fourth-grade school groups were visiting the museum. Some kids were in the dress-up area, trying on cowboy hats and petticoats. Others were dipping strings into melted wax to make candles or arguing about what to pack in the replica wagon bed.

"Aren't you hot?" Tori asked the sweaty-looking guy playing the storekeeper in charge of various boxes and bags labeled FLOUR, BACON, and COFFEE. It was a warm day in late May. We were all in shorts, but the museum

reenactors were stuck wearing layers and long sleeves as if it were really 1850.

“I am quite comfortable, young scribe,” the man said. Tori had a notebook—we all did—because later we had to write a report about life on the trail. Mrs. Whipple had already told us the Oregon Trail was actually the world’s longest graveyard. Ten percent of the people who set out died before making it to their new homes.

I crossed my legs in the other direction, but it didn’t work. I couldn’t wait any longer. Luckily, the other students provided plenty of cover. I slipped behind them and then out the door.

The restrooms were housed in a separate building. I pushed open the door to the ladies’ room and headed straight back toward one of the three empty stalls. When I came out, I noticed what I hadn’t been able to see from the entrance: a girl tucked in the corner, under the paper towel dispenser. Her knees were drawn up to her chest. A blue bonnet with a long bill hid her face, but she looked about my age. Her brown hair fell in two tight braids nearly to her waist. On top of her long gray dress was an apron that might have once been white.

“Are you okay?” I asked. Was she sick? Or maybe she was just tired of having to playact in front of dozens of kids.

“You can see me?” Her voice sounded rusty. Tired.

“Of course.”

“I am shy of trusting you.” The bill of her bonnet waggled back and forth as she shook her head. “You are not real, I warrant it.”

Her pretending to be confused by me made more sense than the other reenactors' casual acceptance of a crowd of strange children wearing cartoon T-shirts, carrying cell phones, and peppering them with questions.

"Do they teach you how to talk all old-timey like that?"

She sighed. "You take pains to discommode me. Do not be such a wisecrack."

I was more and more impressed. "Wow, the other actors don't talk nearly as good as you. I can't even understand half of what you're saying."

"Are you here only to vex me?"

Her annoyed tone let me decipher her words. She was pretending like I was the one who wasn't making sense. I decided to ignore that part of her act.

"My name's Adele. What's yours?"

"Rebecca. After all these years, what has made *you* sensible of *me*?"

She must be asking why I was here. "My whole class is here. It's part of the Oregon Trail unit. So do you tell everyone what it was like for kids on the trail?"

"Sometimes we drove the teams or fetched water or gathered buffalo chips. But for the most part, we children did as everyone else. Walked. Walked and walked and walked." She heaved a sigh. "Such a getting to Oregon. And of course, we were not spared perishing."

"Perishing? You mean dying?"

She nodded. "Even the smallest. After Mrs. Kohler died giving birth, her babe passed just two days later. Mr. Turner's son was only three when the fever took him.

My cousin Abigail was on a raft that overturned crossing the Big Blue. I had to stand within call of her and see her drowned.”

“That’s awful!”

Rebecca spoke so passionately it was an effort to remember these were lines she had rehearsed.

“Memories are nothing but pain to me now. I wish to forget, but I cannot. It is why I choose to slumber. And then you appear, waking me, and inquire after things best left forgotten.”

I shook my head in admiration. “You’re good! You really make me believe all those bad things.”

“Why should you not, when they are true? And then I took sick myself.”

“Wait, so you *are* sick?”

“I was. That morn, I reckoned I felt peevish from so much fatigue and vexation on our journey. And then came the gripes in my bowels. We had medicine—laudanum and camphor, physicking pills and castor oil. But none of it would do.”

Rebecca tilted her head back. I gasped as her face came into view. Her eyes were sunk in gray hollows. Her whole face was barely skin over a skull. Even though she was a child, lines marked her forehead and bracketed her mouth.

But worst of all, her skin was an odd shade of gray-blue.

“Oh, Rebecca, you look awful. You need to go to the hospital or something.”

“You think to gull me? I am hampered here. I

cannot move.” She turned her head and tugged at something behind her.

I looked closer. A mist of rope even longer than her braids ran from the back of her head and disappeared into the floor.

I understood then, cold horror washing over me. Until now I had only seen dead animals above the spot where their bodies had been buried. “You’re dead. You’re already dead.” I swallowed. “You must be buried here.”

“I made Papa promise to bury me deep. How many graves have we seen dug up by wolves because they were too shallow?” She looked up, remembering. “That poor woman with a comb still in her hair. And a few days later, an arm lying in the wagon ruts. Just an arm. We never could find the grave from which it came.”

“So your body is down there someplace.” I pointed at the floor. “Underneath this building.”

Rebecca nodded. “My papa said being dug out of one’s grave was indeed a dreadful fate, but those who were departed no longer cared. Clearly, he was in error. But he did what I asked, even though it took two days. And I have not seen him since, nor any of my kin. Only strangers who have not deigned to answer me, no matter how many times I called. Until you.”

She looked past my shoulder. I turned to follow her gaze.

Mrs. Whipple was standing behind me. And judging by her face, she had been there for quite a while.

“Adele, who are you talking to?” she said slowly. She edged toward me until one of her legs was in about the

same spot Rebecca was already occupying. The two of them overlapped in ways that hurt my eyes and made my head ache. Rebecca wasn't quite as solid-looking as Mrs. Whipple.

"You have got yourself into a scrape," Rebecca observed. "You will not make her sensible I am here. I know, for I have tried to converse with people over the years, and you are the first to see me."

A needle of pain slipped into my temple. "Oh, I was just playing pretend," I ventured. But Mrs Whipple's expression didn't change.

Other girls had crowded in behind her. One of them was Tori. She pointed her index finger at her own head and spun it in circles.

*Crazy.*



*SEVEN YEARS EARLIER*

## CURSED

A few days after visiting the Oregon Trail museum, I was sitting on a brown leather couch, which didn't seem like something you'd find in a doctor's office. But then again, Dr. Duncan wasn't like any doctor I'd met before.

"So, Adele, your grandpa says that when you were at the museum, you were talking to someone from the Oregon Trail times." His voice was matter-of-fact. "I've spoken to other people who've had similar experiences, and I'm wondering what that's like for you."

Relief flooded me. So I wasn't alone.

Dr. Duncan was a psychiatrist. After Mrs. Whipple called my grandpa, he had driven me straight to my pediatrician, insisting I be seen immediately because I was hallucinating. When we were finally taken back to her office, she drew blood, weighed and measured me,

listened to my heart, and sent me to a special room where they took pictures of my brain. But in between, she and my grandpa talked in low voices about my mom and my grandma and their problems. My mom's mom had died in a mental hospital. And even before my mom was killed in a car accident, she had lost her interest in living. After my dad died, she forgot to eat, forgot even to take care of me.

When all the tests on my body came back normal, I ended up at the psychiatrist's.

Unlike my pediatrician, Dr. Duncan didn't wear a white coat, but a pale blue shirt under a dark blue sweater. There was no judgment on his face. Instead he looked . . . interested. He leaned forward, his eyebrows raised, his expression open.

And I was so naive I thought he would believe me if I told the truth. He already knew it happened to others, so why wouldn't he? So I explained about Rebecca. How I had slowly come to realize she was dead, her bones buried under the museum.

He listened intently, without interrupting. When I finished, I sat back, feeling lighter.

"So this Rebecca, did she look real to you?"

"She *was* real. Just because other people couldn't see her didn't mean she wasn't real."

"Did it upset you when your teacher couldn't see her?"

I pressed my lips together for a second, remembering. "I saw the way Mrs. Whipple was looking at me. She looked scared."



“And have you seen other people like that girl before? People that other people couldn’t see? People you thought had died?”

“Not people. Just animals.” I told him about the dog in Pam’s backyard, the bird in Tori’s basement, the cat by the dumpsters.

Once at a restaurant, I had even seen a live fish floating in the air above its dead self. The one on the plate had been one of those fish cooked with the head still on. That was scary enough, the flat, dead silver eye. Everyone thought that was why I started crying. But it was really the second fish hovering in the air right above the first. A thread of mist bound their heads together.

As I talked, Dr. Duncan occasionally nodded or wrote down a word or two. It was a relief to finally tell the truth. I even repeated what my mom had said about it running in our family, though part of me wondered if I should be revealing her secrets. If keeping secrets still mattered when the person you had made the promise to was dead.

“And you say you see this little rope coming from the back of their heads if they’re dead?”

“It’s all misty-looking. It makes it so they can’t go very far. They’re tied to the head of the body they used to be in.”

He sat back in his chair. “Well, you’re lucky, then. My other patients who see things don’t have a clue like that to tell them it’s a hallucination.”

“But it’s not a hallucination. Rebecca was real.” I had developed an explanation. “This kid in my class, Dylan, he’s color-blind. He can’t see pinks or reds. But just

because he can't see those colors doesn't mean they aren't there. Maybe it's the same with the things I see. Everyone else is ghost-blind."

Dr. Duncan nodded, his face noncommittal. "I'm wondering if it might be a good idea not to tell other people about what you see."

"Why?"

"People can be unkind about things they don't understand. Even people who are your friends."

I nodded, thinking of *Tori*.

"I just have a few other questions I need to ask you." He leaned forward. "Do you ever think about hurting yourself?"

I pulled back. "No."

"Or hurting someone else?" Dr. Duncan's voice was blandly neutral, as if wanting to hurt other people was something we all did and just didn't talk about.

"No."

"Do you ever think you're being given a special message, or are supposed to do a special project, or that you've been selected to be someone special?"

"I guess," I said slowly. "I mean, most people can't see what I see. So maybe seeing the dead makes me special."

He pursed his lips. Had that been the wrong answer? "Do you think you're in danger, *Adele*?"

That was an easy one. "No." The dead couldn't hurt me. Once the dead kitten that hung out by the apartment dumpster had scratched me. I had felt the pressure of its claws, but when I looked down, there wasn't the faintest of marks.

“Do you ever hear voices from the TV or the radio when they’re not on?”

“No.” Seeing the dead made a rough kind of sense. Voices coming from the TV when it was turned off seemed like something that would only happen to someone who was mentally ill. Slowly, I was realizing I had made a mistake. A big one.

“Do you know what I am thinking now?” Dr. Duncan tilted his head and made his mouth smile. But to me it looked like he was just baring his teeth.

“Not really. I mean, I could guess.” I was starting to get mad. Underneath the anger was fear. Because what was going to happen to me now?

“And what would you guess?”

“You think there’s something wrong with my brain.”

“That’s not it at all, Adele.” He shook his head, looking sad. “I think you have a disease. But it’s not your fault. We all have circumstances occur that we need to overcome. This is yours.”

“So you don’t think Rebecca was real?”

“No.” There wasn’t a trace of doubt in his voice. “She wasn’t. I’m going to give you some medication, but in the future, if you see someone or something that might be dead, ask yourself what the likelihood is that it’s not real. And if others can’t see what you are seeing, or if you see that silver rope, just note that you are experiencing a hallucination and move on. Don’t interact with it. The more you act like it’s real, the more weight you give it. Leave if you can. If you can’t, ignore it. Keep busy to distract yourself. Don’t attend to the hallucinations. In

the long run, it's only hurtful." Dr. Duncan got to his feet. "I'm going to get your grandfather now."

Grandpa looked out of place in the office, which was decorated in shades of turquoise and dark brown. In his worn clothes, he sat next to me on the couch, rubbing his twisted hands.

"All of Adele's test results are normal, as Dr. Nelson probably told you," Dr. Duncan began. "She's a little taller than average for her age, a little thinner. Her blood pressure is great. Her blood tests were all within normal limits—no signs of alcohol or drugs, or chemical exposure, or an out-of-whack thyroid. No signs of a tumor on her scan. I haven't observed any delays in language or motor development. Her emotions are appropriate. You're not reporting any problems at school. These are all very good signs."

"But she sees things," Grandpa said between clenched teeth. "She sees dead people."

Dr. Duncan corrected him. "What she *perceives* to be dead people. Adele's a smart girl. She has a vivid imagination. But it's more than that. Using her imagination would be a choice. But this girl she thought she saw, this 'Rebecca'—I heard the quotes in Dr. Duncan's voice—"that was something she perceived as being thrust upon her. You need to remember your granddaughter didn't choose this."

After a long moment, Grandpa said, "Then it's her mother's fault. She encouraged Adele to have these so-called visions. To pretend to see things just to get attention."

“No,” I say, stung into speech. “She told me never to talk about them.”

“It’s good you brought her in,” Dr. Duncan said, as if I hadn’t spoken. “Adele is quite young, but given the family history, it’s not surprising she’s already displaying symptoms. Not only is there a genetic component, but her mother raised her to think that it was possible to see things that aren’t really there. She told Adele to keep it a secret, which of course increased her fascination.”

“Our family is cursed.” Grandpa’s fingers, stiff as claws, left furrows as he ran them through his hair. “And now history is repeating itself. Adele’s mother, her grandmother—my daughter and my wife—all lost to delusions. I won’t lose Adele too!”

“That’s why it’s good we’re getting a handle on it now,” Dr. Duncan said as he took out a prescription pad. “I’m going to put her on a medication that should cut back dramatically on the hallucinations, perhaps eliminate them altogether.”

And then Grandpa squeezed my hand with one of his knobby ones. I could tell he was sure this was good news.