

**WHEN
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Jennifer Honeybourn

Swoon READS

Swoon Reads • New York

A SWOON READS BOOK

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For my friend Jennifer McKenzie

Chapter

1

"SHELBY, CONCENTRATE." Uncle Roy's eyebrows snap together, forcing the skin at the bridge of his nose into a deep wrinkle.

I sigh and hold the heavy silver crucifix a little bit higher. Mrs. Collins is chained to the bed, her thin arms stretched across the mattress and secured to the headboard with iron handcuffs. Sounds totally sadistic, but it's actually a necessary safety precaution. That old lady may look frail, but if

she weren't restrained she could easily tear me apart. And from the way she's glaring at me with her crazy red demon eyes, I have no doubt she'd like to.

Before she was possessed, Mrs. Collins probably spent her days baking cookies for her grandchildren and planting tulips in her garden. Now? Her head is spinning on her neck like a globe on its axis and she's using language that's so foul it makes my face burn.

Uncle Roy nudges me toward the bed. The crucifix starts to vibrate in my hands. Mrs. Collins's eyes widen and she strains against the handcuffs, her body arching toward the ceiling. She isn't wearing her false teeth and her mouth is ghoulishly sunken in. Spit is flying everywhere, which is totally gross and part of the reason why I don't want to get too close to her. That and the kicking. Her legs are flying around like the blades of a windmill. She's working them so fast that her bottom starts to lift off the mattress, forcing her modest white nightgown to slide up to her hips in a very un-grandmotherly way and giving me a ringside view of her control-top underwear.

And then the rest of her starts to lift off the bed.

Crap. Looks like she's figured out how to levitate. I guess I should have pinned her legs down after all.

I sneak a look at Uncle Roy. He just sighs and shakes his head.

Lifting the crucifix up even higher, I close my eyes and start to mutter the incantation. “*Deus, in nómine tuo saluum me fac—*”

“Say it like you mean it,” he says.

“—*et virtúte tua age causam meam—*”

“Louder!”

I glare at him. Seriously? How am I supposed to concentrate when he keeps interrupting?

“*Deus, audi oratiónem . . . meam . . . um . . . áuribus?*”

There’s a reason why Latin is a dead language. It’s impossible to learn. Which is why even though Uncle Roy has made me practice this chant a million times, I still struggle with it.

“*Áuribus pércipe . . .*” he prompts me.

“*Áuribus pércipe verba oris mei.*”

I make it through the rest of the incantation without stumbling. As I finish, I feel a shift in the air, and all the sound is suddenly sucked out of the room. Smiling, I open my eyes, expecting Mrs. Collins to be lying quietly against the pillows, returned to her sweet, seventy-year-old self, eternally grateful that I saved her soul.

Unfortunately, that is not what I see.

Mrs. Collins is still halfway in the air, twisting violently, her body being wrung out like a mop by some invisible force. Her tongue is swollen and hanging out of her mouth like a

thick black eel, and her eyes . . . well, they've rolled completely back into her head.

So not only did the exorcism not work, but it seems to have agitated her even more.

Hub. Maybe I wasn't speaking loud enough. Or maybe if Uncle Roy just let me do this without butting in—

There's a splintering sound as Mrs. Collins suddenly yanks her arm back. Fortunately, it's just a piece of the headboard breaking and not her actual bones. She rolls onto her side, one of her hands now free, and tries to work the other handcuff off, so I begin the incantation again. But before I can even get the first few words out, Uncle Roy elbows me out of the way and stalks toward the bed, his black robe flapping behind him like a crow's wings.

"Deus, audi orationem meam; auribus percipe verba oris mei," he bellows. *"Nam superbi insurrexerunt contra me, et violenti quesierunt vitam meam."*

My jaw drops. I can't believe he's taking over. Again. I've been training three times a week for the past five months and he's still never let me finish an exorcism on my own.

Such a control freak.

With a huff, I collapse into an overstuffed floral armchair near the window. The lacy curtains are pulled shut so the neighbors won't see Mrs. Collins hovering over her bed like a UFO.

Uncle Roy continues the incantation, his voice strong and sure—the same way it sounds at the pulpit every Sunday. The kind of voice that even demons listen to.

Whatever. Who cares if I'm good at this or not? I'm not even sure I want to be an exorcist. He's the one pushing me to do it, insisting that I have a gift.

Some gift.

“Nam ex omni tribulatione eripuit me, et inimicos meos confusos vidit oculus meus.”

Mrs. Collins is still struggling to free herself, desperately chewing at her wrist like a wolf trying to escape a steel trap. As Uncle Roy reaches the end of the incantation, a blast of hot air causes his white hair to blow back—a definite sign that the demon is being wrenched out of Mrs. Collins. Sure enough, a few seconds later, she drops back down onto the bed, completely limp.

Uncle Roy doesn't lower his crucifix right away. Demons can be tricky. Sometimes they pretend they've gone and then, once your defenses are down, they attack. Just to make sure, he uncorks a small silver flask and sprinkles some holy water on her. It doesn't burn her skin—another good sign.

Mrs. Collins moans. Her eyes flutter open, and I can see that they've returned to their usual blue color. She stares at us, confused. The possessed generally have no recollection

of what happened to them, and considering how most people behave while possessed, this is indeed a blessing.

Uncle Roy takes her hand—the one not handcuffed to the headboard—and gently strokes it. “It’s all right, Rose. Just relax. You’re going to be okay.”

My irritation at him starts to fade a little; he has a very good bedside manner. That’s one more thing, according to him, that I need to work on.

I get up and walk over to the bed. I pull Mrs. Collins’s nightgown down over her legs and then unlock the handcuff holding her wrist. Her poor skin is raw from where she chewed at it. Good thing she didn’t have her teeth in.

While Uncle Roy continues to comfort Mrs. Collins, I open the door and let her husband into the room. He’s been pacing the hall for the past twenty minutes. Uncle Roy doesn’t like family members to be present during an exorcism. They have a tendency to freak out when they see steam coming out of their loved one’s ears.

Mr. Collins looks at me, his brown eyes hopeful. “Is she . . . ?”

I nod. “The demon’s gone. She’ll be fine.”

His wrinkled old face crumples in relief. He rushes past me and kneels in front of Uncle Roy. He takes Uncle Roy’s hand and kisses his gold signet ring as if Uncle Roy is the Godfather or something.

“Thank you, Father,” Mr. Collins croaks.

Uncle Roy pats his shoulder. “Best to just let her rest tonight, Abe. I’ll call you tomorrow to see how she’s doing.” He drops his silver flask into the black leather doctor’s bag he uses to store his supplies and gestures for me to follow him.

We walk down the plastic runner path the Collinses have laid over their carpet and out the front door. As we climb into Uncle Roy’s ancient green hatchback, I glance at the little brick house. From the outside, you’d never guess anything weird ever happened in there.

But then again, looks can be deceiving. I’m certainly proof of that.

Chapter

2

SPENCER CALLAGHAN rocks the hell out of a Catholic school uniform.

He's taken off his navy blazer and loosened his tie—the first thing he does as soon as the bell rings. His white shirt is still neatly tucked into the waistband of his gray flannel pants. The cuffs of his white dress shirt are turned up, revealing the antique silver watch he always wears with the face turned to the inside of his wrist.

“Hey,” he says, watching me approach. He’s leaning back in his chair, twirling a pencil in his fingers. His dark hair is rumpled and curling over his ears, longer than St. Joseph’s High School would like it to be. It’s this little assertion of independence—his refusal to conform by keeping his hair clipped really short—that first won me over.

“Hey.” I drop into the seat beside him. This corner of the library, our usual meeting spot, is quiet and overlooks the school courtyard. Students are already starting to scatter, and in a matter of minutes, the courtyard will empty out. As soon as the bell rings, all anyone wants is to get as far away from the school as fast as possible, but this has become my favorite time of day, because it means I get alone time with Spencer.

“You want to start with geometry?” he says, leaning forward to open his textbook.

I wrinkle my nose. “Ugh. I hate geometry.” I let my guidance counselor talk me into taking it after he quizzed me about my college plans and I mentioned I was interested in architecture. Unfortunately, architecture turned out to be only a passing interest, and now I’m stuck with this impossibly hard course.

“You may have mentioned that several hundred times,” Spencer says.

“That’s because I can’t stress it enough.”

He smiles and lightly taps the back of my hand with his pencil. He's not even touching me directly and yet a thrill still runs all the way through me. "And that's why we should tackle it first," he says. "Eat the frog."

"Um . . . what?"

"It's an expression." He starts twirling his pencil again. "Mark Twain. Put the worst task behind you and then you can get on with the rest of your day."

Where does he get this stuff?

"Well, it's definitely the worst task," I say, pulling my textbook out of my bag, careful not to let him see the big silver crucifix and bejeweled spray bottle of holy water that I have stashed inside. Because he would definitely have questions.

Spencer and I have been study buddies for the past few months, ever since shortly after he arrived at St. Joseph's, but I still don't feel like I know him all that well. He's pretty tight with details about his personal life. Then again, I don't share much about my life—it's not like I'm going to tell him I'm an exorcist. It's not exactly something I brag about. Even my best friend, Vanessa, doesn't know about my extracurricular activity.

Here's the thing: I go to a Catholic school. Most of the kids at St. Joseph's believe in heaven and hell, in God and Satan. If they found out that I have direct experience with evil spirits, they would probably publicly shun me. And while

I don't have many friends, I want to hang on to the ones I do have. Even if that means not ever letting them know who I really am.

We work silently, the only sound Spencer's pencil scratching across his paper.

"Hey, what'd you get for the first question?" I ask him a few minutes later, casually trying to sneak a glance at his homework.

He places his palm over his paper to hide the answer from me, but not before I see that he's already almost finished the entire page. He narrows his eyes. "First, tell me what you got."

"You're supposed to be helping me."

"Helping you study, not helping you cheat," he says.

"Cheating is pretty much the only way I'm going to pass this course." I put my head down on the table. I'm debating whether to just give up and gracefully accept that I'm destined to fail when Spencer does something totally unexpected; he reaches over and strokes my hair, light as a butterfly.

My breath catches. I don't want to move in case he stops. But I hear him shuffle his papers, and when I sit up, Spencer's eyes are already back on his homework. He's diligently focused on the last question, like whatever just happened didn't happen at all. He's so stone-faced that I begin to question whether I even felt anything, or if I just want him to make a move so bad that I'm imagining things.

I turn back to my own homework, wondering if I'll ever unravel the mystery that is Spencer Callaghan.



Ever since my mom left, I've been in charge of the grocery shopping in our house—a task that Uncle Roy has tried to take back several times in the past five months, because he isn't thrilled with what I bring home: heavy on the fruits and vegetables, very little sugar, zero foods that contain ingredients that aren't found in nature. What he doesn't seem to understand is that he's the reason I buy that stuff in the first place. The fact is, he's old, and I'm determined to keep him healthy. Pumping him full of kale smoothies and quinoa will hopefully help him live to be a hundred.

I'm not nearly as strict with my own diet. I have dinner at Vanessa's house at least twice a week, where I eat my fill of meatloaf and mashed potatoes drowning in butter or tuna casserole with saltine crackers crumbled on top.

"Shelby, honey, grab me some oregano, would you?" Mrs. O'Malley says as I walk in the back door. She's standing in front of the stove, stirring a huge pot of red sauce, a tea towel featuring a cartoon lobster hanging over one shoulder. The kitchen is as steamy as a sauna and smells like garlic and tomatoes.

I root through the spice rack for the oregano and pass it

to her. Mrs. O'Malley twists off the cap and turns the glass bottle over, sending a shower of dried green flakes into the sauce.

“Before you run off . . .” she begins, setting the bottle on the counter. Her glasses are all steamed up. When she slips them off and wipes the lenses on the tea towel, I notice the bags underneath her eyes. I guess that’s to be expected when you have four kids. “How are things going? Are you doing okay?”

What she’s really asking is how I’m doing without my mom. I’ve told everyone that she’s on an extended trip to Italy to visit relatives. It’s not like I can tell them the truth: that my mom’s actually training at some supersecret exorcism school in Rome. It wouldn’t be so bad if she’d at least said good-bye. We’d had a big fight, so I’d told her that I was sleeping at Vanessa’s. When I got home the next morning, she was gone. She didn’t even tell me she was leaving. She let Uncle Roy break the news to me. Thinking about it now, hurt rushes through me.

I can tell from the way Mrs. O'Malley’s mouth turns down whenever she mentions my mother that she thinks she’s awful for leaving me. I can’t imagine what she’d say if she knew that I haven’t heard from her since she left.

Not a phone call, not an e-mail.

Nothing.

She's still angry with me, and I can't exactly blame her. I said some awful things—things I didn't mean—and even though Uncle Roy claims that the reason we haven't heard from her is because the school discourages outside contact, I know the truth.

"I'm all right." I think I sound pretty convincing until Mrs. O'Malley leans over and gives me a hug. She's like an octopus, squeezing me so hard that I have trouble breathing, but I let her do it. I maybe even hug her back.

"I'm sure Robin will be back soon," she says when she finally releases me. She doesn't sound confident, though, and it occurs to me that maybe Mrs. O'Malley doesn't think my mom is ever coming back. In my darkest moments, the thought has crossed my mind, but I just can't believe that my mom would actually abandon me forever, no matter how mad she is at me.

I nod.

"You need anything, you just let me know, okay?" Mrs. O'Malley says.

"Thanks."

I'm halfway up the stairs when I hear Vanessa and her sister fighting. Before I reach the door, Izzy comes streaking out of their room, her face contorted with fury. She darts past me on the stairs, hollering for her mother.

"We have about thirty seconds before Hurricane Sharon

comes storming up here,” Vanessa says. She’s sitting on her bed, calmly flipping through a copy of *Teen Vogue* with an “Isabelle” label tacked on the front cover.

“So? How’d it go with Spencer?” She rolls up the magazine and holds it up to her eye like a telescope, pretending to focus so she can see me better.

“You know Iz is going to kill you when she sees what you’ve done to her magazine,” I say.

“Maybe it will teach her to stay out of my closet.” Vanessa unspools the magazine. The pages are curled beyond repair. She tosses it onto Izzy’s bed and lies back against her pillow, her dark hair wild around her head. “Having to share a room with an uptight thirteen-year-old is my own personal hell.” She sighs. “Now stop trying to change the subject. Spencer. Details.”

I sit down at the end of her bed. I think about telling her how he stroked my hair so we can analyze what it means, but I already know that Vanessa will proclaim it’s a sign that he likes me. I don’t want my heart to be convinced that it’s true when he might not have meant anything by it.

“Nothing to report.”

She shakes her head. “Just make a move already. Quit being such a chicken,” she says, nudging me with her foot.

Chicken? She wouldn’t say that if she could see me facing down a demon. Of course, she doesn’t know that I’m an

exorcist. Although, I'm sure that at some point she'll put two and two together. She'll remember the time she caught me filling up my flask with holy water from the fancy marble fountain in the church. Or when she noticed the weird burn marks on my leg—an injury from a particularly grueling exorcism. And once she discovers the truth . . . I don't know. I'd like to believe that Vanessa would still be my friend, but people can get weird about things like casting out demons. Even best friends.

“Vanessa!” Mrs. O'Malley bellows from the bottom of the stairs. “Get down here. Right. Now.”

Vanessa makes a face. “Only one more year until I'm up for parole,” she says, getting off the bed. “I swear, my main criterion for college is that it's in another state.”

She stomps out of the room. Vanessa may think that being away from her family is the key to freedom, but she only has to look in my direction to know that freedom's not all it's cracked up to be. Even though I'm pretty good at covering it up, I miss my mom so much, it's a physical ache. It's a feeling that's always with me, as strong and solid as my heartbeat. Nothing will feel right until she's back and I can apologize. And the worst part is that I have no clue when that will be.

Chapter

3

UNCLE ROY glances at me over his half-moon glasses as I enter the rectory.

We usually complete the paperwork for an exorcism right away, but Uncle Roy was too tired to work on Mrs. Collins's file the other day. An exorcism can take a lot of energy, and I've noticed that they've affected him more than usual lately.

Maybe if he'd just let me do one myself, then he wouldn't be so tired.

I plunk down at the scarred wooden desk across from him. Moo, my cat, immediately settles across my feet. I grab a yellow legal pad and a pen from the ugly clay holder that one of the parishioners gave Uncle Roy for Christmas one year.

Uncle Roy says it's important to keep records. I get that, but I wish he would at least let me use a computer. He makes me handwrite everything because he's paranoid that someone will hack our files. I'm not sure who he thinks would care enough to do that—and what they'd do with the information if they did manage to get their hands on it—but when I complain, he lectures me about confidentiality. Going to see an exorcist? Not exactly something anyone wants made public.

Fair enough. I mean, it's definitely not something I want anyone to know I'm involved in. But I still wish I could use a computer.

“So, Shelby. What could you have done differently?” Uncle Roy taps a pencil against his lips.

“Uh . . . I don't know. Talk faster?” I reach down to move Moo off my feet; her weight has already made them fall asleep, sending prickles up my legs.

He nods. “Yes, but your pronunciation was off as well. And you were much too far from the bed! You need to get in there. Right up close.”

“Within spitting distance? No thank you.” I shudder.

Uncle Roy's eyes narrow. "Shelby, you need to take this seriously."

"I do take it seriously," I say, stamping my sleepy left foot against the threadbare Oriental carpet. "Maybe if you'd just let me finish one time—"

"You did finish," he interrupts. "And you failed."

I slouch in my chair, arms crossed. I can feel a headache coming on. Uncle Roy's lectures are worse than the paperwork.

"You need to practice the incantation," he says. "It's critical that you get it right. Do you know what can happen if you don't say it properly?"

"I know, I know. The exorcism won't work."

"True, but it's more than that." He sighs and tosses his pencil onto the desk. "These are very powerful words, Shelby. Say them wrong, and . . . well, you can compromise the very soul you're trying to save."

He's warned me about this before, of course. Many times. And it's not that I don't listen. It's just that, even after all my training, even after everything Uncle Roy has taught me, I'm still not convinced that I can actually do it—save someone's soul.

Most Catholics would argue that it's not possible. For one thing, I'm not a priest; exorcists are always priests, at least in the Catholic faith. Also, since there are no female priests,

that also means there are no female exorcists by default. I'm zero for two.

Uncle Roy is a bit bendy on those particular rules.

"It's very important that you practice the incantation until you can say it in your sleep," he says.

I roll my eyes. As previously mentioned, Latin is a bitch to learn, so I feel like he should cut me some slack. I open my mouth to tell him that, but he holds up his hand to stop me.

"It's not just that you got the incantation wrong, Shelby. You also forgot to secure the legs." Uncle Roy scowls. "You could have been seriously hurt. Always secure the legs!" He bangs his fist on the desk for emphasis.

As he continues to nitpick my session, I stare over his shoulder at the painting of Mary hanging behind him on the wall. The painting is a bit Mona Lisa-like in that wherever I am in the room, her eyes seem to follow me. Its placement allows me to tune Uncle Roy out without him noticing that I'm not actually paying attention to him. Very handy.

Eventually Uncle Roy's lecture winds down and he lets me get back to writing my report. With a sigh, I pick up my pen again and start to scribble.

Case Number: EX100-17-3792

Incident: The Exorcism of Rose Collins

Exorcist: Shelby Black

At approximately 1600 hours on the 2nd of May, Father Roy and I met with Abe Collins regarding his wife, Rose Collins. Mr. Collins believed that his wife was presenting signs of demonic possession—suffering from nightmares, talking in tongues, sharp decline in personal hygiene, etc.

After consulting with Mr. Collins—a longtime parishioner of St. Jude’s—Father Roy and I agreed to visit his wife the next—

Moo suddenly leaps on top of the desk, sending the pages of my report flying. Uncle Roy quickly pushes his chair back as far as possible. My cat has been in the room with us for the past twenty minutes, hidden near my feet, but Uncle Roy only ever sneezes when he actually sees her.

“Shoo,” he says, flapping his hands at her. “Shoo!”

Moo stays right where she is, staring him down, daring him to touch her. I fight a smile. She knows that Uncle Roy is “allergic” to her; she just likes to screw with him.

Moo is a stray. She’s white with wide green eyes. She looks innocent, but she’s a scrapper. The tip of her ear is

missing from some long-ago cat fight. She showed up on our doorstep one night last year, and, after much begging, Uncle Roy let me keep her. I guess he must have a soft spot for strays. After all, he took me and Mom in after Dad left to “find himself” in California. Staying with Uncle Roy was supposed to be short-term, just until we got back on our feet. But two years later, we’re still here. Or I am, anyway.

Uncle Roy sneezes. I grab Moo off of the table and give her a scratch behind the ears before setting her in the hall and kicking the door closed with the toe of my sneaker.

I sit back down at my desk. As he continues to snuffle, I turn back to my report.

... day. When we arrived, Father Roy asked me to lead the exorcism. He stayed out in the hall while I conducted a survey of the scene. Mrs. Collins was in her room, still in bed, although not asleep. The room totally reeked like sulfur, so I was confident that possession had occurred.

I quickly handcuffed a half-asleep Mrs. Collins to the bed. Being that she

was so old, I didn't think it was necessary to chain her legs as well, although, according to some people, I should have.

The sun has begun its descent behind the mountains and the office is quickly getting dark. Uncle Roy leans over and flicks on his faux Tiffany desk lamp. Colored light spills across my page.

Once I had her secured, Father Roy came into the room to supervise. When she saw him, Mrs. Collins totally freaked and started struggling to get free. Typical reaction, as demons aren't too fond of priests.

I started the incantation. I forgot one word, which does not seem like such a big deal to me, especially considering that this was supposed to be my first time doing an exorcism on my own. Unfortunately, when I finished the chant, Mrs. Collins was still possessed. This could be due to a number of

reasons, but I think it's mainly because Father Roy kept interrupting me. It's very hard to concentrate when someone keeps interrupting you.

At that point, Father Roy jumped in—even though I was handling it—and completed the exorcism.

By the time I've finished the report, my hand is cramped and it's completely dark outside. It's been a long day, and my brain is foggy.

Uncle Roy peers over his glasses at me. "All done?"

I rip the pages off the legal pad and hand them over. He riffles through them, *tsking* at my terrible handwriting, then slides the report into a file folder, which he locks inside one of the steel filing cabinets lining the wall. He wears the key to the filing cabinets on a chain around his neck. I've never seen him take it off.

Like I said, he takes confidentiality very seriously.

"I'll see you back at the house," he says, turning back to his work.

I stand up and stretch. I grab my messenger bag from underneath the desk. I'm almost out the door when he says, "And, Shelby?"

I turn around, but Uncle Roy doesn't look up.
"Make sure you practice the incantation."

× ×

I walk quickly past the small cemetery that lies between the church and our small clapboard house. All of the headstones are ancient—the cemetery ran out of room a long time ago—so it feels less creepy than if the epitaphs held the names of people I actually knew. Less creepy, but still creepy.

I zip up the steps of our house and through the screen door. Stopping in the kitchen, I grab a sleeve of graham crackers and a glass of milk, then head down the narrow hall toward the back of the house.

There's a new painting on the wall—a big blob of red with a black center. Uncle Roy is way into painting lately, and his rudimentary canvases are all over our house. He only paints flowers, for some reason, and I think this one is supposed to be a poppy. He's a terrible artist, and he doesn't seem to be improving, even though he's been painting for months. Part of me wonders if he enjoys it as much as he claims or if he's just sticking with it because he hates to quit anything.

I continue down the hall. The screened-in porch at the back of the house is probably my favorite place in the world. It faces a copse of evergreen trees, and when it rains, which

it does a lot of in Seattle, I sit out here and listen to it drum against the roof.

After setting my milk and graham crackers on the rickety wooden crate we use for a side table, I reach underneath the chair's thick, orange cushion for my copy of *Rituale Romanum*—the official book of Catholic rituals. It's this incredibly old book that contains all of the Catholic rituals and rites—baptism, penance, marriage. Near the very end of the book, past everything else, is a fifty-eight-page section on exorcism.

Exorcism is all very underground. It's not like Uncle Roy advertises his services, but the people who need his help most always seem to find him anyway. Part of the reason why he's so adamant about training me is that, according to him, the universe is unbalanced. There are way more demons than there are people who know how to expel them.

I don't like to think about that too much.

I sink into the chair, the leather-bound book heavy on my lap. *Rituale Romanum* was originally published in the sixteenth hundreds, but the rituals themselves go all the way back to the first century. The English-translated copy that I have is only about ten years old, though. It belonged to my mom. I found it in her room after she left for Italy.

I flip to the list of instructions. Twenty-one detailed directions on how to conduct an exorcism. I don't need to

read them; I know them by heart. The sight of the notes my mom has made in the margins—her tiny, cramped printing—makes my throat tighten. I have cried over this book so many times that the ink on the pages has started to run.

All these months later, I still can't believe that she left without saying good-bye. She left and forgot about my existence as easily as my dad seemed to. And I know she was mad at me—we'd been fighting for weeks over really stupid stuff, like why it was always my job to unload the dishwasher, or why making dinner and cleaning the bathrooms was suddenly my responsibility, but I never expected her to drop out of my life.

I wish I could figure out what it is about me that makes me so easy to forget.

She'd seemed stressed for months—I think she was having trouble finding the balance between her job as a legal secretary and her exorcism work—and that made her snappier than usual. Instead of cutting her some slack and trying to understand what she was going through, I felt resentful. I was tired of always being at the bottom of her list and sick of the extra housework she kept heaping on me. After all, she wasn't the only one with responsibilities.

Uncle Roy knew we weren't getting along, of course. You couldn't live in our house and not feel the tension. But he

wasn't home the night we had our biggest fight. He insists that it's a coincidence that my mom left for some exorcism school I'd never heard of the very same night we had that terrible argument, but he didn't hear the awful things I said to her. If he did, he wouldn't be on my side.

I've sent my mom a hundred e-mails since that night. I call her cell phone every day, but all I get is her voice mail. She remains as impossible to reach as the moon. So all I can do is hope that she cools off soon and comes home.

I really need her to come home.

Chapter

4

THE NEXT AFTERNOON, Vanessa and I walk past the boys' lacrosse team warming up on the grass field. This isn't our normal route home from school—we have to go out of our way to walk past the field—but Spencer is on the team, and I will take every chance I can get to see him in shorts.

I spot him right away, standing on the sidelines beside Coach Lee. Spencer's wearing the team uniform, a navy-blue jersey with the number seventeen on the back and baggy

blue shorts, but he's not suited up in pads like the rest of the team.

"Spencer!" Vanessa calls, waving like a maniac and making a complete spectacle of herself. And, by association, of me.

"What are you doing?" I grab her hand and hold it down, even though it's way too late because *oh my God* he's already seen us. I feel my cheeks start to heat up. I was hoping to quietly admire Spencer from afar—I don't want him to think that I deliberately came by to see him. Even though I did.

Vanessa rolls her eyes. "I'm trying to help move this along," she says. "That boy is hot. You'd better get on it, Shelby, because the wolves are circling. Bex Wagner was all up in his personal space in bio yesterday."

My stomach sinks. I could almost handle it if Vanessa had named any other senior girl, but, ugh, Bex Wagner is the worst. She is gorgeous, no debate, but she has a heinous personality. She's the girl most likely to take your boyfriend. And she does. Frequently.

Vanessa is probably telling me this to force my hand. She knows how I feel about Bex. And I think my all-talk/no-action approach when it comes to Spencer is starting to drive her crazy.

Spencer says something to Coach Lee and then heads toward us. His dark hair is all messy, exactly the way I like it. As he closes the distance between us, I can see that he's

smiling, and my insides get all melty. If he only knew the power that smile holds over me. . . .

“You’re not playing?” Vanessa asks him when he’s finally standing in front of us.

He shakes his head. “Sitting this one out. I did something to my leg during practice yesterday.”

He’s not playing, but he’s still here supporting his team? God, I love him.

“What are you two up to?” he asks.

“Just on the way home,” I say. I have training in twenty minutes, and if I don’t hustle, I’m going to be late. And Uncle Roy isn’t a fan of lateness. I’ve learned that the hard way. One time, he made me write out the entire incantation in long-hand twenty times all because I was five minutes late. Five minutes!

Spencer’s phone buzzes. He pulls it out of his pocket. Whatever he sees on the screen makes him tense up. He glances around the field, at his teammates gathered in a circle, the handful of people who have showed up to watch the game, the woman on the other side of the field digging in the recycling bin. My stomach tightens. I hope he’s not looking for Bex Wagner.

Vanessa elbows me. I know she wants me to say something, anything, that will show him I’m interested so he doesn’t ride off into the sunset with Bex, but I can’t seem to

get any words out. My mouth is dry. I'm not usually tonguetied around Spencer, but the sight of him in his lacrosse uniform is scrambling my brain.

The whistle blows. Frowning, he slides his phone back into his pocket. "I'd better get back," he says. He reaches out and touches my arm. "See you tomorrow?"

I nod. We have a study session every Wednesday after school. Wednesdays have become my favorite day of the week. I live for Wednesdays.

"He touched your arm!" Vanessa says when Spencer's barely out of earshot. "He didn't touch Bex once in bio, and, trust me, with the way she was draped over him, that couldn't have been easy."

I'm not loving the mental image of Bex and her blond perfection all over Spencer, but it has to mean something that he resisted her charms. He's probably the only boy that has ever managed to.

As I watch Spencer walk back to join his teammates, I decide that Vanessa is right—I need to do something about Spencer Callaghan.



"... *inimicos meos confuses vidit oculos meus.*" I can't keep the smile off my face. I made it through the entire incantation with no prompting! There is no way Uncle Roy

can find fault. For once, he has absolutely nothing to criticize.

I hold my hand out, waiting for him to slap my palm. But he just leans back in his chair, crosses his arms, and says, “Again.”

Seriously? I’ve recited the incantation ten times in the past hour. I’ve also spent two hours practicing my handcuffing technique. Uncle Roy may be seventy years old, but he’s very strong. He fights as hard as any demon.

“But I just did it perfectly!”

He shrugs. “Then you should have no trouble doing it perfectly again.”

Fine. He wants to hear the incantation again? I’ll do it again.

“*Deus . . . in . . . nómine . . . tuo . . . salvum . . .*” I speak as slowly as possible. In a bad Cockney accent.

Uncle Roy sighs, exasperated. “Shelby, if you’re not going to take this seriously, then we can—”

He’s interrupted by a knock on the door. A tiny, owlsh-looking woman pokes her head into the office. “Father Roy?”

“Mrs. Harris, come in. We’ve been expecting you.”

We have?

“Come in, come in.” He waves her inside.

Mrs. Harris crosses the carpet and settles into the armchair across from Uncle Roy’s desk, clutching her black

patent-leather purse to her chest. Her dark hair is pulled back with a wide red headband, and she's wearing a floral dress that is really doing nothing for her.

"You wanted to speak to me about your son, Shane? You believe he's under an evil influence?" Uncle Roy asks.

"Um . . . well, yes, but . . ." Mrs. Harris glances at me. "Maybe it would be best if we spoke in private. I don't want anyone to know about my son's . . . problem."

"No need to worry about Shelby," he says. "She's my apprentice. There's nothing she hasn't heard before."

I give Mrs. Harris a reassuring smile, but she does not seem to be reassured.

"It's not something I want getting around the school," she says, giving me the once-over.

Wait, what? Just because I'm a teenager, she assumes I'm not a professional? That I can't keep a secret?

Rude.

"Lydia, I assure you, your case will be kept completely confidential," Uncle Roy says. "I trust Shelby implicitly."

Mrs. Harris takes a minute to consider this before giving him a curt nod. I guess she figures she can't argue with a priest. Not when she needs his help.

"So." Uncle Roy uncaps his fountain pen. "What makes you think your son is possessed?"

The word makes Mrs. Harris flinch. "He's not himself

lately. He never leaves his bedroom. He's up all night playing violent video games, and when he does come out, he won't talk to me." She lowers her eyes and fiddles with the clasp on her purse. "He's belligerent and rude. The language he uses is just awful. He only wears black. And his eyes . . ."

Uncle Roy looks up from his yellow legal pad. "What about them?"

"They're very red. I've tried to get him to see an optometrist, but he insists it's just allergies." She shakes her head. "I have allergies. My eyes never look like that."

"Tell me, have you noticed a particular smell?" he asks her.

"Now that you mention it, yes," she says, sitting up straighter. "He does sort of smell."

Is she for real? Her son isn't possessed—he's a teenager. One who likes to get stoned, I'll bet. I steal a glance at Uncle Roy. He shakes his head slightly, warning me to keep quiet.

"What about his voice? Any changes?"

"It's deeper. And sort of . . . growly."

I wait for Uncle Roy to tell her about puberty, but instead he just nods thoughtfully. "When did this all start?"

"Well, he's been quite depressed since we moved here a few months ago, so at first I thought that's all it was. I thought he was just adjusting to his new life," she says. "But in the

last few weeks things have gotten worse. And then last Sunday . . .” Her eyes fill with tears. She grabs a wad of tissues out of the box Uncle Roy keeps on his desk.

“He wouldn’t come with me to church. He says he’ll never set foot in church again.” She dabs at her eyes. “He used to be an altar boy.”

Uncle Roy puts the cap back on his pen. “I think we should take a look at him. Shelby, would you mind paying a visit to Shane?”

I narrow my eyes at him, but he just smiles. He knows as well as I do that Mrs. Harris’s son isn’t possessed. What I can’t figure out is why he’s not telling her that.

Mrs. Harris is alarmed. “Father, I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but are you sure . . . ?” She glances at me, frowning. “I mean, she’s so young.”

This is the point where I should jump in and tell her that this is all just a big waste of time. But it really bugs me that she doesn’t think I can do it, so I don’t bother telling her that there’s nothing wrong with her son.

“Shelby is perfectly qualified to help Shane, Mrs. Harris. I wouldn’t send her if I didn’t think she was capable of getting to the bottom of this. Please don’t worry,” he says. “If she runs into any trouble, she knows she can call me and I’ll come right over.”

The only trouble I’m going to have is convincing Shane

to drop the attitude. My crucifix and holy water won't work on that.

"Well, if you're sure," Mrs. Harris says reluctantly.

"I couldn't be more sure," he says. "Now, how does tomorrow afternoon after school sound?"

Her face sags with relief. "That's perfect. Thank you, Father."

I wait until the door closes behind her before rounding on Uncle Roy. "Why are you making me do this?"

He rips the page off his legal pad and hands it to me. He's written the Harris's address at the top. "Just because her son isn't possessed doesn't mean he doesn't have a problem, Shelby," he says. "We help people. That's the job."

"I thought the job was getting rid of demons."

He shrugs. "Who says Shane doesn't have demons?" he says, settling back into his chair. "Now, I believe you were going to do the incantation one more time."

Chapter

5

SPENCER IS waiting at my locker after school. Unfortunately, I can't study with him today because I have an appointment.

With the devil.

Okay, not really. But paying a friendly visit to Mrs. Harris's son instead of spending time with Spencer certainly feels like hell. Uncle Roy has no idea what I'm giving up in order to do this.

"Sorry, I meant to text you," I say, opening my locker and

grabbing my messenger bag. The truth is, I didn't forget to text him. I just wanted to see him, even if it was only for a few minutes. "Tomorrow?"

"You do know we have a geometry test in first period tomorrow, right?" he says, frowning. "And you also know you can't afford to fail this test."

"I'm not going to fail," I say. There's always a chance I'll scrape by. My grades have suffered ever since my mom left, which is why I was so happy when Spencer offered to tutor me a couple months ago. Not only because he's helping me get my grade point average up, but also because I'd been crushing on him for weeks and I didn't think he even knew my name.

But even at the risk of failing geometry, there's no way I'm going to flake out on Mrs. Harris this afternoon and prove to her that a teenager can't handle an exorcism. Even a fake exorcism.

"I have something I need to take care of that just can't wait. It's important." I slide my bag over my shoulder and close my locker door.

"More important than thirty percent of your grade?" he says.

"Definitely not. But I have to do it anyway."

He sighs, exasperated, but he's fighting a smile. "All right, what about later tonight? I'm running a study session in the library."

“It’s a date,” I say. As soon as the words are out of my mouth, my face starts to burn. Following our afterschool study sessions, Spencer runs study sessions every Wednesday evening for St. Joseph’s underperforming students. I know this, and yet I said “date” anyway. I’ve basically just declared my feelings for him right to his face.

His smile widens and the tips of his ears turn red. I’m not sure how to read his response—is it a good sign, one that means he’s embarrassed because he likes me, too? Or is it a bad sign because he’s embarrassed for me?

“Um, I should get going,” I say. “See you tonight.”



Parking near the Harris’s house is nothing short of a nightmare. By the time I finally wedge Uncle Roy’s Honda between two SUVs and jog the half mile to their front door, I’m sweaty and aggravated and twenty minutes late. And in no mood to spend the afternoon trying to convince some spoiled kid to be nicer to his mother.

I speed-walk up the driveway. The curtains twitch, and a second later Mrs. Harris opens the door, making a point to frown at her watch. For someone who’s expecting me to chase the evil spirits out of her son, she doesn’t seem particularly grateful. I’d turn around and leave if I didn’t think that Uncle Roy would just make me come right back.

“Couldn’t find parking,” I say.

Mrs. Harris gives me a tight smile but doesn’t move to let me inside. I can’t figure out why she’s blocking the door, so we just stare at each other until finally she cracks and asks me to remove my shoes.

Whatever. I’m not about to argue with her, I just want to get this whole thing over with, so I kick off my loafers, hoping she doesn’t notice the quarter-size hole in the toe of my tights.

You can tell a lot about a person by their house. The Harris’s place is very formal—all overstuffed chairs, heavy swag curtains, and ballerina figurines that probably cost more than Uncle Roy’s car. And it’s obsessively clean. Like vacuum-tracks-in-the-carpet clean.

No wonder her son won’t come out of his room. This whole place screams “don’t touch anything.” Definitely not somewhere a fourteen-year-old boy would hang out.

Mrs. Harris leads me down the hall, past a wide picture window with a distant view of the Space Needle. She stops in front of a white door with a glow-in-the-dark skull and crossbones sticker crookedly pasted on it.

“He went right in after school,” she says, rapping her knuckles against the wood.

No answer.

“Shane, honey? There’s someone here to see you. A

friend.” Mrs. Harris twists the brass knob, but, of course, the door is locked. She gives me a *see what I have to deal with?* look before withdrawing a silver letter opener from her dress pocket. When she slides it into the keyhole, the door pops open.

The first thing that hits me is the smell.

Demons usually give off a disgusting rotten-egg odor. Smell alone isn’t a foolproof way to diagnose demonic possession, though, especially in a room that belongs to a teenage boy. Kind of hard to know whether there’s an actual demon presence or if someone just had one too many bean burritos for lunch.

I’m guessing in this case that it’s the latter. Mostly because of the mounds of fast-food wrappers littered everywhere, but also because I can tell, just by the way Shane’s eyes are glued to his computer, that he’s not possessed. Demons tend to be more interested in wreaking havoc and spreading evil in real life than in computer games.

Shane’s so engrossed in whatever end-of-the-world game he’s playing that he doesn’t notice we’ve entered his lair. The volume on his headphones is turned up so loud that I can hear the rapid-fire sound of his virtual machine gun.

“Shane, honey? This is Shelby.”

When Shane honey doesn’t answer, Mrs. Harris marches over and shakes his shoulder. He stiffens, then yanks off his

headphones and spins around in his black leather gaming chair with the built-in joysticks.

“What the hell, Mom?” he says. “I just about had him! You ruined my mission. Thanks a lot. Do you know how long it took me to—” He glances at me through the limp strands of his dyed-black hair. “Who are you?”

“I’ll take it from here, Mrs. Harris,” I say.

Mrs. Harris’s eyes dart nervously to her son. He gives her such an evil glare that I can see why she thinks he’s possessed. “Are you sure . . . ?”

I nod. “We’ll be okay.”

She leaves, and I push the door shut behind her.

Shane crosses his arms. “What’s going on? Who are you?”

“I’m Shelby. I’m here because your mom’s worried about you. She says you’ve been acting weird, and she thought it would help if you talked to someone.”

He snorts. “So you’re, like, what? Some kind of teen counselor or something?”

“Or something.” I start to set my messenger bag down on his unmade bed, but then think better of it. God knows when he last washed those sheets.

“I don’t need to talk to anyone. What I need is to be left alone,” he says.

“Really? I guess if all you want from your freshman year is a high score on some stupid alien game, then—”

“Demons, not aliens,” he mumbles. “I’m killing demons.”

Oh, *come on*. . . .

“Step aside.” I hang my bag on the back of Shane’s chair before nudging him out of the seat. I sink into the soft, damp indent made by his butt—*blech!*—and wrap my hand around the joystick.

And then I kick some serious demon ass.

“Are you sure you’ve never played this before?” Shane asks, awestruck, once I’ve handed a few of the dark spirits a one-way ticket back to hell.

“Nope.” At least, not on a computer. Okay, not in real life, either, but my training has to count for something.

After I’ve killed the last demon and earned Shane’s respect, I swivel around to face him. He’s staring at me like I’m Lara Croft or something.

I roll the chair back a few inches to put a bit more space between us. “So are you going to tell me what’s going on with you?”

He flops onto his bed, stares up at the ceiling. “I don’t know. It’s just . . . my mom drives me crazy. She’s always hovering. You know?”

I don’t, actually. My mom hasn’t hovered over me in months. Because she can’t. Because she’s a million miles away in Italy.

“Maybe she would back off a bit if you came out of your cave and talked to her sometimes,” I say. “She’s lonely.”

Shane’s face darkens. “She wouldn’t be lonely if she’d stayed with my dad.”

And there it is. The real reason he’s so angry.

“She left him?”

“She thinks he drinks too much. She didn’t even give him the chance to try and change; we just left,” he says. “She didn’t ask me how I felt about it. Now I’m stuck in a new school and I hate it. Literally everyone at St. Joseph’s sucks.”

“Aw, come on. St. Joseph’s isn’t so bad,” I say. “Give it a chance.”

He rolls his eyes. “Right. Like everyone has given me a chance.”

Shane’s weird, there’s no getting around it, but he could obviously use a friend. It occurs to me that maybe this is why Uncle Roy wanted me to come over here. I know what it’s like to feel alone—I’ve certainly felt that way a lot, especially since my mom left—and if all it takes to help Shane is to be his friend, then I can do that.

“I’ll introduce you to some people,” I say. “And I’ll even come by and kick your ass at *Demon Souls* again.”

A shadow of a smile crosses Shane’s face. “Promise?”

“Promise,” I say, smiling back at him. “Now do your

mom a favor and clean up your room.” I glance around at the mess and shudder. “Seriously, you’re going to single-handedly bring back the black plague.”

He blushes. “I guess I can do that.”

I stand up and grab my bag from the back of the chair. “I have to get going. But come find me tomorrow at school, okay?”

Shane nods.

I’m about to pull the door open when he says, “Shelby?”

I turn around.

“Thanks.”

“No problem.”

As soon as I’m in the hall, Mrs. Harris hustles toward me.

“Demon’s gone,” I say. “He’ll be fine. Just make sure he drinks lots of water.”

Mrs. Harris is so happy she actually hugs me.

Maybe I’m better at this bedside manner thing than I thought.