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Dead on Arrival

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Dead on Arrival

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Departmental Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

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Prologue: Into A Trance

“This is a test,” Carissa smiled deviously while walking into an abandoned house.

A sudden sharp pain went through Audrey’s stomach. Whenever she had gotten these types of pains, her gut was warning her that something was wrong. It could either be a situation, place, object, or even a person. Normally, these warnings about a person would often tell her secrets about them: that they are either toxic or not a good person to be around. These warnings are something that shouldn’t be ignored or taken lightly. While Carissa, Rachael, Morgan and Kaitlyn were walking into the house, Audrey stood frozen at the door. There was something creepy about it. It didn’t just have to do with the outside. It was inside as well. Audrey hasn’t been back to this house since her parents have gotten a divorce, back when she was a teenager. This was her childhood home. There were many memories that happened here—many that she did not want to remember. Some of these memories flooded back to her. She didn’t want to go inside. In fact, it felt like there was something preventing her from going inside.

A cold breeze blew Audrey’s red hair off her shoulders. “I don’t think this is a good idea...”

The broken wooden shutters slammed against the house. At the same time, Carissa turned around and walked over to her. “Look, it’s okay. Nothing bad is going to happen.” Carissa knew how afraid Audrey was of this home. It was time for her to let go of her fears. She couldn’t hold onto this forever. “You need to face whatever it is that you’re afraid of in this house. There’s nothing scary about it, besides the fact that it’s creepy.”

Unexpectedly, Audrey jumped at the touch of Rachael holding onto her arm. “Leave her alone. If she’s not comfortable then we don’t have to go in.”

There was a feeling in the atmosphere that changed. The night that had been planned out didn't feel so welcoming anymore. "Listen, Audrey needs to face her fears." She made eye-contact with everyone. "I'm tired of hearing: 'Oh, I see this I'm so scared... is this person alive or dead?!' The only way to prove that Audrey has a gift, this is a good way to prove it."

This wasn't fair. There was no point in trying to argue with Carissa, since she would most likely win. However, there were other ways of solving this. Rachael would try to reason with her. Out of all the girls, Rachael was the one who had the most power over Carissa. She had known her the longest. Rachael knew her strengths and weaknesses. "I can see where you're coming from, but do we really have to test Audrey here? Why can't we choose a different location that's unknown to us? That way, we can get some type of confirmation that she really does have something."

A moment went by where Carissa was considering it, but then decided to walk into the house. Panic shocked through Audrey as she watched the rest of her friends disappear. Rachael turned to face her.

This experiment had gone too far. "We don't have to do this," Rachael told her. "We can go back to the car, and I'll drive you home. It's not too late to go back."

Audrey shook her head. "No. I don't want to show Carissa that I'm too scared for her games. I don't have a good feeling about this, but maybe there's a reason why we're here." Before stepping inside, Audrey took a deep breath to try to brace herself. While stepping in, she notices that the air is colder than it had been outside. The cold air was usually an indication of a presence nearby. For a second, Audrey caught a glimpse of a gray figure floating by.

The only worry that Rachael had was for Audrey. Whenever Audrey would have a certain experience, she would always overthink—with worry, fear, or both—and call Rachael to

vent about what happened. There was one time where Audrey had phoned Rachael because of a death premonition of her grandmother. It started off as a dream—where she had an image of her grandmother lying down in a coffin inside of a funeral home. A few weeks later, her grandmother had passed, and the funeral home appeared exactly how it did in her dream. These experiences that Audrey has, especially at night, were always scary. Some stories that Audrey would tell her have freaked her out at times.

The moment that Audrey stepped into Carissa's childhood home, the floor made a creak sound. It startled them all. There were so many memories that flooded back into her mind. The house felt so empty now. This house used to be so alive when Audrey was a child. Many holidays were celebrated here. There were birthdays, Christmas and New Years that were celebrated with family. However, it was not all good memories. When it came to Halloween, everything about this house had done one-eighty. There were many nights where Audrey had slept with the lights on. Even years later, the house has been the same temperature as it always has been. Ice cold.

While they all looked around the first floor, Carissa turned around to face Audrey. "See? The only thing to worry about are the loose floorboards. I think everything else is just in your head." Carissa stopped herself from laughing. She wanted to prove so bad that Audrey didn't have an ability. Secretly, she wanted to be the one to prove to everyone that there was an afterlife.

If Carissa thinks there's something wrong with my head, then she makes me seem normal, Rachael kept the insult to herself. Back in high school, something weird had happened to them both. There had been no explanation for it. Till this day, the event was still being talked about by other peers. It was even mentioned all over the media. During that time, there had been an

instance where Carissa was being bullied by two other girls from the drama club. The club that those girls were in was pretty fitting for what had happened. Everyone had just gotten out of gym class, and they were about to go take a shower. Carissa's hair was all over the place—like she had just woken up out of bed. It was frizzy and needed to be brushed. Before Rachael and Carissa had even gotten a chance to take a shower, the three other girls went right up to her. One of these girls, Sasha, used to be good friends with Carissa when they were younger. However, something had changed after becoming friends with another group that changed her personality. Those girls started picking on Carissa, and then Sasha started to join the trio. The girls were laughing at them and started whispering about their appearance. Rachael had just about enough. Her blood started boiling and the room started to get hot. She had never been so angry in her life. Suddenly, the windows in the bathroom had shattered all over the floor. The glass was falling on top of the girls, including other students that were farther in the room. The lights started flickering and the locker doors were opening and shutting by themselves. The sky had started to turn darker.

At this point, Rachael could not control her anger. The water from the fire extinguishers on the ceiling went off. Those who were still in the gym started screaming when the lights had gone fully off. Everyone in the room had gotten soaked. It wasn't until their Cheerleading teacher had walked in while this was all happening. The teacher slamming the door open made Rachael snap out of the trance.

Till this day, Rachael remembered every detail of what happened that day back at the gym. She remembered both being suspended for it.

“What the hell was that?” Carissa noticed Morgan was waving a white smoking stick in the air. “Since when did you start smoking?”

Kaitlyn chuckled. “That’s not a cigarette. It’s called sage. She’s just clearing out negative energy.”

“Hey guys, just like I promised you I’m filming here at Carissa’s abandoned childhood home, and we brought Audrey with us!” Morgan faced her camera phone towards her. “We’re going to test her abilities to see if she really is gifted or not...”

Carissa jumped in the middle of the video. “Hi! So, this is my childhood home. Just being here again makes me have goosebumps. There are a lot of stories about this place that happened to me when I was younger. I used to wake up in the middle of the night and sleepwalk around three a.m.”

Audrey’s eyes widened. They knew that she hated being filmed whenever they were doing a video together for a platform where more than thousands of people had viewed their videos. They were well-known online. The platform allowed people around the world to create their own videos and get paid from them. On Morgan’s channel, she created more videos that revolved around paranormal or spirituality. The only one who was not really a fan of the channel was Audrey, although she would never admit that to her friends. Audrey was the reason why they had gotten a lot of viewers. It was because of her gift. However, she was mostly forced to show her ability after Carissa had mentioned it in a video without her permission. She got more than a thousand views a day. Out of most channels on this website, hers was one of the most watched.

“We’re trying to test if Audrey can pick up on something that’s happened when I was younger,” Carissa hinted. “Doesn’t this place look creepy?”

Morgan turned the camera around so that it viewed the living room. The house was bigger than anyone-floor house. It had a build like a mansion but was considered a three-story

house. The house was painted with bright colored walls and paintings that made it look lively. However, the house has been abandoned since Carissa had been in middle school. Now, the paint on the walls was gone and had cracks. There were cobwebs in almost every corner of the house. Carissa swore that she had seen a spider crawl slowly down one of the webs at the corner of her eye. It made her shiver. She remembered how warm this house used to be when the heater was on. Now, everything just felt ice cold. Even colder in some spots than it had been when they lived here. At the same time, Carissa hoped that Audrey wouldn't pick up something that had happened to her as a child. The only thing that Carissa was interested in was finding out if Audrey really did have a gift. She also wanted to investigate the afterlife, to gather information about its existence.

A few minutes later, Morgan had ended the video and told viewers that she would record again when they had picked up on something interesting. The living room was an open area so that the kitchen was connected. Audrey walked around slowly, trying to feel the energy. She tried to spiritually disconnect herself from the others. She took a deep breath and cleared her mind. In this mode, Audrey blocks out everyone around her. It is just her and the spirits around her. Nobody else was there. This was another way to open herself up to the other dimension. Even if she didn't like that Carissa was trying to prove that Audrey was telling the truth, she wanted to do this to prove to herself that she wasn't going crazy. That she really did have a gift. There was one area where she had felt drawn too, which was behind her. She had strong intuition and would always trust what her gut was telling her. Right now, Audrey's gut was telling her to walk more towards her left. Trying to tune out the others, Audrey walked down an opposite way towards the hallway. The others followed her.

There was one specific room where Audrey had stopped upstairs. It was an empty room with a window. It felt like they were not alone here. “Something happened here,” Audrey looked around. She saw a shadow lingering underneath a window. Then she looked towards an empty spot where a bathtub had been taken out. “What happened in the bathtub?”

Oh god, Carissa thought. She panicked for a moment. She was hoping that Audrey would not have picked up on this. Part of Carissa’s ability was to block out others' energy that tried to read into her. There was one time where Audrey had used tarot cards to read Carissa without her permission and she had pictured a wall surrounding her where nobody could get through. There were certain aspects of her life that she did not want her friends knowing about. Blocking them out was one of these secrets. She was good at protecting herself spiritually. Her mother had the same ability, and she had inherited that from her. “When I was ten, I was taking a bath for school the next day. I was using bubble bath and I had this nice smelling bath bomb that I was going to use. It smelled like pomegranates.”

“Did something happen after you put the bath bomb in?” Audrey knew that the shadow in the room did not like the smell of the bath bomb that Carissa had been using.

Carissa nodded her head. “While I was in the bath, I placed it inside the water. It turned into a purple-ish color. When that happened, I laid my head back against the edge. Suddenly, it felt like hands were forcing me down. I thought I was going to die because it was drowning me for more than two minutes.”

“It’s okay,” Audrey could tell that she was about to cry. “It’s not going to hurt you. It was only trying to test your abilities. It wanted you to know that you had the abilities to pick up that it was there. It just wanted to be known.”

With a tear running down her cheek, Carissa nodded in agreement. She was hoping that Audrey would pick up this specific event. After Audrey had told this story, the shadow that she had seen on the wall waved to her then slowly vanished. It was confirmation that the shadow had just wanted to be known to the world. They were meant for Audrey to know that she did have a spiritual ability, and that she was not going crazy.

Since this room was clear of spirits, that didn't mean that the other rooms in the house did not have any more restless souls. Even though Audrey was a little scared, she knew that she had to go to every room and make sure that they had their stories heard. It was hard with her gift. Audrey knew that she had a special gift, and most people did not believe that she could communicate with the dead. The only people that really understand her are her closest friends. However, it's hard for them to believe her at times because they were not the ones who are experiencing it. In the past, Audrey had instances where her friends' deceased relatives would try to communicate with her at night. While she was lying down, that was the easiest time for her to connect with spirits. They would tell Audrey their names and what had happened to them, without her friends even telling them about her grandparents. In reality, she learned that it is possible there could be an afterlife. They try hard to believe in what she does, at the same time it is hard for them to understand everything that she tries to say about the afterlife. The only hard part about having this gift was that it made Audrey feel lonely at times.

There was one specific room Audrey had passed that made a chill go down her spine. The door was only open by a crack. She pushed it open slowly to see inside. In this room, there were a bunch of spirits having a party. At first, Audrey thought it was a whole family. There were two children: a female and a male, who were setting up the table for a tea party. There was a woman and a male, who Audrey assumed to be the parents. However, they were not parents, and they

were just spirits that could not move on. The woman had noticed Audrey standing at the door. She was pouring tea into a cup then froze when she noticed that someone else had been looking at her. She looked surprised that someone else from the other side could see her.

The woman floated over to her quickly. She whispered into Audrey's ear. "Sit," the voice echoed.

Audrey hesitated at first. This was her first time being in command. She has never done this on cue before. Whenever spirits were around her, Audrey would naturally listen to them. Sometimes it was just silent listening. Just by looking at them, she would know how they died. One time, there were spirits on a road she had seen. The girls were driving home from a school play one night, and Audrey had yelled at Rachael to stop the car. When Rachael did, Audrey had noticed that the spirits were a man and a woman who had cuts all over their faces. There was also glass that was in their skin. She glanced at her friends who were standing behind her. "There are many spirits in this room."

Carissa nodded. "I used to sleepwalk a lot in this room. I would wake up in the middle of the night having sleep paralysis. I would get scared and sleep with my mom. There are many Native Americans that have passed on in this land."

That would explain all the paranormal activity that was going on in this house. Audrey watched the spirits as they continued to set up the table. "They want us to have a tea party."

"Are you serious?" Carissa laughed sarcastically. She knew deep down that Audrey did not really have an ability, and she wanted to prove that she was lying. There was no way that somebody could really speak to the dead, and she wanted to prove this. "There's no way I'm going to sit at a table with a bunch of dead people to have a tea party."

The woman spirit gave Carissa a dirty look. Audrey turned towards Carissa. “She didn’t like that comment. The only way that will help them cross over, is having a tea party with them.”

“There are Starbucks cups in the car,” Rachael offered. “I can go get them if you guys want.”

“I’ll go with you,” Kaitlyn didn’t want to be in the house anymore. She needed some fresh air.

Before arriving here, Audrey knew that the spirits would want some type of offering. Giving an offering to spirits was a way to show respect to them to communicate with the living. Each of them brought something of their own from home. Carissa placed a light pink cloth over the table to make it more pretty. The top of the table was covered with her favorite Lotus flowers. Kaitlyn had provided teacups and a kettle, with coffee or tea to drink. Morgan had grabbed angel cake that her mother had made earlier. Although Audrey didn’t see any of the spirits in the room this time, she didn’t want to say anything because they would stop setting up the party.

It was quiet at the table. Carissa stood up to pour tea or coffee into everyone’s cups. Kaitlyn was placing angel cake on everyone’s dishes. “So, what are the spirits doing now?” Carissa questioned. “I want to know if people can really communicate with the dead.”

Audrey glanced around the room. She was afraid to give too much information out about the spirits. Giving away too much would make her gift sound unrealistic. It was not an everyday thing for someone to see and communicate with spirits the way that Audrey does. “Well, they are not here yet. I think they are getting ready for the party.”

“I’m going to have their portion if they don’t get back,” Kaitlyn teased. She twirled her dark hair around her finger, trying not to make Audrey upset by the thought that this might not all be real. How could anyone see and talk to spirits so easily? Part of her did not really think that any of this would be real. She was the type of person who needed to experience something for themselves. Almost like a skeptic.

The girls started eating angel cake that Morgan’s mother had made. Her mother was a well-known baker in the town. It only took a few minutes for them to down the drinks. Morgan was about to take out her video camera to film when Audrey had stopped her. “No, don’t!”

“Audrey, this would be *great* video footage!” Morgan taped the table setting. “We would get so many subscribers...”

“They don’t like being filmed!” Audrey argued. In her past experiences, Audrey knew that whenever they had gone out to investigate ghosts, there had been instances where some footage would be deleted when they went to edit videos. It would be during the exact time where they had captured an image of spirits that Audrey had seen to prove her ability.

“Okay, okay...” Morgan rolled her eyes, then put her phone back in her purse.

Audrey noticed that one of the children's spirits had appeared at the doorway. This was a good moment to try to sketch his image with the sketch pad and black crayon that she had brought. She had just gotten to draw his eyes when she noticed something different about them. There was a hint of sadness in them. Perhaps he was having a hard time trying to cross over. He stood there staring at her—aware that she could see him. It didn’t seem to bother him. The next spirit that walked in was his sister. In Audrey’s mind, she heard the word: *Emma*. She seemed friendlier than her brother, but shy at the same time. She went to stand next to him. Those were the only two spirits that had appeared at the doorway.

“The children are here,” Audrey muttered to them while looking down at her plate. “Just continue on with what you’re doing.”

It sounded like music was playing from another room. “I love your mom's cooking,” Rachael made a dramatic face that expressed she loved it. Even though Rachael was the quietest, there were instances where her humor was fitting.

“Me too,” Kaitlyn agreed, while breaking off a few pieces of the cake. She tried to act as normal as possible to invoke the spirits to enter the room. Kaitlyn had an ability too, but she did not want the others to put pressure on her. The gift of clairvoyance was not something to gloat about after unpleasant events that she had witnessed. Especially dreaming of people becoming ill before they experienced any symptoms.

“There’s more at home we can have later.” Morgan mentioned.

Everything happened in a heartbeat. Carissa caught everyone’s attention by choking. At first, it seemed like she had stopped after taking a sip of her tea. However, the liquid didn’t go down her throat correctly. The girls all looked at each other—then ran over to her. There was multiple more coughing coming from Carissa, she could barely tell them how she had started choking. Then, Carissa started to cough up blood. Audrey whipped her phone out to call 911. She couldn’t stop herself from shaking. There was no cell service in the building.

Carissa then started laughing. “You guys worry too much.”

The girls stood there frozen. They all looked at each other and didn’t know what to do. “You all look like you’ve seen a ghost,” Carissa held out a bottle of red liquid. “It was just a prank, relax.”

Anger took over Rachael’s body. “That’s not even funny. Let’s go home.”

Carissa tapped her chin with her fingers. “Audrey, if you can really speak to spirits... how come they didn’t tell you that I wasn’t really choking?”

The girls ignored Carissa on their way out the door. While rushing downstairs, they could hear Carissa’s laugh echoing throughout the house. Whenever Audrey felt betrayed by somebody important in her life, it was not the pain that bothered her. The hurt was being close to somebody who thought that they believed in what she did. She does not open to people easily about her abilities, that she can see and communicate with the dead. The only people who knew about that were those who she would talk to daily, or really cared about her. Anger rushed through Audrey’s body as they sat in the car. How could somebody Audrey trusted with her abilities, suddenly turn on her and make it seem like they weren’t real? Audrey was not a liar, and she was not going to allow someone to make her look like one. That is why she had brought a drawing pad and pencil to draw what these spirits had looked like to her. That way, they could look them up later and find out who they were when these souls had been alive.

“Is she coming or not?” Rachael demanded, as she turned the car on. She rested her hand on the wheel furiously.

“What’s taking her so long?” Morgan sat in the front seat. She took out a cigarette.

“I don’t know, but I’m going to do something about it.” Rachael opened the car door.

“Rachael, don’t do anything to get yourself into trouble.” Kaitlyn warned from the backseat. “I’m coming with you.”

“We’ll all grab her by the hair if we have too,” Audrey threatened sarcastically. Secretly, Audrey feared the spirit that was in this house. However, she didn’t want Carissa to know that because she wanted to defend herself. Her ability was a real gift. She just wanted her friends to believe her.

Back inside the house, Carissa was on her hands and knees coughing hysterically. The first time that Carissa had really been choking really was a prank on the others. She thought it would be funny to see their reactions. This wasn't a joke anymore. There was something wrong with her throat, it was closing and drinking tea or coffee wasn't helping. Maybe water would help, but there wasn't any. Carissa started coughing up real blood. She had gathered just enough strength to pull herself up with a chair. Bending down, Carissa rushed down the stairs. There had to be a way out of here. Her heart was beating in overdrive. That's when she remembered that there was a backdoor out of the kitchen.

The girls almost broke down the door to get back into the house. "Carissa?" Rachael called out, "We're leaving with or without you!"

There was no response. Audrey thought it was weird for Carissa not to answer back. She was the first one to head upstairs. The floors made a creak when the girls followed from behind. Inside the room was empty, besides the table that had been set up previously. The first thing that they noticed was the amount of blood all over the floor and chairs. There were handprints of blood that were smudged on the sides of the tablecloth.

The remaining friends stood frozen there for a long time.

Chapter One: There's A Lot More to The Story

“A year later, police are asking the community to come together for help to find out any information on who could have sent in an anonymous report about the night that Carissa Miller went missing.”

A news reporter appeared on the television announcing that a case was being reopened. After hearing that somebody might have more information, Audrey Collins was pouring a hot cup of coffee when she missed the inside of the cup. Immediately, her hand turned red. While rushing to grab a cloth, Audrey turned up the volume on the television. “Since police have gotten new leads to an investigation that happened last summer, Carissa Miller’s case will now be reopened.”

It felt like the whole world stopped. Goosebumps started to crawl up Audrey’s skin when the news reporter showed Carissa’s picture on screen. In the picture, Carissa looked just like how Audrey remembered her from the last time she had seen her while she was alive. Carissa’s curly strawberry-blonde hair looked just like how Audrey remembered.

“Carissa Miller went missing last year in the Freetown State Forest, where she was having fun camping with a group of friends. Carissa was a senior in high school and was part of the school’s Cheerleading squad. She had won the leader back-to-back all through high school.” The blonde-haired news reporter paused, allowing viewers to remember her by. The picture showed a beautiful young girl with wavy brunette hair. Audrey was always jealous of her light gray eyes. “She loved spending time with family, friends and enjoyed going hiking. If anyone has seen her, please call the local police station for any tips. Thank you.”

As soon as the news reporter stopped talking, Audrey shut off the television. Her heart was pounding, and it felt as if her heart had irregular beats. Of course, Audrey had thought about Carissa every day. Their friend group was not the same without them. Just the fact that his picture had appeared on screen painfully brought back memories of him. It never got easier every day that he had been gone.

The news reporter stated that an anonymous report was sent in. Who would have any tips about Carissa Miller? What evidence would be enough that police would have to reopen the case? When Carissa went missing, Audrey remembered being questioned by the police almost every day. It was hard enough knowing that Seth had been gone, never mind having somebody assume that she had done something to him.

Today was the first day of college. There were so many plans that Carissa and Audrey had planned together. Audrey was going to try out for the cheerleading squad once again, and they made sure that Carissa would have been the captain again. Together, they would make a great team. Audrey would be on the sidelines, holding light blue pompoms and cheering on her best friend. Now, Audrey was not even sure that she wanted to be on the squad. Deep down, she knew that Carissa would want her to continue a sport that she loved doing. She did not want to let him down, no matter what.

Audrey had awoken to her mother—Kristina—waking her up to let her know that they were at the college. While they pulled into the parking lot, Audrey was not worried about who her professors were or how strict they were going to be. Audrey was really interested in taking journalism at the college. She had discovered that whenever she was writing that her abilities would develop more. For some reason that she has not discovered yet, Audrey noticed that

whenever she would write, other people's emotions were easy to pick up on. Audrey would write down what she was feeling for that day, maybe it had helped her become more vulnerable to others' emotions.

The arrival at college had reminded Audrey about what had happened to Carissa. They were supposed to be going through these semesters together. Both had planned on applying to cheerleading again, where Carissa had become leader every year. She wondered if the rest of her friends had watched it. The campus was huge. The buildings were mostly made of glass windows with brick underneath. There was a large fountain in the middle where students were throwing pennies into the water, making wishes that they were going to have a good semester with straight A's.

Audrey stepped out of her mother's car. "The campus is huge!"

Kristina smiled, showing dimples in her tan cheeks. "It's beautiful. Despite everything that's going on right now, I know you're going to have a good semester."

"I love you, mom." Audrey hugged her mother with one arm. She was carrying books on her left arm. "It's just not going to be the same without Carissa..."

"I wish she was here." Kristina sighed. "She was like a daughter to me, as well."

Audrey's eyes teared at the thought. Carissa had been at her house daily. They did everything together. He was like a big brother to her. When Audrey had heard that he went missing, it felt like her heart was ripped out of her chest. It triggered a brief flashback of walking into the building just seconds before Carissa had disappeared. Depending on the case, Audrey would sometimes ignore what her intuition had been telling her. Just after the event with Carissa is when Audrey really had started to listen to her inner voice. That inner voice has been warning

her that they were not alone in the house that night. During this time, there was just no proof that somebody else had been there.

“I think I’m going to try out for the cheerleading squad on Friday.” Audrey decided. She shifted her books higher on her waist. “I know that Seth would want me too.”

Kristina nodded, looking up at her through her dark sunglasses. “He would want you to. Try out for cheerleading in memory of him.”

That is what Audrey was going to have to do. She looked down at her iWatch. It was ten minutes until it was time for her to check in. “I have to go.”

Audrey and her mother hugged. She watched her mother drive off, before she turned around to see the big campus behind her. Many students were carrying suitcases or pulling them to their dorms. The only thing that Audrey was not really looking forward to was making new friends. Especially having a new roommate. Out of their three other friends, only Carissa and Rachael had applied to live in a dorm together. While walking up the path to the office, Audrey prayed to a higher being that she would not be stuck with some weirdo. There was an eerie feeling of being watched. It suddenly felt cold. For a second, Audrey felt like she could see her breath. Maybe she was just overthinking or being too paranoid. Whenever it had turned cold like this, that meant there was a spirit nearby. However, Audrey wanted to settle in first before trying to communicate with anything that could be here. While Audrey walked to her dorm, it felt like something was either following or watching her from behind.

A few times, Audrey glanced over her shoulder just to make sure. Those who were walking to class were the only ones there. Finally, Audrey had reached room 111. It looked like Audrey’s roommate was already there, considering pictures had already been posted on the door. A whiteboard was also posted on the door to write notes on. Somebody had already written

something down on it: LEARN TO KNOCK. *Well then*, Audrey thought. Sounds like whoever the new roommate is will be tough to get along with.

Right when Audrey was about to knock, the door opened. Audrey froze, her fist high in the air. The girl who opened the door took a step back.

“Whoa,” The girl put her hands up in defense. “Who the hell are you?”

“Um, your new roommate...” Audrey was puzzled. She held out her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Oh, honey, I’m not your roommate.” The dark brunette-haired girl chuckled. “I’m-”

“She’s leaving.” A girl from behind interrupted. Audrey noticed that she had black hair. “Sorry, I’m Kassie. That’s my friend, Hailey.”

“See you in class later.” Hailey stated. She turned towards Audrey, before leaving. “I’m sure we’ll run into each other again.”

“Yeah.” Audrey agreed quietly. She wrapped the green jean jacket she was wearing tighter around herself. *She was an interesting person*, Audrey thought to herself.

“Hailey is just going through some stuff that she won’t talk about. She won’t talk to me about it. I’m getting worried about her.” Kassie’s black hair brushed over Audrey’s shoulder as she stepped away. “I have not done much to the place yet. I wanted to wait until you arrived to agree upon our own bed. What’s your name again?”

“Audrey,” she glanced around the room. It was so exciting starting college. The thought of having a dorm to herself made her feel like an adult. “I’ll take the room on the right, if you don’t want it.”

“Fine with me.” Kassie placed her suitcase on the bed located in the left-hand corner of the room.

There was a bathroom in the middle of the two rooms, which was good for them to have their own privacy. Audrey wheeled her suitcase over to the right room. On this side, the walls were painted light purple. The other side had light blue walls. The first thing that Audrey did was place pictures of her friends on the walls. It felt like she was doing a complete makeover. There was a white desk next to the bed. Audrey opened her red suitcase. She took out her MacBook and placed it on top of the desk. The room really needed to be redecorated, though that could be worked on throughout the rest of the semester. While Audrey had just finished making the bed, Kassie entered the room.

“I like it.” Kassie looked around. “It feels like home. What major are you taking?”

“English.” Audrey sat at the edge of the bed. She noticed that Kassie was holding a book in her hand. “I’m taking Journalism, specifically.”

“Oh, so you want to write about news reports and all that?” Kassie wondered. “Speaking of news reports, did you hear that a new case around here is being reopened? I feel bad for the guy who is missing. He seemed so happy in the pictures that were on the screen.”

The only thing Audrey could do was watch a tear fall onto the floor. She did not realize how well-known Carissa’s case had been. Kassie did bring up a good point. Before Carissa disappeared, he was happy. According to Rachael, Carissa had been seeing somebody new and even just got hired at a shoe store in the local mall. The sad part is Carissa only had a chance to work one day there before he left. Audrey thought of all the possibilities that could have happened to him. Did somebody from work hurt Seth? It just would not make sense since he had only worked one time there.

The teardrop was not left unnoticed.

“Are you crying?” Kassie noticed that Audrey’s blue eyes were becoming watery. She grabbed a tissue. “Why are you upset?”

This triggered another flashback. Audrey had a glimpse of herself walking into the house. She remembered walking by all the cobwebs. The event had still given her PTSD because it was something that she was not willing to do, more that she had been forced to awaken her abilities. A sudden touch on her arm made her come back to reality.

“I was friends with Carissa. I didn’t want to be there.” Audrey could feel her anxiety start to rise. The room was starting to feel hot. Her body was shaking. “I’m just not ready to talk about it yet.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know that you knew her.” Kassie hugged Audrey. “I shouldn’t have brought that up without warning you first.”

“I just don’t know if I’m going to try out for the cheerleading squad this semester.” Audrey sighed, trying to decide on what to do. “A part of myself wants to. Every year, I’ve always gotten chosen as captain. However, Carissa and I both made plans. We were supposed to be cheering together.”

“I’m sure wherever she is that she is still with you.” Kassie wrapped her arm around Audrey’s shoulder. “You know what else? I think you should still try out. First, Carissa would want you to. Second, cheering would give you a way to celebrate the friendship you had with him.”

There was a certain reason for Audrey not wanting to go back into cheerleading. It would bring back too many memories of Carissa. Still to this day, she did not understand why Carissa wanted to force them all into going to that house. On that day, Carissa’s excuse was that it would help them: “Gain more viewers.” However, Audrey couldn’t help but to blame herself for

allowing Carissa to drag her in there. If they hadn't gone, maybe Carissa would still be here. The only place that the girls had not visited the past few years was Carissa's real home... where her mother had lived. It was a good idea, but she wasn't sure if the others would be willing to go with her. The girls have been trying to reach out more to Audrey, but since the event she had been a little distant towards them.

Audrey took out her phone and sent out a group text. *SOS*.

"I'm Audrey Kline. My major is Writing with a concentration in journalism." Audrey felt sick. She tried to avoid glancing at other students who were awkwardly staring at her. "I've been captain of the cheerleading squad all throughout high school. However, I don't think I'm going to try out this year, since..."

Audrey paused. The image of Carissa's face zoomed into her mind. In high school, Audrey and Carissa would stay after and play soccer with each other. The most memorable moments that Audrey had with Carissa was staying at each other's house, practicing cheerleading at night in their front yard. Then, the scene changed back into a classroom that had looked familiar. Audrey caught a glimpse of rectangular windows behind her. The windows had shattered, and water from the ceiling started to soak all the students. Kassie, who was sitting next to her, had brought her back into the present by touching her arm. The whiteness from the daydream started to slowly fade and the rest of the classroom became clearer.

The science professor applauded. Right when Audrey was about to sit down, two police officers had walked into the room. Professor Manchester stood up to greet them. Everyone in the class looked to try to eavesdrop on the conversation. Kassie met eyes with Audrey, right before the professor had spoken.

“Audrey,” Professor Manchester crossed his arms.

A signal that she needed to go with them. Trying not to cause a scene in front of the whole class, Audrey picked up her pile of books and quietly strolled out of the room with the police officers.

When Audrey walked into the room at the police station, the first thing she noticed were her friends sitting on the couch. Rachael had crossed her legs and was shaking her foot. Audrey knew Rachael--the only time that Rach would ever shake her foot was when she was anxious about something. The other two girls were there: Morgan and Kaitlyn. Twisting her blonde hair around her fingers, Freia seemed the most bored out of them all. Morgan was not really paying attention. She was scrolling through twitter on her phone. Audrey sat down in the space next to Rachael. She rested her head on her hand.

This was going to take a while, and Audrey could not already wait to get out. The girls could not help but to glance at each other. They all knew where this was going... and it wasn't going to be good. If they were going to be getting out at all. Out of them all, it felt like the police were harder on her the most. She was not sure why. The last time that the police had questioned them, the girls had talked about what happened. Even though they really were not supposed to. Everything was supposed to be kept confidential. During their discussions, it sounded like the police were using a different type of tone towards her. If they were going to be too hard on her this time, then Audrey was going to say something about it. The police did not have any right to talk to her like she had something to do with it.

A few minutes later, the girls quieted down while the same officer from last time had walked into the room. It was Officer Grey.

“Audrey, Rachael, Morgan and Carissa...” Officer Grey glared at them one-by-one. “We need to talk.”

Since that wasn't obvious, Audrey kept the thought to herself.

“Audrey,” Officer Grey paused when they made eye-contact. “Come with me.”

Oh, of course Audrey would be the first one to be called, Audrey thought sarcastically.

While getting up, Audrey put her black purse over her shoulder. It was an eerie feeling to be walking through the police station into an interrogation room. It almost felt like she was stepping in the shoes of a murderer in questioning. She tried envisioning herself as someone who was capable of murdering somebody. Although, it would be hard for Audrey to commit murder because of her height. It would be physically and emotionally impossible for her.

Audrey placed her large purse next to her, the one that she had always worn when Carissa was around. There were certain aspects about Carissa that Audrey had noticed about her throughout the years of being friends. Although Carissa was not an easy person to make jealous... she had less patience with Audrey that was unnecessary. That was because Carissa had always hated that purse. It was a black and white Louis Vuitton. The only reason why Carissa wasn't a fan was because she was jealous that she did not have one. Audrey had gotten it as a Christmas gift from her boyfriend last year. She tried bracing herself for the questions that were going to be asked. Officer Grey had shut the door, after a woman with brown hair had walked into the room. This was someone who Audrey had never seen before. It felt a little uncomfortable for Audrey to be in a room with a woman who she had never introduced herself to. Never mind, somebody who was going to be asking her a million questions about her life. She was just going to have to calm down and brace herself for whatever was going to be thrown at her. Audrey took a deep breath and sighed. Hopefully, they will not be too hard on her.

“We called you down here because we were anonymously sent evidence against you being involved in Carissa’s disappearance,” Officer Grey explained. “We’re still in the middle of investigating the object. I don’t have it right now to physically show you, since we’re examining it for fingerprints.”

“Listen,” The woman jumped in, nearly scaring Audrey. “I know you don’t know me. At all. My name is Officer Michelle.”

Audrey did not shake the woman’s hand. She just stared at it, not knowing what to do. Either this woman was going to take Audrey’s side, or she was not.

“Okay... Let’s just get to the bottom of this.” Michelle folded her hands. She seemed to be tough. Someone who Audrey would not want to mess with. “We need to know where Carissa is. If he’s still out there, it would not be too late to save him.”

“Listen,” Audrey mimicked the woman. “I don’t know where Carissa is. The amount of pressure you’re putting on me is not going to make me admit something, since I did not do anything to Carissa.”

“Right,” Michelle nodded, making eye-contact with her. “You girls were the last ones to see him alive. How are we supposed to believe that you had nothing to do with it?”

“Why does it seem like you are being harder on me than the other girls?” Audrey didn’t want to put the blame on them, but it was almost like they thought she had done something when Carissa was the one after her that night.

Both paused. It seemed to throw them off guard. However, not for long. The woman was just not going to let this conversation go.

“I know that it appears we are blaming you for what happened...” Michelle sympathized with her. Almost like she was reading Audrey’s mind. “We are not blaming you, at all. Do you mind telling us what happened that day?”

“I already spoke to the police about this when Seth went missing.” Audrey just wanted to get out of there. Whenever there was a spirit around, Audrey would start to feel cold and have anxiety. She knew that there was one around who wanted to help her with this situation. However, she knew that if she had asked a spirit for help then it would mean more trouble for her. Having a spirit to help her would mean that she would get some type of bad karma back towards her. It was better off if she would just leave the conversation as humanly as possible. It would not be so bad if the police were not hard on her. It was uncomfortable speaking to both. She just couldn’t sit still, and it was getting too cold.

“The case reopened, so we need to go over all of your statements once more.” Officer Grey explained. “Even your friends. We just want to narrow down possibilities of what happened to Seth. Now, explain to us where you guys were that night.”

“We were out in the forest camping,” Audrey recalled, trying to remember details about Seth. “It was a rough day; we were just trying to blow off steam. I was stressed from cheerleading practice almost every day. I was exhausted and needed to get my mind off things.”

“What happened when you got there?” Michelle questioned.

“It was a normal hangout session. Except, we were all smoking or drinking.” Audrey explained. “We didn’t do that all the time when we hung out. It was just that specific night.”

“Listen, if all of you had been drinking that night, that's the least of our problems right now. We just want the truth.” Michelle was not afraid to bring that question up. “We don’t care about that.”

Audrey sighed in frustration. Why did it seem like she was harder on her than the rest of them? It was almost like the police thought that she had done something. “We didn’t touch Carissa. I can guarantee that because all the girls were with me. We were sitting around the campfire. I don’t really remember what happened. I just remember that we were going to her abandoned house, just to see if it was haunted.”

“It’s not a plausible explanation to say that there’s something supernatural in that forest that came and took him.” Officer Grey laughed sarcastically. “There’s no such thing as ghosts.”

Audrey tried to hide her anger. Any sort of emotion would probably be held against her at this point. “All of us were just sitting around the campfire, trying to get warm. We were telling ghost stories, real experiences that have happened to us. The next thing we know, Carissa walked away then disappeared.”

“Do you think he’s still lost in the woods somewhere?” Michelle wrote information down as Audrey was speaking.

Audrey shrugged her shoulders. Tears started to fill her eyes. “I don’t know. I just want my best friend back.”

When warm tears filled Audrey’s eyes, she glanced at them through the strands of her red hair, hoping they wouldn’t catch her about to cry. She tried to sound normal, though they probably noticed the crack in her voice. “I’ve never seen him again...”

Officer Grey and Michelle spoke to each other for a few minutes outside of the room. Audrey rested the back of her head against the wall.

Four beautiful girls walked arm-in-arm down the steps of the police station.

“What are you looking at?” Rachael threw a dirty look at a woman who was staring at them as she drove by. The woman looked surprised, then turned her body towards the road. As other cars drove by Rachael could feel vibes of death stares. The girls let go of each other’s arms and walked towards their mother’s cars. All four mothers were following right behind them, with unhappy expressions written across their faces.

Through her strands of brunette hair, Rachael glanced at the other girls from the corner of her eye. Aggravated, Audrey sat in the passenger seat and slammed the door shut. The sound startled Freia, who was already inside. Freia wiped away a few teardrops that were falling down her face with the back of her hand. Morgan crossed her arms and leg over her knee. She stared out the window, tapping her manicured fingernails on her arm. Morgan’s mother reversed the car. She looked at her daughter for what seemed like a long minute before they finally drove away.

Chapter Two: Hanging by A Thread

Rachael thought about jumping out of the car to avoid going to therapy, then stopped herself after thinking about what would happen if she had done it. First, she would probably severely injure herself... or worse, possibly die. Though, dying seemed better than going somewhere that had a bunch of smelly farm animals. There was nothing she could do now to get out of this. Her mother—Lisa Kline—was forcing her to attend therapy because of indulging in too much alcohol and smoking too much. The argument with Lisa was that working with animals was going to make her situation worse than it would heal, was not enough to prevent her from going. The only thing that was encouraging her to go was that the stables were located on campus.

It could have been worse. During the summer, Rachael's parents wanted her to live at the stables in a small room. She would have been stuck performing stable hand duties, for no money at all. The point of it was supposed to be therapeutic. Rachael just didn't see eye-to-eye with that. How could more work make her feel better? Wouldn't it just cause more stress?

Once they pulled in the driveway at the stables, Rachael couldn't believe that she was here. She was wearing an expensive Hollister t-shirt that was knotted at the bottom and white jean shorts. The moment these clothes would get dirty, Rachael knew she was going to freak out on someone. She was also wearing expensive sunglasses. Nothing else could go wrong at the thought of her sunglasses breaking or getting lost.

According to the owner, the large farmland was 1,421 acres. The farm owned any farm animal someone could possibly think of ducks, goats, cows, chickens, pigs and horses. Of course, the farm had more animals than those. At Rosebud Farm, the first thing that someone

would notice when pulling into the driveway is the stable. The stable was painted white with light blue walls. On the left-hand side, including the right-hand side, were large-sized pastures for the animals to graze in. The riding ring was side-by-side of the pasture on the right-hand side. There were also woods in the back of the stable where riders could practice cross-country or trail-riding.

When Rachael got out of the car, the sound of gravel crackling caught her attention to see what was driving down the driveway behind her. There was a white truck with a carriage attached to the back of the vehicle. Rachael moved out of the way to give the truck driver space to park next to her. The car beeped, indicating that Rachael's parents had opened the trunk for her to get her bags out. *Well, Rachael thought. Seems like they are in no rush to get rid of me.*

There was a guy with a large sized beard that hopped out of his truck. He nodded once at Rachael, acknowledging she was there. Then he gave a small wave to her parents. Rachael watched him stroll to the back of the carriage to open the gate. There was a faint clicking sound. Not long after, the click-clock sound made its way out of the trailer.

Right in front of Rachael, stood a brown and white mare with unique markings on her fur. Even though Rachel did not like horses, she still stared at the animal standing perfectly in front of her. The mare held her chin up high. Almost saying to Rachael that the mare was too good for her. The second Rachael looked into the mare's eyes; the mare threw her head up then half-reared. Rachael took a few steps back. The man who was holding onto the lead rope threw his hands in the air, trying to get the mare to calm down. Once the mare was back on her hooves, the man rubbed her forelock.

An older male walked out of the barn behind them. He had short brown hair and was wearing a light-tanned hat. The man had seen everything that was going on. "Looks like you two have met already." The man held his hand out to Rachael's mother. "You must be Rachael."

Rachael's mother put her hand over her heart and gave a warm smile. "I'm her mother. Thank you for the compliment. You must be Ted."

The man shook her mother's hand. "Nice to meet you, Lisa. You too, Joseph." He smiled at Rachael's father. He turned to Rachael. "You're the only female left, so you must be--"

Rachael rolled her eyes. She gave him the cold shoulder. "Rachael."

This didn't seem to faze the owner. He completely ignored her tone. "I thought you two would be a perfect match."

A perfect match? Who was this guy? Rachael's jaw dropped a little. "I thought this was a therapy barn, not a dating site."

Ted slowly went up to the mare. The mare had a defensive look in her eyes. He was careful not to make any sudden moves. Quietly, he pulled a mint out of the pocket of his brown jacket. He opened his hand under her nose. The mare was hesitant at first, then sniffed his palm. She took the treat out of his hand. Ted rubbed her nose as she chewed the hard candy.

The man who had brought her, patted the horse's neck. "This is Acelyn. She's named after the diamond-shaped mark on her forelock. The diamond reminded her past owner of playing cards."

This made Rachael curious. Even though it didn't change the fact that she didn't want to be here at all. "What happened to her past owner?"

The man rolled some of the lead rope up in his hand. "They passed away. She was owned by an older couple. When the grandmother passed, the grandfather could not find the heart to

take care of her anymore. She became neglected. He realized that it wasn't fair to the horse, so he decided to sell her. It would've been selfish to keep her just because it belonged to his wife."

Neglected, Rachael thought. *Looks like we do have something in common, then.*

Rachael's parents were acting friendly here when there's other people around. At home, Rachael spent time mostly by herself. Her parents would do stuff together, without her most of the time. Joseph would spend most of the day doing work outside. Her mother would be hanging out with friends, drinking, or not wanting to do anything at all.

That's why Rachael is seen with her friends a lot. Nobody would see one without the other. Rachael was always either with Audrey, Morgan, or Kaitlyn. The group would hang out with each other vice versa. Not only outside of school, but Rachael also always had class with one of them. It was to the point where it would give Rachael anxiety, being away from one of them for more than three days. The anxiety is most likely from the time spent home alone.

After everyone introduced themselves, Rachael's parents said their good-byes. When they drove away, Ted grabbed the suitcases that Rachael had brought. "Why don't we take your things inside?"

When they got inside, everything was simple. The house was not big, it worked for the family. The kitchen was the first part of the house they walked into. The walls were painted off-white. The couches in the living room were gray to match the walls. There was a woman in the kitchen who was making dinner. It smelled delicious.

The woman noticed them walking in. She greeted her husband first. "Hi dear." Then she turned to the young lady in front of her. "You must be Rachael."

I'm glad I'm already so popular, Rachael thought to herself. Even though Rachel didn't want to be here, that did not give her any reason not to be nice. "Yes. Hi, Mrs. Johnson."

The blond-haired woman shook her head. “You can call me Michelle. You look exhausted.”

Was it really that obvious? The past year, Rachael had a hard time sleeping. She had been having nightmares almost every night. She did not want her friends to know about it because she was supposed to be the strong one out of them all. Rachael wanted to be the rock of the group and wanted them to feel that they could come to her to talk whenever the girls were feeling down. Rachael did not know how tired she felt, until Michelle had mentioned it. She could barely keep her eyes open. “Yeah, I could get some rest before I faint on the floor.”

A small smile crossed Michelle’s lips. “She has a sense of humor. She’ll fit in just fine with the others.”

There was a sense of agreement from Ted. “She’s funny. Let’s send you to bed to get rest for tomorrow.” Michelle wished Rachael a goodnight, then went back to making dinner. Rachael followed Ted back to the dorms. Upstairs, there were three bedrooms and a bathroom on the right. Ted opened the bedroom door that was straight in front of them. “This is where you’ll be staying. Get some rest. Tomorrow, we’ll be getting you started on stable hand work six a.m. sharp.”

Last night was terrible. The horses in the paddock were neighing all night. Across the yard, were the cows that sounded like they were screaming. It did not get any better in the morning, the chickens had woken everybody up. This was only the first day... it was already a disaster. How did anybody get any sleep around here? It was one of those days where Rachael did not want to wake up. This stupid stable was not helping her PTSD from the Carissa event at all. There was just one thing that she was sure of. Nobody better make her angry today. She was

not in the mood for it. With all the media gossip, these therapists better make sure that Rachael keeps her cool—unless they want to lose power. Though, there was a common sense that Rachael had to keep her ability quiet. Whenever Rachael's ability triggered, it made her become physically and mentally tired after. To the point where it could kill her.

The loud knock on the door made Rachael gasp. She rolled her eyes at the sound of Michelle's happy tone of voice. "Rise and shine! It's six a.m. Start getting ready to do some farm work."

Still half asleep, Rachael moaned. "I'm not ready. I need to take a shower."

There was laughter on the other side of the wall. "With the amount of work, you're going to do, you're not going to need to take a shower."

"I said... I need to take a shower," Rachael paused in between every word. It was only a matter of time before this woman got on her last nerves. The lights flickered just once.

Gross, Rachael was disgusted. She could already tell that they were not going to see eye-to-eye. It did not matter what she said. Rachael took a shower every morning, and taking a shower is exactly what she was going to do. A few minutes after trying to wake herself up, Rachael grabbed the items she needed to take a shower. She grabbed her white-ripped jeans, a dressy black shirt with the same color boots. It took a good amount of time for her to finish putting make-up on.

When Rachael was done, she walked outside to look for Ted. Rachael could not find him out in the front, so the next place he could possibly be in the stable. Rachael glanced inside all the stalls to look at the horses. There were many big and small ones. The only thing is, Rachael could not find the mare that belonged to her. Where was she?

Rachael finally found Ted mucking out one of the stalls. “Hello? What do you want me to do?”

Surprisingly, Ted did not even turn to look at her. “Why are you late?”

Late? Rachael was not aware there was a schedule that she had to follow. “It’s nine.”

The old man shook his head. “I woke you up at six a.m. You were supposed to be here three hours ago. What took you so long?”

Stunned, Rachael had nothing to say. Ted stopped cleaning out the stall to hand her the shovel. This was the first time Rachael had ever cleaned something that was part of a farm. Rachael had never been on a farm. The closest thing that Rachael had gotten to horses was when she was riding a pony when she was four years old. The pony was being led by the owners, with her mother walking alongside the pony.

To get on his good side, Rachael was going to have to do what he said. “Sorry, Ted. I took a shower. I can’t work without feeling clean.”

This made Ted shake his head. He knew that was just an excuse. “I’ll let it slide this time. Just make sure you get the work done. Get all the stalls clean by the end of the day.”

Jeez, Rachael was starting to feel the pressure. The good side of Ted yesterday must have just been a show for her parents. What if she did not even know how to clean the stalls? Well, since it had to be done by the end of the day, Ted was just going to have to be happy with the way it was done.

That’s when Rachael remembered what she wanted to ask him. Before he walked away, Rachael brought it up. “Where’s my horse?”

This made Ted chuckle. “My horse is in the pasture. She will be your horse when you put effort into the work.”

While Rachael was mucking out the stall, she felt like somebody was watching her. With the shovel full of dirty shavings, Rachael ended up spilling the hay over her clothes. She gasped dramatically. A small laugh startled her. There was somebody standing behind her, just like she felt. Except the feeling caught Rachael off guard. That's what made her spill the muck.

There was a cute guy standing at the stall, watching her. "You missed the barrel."

Maybe staying here on the weekends was not going to be so bad. "Thanks, I didn't notice."

The guy leaned against the edge of the door. "What are you in for?"

What? What did that mean? Rachael pushed her eyebrows together. "What does that mean? Who even are you?"

He shrugged, running his hand through his short black hair. "I heard Ted yelling earlier. He's not a person you want to get on your bad side. I'm Justin, by the way."

Well, looks like I'm already on his bad side, Rachael wanted to say. "Ted loves me. He had a hissy-fit because I wanted to take a shower."

A small smile crossed Justin's lips. "That's crazy. I'm done with my work if you want me to help you out."

Why did Justin want to help her out? He probably just noticed that she was going through a lot by the exhaustion on her face. The bright side was that the kid was cute. "Okay, just don't hurt yourself."

The amount of work that Rachael was doing was enough to make her back hurt. There was dirt underneath her fingernails. Her head was pounding. Even though Rachael was only sixteen, she felt like she should be much older with this type of work she had to do. Mucking out

a stall was not bad at first. It just got harder on her back overtime. The pain in her lower back throbbed when she stretched her arms to gather the ditty hay into the shovel. When Rachael scooped up some more shavings, there was a high-pitched sound. Almost like she had hit glass with the shovel.

What the hell was that? Rachael pushed the shovel again in the same direction. Another noise. *That's so weird*, Rachael thought. She hit the object one more time with the shovel, just to make sure it wasn't only her imagination. What could possibly be in the shavings that weren't supposed to be there? Or maybe it was supposed to be there. If it was, what could it be?

The object was not easy to spot in sight. Rachael tried to follow the sound. Something hit her foot. It stubbed her toe a little, enough for her to bite her bottom lip. At least she didn't have to look that hard for it. Rachael bent down to brush some of the shavings off. What Rachael was not expecting was the horror that was right in front of her.

A skeleton's black eyes were staring into her soul. Rachael screamed bloody murder.