

# BITTERSARP

K.D. Burrows

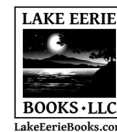
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**Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under't.**

**- William Shakespeare**

## BITTER APPLE BLUES

*Now won't you listen while I tell you a tale,  
about the garden and its solitary male.  
He asked God, who reigns up above,  
to give him someone that he could love.*

*So Adam got Eve, and a warning, too.  
There's only one thing you cannot do.  
Don't eat from the tree of good and evil,  
that grows in the middle of the garden primeval*

*But Eve, she had a burning inside her to know,  
and believed what the snake told her was so.  
Because God lied, and the snake was right,  
nobody died when the apple they'd bite.*

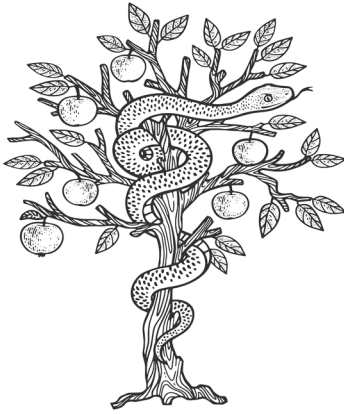
*She fed Adam the apple, that's what they say.  
But he ate it himself; he could have walked away.  
Wouldn't take the blame for his own mistake,  
so God cast his eye on Eve and the snake.*

*Chorus:  
Eve got a raw deal. No chance of appeal.  
The rest of her days full of pain and ordeal.  
Judged for what God had told her was wrong,  
when all she did was be a little headstrong.  
'Cause the truth should be told; we must not conceal,  
Adam turned on his wife and she got a bad deal.*

*Come with me dearie, said Eve to the snake.  
Let us join forces; our own rules we'll make.  
Because bitter the fruit, that grows on the tree,  
that's watered with lies, and never set free.*

*So let's tell the truth, and make it well known,  
that the knowledge of man, by a woman was sown.  
So Eve walked away, and the snake slithered after,  
and all that was heard was the sound of their laughter.*

*Repeat Chorus...*



# Chapter 1

2008

She was always there, popping up when Eve least expected her. Eve tried to tune her out most of the time, but it was like trying to ignore a buzzing, irritating fly you thought you'd gotten rid of but was then back to torment you. Just past her hundredth birthday, Eve was too old to expend time and energy sparring with her antagonist like she used to. Now she spent most pleasant summer days sitting on the porch, hoping she wouldn't fall and break a hip when she tried to get out of her chair. She hadn't been sure for the last fifteen years if she'd survive any subsequent winter and make it back around to sunny days again, so she didn't want to waste time on foolishness if she could avoid it. Her slapping down days were over.

So she turned a blind eye when she could. What did it matter now? She'd be dead soon, and when a bowl of ice cream was the high point of something pleasurable to look forward to in life, you could be damn sure you were ready to go. Her heart was bad. There was a pill for that, because she was way too old to have the surgery that would fix the problem. A pill for her arthritis and one for her blood pressure—which wasn't the same thing as the pill for her heart—and a pill for cholesterol she didn't bother taking because she was a hundred years old. Who cared

about cholesterol when she was going to die soon, unless the doctors found the cure for mortality pretty damn quick? And even if they did, unless they could turn back time, who wanted to be an old and creaky immortal centenarian? No one, that's who.

Thankfully, her mind was still clear. At least she thought it was. How would she know? The only people she usually talked to were the doctors, her health care aides, and the Watkins next door. The doctors mostly nodded and smiled at her as they poked and prodded, eager to get to the next patient; the aides were employed by her so thus deferential; and Marcus, Laurie, and the two boys were practically family and too nice, she was sure, to point out if she said something tinged with senility.

All things considered, she was mostly content for an old lady at the end of her life. She had this house, and enough money to be comfortable and taken care of during her slide into death. And she had her memories, good and bad. Mostly it was the good ones that preoccupied her now. Often she thought of that first summer she'd come here to Hollister House. She'd been young and beautiful—even though she wouldn't have described herself that way then—and in love. The love of her life had been sweet like honey, and warm like the sun on your face on a summer day. And frail and beautiful, like a delicate flower sheltered in a secret garden that only bloomed for a short time before the petals wilted and fell to the ground, dead.

She'd experienced so much that summer. Her confidence in herself and her talent had truly blossomed for the first time. But being here that first season had also taught her that life wasn't always fair, and that you couldn't always do anything about that unfairness no matter how badly you wanted to, and that people lie, sometimes even the ones you love. She'd learned about crushing her enemies, seeing them driven before her, and hearing the lamentation of their women. Okay, she'd gotten that last one from that Conan the Barbarian movie a few years back. She loved Arnold.

Still, she'd done a good bit of crushing her enemies.

“Did you want some more lemonade, Miss Eve?”

Jenny reminded Eve of Corrine. Jenny was not quite as pretty, but she was cute and blond, with big blue eyes, a slim figure hidden beneath her aide's uniform, and a sassy smile. She probably wrapped the men right around her little finger, just like Corrine used to. Jenny had brought the clean laundry out onto the porch and was folding Eve's nightclothes on the wicker table in front of them.

“No, thank you. I'm about ready to float away. Any more lemonade and I'll have to sprint into the house to avoid wetting my drawers.”

Jenny laughed. She was easy to amuse, and Eve enjoyed hearing a young person's laughter. Jenny wasn't the brightest girl she'd ever employed, but she was sweet, dependable, and hardworking, and Eve was fond of her. Jenny had even brought her fiancé over for Eve to meet, and said she was going to invite Eve to the wedding next June. Eve admired her optimism.

"Oh Miss Eve, you're a real card, as my Grandma always says."

"I'd probably like your Grandma."

"She'll be at the wedding. She can't wait to meet you; I talk about you all the time."

Eve was used to hearing that people were talking about her. People had been talking for years. Some people, all they knew how to do was talk, and most of them should learn how to shut up.

Jenny stopped folding the clothes and looked up, as if something across the street had caught her attention, and then Eve saw her shiver. Just the tiniest, tasted-a-sour-lemon shimmy passed through Jenny from her head to her feet.

"Jenny? Everything all right, dear? You look like someone just walked over your grave." Jenny turned and looked at Eve, and then plucked the fabric belt from one of Eve's robes out of the pile of laundry on the table. She walked over and stood in front of Eve's chair, and Eve felt her heart skip a beat. She could hear her pulse pounding in her ears. She always hated when that happened, because it made it harder to think when she really needed to.

"Jenny? Reach over and hand me my walker, will you? I think I want to go in the house."

Jenny bent over, wrapped the belt around Eve's neck, and pulled. Eve put her gnarled hands up to pull at the cloth strangling her, but it was already too tight to get her fingers underneath and stop it from cutting off her air. She tried to grab the belt from Jenny's strong grip, but Jenny just pulled tighter. Eve saw spots in front of her eyes.

All of a sudden, she wasn't quite so ready to wax poetic about death and she reached out her hand, searching on the table next to her. She'd almost blacked out when she finally felt the hard plastic, and she fastened her fingers around it. Quick as a wink she swung the flyswatter as hard as she could, and heard a satisfying whap as it hit Jenny's cheek. One more slap even harder than the first and Jenny released her grip, walked back to her chair, and sat down. Eve pulled the material from her throat. Maybe she had a few more battle wins left in her after all. She took a minute to get some air into herself, her breath coming in ragged little gasps, and then threw the belt back on top of the laundry pile.

She'd have bruises tomorrow for sure.

Jenny went back to folding the laundry. There were two vivid red overlapping squares of grid marks emblazoned on her cheek. "Everything okay, Jenny? You look a little under the weather, dear."

Jenny lifted her hand and rubbed her cheek. "I'm fine, but my face feels hot. Probably just some sunburn from mowing Grandma's lawn yesterday." She folded one of Eve's nightgowns and put it on the pile. "Did you want some more lemonade, Miss Eve?"

Eve leaned back in her chair and relaxed a bit. "No thank you, Jenny. I'm about ready to float away. Any more lemonade and I'll have to sprint into the house to avoid wetting my drawers."

"Oh Miss Eve, you're a real card, as my Grandma always says."





## Chapter 2

2018

Rachel spoke the address into the rental car's navigation system in case her memory failed her, and its English-accented voice reminded her of the narration in an old black-and-white horror movie. She started to fill in her own dramatic subtext as the clipped voice gave each instruction. Turn right in two hundred yards *to return to the place that haunts your dreams*. Stay to the left *to avoid the evil you left lurking behind in your childhood*. Forty minutes later, she shut the nav off when she saw the house up ahead. Good thing she had a sense of humor; she was going to need it at Dad and Lily's new house.

This visit, she was determined to tell her father that she wasn't going to continue flying across the country to Virginia for her birthday every year, a tradition they'd started when she was a kid and she and her mom had moved to Tacoma after the divorce. Dad had never come to visit her in Washington in the decade since, and soon to be twenty-six, she was old enough to realize that it was mostly her trying to maintain their relationship. Time for her to step back and for him to step up. Or not. She was expecting *or not*.

The first thing she noticed when she got out of the car was how postcard-pretty everything looked, so different from what she

remembered as a kid, and from the pictures Lily had posted of the house when Dad first bought the place. The house looked renewed, like an aging dowager after her latest cosmetic surgery. There was a sign hanging from the porch eaves—*Welcome to Hollister House*—above a planter of flowers perched on the railing, their blooms color-coordinated with the newly painted exterior of the Victorian mansion. Wicker furniture with brightly patterned cushions was arranged on the veranda, a charming setting for future guests to sit and enjoy. The sun was shining; the birds were singing; the air smelled sweet and clean like fresh laundry hung on the line to dry. Perfect, perfect, picture perfect. The bed-and-breakfast life Lily had told Rachel she'd always wanted.

Except that Dad was a construction company owner, not an innkeeper. The kind of guy you hire to turn your basement into a man cave, or put a two-bedrooms-and-a-bath addition on your house. Dad said they'd had to hire someone to do what he called the artsy-fartsy artisan stuff. And Lily was kind of a flake. A thirty-four-year-old flake Dad had deserted Mom for ten years ago. Rachel had mostly forgiven Lily for that, because she was a firm believer that stuff happens and life goes on, and there was no doubt Lily loved Dad and made him happy. And Lily tried, in her own hit-or-miss, well-meaning way, to cultivate a relationship with Rachel. That counted for something, even if she usually came up short by saying something awkward, or doing the wrong thing, or just trying too damn hard to make the three of them into some kind of tight family unit with Lily as the cheerleader. Some things were just always there in the background, and in Rachel's mind, her relationship with her father's new wife had a big, dark shadow cast over it. One that she mostly pretended to not see but which refused to disappear, no matter how much she smiled and nodded and tried to connect with Lily. Dad shouldn't need Lily to be the caretaker of his and his daughter's relationship. He should be putting in the effort himself.

As Rachel was pulling her suitcase from the car, a movement on the second floor of the house caught her eye. Past the ornate gingerbread trim on the balcony, she could see a pale face outlined in blond hair at the window. *Lily*. Rachel waved, but Lily had already retreated into the room.

Rachel took a deep breath, climbed the steps, and walked across the porch. The hinges on the wood-spindled screen doors squeaked in protest when she pulled them open. Obviously all the haunted house accoutrements hadn't been face-lifted into oblivion yet.

Dad had closed on the house right after Rachel's last birthday visit, and right before he and Lily got married, after having lived together for

almost a decade. They hadn't told Rachel about either event until after the fact. Ten years after the divorce, Lily still had a weird fear of Rachel's mom knowing anything about what was happening in Dad and Lily's life, and Rachel was obviously considered a conduit of information. Which was stupid, since Dad had a penchant for picking up the phone and calling Mom at least once a year to catch up, usually facilitated by a considerable amount of alcohol and Lily being out of the house.

Inside, Rachel put down her suitcase and scanned the width of the house: sitting room, hall, and parlor. The place was huge, full of carved woodwork, stained glass window panels, and enough era-appropriate furniture on the cusp between vintage and antique to keep everyone comfortable at a house party thrown by Jay Gatsby. There was a pair of those fancy doors that slid back into the wall when you weren't using them, and she could already see two architectural-masterpiece fireplaces in line of sight from the front door. She'd been hearing about every detail of the house for months from Dad and Lily. They were always sending her links to pictures, usually as part of a group text that seemed to include everyone they knew.

She'd never been inside the house before, only in the garden. Miss Boland, the previous owner, had still been alive then.

The interior was amazing, as if the front door was a portal to a different time. Had Lily done all this herself? Rachel had texted back 'nice!' to the last twenty or thirty links without actually looking at the pictures. Lily had a good eye, not that Rachel was the best judge of that. Tending bar and writing listicles for *Headbuzz* in her spare time, while failing—so far—to write the next *New York Times* horror best seller, guaranteed that her apartment was furnished in early twenty-first century Ikea. She was impressed at the job Lily had done.

An elaborately tiled stretch of floor led from the front door toward the center of the house. She shouted into the depths of the house. "Hello! Dad? Lily?" Then louder. "It's me...Rachel."

They were expecting her, right? Where were they? She'd called from the airport while waiting for her rental car, but no one picked up. She'd left a message, but no one called her back during the drive from the airport. She wrote a listicle in her head.

*Ten Reasons To Make You Wonder If Your Family Members Love You: 1. They never pick up the phone when you call. 2. They don't return your calls. 3. They don't come down to greet you when you wave from the driveway. 4. They buy the neighborhood haunted house where you had a traumatic childhood event, without telling you beforehand...*

A rhythmic, creaking noise—almost like the squeak from the screen door—interrupted her thoughts. She walked across the open expanse of the front rooms and down a wide, wood-paneled hall toward the sound. Where was Lily?

“Lily! I’m here!” Lily had been upstairs at the window five minutes ago. How long did it take to get downstairs in a haunted mansion? Maybe the ghosts of Hollister House had gotten annoyed with having to live with her, and had drowned her in one of the newly renovated bathrooms.

Halfway down the foyer she saw a photograph on the floor, and just past it, a sheet of paper. A breeze was blowing through the hall; Lily must have opened some of the windows or a door to enjoy the pleasant spring weather. Rachel bent down and picked up the photo. It was an old snapshot of a blond-haired woman wearing a white summer dress and sitting in a wicker chair on a porch. Hollister House’s porch, it looked like, from the strip of stained glass visible in the photo. The woman was sitting sideways in the seat, one leg thrown over the wicker arm, her left arm stretched over the high back of the chair. Her face was turned toward the camera and she wore a sly grin, as if the photographer had told her to smile but had only coaxed from her an amused look.

The woman was beautiful, but seeing the picture caused a ball of anxiety to blossom in Rachel’s stomach. She flipped over the photograph to see if some long-ago person had jotted down the woman’s name for posterity. Written in neat scrip on the back was: *Beauty on the Front Porch*, and underneath it, *May 1927*. She felt goose pimples forming on her forearms. She took a few steps and scooped up the white sheet of paper. It was a note in her father’s distinctive handwriting:

*Dear Rachel,*

*I’m so sorry. I can’t stand the torment any longer. By the time I realized what she was, it was too late. Watch for the blond-haired woman. Lily is in danger. You have to convince her to leave Hollister House. She won’t believe what I am telling her is happening here. I know you two haven’t been as close as I’d always hoped you’d be, but she’ll need someone to help her, and I don’t have anybody else to ask. We are the only real family she ever had. I love you. You were right, Rachel. Even when you were a kid, you knew. You’ve always been the strong one. Please forgive me - for everything.*

*Dad*

What the hell was going on? Was this Lily and Dad's idea of a joke? No wonder Lily hadn't come downstairs yet. Her dad had been teasing Rachel about Hollister House for years. And he always had a penchant for scary tricks, like the time he'd sent her up to the attic in their old house on Hewlett Street to get something after he'd rigged a Halloween skeleton to swoop down on her when she lowered the ladder.

Lily had probably been watching for her arrival from the upstairs window so they could put everything in motion. The two of them could be oblivious sometimes about their brand of humor falling short. Suicide notes weren't funny. And the rhythmic creaking noise was unnervingly eerie, like the heartbeat under the floorboards in *The Tell-Tale Heart*. Was that designed to draw her down the hall? She could see that the foyer opened into a larger space at the end, and she took tentative steps to the end of the tile floor until she was standing in a large three-storied stair hall. Her eyes were drawn upward to an elaborate stained-glass window on the wide landing of a grand staircase made of carved wood and inlaid marquetry.

*Oh my God, Oh my God.* Her muscles released in shock; the note and the photograph fell from her hand and skittered away on the breeze. Her father was hanging in the center of the stairwell, his dead, hemorrhage-red eyes staring at her as he swayed back and forth in an ever-decreasing pendulum swing. Rachel heard a strangled cry behind her and turned to see Lily drop a bag of groceries and collapse to the floor.

...

The day of the funeral was sunny and warm. Rachel wanted it to be rainy and depressing, with groups of people dressed in somber clothes, gathered under slick black umbrellas. Instead, people were wearing sunglasses and shedding their coats in the spring sunshine.

After inviting the attendees back to Hollister House for the reception, Lily parked herself in the front hall, forming a receiving line with Rachel beside her. Lily looked like a sad, beautiful swan. Her blond hair was pulled back in a sleek ponytail that showed off her long neck, and her makeup was perfectly applied, dark eyeliner circling her eyes and ending in little crescents extending her lash line. Her classic black sheath dress would have been just as well-suited to a cocktail party as it was for her husband's funeral.

Rachel was wearing a navy wrap dress she bought yesterday at the outlet mall, the first thing she'd grabbed off the rack that fit her and seemed appropriate.

Lily had been calm and resolute during the services, giving directions to the funeral director and clutching a white handkerchief. This wasn't the Lily that Rachel was used to; she seemed so under control and in charge. She'd been hysterical when the police, and then the coroner, came to the house. She and Rachel had sat in the kitchen holding each other's hands, Lily sobbing and Rachel doing the best she could to wipe away any tears as soon as they appeared, trying to maintain enough composure to talk to the police. At one point she'd gotten up from the table and when she came back, Lily had been speaking low and intensely to two of the officers, crying and wiping her eyes, but she'd stopped talking when she saw Rachel.

She kept telling herself Dad would want her to help Lily, but Lily seemed pulled together now. Something had happened during the night that had transformed her into a pillar of strength. Rachel didn't know what it was, but it had to be more than the Xanax Lily was popping.

Rachel just felt sad and blank. She couldn't believe Dad was dead, but in a way, he'd mostly been out of her life for a long time already. He'd started a new life and left her behind a long time ago, as if she were a divorce consolation prize for her mother. Dad probably hadn't thought of Rachel moving to Washington with her mother as that, but that's how it had felt to Rachel at the time. It was hard moving to the other side of the country when she'd lived her whole life in Edenvale. She'd had a difficult time in Tacoma at first, but she was fine now. All grown up. She had a life in Washington, and a lot of years in front of her to make it what she wanted it to be, even if it wasn't absolutely perfect now. She was just a grown up that had lost her parent. A father who had fluttered around the edges of her life while facing in a different direction, like a moth suddenly drawn to a brighter, newer flame.

It was different for Lily. She'd lost her husband.

Rachel looked around and thought that her father would've hated that they were throwing a party for him and he couldn't be here to tell jokes and have a few drinks with his friends. She got a drink from the makeshift bar the caterer had set up in the parlor, escaped to a chair tucked into a corner of the sitting room, and called her mom.

"Hi baby, how are you doing?"

The phone had only rung once. Her mother must have been sitting there with the phone in her hand, waiting for her call.

"Okay, I guess."

“Are you sure you don’t want me to fly out and spend a few days there with you? Then we could fly home together. I would have come out for the funeral, you know.”

“Yeah, I know Mom. But Lily’s kind of...you know...Lily. And I didn’t want to add any stress.”

“Yes, I’m pretty aware of how Lily can be.”

Rachel didn’t want to get into ten-year-old divorce drama, especially on the day of her father’s funeral. “Listen, Mom. I’m going to stay for a couple of weeks, maybe. They can cover my shifts at The Red Onion, no problem, and I can write from anywhere. Dad wanted me to help—”

“You don’t have to do what your dad wanted, honey, especially since you were never his first priority. But you should find out about the trust. It should come right to you now that your dad’s gone. Your grandfather set it up for you. Your father was only going to be the trustee until you were thirty.”

“Mom. Enough, okay? I’ve got other stuff going on right now.”

“I’m only thinking about your best interests, Rachel. Don’t be naive.”

“I’ve got to go. I’ll call you tomorrow or the next day. Bye, Mom.” She hung up before her mother could sneak in any more unwanted advice.

She took a long sip from her drink and watched Laurie Watkins, the next-door neighbor, circulate around the room and talk to the catering staff. Laurie and her husband Marcus, a professor at Winchester University, had rushed over when they saw the police cars the night her father died, and then they’d stepped in to help make arrangements for the funeral reception. Laurie and her sister ran a catering business and took care of everything.

The Watkins hadn’t specifically acknowledged having slightly known Rachel ten years ago, and the circumstances of the last time she’d seen them didn’t seem very conducive to reminiscent conversations, especially in the present situation. Rachel had noticed a young man at the cemetery—tall and good-looking, like Marcus, but with skin a shade lighter and curly brown hair—talking to Laurie. Was it Isaiah? She hadn’t seen him since that summer she moved to Tacoma; she’d heard that he had moved to New York after college. She remembered his striking green eyes, and how he’d said they were from his mother—a pale, red-headed, Irish-American Murphy, who married the Black man who’d swept her off her feet and with whom she eventually had two sons. Rachel hadn’t been able to see his eyes from where she was

standing. Then the graveside service had started, interrupting her reverie about the summer of 2008. She'd lost sight of maybe-Isaiah and then hadn't noticed him back at Hollister House.

Marcus had spent most of the afternoon helping the bartender pour drinks at a makeshift bar in the parlor, talking fondly about her father and sharing funny stories with the other mourners. It was obvious he and her father had gotten close in the time they'd been neighbors, but he and Laurie didn't seem that connected to Lily. That didn't surprise Rachel. Her father always had a way of making instant friendships, but Lily just couldn't compete with him in the extrovert competition. She always seemed to say something awkward, or she'd hang back and let Dad take the lead, happy to be the one buzzing around in the background while her charming husband was the star of the show. Dad was like that, consuming all the oxygen in the room and expecting the support staff to take care of everything else, and everyone in Dad's life was support staff. When Mom stopped wanting to play that role, he'd turned to someone who would.

Marcus and Laurie had told Rachel to focus on looking after Lily, and refused to let her do anything. Just small-town etiquette, Laurie had told her when she'd tried to thank her. Someone dies, send some food. Someone needs a hand, make sure you're using yours to help. So Rachel focused on Lily, but Lily didn't seem to need her. Maybe she would after the funeral, when there was nothing else to focus on but the hole her husband had left in her life.

If Rachel wasn't needed, she was happy to spend a few days straightening out the part of Dad's estate that pertained to her and then head back home. His note hadn't seemed rational. She'd asked Lily about it, and it didn't seem to make sense to her, either. Lily said something had happened to Dad. He's been *troubled* lately. It hadn't seemed like the right time to push for more answers, so Rachel hadn't pushed.

A bright flash of color across the room caught Rachel's eye; a woman in a red dress was walking away from her. Just as she was thinking red was an odd color to wear to a funeral, the woman turned down the foyer toward the stair hall. Rachel couldn't see her face, only her wavy blond hair and her face in quarter profile—the curve of her cheek, the tip of her nose—but she thought the woman must be beautiful, because she walked like she was used to ignoring people staring at her.

Seeing a woman in a red dress at Hollister House made Rachel uneasy. She got up and followed her.



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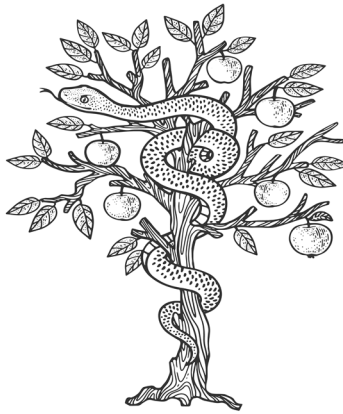
He was coming around the turn in the hall from the bathroom when he saw Rachel walking toward him, and he did a stupid, spontaneous thing before she could spot him—as if his feet were operating autonomously—and turned on his heel and headed right back in the direction he'd come. He ducked into her dad's office and walked through to the other room of the owner's suite, and then stuck his hands in his pockets and stood there like an idiot staring at the wall. *Well, that was slick. Why didn't I just say hi and tell her I was sorry about her dad?* But as soon as he'd seen her at the cemetery, he knew he was going to get tongue-tied. Rae looked good. Beautiful and grown up, but still Rae with the long, light brown hair he used to run his fingers through, and the hazel eyes he used to stare into for hours, and the smile that used to make his teenage stomach flutter.

Of course she wasn't smiling today because it was her father's wake. That was the problem. If he talked to her today, he was going to grin and act like an imbecile. *At her father's funeral.* Which was the opposite of being cool and sophisticated and ten years more grown up than he was when they'd taken each other's virginity in the back yard of the house they were standing in right now.

It hadn't seemed like she'd noticed him at the funeral home or the graveside service. Maybe she'd completely forgotten about him and that summer. She probably had a lot of more important things to do than worry about some guy she dated one summer in high school, especially one who'd stopped writing back to her emails a few months after she'd moved to Tacoma. He'd catch up with her later in the week.

He wondered how rude it would be if he just snuck out the back door and over to his parents' house next door, where he'd parked his car. Just as he was about to do that, the door that connected directly to the main hallway started to open.

A second later Rae walked into the room and he felt a flutter in his stomach.



## Chapter 3

Fall, 1927

She'd given specific instructions when she called the cab company that she did not wish to spend her taxi ride indulging in inane chitchat. The driver had probably heard the rumors, and would be bragging to his buddies about squiring the notorious Corrine Hollister in his cab before her train even left the station. So be it. It was impossible to fight the viciously sharp tongues of the gossipmongers, and all her energy had been burned away with nervous fidgeting and worry in the last hours. Alberta had told her if she could get through yesterday, she could get through today—that the worst of it was over. She adjusted her hat, pulling it down a little farther on her brow to cover her hair. She was pretty sure Alberta was wrong.

“Good morning, Mrs. Hollister.”

The driver picked up her suitcase from the porch and she returned his greeting with cool indifference, not looking at him as she pulled on her gloves. He held the door of the cab open for her and she slipped into the seat. She looked down, searched through her purse, and checked her train ticket.

The smirking driver offered his hand when he opened the door of the cab at the train station, and she took it because it was easier than

ignoring him and exiting the car by herself. The red dress she was wearing was a bit constricting, although she'd lost weight since Luke's death. She wasn't eating or sleeping well; a constant flow of sadness had washed over her every day, wearing away at her bit by bit. A few more days of this and the dress would fit perfectly. She adjusted the mink stole around her shoulders. She didn't like having dead animals draped around her neck, but the dangling mink tails hid her silhouette a bit.

She tipped the driver well and continued her generosity with the porter who took her bag. She pulled her first-class ticket out of her handbag as she headed across the station platform so she could waive it at anybody who gave her a problem about boarding early.

The platform was bustling. One woman sniffed into a handkerchief, while a man who must have been her husband patted her shoulder as they said farewell to a young couple holding hands. The reminder of young love—unblemished, trusting, hopeful young love—twisted a knife in her heart as she walked toward the train.

“Corrine, is that you?”

She recognized Clementine Barry's voice and hurried her pace to match her increasing heartbeat. She silently prayed for a train to hurtle into the station, jump the tracks, and flatten Mrs. Barry into a bloody pile of jowly, corseted taffeta.

Was that the sound of Mrs. Barry walking after her? She walked faster.

“Corrine?” Then louder, “Corrine!”

A conductor stood on the closest train steps, checking his pocket watch. She would have to stop in front of him and hope he stepped aside quickly enough to let her board, or risk continuing to the next car. A second before she reached the train car, the conductor stepped down, cleared the steps and tipped his cap to her. Relief washed over her as she boarded, but then she was frantic again, worried that Mrs. Barry would follow her onto the train.

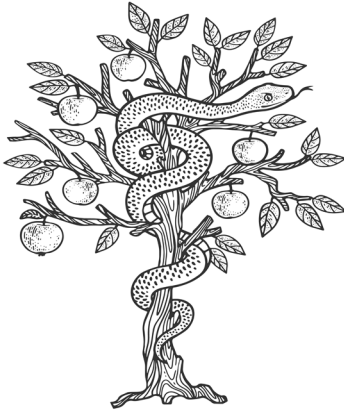
She rushed down the aisle, checking the numbers on the cabins against her ticket. When she found the right one, she closed the door behind her. The window was open. She could hear women talking on the platform and recognized Mrs. Barry's loud voice. Then another female voice was speaking.

“Are you sure, Clementine? Maybe it wasn't her.”

“Of course it was her. I've seen her wearing that red dress before. And a mink stole, for heaven's sake. Any *decent* woman in her position would be wearing black. But I guess she has no reason not to be rude to us, now that she's slinking back to New York with her dead husband's

money. If you ask me, I think there should have been a lot more questions asked.”

She reached over, undid the tieback, and pulled the train’s window curtain closed. At least she’d never have to be social to Clementine Barry again. It gave her a small bit of comfort.



## Chapter 4

2018

**W**here had the woman in the red dress gone so quickly? There was no one in the foyer, and when Rachel walked down to the stair hall and glanced around, there was no red dress there either, and no way could the woman have run up the stairs fast enough for Rachel to have missed her. The back hall was empty, the bathroom was unoccupied, and the only people in the kitchen were two staff from the catering company, who said they hadn't seen a woman in a red dress. It was possible that the woman had ducked into the dining room from the hall, and then circled back through the parlor to reinsert herself into the crowd of mourners.

Rachel was on her way back to the front of the house when she heard a sound coming from her right and noticed a door ajar in the ornate wood paneling of the hall. Was that where the woman had gone? The door was so closely matched to the paneling that if it were fully closed it would be easy to miss, if one wasn't looking closely and didn't notice the doorknob.

She opened the door and stepped in.

Isaiah was standing in the middle of the empty room, framed against the sun pouring in from a large bay window. She'd known it was him

when she saw the tall man at the funeral. She just hadn't wanted to think about Isaiah and that summer so long ago, on the day they were burying her father, so she'd played dumb to herself. Was that even possible? There was probably some psychological term for it.

He smiled at her. "Hello, Rae."

Nobody called her Rae anymore. She'd made a big fuss when she was eighteen and demanded that everybody start calling her Rachel because Rae was a little girl nickname.

"Hi, Isaiah."

"I'm sorry about your Dad."

"Thank you." God, he'd grown up to be gorgeous. He'd been the cutest guy around when he'd been seventeen and she'd been sixteen, but he'd filled out from the skinny, adolescent gangly guy she'd been so in love with—her first love—that summer. His dark hair was shorter, cut closer to control his wild curls. She would have recognized his green eyes anywhere, set off by his dark amber skin, the perfect shade between his mother's peaches-and-cream complexion and his father's dark brown skin. She'd spent hours staring into those eyes that summer, and all of her first fall in Tacoma remembering them while she moped around the house, wishing she was back in Edenvale. "You owe me an email. I asked you in September of 2008 if you were going to the homecoming dance and you never wrote back."

He laughed, and she smiled, remembering how he always laughed at her jokes.

"Yes, I went to the dance with Shelby O'Connor. I would have rather gone with you, but you were two thousand seven hundred miles away and Shelby was available."

"I bet. I heard stuff about her. If I believed in slut shaming, I might throw a little shame Shelby's way." Their conversation felt like they'd just spoken to each other recently, instead of ten years ago.

"Funny you should say that, because she spent most of the dance in the parking lot, making out with the captain of the football team. I found out later they were dating, but her parents wouldn't let her go to the prom with him because they'd caught them together in Shelby's room. I went home and spent the rest of the night looking through the sketches I'd drawn of you that summer, feeling sorry for myself that my girlfriend had moved away."

"Oh, no. That's terrible." She frowned. "Unless you're just saying that so I'll feel sorry for you and forget that you ghosted me."

"Nope. Honest to God truth." He took a step closer to her.

He was tall. He'd been tall ten years ago, but he'd definitely grown a couple inches after she'd left. He leaned toward her. "Totally pathetic, huh? You should definitely feel sorry for me and forgive my seventeen-year-old self," he said.

"I'll think about it." *Oh my God that sounded like flirting.* She was using her flirty voice and flirting at her father's funeral. Even Shelby O'Connor probably wouldn't do that. Rachel had read an article once by a psychologist, about people getting drunk and hooking up at funerals and wakes. You're at a friend or family member's death ritual, and suddenly you want to do something life-affirming in response to the realization of death. And what's more life confirming than the act that can create life? Not that she had any plans to test that psychologist's hypothesis; it was just that weird stuff had a tendency to run through her head when she was sad and nervous.

"I heard you were in New York," she said.

"Yep. For a couple of years. I worked for a firm up there after I got my architectural engineering degree, but city life is really not for me. I wanted to start my own company, and the Big Apple didn't seem like the place to do it."

"I remember that summer all your plans for the future were about being an artist."

He walked over to the paneling on the wall near the door she'd just come through, and started rapping on it: first at the top and then down the middle, from one side to the other.

"I'm still an artist. It's just hard to pay the rent that way." He stepped back to look at the wall, and then ran his hand along a slightly warped piece of stained wood. "But there's plenty of art in helping restore these old houses. There was a slow leak from a water line upstairs. Eve wasn't keeping the house up towards the end, and then it was empty for a while. I'll have to remove this piece and see if I can repair it, or try and match a new board."

"Are you the person my father hired to do what he called the artisan artsy-fartsy stuff?"

He smiled. "That's me. This was a great job, too. All the gingerbread trim on the house, and the new crown moldings to fabricate for the remodeling. And I got to restore some tile work in the hall and on the fireplaces, all done by Eve Boland. The mosaic trims on the porches are her work, too. These old houses have a million stories to tell, this one especially."

Yes, she knew all about the stories this house told. She and Isaiah had made one of their own, outside in the garden, under the Beech tree.

“I’m almost finished,” he said. “I’m assuming Lily still wants me to do the work in here.”

She had no idea what Lily wanted. In a few weeks and she’d be back home in Tacoma and never have to look at this house again. Let Lily fly out to Tacoma if she wanted to, which she didn’t, and wouldn’t. God knows her father never had. “I didn’t even know this room was here. Is it going to be another guest suite?”

“This is the owner’s suite.” He walked past her to a door and opened it. “The room we’re in, the office, and a bathroom off the back stair hall. He pointed to the closed door at the opposite end of the room. “That’s the front of the house through there.” She could hear the funeral guests talking on the other side of the door. She’d been sitting close to the door when she noticed the woman in the red dress.

“We left the owner’s suite until last. Lily and your father were living in the old gardener’s apartment over the garage during the heavy part of the restoration, but when we finished the upstairs, they moved into a guest suite. They were hoping to start offering rooms pretty soon.”

The house was a labyrinth. What was Lily going to do here all by herself? “I better get back to Lily.”

“Are you staying for a while or going right back to Tacoma?”

Did he care whether she was leaving, or was he just making conversation? It would be hard to avoid him if he was going to be working in the house while she was here. “My dad asked me to stay and help Lily, so I’ll be here for a couple of weeks.” *Wow, that sounded strange.* “In his note. He left a note for me.”

He reached over and squeezed her arm. “I’m sorry Rae. Really sorry. I didn’t realize something was wrong. I wish I had. Your dad talked about how proud he was of you all the time; your writing job and how talented you are, and how he wished he could see you more often. We got pretty friendly after I told him we dated that summer before you left, and he and my father were real buddies ever since he and Lily bought the house. You know, your dad even talked about offering you the apartment over the garage. That maybe you’d visit more if you had your own place to stay.”

Dad had told Isaiah he was proud of her? She didn’t remember him ever saying that to her. Her eyes started to water, and she reached up and brushed away a tear before it could roll down her cheek. “I don’t think I talked to my father that whole spring and summer he and Mom broke up and he moved in with Lily.” It was no use rehashing that shitty time—when Isaiah and the friends they hung out with had been the only good things in her life. It was all water under the bridge. Rachel pushed that



thought away, to wonder instead if her father had been surprised when he'd found out her first boyfriend had been Black. Then she realized that whatever her father had thought about anything was moot now. "I should get back to Lily."

"Give me your phone." He put out his hand. After a second of hesitation, she held it out to him. He typed in his number and gave it back to her. "Call me if you need anything, Rae." He gave her a sad half-smile that made her feel better and worse at the same time. "Or if you just want to talk."

Later, after Lily had gone to her room and Rachel was helping Laurie and her sister and their catering staff clean up, she asked if anyone had seen a woman at the funeral wearing a red dress. Nobody had.

...

Rachel could hear her father calling her from a distance. Like he used to, when she was playing at the park down the street and it was time to come home. Then she heard him whistle. She hadn't heard the sound in years, since her father and mother and she had been a real family, but she would have recognized it anywhere. One long, loud, stretched-out note that went down and up like a slide whistle and then cut off quickly. The sound could sing across a field or cut through a cheering crowd at a football game. Her friend Amy used to tease her that her father dog-whistled for her, but it was an instant connection between her and her father. When she was a kid, she'd sometimes answer back with the same whistle.

She turned on the light. Had she been dreaming? She listened, but all she heard were the soft sounds of the sleeping house: a tiny creak as the wooden bones of the newly renovated walls settled, the sigh of steam heat breathing through the radiator. She got up, walked to the window, and pulled back the curtain. Lofty old trees bordered the street like stately sentinels, not a branch stirring. No wind blowing to whistle through a hole or pipe. She reached over and checked that the door to the balcony was locked.

Just a dream.

The room Lily had given her was beautiful, but the odor from a bowl of lavender potpourri was giving her a headache. She took the pungent dried flower salad from the small table between the Morris chairs flanking the fireplace, and walked it out to the balcony. When she came back inside, she locked the door behind her before getting back into bed.

The bedroom set was Craftsman turn-of-the-century tiger maple, according to Lily. Or had she said Arts & Crafts movement? Rachel didn't know enough to tell the difference. The house was a Queen Anne, Lily had told her, and most of the furniture had been included in the sale. She and Dad had used a lot of the old stuff and filled in the rest with weekend antiquing trips.

Rachel stared up at the ceiling, wishing she were back home in Tacoma, in her own bed in her own apartment, on the other side of the country. Maybe she could get away with only staying a week. If the funeral was any indication, Lily didn't seem to want any help.

As she tried to get back to sleep, she heard the whistle again, louder this time. Was it Lily? She sat up. It sounded like it was coming from right outside her room. She got up, pulled on her jeans and crept to the room's entry, pressing her ear against the sliver of space between the jamb and the heavy door. She thought she heard a woman's voice softly whispering her name, like a faint echo bouncing back against a landscape. Then she heard a woman's laughter, much louder, and pulled her head away. *What the hell?*

She jerked open the door. No one was there.

To the right of her room, the door to Lily's suite was shut tight, as were the other guest room doors that opened onto the central lounge area. She walked across the carpet and the wide wood-planked floor to the balustrade and looked down the grand staircase, but saw no sign of anyone fleeing.

Was someone downstairs? No, she was being stupid. A house like this probably made a million sounds. Her imagination was getting the best of her, and the stress wasn't helping. Hadn't she read somewhere that losing a parent was one of life's most stressful events? How much did that get multiplied if your father killed himself in a haunted house?

She walked over and knocked on Lily's door. No answer. She waited a minute and then knocked harder until she heard Lily stirring. She gave a quick look over her shoulder while she waited, making sure there was nobody—nothing—coming up behind her.

The door opened a foot or so.

"What's wrong?"

"I thought I heard something downstairs. Did you hear anything? It was a whistling sound."

Lily pushed her blond hair out of her eyes and squinted. "What? No, I didn't hear anything. I took a sleeping pill. You're not used to staying here. It's an old house that makes lots of noises. Go back to bed, Rachel." Lily closed the door in her face.

Great. Wonderful. She didn't know what she'd expected: Lily to walk her downstairs, make her a hot chocolate and tell her everything was all right and there was no monster under her bed? She went back to her own room, closed her eyes, and tried to go back to sleep.

*She was sitting on the back porch of Hollister House. She looked around for her father or Lily, but she was alone. The house seemed younger, newer. It must be late summer, because she was looking out from a porch onto a garden and the roses were losing their petals and littering the path. She detected the scent of flowering tobacco growing nearby, and there was an apple tree filled with apples a dozen feet from the side of the porch. A wrinkle of uncertainty formed in her brain. How did she know what flowering tobacco smelled like? Her doubt soon dissipated in the warm and pleasant air. September, she thought. It seemed like September. She leaned back in her chair. She was wearing an old-fashioned, airy, light blue dress with a dropped waist and short bell sleeves. Where did she get a dress like this?*

*There were two large, old-fashioned wicker chairs on the porch, and a rag rug in front of the screen door. On a table to her right, tinny music was coming out of a bygone-era Victrola with a big horn. It Had To Be You, the old standard everybody from Billie Holiday to Frank Sinatra to Barbra Streisand had recorded over the years. This version sounded old-fashioned: an orchestra with corny horns emphasizing each verse, and a piano half-way between ragtime and jazz. She didn't recognize the woman singing.*

*An iced glass of lemonade was on the table, sweating drops of water. She picked it up and took a sip and it tasted tart and sweet and spiked with gin. The screen door slammed and a handsome young man with black hair, and tan skin that told her he spent a lot of time outdoors, stood smiling in front of her. He held out his hands to her. She put down the glass and reached up. He pulled her up from the chair, twirled her around, sat in the chair in her place, and pulled her onto his lap.*

*She drew up her knees to throw them over the arm of the chair and she felt him slip his hand under her dress to rest it on the outside of her thigh. It felt right; she relaxed into him.*

*He kissed her cheek, and then their mouths met. Slow, loose kisses became urgent when he slipped his tongue into her mouth and moved his hand underneath her panties to cup her buttocks. His fingers brushed against the cleft between her legs. She pushed his hand away and got up from his lap, pulling on his arm.*

*“Come into the house. Do you want somebody to see us?” She took his hand, raised it to her lips, and sucked his index finger, slowly drawing it out of her mouth and then running the tip of her tongue back and forth over the tip.*

*He groaned in mock frustration. “Don’t be a tease.”*

*“C’mon.” She pulled him up, laughing, and he followed her, playfully slapping her ass when she stopped to open the screen door. “Stop!” she said, rubbing the spot where his hand had been, but then she looked up at him and smiled as she led him into the house. The back hall and the door to the kitchen gave her the same familiar-but-different feeling she’d had on the porch. Was there somebody she was supposed to be looking for? She hesitated but quickly brushed her confusion aside as she reached out for the hand of the beautiful dark-haired man.*

*She wanted him, more than she could ever remember wanting anyone before in her life. She could picture them together so clearly that she knew they were already lovers, even if she couldn’t recall his name. The hair on his chest was like a dark cloud; he had a white ridge of a scar on his shoulder; a constellation of freckles on his hip. He liked to pull her on top and reach his hands up to cup her breasts...*

*A woman stepped into their line of vision as they walked down the hall. Her short blond mane was cut into a wavy bob. She was wearing a sleeveless yellow dress and a long loop of faceted yellow beads, and she stood with her hands on her hips and her head cocked to the side, smiling and barring the way. She was gorgeous: beautiful blue eyes, perfect skin, and red, Cupid’s bow lips. The man dropped Rachel’s hand and she felt scared. Something was wrong, very wrong.*

*“You weren’t supposed to be back until tomorrow,” the man said.*

*“I decided to come home early,” the woman said, speaking to the man but looking at Rachel, her eyes moving up and down Rachel’s body. Rachel stepped back. It felt like the woman knew what she looked like under her dress, and what she’d been doing with the man on the back porch just a moment ago.*

*“We’ve come to be so close this summer,” the woman said. “All three of us.” She narrowed her eyes at the dark-haired man before returning her attention to Rachel. “I thought I’d make you a surprise, darling, something to remember us by.” She swept her arm toward the staircase, ushering them into the stair hall.*

*Rachel’s father was hanging in the stairwell. His face was dark, almost black, his swollen tongue protruding from his mouth, his eyes bulging from their sockets. His head hung at a peculiar angle, his neck oddly elongated. She could hear the creaking of the rope rubbing against*

*the third-floor banister as her father's body swung in a slow arc, back and forth, as if he'd just jumped and she missed the opportunity to save his life by only minutes. As she stared in shock at her father's body, she saw its mouth begin to move. The corpse blinked several times and then opened its hemorrhage-red eyes wide, staring directly at her as it puckered its blackened lips and blew air toward Rachel in a long stream of fetid breath. The corpse began to whistle.*

*The blond-haired woman laughed, and the handsome man from the porch was gone and Rachel was alone with the woman, who stepped toward the corpse and pushed it, sending it flying backwards until it reached the farthest arc of the rope and returned, whistling toward Rachel.*

Rachel woke up from the nightmare, gasping for air. Her heart beat rapid-fire in her chest like popcorn exploding in a hot pan. She started sobbing. She got out of bed and rushed to the door onto the balcony, but her fingers felt tingly and not her own, and it took a minute before she got the door open and was finally outside, gulping the fresh, cool air. Wasn't there some kind of breathing thing you were supposed to do during a panic attack? She couldn't remember what that was. She took a deep breath, held it for a few seconds, and then exhaled, long and slow. That seemed to work, so she did it a few more times until her heart stopped pounding, and then she forced herself to stop crying and wiped the tears from her face. She couldn't believe she was in this house. *This is insane. Everything is so screwed up.*

*Did I take my medication today?*

*That's always my first assumption, isn't it? That somehow it was me that did something to mess everything up, and not someone else.*

No, it was the woman from the garden. She was sure of it, even though the woman had been dressed differently in her dream, not wearing the red dress Rachel remembered from all those years ago, the one she'd been reminded of this afternoon. It was the same woman. The woman she'd seen in the garden with Isaiah. The woman who had spoiled everything—her first time and the last time with the boy she'd been in love with.

Who was she? It was easy to speculate from all the stories. The woman was young and beautiful, so it hadn't been Eve Boland walking into the garden to see who was trespassing. Miss Boland had been a hundred years old then. But just because Eve Boland had lived to be so old didn't mean that Luke Hollister's wife had. Maybe Corrine had come back to Hollister House.

Rachel was convinced she'd seen the ghost of Corrine Hollister. The only problem was that nobody knew what Corrine Hollister looked like. Corrine had only been married a short time to Luke Hollister, and then she'd gone back to New York after he'd died, disappearing into history. But the picture she'd found in the corridor the day her father killed himself had been a picture of Corrine Hollister—Rachel was sure of it—and was the same woman she'd seen in the garden all those years ago.

She wiped a film of sweat off her forehead even though the night air was cool. It was just a nightmare. What was she doing to herself? Her father had just killed himself in this house, after laying a final request on her shoulders to spend her time helping someone she'd never been close to, and who probably didn't want her here. And she'd been kind of freaked out to run into Isaiah and learn he was working here; the circumstances of one of the last times they saw each other were bound to come up sooner or later. To top it all off, she had to figure out what was going on with her trust money from her grandfather, without seeming like a money-hungry mercenary who only cared about her cash, and she was staying in Hollister House, the setting for dozens of scary ghost stories she'd heard since she was a little girl.

Luke Hollister had fallen from Hollister Point into the gorge and died when he was twenty-seven, in the presence of his wife Corrine and his cousin Eve—his supposed lover—and under curious circumstances. Tragedy and speculation about illicit love was hardy seed for any ghost story to grow from, and everyone from Edenvale, Rachel included, could tell the stories about strange goings-on at Hollister House, or Luke's ghost appearing to walk along the cliffs at the point.

*Good luck having pleasant dreams sleeping in this house.* She'd taken all those anxiety-inducing ingredients and cooked it up into a pretty nasty nightmare. What had Dad and Lily been thinking when they bought this place?

Rachel closed the door and went to the bathroom to get a glass of water and another Xanax from the prescription bottle she'd found in the bathroom with her father's name on it. He'd probably been hiding them from Lily. What else had he been hiding?

She'd tried her best to be a good daughter. To consider Lily family, and to maintain a relationship with her father. And now none of that mattered because Dad was dead. He'd deserted her again and left her holding a bag she didn't want to hold.

Oh my God, she hated all those women who spent their lives blaming shit on daddy issues they never got over. Now she sounded like one of them, and it was all her father's fault.

She headed back to bed with the glass of water, but stopped in the middle of the room, staring at the balcony door, remembering something. Wait... *A window. Someone looking out the window onto the balcony.*

When she'd arrived at Hollister House, a motion had caught her eye and she noticed the curtains pulled back in an upstairs window; Lily had been looking out. Rachel had waved but Lily didn't respond. But a minute after she'd found her father, Lily had come in with bags from the supermarket. They had forgotten all about the groceries until after the police had left and the coroner had removed her father's body. They'd had to throw out the milk and the other perishables that had sat in the car for hours.

The glass slipped from Rachel's hand and shattered on the floor. If Lily had been on her way home from the grocery store when Rachel arrived, who was the blond woman at the window?

She cleaned up the broken glass and spent the rest of the early morning hours wide awake, waiting for the sun to rise and light up the dark corners of the house.

...

*She sat on the roof, running her beads through her fingers as she listened to the crying on the balcony. The girl was a pretty thing that took after her father. The same sienna brown hair, hers to her shoulders and streaked with blond, while his had been streaked with gray. The same hazel eyes, the same dimpled cheeks and solid stature, with a hint of chubby softness that made her look like a sturdy farmer's daughter who could do anything from milking the cows to sowing the fields. It was a shame what had happened to her father, but he hadn't been able to fight off the things in Hollister House that go bump in the night. And in the daytime, too.*

*When the young woman had arrived at the house, she'd been surprised to see her, because she remembered her from before. How long had it been? After one died, time had a different feel to it. Sometimes it stretched out like a wet wool scarf hung to dry; sometimes it collapsed in on itself like a falling house of cards. The young woman—her name was Rachel; she'd heard Lily call her that—had been very young then. She'd seen Rachel and the boy from next door—Isaiah—sneaking into the garden to be together in the moonlight. Wasn't young love wonderful? Too bad theirs hadn't worked out that night. She knew how that felt. Her love hadn't worked out either.*

*And now the girl was back, and Isaiah, too. We'll have to see how that works out this time. The house had a way of getting under one's skin like a festering splinter; always there in the background, never allowing you to really forget.*

*From her perch on the roof she heard the balcony door close, and after a minute she pictured herself on the balcony and was instantly there. She peeked through the windows. Rachel had left the drapes open, and she saw her walk into the bathroom. A few minutes later she was back. She stopped in the middle of the room, staring out the windows at the balcony.*

*Had Rachel seen her? It never seemed as if anyone could see her before. She watched Lily all the time, waiting to see if something would happen, and Lily had never exhibited any kind of clue that she knew she was being observed.*

*Picturing the back porch off the kitchen in her mind's eye, she immediately transferred herself there, and sat in one of a set of wooden chairs that Tom had dragged out of the basement and repainted after he'd bought the house. She'd always liked these chairs.*

*She'd never expected to be stuck here forever. She'd expected...something else. Maybe not to go to heaven after what she'd been part of, but she certainly hadn't expected to wake up here after breathing her last breath. Every time she'd tried to leave Hollister House, to see what or who else might be out there in the world of the afterlife, she couldn't. She'd pretend she was walking on her ghostly legs, and the minute she tried to cross the road or go through the gate to the house next door, she couldn't. She'd fly over the back fence by the beech tree and she'd get stuck in the air like a fish caught in a net. Float freely upward, and she'd hit a celestial ceiling that she couldn't see but couldn't get past. That one made sense, she guessed, if there were really a heaven somewhere in the sky above the clouds. There was no place in heaven for her, according to any rules she'd ever heard.*

*You were supposed to confess your sins and be forgiven, but she was kind of fond of hers. She treated them like a worry stone or a favorite pendant that she carried with her, to fondle and polish with her fingers while contemplating life and the universe's peculiarities.*

*But now the girl was back; the girl she remembered from long ago. Maybe Rachel could hear Hollister House. See her, and everything that Hollister House was hiding. Maybe Rachel could help her do what needed to be done.*