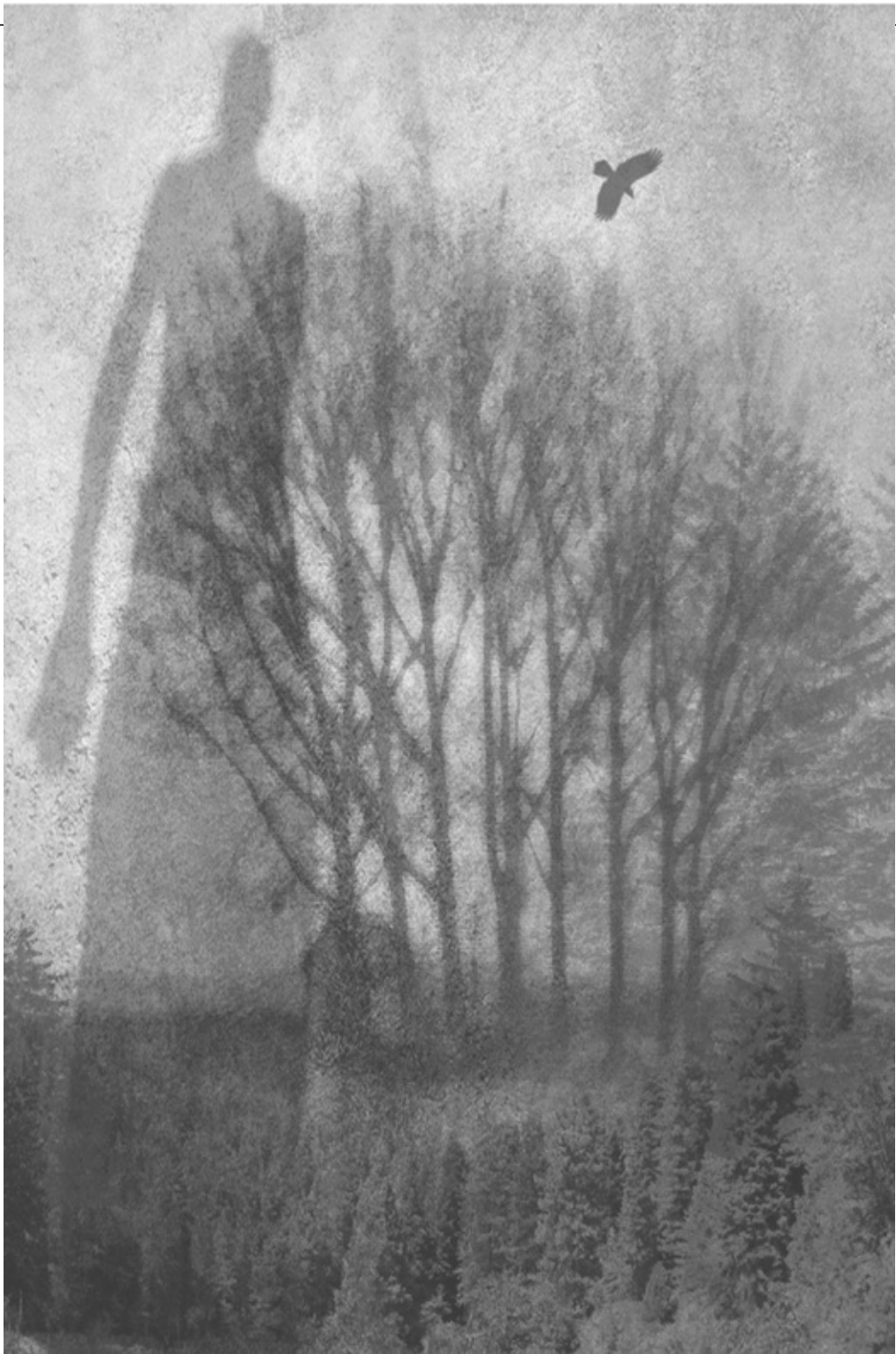


A GHOST STORY

BEYOND



graham mcnamee
EDGAR AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR



Also by Graham McNamee

Acceleration

Bonechiller

BEYOND

A GHOST STORY



graham mcnamee

WENDY
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BOOKS

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Contents

Cover

Other Books By This Author

Title Page

Copyright

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

Chapter 40

Chapter 41

Chapter 42

Chapter 43

Chapter 44

Chapter 45

Chapter 46

Chapter 47

Chapter 48

Chapter 49

About the Author



I remember dying.

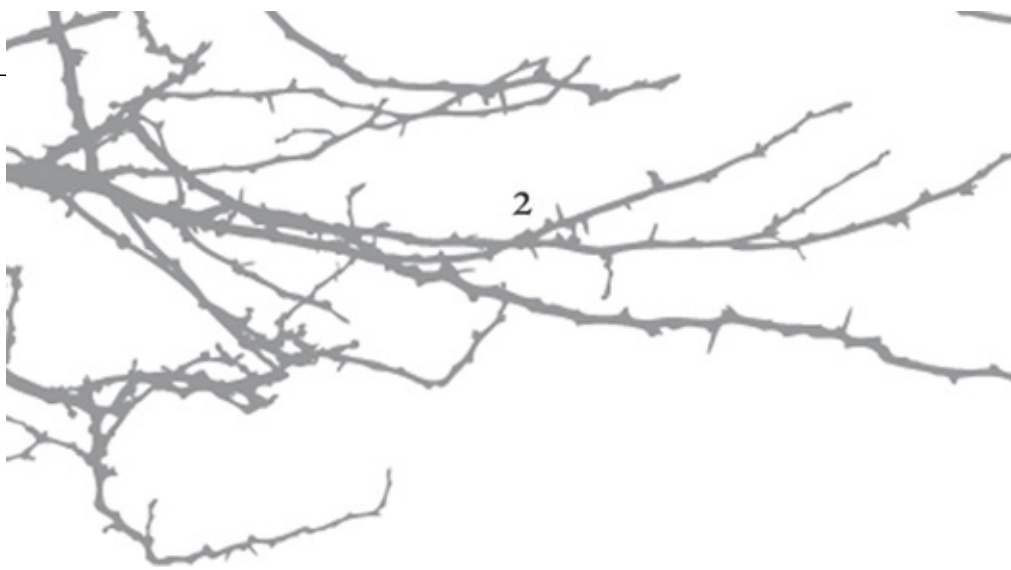
After I got injured my heart stopped and I flatlined.

I was done and gone. But I wasn't alone.

There was something waiting for me when I died. Something dark and cold tried to take my soul away.

When they brought me back to life I escaped from it. Left it behind.

But what if it came back with me, followed me home like a hungry stray?



Don't think about it.

I keep telling myself that.

Today I find out what they're going to do with me. I'm counting down the hours till my doctor's appointment.

My best friend, Lexi, is doing her best to distract me. So on this stormy afternoon she drags me out in my backyard to try a new trick shot with her camera. "We're going to stop the rain."

That would be a real magic trick out here on the Rain Coast, in the town of Edgewood. Never heard of the place? I'm shocked. We're famous for our wet weather.

Lexi gets me to stand under the tree in back. It doesn't give me any shelter, with all the dripping branches.

"What do I do?" I ask as she sets up her tripod on the grass.

"Just stay still, Jane. Facing me. I need to get the focus perfect."

Most days are gray around here, where the sky is always crowded with clouds and the rainy season never seems to end. Makes you feel color-blind sometimes, starving your eyes. Only the bloodred of Lexi's lipstick saves the world from fading to black-and-white right now.

"Ready?" she says. "Okay, the camera's set for superquick shots. Don't move for a minute. And close your eyes. This flash is really intense."

I shut them, and Lexi starts shooting as the wind shakes cold raindrops from the branches above. Through my lids I can make out the flashes, like rapid-fire lightning. When it feels like a minute's gone by, I open my eyes and catch the last blinding flares.

"Done," she says.

We run to the back porch and check out the results. As I blink away the afterimage fireworks, my vision clears and I see Lexi beside me.

Always in black, she looks like the Grim Reaper's hot little sister. Right now she's wearing a hooded slicker over her miniskirt and tight sweater. Raven-dark hair frames her pale face.

"Got it." She shows me the image on her camera. "Took a hundred shots to get it, but we tricked the rain."

There I am. Brown eyes wide, frizzy blond hair blown wild by the wind so it seems like I got zapped by lightning. Makes me look witchy.

But the magic is in how the raindrops are stopped in midair. They show up as streaks

around me, but where the focus is tightest right in front of my face a few are frozen. Caught in the split-second flash, they seem solid, as if you could pluck one out of the air and hold it. Crystal clear pearls.

“You stopped the rain,” I say.

Lexi shrugs it off. “A minor miracle.”

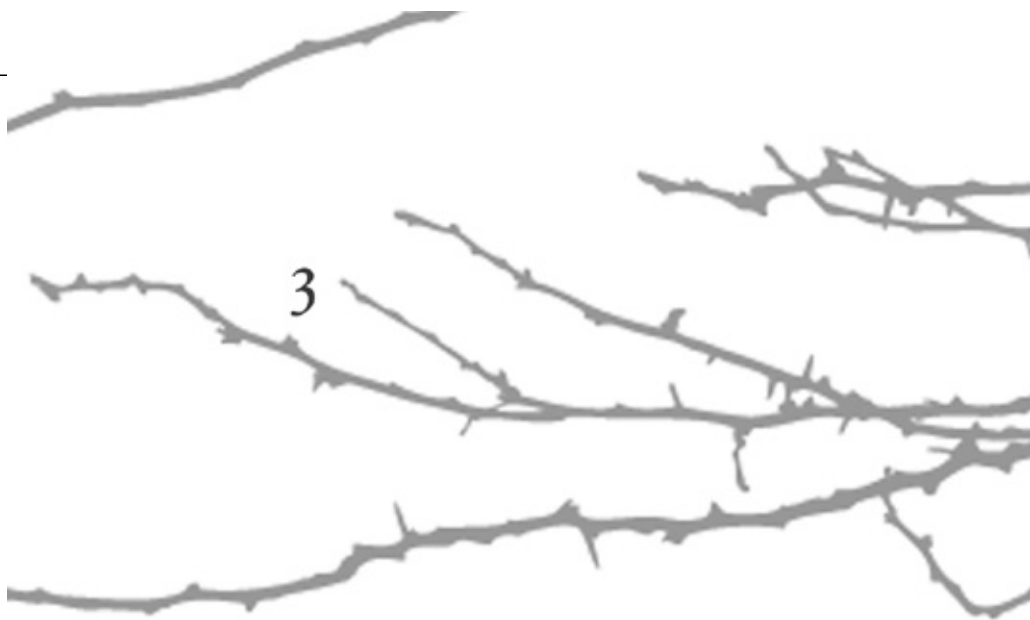
“I could use a miracle right about now.”

“The rain falls too fast to really *stop* it. But the drips from the branches are slowed down enough to catch.” She hands me the camera. “Now you try.”

We experiment some more, capturing the dribbles off the porch roof, suspended before gravity splashes them to the ground. Cool special effects.

But Lexi’s best trick is to take my mind off everything. And it works wonders.

Playing with the camera lets me breathe for a while. Before everything unfreezes, the drops start falling again, and the clock counts down.



That's me.

The X-ray on the wall shows the ghost image of my skull. Me skeletonized. No eyes, no skin, no hair.

It's like seeing my reflection in Death's own mirror. Spooky.

The neurologist is talking to Mom and Dad, but I only catch fragments of what he's saying.

"No intracranial swelling ... no bleeding ... no infection ... no change."

Skeletons are so anonymous. Hard to tell a guy from a girl, old from young. Stripped down to my bare bones, the only way I can really tell this is me is by that little white sliver buried inside the skull.

I'm so fascinated by my naked bones that it takes a few seconds before I realize Mom is talking to me.

"Jane?"

"Huh?"

"Do you have any questions?"

I glance at their faces, all grim and worried.

"Just one," I say, pointing to the X-ray. "Does this make me look fat?"

The neurologist frowns, Dad sighs, Mom looks pissed.

"What?" I shrug, like I can't help it. Nobody ever gets me. I mean, if I don't joke about this a little I'll curl up in a ball in my room and never come out.

"Okay, seriously then. Are you gonna cut the thing out, or will I be setting off metal detectors for the rest of my life?"

The doc glances down at my chart. "Eventually it will have to come out, but right now, the situation is stable. You're doing remarkably well. It might be more dangerous to go in and remove it. We'll have to run some additional tests."

Great. More tests.

They start going over all the pills I'm taking.

As the doc writes some new prescriptions, Mom grills him on side effects and complications.

I turn back to my X-ray. Lexi always said I was wrong in the head, and here's the proof. But really, I can't lay all my weirdness on that little white sliver there. I was twisted long

before that showed up.

The nail in my brain.

On the drive home everybody's all silent and gloomy.

"Call off the funeral!" I say to break the tension. "I'm still breathing."

Mom grunts and shakes her head. Dad frowns at me in the rearview mirror.

"You age me, Boo," he says. That's his pet name for me, Boo, because my big, wide-open brown eyes make me look permanently startled. "I got my first gray hair the day you were born. If I hadn't been there to see you come into the world with my own eyes, I'd swear the devil switched babies with us and gave us a little screaming demon."

He glances over at Mom with a weak smile, but she's not playing along.

So we go back to gloom and doom.

Dad was just getting off work when he picked us up for the doctor's appointment, so he's still in his police uniform. He's a constable here in Edgewood.

The Edge is a small town on Canada's west coast. The Rain Coast. From autumn to spring we get about eight months of wet weather. And even when the sun does break through, all we see is liquid sunshine.

Right now the downpour is drumming on the roof of the car. During the rainy season you tune out the constant *drip-drip-dripping*—that never-ending background of white noise—the way you forget the sound of your own breathing.

The windows in back are all steamed up. I wipe a patch clear as we pull off the coastal highway onto the road that runs along the ridge above town.

Edgewood is spread out below us. Not much to see now after dark, unless you can read the constellations of streetlights. They map out the neighborhoods, with a bright cluster in what passes for downtown, scattered sparks farther out in the hills and a curving line marking the seawall. Past that I catch the bobbing glimmers of boats tied up at the docks.

I'm trying to spot where our house is in this galaxy, but right now the trees block my view as the woods swallow us up.

The Edge is surrounded by ancient forest, giant century-old evergreens. The town was carved out of their turf. And the way they tower over you, leaning in together to eat up the light, it's like they're plotting to take it back.

We pass a sign that says BLIND CURVE AHEAD, and I know exactly where we are. Through the windshield I see a familiar stretch of road.

And I get a little shiver. Like they say, as if someone's stepping on my grave.

This is where they found me on a drizzly night last month, walking blindly down the centerline.



I started sleepwalking after my brain injury.

At first I just wandered around the house in the dark. Harmless.

Until I escaped one night and woke up standing outside, in the rainy dark. The cold hit me like a slap. I was soaking wet.

What is this? Where am I?

Looking down, I saw asphalt under my bare feet, and a painted white line.

I was in the middle of a road.

There was a light coming from behind me. And a voice calling.

“Jane?”

I spun around. Caught in the glare of headlights, I stumbled backward, holding my breath, bracing to get hit.

“Jane.” That voice again, familiar. “Calm down. It’s okay.”

Shielding my eyes, I made out who it was.

Constable Granger. Dad’s boss, standing beside his squad car with the roof light flashing red and white. “What’re you doing out here? Are you hurt?”

I could only shake my head, shocked speechless and trembling.

Looking down at myself, I suddenly realized I was wearing next to nothing. Just what I went to bed in: a long, ratty old T-shirt that stuck to me now like a second skin. And you could see right through it to my underwear with the little red hearts.

I crossed my arms to cover up my chest, wanting to die right there. Total unsurvivable embarrassment. But before I lost it and started crying, I squeezed my eyes shut and tried the old trick Dad taught me.

Bulletproof heart, he calls it. When I was little and the kids at school were bugging and bullying me, he showed me the Kevlar vest he wears on duty. “This is my armor,” he said. “Keeps me safe when I’m out there. You need to grow your own armor, on the inside. Make your heart bullet proof.”

So I forced myself to take a slow, deep breath.

Bulletproof. Then I opened my eyes and found my voice.

“Guess I got lost on my way to the bathroom.” Sounding crazy, I know, but in control. He looked at me like I was speaking Martian, then took off his rain slicker.

“Here. Cover up. Come on now, I’ll drive you home.”

Granger didn’t ask any more questions on the way. The whole town knows my story.

Another time I escaped, Mom caught me while I was still in the driveway. She steered me safely back inside.

It’s freaky and frightening to totally lose control over what your sleeping brain is getting you into. Makes you paranoid to take a nap, in case you wake up staring into the headlights of an oncoming truck. Because that wasn’t the only time they tracked me down wandering along the same road out of town.

My late-night strolls were giving us all sleepless nights.

Everybody has a theory about why I’m doing it. Dad thinks it’s some kind of death wish. Mom worries I want to run away. The doctors think it’s a symptom of my injury.

I tried to cure my nightwalking by wedging a doorstop under my bedroom door. I even got Dad to put a lock on it so I could seal myself in. But my dozing brain just kicked the doorstop out of the way and opened the lock.

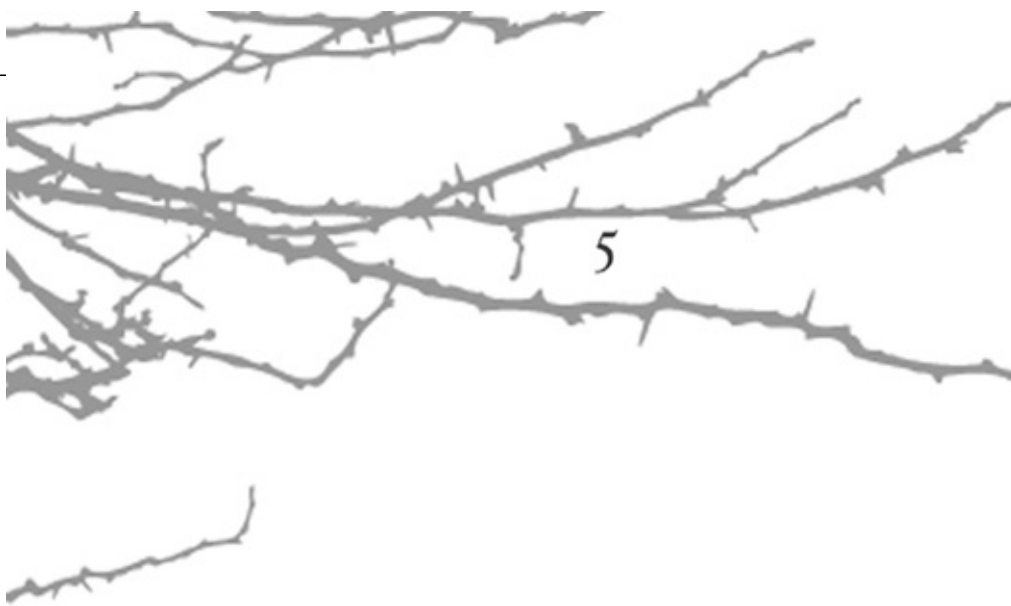
Dad finally came up with a solution. He gave me a ring. A plain silver band with a microchip embedded in it, a GPS locator chip.

It’s the same technology they use to keep tabs on crooks on probation or under house arrest who have to wear ankle monitors. They have these alert systems in nursing homes and maternity wards too, in case some old-timer wanders off or somebody tries to steal a baby.

Now I wear my magic ring to bed. And if I get ten feet from the house an alarm gets sent to Dad’s cell phone so he can go capture me. It’s worked a few times already. I never make it to the end of the driveway before he catches up.

Now I don’t have to worry about where I’m going to wake up anymore.

My sleep is under house arrest.



My phone rings at midnight, so I know it's Lexi. I told her to wait till later to call, to give me time if I needed to squeeze in a panic attack after my doctor's appointment.

"What's the verdict?" she says, no hello or anything. "You going under the knife?"

"Not yet. They want to wait."

"Wait for what? Do they think you're just going to sneeze that nail out one of these days? Or scoop it out with a Q-tip?"

I smile, lying back on my bed. Me and Lexi, we get each other. No heavy gloom-and-doom crap.

"They showed me on the X-ray. It's in there pretty deep. Digging it out could be more dangerous than leaving it for now."

I run my fingers over the shaved patch behind my left ear. I can feel the stubbly fuzz of new hair and the little dent in my skull where the nail entered. I was too far gone for the doctors to even try taking it out right away. Too risky, with me flatlining. So they stopped the bleeding, got my heart beating again and put the surgery off till later.

"You should get a copy of that X-ray. We could put it online. You'd be famous. 'Nailed Girl Cheats the Reaper.' Or, how about 'The Girl with Nine Lives'? We'd get you on the Discovery Channel or something."

"No thanks."

"How many lives have you got left, anyway?" she asks.

Getting nailed was just my latest close call.

"I must be on my last one now."

"I read about this girl," Lexi says, "who didn't even know she had a sewing needle stuck in her brain till she went to the doctor, after six months of headaches. She worked in a sweatshop where the needle snapped out of the machine and went right through the edge of her eye socket. She felt the jab but didn't realize it had penetrated. True story."

"Great. Maybe me and her can start our own freak show."

"So did the doctors clear you for school?"

"Unfortunately, yes." I've been off for two months, recovering. "They say I'm good to go. No danger signs. No bleeding, fevers, swelling or anything."

"So I'll drive by tomorrow morning and pick you up?"

“Sure. How bad is it at school? Should I be worried?”

“Well, they were calling you Psycho Jane for a while. But that was getting kind of old, so they’ve been trying out some new material.”

“Like what?” I hate to ask.

“I heard Zombie Slut. You know, because you’re back from the dead. That’s getting some play. And Reaper Creeper, which is pretty catchy. And what else ...?”

“Enough,” I groan. “Don’t ruin the surprise.”

“I was thinking of something more like Lady Lazarus. If you go with that, we could start an online ministry and get donations. Maybe sell miracle springwater straight from your kitchen tap.”

I shake my head. If I don’t cut her off, she’ll go on like this till dawn. Lexi’s a major insomniac. She’s so naturally wired, it’s hard for her to sleep. She can’t get her mind to shut down or her thoughts to shut up.

But it’s been a long, long day and I’m ready to crash, so I give her a hint by yawning loudly.

“Okay,” she says. “I hear you. Just called for the update. Sweet dreams, then. And hey, no playing in traffic tonight.”

“I’ll try.”

After I hang up, I double-check the lock on my door. Dad’s thinking of putting an alarm on it, but that might be a major hassle when I get up to pee at night. I drag my desk chair over to block the way, figuring if I bump into it that might wake me.

The rain gusts up against my window, tapping on the glass like a cat wanting in.

Before I turn out the light, I look around at the guys on my walls. Posters and photos from movies and magazines, showing a lot of skin. My dream guys: actors, musicians and models. My room is wallpapered in male flesh. Lexi says it’s an overdose of lust.

But that’s nothing compared to what’s hidden away in my closet. Okay, don’t laugh—I’m addicted to romance novels. They’re stacked floor to ceiling in there. I’m a sucker for doomed and dangerous love, reckless and crazy obsessions.

Lexi always makes fun of them. Mom looks at the covers and gets the giggles. Everybody laughs, so I hide my stash. My guilty pleasure. I’m a love junkie.

I kill the light, slip on my magic ring and get under the sheets.

Just when I’m dozing off, lying curled up on my side, I feel a little shiver down my spine. As if a draft has snuck into my room, or one of my dream guys has come in from the cold to spoon with me.



It started with my difficult birth. Mom nearly died having me. When they finally dragged me out into the world I was limp and lifeless, born without a pulse. They had to shock my tiny heart into beating.

Born dead. That set the mood for everything later.

So far I've survived poisoning, electrocution, a close encounter with a train and now the nail.

Don't get me wrong. I was never trying to hurt myself. This stuff just happened.

Stuff like—

At eight years old I was digging around in the kitchen cupboards, looking for art supplies for a project. But instead of paintbrushes and glue I found a plastic bottle with a skull and crossbones on the label, just like the one on pirate flags.

Later, I told Mom I thought the skull and bones meant it was a drink for pirates. Such a lie—I knew what the warning meant.

But I couldn't tell her the real reason why I drank the drain cleaner. Because I didn't know why.

But as I knelt there on the floor in front of the open cupboard, looking at that bottle something strange happened. A wave of dizziness hit me. And a horrible shudder ran through me that felt like bugs crawling all over me. I heard this buzzing inside my head, as if some angry bee was trapped in there.

Then I thought my eyes were playing tricks, because my shadow started moving without me.

I watched, perfectly still, as the shadow of my left hand reached toward the bottle. Like a puppet on a string, I felt a tug and my hand followed the shadow, grabbing the bottle and taking it out.

There was a hazy dream feel to everything, smothering my fear and confusion.

I was watching myself taking directions from my shadow hands, opening the bottle. The liquid cleaner had a sharp, chemical smell.

Looking at my shadow on the floor, I could almost sense it staring back at me, making me do this. I couldn't help it. Lifting the bottle to my mouth, I started drinking.

It burned real bad and made my eyes tear up, but I managed to swallow half of the container and was starting to gag when Mom found me.

She screamed my name and knocked the bottle out of my hand. Then she stuck her finger down my throat to make me throw up, and I spewed a puddle of chemical puke onto the

kitchen floor.

I knelt there, breathless, dry-heaving till there was nothing left. Then we raced to the hospital.

Why? Mom kept asking me. Why did I do that?

How could I tell her it wasn't me? Shocked and shaken, I couldn't believe it myself.

For a long time after, I was literally scared of my own shadow. But eventually I convinced myself I'd imagined it—seeing things, like having a dream when I was awake.

Why did I do it? Who knows?

But there was nothing to be scared of. My shadow couldn't hurt me.

Could it?



After yesterday's hospital checkup, Dad caught me trying to break out in my sleep last night. He says I got pushy this time, shoving him out of the way before I woke up with a heart-stopping shock on the front lawn.

So I have more drama to share with my therapist after school today.

At breakfast I'm groggy and grouchy, ready to pick a fight as Mom sets a paper cup in front of me: my morning pills. I'm still on antibiotics to ward off infection, anticonvulsants in case my brain gives me a seizure, a steroid to prevent swelling and others I don't even know what for.

"It's like you're feeding me the whole pharmacy."

"Don't be a grumpy patient," she says. "Come on now. Down the hatch with them."

She watches me swallow the pills.

"How's your head feeling, Boo?" Dad asks, sipping his coffee. "Any more migraines?"

That little nail missed all the vital areas—a one-in-a-million shot, the doctors say—but it can still hurt like a bitch sometimes. "My head's a mess. But no pain or anything for the last couple of days."

Just looking at Dad's face, you can tell *he's* no stranger to pain. His nose has been broken so many times it's kind of squashed, with the bridge dented in. His left eyebrow is a zigzag from where it was split and didn't get sewn back straight. Souvenirs from his boxing days.

But all that damage is from before he met Mom. Back when he was known around town as *Bulldog*. Mom house-broke him a long time ago. She says now he's only like a bulldog on the outside—inside he's a pussycat.

She puts a plate of French toast in front of me and leans in to press the back of her hand against my forehead.

I sigh. "No fever, Mom. Quit worrying."

She takes her hand away. "Quit worrying me, then."

We scowl at each other. I got my looks from her, but where she's pretty, I'm just odd. My mouth is too wide, my eyes way too big. We're both blond, but her hair is soft and wavy, honey shade, while mine is a frizzy, straw-colored tangle. Mom says I'll grow into my looks just like she says my curves will come. But when? I'm seventeen and I still can't fake any real cleavage. And where's my ass? Seriously, I'm sitting on bone here.

I notice Mom and Dad watching me across the table. I catch them doing that a lot lately.

Like they think I'm going to vanish any second.

"Where's your ring?" she asks.

I shrug. "I'm not gonna wear that thing all day."

"Why not?"

"What, so you can track every step I take?"

"We're not spying on you," she says. "We just want to make sure you're safe."

"I'm safe enough," I grumble. "Besides, I only get lost at night, when I'm asleep."

If it was up to her I'd be under twenty-four-hour surveillance.

"Why do you have to make it into such a huge thing?" she asks.

I take an angry bite of my toast. Can't blame her for worrying, really. But I don't need the ring on my finger every second, reminding me what a wreck I am. How I can't be trusted—can't even trust myself.

Mom's waiting for an answer. Our stare-down is broken by a car horn sounding from the driveway. Lexi saves the day.

"That's my ride," I say. "Gotta go. Gonna be late."

"Hold on," she tells me. "We're not done here."

"Dad?" I turn to the law. "Am I under arrest?"

The constable looks between me and Mom. "You're free to go, I guess. For now. But just think about it, okay? And don't leave town."

Mom frowns at him, shaking her head.

I stuff the last of the toast into my mouth and make my escape, rushing out into the gray January drizzle.

"Perfect timing," I tell Lexi, getting in her car.

As we pull away from the curb and head for school, she glances over. "You look wasted. Rough night?"

"I went sleepwalking again, but my dad stopped me from escaping."

I reach for the rearview mirror and twist it around to see myself. My hair's snarled, a wild jungle of a mane. I try pressing it down, but it just springs back. At least it distracts from the circles under my eyes.

"I look like roadkill."

Beside me, Lexi looks less like the Reaper's little sister today and more like a naughty ninja. Her everyday uniform is black leather jacket over long-sleeved shirt, miniskirt, knee-high socks and chunky-heeled shoes that boost her two inches. She's a shorty, but she's got a bite.

Her look says, You can't handle this, get lost and dream on. I could never make that work. My look just says Help!

"Speaking of roadkill," I say, giving up on my hair. "Has my sleepwalking gone viral? Does everybody know?"

Lexi nods. "Face it, girl. You're notorious. They're saying you run the streets naked after midnight, howling at the moon, feasting on human flesh."

She gives me a half smile to show she's half joking.

"Great," I say. "All these years with me trying so hard to be normal, and now ..."

"Well, it's good to have you back. I was getting lonely being the only freak in class. The *Creep Sisters* ride again."

That's what they call us at school, a name that's stuck to us since sixth grade.

Lexi says we were best friends before we even met. Like it was destiny that brought us together that first time in the school washroom.

Back then I was recovering from another close call. I had to wear gloves everywhere because my hands were still healing.

Lexi was the new girl, showing up in the middle of the school year.

She was standing at the mirrors when I came out of the washroom stall that afternoon. I tried not to stare. Nobody knew anything about her—where she was from, why she dressed all in black and went around filming weird stuff with her cell phone, like a dead seagull she found on the soccer field or some workers feeding branches into a wood chipper.

Hard not to stare at the mystery girl. I loved her hair, so silky black and straight.

I flinched when I saw she was looking back at me in the mirror.

"I've been watching you," she said.

"Huh?" I felt like I'd been caught, but caught doing what, I didn't know. Her dark eyes were locked on me.

"What's with the gloves? You cold?"

"No." I put my hands behind my back.

"Are you scared of germs or something?"

I shook my head.

"So why are you wearing them? What are you hiding? Can I see?"

"What? No. Why?"

The new girl was moving in fast-forward, leaving me kind of dazed. I'd come there to pee, not to get interrogated.

"Whatever it is," she said, "I'll bet you I got it beat."

I glanced from her to the door, thinking of making a quick escape. But this human question mark with the silky hair had me hooked. "Beat how?"

"I got something more freaky. Let's do a show-and-tell. Then we'll see who wins for the weirdest."

"Is it something gross?"

"More like bizarre."

I shrugged. "You go first."

"Okay." She bent and took off her right shoe and sock, till she was standing there with one bare foot. "Check it out."

I looked down. It was a normal foot, except for the big toe.

"It's blue," I said. "What happened?"

"Spider bite."

"No way."

She nodded. "A little wolf spider. It bit me when I stepped on it by accident. You should have seen my foot, it swelled up like a balloon. And when it shrank back down again, all the toes were blue."

"Why?"

"They weren't getting enough blood. So you know what the doctor did? He stuck blood-sucking leeches on my toes, to get more blood to flow into them."

"Leeches?" I cringed.

“Yeah. Little black vampire slugs. And it worked. Now it’s just the big toe that’s blue. Still working on that one.”

She wiggled it at me. “So what do you think? I’m pretty freaky, huh?”

“Yeah,” I blurted out. “I mean no. Not you, just your toe.”

Then she laughed. It was the first time I’d seen her look anything but dead serious. So I smiled too.

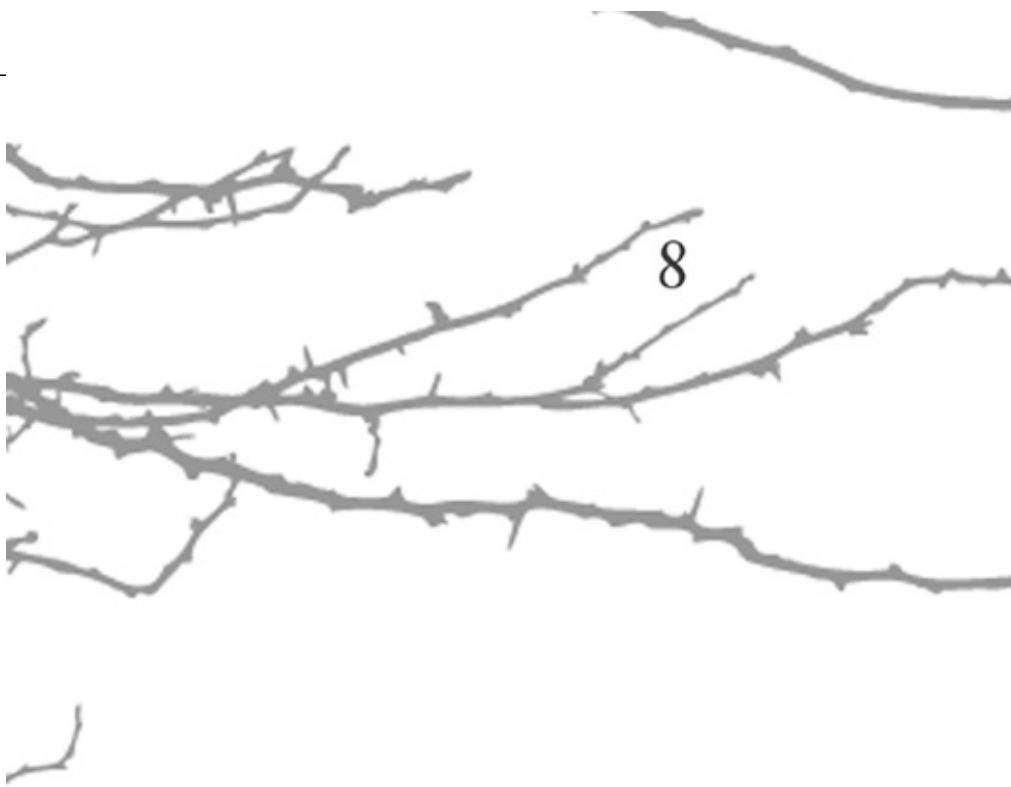
“It’s your turn,” she said. “What are you hiding?”

There was no turning back now.

“It’s kind of gross,” I warned her. Then I pulled the gloves off and let her see my hands.

I waited for shock or disgust. She leaned in for a closer look.

“Cool,” she said finally. “How did you do that?”



After the close call when I hurt my hands, I became smalltown famous for a while.

It started with a wicked windstorm blasting Edgewood.

Hurricane-force gales kept me up all night, shaking the walls of our house and howling like demons. It felt as if the whole place was going to get torn up and tossed into the sky, like Dorothy's house in *The Wizard of Oz*.

When the storm finally blew itself out, the geography of our neighborhood had changed. Trees uprooted, the street buried in debris. I was stunned when I stumbled out into this strange new world that morning, stepping over a twisted metal pretzel that used to be a lawn chair.

The big oak in our front yard had crashed over, taking down the power lines with it. A thick black live wire was whipping across our driveway like an angry snake.

The way it twisted, coiling and lashing out, was hypnotic. I was standing in the litter of leaves and splintered branches on the lawn, staring at it, when I felt suddenly dizzy. For a moment it seemed as if the wind was blowing right through me. There was a strong buzz in my ears, like I'd stumbled on a hive of hornets. And I felt the weirdest sensation, as if something was wriggling and writhing over my skin.

Then I caught sight of something moving down by my boots.

I was about to step away when I saw that it was just my shadow. So I stayed still.

But it didn't.

The shadow of my left rain boot stretched out and stepped forward.

That was when my brain shut down and something else took over. My shadow was like a magnet, dragging me along, leading me onto the driveway toward the power line, which was spitting sparks into the air—high-voltage venom.

But now I wasn't scared. I watched all this play out, a spectator in my own head.

The sparks were raining down around me. I crouched, and my shadow hands reached out, my real ones following after them. The charged air lifted the hairs on my arms.

The wire snapped out blindly, as if searching for contact.

Then it struck my hands.

An explosion of cold fire blasted through me, freezing me rigid for a long second. Then I was flying, thrown back. I hit the garage door and crumpled to the ground.

My heart forgot to beat. I hurt everywhere. Every inch and atom of me.

I lay there with my cheek pressed to the pavement. My eyes were still working. Before I blacked out, I saw a pair of shadow boots standing beside me. My stare was locked straight ahead, couldn't look up. The boots were black silhouettes cut from the bright morning air.

I could feel my legs jerking convulsively, trying to get me up and running away from that dark thing.

I thought if it touched me I'd fall through that black hole shaped like my shadow. It would swallow me.

My vision started to die off, flickering in and out. And with every fading glimpse, those boots seemed closer.

Ten thousand volts, the doctors told me. That was the shock I took when I touched the live power line. Should be dead—they didn't say it, but I knew what they were thinking.

My fingers were burned badly, scabby and peeling for weeks. The nails turned black and fell off. I had to wear the gloves, not just to hide my hideousness but to keep my hands safe from infection. My ears rang with an annoying mosquito buzz off and on for months, driving me crazy.

I told Mom and Dad I didn't see the fallen line till it was too late. Like it snuck up on me.

Why couldn't I tell them the real story? Because it was so impossibly crazy. I didn't want to believe it—that my shadow could turn on me. I'd buried the memory of my earlier poisoning so deep it had the feel of a strange dream. This brought it all back.

Denial is a powerful thing. I told myself the electrocution had messed with my mind, knocking me out and making me remember things wrong. I hadn't seen what I'd thought I was seeing.

Still, one night when Mom was tucking me in, I asked her: "Does my shadow have a life of its own?"

She laughed. "Your shadow is stitched to your feet. Can't make a move without you."

But what if mine had come unstitched somehow? What would it try next?

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