

Free Preview



Prologue

The trip down from Harmony was a long one. That meant a lot of time to think, to remember how this all started. I was so different back then, just a giggly girl with my trendy clothes and bedazzled phone that was practically glued to my hand.

I was at school that day and on my way to meet my friends, Missy and Stephanie, at the cafeteria for lunch. It was a beautiful spring day. That's why I was so surprised when the air turned cold around me.

“Gwen?”

It was my mom. Where'd she come from? I didn't see her approach or anything. “Mom.” I glanced around me. “What are you doing here?”

It was so embarrassing, her just showing up like that. I tried to be upset, only I couldn't. Something about her seemed off. She was so pale, and her face was so expressionless.

“I just wanted to say goodbye.”

I wrinkled my nose. "What are you talking about?"

Mom's body to started to shake. Tears ran down her cheeks. Her mouth fell open as she sobbed. She lunged toward me, arms outstretched.

"Uh, Gwen." I turned to see Missy and Stephanie standing behind me with puzzled looks their faces. "You okay?" Missy asked.

I turned back toward Mom – but she was gone. Where'd she go? I didn't see her anywhere.

"Gwen, is something wrong?" Stephanie asked.

I didn't know how to answer that. It took a moment, but I managed to laugh it off, pretend it was a joke. We headed to the cafeteria, ate, and dished about people like we always did.

Actually, Missy and Stephanie did most of the talking. I was still freaked-out about what had just happened, seeing Mom appear out of nowhere like that then just disappear. I tried calling her after lunch, only I got her voicemail. I hoped she'd call back soon.

My next class was Language Arts. I checked my phone when the teacher, Ms. Rhodes, wasn't looking, to see if Mom had called or texted. No such luck.

Halfway through class, someone came in and gave a note to Ms. Rhodes. Turned

out it was for me. I needed to go to the office. Great.

When I got there, the first person I saw was Grandma. She sniffed and dabbed her red, puffy eyes with a Kleenex. I went to her, to see what was wrong.

Grandma ran up and hugged me. She started to cry. "Oh, Gwen.

Honey." "What is it? What happened?"

"Your mother. There's been an accident."

Chapter One

My demon's hot breath blasted the back of my neck. The tips of his claws danced along my skin. My heart raced. Sweat gathered along my hairline.

I took a deep breath, shut my eyes, and made circles with my finger on my desk, to the left, over and over. This little ritual of mine was my only protection against him.

Slowly, my demon faded away. I let out a sigh of relief.

"Gwen?" a shrill but familiar voice called out.

I opened my eyes to see my math teacher, Ms. Files, looming over me, flashing her wicked witch smile. "Earth to Gwen Gladstone. Are you there, Gwen Gladstone?"

Everyone in class laughed. I glared at them then at Ms. Files. She pointed a bony finger at the Smart Board.

"Perhaps you'd like to answer the question I posed to the class."

She was already smirking, waiting for me to get it wrong. I just grinned and crossed my arms as I leaned back in my chair. "Do we really have to do this? You know I wasn't paying attention. You know I don't know the answer. Are you trying to embarrass me? That's not very mature of you. I thought as an adult and a teacher you were supposed to act as a role model to us impressionable youth."

Ms. Files stammered then said, "Excuse me, young lady?"

"I know your life must be pretty much suck, seeing how you teach sixth grade math, but do you really have to take it out on your students?"

By then, everyone in class was speechless. They watched me and Ms. Files, wide-eyed. Half of them looked like they were ready to cheer.

“Young lady, I’ll have you know math is a very important subject. You use it all the time.”

“The basics, maybe. Addition, subtraction, multiplication. I’ll even give you division. But who doesn’t have a calculator on their phone these days? As for the rest of it? Algebra? Geometry? What use does any of this garbage you’re shoving down our throats actually have?”

“It’s not garbage!” Ms. Files answered in almost a high-pitched squeal. She glanced around the room as if she expected someone, anyone, in the class to back her up. “Math is about structure, logic, and reason! Everything this world is based on!”

I laughed. “I used to be like you. I used to think this world was logical, and there was a reason behind everything.” I narrowed my gaze. “Then a drunk driver plowed into my mom’s car, killing her. And since he was only sixteen and didn’t have any priors, he got to plead out. He got four years. For killing my mom. Four. Years.”

The kids in class looked real uncomfortable now. Some reached for their phones like they’d just gotten a text. Others stared at their books like math had suddenly become interesting.

The color drained from Ms. Files’ face. She was already pretty pale to begin with. Now she was practically see-through. Her mouth quivered like she was about to cry. She was shaking when she pointed at the door.

“To the office! Now!” she screeched.

I shrugged and started packing my things. I took my time, really milking it. Ms. Files stood there, trembling, getting madder and madder, the longer I took. When I was finally on my way to the door, I smiled and waved at her.

“See you tomorrow!”

Ms. Files groaned and leaned against the Smart Board like she was about to collapse. I took my time heading across the quad to the office. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed I had an audience. Missy and Stephanie. My former BFFs. They spotted me but turned their heads and pretended they didn't see me, which was typical these days.

They were so supportive after Mom died. But then, I started to change. All that trendy stuff that used to be so important to me no longer mattered. I dyed my hair black and started wearing black clothes every day, along with calf-high Doc Marten boots, black make-up and silver jewelry – skulls, pentagrams, stuff like that. I guess I wanted everything I felt on the inside to show on the outside.

Things got worse when I was diagnosed with depression and severe anxiety. Out of nowhere, I'd get this feeling of impending doom – like a demon was coming to get me. He'd talk to me sometimes too, tell me how worthless and pathetic I was. All that helped was my ritual, making circles to the left, over and over. It helped me focus and drive my demon away.

I got to the office and sat in one of the ugly chairs near the secretary's desk with my earbuds in, listening to my iPod while waiting for Grandma to show up. She was the one who came to school when I got in trouble.

She finally arrived and looked like she came straight from the gym in her sweats and sneakers and her long gray hair pulled back in a ponytail. As she approached, she gave me this tired frown – as in tired of me always getting in trouble and her having to come to school to get me.

Mr. Warner, the vice-principal, was ready for us. He was okay – for a school administrator. He never yelled or made me feel like a bad person or anything. He liked to say he disciplined the behavior and not the student.

“We meet again,” he said to Grandma, half-joking, as he shook her hand.

“I'm down here so often I should have my own parking space,” she replied.

I chuckled. The looks I got from Grandma and Mr. Warner told me that wasn't a good idea. Grandma turned away, shaking her head. We followed Mr. Warner into his office and sat in the two chairs on the other side of his big boat of a desk.

Ms. Files had apparently talked to Mr. Warner already, because he went ahead and filled Grandma in on what had happened – from her point of view. Grandma let out a long sigh. I shrunk in my seat.

Mr. Warner swiveled his chair towards me. "I'd like to hear your side of the story, Gwen."

"I had an – 'attack' during one of Ms. Files' riveting lectures so I didn't know what was going on. She then tried to embarrass me in front of the class, and I wasn't going to put up with it."

Mr. Warner grinned. "As usual, I appreciate your honesty and your directness."

"Excuse me," said Grandma, cutting in. "But I thought all of Gwen's teachers knew about her condition."

"They do," he said.

"Ms. Files isn't exactly known for her warmth and compassion," I added.

Mr. Warner didn't bother arguing. I had a feeling he knew I was right.

"I'll speak with her," he said.

"I don't want anyone feeling sorry me."

"I know you don't," said Mr. Warner. "Just let me do my job, okay? And unfortunately, that means I'm going to have to suspend you from school for a week."

Grandma leaned forward in her chair. "What?"

"I'm afraid it's policy. Gwen has racked up quite a collection of referrals."

"Do I get a trophy?" I asked.

Grandma glanced at me from the corner of her eye. She wasn't angry. Just disappointed. I would have preferred angry to be honest.

Mr. Warner's secretary drew up the papers, and Grandma signed them. Before we left, she insisted we stop by my locker to pick up my books. My teachers posted their homework online, and Grandma promised Mr. Warner she wouldn't let me fall behind.

We walked through the halls. Grandma hadn't said a word since we left the office.

"I'm getting the silent treatment, is that it?" I asked.

"I'm just trying to figure out what to say to you."

"Look, I'm sorry. It's just Ms. Files –"

"I understand she's not the nicest teacher in the world. But the way you reacted, all you did was make it worse."

"Sorry." This time I actually meant it.

Grandma stopped short. "Gwen, do you think your mother would want to see you acting like this?"

"I – That's not fair."

Grandma crossed her arms. "Well?"

My throat ached. My bottom lip started to quiver. Grandma rested her hand on my cheek.

"Sweetheart, I know you miss her. So do I. I know this last year hasn't been easy for you. Your condition. Your friends abandoning you."

"Nothing makes sense anymore. It all seems so pointless."

Grandma frowned. "Gwen, you know I don't like it when you talk like that."

"Don't worry. I'm not planning on doing anything stupid." I sniffed back a tear. "Fine. I'll go back into counseling. I'll take my meds again. Whatever you want. I'll do it for Mom."

Grandma gave me this sad smile then continued down the hall. "I think your mother would rather you did it for yourself."

Chapter Two

Me and Grandma returned home to our “haunted” house. I called it that, because it felt like Mom’s presence, her spirit, still lingered there. Even a year later, I’d turn a corner and expect to see her sitting on the couch with a cup of tea watching the news or in the kitchen making dinner.

Next week would have been her fortieth birthday. As usual, we’d visit her grave, bring flowers, maybe even light a candle. I liked the idea of honoring Mom on the day she was born instead of the day she died.

Grandpa Jim – Grandma’s husband – was buried in the same cemetery so we’d visit his grave after that. He died a year before Mom did. He was only sixty-five and a health nut like Grandma. He exercised and ate right, was in perfect health, just like her. He died of an aneurysm. I swear, it was like our family was cursed or something.

I headed up to my room, which had gone through a lot of changes since Mom died. For starters, all the Katy Perry and Beyonce posters were history. In their place, I put up posters of these bands from the 80s I’d been getting into. The Cure, Joy Division, Echo and the Bunnymen. Real dark, depressing stuff.

I painted the walls too. Not like with a roller. But pictures. All the crazy stuff I’d been

seeing in my head and feeling in my heart since Mom died.

My room looked like Hell now, literally. Or at least how I imagined Hell would look like. With spires of blue-black flames swallowing the faces of tortured souls. Oh, and don't forget the demons. There were lots of those.

Dad had been away on one of his business trips when I started doing that. When he got back and saw what I'd done, he flipped out big time.

Grandma was able to calm him down though. At the time I was seeing this counselor, who encouraged art therapy, so Grandma convinced Dad this was a good way for me to vent and reminded him we could always paint over it later. He backed off after that and would even tell me how cool my pictures looked sometimes, even though his jaw made this weird clicking sound every time he did.

I knew I promised Grandma I'd go back to therapy and start taking my meds again. Even though I knew they wouldn't work. And as far as therapy went, all the different counselors I saw, they all had the same thing in common. Eventually, they all wanted me to confront my demon. Whenever I felt him coming, they wanted me to not do my ritual. To just let him come. In order to prove he didn't exist.

And I knew my demon wasn't real. Only every time I told myself that and tried to face him, I couldn't. I'd get scared out of my mind.

I stretched out on my bed, just wanting to rest my eyes for a few minutes. When I woke up, the sun was setting. Dad was due home tonight from his latest business trip, to Portland or Seattle or someplace like that.

Grandma had probably picked him up from the airport already – which meant he knew about me getting suspended. I sat there for a moment before heading toward the door. Instead of waiting for him to come to me, I might as well just get it over with.

Halfway down the stairs, I spotted Dad and Grandma in the living room. Dad was still in his suit. His suitcase and laptop sat at his feet. He was usually pretty worn-out from his trips. The last thing he wanted to deal with when he got home was me getting in trouble at school. Again.

At that moment, my courage fled, and I started to head back upstairs. Too bad for me, Dad just happened to turn in my direction.

“Well, speak of the devil,” he said.

Oh, well. So much for a quick and sneaky getaway. I walked into the living room, Dad scowling at me the whole time. Grandma stood back. I couldn't quite get a read on what she was thinking.

“I heard about what happened at school today,” he said.

“Yeah? And?” I replied.

Dad's eyes popped with anger. Grandma frowned at me, over his shoulder, so I decided to dial down the attitude a bit.

“Sorry. I'm – I'm sorry.”

Dad settled down. “Your grandmother said you two talked after that. You said you were ready to make a change. You'd go back to therapy. Start taking your meds again.”

I stared at the floor then back at Dad and nodded. He managed a tired smile.

“Well, at least something good has come out of all this,” he said. “I want you keeping up on your schoolwork this week.”

I nodded yes, waiting for some insane punishment to be handed down. Dad checked his watch. He grinned and headed upstairs with his suitcase. Wait. Was that it? Do your homework. That was the only punishment I was going to get?

“I have a roast in the oven, Craig,” Grandma called after him. “It should be ready in a

few minutes."

"That's okay. You and Gwen go ahead and eat. I'll make myself a plate later."

Me and Grandma watched him disappear up the stairs. What was going on? Last time I got detention, Dad took away my iPod and laptop. I got suspended for a week, and he barely even blinked.

Then again, he had been acting pretty strange lately. He was going to the gym on a regular basis, buying new clothes, got a stylish haircut. And when he was home, he'd disappear into his room for hours. I turned to Grandma. For some reason, I got the idea she knew exactly what was going on with Dad.

"Why don't you go set the table," she said as she started up the stairs.

I stood there until Grandma was out of sight. I was in enough trouble already, being suspended from school and all. I should have just gone and set the table like I'd been told. Instead, I headed upstairs. I had to know what was going on.

I peeked around the corner to see Grandma standing outside Dad's bedroom door. They were having this intense conversation. I was trying to be quiet, but to be honest the two of them were so absorbed in what they were saying I could have stomped around like a mad elephant, and I doubt they would've heard me.

"Craig, you can't keep putting this off," Grandma told Dad. "You're going to have to tell Gwen. The sooner the better."

"You know how she'll react."

"Tell me what?" I said, cutting in.

Grandma and Dad whipped their heads my way.

"Gwen, I thought I told you to set the table," said Grandma.

I placed my hands on my hips and stood firm. "Excuse me, but I figured this was

slightly more important. Now what the heck are you two keeping from me?"

Grandma gave Dad a cross look. He nodded and then faced me. He took a breath to steady himself before he spoke. "Do you remember that convention I attended in San Francisco in January?"

I crossed my arms. "Yeah? So?"

Dad's face lit up. "I met someone there. Her name's Victoria. Victoria Weatherly."

Uh oh. I did not like where this was going.

"We spent a lot of time together during the convention. Since then, we've been talking a lot on Skype." Dad smiled, the way he used to smile for Mom. And only for her. "I like her, Gwen. I really like her."

My stomach tightened up. I couldn't breathe. All I could think to do was run to my room.

"Gwen. Gwen!" Dad called after me. "See. I knew she was going to react like that," I heard him tell Grandma.

She said something back to him, only I couldn't hear it over the sound of me slamming my door as hard as I could. I crawled onto my bed and clutched my sheets.

Before I knew it, I was crying. Dad had met someone. Mom had been dead for barely a year, and he met someone. He was already moving on. How could he do that to her?

"Gwen?" Grandma peeked into my room. When she saw me crying, she hurried to my side. "Oh, Gwen. Honey."

She reached for me, but I pulled away. "You knew, didn't you?"

Grandma had a very guilty look on her face. "I found out a couple weeks ago. I could tell your father had serious feelings for this woman so I told him, then and there, he needed to say something to you. He promised he would. Only he kept putting it off. I'm sorry you had

to find out like this."

"Aren't you mad at him?"

"For what? Meeting someone? Gwen, you knew this had to happen eventually."

"I guess. But it's not right. It's too soon."

Grandma stroked my hair. "When would have been the right time? Next year? The year after that? Ten years? Never?"

I sat up beside her. That last one sounded pretty good.

"Gwen, do you think your mother would want your father to be alone for the rest of his life? Don't you think she'd want him to fall in love again? To be happy?"

"I can't believe you're playing the Mom-card again. Twice in one day."

Grandma grinned. "It worked so well the first time."

I managed a smile. She did have a point. Mom wouldn't want Dad to be lonely. She'd want him to meet someone else. I didn't like it. It was going to take some getting used to. But I'd try my best.

Dad knocked then pushed my door open enough for him to slip through.

"Everything okay in here?"

I glanced at Grandma then at Dad and said, "Sure."

Grandma smiled and rubbed my back.

"You off to talk to Victoria on Skype?" I asked. Unfortunately, it came out a little more snarky than I intended.

Dad slid his hands into his pockets. "Yeah, about that. The reason why Victoria and I wanted to talk today was because – well, she's coming for a visit – this weekend."

I shot to my feet. "She's what?"

"She'll be here on Friday," Dad continued.

I turned to Grandma, who looked just as shocked as I did. She shook her head at Dad.

“Brilliant, Craig. Just brilliant.”

Chapter Three

All week long, I couldn't stop thinking about how this Victoria-person, Dad's new "friend," would be invading our home. He showed me and Grandma some pictures of her he'd taken on his phone. She looked like she was in her thirties. And pretty, I guess. Not as pretty as Mom though.

Today was the day she was supposed to show up. Grandma spent all morning getting ready for her, cleaning and cooking. She knew better than to ask me for help.

I hadn't left my room all day. I just laid on my bed, earbuds in my ears, trying to lose myself in some music. Only my demon wouldn't let me.

Your Dad never loved your Mom, he taunted me. Not for real. Why do you think he's replaced her so quickly?

I sat on the edge of my bed, making circles with my left hand on the sheets, over and over, while my demon continued to torment me.

They'll get married and have babies, and soon they'll forget all about sad, pathetic little Gwen.

I shut my eyes and made frantic circles in the air. Finally, my demon disappeared. I dropped back onto my bed, covering my face with my hands.

When I finally caught my breath, I wandered towards the window just in time to watch Dad's SUV pull into the driveway. He'd left an hour ago to pick Victoria up from the airport. I promised Grandma I'd give her a chance. And at the time I meant it. Only now I was having second thoughts.

Grandma was arranging some fresh flowers she'd placed in a vase in the living room – but froze when she spotted me coming down the stairs.

“You – your father told you to dress nice,” she reminded me.

I know, and I doubted the look I was currently rocking was what he had in mind, dressed all in black with my skull rings, pentagram necklace, and black make-up.

Grandma rushed towards me. “Go upstairs and change now.”

“Too late.”

The door to the garage opened and Dad called out, “Hello. We're here.”

Grandma shut her eyes and mumbled something under her breath as I walked past her.

“Think of it this way,” I said. “This'll give her the chance to get to know the real me.”

Dad walked around the corner with Victoria. She was taller than I thought she'd be, almost as tall as Dad. She wore a floral print dress and flats with red beaded jewelry and a carnation in her blonde hair. She and Dad held hands, giggling like a couple of kids. They both stopped short when they saw me.

Dad tensed. Victoria smiled, setting down the gifts bags she'd been carrying and walked toward me.

“You must be Gwen,” she said with this weird accent. “I'm Victoria. It's nice to finally meet you.”

I stared at her hand then at her. “You talk funny.”

Grandma groaned while Dad gritted his teeth and hissed my name.

Victoria, on the other hand, just laughed. "Yes. I suppose I do. I was born in Manchester, in England. I moved here after graduating from university. I'm afraid I never got around to shedding my accent. I'm sorry, but I couldn't help but notice your pendant."

"Oh? Does it offend you?" I asked hopefully.

"Not at all. Do you practice?"

"Practice what?"

Dad stepped forward. "Victoria's a Wiccan. She's told me all about it. It's really quite fascinating."

"Are you aware of the symbolism behind the pentagram?" Victoria probably guessed I didn't by the look on my face. "The five points of the star represent the four elements and the human spirit. The star itself represents a human being, the head, arms, and legs. The circle represents the universe. It shows how we're connected to all things."

"Interesting," said Grandma as she slipped past me.

"Victoria, this is my mother-in-law, Frances," said Dad.

The two of them shook hands.

"It's lovely to meet you," said Victoria. "I've heard so much about you. I was so touched when Craig told me how you moved in to help him and Gwen after your daughter died."

I bristled when she mentioned Mom. She had no right.

"I was happy to do it," said Grandma. "It was where I wanted to be."

"That's lovely," said Victoria. "I have some gifts for you and Gwen."

"Oh, you didn't have to do that."

Victoria picked up the gift bags she'd brought with her. She gave one to Grandma and held the other one out for me. I stared at the bag, not wanting to touch it. Both Dad and

Grandma glared at me, urging me to take it. So I went ahead and took her stupid gift, whatever it was.

Grandma pulled a bottle of wine from her bag. "Oh. It's from the St. Clair Winery. My favorite."

"Craig told me it was," said Victoria.

"Victoria lives in Harmony," said Dad. "Not far from there."

"Really," said Grandma.

"I have a bit of an acquaintanceship with the St. Clairs," said Victoria. "They're wonderful people."

She turned towards me, obviously eager for me to open my gift bag. Dad and Grandma were also watching me. Talk about pressure. Fine. Whatever. I opened the stupid little gift bag.

My head jerked with surprise when I saw what was inside. The bag was full of art supplies. Charcoals and pastels, a sketchpad, pencils and erasers. It was all quality stuff too.

"Thanks," I said.

Victoria's smile broadened. She looked relieved I liked her gift.

"Your father's told me you're quite the artist. I hope I get the chance to see some of your work."

"I'd like that," I said, grinning wickedly.

Dad dashed between us and took Victoria's hand. "Why don't we show you the house first?"

"That sounds lovely," said Victoria.

Grandma opened her mouth, as if to say something to me, but shut it and shook her head instead. She joined Dad and Victoria. I followed them, carrying the gift bag full of my

new art supplies. Yeah, they were cool, and I'd definitely use them. But little Miss Smiley Face Victoria with her cute British accent had to learn I couldn't be bought off so easily.

I followed them through the house as Dad and Grandma gave Victoria a tour.

"You have a lovely home, Craig," she said.

"My mother decorated it," I said, enjoying the awkward silence that followed.

Victoria approached me. "Your mother had exquisite taste. Your father's told me all about her. She sounded like a wonderful woman."

I fumed. She needed to stop talking about my mother. Right. Now.

"You know, they say the dead never truly leave us," she added. "Not as long as they remain in our thoughts. And our hearts."

"That's beautiful," said Grandma.

Dad just smiled, unable to take his eyes off Victoria.

"That some Wiccan thing?" I asked.

Victoria answered me with a coy smile. "Something like that."

Dad took her arm. "Ready to see the upstairs?"

Grandma walked past me, giving me a smug grin. I couldn't believe this witch was actually winning her over. I headed upstairs after them. Dad showed her his bedroom first. The flirty look on his face made me want to heave.

"You want to see my room?" I asked Victoria.

Both Dad and Grandma's eyes widened.

"I'd love to," she said.

I took her hand and led her down the hall before Dad or Grandma could stop us. Oh, man. I couldn't wait. I opened the door and stepped aside.

"After you," I said.

Dad and Grandma caught up with us. But it was too late. Victoria had already walked inside. She got to see my room in all its glory. My unmade bed and clothes scattered across the floor, my posters, and – most of all – the hellish landscape I'd painted all over the walls.

Dad glared at me. A vein in his temple throbbed. Grandma sighed and gave me her disappointed look. Only this time it didn't work. I checked out Victoria as she studied my painted walls, her mouth open.

"These are amazing," she said. "First of all, I have to compliment you on such an original use of the space. And your command of color. And the texture of your brush strokes. Reminds me of Van Gogh. There's such a dark beauty to your work." Victoria turned her attention back to me, absolutely beaming. "I admire you, Gwen. When I was your age, I was desperate to fit in. It takes courage to stand apart. To be an individual."

I was stunned into silence. Unbelievable. Was this lady for real?

Grandma approached Victoria. "Why don't we go back downstairs? We can open up that bottle of wine you brought."

We headed to the living room. Grandma brought out the wine, some glasses, and a tray of snacks. I kept trying to get a rise out of Victoria, but nothing I said worked.

I told her how I'd gotten suspended from school for standing up to Ms. Files, and how I read on someone's Twitter feed that the old bat had broken down into tears and ended up leaving for the rest of the day. Victoria told me how much she admired my confidence and rebellious spirit.

Both Dad and Grandma shot me similar triumphant grins. By then, I had to give up. Victoria had won the battle – but not the war.

Grandma had a bunch of questions for Victoria. She was dying to get to know her better. Traitor. As we ate dinner, she asked Victoria what it was like growing up in England

and what her new hometown, Harmony, was like and how she and Dad met.

After dessert, Dad offered to clear the table and do the dishes. Grandma used this opportunity to pull Victoria aside and talk to her in private.

I followed them, hanging back so they couldn't see me. Their voices were low so I couldn't hear them, but from the looks of it they were having a rather serious discussion. They talked for a while, and their conversation ended with smiles and hugs.

Victoria passed me, on the way to rejoin Dad no doubt. She smiled. I smiled back. Either she ignored the sarcasm I projected or missed it completely.

I waited for Grandma.

"Fraternizing with the enemy?" I asked.

She turned toward me. "I wanted some time alone with Victoria to gauge her feelings about your father. I can tell she really cares for him."

I struggled for something to say, but nothing came to me. Instead, I ended up folding my arms and leaning against the wall.

"I like her, Gwen. I like her a lot. And the fact she wasn't the least bit fazed by your little shenanigans only helped win me over. You should be happy for your father. I expect we'll be seeing a lot more of Victoria in the future."

I stayed there while Grandma walked away.

Somewhere in the back of my head, my demon laughed.

Chapter Four

Victoria ended up staying until Monday. That wasn't the last we saw of her either. She was an IT consultant like Dad, so she basically made her own hours. She visited two weekends a month and would stay in a hotel.

She'd spend most of her time with Dad of course. They'd go out on dates, either dinner and a movie or dinner and dancing, that kind of thing. Dad wouldn't get home until the next morning – if you know what I mean.

Yuck! It was hard enough imagining him being, you know, “romantic” with Mom. But with Victoria? Ugh! I didn't even want to finish that thought.

She was always so upbeat and smiling all the time. And the way she talked. Not just her accent. It was like she spoke another language. She called the bathroom the *loo*, television *telly*, an elevator was a *lift*, French fries were *chips*, chips were *crisps*, and cookies were *biscuits*.

I didn't get it. If she was supposed to be from England, why didn't she speak, you know, English?

And nothing I could do upset her or even phased her. Finally, I had to give up. When I did – well, I found out she wasn't so bad.

She insisted on spending time with me, bonding. At first, I did it, because Dad and

Grandma made me. But after a while though, I started going, because I wanted to – although I wasn't about to admit it.

Victoria knew a lot about art and would take me to these local galleries and exhibits. I had to admit she had pretty good taste. We'd go shopping too – not at the mall but at thrift stores downtown or funky little boutiques.

One day, she dragged me into this used bookstore. I never considered myself a reader – that was until Victoria bought me a book of poems and short stories by Edgar Allen Poe. Wow! Great stuff!

I had to admit I was starting to like her. She never made me feel like a freak, even when she caught me doing my little ritual one time when we'd gone out to lunch.

“Widdershins,” she said.

“What?”

Victoria demonstrated on the tablecloth. “A counter-clockwise circle, like the ones you made – In magic, it's called widdershins. It's used in banishing rituals.”

I nodded. That was some coincidence.

Victoria went on to me more about Wicca, how it was started in 1954 but was based on magical practices that went back hundreds of years. It wasn't about curses or sacrificing goats or worshipping evil spirits. It was more about being in harmony with nature and using it to increase personal power, which could then be used in spells. It sounded okay. A little too New Agey for me though.

It wasn't long after that when I finally accepted that Victoria wasn't trying to take Mom's place. Let's face it, no one could do that. I started looking forward to her visits. Not as much as Dad of course. I had to admit it was nice seeing him happy again.

The two had planned a week long vacation in Tahiti in June. According to Dad, they'd

meet there and then fly home separately. So naturally me and Grandma were surprised when Victoria showed up at the house with Dad.

It turned out there was a good reason. The two showed off their new wedding rings. Grandma shrieked with joy and hugged them both. Me? I didn't know what to say. Or feel. Except numb.

Grandma whisked Dad and Victoria over to the couch and made them tell all about how he proposed to her. I sat on the arm behind Grandma as Victoria told us how she and Dad were taking a moonlit walk on the beach when he suddenly dropped to his knee and asked her to marry him. He didn't even have a ring yet. It was all so spontaneous. Grandma cooed about how romantic it was and how happy she was for them and welcomed Victoria to the family.

“Have all three of you lost your minds?” I said, killing their little moment. “Seriously, am I the only one here not taking crazy pills? How could you two get married just like that?”

Dad stood up. “Gwen – ”

“You said you and Mom dated for two years before you proposed,” I reminded him. “And you were still engaged a year before you finally got married. You've known Victoria for what? Six months?”

I caught the hurt expression on Victoria's face. I didn't mean for that to happen. I really was starting to like her.

“What are you guys going to do?” I asked. “Are you going to stay here while she goes back to Harmony? Is she going to move in here with us?”

Dad fumed. Victoria took his hand. One look from her and he settled down.

“Actually, we talked about this on the flight back,” he said. “I'm thinking we'll move into Victoria's house. In Harmony.”

I paused for a moment, trying to digest this new little bit of information. "And you were planning on telling me this when?"

"We were going to break it to you gently," said Dad. "Then you decided to throw your little tantrum. And since when do I have to clear any decisions I make with you, young lady? Last time I checked, I was the parent, and you were the child."

"I'm not going to Harmony!"

"Why not? It's not like you've got a life here or any friends!"

The moment Dad said that, both Grandma and Victoria stared at him, eyes wide, mouths open. Me? I trembled and tried not to cry.

Dad let out a long sigh, looking like he regretted what he'd said.

"Gwen." He reached for me, but I pulled away. Next thing I knew, I was running upstairs to my room. "Gwen, I'm sorry! Gwen!"

I slammed the door and threw myself face first onto my bed and sobbed. My demon chose that moment to appear. He hovered over me. His laughter filled my ears. His claws closed around my throat. And this time, I wasn't sure if I wanted to fight back.

Lucky for me, he disappeared the moment Grandma knocked on my door.

"Gwen?" She sat on my bed, next to me, and rubbed my back. "Honey?"

"How could he say that to me?" Even though, let's face it, it was a hundred percent true.

"Your father didn't mean it. And he feels horrible."

"Good," I said, pulling my knees to my chest. "I'm not going to Harmony. I don't care what he or Victoria say."

Grandma smirked. "What exactly makes you think this is all about you?"

“I – I didn't mean it like that. It's just – ” I sighed. “Don't you think Dad and Victoria should have considered what I'd think, how I'd feel? Not just about them getting married, that I can handle, but dropping everything and moving off to this Harmony place?”

Grandma edged closer to me. “Actually, I'm starting to think this move might be good for you.” She cut me off before I could argue. “You've been trying hard to make a change, and I couldn't be more proud of you. You've gone back into counseling. You're taking your medication. But I know things are still difficult for you at school, because of the, well, the reputation you've earned.”

True. I really was trying to change. And not just going to counseling and taking my meds. I was also working hard in school – summer school to be specific – doing my homework, studying for tests and quizzes, and most importantly, staying out of trouble. But most days, it felt like people at school didn't want to give me a chance.

Grandma stroked my hair. “I think you could get a fresh start in Harmony. This might be exactly what you need.”

She had a point. But I still wasn't ready to say yes.

“Gwen, honestly,” Grandma continued. “What are you afraid of leaving behind?”

“You!”

Grandma sat there, stunned. I guess she hadn't thought of that.

Her face softened, and she wrapped her arms around me. “Oh, sweetheart.”

She held me for a while. Her arms then slowly unwound. She lifted my chin and smiled.

“I'll tell you what, after you and your father leave for Harmony, well, your father will need someone to put the house up for sale. I'll take care of that for him. And when it's sold, I'll move to Harmony too.”

“You'd do that?”

“It might take a while, the housing market being what it is – but of course I'd move to Harmony. I'd do anything for you.”

Chapter Five

Summer school would let out a couple weeks after the Fourth of July. The plan was me and Dad would move to Harmony after that. I'd start seventh grade at the middle school the first week of August.

A new school. A new school year. Seemed like the perfect time for that fresh start. It sounded good, at least it did in my head. But I still wasn't feeling it. Not yet anyway.

The day finally came. Me and Dad loaded up his SUV with suitcases full of clothes and some odds and ends. Anything else we needed, he said we could send for, and Grandma would have an estate sale while she was trying to sell the house to get rid of what we didn't want or wouldn't need.

Grandma. We hadn't even left yet, and I was already missing her. She promised we'd talk everyday. She even bought an iPad so we could FaceTime with each other. It took a while to teach her how to use it. Let's face it, this was the woman who still had trouble getting her voice mail off her phone, but she eventually got the hang of it.

We had a stop to make before we left. The cemetery where Mom was buried. To say goodbye.

Well, not really goodbye. Only her body was buried there. Not her spirit. I remembered what Victoria had said, how loved ones never really died as long as we kept

them in our thoughts and in our hearts. I liked that.

I still remembered the day I saw Mom at my locker then getting the news from Grandma about the accident. The creepiest part was, the time I saw Mom – apparently it was the exact moment she died on the way to the hospital.

Dad figured the trip would take about eight hours. He'd bought me an adapter for my iPod so we could listen to my music on the car stereo, which was pretty sweet of him. After the first hour, I could tell it was driving him crazy, but he didn't say anything. He even pretended to like a few of the songs.

We made a few more stops for lunch and snacks. This was the most time I'd spent with Dad since Mom died. I had to admit it was kind of nice. I'd almost forgotten how funny he could be – in a dorky sort of way.

We pulled into Harmony as the sun was starting to set. It was a pretty bling-bling sort of town. There were all these fancy shops, restaurants, and a big hotel for the tourists who visited the winery. I could only imagine what the kids in town were like. Probably a bunch of snobs.

And talk about being in the middle of nowhere. There was nothing, and I mean nothing to do in this town as far I could tell. So much for our fresh-start. Why did I ever agree to this?

Victoria's house was outside of town, near the forest. It was pretty big and old by the looks of it, with a slanted roof and large windows. Dad couldn't get out of the car fast enough to see her. I took my time of course.

He was already through the door and kissing Victoria by the time I got there. They managed to pull themselves apart from each other. Victoria smiled at me. She looked like she wasn't sure if she should hug me or not and settled for laying her hand on my arm.

"It's good to see you again, Gwen," she said.

I didn't say anything. I just nodded and stepped inside. She and Dad talked. Victoria asked how our drive was and what we thought of Harmony, stuff like that. I walked around, taking in the house. It was nice. I had to give her that. Warm and cozy.

While I was still looking around, I turned to see an orange tabby cat staring at me from the back of the couch. I let out a startled cry. The cat just cocked its head and meowed. Dad and Victoria giggled, which I didn't exactly appreciate.

"You must be Barclay," said Dad. "Hey, fella. I've heard a lot about you." He started scratching the cat behind the ears. Barclay ate up the attention, purring like crazy.

"Would you two like to see the house?" Victoria asked. "Or if you're hungry, I've got some nibbles ready."

Nibbles? What did she mean by that? Was that more of her British-speak?

"Actually, I wouldn't mind a tour of the house," said Dad. "We've been sitting for the last couple hours. It'll be good to stretch our legs."

He waited for me to chime in. I shrugged, which he took as a yes.

"Why don't we start upstairs?" Victoria glanced my way. "I have a surprise for Gwen."

She did? Okay, I had to admit I was a little curious. I followed them upstairs. With each step I took, I felt Barclay's eyes on me.

Instead of stopping on the second floor of the house, Victoria led us up another set of stairs. I assumed it led to an attic. Great. This was probably where they were going to keep me. I immediately imagined myself being chained to a wall with a bucket for a toilet.

Victoria and Dad went ahead while I hung back. A moment later, Dad peeked around the corner, looking all excited.

“Gwen, hurry up. You've got to see this.”

I climbed the rest of the way up the stairs and found a little art studio waiting for me in the attic. There was an easel set up by the window and a table full of art supplies – paints, charcoals, pastels, pencils, and erasers, along with a stack of sketchbooks and some canvases leaning against the wall. It was really cool. I felt guilty about that whole chained-to-a-wall-and-a-bucket-for-a-toilet scenario now.

Victoria stood behind me with her hand on my back. “I know it might take a while. But I really want you feel at home here.”

I managed a smile. So far, she was off to a good start.

“It's nice,” I said. “Thank you.”

Victoria smiled back at me relieved. “Would you like to see your room now?”

I nodded and began to follow her but stopped short, “Jeez!”

Barclay appeared out of nowhere again. He sat on the floor in front of me and let out a little meow, like he was talking to me.

“Where did he come from?” I asked.

Dad chuckled. “He's a cat. They do that.”

Victoria picked Barclay up and carried him out of the attic. He stared at me the whole time from over her shoulder. On our way down, Dad made some crack about he couldn't wait to see his and Victoria's bedroom. Please. Make me gag.

We stopped at my room next. It was a little bigger than my old one. There were some nice black sheets on the bed and some prints on the wall. Van Gogh. I remembered them from an exhibit Victoria took me to.

“If you don't like the prints, you can take them down of course,” she said nervously.

“It's your room. I want you to decorate it any way you'd like.”

"They're fine," I said. And meant it too.

Victoria showed us the rest of the house. We then sat in the living room. She and Dad had wine while I drank lemonade, and we ate the *nibbles* she'd prepared, these little sausage rolls.

Dinner was ready after that. Nothing too fancy – chicken, potatoes, and veggies. She was a good cook too. Not as good as Mom though.

Barclay made another surprise appearance at the dinner table. Dad fed him bits of chicken from his plate, with Victoria's approval of course. After we cleaned up, Victoria announced there was blueberry pie and ice cream for dessert. Me and Dad decided to unpack some of our things first.

When I got to my room, I called Grandma to let her know me and Dad had gotten to Harmony okay. I let her know I missed her too.

We continued to talk while I unpacked. I put my clothes in the dresser and the closet and then set up some pictures I brought from home on my nightstand. There was one of me and Mom and another of me and Grandma.

I said goodbye to Grandma then took the art supplies I brought from home up to my new studio and laid them out on the table. Between that and the new stuff Victoria bought me, I'd be set for weeks.

I headed over to the window that overlooked the forest. I didn't pay much attention to it when we first came up here. I was sure, during the day, it was beautiful. But now, at night, it was kind of dark and creepy – which I didn't mind at all.

Dark and creepy. The canvas I'd been carrying fell to the floor as I raced for the sketchbooks I brought with me. I flipped through them until I found the picture I was

looking for.

Before we'd left for Harmony, I'd drawn some pictures of a dark and creepy forest. I held one up. It looked exactly like the view of the forest through the attic window. I mean, exactly the same, down to the position of the clouds and evergreen trees and the crescent moon cradled between two treetops.

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Thank you,

Dan O'Mahony

