

SOIL

***“Evil has only the power that we give
it.”***

***Ray Bradbury “Something Wicked This Way
Comes”***

**She started out whole one fine day,
Then piece by piece she went away.
Gazing at her reflection as she looks in
the mirror,
Don't go looking for her, she's no longer
here.....**

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Prologue

Does everyone have that moment? The moment their life bends and shifts away from what it might have been? I know I did. I had that singular moment in my life that ended up defining me, who I was, who I was always going to be from that day on. Sure, I could blame it on the odd little house my mom and I moved into when I was 12 years old. I could say that the moment that changed my life would never have happened if we hadn't moved into the house on Hillcrest Lane. There is a part of me that truly believes that. But there is another part of me that wonders if this is who I was always going to be regardless. Maybe this was the path that was meant for me no matter where we lived. But I still go back to that life-defining moment and I can't seem to separate it from that house, an odd little house that sat in a small neighborhood in the rural town of Belmore, Missouri. I'll never forget that house. I'll never forget the first thought I had when I stepped over the threshold of our new home, the place that would haunt my dreams for years to come. *This house is off and bad things will happen here.* That was the first thought that popped into my head, followed by the first words that popped out of my mouth as my mom and I stepped through the door of our new home...

Chapter 1

1992

It's a cute house, I think to myself as my mom and I pull into the driveway at 202 Hillcrest Lane. It's obviously the only new home in this subdivision. The other houses look older, maybe built in the 50's or 60's, but well maintained. Even though the other houses in this neighborhood are older, they are still quite a bit larger than our new home, which is a small raised ranch house with a two-car garage. I take a deep breath in. Our new home, our new town, our new life. My mom and I moved here from Iowa, where I grew up, leaving behind our old life, as well as the memories of my parents' not-so-amicable divorce. It wasn't that hard to leave that place behind. My favorite thing about our old life was the safety and security I felt within our family. I didn't really have a ton of friends. So once that security blew up in my face in the form of my parent's divorce, it wasn't all that troubling to leave behind the very small smattering of friends I had made back in Iowa—honestly very few. I think other people mistake my shyness for snobbery, or I am seen as just unapproachable in other ways that I'm completely unaware of. Right now, I'm just focusing on remaining hopeful that this move will be the fresh start my mom and I need! I'm hopeful I'll make friends here in this new town of Belmore Missouri. I'm hopeful my mom

will love her new job teaching health and wellness at the high school and that I'll finally fit in somewhere.

Our new home sits on a corner lot, and the driveway faces the road that runs alongside the right side of the house. The backyard looks pretty large with a fence that runs alongside a row of trees, with just a hint of the next group of houses visible between them. While our new home is smaller than the others, it shines like only a brand-new house can. My mom and I grab a few of our bags and make our way inside. "Holy crap! What the hell is that smell?" The comment bursts out of me as we step through the front door before I have time to filter out the curse word. "Watch your mouth, Veda," my mom warns me before smiling and saying, "It's that new home smell, all clean and unspoiled. Isn't it great?" she asks while taking a deep breath. I just stare at her confused. "Sure mom, but it's not that, it smells like something died in here. Can't you smell it?" My mom sniffs around and shrugs, "Nope, just the smell of clean floors and freedom for me, sorry." That's weird, the smell is fading now, and I'm getting a whiff of what my mom was talking about, the clean industrial smell of newness. But I did smell something weird, and for some reason when we walked through the door, my first thought was 'this place is off and something bad is going to happen here.' What the fuck is that about? I'll keep that outburst to myself for now, though; no need to add to my mom's worry load for the time being.

With the rotten smell gone, and my mind readjusting from catastrophic scenarios, I can more clearly see and smell what my mom is talking about. The house is so new! So clean and unlived in! I've never lived in a home that has never been lived in before. It feels pretty good to be the first occupants, to know that the memories you are about to make within this home will be fresh and new and not competing with the remnants of ghost memories from those that lived in the house before you. The front porch of our new home has enough room for a couple of rocking chairs, and the living room when you first walk in is big enough, with the kitchen just off to the side of it. I can smell the oak wood from all the new kitchen cabinets. To my right is a hallway with a door to the basement and attached garage, the next door is to a small bathroom and then the door to my new room after that. My mom's room is right across the hall from mine. That will be nice; I still find myself seeking my mom out in the middle of the night for comfort. It may have broken me more than I would like to admit when my dad walked out on us, taking with him just a bit of my previous confidence and security. My mom puts on a good front but you can see a bit of sadness in her eyes. She isn't over the sting of it either.

For months leading up to the divorce my parents quietly bickered and froze each other out. They thought I wouldn't notice, but I did, of course I did. Have you ever walked into a room where the other occupants are pissed

at each other? You can feel it in the air, the vibration of anger, the stink of resentment. I could feel it, but I didn't let on that I could. I just desperately prayed to a God I don't really believe in that my parents would work it out. That they would go back to being the awkward yet funny and loving parents they were before this new cold front descended on our home. I held in my worry and my tears through those long days, swallowing the anxiety of it all into my belly, only letting the pain seep out at night alone in my room, my throat aching with the effort of sobbing silently. That changes a person. Then to find out that why my parents were fighting was because my dad had been sleeping with his secretary. Gross! I couldn't even look at him after my mom let it slip out to me one night after a few glasses of wine. He was cheating on her! It felt like someone had reached into my stomach and twisted my guts, how disgusting, how dare he! He picked someone else over us, that's how it really felt. As much as I was ready to write him off along with my mom once he moved out, his absence can still be felt within my heart when I let it. I can compartmentalize it most of the time, but sometimes I let the sadness of it roam around my body and I sob or I scream or I try to escape in whatever way I can.

At least I still have my mom. I can usually console myself with that thought, even though I know there was some internal damage done when I realized my parents are flawed and not perfect role models whose sole purpose is to watch over me. It's a bit self-centered,

really, but what kid doesn't think their parents purpose lives and dies within their child? Turns out they have their own problems and desires just like real people. Who would have thought it? I sure didn't. It didn't cross my mind that my parents had needs that were outside of my existence, that is until my dad up and left us to follow his new 'need,' his skinny, underfed, bony young little helper from work. Whoops, shut up brain, why is my internal dialogue so mean sometimes?

"Veda, start getting the boxes out of the car, okay? Start putting stuff away in your new room." My mom asks with just the slightest bit of a wobble in her voice. She needs a minute, I can tell. This move is a big deal for her; she depended on my dad for assurance and now here she is alone. Suddenly a single parent with nobody else to lean on or confide in besides her adolescent daughter. I do my best to show enthusiasm for the move. "On my way, Patricia! I'll grab some of your stuff, too!" My mom gives me a small chuckle as I run out of the house to the car. She kind of hates it when I use her first name instead of mom, but I knew it would also make her laugh a little. She needs more things to laugh about. I need to work at being funnier, I think to myself. Which could be a hard road for me because I'm just not that funny, it's not one of my strong points, unfortunately. Awkward, yes. Funny not so much! It's not that I'm unfriendly, I just never really feel like I belong when I'm in a group. I kept to myself a lot of the time at my old school in Iowa. Everyone else seemed so much more

comfortable with themselves, while I always felt a bit off and isolated. I had a few friends back home, a few kids that let me hang out on the periphery of their more established friendship groups, clinging onto them like a barnacle on a boat. I got by being in those kinds of relationships—the kind where you know you are the hanger-on, not really part of the tribe. What I really want, what I would die for, is for one of those enviable absolutely best-friend friendships that I have only been able to observe growing between others so far in life. How awesome would that be? To have someone that you could confide everything to. Someone that you just know is important and will be in your life forever! The thought of it makes me break out into the biggest, widest smile while I'm collecting our things from the car.

My mom and I spent the afternoon sweating and organizing and lugging all our stuff into our separate bedrooms. The moving company we hired dropped off our big furniture and other boxes full of essentials while we worked. Our new home is a little beige. Beige walls, beige carpet, beige almost everywhere you look. We'll have to get some color into this place soon. Maybe once we do that, the occasional queasy feeling in my stomach regarding this move will go away. I want to blame that feeling on the house, especially after that weird smell I got when we first walked in, but it's more likely that the feeling is coming from all the changes that have occurred within the past few months. Realizing my parents were just not going to make it together. Having my dad

seemingly pick his stupid young secretary over me. Leaving behind the only place I had ever known as home. Those are more likely the culprit in all this uneasiness. At least I hope that's what it is.

Taking a break from all the work, my mom decided to let me go explore our new backyard while she ordered us a pizza for dinner. "Veggie supreme, thin crust!" I yelled at her as I made my way out the back door off the kitchen onto a small deck with stairs leading down to our fenced-in yard. We could get a dog! I think to myself. Fingers crossed! I can tell how new this grass is, it's so soft and spongy when I step onto it. Even with the newness of the yard, there is one large tree growing in the center of our yard. As I get closer, I can see it's a fruit tree. "No way!" I say to no one. Hopefully no one heard me say that out loud to myself, no need for our neighbors to think I talk to myself on a regular basis. I look around but I don't see anyone outside so I should be good. Our sole surviving tree seems to be an apple tree. How awesome! I can't believe they didn't tear this tree down when they demolished the house that used to sit on this lot. Maybe they saw the large apples the tree had produced and left it alone. I pick a couple and put them in my pocket for my mom and I to try with dinner.

My mom said that the realtor that showed her this place mentioned that there was a house that sat on this property before ours was built. She mentioned in passing that the old house had been demolished

because it had accumulated a fair amount of gossip and rumors surrounding it which made it impossible to sell, so the city tore it down to make room for the new construction of our home. The rumors were something about an accidental death of a former occupant and a tragic accident involving some teenagers back in the 80s. My mom didn't really care. This house was brand new and affordable, so she didn't ask for any more details than that. I'm a bit curious, really, but I'm not sure I want to totally pull on that thread of history. You never know what I might unravel and then can't wind back up. The apple tree is cool, though, and behind it is a fence that runs in front of a small creek. Creek might be a little too generous a word; it's more like a slowly-moving puddle. A good place for weeds, frogs and snakes, not fish. There is a bush of berries that runs along the back fence, weird looking berries. If we get a dog we'll have to keep him or her away from those! I hope we get a dog!!

My mom yelled at me to come inside once the pizza had arrived, and we both sat down with our disposable plates and drinks to enjoy our first dinner in our new home. Breathless from running in, I toss the apples onto the table. "Check it out mom, there's an actual apple tree in the backyard!" "Wow, that's interesting. These look pretty good, too, it must be a pretty established tree," my mom says while examining my unexpected find. "I'll cut them up to have with the pizza. Penny for your thoughts?" my mom asks me now while she cuts up the apples and opens the pizza box. I

can tell she's nervous that she moved me here. Uprooted right after a traumatic divorce and essentially abandoned from my dad, she's scared I'll be damaged for life. "A penny? My thoughts aren't cheap, lady, you need to come up with more than that," I attempted a joke to lighten her mood. She needs reassurance that I'll be okay, and I will be. I can be the comic relief for her if that will help. "Wow, Veda! Well done, that's right, know your worth! How about free pizza for your thoughts then? How are you feeling about starting middle school here?" I take a deep breath, I know she wants to hear that I'll be fine, that middle school will be no big deal, but I'm really terrified. I know I won't show it to those around me, even once I get to school, but I'm a bundle of nerves on the inside. I want to fit in here, I want to be liked! All while attempting to appear cool and indifferent on the outside to my fellow classmates. It sounds impossible to me and scary and kind of stupid, but I'll bury it all down and show my mom that she doesn't need to worry about me. I'll figure it out on my own while she figures out how to function in her new role as sole parent. I can do that for her!

"I'm actually looking forward to it!" I tell my mom now, maybe if I say it out loud with enough confidence, I can will it to be true. "It's a clean slate, and I'll be the mysterious new girl. That's intriguing, right?" I ask my mom with just the slightest cadence of someone who does not feel intriguing at all.

“Look at me, Veda, you’ll do great,” my mom tells me as she cups my cheek. “You’re an amazing, smart and beautiful girl! Just be yourself, your people will find you.” I relax a little within my mom’s gaze. She always has a way of making me feel like everything will work out. I know she worries about me, but she believes in me as well. She’s always telling me how smart I am, how beautiful I am. It’s always nice to hear, but she is my mom, so I’m not always sure it can be trusted. After all, what kind of mom would she be if she told me I was dumb and ugly? Actually, I’m pretty confident of my brain, just not my looks. I’ve always done well in school, gotten straight A’s without much effort. The way I look is not really where my confidence lies. Later in life, I’ll understand what my mom sees in me now. Jet-black hair, porcelain skin, full lips and bright blue eyes, the attributes I have that can be striking when you first see me. However, I am also shorter and a bit more on the muscular side rather than curvy. Not exactly razor-sharp cheekbones and runway ready legs. Maybe ready for hard labor, but not for showing off the latest fashions whilst walking confidently in front of hundreds of people, that’s for sure. Not me. But I’ll take what I have. At least I can lift heavy things most of the time, and that has to count for something.

“I’ll manage, I swear I will, mom. I’m really not that scared to start school. Who knows? Maybe I’ll meet someone on my very first day.” I say it with more false hope evident in my voice than I intended to share, and I

can see the silent plea with the universe on my mom's face. She wants so badly for me to make friends, to get past this little hiccup in our life, to move past the heartache of losing my dad to his hot young secretary. I want that for both of us. I want to reassure my mom and myself that everything will be okay, even though it's obvious to me that we are both struggling to believe that. I really wish I could find the woman my dad left us for and claw her eyes out! Yikes! Where did that thought come from? I have a fair amount of anger at my dad and the floozy he ran off with, but I don't usually think about it so violently. Maybe I'm starting to feel more anger than grief. Who knows, there are stages to this kind of thing, I think. Maybe I'm moving onto the violently angry stage?

My mom and I sit in companionable silence for a bit while we eat our pizza. Thinking about our new situation, some excitement mixed with some sadness I'm sure running through both our heads. I was so lost in thought I didn't even realize it when I started humming. Suddenly humming the tune to *Ring Around the Rosie*. Not just humming it absently, I can hear that tune playing from one of our bedrooms. That's weird. I don't even like that nursery rhyme. Once my teacher from my last elementary school told us the story behind the rhyme. That during the black plague people thought putting posies in your pockets would ward off the illness and you wouldn't get sick and die. It didn't work though and people would still die while their skin formed black splotches that filled with blood and pus before oozing out

in death. Hence the next line of the rhyme, 'ashes, ashes we all fall down'. It was a little hard to see the song we used to sing at recess in the same way after learning about its origin. It was also a bit of a disturbing lesson plan from that teacher, a nursery rhyme with such a strange and disturbing past that we all belt out so merrily as we sing along to it. Why the hell am I humming along to it now, though?

"Why are you humming that tune, Veda?" my mom asks me now, with a slightly curious expression on her face.

"You mean humming along to it," I say. "The music is coming from one of our bedrooms. Did you pack a music box or something?" My mom stares at me with confusion and concern now.

"What are you talking about, Veda? I don't hear anything, and we don't own any music boxes." Now it's my turn to look confused. Where the hell is that music coming from then? I look around on my own a bit dumbfounded, and now I think I can smell that rancid smell again. Like spoiled fruit, kind of sweet and sick at the same time. Why am I the only one hearing that music and smelling that stink? Then suddenly it stops, the music stops, the smell dissipates, and it's like a fog lifts out of my mind. I shake my head and come back to my surroundings.

"It was nothing, I guess. I thought I heard something, but it must have been my imagination," I tell my mom now, hoping not to add to my mom's list of shit

to worry about. Let's not add daughter is hallucinating to that list; that wouldn't be very helpful.

My mom seems somewhat willing to accept that as she nods slowly, "Okay, well, you have to be exhausted. Let's clean up here and head to bed." I nod my head in agreement and start to help my mom pick up our disposable dishes and leftovers, happy she is willing to drop the conversation so I can ignore the sneaking suspicion that I'm mentally unwell. Unwell enough to conjure up imaginary music and smells, it seems.

With the kitchen cleaned up and my little out-of-body experience chalked up to exhaustion and nerves, my mom and I headed to our bedrooms. Snuggling into my newly made-up bed and yelling goodnight to my mom. I hunker down and take a deep relaxing breath. I feel my body start to soften, the tension I was holding onto starts to melt and I start to drift off. Then I'm jerked awake, my body spasming quickly like I've just gotten jolted with electricity. I swear I smell that weird smell again, and I swear I heard that stupid nursery rhyme again right before I violently shook myself awake. It's going to be okay, I tell myself, another deep breath. Listening to the silence of the house for reassurance. There is no music, there is no smell, just a quiet house with a few cicadas and crickets singing outside. It's just nerves, so much has changed so quickly. But change can be good, change can mean a whole new direction for my life. If only I had known what direction that would be.

Elizabeth paces along the back fence and watches as the new family moves into the house that was just built on Hillcrest Lane. She has been watching this area for so long now. After what happened to her all those years ago on this same land, she watches and she waits, and when she needs to, she intervenes. Elizabeth admires the berries that are growing along the fence behind the house. She chuckles that they look a bit like doll's eyes, which is ironic because these berries should not be associated with something as innocent as a baby doll. Elizabeth scans the surroundings of the newly built house. She admires the apple tree that survived the demolition in the backyard. She knows about the ugly little secret that is intertwined around the roots of that tree. She looks at the area where a construction crew tore up a driveway that had such a large dark stain on it, no one was able to ever really wash it away completely. A driveway that was attached to a garage, where at one time two siblings got an idea that changed their lives forever. All that is gone now, torn down to make room for a new home, a new concrete driveway without a huge stain on it. All of it, except the precious apple tree with its bountiful fruit. Fruit that likely shouldn't be consumed at all. Elizabeth watches the new occupants as they move about the house and lay down to sleep for their first night here. "Don't worry", she wants to tell them, "I'll watch over you. If anyone ever hurts you, I'll be there

and I'll help you hand back that hurt. Welcome home." If only they could hear her.

Chapter 2

2015

When I think back on that time now, I wonder If I had taken that uneasy feeling, the strange smell and the weird music playing more seriously, would my life have turned out differently? If I had pushed the point to my mom that I heard music playing in an empty house, maybe I could have stopped all that happened after. Perhaps things would have turned out differently if I had spoken up more after any one of the other unsettling, but easily dismissed, things that happened in that brand-new home during the 5 years we ended up living there. Maybe the one incident that ended up defining my life well into adulthood could have been avoided.

But in reality, it wasn't avoided and I have to live with it. How many times have I replayed that first night in my head? How many times have I thought, *why didn't you run, why didn't you speak up about some of the strange occurrences?* But in all honesty, who really would? The small strange occurrences were so innocuous and at the time didn't seem that threatening—not to mention that we were two women living alone in the 1990's. Most people would dismiss us even if we had mentioned any of the oddities that came with the house. It would be assumed that we had overactive

imaginations or something, I'm sure, but sometimes in hindsight, I do wonder. Would it have helped if I had acknowledged to my mom that the house made me feel a little unsettled sooner? That even on that first night the energy in the house was a little odd. I felt like there was just something off about it. But I didn't speak up that first day or any of the other days. The little odd things that sometimes happened while we lived there were just collectively dismissed by both of us, likely feeling a bit as though we had no other choice. Now I live in a reality where one night, in that odd little house, at a sleepover I shared with my very best friend at the time, turned into one of the worst things that has ever happened to me. The one thing in my life that I feel like can never be undone, or unseen.

I do, however, frequently travel there in my mind, to that damn house, that damn time in my life. We only lived there 5 years. I went from a semi-awkward 12-year-old to a highly-damaged 17-year-old in that time frame. Now, here I am, a full grown 35-year-old woman, and I still can't shake that house, the memory of that horrible night. It hasn't completely dominated my life. I'm a fairly successful adult. I followed in my mom's footsteps and studied health and education, and now I teach health and science class to the next generation of kids at the local high school where I currently live. I didn't move too far away from that town. Obviously I didn't move far enough away to escape the memory of that time. Right now, I currently live in a suburb

surrounding Kansas City. A small suburb, just like Belmore, the town with that odd little house. Thankfully I no longer live in Belmore, but I'm not too far away from it. I don't mind living close to that town, but I would never be able to stomach still living there. Not that town, not that house, never again that house!

I try to keep myself from even driving past that stupid house, and sometimes it works. Other times it doesn't and I find myself unable to resist the urge to drive by it, just to look at it. For a while there was nothing much to see as the house sat vacant for a few years after we left in 1997. Then I remember my drive-by visit to the house right before going off to college and seeing that a young newlywed couple were moving in. There were no kids that I saw and a lot of work ahead of them to fix the place up. Maybe that will shake whatever bad juju I felt lingering there. I remember thinking, possibly more hoping, that to myself. Was that a lie I was telling myself to be rid of that place forever in my mind? I don't know, and I try not to care too much about it. But that can be difficult when the memories of that house get warped in my brain and come to life in my dreams.

Due to my somewhat obsessive behavior regarding that house, among a few other things, I regularly speak to a therapist a few times a month now. Sometimes at my appointments I discuss how the memories of my time there can start to crowd my brain and disrupt my life. And of course, my current therapist, Lily, knows what

happened to me in that house right before my mom and I abruptly moved out. She knows more about it than the first therapist I saw after moving away from that house and that tragedy. After we had moved out, before I started college, my mom insisted I see a therapist to help me process that night and what had happened. I did as she asked, but I was a traumatized 17-year-old. I was trying to process what had happened right before the start of what was supposed to be my best year of school, my senior year. I did share what I could, I listened to what that therapist told me would help, but there was only so much I was willing to share at that time and only so much listening I could reasonably do.

Did my original therapist really help me? Maybe enough that I could move past my trauma somewhat, enough to start a semi-normal freshman year of college. I did have a somewhat normal college experience despite my trauma. I made friends, I had boyfriends, I even had a few serious boyfriends. But anytime anyone got too close, close enough that I felt the carefully constructed wall I had wrapped around my heart slipping a little, I pushed them away. I was then, and still am today, very good at faking a deep connection with others, when in reality I'm only letting them see the parts of me that I feel are palatable. I'm decent at sharing the parts of me that I feel are sharable and then I hide away the rest. I'm good at concealing the aspects about myself that I fear won't be agreeable to others.

But don't we all do that? We never show our whole true selves to the world. That would be terrifying. Even with the carefully constructed layers of protection I maintain, there always seems to be a point in my relationships with others where I feel myself slip and share more than I intended to. It almost reaches the point where I fear my friend or boyfriend will question what they know about me. I start to fear that those I surround myself with will question whether I am truly as genuine as they thought I was, or that they will start to think they have misplaced their trust in getting to know me. Maybe I'm a little paranoid, but I can't help shoving people away the minute I think they may be getting a little too close to me, therefore making me feel vulnerable. There is too much fear within me that if I were to be completely exposed to others, they wouldn't like what they saw—even though I tell myself that for the most part I am a pretty genuine person. But to be truly genuine, I would have to fully dispose of the mask I wear to keep others at arm's length. I'm not willing to do that.

My current therapist, Lily, likes to say, "Show them who you really are, not the representation of who you want to be. The real you is in there and she's lovely. People can and will love the real you, but you have to be brave enough to show them your true self." She's always telling me shit like that. I want to believe her, really I do. But she doesn't even know the real me when it comes down to it. I still pick and choose what I'm willing to share, even behind the closed and confidential

door of my therapist's office. I don't feel like that makes me any different than everyone else, really. Most of us aren't entirely completely honest in our own minds, nor in the dialogue we have with just ourselves, much less with another actual human being. When it comes to my therapist, it's much easier to tell her that I'm really trying to be my true self all the time instead of doing what I actually do, which is to carry on as I have carried on for years—half present in each moment and half buried deep within myself, hidden well enough around others so that they don't see all of me. No one needs to see everything about me; that would only scare them away. I truly believe that.

My mom was the one and only person that saw the real me. She could always tell if my cheerfulness was fake or real. She would still be my one and only confidant if she were still alive—something more to add on to the mess that is my psyche. The death of my mother happened far too early in my life, which gave me another valid reason for my few-times-a-month therapy appointments. In all honesty, I don't really believe I need a reason to go talk to a therapist. Everyone should be doing that. It should be a yearly requirement, like mammograms and flu shots. What human being couldn't use the advice of an expert when dealing with life and all its lifey-ness? We should all be so lucky to have someone listen and try to help us navigate it, especially when the person we counted on to help us navigate it is no longer around. Before I met my therapist Lily, my

mom was that person for me—another reason I ache with sadness when I think about her. I could always count on her to see through my bullshit and love me anyway. I miss her more than seems possible. It's such an unfair side note to my already unfairly fucked-up life.

My mom's death blew me apart, but for the rest of the world it was just another news story. just another one of the many tragic stories we hear on the news every night. My mom was on her way home from a dinner date, living her single life in as responsible a way as possible while her only daughter was away at college. She was set up on a blind date by a friend at work, and since she had never met this man before, she requested her date to meet her at the restaurant rather than having him pick her up. From what her blind date said to me at her funeral, I gather they had an enjoyable night. He worried that her accident was in part due to the bottle of wine they split at dinner. I remember reassuring him that it wasn't. My mom was capable of driving safely after a couple of glasses of wine, but not everyone on the road that night would be so capable. She was hit head-on by a drunk driver on her way home and was killed instantly.

If the police report is to be believed, the driver that hit my mom had way more than a couple glasses of wine in her system. She apparently wasn't even aware of what had happened after she hit my mom, still stumbling around after the accident, incoherently drunk. From what I heard, she wasn't even aware that she had killed

somebody until the following day when she woke up in the hospital. I can't imagine what a shock that must have been to her. As much as I don't have a ton of sympathy for her, I can't imagine waking up hungover in a strange place only to realize that you've done something unthinkable. But we all do unthinkable things sometimes, don't we? So it's hard not to have some amount of empathy for the poor woman. And as it goes with most stories like this, Louise, the drunk driver, sustained only minor injuries and was remorseful once she learned of what she had done. Therefore I try my best to find forgiveness in my heart for her—for making a mistake. We all make mistakes sometimes. It's just that this particular mistake killed my mom and handed Louise just community service. Seeing as Louise was an upstanding citizen of her small community, and it probably didn't hurt that she was an upstanding white citizen, she got minimal punishment. Although if her facebook page is to be believed, Louise's mistake also came with a lifelong guilt complex that manifests as her leading the charge to a no-tolerance law when it comes to driving under the influence, along with what appears to be a lifetime of sobriety for the poor woman. Good luck, Louise! I can't imagine going through life without a little help to mask all those pesky emotions. Kinda sounds like hell if you ask me. Maybe she did get plenty of punishment.

My mind is wandering on this sunny Saturday afternoon. As I relax in my sunroom, I go back to

rehashing my visit this morning with my therapist. As my house dreams are becoming a little too regular again, I needed a chat to help process my feelings about it. My current therapist, Lily, knows my backstory, at least most of it, and she truly is, for the most part, the closest living person to see the real me, as real as I'll get with the living, that is. Today's session was spent untangling what she perceived to be my obsession with the house.

"It really had nothing to do with the house itself, the tragedy," she told me earlier today. "You've attached your feelings surrounding your friend's accident to the house itself, instead of just identifying it for what it was. An accident." I disagree, but she doesn't need to know that to help me. At least that's what I tell myself. Her suggestion to me today was to do some light research and find out some history surrounding the house. "The house was brand-new. We were the first people to live there," I told her. Lily continued to explain to me what she meant. "The first to live in that house, yes, but every bit of land we walk on has a history. All those places we visit because of their historical significance aren't any different than your own backyard, if you think about it. You can simply walk outside and you are literally standing on historical soil." I thought about that for a while, and decided that she was right. There are probably a lot of stories associated with that area. Maybe reading about some of the other stories regarding that area will help me to loosen the grip of the horror story that I encountered while living there.

I know there was a house that was on that lot before our house was built, but I don't know much about it. All I know is that it was torn down in the 80's before construction on our home began in 1991 amongst some speculation and rumors regarding its history. There were definitely some rumors at school that the house that was there before ours was home to some kind of 'satanic panic' horror movie-esque drama, but I deliberately avoided finding out much about that. I didn't need any more help feeling unsettled in that house, so I would deliberately block out anyone that talked about the house that was there before our new home was built on the same plot of land.

However, even when trying to block it out, I still heard a little about the drama. It had something to do with some kid in the 80's that set up a satanic ritual prank to pull on another kid. Tragically, later, the kid that pulled the prank died accidentally at the house. I didn't want to know any more than that at the time. I didn't want anything more to spoil the fresh start that my mom and I were so desperate for. As it turns out, that fresh start spoiled all on its own without any help from rumors I heard at school.

I hadn't really thought about that until she mentioned it. Blocked it out entirely, actually. While I was sitting in my therapist's office earlier, mulling that over, I replied, "Now that you mention it, there was some

kind of sordid story attached to the house that was there before ours was built. Do you think that means something?”

Lily paused, “No, I don’t.” She tried to reason with me. “I think horribleness happens everywhere and it’s typically carried out by our own human hands. It’s not happening because of inanimate objects such as houses. What I would like for you to do is look into the history so you can see that not only did some bad things happen in that spot, so did some good things. You need to disassociate the tragedy from the object. You need to see that life comes with both the good and the bad and it has nothing to do with the location.” I let that sink in as I thought it over before the session ended.

I ended our appointment that day promising Lily to do just that. A little light research couldn’t hurt anything. As I left my appointment that day, I promised Lily that I would dive into her assignment for me soon. Very soon, but not today. Today I just want to remember—remember my years there, my doomed friendship with Sasha Roberts and try to make more sense of it. Try to understand how it ended in a tragedy that I still carry around with me in my head. I will research the history of the original house another time, and I’ll find out what I can. I can say I’m hopeful that I will discover exactly what my wise therapist said I would, that both good and bad things have happened where my childhood home sits. I can say I’m hopeful for that outcome, but somehow I’m not. I fear I will find out exactly what I don’t want to find out, that the land that house sits on is

cursed. But for now, I'll just get lost in the memories of those five years I spent there. I'll reminisce about the friendship I made during those five years and how it ended in disaster, and possibly allow myself to consider why it ended that way.

Chapter 3

1992-1993 7th grade year

The school year begins almost before I have time to settle into my new surroundings. The nursery rhyme music I heard on move-in day along with that strange smell was easily forgotten. No other strange occurrences had happened since that first day, so it was easy to forget about them. Before school began, I spent the first two weeks in our new home organizing my room and exploring the backyard. I picked any apples I could find off of the amazing apple tree in the backyard. They really were the most delicious apples I've ever eaten. They were a bonus I would take to compensate for my occasional feelings of unease surrounding our new home. It was the only tree to survive the construction phase when the builders built our home. It makes me wonder who planted it. How did this bountiful apple tree end up in our backyard?

By far the best part of those two weeks, apple tree aside, was that my mom allowed us to go to the local shelter and pick out a dog. We found the most adorable mutt! Sitting in her small kennel at the local shelter, she looked so scared and small. Mom and I decided she was definitely the prettiest dog at the shelter, even if she did seem a little on the shy side. She had short hair, was