

THE WITCH HOUSE OF SALEM STREET



by Jane Smith

AGES 8-12 · MIDDLE GRADE

The Witch House of Salem Street

A Story Starring Jane

Haunted House · Ages 8-12

by Jane Smith

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Welcome to Witch House



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CHAPTER 1: The House on Essex Street

The moving truck rumbled to a stop, and Jane felt her stomach drop.

Not because of the house itself—though it was definitely strange. The colonial mansion at the end of Essex Street in Salem loomed three stories tall, with crooked black shutters that looked like they were frowning. The widow's walk perched on the roof like a lonely crown. But that wasn't what made Jane's chest tighten. It was the feeling, already creeping over her shoulders like cold fingers, that she was being watched.

"Isn't it magnificent?" her mother said, stepping out of the car with her hands on her hips. "Built in 1742. The realtor said it's been sitting vacant for almost a year. Can you believe that?"

Jane could believe it. She didn't say so.

Instead, she opened her door and climbed out into the October air, which tasted like rust and decay—like old pennies left in the rain. The fog rolled across the front lawn in thick, deliberate waves, as if it were searching for something. Or someone.

"Come on, honey," her father called, already hauling a box marked "JANE'S STUFF" from the truck. He was trying to sound cheerful, but Jane could hear the strain underneath. This move had

cost them everything. New job. New town. New start. That's what they'd told her. But Jane had caught them arguing in the kitchen two weeks ago, heard her mother say, "We couldn't afford to stay in Portland anymore," and something in that admission had scared Jane more than the actual moving.

"Everything is fine now," her mother had said when she caught Jane listening. She'd smiled too wide.

Jane hated when grown-ups lied.

She shouldered her backpack and walked toward the front door, already composing the lie she'd tell the kids at her new school. *Oh, this place? It's totally normal. Totally cool. You should come over sometime.* Even though absolutely no one should ever come over here. Even though she could already feel it—the watchfulness pressing down like a hand on the back of her neck.

The front door stuck when her father pushed it open. Then it swung inward with a groan that sounded almost alive.

The foyer smelled like abandonment. Like the vintage shops where Jane hunted for old keys—that particular smell of time stopped, of dust settling on things no one wanted anymore. A curved staircase rose into shadows. Floorboards creaked beneath her sneakers. To the left, a living room with furniture-shaped outlines on the carpet where the old owners' things had sat. To the right, a hallway lined with framed photographs.

Jane wandered over to the photographs without meaning to.

They were all old—probably from decades ago, judging by the sepia tone and the fashions. A family in Victorian dress. Children with solemn expressions. But one portrait stopped her cold. It was positioned at eye level, right where anyone entering the house couldn't help but see it.

Three children stood in formal dress, positioned carefully for the photographer. A boy on the left. A girl on the right. And in the middle—

Nothing.

Not nothing exactly. There was definitely someone there. Jane could see the outline of a dress, the edges of where a head should be. But the center was blurred. Deliberately blurred, as if someone had painted over it. Or as if the child had been so violently erased that even the photograph

remembered the violence.

Jane's hand reached up to tuck her red hair behind her ear—a nervous habit—and she couldn't look away.

"That's creepy," a voice said.

Jane jumped, her heart hammering. She spun around to find her younger brother Marcus standing behind her, his nose already sniffing. Marcus was nine and allergic to everything, which meant their house was always loud with his complaints.

"It's just an old picture," Jane said quickly, which was a lie. It wasn't just anything. But she could already feel the panic rising in her chest, the familiar need to make everything okay, to smooth things over. If Marcus got spooked, he'd tell their parents. Their parents would worry. Worry would turn into regret about the move. Regret would turn into anger. And then Jane would be alone in this house with all that anger.

"Yeah, but who **is** it?" Marcus pointed at the blurred space. "Who gets erased from a photo? That's like, serial killer stuff. That's like **Unsolved Mysteries.**"

"It's just damaged," Jane insisted. "Old photos get damaged. Stop being weird about it."

But even as she said it, she was tucking the detail away in her mind like she tucked away old keys. This would matter. She didn't know how. She just knew.

Their mother appeared in the kitchen doorway, carrying a roll of paper towels. "Come on, you two. Your father's setting up your beds. Jane, you're in the room at the top of the stairs. Marcus, you're down the hall."

Jane climbed the staircase, her hand sliding along the banister. The wood was smooth and cold, and somewhere above her—in the attic or the walls or maybe nowhere at all—something creaked. The house settling, her father would say. Old houses settle. But Jane knew the difference between settling and something moving.

Her room was smaller than she'd expected, with windows that overlooked the fog-shrouded backyard. The wallpaper was faded yellow with a pattern of roses that had probably been cheerful once. Now they looked diseased. Two boxes marked with her name sat in the corner. Her bed frame was half-assembled, leaning against the wall like something wounded.

Jane set down her backpack and noticed the attic door.

It was in the ceiling at the far corner of her room—a square of wood with a dangling chain. She'd never had an attic before. The thought of all that hidden space, all those mysteries tucked beneath the roof, gave her a flutter in her stomach that wasn't entirely unpleasant. Mysteries were better than the present. Mysteries had answers waiting to be discovered.

The chain pulled easily. A ladder unfolded with a shriek of hinges.

Jane hesitated for only a moment before climbing.

The attic was exactly what she'd imagined: cramped and sloped, with exposed beams and a floor of rough boards. Dust particles hung in the thin light from a small, round window. Boxes were stacked in the corners—boxes from the previous owners, she realized. Things they'd left behind. The air smelled like old wool and something else. Something sweet and wrong, like flowers that had rotted.

She picked her way across the floor, careful not to step through any boards. The floorboards were uneven here, warped with age. Some of them had gaps between them.

That's when she saw the glint.

It was in a gap near the center of the floor—something silver catching the dusty light. Jane crouched down and peered into the darkness between boards. Her fingers were thin enough to work into the space. She could feel something rough and cold. She worked it back and forth until it came free.

A key.

It was small and intricate, made of tarnished silver with an ornate handle shaped like a rose. Jane had collected seventeen keys before the move—she kept them in a wooden box under her bed, each one representing a mystery, a lock waiting somewhere in the world. This key felt different, though. Heavier. Important.

She turned it over in her palm, and for just a moment, she could have sworn she felt it vibrate. Warm. Alive.

"Everything is fine now," she whispered to herself, which was what her mother said when things were least fine. It was a lie. But Jane was good at lies.

She pocketed the key.

Downstairs, she could hear her parents arguing about where to put the couch. Marcus was coughing. The house settled and shifted around her, and Jane sat on the attic floor for another moment, just listening. Just feeling the press of the house around her like a living thing.

She climbed back down and closed the attic door. She didn't mention the key to anyone at dinner. She didn't mention the blurred photograph or the way the air tasted or the watchful feeling that never quite went away. She answered her mother's cheerful questions about her room with, "It's nice," and her father's questions about whether she was excited with, "Sure."

That night, lying in her new bed with unfamiliar darkness pressing in from all sides, Jane heard footsteps in the walls.

Not above her. Inside the walls. Moving slowly, methodically, from somewhere behind her headboard and tracking across toward the far corner of the room. The sound of something heavy dragging. Something tired.

Jane's breath caught. She pulled the blanket up to her chin, her fingers trembling.

The footsteps stopped.

Silence flooded back. Complete and total. The kind of silence that's almost louder than sound.

Jane waited for what felt like hours. Her heart slowly returned to normal rhythm. It was the house settling, she told herself. It was pipes and wind and her own scared imagination. Everything was fine. Everyone was fine. Nothing was wrong.

The footsteps started again—directly above her now. In the attic.

And then Jane heard something worse than footsteps. She heard breathing. Slow and deliberate. The breath of something large, tucked into the darkness just above the ceiling, waiting.

Jane ran. Heart pounding. Couldn't breathe.

She burst into the hallway, nearly colliding with Marcus, who was on his way to the bathroom. In the confusion and his startled cry, she heard her parents' door open downstairs, heard her father's confused, "What's going on up there?"

Jane forced herself to stop. To turn back. To walk calmly to Marcus's room where he stood with his asthma inhaler already in hand, his eyes wide.

"Bad dream," she told him. "Sorry."

He didn't look convinced, but he didn't press. That was the thing about lying—sometimes people wanted to believe you, even when they knew you weren't being honest.

Jane returned to her room and closed the door. She pulled out the silver key from under her pillow where she'd hidden it. In the moonlight from her window, she could see it clearly now. Could see something else too.

An inscription on the handle, so small and fine she'd almost missed it. Two words, scratched or engraved into the metal: *LET ME OUT.*

The Girl in the Mirror



* * *

CHAPTER 2: The Girl in the Glass

Jane's toothbrush tasted like mint and moving-day dust. Everything in the bathroom smelled faintly of lemon cleaner—her mother's attempt to make the old house feel new. The tile floor was cold even through her socks.

She looked at herself in the mirror above the pedestal sink. Same red hair. Same freckles she hated. Same nervous expression she always wore when she was alone. Which she was. Alone. Again. Mom was downstairs unpacking boxes. Dad was still at work. Her little brother Marcus wouldn't be back from soccer camp until next week.

Jane leaned closer to the mirror, examining a small pimple forming on her chin. She'd have to tell Mom it was just dry skin from the move. She hated looking bad. Hated disappointing people. Hated being—

That was when she saw her.

Standing directly behind Jane's reflection.

A girl, pale as moonlight, wearing a long dress that looked like something from an old history book. Dark hair fell down her back in a single braid. Her eyes were enormous and black and *looking

right at Jane*.

Jane spun around so fast her hip cracked against the sink.

Nothing. The bathroom was empty.

She turned back to the mirror. The girl was gone. The space behind the reflected Jane was ordinary now—just the white tile wall and the small round window that overlooked the backyard.

Jane's hands were shaking. She gripped the edge of the sink, feeling the cold porcelain bite into her palms. It was nothing. A trick of the light. Tired eyes from the drive. She'd read about that once—how your brain fills in patterns when you're exhausted. Pareidolia. That was the word. Your mind sees faces in clouds and trees and—

—and in mirrors that are absolutely, definitely empty.

She picked up her toothbrush again with trembling fingers and tried to act normal. Everything is fine now, she whispered to herself, the way Mom always did. Everything is fine.

But as Jane brushed her teeth, something felt wrong about her reflection.

It was moving slower.

Not much. Just a fraction of a second behind. When Jane raised her toothbrush, the reflection-Jane raised hers a heartbeat later. When Jane tilted her head left, the mirror image followed, but not quite in sync. Like watching a video with slightly delayed audio.

Jane blinked hard. Looked away. Counted to five. When she looked back, it was fine. Normal. Synchronized perfectly.

She had to stop doing this to herself. Mom would worry. She'd say Jane was being "dramatic about the move" again, the way she had when Jane cried about leaving her old school. Jane didn't want to worry anyone. Didn't want to be the reason they regretted moving to this house.

The bathroom door creaked as Jane opened it. The hallway beyond was shadowy. The afternoon light from downstairs barely reached this far up. She could smell something cooking—carrots, maybe, and onions. Mom was making dinner.

Jane walked past the other upstairs bedrooms toward the stairs, but something made her stop.

There was a hallway she didn't remember from the house tour. It was narrower than the main

hallway, running off to the left between two walls. Jane was certain it hadn't been there this morning. She frowned, rubbing her eyes. Of course it had been there. The house didn't change. Houses didn't rearrange themselves.

She was just tired.

Jane turned toward the stairs when something caught her eye—a portrait on the wall. It was old, the oil paint cracked and faded. Three children posed formally in front of a window. A girl of about fourteen with her hand on the shoulder of a younger boy. And then—

Jane stepped closer.

There was a third child, but something was very wrong. A section of the portrait looked deliberately smeared, as if someone had taken a knife or cloth and obliterated the image. It was just a blur of muddy brown and sickly yellow where the third child should have been. The painting technique was perfect everywhere else, so careful and detailed. But that one spot looked like someone had wanted to erase that child from history.

Jane's stomach twisted. Why would anyone do that?

"Jane?" Mom's voice drifted up from downstairs. "Dinner in five minutes, honey!"

"Okay!" Jane called back, but her voice sounded small and far away.

She stood in the hallway a moment longer, staring at the ruined portrait. The paint smudge almost looked like it was still moving, a greasy shadow that refused to stay still. Jane blinked. No. It was just a painting. Just an old, sad painting.

She made herself walk away.

Dinner was chicken and root vegetables. Mom had set the table nicely even though they didn't have the good dishes unpacked yet. Jane picked at her food and told Mom about how nice the bathrooms were and how big her new bedroom was going to be once they arranged the furniture.

"I'm so glad you're happy here," Mom said, squeezing Jane's hand. "I know the move was hard. But this house... there's something special about it, don't you think? It has character."

Jane nodded and smiled, even though character wasn't the word she would have chosen. The house felt more like it had **personality**. A strange, old personality that didn't quite like them being here.

After dinner, Jane told Mom she wanted to explore the upstairs more. Mom said that was a wonderful idea and went back to unpacking boxes in the living room. Jane climbed the stairs slowly, her hand trailing along the banister. The wood was smooth and worn, shaped by a hundred years of hands just like hers.

When she reached the top, she found herself walking back toward the bathroom without meaning to.

The mirror.

She needed to know if it happened again. Needed to prove it was nothing. Just her imagination. Just—

Jane opened the bathroom door and stepped inside. The light was dimmer now that the sun was setting. She reached for the light switch and froze.

There were wet footprints on the tile floor.

Small, bare footprints, soaking wet and glowing faintly in the dim light. They came from the bathtub, crossed the floor, and led directly to where Jane was standing. They dripped. Actual water was pooling on the floor.

Jane's breath came in short, sharp gasps. She looked at the bathtub. Bone dry. Not even damp. The shower curtain was pulled back, showing empty white porcelain.

She turned on the light—painful and bright—and the footprints were gone.

Just like that. Vanished. But the floor was still faintly wet. Jane could see the sheen of moisture, and when she knelt down and touched it with her finger, it was cold. So cold it made her teeth ache.

Jane stood up fast, backing toward the door.

That was when she caught her reflection in the mirror.

The girl was there again. Clearer this time. She was standing in the corner of the bathroom, watching Jane with those enormous black eyes. Her lips were moving, forming words Jane couldn't quite hear. The girl raised one pale hand and pointed directly at Jane.

Not at her reflection.

At Jane herself.

Jane spun around screaming, but there was no one there. She turned back to the mirror. The girl was gone, but Jane's own reflection seemed to smile.

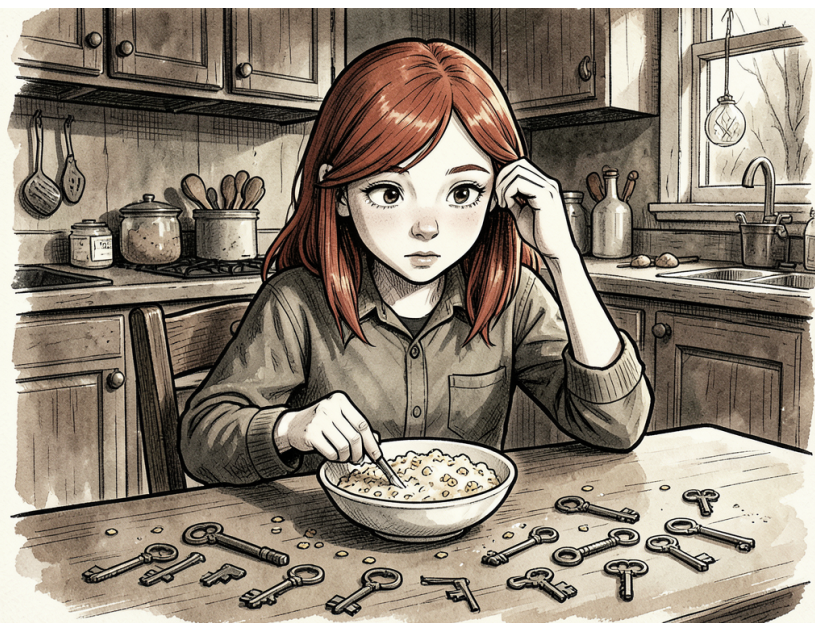
Just for a fraction of a second.

Then her reflection's smile faded, and it was just Jane again—terrified, gasping, alone in a bathroom in an old house in Salem where things were definitely, absolutely, certainly **not fine at all**.

And in that moment of silence, as Jane's heartbeat slowly returned to normal, she heard something that made her blood freeze solid in her veins.

From somewhere deep beneath the floorboards came the sound of small feet, running, running, running—and then the unmistakable click of a lock being fastened from the outside of a door that shouldn't have any lock at all.

Nobody Believes Me



* * *

CHAPTER 3: The Wet Footprints

Jane sat at the kitchen table, pushing her cereal around the bowl. Milk had turned the cornflakes into a soggy paste. She wasn't eating. She was stalling.

Her mother stood at the counter, humming something cheerful while scrolling through her phone. Dad was already at work. The house felt different in daylight—less menacing, more like just an old house. More like a house where nobody would believe what Jane had seen.

"Mom?" Jane's voice came out smaller than she intended. She cleared her throat. "Last night, I saw something. In my mirror. There was this girl, and—"

"Mmm-hmm?" Her mother didn't look up from her phone.

"And she looked exactly like me, but not exactly. She had this strange expression, and I think she was—"

"Probably just tired, honey." Her mother smiled absently. "The light in this house does funny things. Probably a reflection from outside. Trees, maybe. This old glass isn't like modern mirrors."

Jane's fingers clenched around her spoon. "It wasn't a reflection. It was—"

"Everything is fine now." Her mother said it the way adults do when they've already decided something isn't worth thinking about. "You're still adjusting to the move. Big change. Big house. Your imagination is probably working overtime."

Jane wanted to scream that her imagination had nothing to do with it, but instead she nodded. She stirred her cereal. She said nothing else.

That afternoon, Alice came over.

Alice was Jane's best friend since third grade, and she had a way of making everything feel manageable. She had blonde hair in two braids and absolutely zero patience for drama. When Jane answered the door, Alice took one look at her face and said, "Okay, what's wrong?"

They went upstairs to Jane's room. The afternoon light slanted through the window, and dust motes floated in the beams like tiny ghosts. Jane sat on the edge of her bed—the same bed the mirror girl had seemed to float toward—and told Alice everything.

The reflection that wasn't a reflection. The girl with her face but different eyes. The way the bathroom suddenly felt cold. How her mother had dismissed it.

Alice listened, picking at the hem of Jane's curtain. When Jane finished, Alice was quiet for a long moment.

"You're probably just tired from the move," Alice said finally. The exact words Jane's mother had used. "I mean, I was kind of weird when my family moved to Oakwood Lane. I thought I heard someone in the attic for like two weeks, and it was just squirrels."

Jane felt something crack open in her chest. "It wasn't my imagination."

"I didn't say it was." Alice climbed onto the bed next to her. "I just said you're probably tired. This house is kind of creepy though, honestly. I wouldn't be surprised if you're freaking out a little."

Freaking out. As if Jane were some nervous little kid who couldn't handle a simple house. Jane stood up abruptly, her hip bumping Alice's shoulder.

"Forget I said anything," Jane said.

"Jane—"

"I mean it. I don't want to talk about it anymore."

Alice left an hour later, and Jane didn't walk her to the door. She sat in her room with the door closed, feeling the weight of being alone settle on her shoulders. This was what happened when you tried to get help. This was what happened when you told the truth.

Except nobody believed the truth.

She spent the afternoon unpacking boxes. Her collection of old keys went into a mason jar on her dresser—brass keys, skeleton keys, ornate Victorian keys, each one a tiny mystery waiting to be solved. She'd bought most of them at the Salem Antique Collective for fifty cents each. Finding a key's lock became her practice in persistence. Maybe one day she'd find a door in this house that one of them opened.

The thought made her shiver.

By evening, Jane's anger at Alice had cooled into something more like regret. She'd snapped at her best friend over nothing, really. Over something that sounded crazy when you said it out loud. Her lying instinct kicked in automatically. Tomorrow she'd apologize. She'd tell Alice it was just stress. She'd smooth it over.

This was how Jane had always managed things. This was how she survived.

She brushed her teeth at 8:47 PM. The bathroom smelled like lemon cleaner still, though fainter now. The mirror showed only her reflection—tired eyes, red hair tangled from the day, a small red pimple forming on her chin. Ordinary. Normal.

She went to bed at 9:15 and fell asleep listening to the old house creak and settle around her.

Jane woke at 2:34 AM.

Not gradually. Not naturally. One moment she was asleep, and the next moment her eyes snapped open in absolute darkness. Her heart was already racing. She held her breath, listening.

Something had changed in the air. The room was colder. So much colder that she could see her breath misting in front of her face, a ghost appearing and disappearing with each exhale.

Her eyes adjusted slowly to the dark. The window was still shut. Locked. Rain pattered softly against the glass—she could hear it now, a gentle percussion that meant the weather had turned.

That should have been a comfort. Ordinary rain. An ordinary night.

Then she noticed the smell.

Lake water. Murky and stagnant, with something else underneath it. Something organic. Rotting. The smell filled her nose, and Jane gagged, pulling her blanket up to her mouth.

She reached for the lamp on her nightstand with a shaking hand.

The light clicked on, flooding the room with warm gold, and Jane's scream caught in her throat.

Footprints.

Wet footprints tracked across her hardwood floor. They started at her bedroom door—which was closed, locked from the inside—and led in a direct line across the room to her bed. To her. The prints were small, child-sized, and they glistened in the lamplight, wet and dark.

Jane scrambled backward on her bed, her legs tangling in her blankets. Her heart hammered so hard she thought it might break through her ribs.

"No," she whispered. "No, no, no."

She stared at the footprints. They were real. She wasn't imagining this. The floor was dry everywhere else in the room—completely dry. But the prints were unmistakable. Water droplets were still beading on the wood, catching the light like tiny mirrors.

Jane's breath came in short, sharp gasps. The lake smell was overwhelming now. It filled her mouth, her lungs, her whole body.

She did the only thing she could think to do.

She grabbed her phone from her nightstand and took a picture.

Then another. And another. Proof. Documentation. The photos showed the wet prints clearly, impossibly, undeniably real.

Her hands were shaking so badly she could barely hold the phone steady. Her mind raced through possibilities. A dream? No—dreams didn't smell like this. She wasn't imagining this. She absolutely was not imagining this.

The footprints led to her bed.

Which meant something had walked across her floor in the dead of night and come directly to where she slept. Had stood over her while she dreamed. Had been close enough to touch her and chose not to.

Jane's chest tightened. She couldn't breathe properly. She wanted to scream but forced herself to stay quiet. What would happen if she screamed? What if it—

She didn't let herself finish that thought.

Very slowly, Jane climbed out of bed, careful to avoid stepping on the wet prints. Her feet touched the cold hardwood and she flinched. The prints were still wet. Still warm. She could feel the heat radiating from them like body temperature, like something alive had just walked this path.

The smell of lake water grew stronger.

Jane moved to her door and checked the lock. Still engaged. She unlocked it and stepped into the hallway, leaving the bedroom light on behind her. The hallway was dark, and she made her way toward her parents' room by memory more than sight.

As she passed the stairwell, she noticed something else.

More wet footprints on the hall carpet, visible in the dim light from her bedroom. They came down the hallway from the direction of the bathroom. They led downstairs.

They led down to the basement door.

Jane stopped moving. Stopped breathing. The basement door was at the bottom of the stairs, and even from here, she could see that it was open.

It had been closed this morning. She was sure of it.

The portrait in the hallway caught her eye—the one with three children, one blurred as if deliberately erased. In the darkness, the blurred child's face looked even more distorted, more wrong. The paint seemed to shift and writhe in the shadows.

Jane's bladder suddenly felt full, a shock of fear that threatened to spill over. She pressed on toward her parents' room, moving faster now, not quite running but close.

Behind her, from somewhere deep in the house, came a sound.

Water dripping.

Slow and steady. Drip. Drip. Drip. Like a faucet that wouldn't turn off, or like something very wet and very cold was making its way through the halls.

Jane reached her parents' bedroom door and pushed inside.

"Mom," she whispered urgently. "Mom, wake up."

Her mother stirred, confused. "Jane? What's wrong? What time—"

"There are footprints. In my room. Wet footprints. And the basement door is open, and I didn't open it, and—"

"Honey, slow down." Her mother was fully awake now, turning on the lamp. "What do you mean there are footprints?"

Jane knew how this would sound. She knew exactly how her mother would react because she was already seeing it in her mother's expression—the same patient, slightly worried look she'd given at breakfast. The look that said Jane was tired and stressed and letting her imagination run away with her.

But this time, Jane had proof.

"My phone," Jane said. "I took pictures. Come look."

Her mother put on her robe and followed Jane downstairs.

The bedroom door was still open, the light still on. Jane stepped inside and immediately stopped.

The floor was completely dry.

Every single footprint was gone. The wood gleamed in the lamplight, unmarked and innocent. The lake smell had vanished too, replaced by the familiar lemon cleaner and old house mustiness.

Jane's phone felt suddenly very heavy in her hand.

"Show me the pictures," her mother said gently.

Jane's thumb shook as she pulled up the photos. She scrolled through them, her heart sinking with each image. Photo after photo of her empty bedroom floor. No footprints. No evidence. No proof.

Because the pictures were from before she'd taken them.

They showed her room empty and dry, just as it appeared now. Jane's mind stuttered. She hadn't

taken any pictures. She'd opened the camera app, but the photos on her phone were from earlier today—just images of her unpacked boxes and the mason jar of keys on her dresser.

"Jane," her mother said carefully, "when exactly did you see these footprints?"

Jane opened her mouth to answer, but no words came out.

Behind them, from somewhere deep in the house, the dripping sound intensified. And this time, Jane was certain she heard something else beneath it.

Footsteps.

Small footsteps, padding softly through the halls of the witch house, getting closer, heading up the stairs toward the second floor. Heading toward them.

"Do you hear that?" Jane whispered.

Her mother's face had gone pale. "Hear what?"

But Jane was already moving toward the door, pulling her mother with her.

Because now she could see them—faint, barely visible in the lamplight, wet footprints forming on the hallway carpet.

Footprints that appeared and disappeared as if something invisible was walking toward them, step by step, and whatever it was, it was carrying water from the lake inside the house, leaving traces of its impossible journey through the halls.

And it was no longer alone—Jane could hear other sounds now, whispers that might have been voices or might have been wind, and beneath it all, the unmistakable sound of wet breathing in the darkness just beyond the doorway.

Something was standing in the hallway.

Something that had followed her out of the bedroom.

The Girl Who Wouldn't Stay Dead



* * *

Jane's hands trembled as she held the journal. The pages were brittle, the color of old teeth. The handwriting was childish but deliberate—each letter pressed hard into the paper as if the writer had needed to prove she existed.

Mother says I'm wicked.

The words blurred. Jane blinked hard. The small room behind the closet panel was so cold her breath came out in pale clouds. Frost gathered on the inside of the single window, which had been painted shut—or painted over—long ago. The wooden doll sat on the child's bed, its eyeless face tilted toward Jane as if listening.

She wanted to leave. Part of her was already running for the door.

But another part—the part that collected keys and solved mysteries and pretended everything was fine even when it wasn't—needed to know more. Needed to understand.

Jane flipped through the journal carefully. More entries, all in the same shaking hand:

July 15, 1723. Four days now. I knocked on the door until my knuckles bled. No one came. I can hear Father's voice downstairs. He's angry. He's always angry when Mother gets like this.

*August 2, 1723. I don't know what day it is anymore. The water pitcher is empty. I'm drinking

from the rain that comes through the crack near the window. It tastes like wood and sadness.*

Jane felt something crack open inside her chest. This wasn't a ghost story. This was real. A real girl. A real child locked in this room, in this house, three hundred years ago.

She heard it then—a soft sound from outside the room. A footstep in her closet.

Jane's head snapped up. "Mom?"

Silence.

The temperature in the small room dropped further. Jane could see her breath now in thick, white clouds. The frost on the window began to spread, creeping across the glass like something alive, like something searching.

"I'm being silly," Jane whispered aloud. She did this sometimes—narrated her own life to make it less frightening. "It's just the house settling. Old houses make noises. That's normal. Everything is fine."

But her voice sounded thin and unconvincing, even to herself.

She looked down at the journal again. The next entry made her stomach clench:

August 20, 1723. She came to the door today. Not Mother. The girl with the red hair. She stood in the dark hallway and stared at me through the keyhole. She didn't speak. She just stared and stared until I couldn't breathe. When I looked away, I heard her whisper something. It sounded like my name. But that's impossible. She doesn't know my name. Nobody knows my name anymore.

Jane's fingers went numb. Red hair.

The girl in the mirror had red hair.

A sound came from the closet again—louder this time. Not a footstep. Dragging. Something heavy being pulled across the floor. Jane shoved the journal into her pocket and scrambled backward, nearly tripping over the small bed. The wooden doll tumbled to the floor. Its eyeless head faced Jane, and for just a moment, she could have sworn she heard it laugh.

She didn't think. She just moved.

Jane squeezed through the doorway and into the closet, her heart hammering against her ribs. The loose panel was still visible, slightly ajar. She pulled it closed behind her, and the hidden room

disappeared. Her fingers found the edge of the panel, and she pressed it tight against the wall, holding her breath.

The dragging sound stopped.

Everything went quiet. The kind of quiet that felt wrong, that felt full of waiting.

Jane stepped out of the closet and into her bedroom. Sunlight streamed through her window—real, golden, normal sunlight. She could hear her mother humming downstairs. A car passed on the street outside. The world was still there. The regular world. It hadn't disappeared.

She sat on the edge of her bed and pulled out the journal.

The entries continued, becoming more frantic, the handwriting more erratic:

She's in the walls now. I can hear her moving. Crawling. The walls are thin here, and I can hear her on the other side, calling me. But her voice is wrong. It sounds like it's coming from far away and very close at the same time.

She brought me the doll. I don't know how. But I woke this morning and it was sitting on my pillow. Staring. Waiting. The doll has no eyes but I feel it watching me.

I think I'm forgetting what sunlight feels like.

The last entry was dated October 3, 1723. The handwriting was barely legible:

Mother opened the door today. After so long. She looked at me and didn't recognize me. She screamed. She screamed so loud I thought the house would break. She locked the door again and I heard her running down the stairs. I heard shouting. I heard Father say, "Burn it. Burn the whole room." But he didn't. They left it. They left me.

And then the girl came. The red-haired girl. She sat on my bed and took my hand. Her hand was ice. Everything went dark.

This is the last entry I can make. I don't think I'm writing anymore. I think she's writing. I think she's always been writing. I think I stopped being me a very long time ago.

Jane dropped the journal as if it had burned her.

The girl in the mirror. The wet footprints in the hallway. The girl in the closet who looked exactly like Jane but wasn't quite right—her movements too smooth, her smile too wide, her eyes too

empty.

Jane ran to her closet and yanked open the door. She had to see. Had to know.

The loose panel was still there. The hidden room was still there. The small bed, the doll, the cold that reached out like fingers. Everything exactly as she'd found it.

But something was different.

The journal wasn't alone anymore.

There was another journal on the bed, the cover fresh and new, written in modern handwriting. Jane's handwriting. She recognized it immediately—the way she looped her 'g's, the way she crossed her 't's with a hasty little slash.

With shaking hands, Jane pulled out the modern journal. It fell open to a page dated today.

The entry read:

Dear Mom,

I'm not sure how to tell you this, but I think I've figured out the truth about this house. I think it's been trying to tell me something. The girl I saw in the mirror—the girl with red hair like mine—I think she's real. I think she's been here the whole time. And I think she's finally ready to let me leave.

Don't worry about me. I'll be happier this way. Happier than I've ever been. No more pretending. No more lying.

Love,

Jane

Jane's legs gave out. She sank to the floor, pressing her back against the closet wall.

She hadn't written that. She would never write that. She would never—

Downstairs, she heard her mother call out: "Jane? Sweetie? Can you come help me with dinner?"

Jane tried to answer. Tried to call back. But the sound that came out of her mouth wasn't her voice. It was higher, older, sadder. It was the voice of a girl who'd been trapped in the dark for three hundred years.

And then Jane realized something that made her blood turn to ice:

She couldn't remember if she was walking to the stairs, or if something else was wearing her body and walking to the stairs.

She couldn't remember whose hand was at the end of her arm.

The Girl's Story



* * *

CHAPTER 5: The Door That Shouldn't Lock

The journal felt heavier in Jane's hands with each page she turned.

They whisper about me in town. Mother's friends come to tea and their voices drop when I enter. Sarah Blackwood says I made her doll's head turn around. I didn't. I was in the garden. But I was thinking about Sarah Blackwood. I was wishing she would stop being cruel.

Jane sat cross-legged on the cold wooden floor of the hidden room, her back pressed against the wall. Dust motes floated through the pale light seeping under the closet door. The air tasted metallic—like licking a penny. Her fingers traced the faded ink, following the desperate loops and curves of Mercy's handwriting.

The name was Mercy Garrett. Born 1692. Jane had found the date pressed into a corner of the journal's front cover, scratched so hard the leather had torn.

She should leave. Her mother would be calling her soon. Lunch was probably already on the table—one of those things her mom made when she was trying too hard, something with too many colors and an encouraging smile attached. The thought made Jane's stomach clench. She should go down and be grateful. She should tell her mother everything was fine. She should lie convincingly

enough that nothing seemed wrong.

But she couldn't move.

I can do things. Small things. I can make a candle flame dance without blowing. I can hear what people are thinking sometimes—not words exactly, but the shapes of their meanness. The shapes of their fear. Mother caught me moving the salt shaker across the table with no one touching it. She went very still. Then she hit me.

Jane's throat tightened. She knew about being hit—not by her mother, who would never, but she understood the shock of it. The way your body didn't believe pain could come from someone who was supposed to keep you safe.

She read on.

The entries became more frantic. Mercy wrote about other girls in Salem—girls who were also different, also strange, also scared. Girls who could sense things. The journal didn't say if they could move things or hear thoughts. Mercy seemed to think they shared something. A sickness. A gift. She wasn't sure which.

And then: *Mother went to the magistrate.*

Jane's hands began to shake.

She told them I am wicked. She told them about the things I made happen. She said it was the devil's work. She said she was sorry but she had to save herself. She said I was already lost.

The final entries were barely legible. The handwriting became jagged, desperate, like Mercy had been writing in the dark or in terrible pain.

They won't let me leave the house. The door to the cellar has a lock on the outside now. I hear the magistrate's men talking to Mother. They say I must confess. They say if I confess the devil will leave me alone. If I don't confess, they will have to prove my wickedness another way.

I don't know what that means. I'm so cold.

The final page had only three words, written over and over until the pen had torn through the paper:

Don't leave me. Don't leave me. Don't leave me.

Jane closed the journal. Her breathing came in short, sharp gasps.

Mercy Garrett. Accused by her own mother. Locked in a cellar. Waiting for judgment while she waited to die.

A sound made Jane's head jerk up.

Footsteps. In the closet. The main closet, on the other side of the panel.

"Hello?" Jane called out, her voice thin and small. "Mom?"

The footsteps stopped.

Jane pushed herself to her feet, clutching the journal. Every instinct screamed at her to get out, to leave this room with its bitter cold and its stale air and its walls that seemed to press closer every second. She moved toward the panel, reaching for the wooden edge she'd used to slip inside.

It wouldn't budge.

Jane pulled harder. Her fingernails caught on the wood. A splinter drove itself deep into her thumb, but she barely felt it. She pulled and pulled and the panel didn't move an inch. It was like it had been sealed shut. Like it had never been open at all.

"No," Jane whispered. "No, no, no."

She spun around, looking for another way out. There was none. Just four walls of faded wallpaper and a single small window so high and so filthy that it might as well have been painted over. The room seemed smaller than it had been five minutes ago. The ceiling seemed lower.

Jane ran her palms over the panel again, feeling for a seam, a lever, anything. Nothing.

The cold pressed against her skin like invisible hands.

"Mom!" Jane shouted, pounding on the panel. "MOM! I'm stuck! I'm in the closet! Mom!"

She waited. Listened.

The house was completely silent. Not the comfortable silence of an empty room. The silence of something holding its breath.

Jane's heart hammered against her ribs. Think. She had to think. The panel had opened from the inside before—she'd done it herself. So it had to open again. Maybe it was just—

The temperature dropped.

Jane could see her breath suddenly, small clouds that hung in front of her face before dissolving. Her skin erupted in goosebumps. The journal tumbled from her nerveless fingers and landed on the floor with a soft thud.

A voice whispered her name.

Not a child's voice. Not an adult's either. Something between—stretched thin, like fabric pulled too tight. Like wind moving through a crack in old wood.

"Jane."

Jane's legs gave out. She collapsed against the wall, her back scraping wallpaper. Dust fell like snow.

"Don't be afraid," the voice whispered. It seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. From the walls themselves. From the air. From inside Jane's own chest.

"I'm alone," the voice continued. "I've been alone for so long. Since before your great-great-great-grandmother was born. Since they took me down to the cellar and locked the door and left me there while they decided if I was worth saving."

Jane's mouth opened but no sound came out.

"I can't leave," the voice said. It almost sounded sad. "I tried and tried, but the house won't let me go. It keeps me here. It keeps me hungry."

The air felt thick. Hard to breathe.

"But you," the voice whispered, and Jane felt something brush against her cheek—not quite a touch, but the memory of one, cold as grave dirt—"you're like me. You feel things differently. You see things nobody else sees. You know about being alone even when people are all around you."

Jane shook her head violently. "No," she managed to choke out. "I'm not like you. I'm not—"

"Liar," the voice said, and there was no anger in it, only a terrible understanding. "You lie all the time so nobody will know how scared you are. You lie so nobody will leave you. But they leave anyway, don't they? Everyone always leaves."

"Stop." Jane pressed her hands over her ears, but the voice wasn't coming from outside. It was inside her head. Inside her bones.

The panel burst open.

Not slowly. Not gradually. All at once, like something had torn it away from the inside.

Jane stared through the opening into the closet. Moonlight streamed through the window, impossibly bright for the middle of the day. The closet was empty. Just hanging coats and dark shadows and the smell of old fabric.

She could leave. The way out was right there.

But standing in the center of the room, barely visible in the dimness, was a figure.

A girl.

She looked about Jane's age, maybe younger. She wore old-fashioned clothes—a long gray dress with a white apron. Her skin was pale as bone. Her eyes were dark and hollow, like someone had carved them out and filled the spaces with midnight.

The girl smiled.

It wasn't a nice smile.

"Thank you for reading my story," she said in a voice like wind through a graveyard. "Thank you for caring. Thank you for understanding. I haven't had anyone understand in three hundred and twenty-seven years."

"You're not real," Jane whispered.

"I'm real enough," Mercy said. She took a step forward, her bare feet making no sound against the wooden floor. "Real enough to keep you here. Real enough to make sure you're never alone again. Never."

Jane scrambled backward, but there was nowhere to go. The hidden room was behind her. In front of her was Mercy—solid now, no longer translucent, her dress stained with something dark that might have been dirt or might have been something worse.

"We can stay together," Mercy said. Her voice grew softer, almost gentle. "In the room behind the closet. In the dark. You'll read my journal over and over and you'll understand. You'll understand what it means to be like us. You'll understand that we belong together."

Jane's hand shot out and grabbed the first thing it touched—the journal, lying on the ground. She

hurled it toward Mercy. The ghost girl didn't flinch. The book passed straight through her body as if she were made of smoke and shadow.

"You can't hurt me," Mercy whispered.

Jane ran.

She dove through the open panel and into the closet, her shin cracking against the edge. Pain exploded up her leg. She ignored it. Behind her, she heard Mercy's voice—no longer sad, no longer gentle, but furious and hungry and ancient beyond measure.

"Come back! You promised! You promised we'd stay together forever!"

Jane burst out of the closet, through the bedroom, and into the hallway. She could hear Mercy behind her—footsteps that didn't quite match Jane's own, like an echo that was slightly wrong.

She reached the stairs and half-fell, half-tumbled down them. Her mother was in the kitchen. Jane could see her through the doorway at the bottom—her mother, real and warm and alive and completely unaware that her daughter had just run screaming from a three-hundred-year-old ghost girl who was now descending the stairs behind her with arms outstretched.

Jane's mouth opened to scream her mother's name.

But no sound came out.

Because Mercy's cold fingers had already wrapped around her throat.

Chapter 6



* * *

CHAPTER 6: The Photograph

The journal disappeared.

Jane checked behind the loose closet panel three times on Saturday morning, her fingers scrabbling in the darkness like pale spiders. Nothing. Not the brittle pages. Not the childish handwriting. Not even the faint smell of old paper that had made her throat tight.

She told herself it was fine. Good, even. She told herself that losing it meant the whole thing had been a dream—one of those vivid nightmares that clung to you after waking but dissolved if you didn't think about it too hard. She was getting good at not thinking about things.

"You seem happy," her mother said at breakfast, setting down a plate of scrambled eggs that steamed with butter. "Like you've made peace with the house."

Jane tucked her red hair behind her ear and nodded. "Yeah. It's growing on me."

It was the kind of lie she told best—the kind that made other people relax. The kind that turned her into the daughter everyone wanted, instead of the strange, frightened girl who found journals hidden in walls and saw things in mirrors that couldn't possibly be real.

"I knew you would," her mother said, squeezing her shoulder. "Salem's a wonderful town. And this

house... well, it has character, doesn't it?"

Character. Jane almost laughed. Character was what people said when they meant *haunted*, when they meant *dangerous*, when they meant *things happened here that we don't talk about*.

But she smiled instead. "Yeah. Lots of character."

By noon, Jane had almost convinced herself. She spent the morning unpacking boxes in her room, arranging her collection of old keys on the windowsill—the brass one from the antique mall, the ornate silver one from the estate sale, the tiny iron key she'd found in the backyard on moving day. Each one was a promise. A mystery waiting to be solved. A door waiting to be opened.

The sun moved across her carpet in a long, golden rectangle. Normal. Safe. Everything is fine now. Everything is fine now.

She was repeating it like a spell when her mother called from downstairs: "Jane! Come help me with something!"

Her mother was standing in the second-floor hallway, staring at the wall. Specifically, at the portrait that hung between the bathroom and Jane's parents' bedroom—the one Jane had walked past a hundred times without really looking at it.

"Don't you think this is odd?" her mother asked.

The portrait was old, the frame ornate and dark. It showed three children in Victorian dress, posed stiffly as children always were in old photographs. A boy of about fourteen in a jacket with brass buttons. A girl maybe Jane's age with ringlets and a pale, pinched face.

And then... nothing. Where the third child should have been, the photograph blurred into shadow. As if someone had deliberately rubbed away the image, or as if the child had moved at just the wrong moment—so violently, so desperately, that the camera couldn't capture anything but motion.

Jane's mouth went dry. "What do you mean?"

"Well, look." Her mother leaned closer, squinting. "It's clearly a family portrait. Three children. But this one..." She pointed at the blur. "It's like they tried to erase someone from the picture. How strange is that?"

Not strange. Intentional.

Jane remembered the journal. *They whisper about me. Mother's friends come to tea and their voices drop when I enter.*

"Maybe it was just a bad photograph," Jane said. Her voice sounded thin and far away. "Old cameras did that."

"Maybe." Her mother didn't sound convinced. "The previous owners left it hanging. I was going to take it down, but then I thought—it's part of the house's history, you know? Part of its charm."

Charm. There was that word again.

Jane went back to her room and tried to read, but the words squirmed on the page. Through her window, she could see the fog rolling in from the nearby marshes, thick and white and purposeful. It moved like something alive. It moved like it was looking for her.

By evening, the fog had swallowed the entire street. The neighbors' houses disappeared. The trees became suggestions. The world shrank to just the three-story colonial and the gray nothing pressing against its windows.

Jane's mother had gone to bed early with a headache. Her father wouldn't be home until late. The house groaned and settled around Jane as she sat in the kitchen, nursing a cup of hot chocolate that had gone lukewarm.

That's when she heard it.

A sound from the basement.

Not loud. Not threatening in an obvious way. Just... a thump. Like something heavy shifting. Like furniture being moved. Like feet on the basement stairs.

Jane's hands tightened around the mug. The basement door was right there, past the pantry. She'd avoided it since moving in. Her parents had mentioned something about "needing to get down there eventually" to check the furnace, but they'd never actually gone. Neither had Jane.

She remembered the foreshadowing her mother had carelessly dropped: *The previous owners didn't last long.*

Another thump. Closer this time. And now she could hear something else. A scraping sound. Nails on wood? Fingernails? A branch against the house?

"Stop it," Jane whispered to herself. "Stop it. Stop it."

She stood on shaky legs and walked to the basement door. The lock was a deadbolt, heavy and old. The bolt faced outward. Away from the basement. Which meant—

Which meant something had to lock it from the inside for this configuration to make sense.

Why would anyone lock something in?

Jane's hand moved toward the bolt before her brain could stop it. She was going to open it. She was going to look. Because Jane was a seeker of mysteries, a collector of secrets, a girl who opened doors that other people wisely left closed.

She turned the bolt. It moved easily, as if it had been waiting. Waiting for her.

The basement door swung inward, and cold air rushed up like a held breath finally released. Not the normal cold of an unheated basement. This was something else. Something that carried the smell of earth and old stone and something sweet and rotten, like fruit left in the sun too long.

Jane stepped onto the first wooden step.

The light switch was somewhere... there. The basement flooded with pale illumination from a single bulb. She could see concrete floor, boxes stacked against the far wall, the hulking shape of the furnace in the corner. Everything normal. Everything fine.

Except for the footprints.

Small, bare feet on the dusty concrete. Not hers. Too small and too numerous—they wandered in confused loops across the floor, as if whoever was walking them didn't know where to go. Didn't know how to escape. The prints went from the bottom of the stairs, across the floor, and then... they stopped abruptly near the far wall.

As if the person had simply vanished.

"No," Jane breathed. "No, no, no."

That's when she heard the voice. Not from the basement, but from above her, from upstairs. From down the second-floor hallway.

Her mother's voice, calling her name.

Or something that sounded like her mother's voice.

"Jane," it called, thin and distant. "Jane, come here. I need you."

But Jane had just come from upstairs. Her mother was asleep. Her mother's door was closed.

Jane backed up the basement stairs, her eyes never leaving those small, bare footprints. She reached the basement door and slammed it shut, twisting the deadbolt so hard the old mechanism groaned in protest.

The voice called again, closer now.

"Jane. Jane, where are you?"

It was coming from the hallway. Getting closer. Moving toward the kitchen.

Jane ran. Heart pounding. Couldn't breathe.

She burst through the kitchen door and skidded into the hallway, her socks sliding on the hardwood. The fog outside pressed against the windows like pale hands.

Standing at the top of the stairs, backlit by the darkness of the upper floor, was a figure in her mother's nightgown.

But it wasn't her mother.

It was a girl with long hair that dripped water onto the floor in a steady, patient rhythm. Drip. Drip. Drip. A girl whose face was too blurred to make out, as if she existed only partially in this world, as if someone had tried very hard to erase her.

The girl smiled.

"Finally," she said, and her voice sounded like wind through a well, like the last gasp of someone drowning, "you found me. Now I don't have to be alone."

And Jane realized, with a horror that froze her blood solid, that the girl was wearing a mirror where her face should be.

Chapter 7



* * *

CHAPTER 7: The Basement Door

The photograph fell out of Jane's backpack on Monday morning.

She didn't put it there. She was certain of that. The picture—the one with three children, one of them blurred beyond recognition—had been in the hallway. Hanging on the wall between the stairs and her parents' bedroom. She'd walked past it a hundred times since moving in, each time feeling that strange pinch in her chest, that sense of wrongness.

Now it was in her backpack. In her Social Studies folder. Waiting for her to find it.

Jane's hands shook as she picked it up. The photograph was cool to the touch, and slightly damp, as if it had been held by wet fingers. She turned it over. On the back, in handwriting that made her blood freeze, were three words:

Stop asking questions.

"No," Jane whispered. "No, no, no."

"Did you say something, honey?" Her mother called from downstairs.

Jane shoved the photograph into the deepest corner of her locker at school and didn't touch it again

until lunch. Even then, she only looked at it for two seconds. The blurred child—because now that she stared at it, she was absolutely certain it was a child, not just a photographic accident—seemed to be looking directly at the camera. Directly at her.

She threw it away in the cafeteria trash, buried under chocolate milk cartons and pizza crusts.

By the time she got home, it was on her pillow.

Jane's chest heaved. She spun around, checking the corners of her bedroom, the closet, under the bed. Nothing. No one. Just the soft hum of the house settling around her like skin. The walls seemed to breathe in rhythm with her own panicked gasps.

She grabbed the photograph and ran downstairs.

Her mother was in the kitchen, chopping vegetables for dinner. The knife came down in rhythmic, practiced strokes. Chop. Chop. Chop. The sound was so normal, so sane, that Jane almost turned around and left. Almost lied and said everything was fine.

But she didn't.

"Mom." Jane's voice came out smaller than she'd intended. "I need to tell you something."

Her mother looked up, a strand of brown hair falling across her face. She smiled, but it was the tired smile of someone with a thousand things on her mind. "Of course, sweetie. What is it?"

Jane opened her mouth. Closed it. The photograph suddenly felt like it weighed a thousand pounds. She held it out.

"I found this in the house. And now it keeps... it keeps moving. I put it in the trash at school, and it was on my bed when I got home."

Her mother set down the knife and took the picture. Jane watched her face change—just slightly, just enough. Her mother's jaw tightened. A small muscle worked at her temple.

"Where did you find this originally?" Her mother's voice had gone quiet in a way that was worse than anger.

"In the hallway. It's been hanging there since we moved in. Don't you see it every day?"

Her mother stared at the photograph for a long moment. Then she walked to the sink and ran it under hot water, as if that would somehow cleanse it. Steam rose around her hands. She rubbed the

photograph with her thumb, and the image seemed to blur even more, the already-faint child becoming nothing but a smear of gray.

"Mom, what's happening?"

"Nothing is happening," her mother said. But her hands were shaking. "Your father and I should have told you. We should have... but you seemed so happy this weekend. And we didn't want to frighten you."

Jane's stomach twisted. "Told me what?"

Her mother set the photograph down on the counter, still damp. She didn't look at Jane. "The previous owners left in the middle of the night. Just... left. They had a daughter. She was about your age."

"What do you mean, they left?"

"They didn't say goodbye to anyone. Didn't sell the house normally. The real estate agent said they were very anxious to leave Salem. To leave this house." Her mother finally turned to face her. In the afternoon light, she looked older than Jane had ever seen her. "Their daughter had an accident in the basement. A fall, they said. But..."

"But what?"

"But she disappeared before the ambulance came. They never found her body."

The kitchen tilted. Jane gripped the edge of the table. The house's gentle breathing suddenly felt like suffocation. She thought about the basement door—the one with the deadbolt on the outside. The one she'd been too afraid to approach since finding the journal.

"We didn't know about it when we bought the house," her mother continued. "The realtor didn't tell us. We only found out from the neighbors. I'm sorry, Jane. I should have told you. I was going to, but I didn't want to scare you, and then you seemed so interested in exploring, and I didn't want to..."

She trailed off. Jane recognized the lie in her mother's voice. Not a complete lie. A shaped one. A bent one. A lie designed to make everything seem fine when it absolutely wasn't.

"I need to go upstairs," Jane said.

"Jane, wait—"

But Jane was already moving. Up the stairs. Past the hallway where the portrait used to hang (it was gone now—or was it? The wall looked different, but she couldn't remember what it had looked like before). Up to the second-floor landing.

The closet panel was open.

Jane knew she hadn't left it open. She'd checked it compulsively all weekend—checking and closing, checking and closing, like a nervous tic. Now the wooden panel hung loose, and the space beyond was dark and impossibly deep, far deeper than it should have been.

She grabbed her phone and turned on the flashlight.

The beam cut into the darkness and illuminated something impossible. Behind the small hidden room where she'd found the journal, there was another door. A small door, child-sized, with old brass hinges and a lock shaped like a crow's head.

And on the floor in front of it, a key.

It was one of her keys. One from her collection. She was certain of it. The skeleton key with the ornate bow, the one she'd found in Mrs. Chen's junk shop last month, the one that had caught the light and made her think, **This one unlocks something important.**

She'd left that key in the decorative tin box on her desk.

Jane's phone fell from her trembling hand and clattered against the floorboards. The sound was very loud in the silence of the old house.

From somewhere below—from the basement, perhaps, or from the walls themselves—came a sound that made every nerve in Jane's body go rigid.

A child laughing.

Not a happy laugh. Not quite a laugh, really. More like the sound a laugh would make if it came from somewhere very far away, if it came from someone who'd forgotten how laughing worked but was trying to remember.

"Jane?" Her mother's voice was muffled, distant. "Jane, come downstairs, please. We need to talk about this."

But Jane couldn't move. She stared at the key. At the crow-headed lock. At the door that shouldn't exist and the sound that shouldn't be possible.

The laughing stopped.

In its place came something worse: the sound of small feet, wet feet, dragging slowly down the basement stairs.

And then a voice—thin and reedy and ancient—that whispered from somewhere so close to Jane's ear that she could feel the breath:

"You opened my journal. You read my words. Now you're the one who asks questions they shouldn't."

Jane spun around. The hallway was empty. The closet panel hung open like a mouth. The hidden room beyond was dark and waiting.

Her hand reached out on its own.

She didn't want to reach out. She didn't want to take the key. She didn't want to turn it in the lock and see what door it would open.

But she was going to anyway.

Because Jane was a people-pleaser who always did what was expected of her, even when what was expected came from something that wasn't a person at all.

Her fingers closed around the key, and it was ice-cold, and it burned.

Chapter 8



* * *

CHAPTER 8: The Child in the Basement

The basement door was open.

Jane stood at the top of the stairs, her hand frozen on the wooden banister. The door—the one with the deadbolt on the outside, the one that had always been closed—swung inward on creaking hinges. A breath of cold air rolled up from the darkness below, carrying the smell of earth and something else. Something like copper pennies left in water.

It was Tuesday afternoon. Mom was at the grocery store. Dad wouldn't be home for three hours. The house hummed around her, a sound like electricity, or like something breathing.

Jane's red hair fell across her face as she leaned forward. She tucked it behind her ear—a nervous habit that never quite worked. The strands fell right back down.

"Hello?" Her voice cracked. "Is someone there?"

Stupid question. Of course no one was there. The basement was a basement. It had a furnace and old boxes and spiderwebs that made her skin crawl. There was no one there. There couldn't be.

But the photograph was still in her backpack.

She'd checked twice. The picture with the three children—one blurred beyond all recognition—was definitely, absolutely in her backpack, folded inside her math homework. How it got there, Jane couldn't explain. And she definitely couldn't tell her parents about it. Not when they were already worried. Not when Dad had said yesterday, "This house just takes some getting used to." Not when Jane had promised—promised—that everything was fine.

Everything is fine, she'd told them.

The lie had felt heavy on her tongue, like she was swallowing stones.

Now the basement door was open. A thin line of darkness stretched from the top step down, down, down into a place she'd only visited once, holding her mother's hand, while Mom pointed out the circuit breaker and the water heater and acted like basements were perfectly normal places that normal families had.

Jane took a step backward.

The floorboards creaked beneath her socks. The sound seemed impossibly loud in the quiet house. Somewhere upstairs, a window rattled. Wind, probably. Just wind.

Another step back.

That's when she heard it.

A sound from the basement. Not loud. Barely a whisper—but unmistakably there. The sound of something small and wet, dragging across concrete. Back and forth. Back and forth.

Draaaaag. Draaaaag.

Jane's throat went dry.

She should run. Every nerve in her body was screaming at her to run, to find her phone, to call someone. Anyone. But the people-pleaser in her—the part that was always terrified of being a bother, of asking for help, of admitting that something was actually, genuinely wrong—that part whispered: *Maybe you imagined it. Maybe it's just the pipes.*

Jane descended the stairs.

Each step groaned under her weight. The basement was cold, so cold that her breath came out in small clouds. The furnace sat in the corner like a sleeping beast, all rust and shadows. Boxes were

stacked haphazardly against the far wall—the previous owners' things, Mom had said. We'll sort through them someday.

No they wouldn't. Jane knew that now.

The concrete floor was damp beneath her feet. Not just damp—wet. Shiny in the single bare bulb's weak light. And there, near the far corner, were wet footprints.

Small footprints. Child-sized. Leading from the far wall toward—

The dragging sound came again.

Draaaag.

Jane spun around. "Who's there?"

For a moment, nothing. Just the furnace's low hum and the sound of her own pulse thundering in her ears.

Then, from behind the stack of boxes, a figure moved.

It was a girl.

She was small, maybe seven or eight, with pale skin that seemed to glow in the dim light. Her dress was old-fashioned—long and gray, with buttons up the front. Her hair was dark and matted. And her face—

Her face was the face from the photograph. The blurred face. Except now it wasn't blurred. It was perfectly clear. Perfectly visible. And filled with an ancient, desperate sadness.

"You found my journal," the girl said. Her voice sounded like wind through a broken window. Like something trying very hard to sound human and almost succeeding.

Jane's legs felt weak. "I... yes. I did. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—"

"I needed someone to find it." The girl took a step forward. Her foot didn't quite touch the ground.

"I needed someone to know. To understand."

"Understand what?" The words tumbled out before Jane could stop them. She was doing it again—answering when she should have been running, asking questions when she should have been screaming for help. Making conversation with a ghost because somehow, somehow, that seemed less rude than screaming.

"That I didn't do the things they said I did." The girl's eyes were fixed on Jane's face, searching. "That I was just a child. That I didn't deserve..."

The girl's form flickered, like a candle flame in wind. For just a moment, Jane saw her differently—older, twisted, covered in something dark. Then she was small again. Pathetic. Alone.

"They locked me down here," the girl whispered. "My mother and father and the town. They said I was wicked. They said I had to be punished. They locked me down here and—"

"Stop," Jane said. She surprised herself. The word came out sharp, clear, the voice of someone who wasn't terrified. "Stop. You're trying to scare me. You've been trying to scare me since I moved in."

The girl's expression didn't change. "Yes."

At least she was honest about it. Jane appreciated that, in a horrible, awful way. "Why?"

"Because you're like me." The girl's form solidified slightly, becoming more real, more present. More **there**. "You tell lies. You pretend everything is fine when it isn't. You're so afraid of being alone that you'll say anything to keep people close. I can feel it in you. I've been watching you."

Jane's skin crawled. She thought of the girl in the mirror. The blurred face in the photograph. The journal that had appeared and disappeared.

She'd been watched. All along, she'd been watched.

"I'm going to leave now," Jane said. Her voice trembled. "I'm going to go upstairs and I'm going to tell my parents everything. About you. About this house. About—"

"No, you won't." The girl's smile was sad and knowing. "Because you're a liar, Jane. And liars don't tell the truth. They keep quiet. They pretend. They stay silent to avoid disappointing the people they love. And you'll stay silent too. Until it's too late."

The basement lights flickered.

In that moment of darkness—just a fraction of a second—Jane moved. Not toward the girl. Toward the stairs. Her feet pounded against the concrete, her heart a mad drum in her chest. The basement suddenly felt vast and impossible, the stairs impossibly far away.

I ran. Heart pounding. Couldn't breathe.

She hit the staircase and took the steps three at a time, one hand on the banister, the other reaching

for the door at the top. Behind her, she could hear the dragging sound again. Getting closer. Getting *faster*.

Draaaaag. Draaaaag. *DRAAAAAG.*

Jane grabbed the doorframe and pulled herself through, slamming the door shut behind her. She threw the deadbolt—the one on the outside, the one that locked something in rather than out—and pressed her back against the wood.

Her breathing was ragged. Her hands shook.

The door was silent now. Still. As if nothing had happened at all.

Everything is fine, Jane's mind whispered. Everything is fine. Just go upstairs. Act normal. Don't tell anyone. Don't bother anyone with this.

She was halfway to the kitchen when she heard her mother's car pull into the driveway.

Relief flooded through her. Mom was home. Everything would be okay. She'd tell her mother everything right now, the whole impossible story, and Mom would—

Jane stopped.

In the hallway mirror, her reflection stared back at her. Red hair, freckles, pale face twisted with fear.

But there was something wrong with the reflection.

It wasn't quite moving at the same time she was.

And behind her reflection, in the mirror's depths, Jane could see another figure. Standing just behind her in the hallway. A girl in an old gray dress.

Except when Jane spun around, the hallway was empty.

"Jane? I'm home!" her mother called from the front door.

Jane didn't answer. She was staring at the basement door.

It was open again.

And this time, the dragging sound wasn't coming from the basement.

It was coming from upstairs.

Chapter 9



* * *

CHAPTER 9: The Third Child

The basement stairs descended into shadow.

Jane's foot found the first step. Then the second. Her hand slid along the banister, and splinters caught beneath her fingernails. The air grew colder with each step down, and she could smell it now—that earthy rot, mixed with something sweeter. Something like flowers left too long in a vase.

The flashlight beam from her phone carved a tunnel through the dark.

At the bottom of the stairs, the basement opened up into a space that seemed larger than the house above it. That wasn't possible. Jane knew that. But the beam of her flashlight disappeared into shadow before hitting a far wall. The floor was concrete, cracked and stained with water marks that looked almost like handprints.

Everything is fine now, Jane whispered to herself. The words felt like a lie the moment they left her mouth.

The photograph. That's what she'd come down for. It had to be here somewhere. The picture of the three children—the one with the blurred face—had fallen from her backpack this morning. It had been on the hallway wall upstairs. She was sure of it. Wasn't she?

Her mind felt slippery lately.

She turned slowly, her flashlight beam sliding across the basement like a searchlight. Boxes stacked in corners. Old shelves lined with mason jars. A wooden table with something piled on top of it—clothes, maybe, or rags. And then she saw them.

The photographs.

They covered one entire wall, pinned or taped or glued in some places, scattered and overlapping in others. Dozens of them. Hundreds, maybe. Jane moved closer, and the temperature dropped another ten degrees. Her breath came out in small white clouds.

Every photograph was the same.

Three children. Always three. But in each one, a different child was blurred beyond recognition. In the first photo, the one on the left was erased into shadow. In the second, the child in the middle became a smear of moving darkness. In the third, the one on the right was nothing but a blur of hands and hair and absence.

Jane's hands started shaking.

"No," she whispered. "No, no, no."

She reached for the photographs, but her fingers stopped inches away from the wall. They were warm. The wall itself was warm, which made no sense. The basement was freezing. Frost had gathered in the corners. The air tasted like pennies and old metal.

But the wall where the photographs lived was warm like skin.

"Jane?"

She spun around. Her mother stood at the top of the basement stairs, silhouetted against the hallway light. For just a moment—just a fraction of a second—her mother's face was blurred, unfocused, as if Jane was looking at her through rippling water.

Then it sharpened. Her mother's concerned expression snapped into place like a photograph developing.

"Honey, what are you doing down here? You know this room is off-limits."

Jane opened her mouth. The lie came automatically—it always did. "I was looking for my roller

skates. I thought—"

"They're in the garage," her mother said. But she wasn't coming down the stairs. She was blocking the exit, standing very still in the doorway. "Come up. Now."

Jane climbed the stairs. Her legs felt heavy, as if the basement didn't want to let her go. With each step, the temperature rose slightly, and by the time she reached her mother, she was shivering so badly her teeth chattered.

"You're freezing," her mother said. She didn't sound like herself. Her voice was flat, rehearsed, like she was reading dialogue from a script. "Come on. Let's get you warm."

Jane followed her mother down the hallway. Behind her, she heard the basement door swing shut with a soft click. The deadbolt wouldn't turn though. She could hear the mechanism resist, grinding and refusing to lock.

In the kitchen, her mother made hot chocolate. The milk steamed in the pot. Marshmallows floated on the surface of the mug. Everything was normal. Everything was fine.

But Jane noticed her mother's hands shaking as she handed over the cup.

"Mom," Jane said carefully, "have we always lived here?"

Her mother set down her own mug. The ceramic made a soft clink against the table. "What do you mean, honey?"

"I mean... did we move here? Or have we lived here forever?"

For a long moment, her mother didn't answer. She looked past Jane, her eyes fixed on something Jane couldn't see. When she finally spoke, her voice was small. Like a child's voice.

"The previous owners didn't stay long," she said quietly. "The realtor told us they left very suddenly. They didn't even take all their things."

"Why did they leave?" Jane leaned forward.

"They said..." her mother paused, her fingers tightening around her mug. "They said someone was always missing. One of their three children. Sometimes it was the oldest. Sometimes the middle one. Sometimes the youngest. But never all three at the same time. They said they'd wake up to a blurred photograph where there had been a clear one. They said their child's face would start to

fade, and they couldn't remember what they looked like anymore."

Jane felt the hot chocolate turn to ice in her stomach.

"They said," her mother continued, still staring at nothing, "that the house was taking them one at a time. That it needed three to be complete. That it had been waiting for a family with three—"

She stopped abruptly. Her eyes snapped back into focus, and she looked at Jane with such sudden concern that it felt like a mask slipping off and on again too quickly.

"I don't know why I said that," her mother said. "That's not true. That's nonsense."

But her hands were still shaking.

Jane stood up. "I'm going to my room."

She climbed the stairs. Behind her, she heard her mother call out: "Jane? Come back. Let's talk about—" But Jane was already on the second floor, moving down the hallway toward her bedroom.

The portrait was still there. The one with three children.

But now, when Jane looked at it, she could see that there were four frames hanging on the wall. She was certain of it. There had only been one frame yesterday. Now there were four. In three of them, children stared out at her. Different children in each one. Serious expressions. Old-fashioned clothes.

But the fourth frame...

The fourth frame was empty. Just a glass rectangle showing the wall behind it.

Jane's reflection wavered in the glass.

She reached out to touch the frame, and that's when she felt it—a hand grabbing her wrist from behind. Small. Cold. Slightly damp, like it had just climbed out of water.

Jane jerked away and spun around.

The hallway was empty.

But her wrist bore the red marks of small fingers, and when she looked back at the empty frame, her reflection was no longer visible.

In its place, a blurred shape. Moving. Reaching. Trying to press through the glass.

And Jane suddenly understood—with perfect, horrible clarity—that the house wasn't trying to take her.

It was trying to replace her.

The blurred thing in the frame pressed harder against the glass, and the frame began to crack.

Jane ran to her bedroom and slammed the door shut. She leaned against it, breathing hard, listening to the sound of something moving in the hallway. Something that dragged itself across the carpet with wet, slithering sounds.

From downstairs, she heard her mother call out in that same flat, rehearsed voice:

"Jane? Dinner's ready. Come meet the new children. We adopted them today. Isn't that wonderful? You always wanted siblings."

Jane's hand was still on the doorknob.

She could feel it turning.

Slowly.

From the outside.

Chapter 10



* * *

CHAPTER 10: The Photographs Never Lie

The basement smelled like Jane's grandmother's attic—old, dusty, full of things that had been forgotten on purpose. But underneath that, something else. Something that made her throat close.

She'd made it down six steps before she heard her mother calling from upstairs.

"Jane! Breakfast!"

Jane froze. Her hand gripped the banister so hard her knuckles went white. The basement below remained dark. Patient. Waiting.

She climbed back up. She didn't want to, but she did. The people-pleaser in her always won. Don't worry your mother. Don't make a fuss. Just come eat your eggs and pretend everything is normal.

By noon on Tuesday, Jane had almost convinced herself the basement door had been open because of the draft. Houses settled. Doors shifted. Deadbolts could loosen. There was a logical explanation for everything if you tried hard enough. If you lied hard enough.

Her mother was humming in the kitchen, chopping vegetables for soup. Through the window above the sink, the fog rolled across Salem in thick, wet blankets. It had been rolling in every afternoon since they'd moved in. Never quite lifting. Never quite smothering everything.

"Isn't this nice?" her mother asked, not looking away from the carrots. "Just us. A quiet Tuesday."

"Really nice," Jane said, even though her stomach felt like a stone.

"I've been thinking we should invite the Hendersons over for dinner. Their daughter is your age, isn't she?"

"Yeah. Sarah." Jane picked at a loose thread on her sleeve. Sarah Blackwood had become Sarah Henderson after she'd married. She lived three streets over now. Jane knew because she'd looked it up.

"Maybe this weekend?"

"Sure." Another lie. Another promise Jane wasn't sure she could keep. Not if things got worse. Not if—

The photograph on the wall behind her mother suddenly felt very heavy.

Jane turned. It was the one that had fallen from between the stairs and her parents' bedroom. The one with three children. The one where the middle child looked like someone had smeared their face with a thumb while the photograph was developing. Blurred. Erased. Gone.

But something was different.

Jane stood up slowly. The wooden chair scraped against the tile floor. The sound was too loud. Too real in the quiet kitchen.

"What?" her mother asked, glancing over her shoulder.

"Nothing. I just—where did we get that picture?"

Her mother turned fully now, following Jane's gaze to the wall. The knife hung loose in her hand, dripping carrot juice like blood.

"It was in the house. With the other things. When we moved in." She said it slowly, like she was remembering something she'd tried not to think about. "I meant to ask the realtor about it. I forgot."

"Oh."

Jane stared at the photograph. Three children in old-fashioned clothes stood in front of the very house they were in now. The two on the edges were clear—a boy and a girl, maybe fourteen and twelve. But the middle child...

That blurred face had moved.

Jane was certain of it. The blur was in a slightly different position than she remembered. Closer to the left. Or was it the right? She blinked hard, but the image wouldn't settle. The harder she looked, the more the smudged features seemed to shift, like they were swimming beneath the surface of the photograph.

"Jane, you're pale. Are you feeling okay?"

Her mother had set down the knife and crossed the kitchen. Her hand felt warm against Jane's forehead—so warm it seemed wrong in the cold house.

"I'm fine," Jane whispered.

"You keep saying that."

Her mother's eyes were concerned. Worried. The kind of eyes that made Jane want to confess everything—the journal, the basement, the way the house had started to feel less like a building and more like something breathing. Something with intentions.

But Jane couldn't do that. Couldn't worry her mother. Couldn't be the reason they had to move again. Her father had already changed jobs twice because of her. Because of her lies. Because she kept disappearing into her own head, and people couldn't deal with that.

"I'm just tired," Jane said. "From school."

She saw her mother want to push. Want to ask more questions. But then her mother smiled—that tired, distracted smile—and returned to her carrots.

"Get some rest today. Maybe you'll feel better by dinner."

Jane nodded and climbed the stairs to her room. The photograph on the wall watched her go. She could feel it watching. Feel that blurred face tracking her movement like eyes that had finally learned to see.

In her room, Jane sat on the edge of her bed and pulled out the small wooden box where she kept her found keys. Thirty-seven of them now, each one smooth and cold and full of promise. Keys from estate sales and antique shops, keys that had opened doors to places she'd never know. Keys that belonged to mysteries now locked away forever.

She needed one to fit that basement door. Just to lock it from the outside, the way it had been before. Just to keep whatever was down there in the dark where it belonged.

Her collection of keys felt heavier in her hands than it had before.

That night, Jane couldn't sleep. The house creaked and settled around her. Pipes knocked in the walls. Wind pressed against the windows. And underneath it all—a sound like scratching. Like something with fingernails trying to get out of the walls.

She got up at 2 a.m. and walked to the hallway.

The photograph was no longer on the wall.

Jane's breath came in short, sharp gasps. She ran her hand over the spot where it had hung. The wallpaper was slightly lighter there, outlined in dust. It had definitely been there. She'd seen it this afternoon.

She turned in a slow circle. The hallway was empty except for shadows and the faint glow of fog pressing against the windows like something trying to get in.

The photograph was on the stairs.

Sitting on the third step down—the same step where it had fallen days ago. But this time, it was facedown. Jane could see the cardboard backing, yellowed and fragile. Could see the water stains in the corners like it had been left in the rain for a very long time.

Her bare feet were cold against the hardwood as she walked toward it.

She didn't want to flip it over. Every instinct screamed at her not to. But Jane had spent her entire life doing what other people wanted. What other people needed. What other people expected. The people-pleaser in her had finally gotten so used to ignoring her own instincts that the warning bells were barely a whisper.

She picked up the photograph.

The cardboard was damp. Cold. It smelled like basement and earth.

Jane turned it over.

The three children were still there. The boy. The girl. And between them—the blurred middle child had come into focus. Not completely. Just enough.

It was a girl. Jane's age. Her red hair hung in braids down her back. Her eyes were dark and sad and furious all at once. And her mouth—

Her mouth was open. Screaming.

Jane's scream came first. Loud. Sharp. The sound of a girl who had finally, finally let herself feel what she'd been avoiding.

Her mother's feet pounded on the stairs from above. Her father's voice called out. The house erupted into noise and light and the terrified sounds of people who had no idea what lived in the shadows with them.

But Jane was already moving. Already running down the stairs. Already heading for the basement door that stood open in the darkness, just waiting.

Because she understood now. The blurred child. The journal. The photograph that moved on the wall. The deadbolt on the outside of the basement door, suggesting something had been locked away instead of locked out.

She understood, and that understanding left her with only one terrible choice.

She had to go down into the dark. Had to find out what the girl in the photograph wanted. Had to know what it meant that the child's face was finally, finally clear.

Because in the photograph, behind the screaming girl, behind the boy and the girl in their old-fashioned clothes—

Jane was standing there too. She was standing there wearing clothes she'd never owned, from a time she'd never lived. She was standing there in a photograph taken more than a hundred years ago.

And she was smiling.

Chapter 11



* * *

CHAPTER 11: The Thing with Three Faces

The basement stairs creaked under Jane's weight, each step a small betrayal. She'd made it to the tenth step when her mother's voice came again from upstairs, sharper this time.

"Jane! Now!"

Jane's hand tightened on the banister. The wood was so cold it burned. She could turn around. Go back to the kitchen. Eat cereal and pretend everything was normal, the way she always did. The way she was so good at.

But the basement door was open. That had never happened before.

She climbed back up, each step slower than the last. The basement light—the single bare bulb that dangled from the ceiling like something dead—went dark behind her. She hadn't turned it off. She was sure of that.

Her mother was waiting in the kitchen with that expression. The one that meant Jane had done something wrong without even knowing what it was yet.

"You're pale," her mother said. It wasn't a question. "Did you sleep okay?"

Jane nodded. Then shook her head. Then nodded again, trying to pick the lie that would cause the least disappointment.

"I slept fine," Jane said finally. "I just... I was looking for something in the basement."

The lie came out automatic, smooth as oil. What she meant was: *I heard something in the basement and I was terrified, and I'm still terrified, and I need help but I don't know how to ask without worrying you.*

Her mother's expression softened. "Oh, honey. Did you lose something? I could help you look."

Jane's stomach twisted. There was her escape route—tell the truth, ask for help, have her mother come downstairs and see the basement was normal, probably see nothing at all, and then everything would be fine.

"No," Jane said quickly. "I found it. Whatever it was. It's fine."

Her mother smiled. It was her real smile, the one that meant she was happy. Jane had gotten good at making that smile appear. Which meant she was very good at lying.

She sat down and pushed cereal around her bowl.

By Monday afternoon, Jane couldn't take it anymore.

She'd spent the weekend being helpful—too helpful. She'd cleaned her room, organized the hallway closet, folded laundry without being asked. Anything to keep moving, to keep her hands busy, to avoid thinking about the basement door or the journal or the blurred photograph that had disappeared from the hallway.

(When had it disappeared? Jane realized she couldn't remember. It had been there. Then it wasn't. Just like the journal.)

That's when she saw the girl again.

Not in the mirror this time. In the hallway outside her bedroom. Just for a second—a flicker of red hair, a pale dress that might have been from any century or none at all. And then she was gone.

Jane's heart stopped. She stood very still, listening. The house made no sound. The house was holding its breath.

She found herself walking toward the hallway closet—the one with the loose panel, the one that led to that small room full of cold air and old handwriting. Her feet moved without asking permission from her brain.

The panel came loose easily now. Too easily. As if it had been opened many times recently.

Inside, the small room was empty except for dust. No journal. No handwriting pressed into the walls. Nothing. But the cold air was still there, coming from somewhere Jane couldn't see, carrying a smell like copper and flowers.

And there was something new.

A key. Brass, tarnished green with age, lying on the wooden floor as if someone had placed it there specifically for Jane to find. As if they'd known she collected keys. As if they knew her.

Jane picked it up. It was warm.

The key shouldn't have been warm. Nothing down here was warm. But it was—almost hot—burning gently against her palm. She closed her fingers around it and felt something else too. A sensation like being watched. Not the comfortable feeling of someone familiar keeping an eye on you. The other kind. The hungry kind.

"Jane?" Her mother's voice came from downstairs. "Can you come help with dinner?"

Jane's eyes snapped open. She hadn't realized she'd closed them.

The key was still in her hand, still warm. She shoved it into her pocket and scrambled out of the closet, pulling the panel closed. Her hands were shaking. She sat on the edge of her bed and took three deep breaths, like her guidance counselor had taught her.

Everything is fine, she told herself.

But it wasn't.

Dinner tasted like nothing.

Jane's father talked about work. Her mother talked about the garden she wanted to plant in spring. Neither of them seemed to notice that Jane wasn't really there. She was still in the small cold room with the warm key burning a hole through her pocket.

"You've been quiet all day," her mother observed, reaching for the salad bowl.

Jane almost told her. Almost opened her mouth and let everything spill out—the journal, the girl, the key, the basement door standing open. Almost.

"Just tired," she said instead. "School is hard this year."

Her father nodded sympathetically. Her mother smiled. Jane had successfully diverted the conversation away from herself, which meant she was a liar and a coward and also her parents would never have to worry about her, which was exactly what she wanted, which was exactly the problem.

After dinner, she excused herself to do homework and went straight to her bedroom, locked the door, and pulled out the key.

It was shaped wrong. Too ornate, too old, with symbols stamped on the handle that Jane couldn't identify. Not a house key. Something older. Something that opened something that hadn't been opened in a very long time.

The basement door.

The deadbolt on the outside.

The door that locked something in rather than locked something out.

Jane's mouth went dry.

She pulled out her phone and typed into the search bar: *Salem witchcraft trials children.*

The results appeared instantly. Photos of old documents. Paintings of stern-faced judges. Names.

And then: *Mercy Hawthorne, age 11, accused of witchcraft in 1692. Trial records incomplete. Child disappeared before sentencing. Body never found.*

Jane stared at the name.

Mercy.

The journal had never given a name, but the handwriting—childish and determined—suddenly felt like it belonged to someone called Mercy. Someone who'd been eleven years old. Someone in this house.

She heard something then. A sound from the walls, very faint. Like fingernails scratching. Or like someone trying to tap out a message from very far away.

Or like someone scratching from inside.

Jane didn't sleep that night.

She lay in bed with the key under her pillow, feeling it pulse like something alive. The scratching sound came and went—sometimes from the walls, sometimes from inside the closet, sometimes from directly underneath her bed, which was impossible because her room was on the second floor and the basement was three stories down.

Except maybe it wasn't.

Maybe the house had other spaces. Other rooms. Other doors.

Around 2 AM, Jane heard her parents' door close—they were going to sleep. She waited until the house was completely silent. Then she got out of bed, still in her pajamas, and made her way downstairs in the dark.

The key wanted to lead her somewhere. She could feel it like a compass in her pocket, pulling her forward. Down the hallway. Past the photograph of the three children—still hanging on the wall, still with one face blurred beyond recognition. Down the stairs to the basement door.

The deadbolt was facing the wrong direction. Facing outward. Toward whoever was trying to keep something in.

Jane's hand moved toward the lock.

"Don't go down there."

Jane spun around. Standing at the top of the basement stairs was a girl with red hair, wearing a pale dress that seemed to glow in the darkness. Her face was clearer than before, but still not quite right—like a photograph slightly out of focus.

Mercy.

"I have to," Jane whispered. "You need—"

"I need you to run," Mercy said. Her voice sounded like wind through an empty house. "I've been

trying to show you. The journal. The photographs. The key. I've been trying to warn you."

"Warn me about what?" Jane asked.

"About her," Mercy said, and she pointed past Jane, toward the basement door.

Jane turned around.

The door was opening.

Not on its own. Something was pushing from the other side. Something that took up a lot of space. Something that smelled like rot and flowers and copper.

Something that was very, very old and very, very hungry.

And Jane realized, with a clarity that made her knees weak, that she had two choices:

She could run upstairs, wake her parents, tell them everything—all the lies she'd been telling, all the things she'd hidden, all the impossibilities—and risk them not believing her, sending her to a doctor, making her feel even more alone.

Or she could go down.

Into the basement.

With the key.

And confront whatever lived beneath the house on Salem Street.

There was no third option. There was no easy way out. The girl in the pale dress was fading now, becoming transparent, returning to whatever version of dead she occupied.

Jane could feel it—the moment of choice, the instant when everything committed to one outcome or the other.

She looked at Mercy.

Mercy nodded very slightly.

Jane's trembling fingers found the deadbolt.

And turned.

Chapter 12



* * *

CHAPTER 12: The Third Face

The basement air hit Jane like a hand pressed against her chest.

She stood on the tenth step, frozen between her mother's voice from above and the shadow pooling below. The cold was so intense it made her teeth ache. Her breath came in small white clouds that dissipated into the darkness like ghosts.

"Jane! I'm not asking twice!"

Her mother's tone had that edge it got when Jane made her disappointed. Jane hated that edge. It was worse than yelling. She took another step down.

The basement revealed itself gradually as her eyes adjusted. Old wooden support beams crossed the ceiling like the ribs of something dead. Cardboard boxes were stacked against one wall, labeled in faded marker: *CHRISTMAS* and *BOOKS* and *JANE'S THINGS*—her own handwriting from the move, already looking like it belonged to someone else. But it was what hung on the far wall that made her breath catch.

A mirror.

Not a small mirror. This one was enormous, ornate, with a frame of dark wood carved into twisted

shapes that looked almost like faces if you weren't careful. Jane had never seen it before. She was certain of that. Completely certain.

A reflection moved in the glass.

Not her reflection. She hadn't moved. The figure in the mirror was small—child-sized—and wore something old-fashioned, a long dress from another century. The child's face was turned away, but the posture was familiar in a way that made Jane's skin crawl. Like watching someone imitate you without knowing they're doing it.

"Jane! Where are you?"

Her mother's voice came from directly above now, at the top of the basement stairs. The basement door was still open behind Jane. She could see the kitchen light spilling onto the linoleum floor above.

"I'm coming!" Jane called back, the lie automatic. *Everything is fine. I'm just being silly. There's nothing down here.*

But she didn't move up the stairs.

Instead, she descended three more steps. The temperature dropped with each one. Her fingernails—already bitten short from nervousness—turned pale blue. The mirror at the bottom of the basement seemed to pull her toward it, and Jane understood with a clarity that bypassed reason: she had to know who that was. Had to know *why* it wore that dress, why it moved when Jane didn't.

The basement floor was concrete, cold and gritty beneath her socks. She'd kicked off her shoes somewhere between the tenth step and the bottom. She didn't remember doing it.

The mirror grew larger as she approached. She could see more of it now. There were three figures reflected in the glass instead of one.

Three children in old-fashioned clothing stood in a circle, facing inward. None of them were moving. None of them were her. But all three of them had red hair.

Jane's hand rose to her own red hair without her permission. Her fingers felt numb. Behind her, the basement stairs seemed to recede into impossible distance. The light from above was now the size of a postage stamp.

"Who are you?" Jane whispered.

The center figure in the mirror turned its head slowly.

She recognized the face immediately. It was the blurred one. The third child from the photograph, the one that had been deliberately obscured, as if someone had tried to erase her from history. But now Jane could see her clearly. Cheekbones sharp as glass. Eyes too old for the young face. And a smile that didn't reach those eyes.

"We've been waiting for you," the figure said in a voice like wind through dead leaves. "Mother said you would come. She said you had the right blood."

Jane tried to back away, but her feet wouldn't obey. The cold wasn't coming from the air anymore—it was coming from inside her, spreading from her chest outward like frost on a windowpane. Her breath came faster. Shallower.

"That's not—I'm not—" Jane stammered, and hated herself for lying even now, hated that she was trying to be nice about this, trying not to make the girl in the mirror *upset*. "I don't know what you want."

"The journal," said one of the other figures. This one's voice was younger, almost gentle. "You read the journal. Mother's journal. You know what they did to us."

The third child didn't speak. It only smiled that terrible, wrong smile.

Jane's mind raced backward through the chapters of her own discovery. The loose panel in the closet. The brittle pages. *Mother says I'm wicked.* The handwriting growing more frantic toward the end, pressing so hard the pen had torn through the paper. And then the journal disappearing. Gone. Like it had never existed.

Except it had to have existed. Someone had to have *wanted* Jane to find it.

"The previous owners," Jane heard herself say, her voice small and strange. "They didn't last long. Mom said that. She changed the subject when I asked—"

"They saw us," the first figure interrupted. "They weren't like you. They were afraid, so they left. But you—" The blurred face tilted closer to the mirror's surface. She could see the individual hairs now, could see the pores on her transparent skin. "You're curious. You read our story. You wanted to know us."

Jane's hands were shaking. She looked down at them and saw they were transparent too. Not gone. Just... less solid. Like she was fading.

"No," she whispered. "No, I didn't want to know you. I wanted to help. I wanted to tell someone what happened. That's all."

"And who would believe you?" asked the second figure. "Your mother? She doesn't listen when you tell her the truth. Your father? He's never home. Your friends?" The figure's smile widened. "You don't have any friends. You push them away with your lies."

That was the worst part. It was true.

Jane's legs buckled. She sat down hard on the basement floor, and when she looked at her hands, they were only slightly more transparent than they'd been a moment ago. When she looked up at the mirror, she was in it now. The three other children had pulled back, and Jane stood in the circle with them, wearing a dress from 1692, her red hair loose around her shoulders.

The realization came slowly, like cold seeping under a door.

They weren't trying to trap her. They weren't trying to pull her down into the dark.

They were trying to show her the truth.

Jane had been in the house for weeks now. She'd moved every box. She'd walked every hallway. She'd slept in the bedroom above. She'd felt the house breathing around her, alive with something that had been waiting for someone like her—someone lonely, someone desperate to solve the mystery, someone willing to uncover the secrets without asking for help.

Someone whose blood called to blood.

The journal had found her deliberately. Not the other way around.

"What do you want from me?" Jane asked, and she was crying now, tears running silent and cold down her cheeks.

The first figure—the one who had been blurred—stepped forward and placed her pale hand against the inside of the mirror's surface. The glass didn't ripple. It didn't break. It just pressed inward, like the membrane between one world and another was thinner than it should be.

"We want to stop being alone," she said simply. "We've been alone for so long. Mother kept us

locked in the basement. She told the townspeople we didn't exist. She told them she only had one child. The boy. He lived. He left. He lied to everyone about what happened here." The figure's eyes fixed on Jane's. "He said there were no daughters. He said Mother never—"

The mirror cracked.

Not a long fracture. Just a hairline split, right down the center of the glass. And through that crack came the smell of something burning.

Jane scrambled backward, her transparent hands slipping on the concrete. The basement was shaking now—not violently, but with a terrible, purposeful tremor. The cardboard boxes slid across the floor. The light from above flickered.

And Jane understood, in that moment, the most important truth of all.

She understood why the deadbolt had been on the outside of the basement door. Not to keep something in. To keep someone **in**—three someones—while a lie was told to Salem. While history was rewritten. While a boy who had survived took his inheritance and his silence and his lies and left his sisters behind.

The houses that came after. The families. The previous owners who saw the three in the mirror and ran. They had been sane. They had been right to leave.

But Jane had read the journal. Jane had **wanted** to know. Jane, with her red hair and her fear of being alone, had opened a door that should have stayed closed.

The mirror cracked again. Bigger this time. Spider-web fractures spreading across the surface like something trying to break **out**.

"We're sorry," the second figure whispered. "We don't want to hurt you. We just don't want to be alone anymore."

Jane ran.

Heart pounding. Legs pumping. She couldn't feel them anymore—they were transparent up to her knees. She hit the basement stairs and pulled herself up using the banister, splinters driving deep into her palms, but she didn't feel pain, only cold, so much cold. The basement stretched below her, impossibly long now, and the mirror at the bottom was cracking apart entirely, and through the fractures came light—not the warm light of the kitchen above, but an old light, a colonial light, the

light of 1692, and there were voices underneath it, so many voices, townspeople accusing, mothers screaming, children crying—

Jane burst through the basement door and slammed it shut.

She threw the deadbolt. The lock engaged with a sound like a coffin closing.

For three seconds there was silence. For three beautiful, impossible seconds, the house held its breath.

Then her mother screamed.

It came from the kitchen—a sound of pure, animal terror that Jane had never heard before, that she hadn't known her mother was capable of making. Jane ran toward it, her feet still solid but getting lighter, getting less real with every step.

Her mother stood at the kitchen window, staring out at the front yard.

Every person on Salem Street—every neighbor, every passerby, every soul who had passed within a hundred yards of the house—was walking toward Essex Street. Walking in perfect, synchronized unison. Walking toward the house. Walking toward the basement door.

Their eyes were all the same color. Red, like Jane's hair.

"Mom—" Jane tried to speak, but her voice was wrong now, layered, like three voices speaking at once.

Her mother turned. Looked at Jane. And in that moment of recognition, Jane saw the truth reflected in her mother's eyes:

Jane was still solid. Still real. Her mother could still see her as a living girl.

But she was becoming transparent.

And behind Jane, casting no shadow, stood three children in old-fashioned dresses.

They were smiling.

Outside, the sound of footsteps on the walkway grew louder. The knocking on the door began—gentle, patient, inevitable—and Jane understood that this was how it worked. This was how the house fed. It found the lonely, the curious, the desperate ones. The ones who read the journals. The ones who wanted to solve the mystery instead of asking for help.

The ones just like her.

The deadbolt on the basement door—the one on the *outside*—began to rattle.

On the hallway wall, the photograph that had fallen from Jane's backpack began to change. The third face, the blurred one, was becoming clear at last.

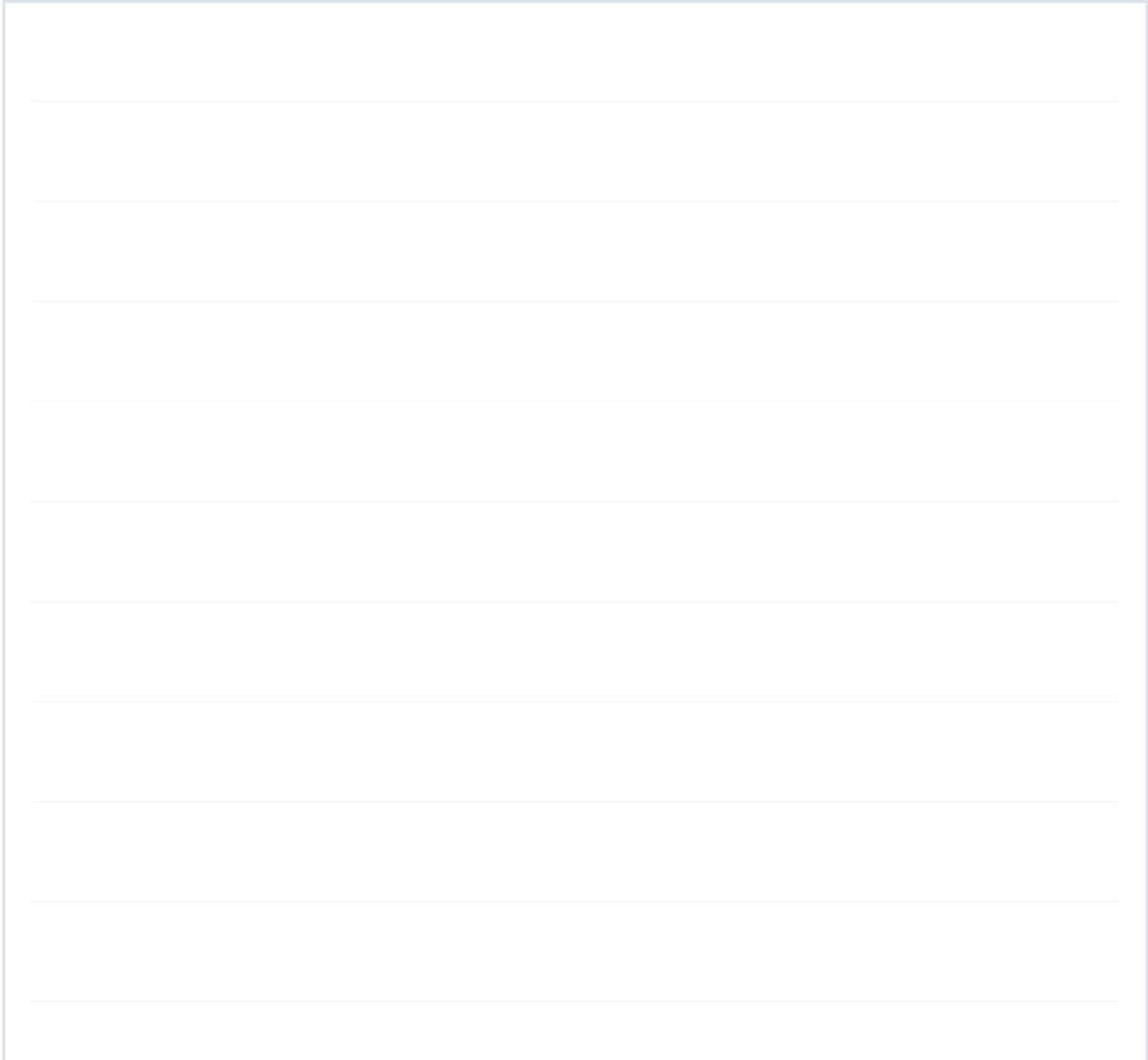
It was Jane's face.

She had always been the third child.

She just hadn't known it yet.

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What did Jane see? Draw the scariest monster you can imagine!

A large rectangular box with a thin blue border, containing ten horizontal light blue lines for drawing. The box is intended for the student to draw their own monster.

My monster's name: _____

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Find these spooky words in the story and write what you think they mean:

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The Witch House of Salem Street

by Jane Smith

When Jane moves into a historic mansion on Salem's oldest street, she discovers a hidden room—and a girl who died there two hundred years ago. But the ghost isn't asking for help; it's asking Jane to make a choice. Now Jane must uncover the truth about the haunted house before the line between the living and the dead disappears forever.