

Chapter One

NOT READY



Besides, there is no encouragement for ghosts in most of our villages . . .

—“The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” by Washington Irving”

I'm not ready to go back. “Can I just stay here forever?” I leaned my head against the seat of Aunt Marjorie’s car. “I don’t eat very much, and really, who needs to graduate from high school?”

Aunt Marjorie laughed. “*You* need to graduate, for one thing. And don’t you miss home? Your parents? Friends?”

I looked out the window. I *did* miss Sleepy Hollow. But not much else. I missed my best friend, but Kristen wasn’t there anymore. Only her grave was. “I think farm living is the life for me. Mom and Dad can come visit, and I’ll just stay here. There’s a lot I still need to learn about flying your plane.”

Her brown eyes sparkled. “We should take her out again

tomorrow. We've only got a couple of weeks left until you *do* have to go home."

"Aunt Marjorie, that's what I'm trying *not* to think about," I groaned. "Help me out here."

"Okay, okay," she said. "You don't think about how *not* ready you are to go back home, and I won't mention how many chances we have left to take the plane up together. Deal?"

"Deal."

"So, how was the visit with Dr. Pendleton this morning?"

"It was good. Really good." A big red barn came into view. We were almost back to Aunt Marjorie's house. She turned onto a rutted road, and we bumped our way down the grassy lane. "He thinks I've made a lot of progress, and I agree."

"Will you be seeing any doctors when you return home?"

"I don't think so. I feel like I've finally gotten a handle on . . . things." *Well, as much of a handle as you can have on thinking you were in love with a dead boy, and that you'd had afternoon tea with Katrina Van Tassel and the Headless Horseman from "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow."* "I feel like I can deal with it all and put it in its place."

We pulled up to the old farmhouse with its faded black shutters, and Aunt Marjorie parked the car under a metal carport right next to the front door. "And what place would that be?"

I unbuckled my seat belt and shrugged at her question before getting out. Aunt Marjorie still didn't know the whole story—just the parts about how I needed time away from Sleepy Hollow and professional help because I couldn't deal with Kristen's death. Which was technically, sort of, true. Everything that *had* happened to me all started on the day of Kristen's funeral.

“Just . . . in their place,” I said. “Head grasping facts, heart dealing with emotions. Death is a natural part of life, and I don't have to feel guilty about living because Kristen isn't here to share it anymore.” I was spouting psychobabble I'd lifted almost word for word from Dr. Pendleton, but it sounded good.

And sometimes I could almost convince myself that it was true.

Aunt Marjorie nodded and held the screen door open for me as I followed her into the house. “He sounds like a smart fella. I think I'd like him.”

“I think you would too, Aunt Marj. Call me down for dinner?” She agreed, and I headed up to my room. It was formerly part of the attic, a section that had been converted and walled off into a tiny reading nook. I'd begged Aunt Marjorie to let me have it the instant I'd seen it. She'd wanted to give me a larger, “more comfortable” guest room downstairs, but I told her this

room was perfect. It had a window seat, like my room at home, and a round, leaded-glass window with a view that stretched across the entire farm.

It was absolute heaven to curl up and read there while warm sun slanted in on my shoulders, making me feel like a fat, lazy cat. Cats don't have any worries.

I threw my messenger bag down onto the neatly made bed and crossed over to the lone bookcase that stood directly across from the window, propped up next to a dormer arch. Perusing the wooden shelves like I'd done at least a dozen times over the last three months, I pulled down *Jane Eyre*.

Turning to the ribbon that marked my place, I kicked off my shoes and climbed onto the seat, tucking my feet up underneath me. Where could I find myself a Mr. Rochester? Preferably one who *didn't* have a crazy wife hidden away in his attic . . . But a sexy and mysterious hero to call my own? Sign me up.

You found a sexy and mysterious hero to call your own, my subconscious whispered. But I ruthlessly pushed that thought away. One who isn't dead and a figment of my hallucinations, please. Finding my last stopping point, I began to read . . . and was promptly jerked away from the page by the sound of my cell phone ringing.

I glanced over at it lying on the small nightstand next to the bed. Something told me not to pick it up. Not to go over and see who it was. But I did.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Abbey, it’s Dad. How are you, sweetie?”

Waves of homesickness washed over me at the sound of his voice. I really *did* miss my bed. And my room. And the rest of my perfume supplies. “I’m good, Dad. I’m doing good.” Yeah, and okay, maybe I missed Mom and Dad a little bit too. “What’s up?”

“Well . . .” He hesitated. “Your mother and I wanted to talk to you about something.”

I could hear Mom in the background telling him to hand her the receiver.

“What is it, Dad?” My stomach did nervous flip-flops. “Just tell me.” I hated drawn-out phone calls. Especially *these* types of phone calls.

“They finished the work on the Washington Irving Bridge,” he said. “It’s all done.”

I had a quick flashback to a memory of sitting with Kristen under that bridge before the construction work had ever started. Before she’d fallen into the Crane River. “That’s great, Dad.” *But why is it significant enough to call and tell me about?*

Mom picked up the other line. “Abbey, what your father is trying to say is that the town council will be holding a ceremony there soon, to celebrate the finished project. I told them that I’d make arrangements for you to be a part of it. To say something about Kristen and to dedicate the bridge to her memory.”

A loud ringing filled my ears, and for a second I thought it was coming from the phone. Holding the receiver away from my ear, I shook my head to stop the noise.

Dad spoke up now. “Your mother and I think that this would be really good for you, sweetie. To help you get over your . . . issues.”

The buzzing was growing fainter, but my stomach was still flip-flopping. “I can’t,” I blurted out. Thinking as quickly as I could, I added, “I’m not supposed to come home until the end of June.”

“We know it’s earlier than expected, but you’ve made remarkable progress,” said Mom. “The weekly reports from your therapist have shown *such* improvement.” Her tone was enthusiastic, but I couldn’t tell if she was trying to convince me, or herself. Mom never called Dr. Pendleton my psychologist. He was always my “therapist.”

She was obviously where I got my avoidance issues from.

“Dad, I . . . I . . . can’t. Tell Mom that I can’t do this. I’m not ready. I need more time.”

“I know, I know.” He sighed heavily. “It’s just that the town council wants you to be a part of this, and it would really please your mother. . . .”

“I’ve been working on it for weeks. We’ve already cleared it with your doctor,” Mom said. “The dedication ceremony will be on the twelfth.”

What? “You talked to Dr. Pendleton about this before you talked to *me?*”

“Well, we didn’t want to impede your progress. We wanted to make sure that something like this wouldn’t be harmful.”

“Don’t you think that I have a right to be talked to first? Since *I’m* the one being asked to do it?”

“Don’t you think that it’s appropriate for you to be there for Kristen? She was *your* best friend.”

Guilt-trip city. Mom was pulling out the big guns now. But two could play at that game.

“But isn’t my *therapy* more important, Mother?” I asked sweetly. “Are you telling me to come home and *not* finish all of my arranged sessions with Dr. Pendleton?”

If eyebrows made noises, I swear hers were making one right now as they shot up.

“I don’t think coming home a couple of weeks early is too much to ask,” Mom huffed. “Your doctor—”

“Dad?” I interrupted her. “Dad, please? Please don’t make me do this. Don’t make me go back to the spot where my best friend died. I need more time to make sure I’m all better.”

“I know this is difficult for you, but your mother . . .” Dad sighed again. “Just think about it, okay, sweetie? That’s all we’re asking for right now.”

Mom started to say something, but he stopped her. “Just take tonight to think it over, and we’ll discuss it again in the morning.”

I sniffled. I tried to hold it back, but the tears were breaking through anyway. Kristen . . . the river . . . The wound was still so fresh. The ache in my heart still so unbearable.

“Okay, Dad. I’ll thi—” My voice broke. “I’ll think about it.”

“That’s good, Abbey. Really good. We’ll talk tomorrow,” he murmured.

I forced out a quick good-bye and hung up the phone. Just before the backlight grew dark, I caught the date on the tiny screen below me. *June ninth*. The same day that Kristen went missing last year. The same day that my life changed forever. And here it was, changing again when I didn’t want it to.

June ninths were really starting to suck.

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I picked up the phone again and called Dr. Pendleton's office before I lost my nerve. His secretary answered and put me through. A half second later his voice-mail greeting started to play.

I waited for the beep and then spoke in a rush. "Hi, Dr. Pendleton, this is Abbey . . . um, Abigail Browning. I was calling to speak to you about my parents. They want me to go home early, and they said you told them that I could. Why wasn't this brought up in our session today? Please call me back. . . ." I left my name again and my phone number, then hung up.

How could they do this to me? Was I ready? What if I couldn't go back? What if I couldn't be a part of that ceremony? What if I wasn't better?

Would *they* still be there?

Would *he*?

I dropped the phone on the bed and moved to the door. I needed to talk to Aunt Marjorie about this. She would know what to do.

I found her on the porch swing outside, moving slowly back and forth. She stopped for a moment at my unspoken request and I sat down. It didn't take very long for her to start swinging again, and the chains supporting us squeaked as we moved

in silence. In the fields large sunflower stalks with furled green leaves and heavy sagging heads dipped and swayed in the breeze as it danced around them. The sun gilded everything it touched, and a haze of gold settled down like a finely spun cloak draped across the land.

A sudden buzzing noise caught my attention, and the massive dome light over the big red barn started kicking on. It wasn't dark yet. Not even dusk, but it would be. Soon. The light steadied and burned bright, and the buzzing slowed.

Everything felt safe here. *Normal*. I didn't want to admit to myself that something was missing. There was a small hole inside of me. But unlike the black void that had been left behind when Kristen died, this empty space felt like it could be filled again.

"I got a call from Mom and Dad," I told Aunt Marjorie, looking down at my bare feet.

"Weekly update?"

"No."

I traced a crack in the porch floor with my eyes, following it as it disappeared under my heel. "They want me to go home early."

She didn't say anything, and I knew she was waiting for me to carry the conversation.

"They want to have this dedication ceremony at the bridge,

where Kristen . . . died. And they sprung it on me at the last minute.” I shifted my body so that I could see her face. “Do you think I’m ready?”

She faced me too, and I could see years of wisdom in her eyes. “Do *you* think you’re ready?”

“I don’t know.”

“What would be some of the benefits?”

I thought about it for a minute. “Well, I’d be home, for one thing. Back in my own room. Able to work with all of my perfume supplies again.”

She nodded. “And?”

“I’d get to see Mom and Dad and Mr. and Mrs. M.”

“And you might get some closure,” she said. “You’d be surrounded by the love and support of family and friends as you honored Kristen’s memory.”

Now it was my turn to nod.

“Good. Now what would be some of the drawbacks?”

I had a whole list of answers for that one. “I could break down again. Have nightmares. Lose sleep.” She put her hand on mine and squeezed gently. I kept going. “I could go completely insane. Freak out my parents. Have everyone in town start talking about me. Lose it in front of the Maxwells. I just thought I’d have more time—”

She squeezed my hand harder, and I broke off.

“That’s quite the list of negatives.”

“Yes, but all things that could possibly happen,” I pointed out. “If it happened before, it can happen again.”

“That’s true,” she said. “But if it did, you would be better prepared to handle it now. You have your parents, Dr. Pendleton, me . . . So, what’s your gut telling you? Do you think you’re ready to go back?”

I sat quietly, contemplating her question. My gut told me that sooner or later I was going to have to go home. I couldn’t stay away forever.

It also told me that I needed to be there for Kristen. First and foremost, she was more important than me. And Caspian . . .

I had to face that truth too.

“I need to go back,” I said softly.

She nodded. “I thought that would be your choice.”

The seat beneath us shifted in an easy rhythm, and there was a gentle pull on the back of my calf muscles every time my knees stretched to propel us forward. The motion was soothing, a relaxing kind of ache that made me think of riding a bike for the first time after the winter snow had melted.

“There are a lot of nee-deeps this year,” Aunt Marjorie com-

mented, and I turned my head toward the dark line of trees that swallowed the back of the barn. A swampy forest lay within a dozen feet of the trees, and the toads that lived there swelled in a symphony, croaking out a cacophony of sound that started and ended in a blur of syllables that made up their nickname.

“Great,” I replied. “Guess I’ll be sleeping with headphones on again tonight.”

She chuckled. “I actually like them. They remind me of hot summer nights with your uncle. Cool breezes, the rasp of an overhead fan, rumped bedsheets.” She grinned at me, and I felt my cheeks flame.

“And moving on to other subjects . . . Thanks for letting me stay with you, Aunt Marjorie. Being here . . . away from everything there . . . was exactly what I needed.” I planted my feet firmly on the ground, and the swing came to a halt. Then I reached over and wrapped my arms around her.

She hugged me back and rested her chin on top of my head. “You’re welcome to come and watch *Murder, She Wrote* with me anytime, Abbey. I’ll get the other episodes on DVD.”

I closed my eyes and enjoyed the simple comfort of her embrace. We sat there in silence for a few minutes before I started to pull away. “I guess I need to go call Dad. Let him know about my decision.”

She stood too. “I’m off to the kitchen. Dinner should be ready soon.”

I followed her into the house and inhaled deeply. The aroma of fried chicken hung in the air, and I spotted two striped cardboard buckets sitting on the table.

“Is the chicken from Frankie’s Restaurant?”

“Yup. It’ll be ready in about ten minutes.”

Aunt Marjorie *never* cooked. She had told me once that she preferred to let the professionals do their jobs, and she’d be glad to pay them handsomely for it. I hurried up the stairs and went to my room. I found the phone in the covers and flipped it open. There was one missed call from Dr. Pendleton. I ignored it and pushed the button to call home. Dad picked up on the third ring.

“Hi, sweetie. I thought we weren’t going to talk until tomorrow. What’s up?”

I was so relieved to hear his voice instead of Mom’s that I let out a breath I didn’t even realize I’d been holding.

“Hey, Dad. I just wanted to let you know that I thought about what you said and . . . I’m ready. I’m ready to come home.”

“Are you sure? Don’t you want to sleep on it? You don’t have to make your decision right now, you know.” Now *he* sounded

unsure. “I don’t want you to regret this, Abbey. Why don’t you call me tomorrow and we’ll discuss it some more.”

“No, Dad.” I said. “My mind is made up. Can you guys come pick me up tomorrow?” The last thing I needed was time to reconsider.

“I guess. Then you’ll have a day or two to get settled before the ceremony. I’ll go tell your mother.”

I hung up the phone and heaved a frustrated sigh. First he was trying to talk me into going back, and now he almost sounded like he was trying to talk me out of it? I didn’t get it.

But at least the decision was made now.

I was going back.

Music seemed to be nudging me awake. Soft and faint, bare wisps of song floated along, and I could barely make them out. I thought I was dreaming.

I lay very still and opened my eyes wide. I don’t know why I thought not blinking would help me hear better, but it seemed to make some sort of sense as I held my breath in that hushed darkness.

There it is again.

It was old-fashioned sounding, like something that would play during an epic love scene of a black-and-white movie.

Silvery strains slipped through the crack under my door, and I waited in anticipation. It was lovely and haunting.

But still too faint.

I threw back the covers, slid my feet to the floor, and tiptoed over to the door. *Maybe I can hear it better this way.* With one hand on the knob I turned it gently, easing the door open.

I followed the sound until it stopped. There was a pause, a shift, and the music changed to a Cat Power song. Her voice ached with longing and sadness. I closed my eyes, overcome by emotions the song evoked.

A soft clinking of glass interrupted the moment, and I found myself moving forward again, peeking through the sliver of opened door into Aunt Marjorie's room. It was open far enough that I could see in without having to press my face close, but not wide enough for her to see me if she should happen to glance over.

Aunt Marjorie was standing in front of a vanity, pouring a drink from a glass bottle. The amber liquid splashed into the bottom of a tumbler, barely filling it half an inch. Then she picked it up and toasted a large picture frame of Uncle Gerald that hung over the vanity mirror. An instant later she tipped her head to one side and put the glass back down. A low murmur

and a giggle escaped her, and she put her arms up like she was getting ready to waltz with someone.

Cat's voice soared, and the words "Oh, oh, I do believe . . ." filled the room as Aunt Marjorie started dancing.

Once, twice, three times she slowly moved back and forth in a triangle pattern. She wore a long, flowing white nightgown, and I noticed that her hair was down. I'd never seen it that way before. She normally wore it tied back in a bun, but now the dark brown waves gently bobbed around her shoulders as she swayed in time to the music.

I smiled. *So this is where I get my crazy dancing-with-imaginary-partners gene from.* It was kind of nice to know it came from her.

Then the song ended. The room grew still.

Stumbling to an abrupt halt, she stood, arms frozen in place. Waiting for a partner who was not there. Who would never *be* there. Her shoulders shook, and a harsh sob echoed throughout the room. Within seconds it multiplied, and she started to cry like her heart was breaking.

I moved to go to her, and my toe bumped into the bottom of the door. I froze at the sound. What if she didn't want me to see her like this?

She glanced up, her eyes meeting mine. I held my breath,

waiting to see what she would say, or do. But she only wrapped her arms around herself and sank to the floor, a lonely old woman trying to make it through life with a piece of her heart missing. In some ways I knew exactly what she was feeling. As hard as I tried to forget, there was a Caspian-shaped hole inside me, too.

Slowly, I retreated. Her sobs echoed in my ears the whole way back, and even as I shut my door, I could not escape them. They followed me into my dreams.

I flung myself forward, sitting straight up in bed. I don't know how long I'd been asleep, but a nightmare had startled me awake. My eyes searched the dark corners, flew to the clock blinking 3:12 a.m., and scanned the ceiling. Looking for whatever it was that had my heart racing.

My mind frantically tried to reassemble the jumbled pieces of my dream.

I'd been . . . running? *No*. More like stumbling, really. Hands outstretched in the darkness. There were things all around me, and I could tell by their shape and feel that they were tombstones. Sharp edges and jagged pieces that left my stumbling knees and shins bruised, my fingers scratched.

I shook my head, looking for the missing scenes.

Stumbling . . . stumbling . . . almost falling, always moving.
I knew I had to keep moving. What was after me? What was I running from? I saw myself try to glance behind, but it was too dark. I couldn't make out what was there.

The dream started fading, and I knew I was losing it. Already the bare fragments of memory were slipping through my fingers.

With a final glance at the room around me, I slid back down onto the sheets and pillows, closing my eyes. *Stupid dreams. I should not have drunk that Mountain Dew at dinner.* It always gave me the jitters.

And then I sat bolt upright again.

I knew. I knew what the dream meant.

I wasn't running *from something*. I was running *to someone*.