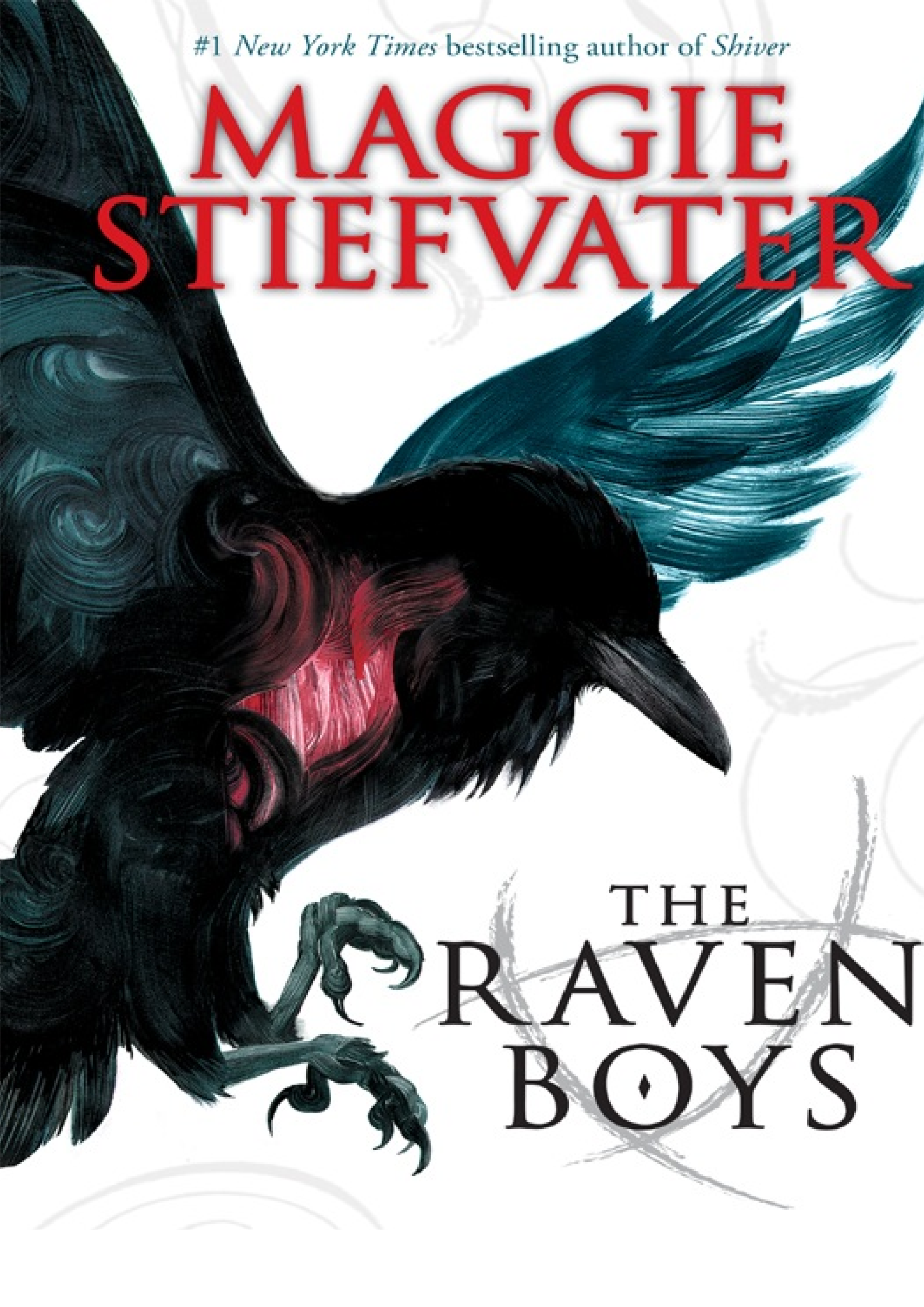


#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Shiver*

MAGGIE STIEFVATER

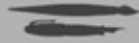


THE
RAVEN
BOYS



THE
RAVEN
BOYS

MAGGIE STIEFVATER



SCHOLASTIC PRESS • NEW YORK

*for Brenna,
who is good at looking for things*

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*Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there, wondering, fearing,
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before ...*

— EDGAR ALLAN POE

*A dreamer is one who can only find his way by moonlight, and his punishment is that he sees the dawn
before the rest of the world.*

— OSCAR WILDE



PROLOGUE

Blue Sargent had forgotten how many times she'd been told that she would kill her true love.

Her family traded in predictions. These predictions tended, however, to run toward the nonspecific. Things like: *Something terrible will happen to you today. It might involve the number six.* Or: *Money is coming. Open your hand for it.* Or: *You have a big decision and it will not make itself.*

The people who came to the little, bright blue house at 300 Fox Way didn't mind the imprecise nature of their fortunes. It became a game, a challenge, to realize the exact moment that the predictions came true. When a van carrying six people wheeled into a client's car two hours after his psychic reading, he could nod with a sense of accomplishment and release. When a neighbor offered to buy another client's old lawn mower if she was looking for a bit of extra cash, she could recall the promise of money coming and sell it with the sense that the transaction had been foretold. Or when a third client heard his wife say, *This is a decision that has to be made*, he could remember the same words being said by Maura Sargent over a spread of tarot cards and then leap decisively to action.

But the imprecise nature of the fortunes stole some of their power. The predictions could be dismissed as coincidences, hunches. They were a chuckle in the Walmart parking lot when you ran into an old friend as promised. A shiver when the number seventeen appeared on an electric bill. A realization that even if you had discovered the future, it really didn't change how you lived in the present. They were truth, but they weren't all of the truth.

"I should tell you," Maura always advised her new clients, "that this reading will be accurate, but not specific."

It was easier that way.

But this was not what Blue was told. Again and again, she had her fingers spread wide, her palms examined, her cards plucked from velvet-edged decks and spread across the fuzz of a family friend's living room carpet. Thumbs were pressed to the mystical, invisible third eye that was said to lie between everyone's eyebrows. Runes were cast and dreams interpreted, tea leaves scrutinized and séances conducted.

All the women came to the same conclusion, blunt and inexplicably specific. What they all agreed on, in many different clairvoyant languages, was this:

If Blue was to kiss her true love, he would die.

For a long time, this bothered Blue. The warning was specific, certainly, but in the way of a fairy tale. It didn't say how her true love would die. It didn't say how long after the kiss he would survive.

Did it have to be a kiss on the lips? Would a chaste peck on the back of his palm prove as deadly?

Until she was eleven, Blue was convinced she would silently contract an infectious disease. One press of her lips to her hypothetical soulmate and he, too, would die in a consumptive battle untreatable by modern medicine. When she was thirteen, Blue decided that jealousy would kill him instead — an old boyfriend emerging at the moment of that first kiss, bearing a handgun and a heart full of hurt.

When she turned fifteen, Blue concluded that her mother's tarot cards were just a pack of playing cards and that the dreams of her mother and the other clairvoyant women were fueled by mixed drinks rather than otherworldly insight, and so the prediction didn't matter.

She knew better, though. The predictions that came out of 300 Fox Way were unspecific, but undeniably true. Her mother had dreamt Blue's broken wrist on the first day of school. Her aunt Jimi predicted Maura's tax return to within ten dollars. Her older cousin Orla always began to hum her favorite song a few minutes before it came on the radio.

No one in the house ever really doubted that Blue was destined to kill her true love with a kiss. It was a threat, however, that had been around for so long that it had lost its force. Picturing six-year-old Blue in love was such a far-off thing as to be imaginary.

And by sixteen, Blue had decided she would never fall in love, so it didn't matter.

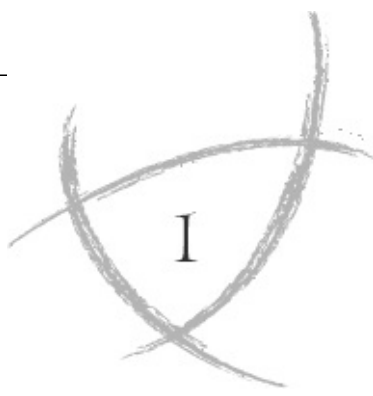
But that belief changed when her mother's half sister Neeve came to their little town of Henrietta. Neeve had gotten famous for doing loudly what Blue's mother did quietly. Maura's readings were done in her front room, mostly for residents of Henrietta and the valley around it. Neeve, on the other hand, did her readings on television at five o'clock in the morning. She had a website featuring old soft-focus photographs of her staring unerringly at the viewer. Four books on the supernatural bore her name on the cover.

Blue had never met Neeve, so she knew more about her half aunt from a cursory web search than from personal experience. Blue wasn't sure why Neeve was coming to visit, but she knew her imminent arrival spurred a legion of whispered conversations between Maura and her two best friends Persephone and Calla — the sort of conversations that trailed off into sipping coffee and tapping pens on the table when Blue entered the room. But Blue wasn't particularly concerned about Neeve's arrival; what was one more woman in a house filled to the brim with them?

Neeve finally appeared on a spring evening when the already long shadows of the mountains to the west seemed even longer than usual. When Blue opened the door for her, she thought, for a moment, that Neeve was an unfamiliar old woman, but then her eyes grew used to the stretched crimson light coming through the trees, and she saw that Neeve was barely older than her mother, which was not very old at all.

Outside, in the distance, hounds were crying. Blue was familiar enough with their voices; each fall, the Aglionby Hunt Club rode out with horses and foxhounds nearly every weekend. Blue knew what their frantic howls meant at that moment: They were on the chase.

"You're Maura's daughter," Neeve said, and before Blue could answer, she added, "this is the year you'll fall in love."



I

It was freezing in the churchyard, even before the dead arrived.

Every year, Blue and her mother, Maura, had come to the same place, and every year it was chilly. But this year, without Maura here with her, it felt colder.

It was April 24, St. Mark's Eve. For most people, St. Mark's Day came and went without note. It wasn't a school holiday. No presents were exchanged. There were no costumes or festivals. There were no St. Mark's Day sales, no St. Mark's Day cards in the store racks, no special television programs that aired only once a year. No one marked April 25 on their calendar. In fact, most of the living were unaware that St. Mark even had a day named in his honor.

But the dead remembered.

As Blue sat shivering on the stone wall, she reasoned that at least, at the *very* least, it wasn't raining this year.

Every St. Mark's Eve, this was where Maura and Blue drove: an isolated church so old that its name had been forgotten. The ruin was cupped in the densely wooded hills outside of Henrietta, still several miles from the mountains proper. Only the exterior walls remained; the roof and floors had long ago collapsed inside. What hadn't rotted away was hidden under hungry vines and rancid-smelling saplings. The church was surrounded by a stone wall, broken only by a lych-gate just large enough for a coffin and its bearers. A stubborn path that seemed impervious to weeds led through to the old church door.

"Ah," hissed Neeve, plump but strangely elegant as she sat beside Blue on the wall. Blue was struck again, as she had been struck the first time she'd met Neeve, by her oddly lovely hands. Chubby wrists led to soft, child-like palms and slender fingers with oval nails.

"Ah," Neeve murmured again. "Tonight is a night."

She said it like this: "Tonight is a *night*," and when she did, Blue felt her skin creep a little. Blue had sat watch with her mother for the past ten St. Mark's Eves, but tonight felt different.

Tonight was a *night*.

This year, for the first time, and for reasons Blue didn't understand, Maura sent Neeve to do the church watch in her place. Her mother had asked Blue if she would go along as usual, but it wasn't really a question. Blue had always gone; she would go this time. It was not as if she had made plans for St. Mark's Eve. But she had to be asked. Maura had decided sometime before Blue's birth that it was barbaric to order children about, and so Blue had grown up surrounded by imperative question marks.

Blue opened and closed her chilly fists. The top edges of her fingerless gloves were fraying;

she'd done a bad job knitting them last year, but they had a certain trashy chic to them. If she hadn't been so vain, Blue could've worn the boring but functional gloves she'd been given for Christmas. But she *was* vain, so instead she had her fraying fingerless gloves, infinitely cooler though also colder, and no one to see them but Neeve and the dead.

April days in Henrietta were quite often fair, tender things, coaxing sleeping trees to bud and love-mad ladybugs to beat against windowpanes. But not tonight. It felt like winter.

Blue glanced at her watch. A few minutes until eleven. The old legends recommended the church watch be kept at midnight, but the dead kept poor time, especially when there wasn't a moon.

Unlike Blue, who didn't tend toward patience, Neeve was a regal statue on the old church wall: hands folded, ankles crossed beneath a long wool skirt. Blue, huddled, shorter and thinner, was a restless, sightless gargoyle. It wasn't a night for her ordinary eyes. It was a night for seers and psychics, witches and mediums.

In other words, the rest of her family.

Out of the silence, Neeve asked, "Do you hear anything?" Her eyes glittered in the black.

"No," Blue answered, because she didn't. Then she wondered if Neeve had asked because Neeve *did*.

Neeve was looking at her with the same gaze that she wore in all of her photos on the website — the deliberately unnerving, otherworldly stare that lasted several more seconds than was comfortable. A few days after Neeve had arrived, Blue had been distressed enough to mention it to Maura. They had both been crammed into the single bathroom, Blue getting ready for school, Maura for work.

Blue, trying to clip all of the various bits of her dark hair back into a vestigial ponytail, had asked, "Does she have to stare like that?"

In the shower, her mother drew patterns in the steamed glass door. She had paused to laugh, a flash of her skin visible through the long intersecting lines she had drawn. "Oh, that's just Neeve's trademark."

Blue thought there were probably better things to be known for.

In the churchyard, Neeve said enigmatically, "There is a lot to hear."

The thing was, there wasn't. In the summer, the foothills were alive with insects buzzing, mockingbirds whistling back and forth, ravens yelling at cars. But it was too cool, tonight, for anything to be awake yet.

"I don't hear things like that," Blue said, a little surprised Neeve wasn't already aware. In Blue's intensely clairvoyant family, she was a fluke, an outsider to the vibrant conversation her mother and aunts and cousins held with a world hidden to most people. The only thing that was special about her was something that she herself couldn't experience. "I hear as much of the conversation as the telephone. I just make things louder for everyone else."

Neeve still hadn't looked away. "So that's why Maura was so eager for you to come along. Does she have you at all her readings as well?"

Blue shuddered at the thought. A fair number of the clients who entered 300 Fox Way were miserable women hoping Maura would see love and money in their future. The idea of being trapped in the house with that all day was excruciating. Blue knew it had to be very tempting for her mother to

have Blue present, making her psychic powers stronger. When she was younger, she'd never appreciated how little Maura called on her to join in a reading, but now that Blue understood how well she honed other people's talents, she was impressed at Maura's restraint.

"Not unless it's a very important one," she replied.

Neeve's gaze had edged over the subtle line between discomfiting and creepy. She said, "It's something to be proud of, you know. To make someone else's psychic gift stronger is a rare and valuable thing."

"Oh, *pshaw*," Blue said, but not cruelly. She meant to be funny. She'd had sixteen years to get used to the idea that she wasn't privy to the supernatural. She didn't want Neeve to think she was experiencing an identity crisis over it. She tugged a string on her glove.

"And you have plenty of time to grow into your own intuitive talents," Neeve added. Her gaze seemed hungry.

Blue didn't reply. She wasn't interested in telling other people's futures. She was interested in going out and finding her own.

Neeve finally dropped her eyes. Tracing an idle finger through the dirt on the stones between them, she said, "I passed by a school on the way into town. Aglionby Academy. Is that where you go?"

Blue's eyes widened with humor. But of course Neeve, an outsider, couldn't know. Still, surely she could have guessed from the massive stone great hall and the parking lot full of cars that spoke German that it wasn't the sort of school that they could afford.

"It's an all-boys school. For politicians' sons and oil barons' sons and for" — Blue struggled to think of who else might be rich enough to send their kids to Aglionby — "the sons of mistresses living off hush money."

Neeve raised an eyebrow without looking up.

"No, really, they're awful," Blue said. April was a bad time for the Aglionby boys; as it warmed up, the convertibles appeared, bearing boys in shorts so tacky that only the rich would dare to wear them. During the school week, they all wore the Aglionby uniform: khaki pants and a V-neck sweater with a raven emblem. It was an easy way to identify the advancing army. Raven boys.

Blue continued. "They think they're better than us and that we're all falling all over ourselves for them, and they drink themselves senseless every weekend and spray paint the Henrietta exit sign."

Aglionby Academy was the number one reason Blue had developed her two rules: One, stay away from boys, because they were trouble. And two, stay away from Aglionby boys, because they were bastards.

"You seem like a very sensible teen," Neeve said, which annoyed Blue, because she already knew she was a very sensible teen. When you had as little money as the Sargents did, sensibility in all matters was ingrained young.

In the ambient light from the nearly full moon, Blue caught sight of what Neeve had drawn in the dirt. She asked, "What is that? Mom drew that."

"Did she?" Neeve asked. They studied the pattern. It was three curving, intersecting lines, making a long sort of triangle. "Did she say what it was?"

"She was drawing it on the shower door. I didn't ask."

“I dreamt it,” Neeve said, in a flat voice that sent an unpleasant shudder along the back of Blue’s neck. “I wanted to see what it looked like drawn out.” She rubbed her palm through the pattern, then abruptly held up a beautiful hand.

She said, “I think they’re coming.”

This was why Blue and Neeve were here. Every year, Maura sat on the wall, knees pulled up to her chin, staring at nothing, and recited names to Blue. To Blue, the churchyard remained empty, but to Maura, it was full of the dead. Not the currently dead, but the spirits of those who would die in the next twelve months. For Blue, it had always been like hearing one half of a conversation. Sometimes her mother would recognize the spirits, but often she would have to lean forward to ask them their names. Maura had once explained that if Blue wasn’t there, she couldn’t convince them to answer her — the dead couldn’t see Maura without Blue’s presence.

Blue never grew tired of feeling particularly needed, but sometimes she wished *needed* felt less like a synonym for *useful*.

The church watch was critical for one of Maura’s most unusual services. So long as clients lived in the area, she guaranteed to let them know if they or a local loved one was bound to die in the next twelve months. Who wouldn’t pay for that? Well, the true answer was: most of the world, as most people didn’t believe in psychics.

“Can you see anything?” Blue asked. She gave her numb hands a bracing rub before snatching up a notebook and pen from the wall.

Neeve was very still. “Something just touched my hair.”

Again, a shiver thrilled up Blue’s arms. “One of them?”

In a husky voice, Neeve said, “The future dead have to follow the corpse road through the gate. This is probably another ... spirit called by your energy. I didn’t realize what an effect you would have.”

Maura had never mentioned *other* dead people being attracted by Blue. Perhaps she hadn’t wanted to scare her. Or maybe Maura just hadn’t seen them — maybe she was as blind to these other spirits as Blue was.

Blue became uncomfortably aware of the slightest breeze touching her face, lifting Neeve’s curly hair. Invisible, orderly spirits of not yet truly dead people were one thing. Ghosts that weren’t compelled to stay on the path were another.

“Are they —” Blue started.

“Who are you? Robert Neuhmann,” Neeve interrupted. “What’s your name? Ruth Vert. What’s your name? Frances Powell.”

Scratching quickly to catch up, Blue printed the names phonetically as Neeve solicited them. Every so often, she lifted her eyes to the path, trying to glimpse — *something*. But as always, there was only the overgrown crabgrass, the barely visible oak trees. The black mouth of the church, accepting invisible spirits.

Nothing to hear, nothing to see. No evidence of the dead except for their names written in the notebook in her hand.

Maybe Neeve was right. Maybe Blue was having a bit of an identity crisis. Some days it did seem

a little unfair that all of the wonder and power that surrounded her family was passed to Blue in the form of paperwork.

At least I can still be a part of it, Blue thought grimly, although she felt about as included as a seeing eye dog. She held the notebook up to her face, close, close, close, so she could read it in the darkness. It was like a roster of names popular seventy and eighty years before: Dorothy, Ralph, Clarence, Esther, Herbert, Melvin. A lot of the same last names, too. The valley was dominated by several old families that were large if not powerful.

Somewhere outside of Blue's thoughts, Neeve's tone became more emphatic.

"What's your name?" she asked. "*Excuse me. What is your name?*" Her consternated expression looked wrong on her face. Out of habit, Blue followed Neeve's gaze to the center of the courtyard.

And she saw someone.

Blue's heart hammered like a fist to her breastbone. On the other side of the heartbeat, he was still there. Where there should have been nothing, there was a person.

"I see him," Blue said. "Neeve, *I see him.*"

Blue had always imagined the procession of spirits to be an orderly thing, but this spirit wandered, hesitant. It was a young man in slacks and a sweater, hair rumpled. He was not quite transparent, but he wasn't quite there, either. His figure was as murky as dirty water, his face indistinct. There was no identifying feature to him apart from his youth.

He was so young — that was the hardest part to get used to.

As Blue watched, he paused and put his fingers to the side of his nose and his temple. It was such a strangely *living* gesture that Blue felt a little sick. Then he stumbled forward, as if jostled from behind.

"Get his name," Neeve hissed. "He won't answer me and I need to get the others!"

"Me?" Blue replied, but she slid off the wall. Her heart was still ramming inside her rib cage. She asked, feeling a little foolish, "What's your name?"

He didn't seem to hear her. Without a twitch of acknowledgment, he began to move again, slow and bewildered, toward the church door.

Is this how we make our way to death? Blue wondered. *A stumbling fade-out instead of a self-aware finale?*

As Neeve began again to call out questions to the others, Blue made her way toward the wanderer.

"Who are you?" she called from a safe distance, as he dropped his forehead into his hands. His form had no outline at all, she saw now, and his face was truly featureless. There was nothing about him, really, that made him human shaped, but still, she saw a boy. There was something telling her mind what he was, even if it wasn't telling her eyes.

There was no thrill in seeing him, as she had thought there would be. All she could think was, *He will be dead within a year.* How did Maura bear it?

Blue stole closer. She was close enough to touch him as he began to walk again, but still he made no sign of seeing her.

This near to him, her hands were freezing. Her heart was freezing. Invisible spirits with no

warmth of their own sucked at her energy, pulling goose bumps up her arms.

The young man stood on the threshold of the church and Blue knew, just *knew*, that if he stepped into the church, she would lose the chance to get his name.

“Please,” Blue said, softer than before. She reached out a hand and touched the very edge of his not-there sweater. Cold flooded through her like dread. She tried to steady herself with what she’d always been told: Spirits drew all their energy from their surroundings. All she was feeling was him using her to stay visible.

But it still felt a lot like dread.

She asked, “Will you tell me your name?”

He faced her and she realized with shock that he wore an Aglionby sweater.

“Gansey,” he said. Though his voice was quiet, it wasn’t a whisper. It was a real voice spoken from someplace almost too far away to hear.

Blue couldn’t stop staring at his mussed hair, the suggestion of staring eyes, the raven on his sweater. His shoulders were soaked, she saw, and the rest of his clothing rain spattered, from a storm that hadn’t happened yet. This close, she could smell something minty that she wasn’t sure was unique to him or unique to spirits.

He was so real. When it finally happened, when she finally saw him, it didn’t feel like magic at all. It felt like looking into the grave and seeing it look back at her.

“Is that all?” she whispered.

Gansey closed his eyes. “That’s all there is.”

He fell to his knees — a soundless gesture for a boy with no real body. One hand splayed in the dirt, fingers pressed to the ground. Blue saw the blackness of the church more clearly than the curved shape of his shoulder.

“Neeve,” Blue said. “Neeve, he’s — dying.”

Neeve had come to stand just behind her. She replied, “Not yet.”

Gansey was nearly gone now, fading into the church, or the church fading into him.

Blue’s voice was breathier than she would have liked. “Why — why can I see him?”

Neeve glanced over her shoulder, either because there were more spirits coming or because there weren’t — Blue couldn’t tell. By the time she looked back, Gansey had vanished entirely. Already Blue felt warmth returning to her skin, but something behind her lungs felt icy. A dangerous, sucking sadness seemed to be opening up inside her: grief or regret.

“There are only two reasons a non-seer would see a spirit on St. Mark’s Eve, Blue. Either you’re his true love,” Neeve said, “or you killed him.”

It's me," said Gansey.

He turned around so that he was facing his car. The Camaro's bright orange hood was up, more a symbol of defeat than for any practical use. Adam, friend of cars everywhere, might have been able to determine what was wrong with it this time, but Gansey certainly couldn't. He'd managed to roll to a stop about four feet off the interstate and now the car's fat tires sat off-kilter on top of lumpy tufts of valley grass. A semitruck roared by without pause; the Camaro rocked in its wake.

On the other end of the phone, his roommate Ronan Lynch replied, "You missed World Hist. I thought you were dead in a ditch."

Gansey flipped his wrist around to examine his watch. He had missed a lot more than World History. It was eleven o'clock, and already the chilliness of last night seemed improbable. A gnat was stuck in the perspiration on his skin next to the watch-band; he flicked it off. Gansey had camped, once, when he was younger. It had involved tents. Sleeping bags. An idling Range Rover parked nearby for when he and his father lost interest. As an experience, it had not been anything like last night.

He asked, "Did you get notes for me?"

"No," Ronan replied. "I thought you were dead in a ditch."

Gansey blew grit off his lips and readjusted the phone against his cheek. *He* would've gotten notes for Ronan. "The Pig stopped. Come get me."

A sedan slowed as it passed, the occupants staring out the window. Gansey was not an unpleasant-looking boy and the Camaro was not too hard on the eyes, either, but this attention had less to do with comeliness and more to do with the novelty of an Aglionby boy broken down by the side of the road in an impudently orange car. Gansey was well aware that there was nothing little Henrietta, Virginia, preferred over seeing humiliating things happen to Aglionby boys, unless it was seeing humiliating things happen to their families.

Ronan said, "Come on, man."

"It's not like you're going to class. You know what, it'll be lunch break anyway." Then he added perfunctory, "Please."

Ronan was silent for a long moment. He was good at silence; he knew it made people uncomfortable. But Gansey was immune from long exposure. He leaned into the car to see if he had any food in the glove box while he waited for Ronan to speak. Next to an EpiPen, there was a stick of beef jerky, but the jerky had expired two years ago. Possibly it had been there when he'd bought the car.

“Where are you?” Ronan asked, finally.

“Next to the Henrietta sign on 64. Bring me a burger. And a few gallons of gas.” The car had not run out of gas, but it couldn’t hurt.

Ronan’s voice was acidic. “Gansey.”

“Bring Adam, too.”

Ronan hung up. Gansey stripped off his sweater and threw it in the back of the Camaro. The tiny back of the car was a cluttered marriage of everyday things — a chemistry textbook, a Frappuccino-stained notebook, a half-zipped CD binder with naked discs slithering out across the seat — and the supplies he’d acquired during his eighteen months in Henrietta. Rumpled maps, computer printouts, ever-present journal, flashlight, willow stick. When Gansey plucked a digital recorder out of the mess, a pizza receipt (one large deep-dish, half sausage, half avocado) fluttered to the seat, joining a half-dozen receipts identical except for the date.

All night he’d sat outside the monstrously modern Church of the Holy Redeemer, recorder running, ears straining, waiting for — something. The atmosphere had been less than magical. Possibly not the best place to try to make contact with the future dead, but Gansey had maintained high hopes for the power of St. Mark’s Eve. It wasn’t that he’d expected to see the dead. All of the sources said that church watchers had to possess “the second sight” and Gansey barely possessed first sight before he put his contacts in. He’d just hoped for —

Something. And that was what he had gotten. He just wasn’t quite sure what that *something* was yet.

The digital recorder in hand, Gansey settled himself against the rear tire to wait, letting the car shield him from the buffeting of passing vehicles. On the other side of the guard rail, a greening field stretched out and down to the trees. Beyond it all rose the mysterious blue crest of the mountains.

On the dusty toe of his shoe, Gansey drew the arcing shape of the promised supernatural energy line that had led him here. As the mountain breeze rushed over his ears, it sounded like a hushed shout — not a whisper, but a loud cry from almost too far away to hear.

The thing was, Henrietta looked like a place where magic could happen. The valley seemed to whisper secrets. It was easier to believe that they wouldn’t give themselves up to Gansey rather than that they didn’t exist at all.

Please just tell me where you are.

His heart hurt with the wanting of it, the hurt no less painful for being difficult to explain.

Ronan Lynch’s shark-nosed BMW pulled in behind the Camaro, its normally glossy charcoal paint dusted green with pollen. Gansey felt the bass of the stereo in his feet a moment before he made out the tune. When he stood up, Ronan was just opening his door. In the passenger seat was Adam Parrish, the third member of the foursome that made up Gansey’s closest friends. The knot of Adam’s tie was neat above the collar of his sweater. One slender hand pressed Ronan’s thin cell phone tightly to his ear.

Through the open car door, Adam and Gansey exchanged the briefest of looks. Adam’s knitted eyebrows asked, *Did you find anything?* and Gansey’s widened eyes replied, *You tell me.*

Adam, frowning now, spun the volume knob down on the stereo and said something into the

phone.

Ronan slammed the car door — he slammed everything — before heading to the trunk. He said, “My dick brother wants us to meet him at Nino’s tonight. With *Ashley*.”

“Is that who’s on the phone?” Gansey asked. “What’s *Ashley*?”

Ronan hefted a gas can from the trunk, making little effort to keep the greasy container from contacting his clothing. Like Gansey, he wore the Aglionby uniform, but, as always, he managed to make it look as disreputable as possible. His tie was knotted with a method best described as *contemptuous* and his shirt-tails were ragged beneath the bottom of his sweater. His smile was thin and sharp. If his BMW was shark-like, it had learned how from him. “Declan’s latest. We’re meant to look pretty for her.”

Gansey resented having to play nicely with Ronan’s older brother, a senior at Aglionby, but he understood why they had to. Freedom in the Lynch family was a complicated thing, and at the moment, Declan held the keys to it.

Ronan traded the fuel can for the digital recorder. “He wants to do it tonight because he knows I have class.”

The fuel-tank lid for the Camaro was located behind the spring-loaded license plate, and Ronan watched silently as Gansey simultaneously wrestled with the lid, the gas can, and the license plate.

“You could have done this,” Gansey told him. “Since you don’t care about crapping up your shirt.”

Unsympathetic, Ronan scratched at an old, brown scab beneath the five knotted leather bands he wore around his wrist. Last week, he and Adam had taken turns dragging each other on a moving dolly behind the BMW, and they both still had the marks to show it.

“Ask me if I found something,” Gansey said.

Sighing, Ronan twitched the recorder toward Gansey. “Did you find anything?”

Ronan didn’t sound very interested, but that was part of the Ronan Lynch brand. It was impossible to tell how deep his disinterest truly was.

Fuel was leeching slowly into Gansey’s expensive chinos, the second pair he’d ruined in a month. It wasn’t that he meant to be careless — as Adam told him again and again, “Things cost *money*, Gansey” — it was just that he never seemed to realize the consequences of his actions until too late. “Something. I recorded about four hours of audio and there’s — something. But I don’t know what it means.” He gestured to the recorder. “Give it a whirl.”

Turning to stare out over the interstate, Ronan pressed PLAY. For a moment there was merely silence, broken only by icy-sounding shrills of crickets. Then, Gansey’s voice:

“Gansey,” it said.

There was a long pause. Gansey rubbed a finger slowly along the pocked chrome of the Camaro bumper. It was still strange to hear himself on the recording, with no memory of saying the words.

Then, as if from very far away, a female voice, the words hard to make out: “Is that all?”

Ronan’s eyes darted to Gansey, wary.

Gansey lifted his finger: *Wait*. Murmured voices, quieter than before, hissed from the recorder, nothing clear about them except the cadence: questions and answers. And then his disembodied voice

spoke out of the recorder again:

“That’s all there is.”

Ronan cast a glance back over to Gansey beside the car, doing what Gansey thought of as his smoker breath: long inhale through flared nostrils, slow exhale through parted lips.

Ronan did not smoke. He preferred his habits with hangovers.

He stopped the recorder and said, “You’re dripping gas on your pants, geezer.”

“Aren’t you going to ask me what was happening when I recorded that?”

Ronan didn’t ask. He just kept looking at Gansey, which was the same thing.

“Nothing was happening. That’s what. I was staring at a parking lot full of bugs that shouldn’t be alive when it’s this cold overnight, and there was nothing.”

Gansey hadn’t really been sure if he’d pick up anything in the parking lot, even if he was in the right place. According to the ley hunters he’d spoken to, the ley line sometimes transmitted voices across its length, throwing sounds hundreds of miles and dozens of years from when they’d first been heard. A sort of audio haunting, an unpredictable radio transmission where nearly anything on the ley line could be a receiver: a recorder, a stereo, a pair of well-tuned human ears. Lacking any psychic ability, Gansey had brought the recorder, as the noises were often only audible when played back. The strange thing in all this was not the other voices on the player. The strange thing was *Gansey’s* voice. Gansey was quite certain he was not a spirit.

“I didn’t say anything, Ronan. All night long, I didn’t say anything. So what’s my voice doing on the recorder?”

“How did you know it was there?”

“I was listening to what I’d recorded while I was driving back. Nothing, nothing, nothing, and then: my voice. Then the Pig stopped.”

“Coincidence?” Ronan asked. “I think not.”

It was meant to be sarcastic. Gansey had said *I don’t believe in coincidences* so often that he no longer needed to.

Gansey asked, “Well, what do you think?”

“Holy grail, finally,” Ronan replied, too sarcastic to be any use at all.

But the fact was this: Gansey had spent the last four years working with the thinnest scraps of evidence possible and the barely heard voice was all the encouragement he needed. His eighteen months in Henrietta had used some of the sketchiest scraps of all as he searched for a ley line — a perfectly straight, supernatural energy path that connected spiritual places — and the elusive tomb he hoped lay along its path. This was just an occupational hazard of looking for an invisible energy line. It was ... well, *invisible*.

And possibly hypothetical, but Gansey refused to consider that notion. In seventeen years of life he’d already found dozens of things people hadn’t known could be found, and he fully intended to add the ley line, the tomb, and the tomb’s royal occupant to that list of items.

A museum curator in New Mexico had once told Gansey, *Son, you have an uncanny knack for discovering oddities*. An astonished Roman historian commented, *You look under rocks no one else thinks to pick up, slick*. And a very old British professor had said, *The world turns out its pockets for*

you, boy. The key, Gansey found, was that you had to believe that they existed; you had to realize they were part of something bigger. Some secrets only gave themselves up to those who'd proven themselves worthy.

The way Gansey saw it was this: If you had a special knack for finding things, it meant you owe the world to look.

"Hey, is that Whelk?" Ronan asked.

A car had slowed considerably as it passed them, affording them a glimpse of its overly curious driver. Gansey had to agree that the driver did look a lot like their resentful Latin teacher, an Aglionby alumnus by the unfortunate name of Barrington Whelk. Gansey, owing to his official title of Richard "Dick" Campbell Gansey III, was fairly immune to posh names, but even he had to admit there wasn't much forgivable about Barrington Whelk.

"Hey, don't stop and help or anything," Ronan snapped after the car. "Hey, runt. What went down with Declan?"

This last part was directed at Adam as he climbed out of the BMW with Ronan's phone still in hand. He offered it to Ronan, who shook his head disdainfully. Ronan despised all phones, including his own.

Adam said, "He's coming by at five tonight."

Unlike Ronan, Adam's Aglionby sweater was secondhand, but he'd taken great care to be certain it was impeccable. He was slim and tall, with dusty hair unevenly cropped above a fine-boned, tanned face. He was a sepia photograph.

"Joy," Gansey replied. "You'll be there, right?"

"Am I invited?" Adam could be peculiarly polite. When he was uncertain about something, his Southern accent always made an appearance, and it was in evidence now.

Adam never needed an invitation. He and Ronan must've fought. Unsurprising. If it had a social security number, Ronan had fought with it.

"Don't be stupid," Gansey replied, and graciously accepted the grease-splotted fast-food bag that Adam offered. "Thanks."

"Ronan got it," Adam said. In matters of money, he was quick to assign credit or blame.

Gansey looked to Ronan, who lounged against the Camaro, absently biting one of the leather straps on his wrist. Gansey said, "Tell me there's no sauce on this burger."

Dropping the strap from his teeth, Ronan scoffed. "Please."

"No pickle, either," Adam said, crouching behind the car. He'd not only brought two small containers of fuel additive, but also a rag to place between the gas can and his khakis; he made the entire process look commonplace. Adam tried so hard to hide his roots, but they came out in the smallest of gestures.

Now Gansey grinned, the warmth of discovery starting to course through him. "So, pop quiz, Mr. Parrish. Three things that appear in the vicinity of ley lines?"

"Black dogs," Adam said indulgently. "Demonic presences."

"Camaros," Ronan inserted.

Gansey continued as if he hadn't spoken. "And ghosts. Ronan, queue up the evidence if you

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