MEG CABOT

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

REMEMBRANCE

A MEDIATOR NOVEL

“Fabulous author.” — USA Today
Dear Reader,

I’m sure you’ve seen lots of movies and TV series and maybe even reality shows about people with the same ability as my heroine, Suze Simon: so-called “mediators” who can communicate with the dead, helping them resolve whatever issues they’ve left behind in this world, so they can cross over to the next.

But the “reality” of Suze’s gift isn’t at all the way they portray it in the movies or on TV. That’s because—though she’s kept notes on her cases for some time—Suze hasn’t shared them, since doing so might risk someone’s physical or emotional safety. That’s why only a few of her closest family and friends (and now you) are aware of her secret.

But don’t worry if you missed any of Suze’s previous “progress reports.” After all, they took place in high school. And who wants to relive high school?

Except that it was in high school when Suze first encountered the love of her life, Jesse de Silva. It took a miracle to bring them together, and they’ve sworn that nothing will ever tear them apart. Or will it?

If there’s one thing I’ve learned since high school, it’s that life is full of miracles . . . and secrets . . .

And surprises, like that a character I created in the year 2000 would have such a lasting impact on the lives of so many, including my own.

For that, I’ll never stop being thankful, especially to all of you.

Meg Cabot
remembrance
It started while I was in the middle of an extremely heated online battle over a pair of black leather platform boots. That’s when a chime sounded on my desktop, letting me know I’d received an e-mail.

Ordinarily I’d have ignored it, since my need for a pair of stylish yet functional boots was at an all-time high. My last ones had met with an unfortunate accident when I was mediating a particularly stubborn NCDP (Non-Compliant Deceased Person) down at the Carmel marina, and both of us had ended up in the water.

Unfortunately, I was at work, and my boss, Father Dominic, frowns on his employees ignoring e-mails at work, even at an unpaid internship like mine.

Muttering, “I’ll be back,” at the screen (in what I considered to be a pretty good imitation of Arnold Schwarzenegger as the Terminator), I clicked my in-box, keeping the screen to the auction open. With their steel-reinforced toes and chunky heels,
these boots were perfect for dealing with those who needed a
swift kick in the butt in order to encourage them to pass on to the
afterlife, though I doubt that’s why the person who kept trying to
outbid me—Maximillian28, a totally lame screen name—wanted
them so badly.

But if there’s anything I’ve learned in the mediation business,
it’s that you shouldn’t make assumptions.

Which is exactly what I realized when I saw the name of
the e-mail’s sender. It wasn’t one of my coworkers at the Mission
Academy, let alone a parent or a student. It wasn’t a family mem-
ber or friend, either.

It was someone I hadn’t had any contact with in a long, long
time—someone I’d hoped never to hear from again. Just seeing
his name in my in-box caused my blood to boil . . . or freeze. I
wasn’t sure which.

Forgetting about the boots, I clicked on the e-mail’s text.

To: suzesimon@missionacademy.edu
Fr: paulslater@slaterindustries.com
Re: Your House
Date: November 16 1:00:02 PM PST

Hi, Suze.

I’m sure you’ve heard by now that my new company, Slater Industries,
has purchased your old house on 99 Pine Crest Road, as well as the
surrounding properties.

You’ve never been a sentimental kind of girl, so I doubt you’ll have a
problem with the fact that we’ll be tearing your house down in order
to make way for a new Slater Properties development of moderately
sized family homes (see attached plans). My numbers are below. Give me a call if you want to talk.

You know, it really bothers me that we haven’t stayed in touch over the years, especially since we were once so close.

Regards to Jesse.

Best,

Paul Slater

P.S.: Don’t tell me you’re still upset over what happened graduation night. It was only a kiss.

I stared at the screen, aware that my heart rate had sped up. Sped up? I was so angry I wanted to ram my fist into the monitor, as if by doing so I could somehow ram it into Paul Slater’s rock-hard abs. I’d hurt my knuckles doing either, but I’d release a lot of pent-up aggression.

Did I have a problem, as Paul had so blithely put it, with the fact that he’d purchased my old house—the rambling Victorian home in the Carmel Hills that my mom and stepdad had lovingly renovated nearly a decade earlier for their new blended family (myself and my stepbrothers Jake, Brad, and David)—and was now intending to tear it down in order to make way for some kind of hideous subdivision?

Yeah. Yeah, I had a problem with that, all right, and with nearly every other thing he’d written in his stupid e-mail.

And not because I’m sentimental, either.

He had the nerve to call what he’d done to me on graduation
night “only a kiss”? Funny how all this time I’d been considering it something else entirely.

Fortunately for Paul, I’d never been stupid enough to mention it to my boyfriend, Jesse, because if I had, there’d have been a murder.

But since Hispanic males make up about 37 percent of the total prison population in California (and Paul evidently had enough money to buy the entire street on which I used to live), I didn’t see a real strong chance of Jesse getting off on justifiable homicide, though that’s what Paul’s murder would have been, in my opinion.

Without stopping to think—huge mistake—I pulled my cell phone from the back pocket of my jeans and angrily punched in one of the numbers Paul had listed. It rang only once before I heard his voice—deeper than I remembered—intone smoothly, “This is Paul Slater.”

“What the hell is your problem?”


“Shut the hell up.”

I’d like to point out that I didn’t say hell either time. There’s a swear jar on my desk—Father Dominic put it there due to my tendency to curse. I’m supposed to stick a dollar in it for every four-letter word I utter, five dollars for every F-bomb I drop.

But since there was no one in the office to overhear me, I let the strongest weapons in my verbal arsenal fly freely. Part of my duties in the administrative offices of the Junípero Serra Mission Academy (grades K–12)—where I’m currently trying to earn some of the practicum credits I need to get my certification as a school counselor—are to answer the phone and check e-mails while all of my supervisors are at lunch.
What do my duties not include? Swearing. Or making personal phone calls to my enemies.

“I just wanted to find out where you are,” I said, “so I can drive to that location and then slowly dismember you, something I obviously should have done the day we met.”

“Same old Suze,” Paul said fondly. “How long has it been, anyway, six years? Almost that. I don’t think I’ve heard from you since the night of our high-school graduation, when your step-brother Brad got so incredibly drunk on Goldschläger that he hurled all over Kelly Prescott’s Louboutins. Ah, memories.”

“He wasn’t the only one who was drunk, if I recall,” I reminded him. “And that isn’t all that happened that night. You know what I’ve been doing since then, besides getting my counseling degree? Working out, so that when we meet again, I can—”

I launched into a highly anatomical description of just where, precisely, I intended to insert Paul’s head after I physically removed it from his body.

“Suze, Suze, Suze.” Paul feigned shock. “So much hostility. I find it hard to believe they allowed someone like you into a counseling training program. Have the people in charge there ever even met you?”

“If they met you, they’d be wondering the same thing I am: how a manipulative freak like you isn’t locked up in a maximum-security penitentiary.”

“What can I say, Simon? You’ve always brought out the romantic in me.”

“I think you’re confusing the word romantic with sociopathic sleazebag. And you’re lucky it was Debbie Mancuso and not Jesse who came along when you were pawing at me that night like an oversexed howler monkey, because if it had been, he’d—”

“—have given me another one of those trademarked beatings
of his that I so richly deserve. Yes, yes, I know, Suze, I’ve heard all this before.”

Paul sighed. He and my boyfriend have never gotten along, mainly because Jesse had been an NCDP for a while and Paul—who, like me, was born with the so-called “gift” to communicate with those trapped in the spirit world—had been determined to keep him that way, mostly so that Paul could get into my pants.

Fortunately, he’d failed on both accounts.

“Could we move on, please?” Paul asked. “This is very entertaining, but I want to get to the part about how I now own your family home. You heard the news, right? Not about your house—I can tell by your less than graceful reaction that you only just found out about that. I mean about how Gramps finally croaked, and left me the family fortune?”

“Oh, no. Paul, I’m—”

I bit my lip. His grandfather had been cantankerous at times, but he’s also been the only person in Paul’s family—besides his little brother, Jack—who’d genuinely seemed to care about him. I wasn’t surprised to hear that he’d passed on, however. The old man had been in pretty bad shape when I’d met him from “shifting” back and forth too often through time, a skill mediators possess, but are warned not to use. It’s considered hazardous to their health.

Still, it felt wrong to say I’m sorry for your loss to Paul, considering he was acting like the world’s biggest jackhole.

It didn’t end up mattering. Paul wanted something from me, but it wasn’t my condolences.

“Yeah, you’re talking to one of Los Angeles magazine’s most eligible bachelors,” he went on, oblivious. “Of course my parents aren’t too happy about it. They had the nerve to take me to court to contest the will, can you believe that?”

“Uh . . . yes?”
“Funny. But justice prevailed, and I’m now the president and CEO of Slater Industries. I’ve got a home on both coasts and a private jet to fly between them, but—as the magazine put it—no one special with whom to share them.” I could hear the mocking tone in his voice. “Interested in being that special someone, Suze?”

“I’ll pass, thanks,” I said coolly. “Especially since you can’t think of anything more creative to do with your new fortune than knock down other people’s houses. Which I don’t think you can even do legally. Mine’s nearly two hundred years old. It’s still got the original carved newel post on the staircase from when it was built in 1850. It has stained-glass windows. It’s a historic landmark.”

“Actually, it isn’t. Oh, it’s quaintly charming in its own way, I suppose, but nothing historic ever occurred there. Well, except for what happened between you and me,” he smirked, “and considering the way you’ve been avoiding me these past few years, I guess I’m not the only one who remembers that as being historically significant.”

“Nothing ever happened between us, Paul,” I said. He was only trying to get under my skin, the same way he’d tried to get under my bra at graduation. That’s how he operated, much like a chigger, or various other bloodsucking parasites. “Nothing good, anyway.”

“Ouch, Simon! You sure know how to hurt a guy. I distinctly recall one afternoon in my bedroom when you did not seem at all repulsed by my advances. Why, you even—”

“—walked out on you, remember? And no one can tear down a house that old. That has to be a violation of some kind of city code.”

“You slip enough money to the right politicians, Simon, you can get permits to do anything you want in the great state of California. That’s why they call it the land of opportunity. Congratula-
tions, by the way, on your stepfather’s success. Who would have thought that little home-improvement show of Andy Ackerman’s would become an international sensation. Where’d your parents move to with all the money he’s raking in from the syndication rights? Bel Air? Or the Hills? Don’t worry, it happens to everyone. I’m sure they haven’t let fame go to their heads. Your mother is a lovely woman with such gracious manners, which is more than I can say for her only daughter—”

“You say one more word about my mother,” I snarled, “and I will end you, Paul, like I should have done years ago. I will find you, wherever you are, remove your head from your body, and stuff it up your—”

“You already used that one,” Paul reminded me. “So I take it that you do have a sentimental side, Suze. How surprising. I always knew you had a soft spot for that undead boyfriend of yours, of course, but I never expected it to extend to real estate. Oh, wait—Jesse must be more than just a boyfriend now that you managed to reunite his body with his soul. I’m afraid I’ve been a bit out of the loop lately—and who has time to read their alumni newsletter anyway? Have you two tied the knot? Wait, silly me—of course you have. It’s been six years since high school! I know a love as passionate as the one you and that necromantic cholo shared couldn’t possibly wait six years to be consummated. And from what I remember, Hector ‘Jesse’ de Silva respected you far too much ever to try to get into your pants without the sanctity of holy matrimony.”

I felt my cheeks begin to burn. I told myself it was indignation at his racism—necromantic cholo? Really?—but I knew some of it was due to a different emotion entirely. I was happy Paul wasn’t in the same room with me, or he’d surely have noticed. He’d always been discomfortingly sharp-eyed.

“Jesse and I are engaged,” I said, controlling—with an effort—
my impulse to swear at him some more. In the past, anytime Paul
was able to evoke any kind of emotion from me at all—even a
negative one—it pleased him.

And the last thing I'd ever wanted to do was please Paul Slater.

“Engaged?” Paul crowed. “What is this, the 1950s? People still
get engaged? Do people even get married? I mean, straight people?”

I really should have thought before I acted and never called
him in the first place, I thought miserably, eyeing a poster Ms. Diaz,
the Mission Academy guidance counselor, had stuck on the wall
over by the entrance to her office. It was one of those posters
ubiquitous to the profession, a blown-up photo of a kitten strug-
gling to hang on to a tree branch emblazoned with the words
Aim High!

Too late, I realized I ought to have aimed high and approached
Paul with cool dispassion, not let my emotions get in the way.
That was the only way to handle him.

But he'd always been good at pushing my buttons.

All my buttons.

“Isn’t an engagement a little old-school for a modern girl like
you, Simon?” he went on. “Oh, wait, I forgot... Walking Dead
Boy likes to do things the old-school way, doesn’t he? Does that
mean”—he sounded more pleased with himself than ever—“you
two are waiting for marriage?”

I felt another overwhelming urge to lash out and punch
something, anything, maybe even the tabby kitten in the poster.
But the wall behind it was three feet thick, built in the 1700s, and
had withstood many a Northern California earthquake. It would
definitely withstand my fist.

“That is none of your business,” I said, so icily that I was sur-
prised the phone in my hand didn’t freeze to my face.

I was trying hard not to clue Paul in to how annoyed I was
with my boyfriend’s prehistoric notion that we not only couldn’t
marry until he was in a financial position to support me and whatever children we might have (even though I’d assured him I was on the pill and planned to stay on it until I’d finished my MA and had a job with full dental, at least), we couldn’t move in together.

Even worse, Jesse insisted we had to wait until we’d formally exchanged vows—in a church, with him in a suit, and me in a white dress and veil, no less—before we could enjoy conjugal relations. It was the least he could do, he insisted, out of “respect” for all that I had done for him, not only bringing him back to life, but providing him with a life worth living.

I’d let him know many, many times, and on no uncertain terms, that I could live without that kind of respect.

But what else could you expect from a guy who’d been born during the reign of Queen Victoria? Not to mention murdered in—then buried behind, then spent 150 years haunting—the very same house Paul was threatening to tear down?

This had to have something to do with why Paul was tearing it down. I’d always suspected Paul of being jealous that in the end I’d chosen the ghost instead of him.

But how could I not? Even in the days when Jesse hadn’t had a pulse, he’d had more heart than Paul.

“Waiting for marriage,” Paul repeated. He was hooting with laughter that bordered on tears. “Oh, God. That is so sweet. It really is, Simon. I think your stepdad’s TV show is about the wrong person. They should be filming you and that boyfriend of yours, and call it The Last Virgins. I swear it’d be the highest-rated show since Ghost Mediator.”

“Go ahead,” I said, lifting my heels to my desk and crossing my feet at the ankles. “Laugh it up, Paul. You know what Jesse’s doing right now? His medical residency.”

That hit home. Paul abruptly stopped laughing.

“That’s right,” I went on, beginning to enjoy myself. “While
you’ve been out being named one of LA’s most eligible bachelors for doing nothing but inheriting your grandfather’s money. Jesse passed the MCATs with one of the highest scores in California state history and got a medical degree at UCSF. Now he’s doing a pediatrics fellowship at St. Francis Medical Center in Monterey. He just has to finish up his residency there, and he’ll be fully licensed to practice medicine. Do you know what that means?”

Paul’s voice lost some of its laughter. “He stole someone else’s identity? Because that’s the only way I can see someone who used to be a walking corpse getting into UCSF. Except as a practice cadaver, of course.”

“Jesse was born in California, you idiot.”

“Yeah, before it became a state.”

“What it means,” I went on, tipping back in my chair, “is that next year, after Jesse’s board-certified, and I’ve gotten my certification, we’ll be getting married.”

At least, if everything went according to schedule, and Jesse won the private grant he’d applied for to open his own practice. I didn’t see the point in mentioning any of these “if’s” to Paul . . . or that I didn’t know how much longer I could go on swimming laps in the dinky pool in the courtyard of my apartment building, trying to work out my frustration about my fiancé and his very nineteenth-century views about love, honor, and sex . . . views I’m determined to respect as much as he (unfortunately) respects my body.

Things have gotten steamy between us enough times for me to know that what’s behind the front of those tight jeans of Jesse’s will be worth the wait, though. Our wedding night is going to be epic.

Unless one of those many “if’s” doesn’t work out, or something happens to get the groom thrown in jail. Of all the obstacles I’d envisioned getting in the way of our very much deserved
wedding night, Paul popping around again was the last thing I’d expected.

“But more important, it means someday we’ll be opening our own practice, specializing in helping sick kids,” I went on. “Not that helping other people is a concept I’d expect you to understand.”

“That’s not true,” Paul said. There was no laughter in his voice at all now. “I’ve always wanted to help you, Suze.”

“Is that what you call what you did to me graduation night, when you said you had a present you had to give to me in private, so I followed you outside and you threw me up against the mission wall and shoved your hand up my skirt?” I asked him, acidly.

“You consider that helping me?”

“I do,” he said. “I was trying to help teach you not to waste your time on formerly deceased Latino do-gooders who consider it a sin to get nasty without a marriage license.”

“Well,” I said, lowering my feet from my desktop. “I’m hanging up now. It was not at all a pleasure speaking to you again after all these years, Paul. Please die slowly and painfully. Buh-bye.”

“Wait,” Paul said urgently before I could press End. “Don’t go. I wanted to say—”

“What? That you won’t tear down my house if I take lessons from you in how to be a more effective mediator? Sorry, Paul, that might have worked when I was sixteen, but I’m too old to fall for that one again.”

He sounded offended. “The thing with your house is just business. I only told you about it as a courtesy. What I wanted to say is that I’m sorry.”

Paul Slater had never apologized for anything before . . . and meant it. He caught me off guard.

“Sorry for what?”

“Sorry for what I said about Jesse just now, and sorry for what
happened that night. You’re right, Suze, I’d had way too much to drink. I know that’s no excuse, but it’s the truth. Honestly, I barely remember what happened.”

Was he kidding? “Let me remind you. After you tried to nail me against that wall, I gave you a present. It was with my knee, to your groinal area. Does that refresh your memory?”

“A man doesn’t forget that kind of pain, Simon. But what happened after that is a bit hazy. Is that when Debbie Mancuso came along?”

“It was. She seemed eager to tend to the wound I gave you.”

“Then you should be the one apologizing to me. Debbie’s ministrations were far from tender. She straddled me like she thought I was a damned gigolo—”

“Watch it,” I growled. “Debbie’s married to my stepbrother Brad now. And obviously I didn’t knee you nearly as hard as I should have if you were still able to get it on with Debbie afterward. The last thing you’re ever going to hear from me is an apology.”

“Then accept mine, and let me make it up to you. I have a proposal.”

I barked with laughter. “Oh, right!”

“Simon, I’m serious.”

“That’ll be a first.”

“It could save your home.”

I stopped laughing. “I’m listening. Maybe.”

“Give me another chance.”

“I said I’m listening.”

“No, that’s the proposal. Give me another chance.”
The school office was air-conditioned, but the shiver I felt down my spine had nothing to do with the fact that my supervisors (some of whom dress in religious habit) liked to keep the thermostat at a crisp sixty-five degrees.

“I’m sorry,” I said, glad the shiver didn’t show in my voice. “I’m actually very busy and important and don’t have time for rich jerks from my past who want to make amends. But I wish you luck on your path toward transformative enlightenment. Bye now.”

“Suze, wait. Don’t you want to save your house?”

“It isn’t mine anymore, remember? It’s yours. So I don’t care what happens to it.”

“Come on, Suze. This is the first time in six years you’ve actually called me back when I’ve reached out to you. I know you care—about the house.”

He was right. I’d been upset when Mom told me she and my stepdad, Andy, were selling it—much more upset than Jesse when he heard the news.
“It’s only a house, Susannah,” he’d said. “Your parents haven’t lived there in years, and neither have we. It has nothing to do with us.”

“How can you say that?” I’d cried. “That house has everything to do with us. If it weren’t for that house, we’d never have found one another!”

He’d laughed. “Maybe, querida. Then again, maybe not. I have a feeling I’d have found you, and you me, no matter where we were. That house is only a place, and not our place, not anymore. Our place is together, wherever we happen to be.”

Then he’d pulled me close and kissed me. It had been hard to feel bad about anything after that.

I guess I could understand why the big, rambling Victorian on 99 Pine Crest Road meant nothing to him. To Jesse, it’s the house in which he was killed.

To me, however, it was the house in which we’d met and slowly, over time and through many misunderstandings, fell in love—though it had seemed for years like a doomed romance: he was a Non-Compliant Deceased Person. I was a girl whose job it was to rid the world of his kind. It had ended up working out, but barely.

While the so-called “gift” of communicating with the dead might sound nifty, believe me, when a ghost shows up in your bedroom—even one who looks as good with his shirt off as Jesse does—the reality isn’t at all the way they portray it in the movies or on TV or the stupid new hit reality show Ghost Mediator (which is, I’m sorry to say, based on a best-selling video and role-playing game of the same name).

The “reality” is heartbreaking and sometimes quite violent . . . as my need for new boots illustrated.

Except, of course, that in the end it was my “gift” that had enabled me to meet and get to know Jesse, and even help return
his soul to his corporal self, though my boss and fellow mediator, Mission Academy principal Father Dominic, likes to think that was “a miracle” we should be grateful for. I’m still on the fence about whether or not I believe in miracles. There’s a rational and scientific explanation for everything. Even the “gift” of seeing ghosts seems to have a genetic component. There’s probably a scientific explanation for what happened with Jesse, too.

One thing there’s no explanation for—at least that I’ve found so far—is Paul. Even though he’s the one who showed me the nifty time-jumping trick that eventually led to the “miracle” that brought Jesse back to the living from the dead, Paul didn’t do it out of the goodness of his heart. He did it out of a desire to get in my pants.

“Look, Paul,” I said. “You’re right. I do care. But about people, not houses. So why don’t you take your amends and your fancy new housing development and your private jet and stick them all up your external urethral orifice, which in case you don’t know is the medical term for dick hole. Adios, muchacho.”

I started to hang up until the sound of Paul’s laughter stopped me.

“Dick hole,” he repeated. “Really, Simon?”

I couldn’t help placing the phone to my ear again. “Yes, really. I’m highly educated in the correct medical terms for sexual organs now, since I’m engaged to a doctor. And that isn’t just where you can stick your amends, by the way, it’s also what you are.”

“Fine. But what about Jesse?”

“What about Jesse?”

“I could see you not caring about me, or about the house, but I think you’d be at least a little concerned about your boyfriend.”

“I am, but I fail to see what your tearing down my house has to do with him.”

“Only everything. Are you telling me you really don’t re-
member all those Egyptian funerary texts of Gramps’ that we used
to study together after school? That hurts, Suze. That really hurts.
Two mixed-up mediators, poring over ancient hieroglyphics . . . I
thought we had something special.”

When you’re a regular girl and a guy is horny for you, he
invites you over to his house after school to watch videos.

When you’re a mediator, he invites you over to study his
grandfather’s ancient Egyptian funerary texts, so you can learn
more about your calling.

Yeah. I was real popular in high school.

“What about them?” I demanded.

“Oh, not much. I just thought you’d remember what the
Book of the Dead said about what happens when a dwelling place
that was once haunted is demolished . . . how a demon disturbed
from its final resting place will unleash the wrath of eternal hell-
fire upon all it encounters, cursing even those it once held dear
with the rage of a thousand suns. That kind of thing.”

I swore—but silently, to myself.

Paul’s grandfather, in addition to being absurdly wealthy,
had also been one of the world’s most preeminent Egyptologists.
When it came to obscure, ancient curses written on crumbling
pieces of papyrus, the guy usually didn’t get it wrong.

That’s why I was swearing. I’d been wrong: Paul wasn’t calling
to make amends. This was something way, way worse.

“Nice try, Paul,” I said, attempting to keep my voice light and
my heart rate steady. “Except I’m pretty sure that one was about
mummies buried in pyramids, not ghosts who once haunted resi-
dential homes in Northern California. And while Jesse was never
exactly an angel, he was no demon, either.”

“Maybe not to you. But he treated me like—”

“Because you were always trying to exorcise him out of exis-
tence. That would make anyone feel resentful. And 99 Pine Crest
Road wasn’t his final resting place. Even before he became alive again, we found his remains and moved them.”

I couldn’t see Jesse’s headstone from my desk, but I knew it was sitting only a few dozen yards away, in the oldest part of the mission cemetery. On holy days of obligation, it’s the fifth graders’ job to leave carnations on it (as they do all the historic gravestones in the cemetery), as well as pull any weeds that might have sprouted from it.

The fact that there’s nothing buried under Jesse’s grave—since he happens to be alive and well—is something I don’t see any reason to let the fifth-graders know. Kids benefit from being outdoors. Too much time playing video games has been shown to slow their social skills.

“So tearing down the place where he died isn’t going to hurt him,” I went on. “I’m not personally a fan of subdivisions, but hey, if that’s what floats your boat, go for it. Anything else? I really do have to go now, I’ve got a ton of things to do to get ready for the wedding.”

Paul laughed. Apparently my officious tone hadn’t fooled him.

“Oh, Suze. I love how so much in the world has changed, but not you. That boyfriend of yours haunted that crummy old house forever, waiting around for . . . just what was he waiting for, anyway? Murder victims are the most stubborn of all spooks to get rid of.” He said the word _spooks_ the way someone in a detergent commercial would say the word _stains_. “All they want is justice—or, as in Jesse’s case, revenge.”

“That isn’t true.” I made the mistake of interrupting, and got rewarded by more of Paul’s derisive laughter.

“Oh, isn’t it? What was it you think he was waiting around for all those years, then, Suze? You?”

I felt my cheeks heat up again. “No.”
“Of course you do,” Paul smirked. “But that love story of yours may not have such a happy ending after all.”

“Really, Paul? And why is that? Because of something written on a two-thousand-year-old papyrus scroll? I think you’ve been watching too many episodes of *Ghost Mediator*.”

His voice went cold. “I’m just telling you what the curse says—that restoring a soul to the body it once inhabited is a practice best left to the gods.”

“What are you even talking about? You’re the one who—”

“Suze, I only did what people like you and me are supposed to—attempt to help an unhappy soul pass on to his just rewards.”

“By sneaking back through time to keep him from dying in the first place so I’d never meet him?”

“Never mind what I did. Let’s talk about what you did. The curse goes on to say that any human who attempts to resurrect a corpse will be the first to suffer its wrath when the demon inside it is woken.”

“Well, that’s ridiculous, since there’s no demon inside Jesse, and I didn’t resurrect him. It was a miracle. Ask Father Dom.”

“Really, Suze? Since when did you start believing in miracles?” I hated that he knew me so well. “And when did you start believing that you could tinker around with space and time—and life and death—without having to pay the consequences? If you help to create a monster, you should be prepared for that monster to come back and bite you in the ass. Or are you completely unfamiliar with the entire Hollywood horror movie industry?”

“Fiction,” I said, my mouth dry. “Horror movies are fiction.”

“And the concept of good and evil? Is that fiction? Think about it, Simon. You can’t have one without the other. There has to be a balance. You got your good. Ghost Boy’s alive now, and giving back to the community with his healing hands . . . which
makes me want to puke all over myself, by the way. But where’s the bad? Have you not noticed there’s something missing from this little miracle of yours?”

“Um,” I said, struggling to come up with a flippant reply.

Because he was right. As any Californian worth his flip-flops could tell you, you can’t have yin without yang, surf without sand, a latte without soy (because no one in California drinks full dairy, except for me, but I was born in New York City).

“I assume the bad is . . . you.” This was weak, but it was the best I could come up with, given the terror slowly creeping up my spine.

“Very funny, Suze. But you’re going to have to come up with something better. Humor doesn’t work as a defense against the forces of evil. Which are dwelling, as you very well know, inside your so-called miracle boy, just waiting for the chance to lash out and kill you and everyone you love for what you did.”

Now he’d gone too far. “I do not know that. How do you know that? You haven’t even seen him in six years. You don’t know anything about us. You can’t just come here and—”

“I don’t have to have seen him to know that he didn’t escape from having lived as a spook for a century and a half without having brushed up against some pretty malevolent shit. De Silva didn’t just walk through the valley of the shadow of death, Simon. He set up camp and toasted marshmallows there. No one can come out of something like that unscathed, however many kids he’s curing of cancer now, or however many wedding-gift registries his girlfriend’s signing up for in order to assure herself that everything’s just fine and dandy.”

“I haven’t signed up for a single gift registry,” I protested. “And that’s not fair. You might as well be saying that anyone who’s ever suffered from any trauma is destined never to overcome it, no matter how hard they try.”
“Really? You’re going to fall back on grad school psycho babble?” His voice dripped with disgust. “I expected better from you. Can you honestly tell me, Simon, that when you look into de Silva’s big brown telenovela eyes, you never see any shadows there?”

“No. No, no, of course I do, sometimes, because he’s human, and human beings aren’t happy one hundred percent of the time.”

“Those aren’t the kind of shadows I’m talking about, and you know it.”

I realized I was squeezing my phone so hard an ugly red impression of its hard plastic casing had sunk into my skin. I had to switch hands.

Because he was right. I did see occasional glimpses of darkness in Jesse’s eyes . . . and not sadness, either.

And while of course I hadn’t been lying when I’d told Paul about Jesse’s desire to help heal the sick and most downtrodden of our society—it was an integral part of his personality—I did worry sometimes that the reason Jesse fought so desperately against death when he saw it coming for his weakest patients was that he feared it was also coming back for him . . .

Or, worse, that there was still a part of it inside him.

If what the Book of the Dead said was true, and Paul really did tear down 99 Pine Crest Road, there was no telling what that destruction might unleash.

And it didn’t seem likely we could count on yet another miracle to save us. A person is only given so many miracles in a lifetime, and it felt like Jesse and I had received more than our fair share.

If miracles even exist. Which I’m not saying they do.

As if he’d once again sensed what I was thinking, Paul chuckled. “See what I mean, Simon? You can take the boy out of the darkness, but you can’t take the darkness out of the boy.”
“Fine,” I spat. “What do you want from me, exactly, in order to keep you from tearing down my house and releasing the Curse of the Papyrus, or whatever it is? Forgiveness? Great. I forgive you. Will you go now and leave me alone?”

“No, but thanks for the offer,” Paul said, smooth as silk. “And it’s called the Curse of the Dead. There’s no such thing as the Curse of the Papyrus. Curses are written on papyrus. They’re not—”

“Just tell me what you want, Paul.”

“I told you what I want. Another chance.”

“You’re going to have to elaborate. Another chance at what?”

“You. One night. If I can’t win you over from de Silva in one night, I’m not worthy of the name Slater.”

“You have got to be kidding me.”

If I hadn’t felt so sick to my stomach, I’d have laughed. I tried not to let my conflicting feelings—scorn, fear, confusion—show in my voice. Paul fed off feelings the way black holes fed off stars.

“I’m not, actually,” he said. “I told you, it’s never a good idea to joke when the forces of evil are involved.”

“Paul. First of all, you can’t win back something you never had.”

“Suze, where is this coming from? I really thought you and I had something once. Are you honestly trying to tell me it was all in my head? Because I’ve had a lot of time to think it over, and I have to say, I don’t agree.”

“Second of all, I’m engaged. That means I’m off the market. And even if I wasn’t, threatening to tear down a multimillion-dollar house and release some kind of evil spirit that may or may not live inside my boyfriend is beneath even—”

He cut me off. “What do I care if you’re engaged? If Hector doesn’t put enough value on your relationship to bother consummating it”—Paul put an unpleasantly rolled trill on the second syllable of Jesse’s given name—“which I know he doesn’t, you’re still fair game as far as I’m concerned.”

“And you and I are non-believers,” Paul pointed out. “So I don’t understand why you’d want to be with a guy who believes that—”

“I never said I was a non-believer. I believe in facts. And the fact is, I want to be with Jesse because he makes me feel like a better person than I suspect I actually am.”

There was a momentary silence from the other end of the phone. For a second or two I thought I might actually have gotten through to him, made him see that what he was doing was wrong. Paul did have some goodness in him—I know, because I’d seen it in action once or twice. Even complete monsters can have one or two likable characteristics. Hitler liked dogs, for instance.

But unfortunately the good part of Paul was buried beneath so much narcissism and greed, it hardly ever got a chance to show itself, and now was no exception.

“Wow, Simon, that was a real Hallmark moment,” he snarked.

“You know I could make you feel good—”

“Well, you’ve gotten off to an excellent start by threatening to turn my fiancé into a demon.”

“Don’t shoot the messenger, baby. I’m not the bad guy here. If I weren’t the one tearing down your house, it was going to be some other filthy-rich real-estate developer.”

“I highly doubt that.”

“What the hell, Simon? You should be grateful to me. I’m trying to do you a solid. Where is all this hostility coming from?”

“My heart.”

“This is bullshit.” Now Paul sounded pissed off. “Why should I have to respect some other guy’s beliefs? It’s called free enterprise. Since when can’t a man try to win something that’s still on the open market?”
“Did we just travel back through time again to the year 1850? Are women something you believe you can actually own?”

“Funny. I’ll give you that, you’ve always been funny, Simon. That’s the thing I’ve always liked best about you. Well, that, and your ass. You still have a great ass, don’t you? I tried to look up photos of you on social media, but you keep a surprisingly low profile. Oh, shit, wait, never mind. You’re a feminist, right? You probably think that ass remark was sexist.”

“That’s what you’re worried about? That I’m going to think you’re sexist? Not that I’m going to report you to the cops for trying to blackmail me into going out with you?”

“I’m afraid you’re going to find any wrongdoing on my part a little difficult to prove to the cops, Suze, even if you’ve been recording this phone call, which I’m guessing you only thought of doing just now. No monetary sums have been mentioned, and even if you call it coercion, I’m pretty sure you’re going to have a hard time explaining to the cops exactly how my tearing down a property I legally own is threatening you. Though if you mention the stuff about the ancient Egyptian funerary texts, it will probably give the po-po a good laugh.”

Unfortunately, he was right. That was the part that burned the most. Until he added, “Oh, and I’m going to expect a little more than you merely going out with me. Not to be crude, but virtue is hardly something I value. Unlike Hector, I’m not particularly marriage minded. But I guess being married to you might be fun . . . like being a storm chaser. You’d never know what to expect from day to day. But I’m getting ahead of myself. First, our date—it will definitely have to include physical intimacy. Otherwise, how else will I be able to show you I’ve changed?”

I was so stunned, I was temporarily unable to form a reply, even a four-letter one, which for me was unusual.

“Don’t worry,” he said soothingly. “It’s been a long time since
I’ve touched Goldschläger. I’ve vastly improved my technique. I won’t throw you against another wall.”

“Wow,” I said, when I could finally bring myself to speak. “What happened to you? When did you become so hard up for female company that you had to resort to sextortion? Have you ever thought of trying Tinder?”

He laughed. “Good one! See, I’ve missed this. I’ve missed us.”

“There was never any us, you perv. What happened between you and Kelly, anyway?”

“Kelly?” Paul hooted some more. “Kelly Prescott? I guess you haven’t been reading the online alumni newsletters, either.”

“No,” I admitted guiltily. The guilt was only because my best friend, CeeCee, wrote the newsletter for our graduating class, and I paid no attention to it.

“Well, let’s just say Kelly and I weren’t exactly meant for each other—not like you and me. But don’t worry about old Kel. She’s rebounded with some guy twice her age, but with twice as much money as I have—which is saying a lot, because as I mentioned, I’m flush. Kelly Prescott became Mrs. Kelly . . . Walters, I think is what it said on the announcement. She had some huge reception at the Pebble Beach resort. What, you weren’t invited?”

“I don’t recall. My social calendar’s pretty full these days.”

I was lying, of course. I’d been invited to Kelly’s wedding, but only because I was related through marriage to her best friend Debbie, who’d been the maid of honor. I’d politely declined, citing a (fake) prior commitment, and no one had mentioned missing me.

Weddings aren’t really my thing, anyway. Large gatherings of the living tend to attract the attention of the undead, and I usually end up having to mediate NCDPs between swallows of beer.

My own wedding is going to be different. I’ll kick the butt of any dead head who shows up there uninvited.
“So when are we having dinner?” Paul asked. “Or, more to the point, what comes after dinner. And I’m not talking about dessert.”

“When Jupiter aligns with planet Go Screw Yourself.”

“Aw, Suze. Your sexy pillow talk is what I’ve missed most about you. I’ll be in Carmel this weekend. I’ll text you the deets about where to meet up then. But really, it doesn’t sound like you’re taking anything I’ve just told you about the potential threat to your boyfriend’s life very seriously.”

“I do take it seriously. Seriously enough to be looking forward to seeing you as it will allow me to fulfill my long-held dream of sticking my foot up your ass.”

“You can put any body part of yours in any orifice of mine you please, Simon, so long as I get to do the same to you.”

I was so angry I suggested that he suck a piece of anatomy I technically don’t possess, since I’m female.

It was unfortunate that Sister Ernestine, the vice-principal, chose that particular moment to return from lunch.

“What did you say, Susannah?” she demanded.

“Nothing.” I hung up on Paul and stuffed my phone back into the pocket of my jeans. I was going to have to deal with him—and whether or not there was any truth to this “curse” he was talking about—at another time. “How was lunch, Sister?”

“We’ll discuss how much you owe the swear jar later, young lady. We have bigger problems at the moment.”

Did we ever. I figured that out as soon as I saw the dead girl behind her.
I’ve been seeing the souls of the dead who’ve left unfinished business on earth for as long as I can remember. I “mediated” my first ghost—mediate is what we pros call it when we help a troubled spirit cross from this world to the next, which, unless you happen to be Paul Slater, we do without charge—when I was just a toddler.

I can remember it like it was yesterday: I think that old lady ghost was more frightened of me than I was of her.

But this was the first time I’d ever seen a ghost clutching a wad of paper towels to a wound to staunch the blood flowing from it.

Forgetting to keep my cool, let alone my secret (that I see dead people), I leapt from my office desk chair, crying, “Oh, my God!”

It took me a few seconds to realize that if she was recently deceased, this girl wouldn’t still be gushing blood.

Nor would the full-bosomed, gray-haired figure of the vice-principal be steering her toward me, saying with forced cheer,
“It’s all right, Becca, dear. Everything’s going to be all right. Miss Simon will get that little cut bandaged up, and this will all be straightened out.”

In that instant I knew:
This girl was very much alive.
Also that Sister Ernestine was crazy. That “little cut” on Becca’s arm didn’t look so little to me, judging from the amount of blood pumping out of it. It looked like a full-on gusher. And none of this was going to be “straightened out” anytime soon, especially since the phone in my back pocket was buzzing.

Paul was calling back, of course, to make sure I’d be showing up for our “dessert.”

“Susannah.” There wasn’t the faintest trace of cheer in Sister Ernestine’s voice when she addressed me.

This was not unusual. I’d never been one of Sister Ernestine’s favorite students back when I’d attended school here, and six years later she’d been appalled at the idea of hiring me. She had preferred the former full-time administrative assistant, Ms. Carper, but due to cutbacks, dwindling enrollment, Father Dominic’s insistence that I’d make a fine, read: free, intern, and Ms. Carper’s sudden decision to run off to India with her married Bikram Yoga instructor, the nun had had no choice.

“Where is Father Dominic?” Sister Ernestine demanded.

“He’s at that conference in San Luis Obispo,” I reminded her, my fingers hovering over the phone. Not my cell—I let Paul’s call go to voice mail—but the office phone. “He won’t be back until tonight. Sister, I really think we should call 911, don’t—”

The nun cut me off, her gaze darting to the open doorway to the guidance counselor’s office on the other side of my desk.

“Becca’s fine. Put that phone down. Where is Miss Diaz?”

“Lunch,” I said. “Ms. Diaz said she’d be back in half an hour,” I added.
What Ms. Diaz *actually* said was that she was going down to Carmel Beach to “split a footlong” with Mr. Gillarte, the track coach and PE instructor, but as they were trying to keep their sizzling affair with cold cuts and one another on the down-low from the higher-ups, I obviously couldn’t mention this.

What I also couldn’t mention to Sister Ernestine was the second emergency I could now see blooming on the horizon. That’s because my initial assessment of the situation had been correct:

There *was* a dead girl in the room.

It just wasn’t Becca, the student Sister Ernestine had escorted into the office, who was barely managing to keep the blood flow from her left wrist under control with paper towels someone—I was guessing the good sister—had seized from one of the rest-rooms.

Younger than Becca by about six or eight years, the dead girl was peeping out from behind Becca’s skirt. She seemed to be trying to make herself as transparent and unnoticeable as possible.

It wasn’t working, though. Her otherworldly glow was bright enough that I could see it even with the sunlight streaming through the office’s tall, wide casement windows. It was as noticeable to me as the blood on the living girl.

No one else could see it, however. No one but me.

There wasn’t time to deal with a dead girl, though. Not when there was a living one in the same room, dripping blood down her own shirt.

I went into Ms. Diaz’s office and grabbed the first-aid kit. Since the Junípero Serra Mission Academy lacks not only a full-time (paid) administrative assistant but a school nurse, I’ve been filling in as both.

My cell phone chimed again. I knew without pulling out my phone that this time it wasn’t Paul, but Jesse calling from St. Francis, the newly renovated medical center in Monterey where he’d
been lucky enough to win his fellowship . . . although I sometimes wondered, in spite of Jesse’s being a brilliant medical student, how much luck had to do with it. St. Francis had at one time been a Catholic hospital, and Father Dominic’s influence over the local archdiocese is considerable.

The ringtone I’d assigned Jesse was Elton John’s oldie but still goodie “Someone Saved My Life Tonight.” Jesse had saved my life so many times—and I his—that it was pretty much a no-brainer that this was our song, especially given the line about butterflies being free to fly away. We’d given each other the freedom to fly away, but we’d chosen instead to stay together, despite what had seemed, at times, like insurmountable odds against us.

Now, even though Jesse and I no longer shared a mediator/non-compliant-deceased-person bond, he still always seemed to know when my life needed saving, or even when I was merely feeling uneasy . . . like because there were a couple of very distressed girls—one living, one not so much—standing in my office.

I told myself that’s why he was calling, anyway, and not because he’d sensed, from a half dozen miles away, that Paul Slater was trying to sextort me.

“Hi,” I whispered into the phone. “I can’t talk right now. Things here at work are a little crazy. Can I call you back?”

“Of course, querida.”

Simply hearing that deep, smooth tone made the tight muscles in the back of my neck loosen, my shattered nerves begin to heal. Jesse’s voice was a soothing elixir, whipped cream floating on rich steaming cocoa on a cold winter morning.

“I wanted to make sure you were all right,” he said. “I got the strangest feeling a few minutes ago that something was wrong. I’d have called then, but I was with a patient.”

“Wrong? Nope, everything’s fine.”
What was I doing? Jesse and I were engaged. We were supposed to be completely honest with each other.

Except I couldn’t afford to be honest with Jesse. Not about one thing. Well, one person, anyway.

“Sister E brought a student in here who’s a little banged up, that’s all,” I said. “Everything else is totally copacetic.”

_Don’t let him sense I’m lying, don’t let him sense I’m lying, don’t let him sense I’m lying . . ._

“I see,” Jesse said. “Well, you know where you can bring her if it gets to be too much for you to handle. Not that there’s much you can’t handle, Susannah.”

Jesse’s always insisted my nickname, Suze, is too ugly and diminutive for a girl of my strength and beauty. With Jesse it’s always been Susannah or—later, when he got to know me better—querida, which means sweetheart or my darling. It still sends a thrill through me when he says it, just like when he says my name.

Let’s face it, I’m warm for the boy’s form. Which is good, since I fully intend to marry that form. I don’t care how many Egyptian curses I have to break in order to do it.

“I think I’ve got things under control for now,” I said. “I’ll call you later when I can talk more.”

“Yes, you will. Because there is very definitely something going on that you’re not telling me. Am I right, Susannah?”

“Damn, Jesse,” I said, hoping my light-hearted tone would disguise the fact that I really was unsettled by his seeing through my lie. “You may not be a ghost yourself anymore, but you sure as hell can sense when one’s around. How do you do that?”

“A ghost? Is that all? I thought at the very least you’d found out you’d won the Powerball.”

“Ha! I wish. I’d buy you that cool new PET scanner you’ve been wanting.”
I knew Jesse was only acting as if he wasn’t concerned. He’s protective by nature, and when it came to the supernatural, he’s more than simply protective. He was what we call in the counseling trade hypervigilant.

Considering what he’d been through, however, this was only natural.

He couldn’t keep up the casual façade. I heard the concern in his tone.

“Look out for yourself, then, all right, querida? The last thing I want is my fiancée being brought in to the ER as a patient.”

“You know that’s never going to happen. I can’t stand doctors, remember? They think they know everything.”

“Because we do know everything, actually. Te amo, querida.”

Thankfully he hung up before he could do any more extrasensory perceiving (or turn me into a puddle of desire right there on the phone).

I hung up, too. There was no way on earth I was going to tell Jesse about Paul’s threat, let alone his proposition. It would only make him angry.

Angry? It would set off a nuclear explosion inside his head.

And now—despite Paul’s assertions otherwise—Jesse was a gainfully employed, full-blooded citizen. Unlike before, if he was caught attempting to kill a fellow citizen, he had a lot to lose, what with his fellowship and our planned wedding next year in the basilica at the Carmel Mission. True, the invitations hadn’t gone out yet, but there were two hundred guests and counting on the list . . . none of them family from the groom’s side, of course, all of Jesse’s relatives having died over a century earlier, something Jesse pretended not to mind. But who wouldn’t be bothered by it?

It would be awkward to have to pay back all those deposits due to the groom having been indicted for murder.

And what about the private grant Jesse had applied for that,
if he won it, would help pay back a substantial chunk of what he owed in student loans, and also help finance his own practice after he became certified? (As long as he agreed to serve uninsured and low-income patients, something he’d planned on doing anyway. One in five American households lives below the poverty line, even in a community as outwardly glitzy as Carmel.)

Jesse’s chances of winning it out of so many hundreds of applicants would be another miracle, however, that I didn’t think we could count on.

I came out of Ms. Diaz’s office and waved the first-aid kit at the bleeding girl. “Let me take a look at that.”

“No, it’s okay,” Becca protested, backing away from me and pulling her arm close. “I’m fine.”

She was so far from fine this statement was almost hilarious—except no one was laughing. Besides the blood dripping from her arm, some had spilled down the front of her school uniform—the school had re instituted a uniform policy after having relaxed it in the years I’d been there (I tried not to take the reinstatement personally). Now all students were required to wear a navy blue sweater over a white shirt, with either gray trousers or a blue plaid skirt. This girl had opted for the skirt.

Her mouse brown hair looked as if it had never met conditioner . . . or a brush. Her skin was pale and unhealthily blemished, her uniform a size or two too big on her. She was wearing glasses with frames that appeared to have been purchased in the early 2000s, or perhaps were hand-me-downs from the nineties.

To use the phrasing of a (soon-to-be) professional school counselor, this kid was a hot mess, and that’s not even mentioning the Non-Compliant Dead Person hanging on to one of the pleats of her too-big navy plaid skirt, dragging it even further askew.

I was the only person in the room who could see it, but I was
sure Becca could feel the extra weight. She probably had chronic back or neck pain for which her doctor could find no medical cause.

I knew the cause. It was a ghostly parasite, and I was staring right at it, and at the miserable expression it was provoking from its human host.

Then again, that misery might have been because Becca had just jacked up her wrist so badly, and was being hauled around by one of the state of California’s biggest busybodies.

“You sit down right here, Becca,” Sister Ernestine said, all but shoving the bleeding girl into the mission-style chair across from my desk. Only it wasn’t a chair designed to look mission style, it was a chair likely dating back to the 1700s when Father Junípero Serra, a Franciscan friar from Spain, had run up and down the coast of California, frantically building missions so he could beat the Lord’s word into the Native Americans he had captured and held there. Judging by their extreme creakiness, I wouldn’t doubt most of the school’s office furniture has been around since old Father Serra’s time. “Let Miss Simon bandage those cuts. I’m going to telephone your parents.”

“No!” Becca cried, trying to leap back up from the chair. “I told you, Sister, I’m fine! This is stupid. My compass slipped in geometry, is all. You don’t have to call my parents. Mr. Walden was way overreacting—”

“Mr. Walden?” I raised a skeptical eyebrow as I snapped on a pair of latex gloves.

It’s completely humiliating that after nearly six years of post-secondary education, the only place in the entire state of California where I could find employment (and not even paying employment) is my former high school. But there are a few upsides. At least here I can tell when kids are lying to my face about the teachers.
“Mr. Walden doesn’t overreact,” I said. “I had him for my ju-
ior and senior years. If he says there’s a problem, there’s a prob-
lem. So show me your arm, please.”

The girl stared at me through her overlarge, brown plastic
frames.

“Wait,” she said, registering what the nun had called me. “Miss
Simon? Are you Suze Simon? The one who knocked the head off
the Father Serra statue in the courtyard?”

My gaze slid quickly toward Sister Ernestine, who’d fortu-
nately bustled into her office and was already on the phone, pre-
sumably with Becca’s parents.

“Nope,” I said, turning back to Becca. “Never heard of her.”

The girl dropped her voice so the nun couldn’t overhear us.

“Yes, you are. Everyone says you knocked Father Serra’s head off
with your bare hands during a fight, and that you had to work
here in the office to pay to get the statue’s head soldered back
on.” Her eyes widened. “Oh, my God. Are they still making you
work here to pay it off? Didn’t you graduate, like, ten years ago?”

“Six. Six years ago. How old do people think I am, anyway?
Arm, please.”

Reluctantly, the girl stretched her wrist toward me and I
plucked the wad of paper towels from it … then inhaled almost
as sharply as she did, but not for the same reason. Her blood had
finally coagulated, and my ripping the paper towels from the
wound had torn it open afresh, causing her to cry out in pain.

I gasped because now that I could finally see the injury, I
could tell it hadn’t been the result of any accident, though it had
definitely been done with a sharp instrument—maybe even like
she said, a geometry compass. Carved into the pale flesh of the
back of her left wrist were the red letters:

\[ STUP \]
Whoever—or whatever—had done it had been stopped before getting to what I had to assume were the last two letters, ID. Stupid.
Someone—or something—had tried to carve the word stupid in the flesh of this girl's arm.
I looked from the scratches—which went from artificial cuts to deep gouges. The U would leave a scar if not properly attended to—to the girl’s face. She was glancing nervously in Sister Ernestine’s direction, then down at the wounds, then at me. Her lips were pale and chapped. She wore no makeup, though she was sixteen, and makeup isn’t against the dress code for high school girls at Junípero Serra Mission Academy.

Something made me doubt Becca had ever applied makeup to her face in her life, however. Her entire look—lank hair, oversized uniform, untidy skin—screamed, Don’t look at me, please.

“Who did this?” I demanded. My mind was awhirl. The NCPD? Had the ghost done it? Whoever it was, he or she was going to get the ass kicking I’d promised Paul earlier. “Who did this to you, Becca? There’s nothing to be afraid of. I won’t hurt them.”

Much.

“What? Who—?” Her eyes filled with tears behind the lenses
of her glasses, and she shook her head. “No. Oh, no. No one did this to me. I did it . . . I did it to myself.”

“What?” The word came bursting out of my mouth before I could stop it. But I should have known. We’d covered self-injury in my courses on juvenile and adolescent psychology. But seeing it in real life was entirely different from seeing it in photos, and I couldn’t hold back my second question, either. “Why?”

“I . . . I don’t know,” Becca whispered. I could tell by the color rushing into her cheeks—and the fact that she wouldn’t meet my gaze—that she was telling the truth. Liars—such as Paul—usually have no problem looking you in the eye. “I just . . . I just hate myself sometimes. This is the first time I’ve ever done anything like this, though, I swear.”

Now she was lying. She looked me full in the face, sweet as pie, lying for all she was worth.

“I’ll never do it again, I promise. Please, please don’t tell. My dad will be so disappointed in me, and my stepmother . . . well, my stepmother won’t like it, either. Please, I’m begging you—don’t tell. Come on. You know what it’s like.”

I did not. But apparently, because she’d heard I’d had troubles of my own in my day, she thought I did.

My kind of trouble had never involved gouging myself with sharp objects, though. Only other people trying to gouge me with them.

I tried to remember what I’d studied about individuals who self-harm. They don’t do it to get attention—in fact, they almost always try to keep their cutting a secret, and usually succeed, except in cases like Becca’s, where something goes wrong and they get caught. The brief release of endorphins from the physical pain serves as a balm for whatever emotional trauma or stress they’re suffering.

That’s why in the long run, cutting doesn’t work: the balm is
temporary, lasting only as long as the pain itself. Only by getting to the root of the emotional pain (usually through talk therapy with a trained professional) can the patient truly begin to heal.

Obviously something was tormenting Becca. The pitiful ghost child clinging to her—the one that only I could see—was a pretty big clue, and one I could easily handle.

Self-harm, though? Way over my nonexistent pay grade.

And now I couldn’t toss it over to Sister Ernestine, because Becca had asked me not to tell. School counselors can’t do their jobs effectively if students think they can’t trust them not to violate their right to privacy. We’re not allowed to inform parents what’s going on unless there’s a clear threat to their child’s safety (or the safety of others).

I didn’t have any proof—yet—that Becca’s life was in danger, only that she was hurting—and badly—both inside and out.

So all I could say was, “Fine,” and reach into the first-aid kit for a disinfectant pad. “But your first time, Becca? Really? That line might work on Sister Ernestine, but unlike her, I only work in a rectory, I don’t actually live in one. I’m not that gullible. What’s going on? Why do you, uh, hate yourself so badly that you’d want to hurt yourself like this?”

Bringing up the elephant—or NCDP—in the room is never easy. I’ve been doing it for years, and I still haven’t figured out the best method. The subtle approach tends to go right over people’s heads—“Has there been a death in the family recently?”—but bluntly stating, “There’s a ghost behind you,” can lead to ridicule or worse.

I wasn’t sure which strategy to take with Becca. She was in crisis, but it looked as if she’d been that way for some time. I didn’t know if the spook was a symptom or the cause.

“Look,” I said when she only stared down into her lap. “Don’t worry, you can tell me. I’m an expert on self-hatred.”
Becca made a noise that was somewhere between a laugh and a snort of disgust. “You? What have you got to hate yourself for? Look at you, with all that hair. You’re perfect.”

It’s true, my hair is pretty amazing. But that wasn’t the point.

“No one’s perfect, Becca,” I said. “And don’t try to tell me that you did this because you hate the way you look. You’re a smart girl, and smart girls know how to change their look if they’re unhappy with it. You obviously don’t want to. So what’s really going on?”

In a perfect world, this should have led to her blurting, “My little sister died last year, and I miss her so much!”

Then I’d have said, “I’m so, so sorry to hear that, Becca. But, wow, what a coincidence. I happen to be able to see the dead, and your little sister’s spirit is standing right next to you! She misses you, too. But your clinging to her memory is causing her to cling to your love, and that’s keeping her from being able to pass on into the afterlife. So both of you need to say good-bye now so she can go into the light, and I can go to lunch with my awesome boyfriend. Okay? Okay.”

But of course this isn’t a perfect world. And considering the day I was having, it was crazy of me to have thought even for one second that there was a possibility this was going to happen.

Instead, Becca pressed her lips together and stubbornly refused to reply to my question.

So I said, “Fine, suit yourself,” and laid the disinfectant-soaked pad I’d opened over her arm.

This was a huge mistake—a lot like my having called Paul. But I didn’t realize it then.

Becca gave a little squeak and tried to yank her wrist from me as the alcohol seeped into her wounds, but I held on, keeping the pad pressed to the cuts so the disinfectant could do its work.

“Sorry, Becca,” I said. “I should have warned you it was going
to sting. But we can't let you risk an infection. Anyway, I would have thought you'd enjoy it, hating yourself so much, and all.”

I knew Dr. Jo, my school-appointed therapist—everyone getting a master's in counseling has to undergo a few semesters of personal counseling themselves—would disapprove. Counselors (and mediators) are supposed to show compassion toward their clients. We aren't supposed to hurt them, even while cleaning their wounds with disinfectant pads.

But sometimes a little pain can help. Radiation kills cancer cells. Skin grafts heal burns.

I told myself that Becca’s reaction was good. It showed spirit. Her ghost-barnacle hadn't completely sucked the will to survive out of her . . . yet.

“My God,” Becca whispered. Another good sign—she still didn’t want Sister Ernestine overhearing our conversation, even though the nun would definitely have put a stop to my unorthodox nursing methods. “You did knock the head off that statue, like everyone says. You’re crazy!”

“Yeah,” I whispered back. “I am. Be sure to complain to your parents about the crazy woman in the office. That way you'll have to show them your arm to explain how you got sent here in the first place. Then they’ll know that you’ve been hurting yourself, and maybe get you the help you—”

“Get away from her!”

Becca wasn’t the only one showing some spirit. For the first time the little ghost girl showed some, too, lifting her blond head and taking an interest in what was happening around her.

And she definitely didn’t like what she saw . . . namely, me.

Stepping out from behind the shadow of Becca’s chair, she drew her brows together in a pout, and, hugging the stuffed animal she was holding—a threadbare horse—she pointed at me and said in a low, guttural voice, “Stop. You’re hurting Becca.”
It could have been comical, being bossed around by such a
tiny sprite.

Except that where ghosts are concerned, size doesn’t matter.
I’ve had my butt kicked by some NCDPs who seemed completely
harmless . . . until their hands were wrapped around my throat.

Plus, there was nothing comical about the burning hatred in
her eyes, or the throaty anger in her voice.

“I’m not hurting Becca,” I explained to the dead girl in my
most reasonable tone. “Becca’s been hurting herself, and I’m try-
ing to help her.”

Becca, perplexed, glanced in the direction I was speaking, but
didn’t see anyone standing there. “Uh . . . Miss Simon? Are you all
right?”

I didn’t have time for Becca’s concern that I’d jumped on the
train to Crazy Town.

“I’m trying to help you, too, kid,” I said to the ghost. “Who
are you, anyway?”

Big mistake. Really, my third biggest mistake of the morning,
after calling Paul, then slapping the disinfectant pad on Becca.

Though in my defense, you really shouldn’t let the undead
run around unsupervised, any more than you should let wounds
go too long without cleaning them.

The tiny ghost reacted by reeling backward, so stunned that
after however many years she’d been dead someone could finally
see her—let alone had communicated with her. She landed with
a thump on the cool stone floor . . . a thump that left her looking
shocked and humiliated.

But what followed was no girlish tantrum. She may have
seemed cute with her blond bangs, stuffed horse, and riding boots
and jodhpurs—apparently she’d been an aspiring equestrian in
life—but she was by no means an angel (certainly not yet, as
something was keeping her earthbound). She leveled me with a menacing stare.

“Lucia,” she screamed, with enough force that my hair was lifted back from my face and shoulders and the panes in the windows shook. “And no one hurts Becca!”

And that’s when the simple mediation I’d been planning went to complete hell.

The stone tiles beneath my feet began to pitch and buckle . . . which was some feat, because they were stone pavers, each more than two feet wide. They had been laid there three hundred years earlier by true believers at the behest of Father Serra. They’d never shown so much as a crack despite all the earthquakes that had since shaken Northern California.

And now some little girl ghost venting her wrath at me had the ancient floors splitting, and the three-foot-thick mission walls trembling, and the fluorescent lights overhead swaying, even the glass in the casement windows tinkling.

“Stop!” I cried, reaching out to grab the arms of the chair in which Becca sat, both to steady myself as well as to shield her from any glass that might start falling. Becca’s eyes were wide with terror. She still couldn’t hear or see Lucia, and so had no idea what was going on.

I knew, and not only was I as scared as Becca—my heart felt as if it was about to jackhammer out of my chest—I couldn’t have been more mad at myself. I’d been so distracted by the potential curse on my boyfriend I’d forgotten one of the most important rules of mediation:

Never, ever underestimate a ghost.

“I’m sorry,” I shouted at Lucia’s spirit. “I swear I was only trying to help—”

“Shut up!” the little girl thundered in a voice that seemed
to come from straight from the depths of hell itself. “Shutupshut-upshutup!”

Each syllable was emphasized by another jolt to the floor and walls, sending drawers from the file cabinets slamming wildly, files—as well as the pages within them—flying like a blizzard of eight-by-eleven-inch paper snowflakes, and the wooden Venetian blinds that had never in my memory been lowered over the windows suddenly came crashing down.

“What’s happening?” Becca shouted. It was hard to hear anything above the tinkling of the glass and, above our heads, the groaning of the rafters in the pitched wooden ceiling that tourists loved snapping photos of so they could tell their architects back home, *I want the living room to look just like* this. “Is this an earthquake?”

I wished it were an earthquake. A geological explanation for what was happening would be so much simpler than, *Actually, it’s a ghost.* No one ever goes for that one.

Instead I said, “Crap,” because I noticed my computer had begun to slide from my desk. The huge monitor—not a flat screen because the school couldn’t afford anything that fancy—was sliding in our direction.

Becca, hearing my curse, followed the direction of my gaze, then screamed and ducked her head. I hunched over her so my back would take most of the weight of the computer if things didn’t work out, then kicked backward, relieved when I felt the sole of my platform wedge meet with a chunk of hard plastic.

This is why I needed a new pair of boots. You never knew when you were going to have to keep a ghost from using your computer to crush you (and a student) to death.
MEG CABOT was born in Bloomington, Indiana. In addition to her adult contemporary fiction, she is the author of the best-selling young-adult fiction series *The Princess Diaries*. Over twenty-five million copies of her novels for children and adults have sold worldwide. Meg lives in Key West, Florida, with her husband.