

The Skeleton Key

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Blood is the ink in which we write the meaning of our lives.

I didn't discover this until after I died. That was when the scribbles I had made with my blood while living became leg-ible, and I had reason to thank the god I had consecrated myself to.

By the time I was thirteen I knew Hermes was my favorite god. My mom had read me the D'Aulaires book of Greek myths when I was eight, and I had memorized all the pictures and most of the myths pretty soon after that. At ten I got my new best friend Sasha to read the book, and though we were attracted to Artemis and Athena, we loved Hermes best. We were obsessed with things Greek after that. Our thirteenth Halloween, instead of trick-or-treating, Sasha and I snuck off to the hill back of Lindley Farm.

The air was full of frost and wood smoke and mischief. We wore our winter coats, hats, gloves and scarves. Sasha carried a canteen half-full of red wine she had stolen from her par-ents' liquor cabinet. I had a saucepan, some charcoal bri-quettes, and a little piece of raw flank steak. We had thought about using candles to light our way, but it was too windy and somebody might see us, so we each had a flashlight.

Near the top of the hill, not far off the hiking trail, lurked a clearing. We pushed our way through bushes to get there. Between sentinel trees with bare branches, we scuffed new-fallen leaves aside with our boots to bare the earth to the constellations, and sat on the damp ground. I set the charcoal on a flat rock and managed to light it without extra lighter fluid (I'd dosed it before I left the house).

Sasha and I did our Greek things: she poured a libation of wine on the earth, dedicating it to all the Olympians, after which we took a comradely sip and winced at the tongue-drying alcoholic taste. I scorched the steak over the coals, saying I hoped the fragrance of the smoke would nourish the gods. We chanted a chant we had devised with many erasings and lots of note-passing in history class, which was the most boring class we had, with the least attentive teacher. Our chant was full of careful phrases about how all the gods were great and yet we wanted one of them in particular to watch over us, if that wouldn't offend the rest of them too much (in Greek myths many people appeared to have patron gods, so it didn't seem out of line to ask for it).

We slashed our thumbs with a razor blade I had taken from my dad's medicine cabinet, squeezed out a drop of blood each on the ground (thanking Gaea), pressed our wounds together, and declared that we belonged to the Sis-terhood of Hermes.

Sasha's blood was cold and so was mine, but with our fin-gers pressed together I felt warmth, even though the rest of my hand was freezing. I saw a falling star above me and sud-denly my arms prickled, with hair standing on end. I glanced at Sasha. It was too dark for me to see what she was thinking behind her face. Neither of us breathed for a moment. A flower of warmth blossomed in my chest.

"Tess?" Sasha murmured.

"Yes," I whispered, but that was all we said.

At last we separated our hands. I started breathing again, and my sense of the mystery in everything went away, but I remembered how it had felt.

Coming down the hill, Sasha and I were silent. We never did talk about it directly, but we continued to act as if the Sis-terhood were real.

We taught ourselves the Greek alphabet to the extent of using it as a replacement code for regular letters, and we wrote notes to each other we had trouble decoding. We met once a month and snuck off

to our hill, no matter what the weather, and performed rituals we made up, sometimes stealing bits from things we found in the encyclopedia or myth books. It was the best secret we had ever had. Often I felt the silence come over me, the sense that something was listening to us and responding. Sometimes we received signs that our prayers were answered: Sasha got an A on a test she barely studied for; I got the bike I wanted for my fourteenth birthday; we both got dates for school dances; and Sasha found a five-dollar bill on the sidewalk.

It was as close as I got to religion.

By the time I was sixteen, the words "Hermes help me" came out of my mouth instead of cuss words whenever the situation warranted an exclamation, and I didn't even notice. Mom stopped commenting on it after the novelty wore off; Dad had never even noticed.

When we were seventeen, Sasha, who had skipped a grade in junior high, left for college. In our letters we never talked about the Sisterhood; she was never home at the right time of month for ritual, and I didn't know if she did something about it where she was. I continued to go to the hilltop to offer fire, wine, words, and the incense of burning meat to the open sky, but I felt lonely without Sasha. The mystery seemed more distant.

Sasha had gone on to the University, but my grade point average and my ambitions weren't as high as hers. She planned to be a psychologist. I didn't know what I wanted, so when I got out of high school, I decided to settle for General Studies at State, and see if anything excited me. Sasha's letters got shorter and shorter and mostly talked about the fact that she had to study a lot now so she didn't have time to write. I talked about my excitement when I moved into my own studio apartment and how weird it was when Mom and Dad were right across town.

Then I met Steve.

If I had seen highlights of my first college semester in a horror movie, I would have been yelling at the girl on screen not to be such an idiot. I mean, it's like when people split up to search the scary house with all the lights off—you know: stupid.

But I was just me, and Steve was just a great-looking curly-haired guy from the coffee shop who invited me to his apartment a couple of times. We had a great time at his place. We rented horror movies and ordered out for pizza and played *Monster in the Closet* after we turned off the TV.

So when he invited me to a Halloween party where there would be a lot of other people like him, I thought it was a terrific idea. Of the four guys I had dated so far in college, Steve was the most fun. If there were more people like him, I was ready to meet them. As long as I got home before midnight, so I could celebrate my fifth anniversary of the Sisterhood up on Lindley Hill. I put a twenty in my pocket for cab fare in case Steve didn't want to leave when I did.

Only he didn't take me to somebody's house; he took me to an abandoned church.

"It's awfully dark," I said when we drove up to the building, which was on the outskirts of town without even a street-light near it. The only light came from the building itself, a flickering behind broken stained glass windows.

"It's that kind of party, Tess," Steve said, ushering me in through big wooden double doors and barring them behind us.

I began to feel suspicious and just a little sick around then, because beyond the entry hall, in the church's chapel, stood a circle of fat lighted black candles on the flagstone floor, and around the circle of light stood a circle of people in dark hooded robes, and on the far wall hung a big black cross, upside down.

The air smelled of *patchouli* and singed hair.

In the center of the circles of light and people, there was a black slab about six feet long and three feet wide, with shackles attached. It was crusted with something dark and flaky.

I glanced up at the windows. The faces had been broken out of all the saints.

"Hermes help me," I muttered.

They dressed me in a white gown. A young woman with green eyes combed out my hair before they shackled me to the stained stone.

They told me no one would hear me scream, and I tested it and discovered they were right.

They told me Satan would be pleased with me, that each act of humiliation, degradation, and cruelty they practiced on me would bring them power; and that my ultimate sacrifice of blood and life would bring them extreme power. And in the end, they were wrong.

When at last I wept, voiceless, an aching in some parts of me, sharp shocks in others, burning and throbbing elsewhere, when at last Steve drew a knife and spilled my heart's blood, the god came to us in the guise of a dark-haired boy, his *chlamys* draped carelessly over one shoulder and fastened at the other. In his hand he held the *caduceus*, his wand of sleep and balm of healing, with serpents twined about it.

"I'm sorry I'm late," he said.

Steve had given me a slow but fatal wound. It was a relief, actually, because they stopped torturing me and just waited for me to die. I was still aware enough to see that all the black-robed people fell to the ground. One started a chant, "Bless us, Lord Satan," and all the others joined in.

He glanced at them, but walked through their circle and came to kneel on the slab beside me. "I'm sorry," he said again. Pearly light haloed him. I couldn't figure out if it was my sight going or something that was actually happening. "I'm sorry," he said, touching the smaller wounds. As he touched them, the pain faded from them. "There was so little energy for me in this era that it took your great sacrifice for me to manifest. I would not have had you die for me."

My eyelids were getting heavier, and pain no longer pinned me in place.

"Not against your will," he murmured, putting his hands in the blood on my chest.

I shaped my mouth around the breath coming out of me. "Much rather you than any other," I whispered. Wonder bat-tled the lassitude seeping into me.

"Bless us, Lord Satan. Bless us, Lord Satan," they cried all around us.

He leaned over and pressed his lips to mine, and in that moment, all pain faded and I came free of my body, which stopped breathing. He rose and held out his hand, which glowed with my blood as if it were rosy liquid light. Confused, I reached toward him—how could I do that without a body?—and saw my own arm, a phantom but there, as I held it out.

"Come," he said, taking my hand. I felt a tingling warmth in my palm and fingers where his hand touched mine. The pearly haze wrapped around him was very strong now. We walked out past all the kneeling dark figures. I glanced back once. My body, violated, burned, stabbed, its face twisted with pain, lay in its own blood and fluids. I shuddered and walked through the wall hand in hand with my god.

We traveled to a place removed from the earth I had spent my life on, yet just around the corner. We sat in a midnight meadow where all the grasses glowed with green pinpoints of light, and night-blooming flowers offered cores of yellow radiance and golden scent to the stars. From somewhere not too far away, a stream whispered and murmured.

"I am the god of travelers," he said, "I am the conductor of souls; I can take you to the next world."

"But I—" I began, then stopped, my fingers touching my throat, surprised at having a voice again. They had gripped my tongue in red-hot pinchers, and my screams had left my throat torn and raw; but that pain was gone now.

He waited, smiling at me, so beautiful I wanted to hug him, the image of my dreams and wishes.

"I don't feel ready," I said. Though I didn't know what I meant.

"You can stay for a while," he murmured. "It won't be the same."

After a silence, I touched his knee.

He put his hand on mine, closed his fingers around my hand. "Do you wish to go back into your dirt? I have done such a thing before."

"My body, you mean?" I asked. I thought of my last sight of my body: hurt, mangled, wretched. "No!" Heat flowed through me as I remembered candlelit faces framed in black hoods. A smile from a brown-eyed woman as she leaned down to flay some skin off my arm. The frowning concentration of a man with deep crows'-feet at the outer edges of his eyes as he sketched a design on my stomach with many prickings of a hot needle. "No," I said, "but I don't want to leave Earth. And I—Lord, those people tortured me..." I stared at my free hand. Each bone in each finger had been broken, yet now my hand looked whole.

"Yes," he said.

"And, Lord, I want to hurt them."

"It will pass," he said after a little while, gripping my hand gently.

"Is it wrong for me to want that?"

"You must want what you want," he said. "I can help you with some things. Vengeance is not one of my attributes. If it is in your heart to search out and punish all who have harmed you..." He looked away. "I can grant you certain powers. Then you will have to use them as you deem best."

We stood in front of my parents' house. Something in me had called me Home, here, not to my apartment, where I had only lived six months. His hands lay on my shoulders, warm, comforting. I could feel strength flowing from them. "Tess," he murmured. "You need never be alone now. When you are ready to travel, call me and I'll come for you."

"What if I'm not ready but I just...need you?"

"Call." He turned me. He embraced me. He faded away.

I clutched the key he had given me. I wanted to be three places at once:

I wanted to be alive and walking up the path to my parents' house, so I could knock on the door and Mom would answer and I could fall into her arms.

I wanted to be with Sasha, telling her that we had been right all along, that there really was a force, that it heard us when we spoke to it.

I wanted to be in the abandoned church.

I wanted to be alive and terrible in the church, slicing all those people open, shedding their blood in the name of my Lord, making him stronger at their expense.

Though when I really thought about it, I knew that wouldn't work, any more than their sacrifice of me had worked; I was already promised to Another. They, too, had made their choice.

The wind rose, carrying papers down the street. I felt it against my hair, the faintest tickle of breath.

I walked up the path to my parents' sleeping house.

The curtains to most of the rooms were closed, but through a gap in the living room curtains I saw Dad's recliner with sections of newspaper scattered near it, left the way he had dropped them earlier as he searched out Mom's byline, and Mom's recliner with a stack of blue books on the table next to it, one opened: she had been reading the work of Dad's high school students. They spent their evenings talking about work. I had heard it all my life, the excitement Dad felt finding a story in the paper Mom hadn't told him she was working on, his patient suspense as she searched through a stack of exercise papers for the one he thought was a gem. Often she saw things in his students' work that didn't impress him until she

pointed them out to him. Sometimes he mentioned an angle she hadn't thought of in her search for story, and she would address it in the follow-up story. They both valued the fresh eyes of each other.

I wondered how they would see me.

I stood on the porch, thinking about walking through walls the way I had seen ghosts in movies do, wondering. I put my hand on the door and pushed. There was initial resistance. I pushed harder, felt the door against my palm: not solid, really; like water on the verge of freezing, without the cold. I leaned against the door and gradually it parted somehow, its matter moved to either side, and I was in the front hall.

"That takes too long," I muttered. I turned back and jumped at the door. I bumped my chin and scuffed my palms and bounced back into the front hall. "Ouch! Hermes help me!"

"What is it?" he asked, standing beside me.

"Oh. Excuse me. Why is it so hard to walk through things?"

"Did you ask first?"

"What?"

"Everything has its own spirit, Tess. Homes especially, where people sleep; their dreams soak into the walls, investing the dwellings with living energy, for good or ill. Have you asked this dwelling if you could enter?"

"No."

"It let you in anyway. It knows you."

"It won't let me leave."

"Have you completed your business here, and asked to exit?"

"No."

He stroked my hair. "If you are determined to leave and a dwelling tries to trap you, you can step sideways into the meadow and then emerge where you choose. But a gentle aspect will take you far. Respect will help you."

"Step sideways?"

"Close your eyes and see the meadow where we were."

I did it.

"Take a step."

I stepped.

"Open your eyes."

We were back in the night-dark meadow where the grass glowed.

He smiled at me. "Now. Find your way back."

I closed my eyes and thought about my parents' front hall. I took a step. I opened my eyes and stared at the coat rack where Dad's fedora hung (he never wore it). Mom's back-pack drooped in its straps, and my rain slicker dangled—I had forgotten to take it when I moved out. I turned to thank Hermes, but he was no longer with me.

"Thanks for letting me in," I said to the door. I patted the wood. It felt warmer than it had before. Feeling a little stupid, I went upstairs.

The digital clock on my mom's bedside table said 4:32. Dad's snores were gentle, rhythmic as waves slapping against a dock. I went over to Mom's vanity and sat on the tuffet. The urge to weep washed over me. They might never know where I had gone. If they ever found out—

—an image of my dead self, twisted and horrible—

—it would hurt them even worse. My torture had been finite; theirs might go on for years.

"Mom," I whispered.

My mother's breathing shortened.

"Mom?"

She turned over. "Wha?"

"Mom? Can you hear me?"

She sighed. She rubbed her eyes. She sat up, blew out a breath.

"Mom?"

She took a sip of water from the glass on her bedside table, then lay down, her back to me, and her breath lengthened again.

"Mom," I said, out loud, but there was no response.

I looked at the key I held, a gift from Hermes. I sat a little longer, wondering if this was the right time for its first use.

I didn't know what Steve and his friends did with their corpses. Maybe they ate them or burned them. Maybe Mom would never know.

I thought of a TV show I saw once about missing children, a segment of "Sixty Minutes," where someone whose child had disappeared said, "You wait. You hope. You cry...a river of tears."

I went to my mother and plunged the key into her chest. It slid in easily. I gave it a half-turn, and her spirit sat up, loosed from her body, blinking and looking around. "What?" she said.

"Mom, are you awake?"

"Of course I'm awake, Tessa! What do you think?" She glared at me.

"How do you feel?"

"Startled, I guess. What are you doing home? What time is it?" She glanced over at the bedside table, reached out to switch on the lamp. Her hand went through it. She screamed.

"Mom," I said. I took her spirit hands. They felt more solid than the door had, warm and dry.

"Mom. Take it easy."

"Is this a dream?" She looked down, saw her own sleeping form. "Yah!" She was still half inside it, up to the waist. "This had better be a dream!"

I started to cry.

"What is it, baby?" she asked. She rose from her body and hugged me.

"Oh, Mom," I said, leaning into her embrace. I sniffled. Her warmth wrapped me up like a cocoon.

She stroked my back the way she had when I was little and hurt. "What is it?"

"Mom...I'm dead."

"Don't be ridiculous," she said in a soothing voice.

"I'm dead, and it doesn't hurt anymore. I wanted you to know that."

"This is a strange dream," she said.

"Please remember it. Write it down when you wake up. Promise?"

"How binding is a promise made in a dream?" she mused.

"Promise?"

"All right," she said.

"This is what you have to write: 'Tess is dead, but she feels good. She's happy. It doesn't hurt.' "

"That's so sappy, Tess, and on a symbolic level it's quite disturbing. Why should I dream that you're

dead?"

"Because it's not a dream. Mom, I love you. I have to tell Dad now." I reached around her and turned the key, and she slipped out of my arms and back into her body. Her eyes popped open. She sat up and turned on the light, then looked around the room, looked right through me.

I went to Dad, but before I could unlock him, Mom shook him awake. "Henry, I've just had the strangest dream."

He came instantly awake. "What is it, May?"

"I dreamed that Tess was dead."

"What?"

"Wait a minute, I promised to write it down." She picked up the pen and steno pad she kept on the bedside table, wrote the date: November 1, and, in quotes, "Tess is dead, but she feels good. She's happy. It doesn't hurt." She showed it to Dad.

"What did we have for supper last night?" Dad said. He rubbed his eyes. He yawned. Then he glanced at Mom and the steno pad again. "Hmm." He reached for the phone and dialed my number. The phone rang and rang. "Oh, God," he said faintly. "She's not home."

"Last night was Halloween. Maybe she spent the night at a friend's house."

"May," said Dad. His voice trembled. "Tell me about your dream."

They called the police, who refused to get worked up about it. "Let us know when she's been missing twenty-four hours."

They sat in the kitchen, wearing bathrobes and drinking instant coffee. "She didn't say how she died?" Dad asked. He was doodling on Mom's steno pad. "Why? Where?"

"It was just a dream," said Mom.

It was six-thirty a.m. "I'm going to call her next-door neighbor," Dad said, and he did.

Abby wasn't thrilled to wake up so early. I could hear her hungover voice from across the room. "Maybe she slept over at some guy's house, didja ever think of that? Don't call this number again, I've already got a splitting headache!" she shrilled, and hung up.

"What guy?" Dad asked into the dead phone.

I didn't know what to do. I could answer all Dad's questions if I used the skeleton key again, but would that be right? The key hadn't come with instructions beyond basic use. Did it hurt people when I used it?

Mom seemed to be okay.

I went to Dad, slipped the key into his back, turned it. His body slumped, his cheek hitting the table, and the phone slipped from his hand. His spirit, still sitting up straight, looked around, startled but alert. "Tess," he said. "What am I making all this fuss about when you're right here?" He glanced down at the back of his body's head. "Yow!" he said. He reached out and his hand passed through his own head. "What! Am I awake? How can this be?"

"It's the only way I can talk to you, Daddy," I said.

"What?"

"Henry? Henry?" Mom was shaking Dad's body. "What happened? Are you all right?" She felt for his pulse.

I gripped Dad's hand and pulled him out of himself to get him away from the action. "I'll talk fast and then I'll put you back inside, Dad. I'm dead. I'm a ghost. The way I died was horrible. That's why I wanted to let you know I'm okay now."

"How can you be okay when you're dead?"

A little strangled laugh rose in my throat. "I know it sounds weird. I have a friend over here who helped me. I just didn't want you thinking..."

"Thinking what?"

"I don't know. Whatever. That you ever did anything wrong, or that there was anything you could have done to save me or help me. You are a great father. I love you. And I'm okay."

"Tessie..."

"I don't know if they're going to find me. If they do, it's going to be really, really awful for you. Just remember. I'm all right now." I hugged him and led him back to his body. Mom was really getting upset now.

"Where are you?" Dad asked me. He tried to watch me, but he kept getting distracted by Mom's efforts to revive his body.

"I'm here."

"I mean, where's your body?" he asked as I reached for the key.

"The last time I saw it, it was in an abandoned church."

"When did you die?"

"Sometime last night."

"Okay." He patted my cheek. "Okay."

I kissed him and turned the key.

He sat up.

"What happened?" Mom asked. "Are you all right?"

"Just a little out-of-body experience. I was talking to Tess. Oh, May. I think she really is dead." He made notes: abandoned church, Halloween night. "Oh," he said, staring at his notes. "Oh." His face paled. "It's the Satanists."

Mom stared at him a moment, her eyes wide. Then she went to the sink and threw up.

For the first time I remembered that they had killed some-body last Halloween, too. Not here in Holdfield, but in Mostyn, a little town six miles south. A girl named Deedee Christy, sixteen; the police had withheld most of the details, but the stories going around were so gross I got sick just thinking about them, and I had put them out of my mind.

Last Halloween, this Halloween—what about next Hal-loween?

Mom rinsed out her mouth with water, gargled, spat in the sink. "She's happy. It feels good. She's safe," she said. "Oh, Henry..."

"Tess, are you here?" Dad asked in a low voice.

"Yes," I said, but he couldn't hear me.

He sighed. "Tess, when I was just talking to you, you—you said something about putting me back inside. Does that mean you can take me out again? What is that? If you can do it, please do it again, all right?" And then, in an aside to Mom, "If I slump again, don't worry. I think she's doing it." He moved his coffee cup and the steno pad out of his way and laid his head and arms on the table.

I slid the skeleton key into his back and turned it, and he came loose again, rose to his feet, staring at me. His body sagged. Mom looked this way and that. He glanced back at her, then down at himself, finally again at me.

"Was it the Satanists, Tess?"

"Yes," I said.

"Tess," said Mom, "let me talk to you too." She leaned against the table the way Dad had, like a little kid taking a nap at her desk. I pulled the key out of Dad without relocking it and slid it into Mom, turning it. She rose up, looked at herself and Dad doubled. "Oh," she muttered, and touched her mouth with her fingers.

"How did you do that?" Dad said. He reached for Mom's body, but his hand went through the key, and through Mom, too.

"It was a gift," I said.

"This is going to sound really stupid," Dad said. "Are you a minion of Satan now?" Then, in a mutter to himself, "Minion? Is that the technical term?"

I laughed and said, "No, Dad. I cheated them, because I had my own god. I don't think they got much good out of killing me."

"Your own god?" said Dad, astonished.

"Hermes," said Mom at the same time.

"I told him I wasn't ready to take the next step yet, and he said I can stay here for a while if I need to. I didn't want you to...find out the hard way about me."

Mom came and hugged me. It felt just like a real hug, a hard one, flesh and bones, breath and beating heart to beating heart. I kept my arms around her too, despair and crushed hope and love lodged in my chest like an arrowhead, burning and yet pleasant. Dad came and put his arms around both of us. I felt like I had when I was ten and really totaled my bike, skinned and scraped myself, bit my lip. I had thought maybe if we all hugged hard enough the pain would go away. And in a weird way it had worked.

"Hermes," said Dad when at length we all let go of each other. "How do you worship this guy?"

Sasha came to my funeral.

So did Steve.

By that time I had worked with some of my other gifts, enough to be able to hold a pencil (if the pencil would let me) or to move matter (if the matter was agreeable, and a surprising lot of it was, when approached politely). When Mom and Dad were going through my apartment, I wrote them notes about what to do with my possessions. Unlocking Mom and Dad and then putting them back would have taken too long.

We developed a whole lot of shortcuts. Mom carried her steno pad everywhere, holding a blank page up occasionally to give me the opportunity to tell her something. The pencil was tied to a string, which was fastened to the spiral binding. It soon got used to me.

My parents took my altar to Hermes and set it up on the mantel at home. With every meal they made an offering to him.

Mom let someone else on the paper handle the story of my death. She took a leave of absence from the paper, and everyone understood. Again, the police withheld a lot of the details, but everyone knew Mom and Dad had gone in to identify the body, which was found where I had left it, within a circle of black candle stumps in an old desecrated church.

Sasha arrived at my parents' house before the funeral, enveloped in a green cape, the scent of autumn leaves hanging around her like perfume. Her auburn hair hung lusterless to her shoulders, and her hazel eyes looked too large in her face. She had lost weight since I saw her in August. She looked tense and nervous. "I'm so terribly sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Hector," she said, standing on the front porch, her hands buried in her pockets, her shoulders hunched.

"Come in, come in," Mom said, putting an arm around Sasha's shoulders and wafting her into the

house.

"Tess will be so glad you're here," said Dad.

Sasha paled as Mom closed the door behind her. She looked around the front hall as if searching out a fast exit.

I tugged on Dad's sleeve. "Oh," he said. "Wrong thing to say, eh? Sorry, Sasha. I'm getting a little absent-minded lately."

"That's quite all right," she said in a thin voice.

"We're glad you could make it, Sasha," said Mom. Sasha glanced at her sharply. I thought Mom sounded a little too cheerful for a funeral too. More like she had just gotten a positive R.S.V.P. for a birthday party.

But then, everybody thought my parents were much too chirpy for having lost their daughter in such an ugly way.

"You're more than welcome to stay here," Dad said.

Sasha wavered, then said, "I'd like that."

"Good. Good," said Dad. "Would you like tea or cocoa? You look chilled."

"I do feel cold."

"Come into the kitchen."

When they had her sitting between them at the kitchen table with a mug of cocoa warming her hands and her cape half off, Mom said, "Sasha, we do need to tell you about Tess. When you're ready."

"What is there to tell?"

"There are some things she wanted you to know," Dad said.

"Did she leave me a letter?"

"Kind of," said Mom.

"Is it private?"

"She told us, too."

Sasha sipped cocoa, looking back and forth between my mom and my dad. She had never spent much time at my house. Her parents had a big screen TV and an air corn popper, so we had watched movies at her house. The rest of the time we were out in the weather, or sneaking off someplace, or searching out obscure Greekisms in the library. "I think," she said. "I think I'm ready."

Mom picked up the steno pad. "Faith is rewarding," she read.

Sasha frowned. "Did Tess find Jesus before she died?" she said, then gasped. "Oh! I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

"Why?" asked Dad.

"Because of the way—"

"Oh." He thought for a second. "That would be ironic, wouldn't it? She finds Jesus and dies at the hands of Satanists?"

"How can you say that?" Sasha asked, shocked.

"Because you could think it. It's all right, Sasha. We're not nuts. Really we aren't. And we're not denying what happened. We..."

"We've had a lot of help," said Mom. "Sasha, Tess wants you to know that faith in Hermes is justified."

Sasha's mug banged down on the table top. The color drained out of her face. "No," she said, "no. I'm getting out of here." She stood up.

"What are you afraid of?" Dad asked.

"Tess would never tell you any of this! The Sisterhood was secret. What have you done? Gone through all her private things, like ghouls?"

"We did whatever Tess asked us to," Mom said. "But I do think if my daughter was dead and I didn't know how she would have wished her things disposed of, I really think it would be all right for me to read whatever record she left behind. I think that would be a parent's prerogative."

"We didn't have to do that, because her ghost is here," said Dad.

"Oh, no," said Sasha, shaking her head. "No. You're gone. Right around the bend."

I grabbed my friend the pencil and wrote to Mom, "Ask her if that's the technical psychological term for this."

Mom sat back with her arms crossed while I wrote, and when I was finished, she flicked her eyebrows at Sasha, who had been watching the pencil move. Sasha, her hands trembling, leaned over far enough to read the message. She licked her lips. "No," she said. "I don't know what the DSM-III-R diagnosis would be for this. Severe psychosocial stressors on one of the axes, I bet." Then she sort of fell back into her chair. "Tess?" she whispered.

"Yes," I wrote.

"It's your handwriting. Is it really you?"

"Yes," I wrote. "I'm a wandering shade. I wanted to wander over to where you are, but I don't know much about traveling yet, especially to someplace I've never been. I'm so glad you came, Sasha."

She reached out and touched the paper, tracing the letters of her name with her fingertip. She shivered. Then she looked up at Mom and Dad.

"If you actually want to *see* her, to talk with her, she can unlock your spirit from your body, and then it's like she's standing in front of you," Dad said. "If you're prepared to risk it."

She thought about that for a while. She took a sip of cocoa, licked chocolate off her lip. She touched my writing again. "Does it hurt?"

"No," said Mom. "Unless you're not braced for it. Then you can bruise yourself."

"How do I brace for it?"

Mom showed her how to lay her head and arms on the table top. With her cheek pressed to the Formica, Sasha said, "Okay. I'm ready."

I unlocked her. She sat up and looked around. "Tess," she whispered.

I held out my hands to her and she took them. I pulled her free. "Oh, Tess," she said, and hugged me.

"It was a nightmare," she said a little later, "reading about it."

"He came and rescued me, Sasha."

"He?"

"Hermes," I said, and then he stood beside me and smiled down at Sasha.

"Oh my god," she said, and he laughed.

"This is what I wanted you to know. It's real," I said.

"Oh my god."

"I hear your prayers, even when there is no faith behind them," he said. "The mere act of praying generates faith."

"Oh my god."

"A short prayer, but a useful one." He touched Sasha's head. "I am glad you found me, priestess."

He vanished.

"Tess!" Sasha wailed.

"It's okay, Sasha. Really it is. When you have time to think about this..." I shook my head. I didn't know what she would think. "Listen, I should put you back now. If you stay out too long your body has trouble breathing. I just wanted you to know I'm still here for a while—until I feel ready to go on—so if you want to talk, just tell me. I can do that pencil thing, or I can unlock you. I can hear you. If I'm near, anyway."

She touched my face. She stroked my hair. She looked behind her at the table, where Mom and Dad sat beside her still form, sipping their own cocoa and not saying anything. "Tess..."

"Yes?"

"Don't you hate those people for hurting you?"

"Yes," I said. "That's one of the things keeping me here. I guess I'm not supposed to hate them, but I do. I want them hurt. He says it'll wear off, but I haven't lost it yet."

"Oh," she said. She sighed and went to stand by her body. I relocked her spirit inside her. She took a few deep breaths and sat up. Then she sat there shaking her head and looking at my parents, who smiled at her.

"Feel better?" Mom asked.

Sasha changed her shake to a nod. She bit her lower lip. "I feel—" Trembling took her over. She sat in the chair and shook for a while. Mom patted her shoulder and waited it out.

"Was this hard for you?" Sasha asked them at last.

"It would have been much worse if she hadn't come back," said Dad.

"I've been playing with this belief for five years," Sasha said. "I thought it was just a game. But I just met my god." She got up and started pacing around. "People aren't supposed to be able to *meet* their gods; that's the point of gods, they're just ideas off in the mist somewhere and people use god-ideas to control their own behavior or excuse it or some-thing, but..." She paced and paced. "First I meet a *ghost*, and then I meet a *god* I thought I made up—"

"Rough day," said Dad. "Maybe you need to lie down?"

"Yes," said Sasha. "Yes."

"Will you be okay in Tess's old room?"

"Yes," said Sasha, with a huge sigh.

I wasn't paying much attention to my memorial service. I was looking at the flowers banked around my closed casket, moving the cards just enough to read them, and I was looking at members of my extended family whom I hadn't seen since the family Fourth of July picnic last summer, aunts and uncles and cousins all dressed in dark colors and looking sad; and sometimes I watched Mom and Dad and Sasha in the front pew. Sasha sat next to Dad; Dad sat next to Mom; Mom sat next to Flo Reitz, a friend from the newspaper, somebody I'd called Aunt Flo since I was six, who was covering the funeral for the paper—who had, in fact, been covering the whole story of my murder.

The steno pad lay between Sasha and the pew's edge, shielded from casual view by her skirt and the flare of the pew's end.

I felt strange and sad, and wondered how everybody was doing. My cousin Marisha was actually crying. I had never seen her cry before. My dad's brother, Uncle Jake, had red-denied eyes; he was holding tight to Aunt Mary's hand. Well, sure, I had always liked him too. He had taught me chess, and I had spent most of my twelfth summer at his house with my cousins Amy, Bert, and Lucy.

Feeling like I was peeping at private grief, I walked farther back, wondering who all these people

were; I didn't know half of them. Friends of Mom's and Dad's from work, I decided after some study.

Steve slipped in about halfway through the service.

I couldn't believe it.

He had a black suit on, and a black bolo tie with a silver scorpion clasp; and even though one of the ushers tried to direct him to a seat, he stood in back, his arms crossed over his chest, and just listened.

I stared at his face, but he wasn't wearing an expression. I wondered what he felt. Had he gotten satisfaction out of what he had done to me? Did Satan let his followers know when he was pleased with them? Or displeased with them? After my encounters with my own god, I wasn't sure what anybody else's did for them.

Steve frowned.

I remembered who I was and where. I glanced down at myself. Since my death I had been wearing the simple white bridal dress Steve had given me Halloween night, though without the stains and rips it had acquired in the course of that night. I held out my hands and my fingers curled into fists. Rage ignited inside me, flaring high until I felt as if any-thing I touched would burst into flame. How dare he! How dare he take me when I trusted him, take me and hurt me and kill me? How dare he come here after having done that?

I found myself beside the front pew. I reached through the wood, gripped the pencil, and wrote, "He's here. At the back of the church. The man who killed me." I threw the pencil down. It bounced once and then rolled off the pew.

Mom, Dad, Sasha glanced over. Flo glanced over. Sasha's eyes widened as she read what I had written. Then she pressed the steno pad to her breast, hiding it from Flo. She gave a little nervous smile and bent to retrieve the pencil. Flo faced front again. Sasha handed the pad to Dad, who gave Mom a glimpse of it. All three of them turned to look back at Steve.

After a moment he felt their regard and stared back at them. His eyes were ice-cold. How had I ever found him friendly? Danger was like a black shroud around him, edged with silver.

Dad half rose. I tugged on his sleeve. "We can't let him get away," he whispered.

Steve was smiling now. My anger was freezing into fear. Steve could still hurt me by hurting Dad or Mom. They were forewarned—but Steve had lots of friends, some of them possibly augmented by their faith. I pulled Dad's sleeve hard. He sat down again, muttering, "What? What?"

"Henry, are you all right?" Flo asked.

Above us, the priest was still talking about his god and my life. Dad looked around, then said, "Flo, the murderer is standing in the back of the church. I want to stop him before he gets away."

Flo glanced back at Steve, who smiled at her, too. "My god," she said. She swallowed. "How do you know? The police haven't been able to find anything solid."

"Trust me on this."

"I'll go call the cops." She slipped out the end of the pew, and slid soundlessly down the side aisle toward the back. Dad kept his eye on Steve.

Steve moved over and blocked Flo's exit, catching her wrist. But by this time some of the other people had noticed Dad constantly looking back, and they turned too, to see Steve hanging onto Flo as she tried to twist free.

The priest paused. "Young man?" he said, which I thought took guts, since the priest looked barely older than Steve, and much less effective.

Steve smiled.

"Is there a problem? You're disturbing our service."

"I'm sorry. I came to the wrong place," said Steve. "I was looking for the funeral of a girl who died

in service to God. Come on, Ma." Keeping his grip on Flo's wrist, he pulled her out of the door.

Mom stood up. Dad started to his feet again. Before he had gotten very far, I unlocked him. His body sagged back down in the pew. Sasha stared at him, then looked around as if searching for a shadow. "Dad, stay here—" I said. "I'll follow them. Don't let him get you, too."

"Tell me what happens, tell me where they go, Tess—oh, Tess—"

"He's dangerous, Dad. Stay here." I locked him in and fled after Steve and Flo.

Who hadn't gotten very far. Flo was yelling, gripping the arm of one of the solemn young men who drifted around the corridors in the funeral home. "Help me," she said, "help me, this man is a murderer."

"Up to your old tricks, Ma?" said Steve. He smiled at the young man. "She has these psychotic episodes. The doctor cautioned me against restimulating her with this funeral, but I just thought—such a close member of the family—she ought to have a chance to say goodbye. I think I'd better get her back to Reston. Come on, Ma." He pulled her fingers off the young man's arm one at a time.

"Help me," Flo said. "This man murdered Tess Hector."

Steve still smiled. I remembered that smile. It was his most irresistible one, the one that insisted we were in a conspiracy together, and wasn't it fun? He was using it full power on the young man.

"I'm Florence Reitz, with the *Holdfield Guardian*, and this man is trying to silence me," said Flo. "Call the police!"

The young man looked bewildered. He opened his mouth.

"I appeal to you as one human being to another," Flo said in a low voice. "Help me. Help me." She kicked at Steve's crotch.

"Now, now, Ma," said Steve, pinching her shoulder. She grimaced.

"I—" said the young man. Steve smiled at him again and jerked Flo out of the building.

"You've got a good spirit in you," Steve said to Flo, drag-ging her toward his car, a black mid-seventies Mustang. "I like that."

Flo screamed. She struck him in the face with her free hand, and kicked at him. He pinched her shoulder again and she wilted.

I thrust the skeleton key into Steve's chest and turned it, and his body tumbled to the concrete sidewalk. Flo broke its grip on her and fled.

Steve's spirit stood before me. He was tall and pale and starved-looking. I could see through him. On the inside of his spirit skin there were a million wounds and scabs, some old and crusty, some fresh and bleeding. As I watched, he reached inside himself and picked at the scab over his heart, pulled it until fresh blood flowed. Then he stared at his red-dened fingers with their rosy halo of spirit blood. At length he looked up at me.

"Tess," he said. He stared at me from my bare toes to the curly hair on my head. "What are you doing still here? This is why the Master was angry? Because you never crossed over?" He raked his fingernails across his stomach, swiping right and left, opening fresh wounds.

"You can't spend what I've already donated," I said. I searched myself for the rage that had fueled me in the church, but it was gone now, replaced by a creeping horror at what Steve was doing to himself.

"You have broken my communion with my god by being an imperfect sacrifice," Steve said, and pulled off a great scab in his head. "I will never regain his trust. I worked so hard, so long to get where I was—"

He flickered. For a moment I saw a little boy in his place, small, frightened, wounded, cupping his hands over his geni-tals and looking up with huge eyes for the direction of the next bruising blow. Inside him there flared a white light, which dimmed immediately.

"—and you destroyed everything!" And then he was lunging at me, reaching for me with his dripping

red hands.

I closed my eyes and stepped into the midnight meadow, where I trembled and looked all around to see if Steve had somehow followed me. But I was alone.

"Hermes," I whispered, and my god came to me, stepping out of the air. "I'm frightened," I said.

He hugged me. After a little while, he whispered, "You are under my protection. He cannot harm you anymore."

"I didn't know if you knew what was happening."

"I learned."

I leaned my head against his chest, absorbing his support. Then I pushed away a little. "All right," I said. "I'll go back."

"Here," he said, handing me his *caduceus*.

Wordless, I gripped it. It was lighter than it looked, the twined serpents somehow balancing it so that its weight lay in some other plane.

He laid his palm on my forehead. I felt warmth enter me from it, melting into me like sunlight.

"Thank you," I said. I closed my eyes, thinking of the side-walk in front of the funeral home, and took a step.

Steve's shade was plucking at his body, trying to slip back inside. The body's breathing was laboring and ragged. Dad, Mom, Sasha, and Flo stood around it. I could hear approach-ing sirens, still distant.

"Tess," said Sasha, urgently. "Tess, where are you?"

I went to Steve. His spirit looked up at me. "Are you trying to kill me?" he said.

"Turnabout," I began, but the *caduceus* stirred in my hand. I stared at the snakes on it and they stared back. "Steve," I said, and held the wand out. Golden light flowed from it, washing down over Steve; under that gentle flood, his sores and scabs washed away, leaving his skin clean and whole.

"No!" he screamed. "No, you're destroying my identity!"

I lifted the *caduceus*, cutting off the flow of healing. "You *like* what you are?"

"This is who I am," he said. He scratched a new bloody furrow across the inside of his chest. "If you change it, I'll lose myself."

"But—" I remembered the clear white light inside the little boy, and looked for it. Inside Steve there was only dark-ness. Except the little boy had been inside Steve, too..."But—I can't wait any longer," I said, and leaned down to twist the key in his chest and lock him back in his body.

The body's breathing strengthened. Presently Steve opened his eyes, looking up at the people around him.

"Just lie still, son," said Dad. "Help is coming."

"Are you crazy?" Steve asked, his voice raw. He tried to get up, but he'd been away too long.

"Probably I am," said Dad. An ambulance and a police car pulled up simultaneously. Steve struggled to get up again, and again he failed. Dad knelt beside him. "Why did you do it?" he whispered to Steve. "Why did you kill my daughter?"

"My god wants blood," Steve muttered. "My blood isn't good enough. My god wants me to prove I love him. When I give him the perfect sacrifice, that's when he'll love me back." He frowned then, and glared at Dad, as if he was angry because Dad had made him say something.

Dad touched Steve's hand. Then the ambulance guys were shooing everybody away so they could take Steve's pulse and blood pressure and lift him onto a stretcher.

"Your daughter couldn't even die right," Steve yelled as they put him in the ambulance.

Sasha drove me to the university and showed me her room. With my help, she set up an altar to Hermes in a desk drawer, where she could lock it when she was gone, and unveil it when she was home. Once I had seen what her place looked like, I could step out of the meadow to there anytime. She put a steno pad and a pencil on her desk so I could leave her notes.

Mom and Dad went to grief counseling, and to a special counselor who worked with the victims of violent crimes and their families. Sometimes Mom told me about the sessions, but more often not.

I spent a lot of my time walking the streets of Holdfield, passing through buildings if they admitted me, staring into people's faces. I found five more of the people who had been in the circle the night of my death. One was a sales clerk at the perfume counter of a department store. One was a short order cook at a burger place. One was a doctor. One worked at a day care center. One was a mechanic in a garage for for-eign cars.

I followed two of them home, and their houses were soaked with pain dreams and wouldn't let me in.

One day I was walking down a street and realized that my feet refused to touch the ground; I was floating a yard above the sidewalk. I was losing touch.

It was time to go on.