

Chapter 4

The Haunting

July 5, 2021

Sleepless, Greg slogs down the steps wearing nothing at all and sits at the dining table. Staring at the Milky Way picture set as his laptop's wallpaper, he notices the hour—it's 1:17 a.m. He hasn't slept a wink. *Not good for your moods*, he can hear Betsy reminding him. At least he'd taken his meds that night. He fiddles with the fruit arranged in the center of the table. *How about an apple? A mango? No? Not even a mango? Maybe some grapes?*

Nothing interests him—he's simply trying not to open a Word document, certain that no words will come forth. He isn't sure why he's sitting at the computer.

He grabs his phone and walks out to the deck. *Maybe out here? Will the words come to me out here? Where are the words?* His thoughts feel transparent and hollow.

The stale air bites at the back of his throat as crickets chirp in the grass below. Greg considers another round in the hot tub. Instead, he steps to the edge of the deck and leans over the rail, peering up at the sky. A waning crescent moon joins Jupiter in a waltz.

"Ah, Jupiter," he says. "The sky god. I don't need the sky god, though. You can't help me write, now, can you? I need the writing god. Why doesn't Hermes

have a star?" Having mixed his Roman and Greek deities, Greg smirks and plops down in the rocker behind him.

Eager to move into crafting the next great American novel, he beckons the Idea as if summoning a witness to testify. He inhales a deep breath of the stale air, turns on his phone, and opens Word. His thumbs float over the keys, two hot air balloons ready to land. Again, he waits; again, nothing comes. Huffing, he stands to make his way to bed but stops in his tracks when the Shadow emerges, chortling, with the Idea in tow.

The Shadow has plagued him for years, demanding that he acknowledge it, taunting him to surrender and daring him to kill himself. Where the Idea has been intermittently enticing despite its ridicule and castigation, the Shadow has been nothing but sinister. Lurking in darkness but casting an imposing form, the Shadow has stalked and threatened him.

"Pathetic," it screeches. It has assumed many voices over the years it has plagued Greg. Its tone tonight is bitterly cold and oppressive, slicing through his ears as if they were delicate flowers.

The gangly Shadow seems to swallow the Idea, giving them a singular form and voice with which to attack Greg. *Is the Shadow part of the Idea?* he ponders, befuddled. Twitching, he stands, but a gust pushes him off his feet. Lifting his hand, he shields his eyes as if blocking the midday sun. He gathers his wits and engages the Shadow.

"What are you?"

The Shadow flashes images like a slideshow. It replays Greg's charade from yesterday at the willow. He cringes, hearing himself brag about his unwritten book. Seeing it as an onlooker is too much, and he retches. The Shadow and the conjoined Idea back off, easing their stranglehold, vowing not to make quick work of this.

"Watch and learn!" With the Shadow at its side, the Idea finds a palpable voice. Still, Greg struggles to acknowledge its directive, and the Idea turns to something initially unfamiliar:

Travis, a young speed-skating star from Colorado, greets Carlos while on vacation in Mexico City. Carlos loved his inline skates, but when he saw Travis, he imitated a novice. Carlos "lost control," wobbled to and fro, and bumped into the other boy. Travis had accepted the ensuing apology, and the two became one in a conversation. After cockily revealing his deception with a display of sheer speed and uncanny balance, Carlos offered up his skates for Travis to take for a spin. Travis jumped at the chance to be coached by this taller, more muscular, and less timid athlete. He was a quick study, observing that many of the mechanics resembled speed skating. As the story unfolded, Carlos disclosed that he was homeless because he'd been disowned by his family when he announced he was

gay. Without explaining the logistics, Travis managed to get Carlos relocated to Colorado. There, he lived with Travis's family, who was loving, encouraging, and accepting. Carlos took up speed skating, and the pair pushed each other so hard they rose quickly to the top of their sport. Carlos became known as the Winter Mexican...

"Oh. My. God!" Greg finally sputters, interrupting the scene before him. He recognizes this! It's one of his favorite concoctions.

Starting at age twelve, Greg spent every waking moment constructing fantasy lives. This one emerged when he was almost sixteen years old after watching Eric Heiden in the 1980 Winter Olympics. For weeks and weeks, he'd walked through copious details of Travis and Carlos's lives, but he never recorded any of it. He opted, instead, to live it in lieu of his waking life. Aside from homework and track practice, all Greg did was construct this world.

"Yes." The Idea smirks, emerging from the Shadow and taking its own robust form. "You spent the entire spring in that universe."

Without further discourse, the Idea engulfs Greg with another tale:

Alone, Steve sits frozen in his room with his eyes fixed and dilated despite the intense light surrounding him. A bright-orange octopus spreads its tentacles, reaching for him. The tentacles flap in all directions, methodically searching. He hears imperceptible voices over the ear-crushing roar. His skin begins to slide as though melting from the muscle and bone...

"Enough!" Greg cries. He recalls this one too—*Hypnotizing Flames*. He'd named them all but committed none to writing. The Idea reminds him that he lived this fantasy the summer he was twelve in the weeks and months after the assault. It was his first such excursion, and it had been vivid only in its isolation and agony. Scarred and disfigured, Steve had survived the fire, and Greg traced Steve's steps through a lonely fight with rehabilitation and an enduring desire to die. Throughout the tale, Steve always pondered his death and wondered why he'd sat so paralyzed amid the flames.

Greg wonders if he should be writing, but he's lost track of his phone and wants nothing to do with his laptop. He paces the deck, plagued by the Idea's ferocity. Ultimately, he drags himself into the cabin for some limeade. The summer favorite hits his tongue and becomes bitter as it mixes with the lingering mint of the toothpaste from hours earlier. He's lost about an hour and a half—it's 3:48 a.m. The sun will be up soon, and he resolves to snap this taut thread by walking up the hill to catch the sunrise.

Retracing what few steps he remembers taking, he finds his phone and starts down the stairs in front of the cabin. "Ugh! Maybe you should get dressed," he grumbles to himself, noticing his bare feet and recalling that he is uncomfortably attired in nothing.

The Idea is tenacious in its pursuit; the Shadow lurks in the trees, unfamiliar with these creations of Greg's. The change in scenery only changes the Idea's tone. The Idea undertakes to break the cycle, to end Greg's fantasy life. It shows him less dramatic tales that he'd fashioned: *Peter's Quest*, a tale from age fourteen that immersed Greg in Ancient Greece as a floundering young demigod, an unknown son of Apollo; *LS*, a story much closer to home, had seen Greg continuing the training he had all but stopped and winning several Olympic gold medals; *Mr. President*, a story from age seventeen, which was prompted by the rise of Reagan, included Greg's ensuing climb out of obscurity and into politics to become governor, senator, and finally, commander in chief; and so on and so on.

Greg stumbles. Frustrated that these vignettes have caused him, again, to miss capturing the oddly evasive sunrise, he lurches. As he starts walking again, his pace is awkward and heavy, and he crests the steepest hill he's seen in the resort. It leads him toward the still-lingering moon, but he isn't sure where he is. Lazily, he retrieves his phone, asks Siri for directions to Grant's Cozy Cabin, and heads toward his temporary home.

"Whoa! We're not done," the Idea insists, now using the Shadow's more menacing voice. With a physical jolt that forces Greg down onto a roadside log, the Idea unleashes:

Sampson, a sophomore in college, began having chest pains and shortness of breath. At first, his family thought nothing of it and treated him anew for the asthma they thought he had outgrown. When his heart rate soared to 197 after a light run, the aerobics coach demanded he consult a doctor. The Idea lurches forward in the story to Sampson learning that he has congestive heart failure. Doctors estimated that he would need a transplant within a year, and his family mourned prematurely. Sampson felt relief, as he had grown exhausted by living with lie upon lie. He had silently hoped to fall short on the list for a heart, and, in the end, he did. He died at nineteen.

"But the story didn't end there, did it, Greg?" the Idea scolds, using a new venomous voice. With blow after blow across Greg's brow, it demands that he fill in the blanks. He does remember this tale of desperation—*Dying a Lie*. He'd thought this was a cute spin on "living a lie," which Greg was doing at the time. As with *Winter Mexican*, *Hypnotizing Flames*, *Peter's Quest*, and all the others, Greg had inhabited *Dying a Lie* for ages. In fact, he ate, slept, and breathed it for nearly five months, lying in bed every night—rewording, reliving Sampson's plight.

When Sampson died, the tale continued unabated. Night after night, Greg lay still in his makeshift coffin and wept. He had visualized Sampson's funeral and imagined it as though it were his own because, in many ways, he wished it were.

He envied Sampson. He had watched the reactions of Sampson's family, peers, and teachers, and he sobbed when they did not...

The Idea cuts off Greg's train of thought. "Blah, blah, blah... Ask yourself: why was Sampson 'dying a lie'? Do you remember?"

He remembers, but he resists. He's dealt with these demons. Why relive them now? Sampson had had more than one lie that left him yearning for death. One was the assault against him just as he turned twelve that he'd hidden from the world. That attack had changed the course of his life—it had destroyed him, leaving him to welcome his last breath. The other had been Sampson's secret attraction to boys. In his small town, he knew no one else who shared his predicament, and his loneliness left him bereft.

By now, Greg is straggling home, paying little regard to Siri and hearing only the eerie rustling of leaves. The Shadow creeps out of the trees and clings to his leg like a sock to a towel fresh out of the dryer.

"Each lie was killing him one breath at a time," Greg mumbles.

"Killing whom?" the Idea interjects to the Shadow's delight.

Greg's head reels. He feels panic rising within him. His eyes bulge and his heart pounds as he struggles to fend off the Idea and the Shadow. *Why has the Idea recruited the Shadow?* he whines silently. Siri's voice defiantly interrupts. "Your destination is on the left."

Making it to the cabin door, Greg fights to escape. The Shadow presses him against the doorframe, his face smashed flat against the window. The Idea belittles his fantasy lives once again with a torrent of images. As the two beings recede, he again weighs abandoning the plan to write a book. For years now, each time Greg has pursued the Idea, it has eluded him, but now, it has sought the aid of the Shadow to stalk, harangue, and intimidate him. Greg recoils and falls into a fetal heap on the deck.