Spooksmiths Investigate
The Cinderman

Don't expect a warning,
The Cinderman is calling,
Ashes, ashes,
Beware his name!

For Mum and Dad,
thank you for everything.

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THE CINDERMAN

ALEX ATKINSON

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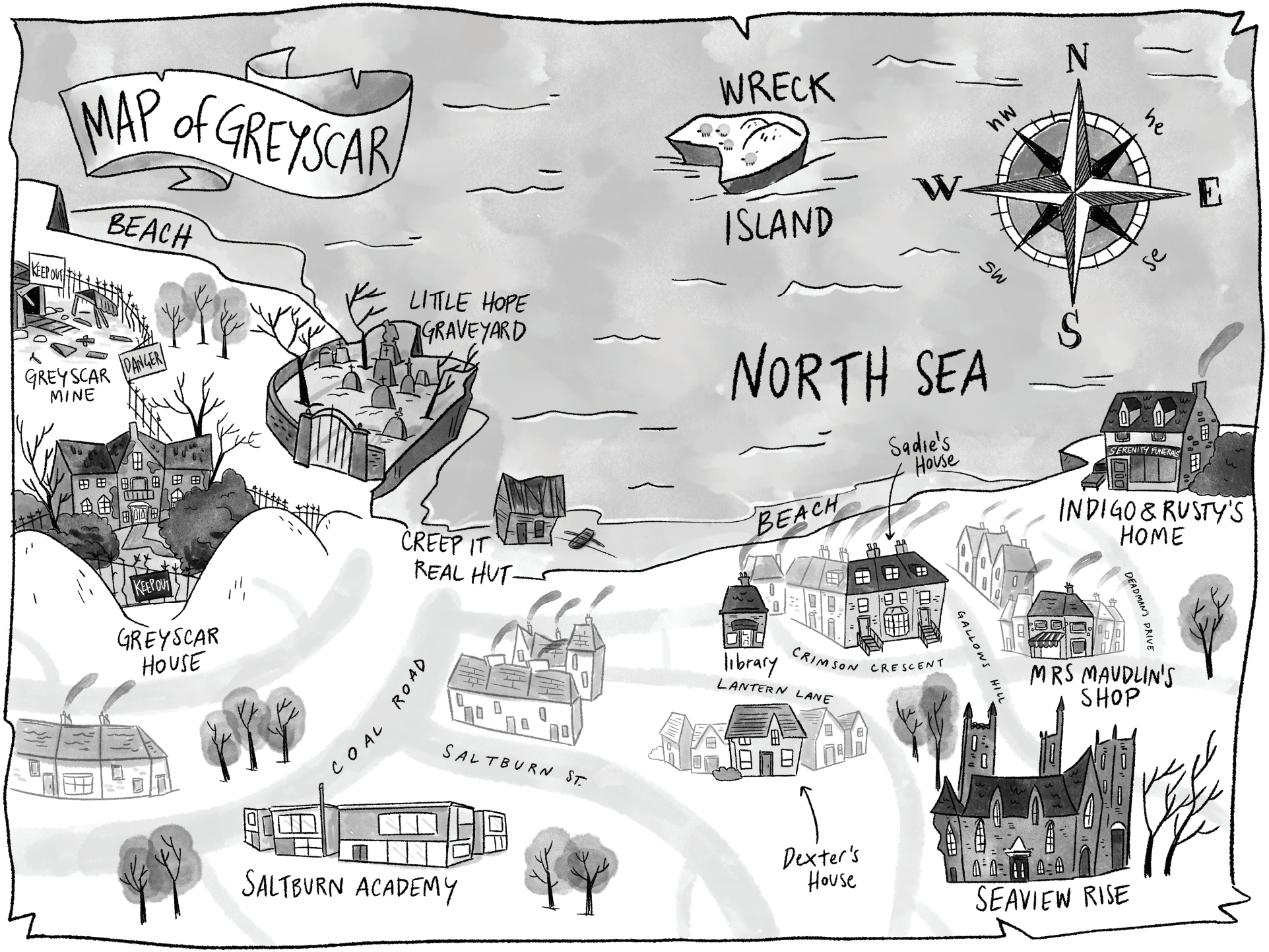
MAP of GREYSCAR
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KEEP OUT
DANGER
GREYSCAR MINE
LITTLE HOPE GRAVEYARD
GREYSCAR HOUSE
KEEP OUT
CREEP IT REAL HUT
Sadie's House
BEACH
SERENITY FUNERALS
INDIGO & RUSTY'S HOME
library
CRIMSON CRESCENT
GALLOWS HILL
DEADMAN'S DRIVE
MRS MAUDLIN'S SHOP
LANTERN LANE
COAL ROAD
SALTBURN ST.
SALTBURN ACADEMY
Dexter's House
SEAVIEW RISE

1

Most twelve-year-olds would be creeped-out standing alone in a graveyard at dusk.

I'm not most twelve-year-olds.

Growing up in a funeral home, I know the dead don't come back and ghosts only exist in stories.

I check Dad isn't watching and push further into the long grass, the sweet smell of pollen washed away by the salty sea breeze. Ahead is the cliff top and what remains of Little Hope Church: a crumbling tower surrounded by lichen-covered graves. It's the perfect habitat for one of my favourite animals.

High above my head, a single shadow zigzags through the darkening sky. I freeze, my breath catching in my throat, and listen hard. Most bat calls can only be heard with a special detector, but my

hearing seems to be getting better with age. I can make out its high-pitched squeak-clicks above the crash of the waves.

The creature weaves through the air, fast and jerky as it ducks and dives, catching insects on the wing. A single pipistrelle bat can eat up to 3,000 insects in one night. That's the same as a human eating sixty roast dinners in a day. Mind-blowing. Or, in this case, stomach-busting.

Even though I can quote at least another million wildlife facts, Dad thinks my animal obsession is just a phase. No matter how many times I tell him I'm going to be a vet, he thinks I'll eventually join the family business like he did.

Me? A funeral director? I'd rather swallow a spider in my sleep! (That's an urban myth by the way. Snoring scares arachnids away.)

More bats are appearing now, shooting out of the belfry at electrifying speeds. I wade through a patch of ox-eye daisies and sit down, leaning against an unnamed gravestone covered in honeysuckle. I inhale the vanilla scent of the flowers – Grandpa would have been proud I identified them so quickly – and sit back to enjoy the show.

"Indigo?"

Ugh. Dad has remembered me. He's been chatting to the Rev about moving the cliff-top graves to the new churchyard. The Rev doesn't do quick conversations. He took so long over

our next-door neighbour's christening I thought baby Harvey would be ready for secondary school before the service was over.

If I'm quiet, maybe the two of them will keep blathering on...

"Indigo!"

Or maybe not.

I sit up.

"Are you there?" Dad shouts.

There's no right answer. He knows I'm in the graveyard. And I know I'm not supposed to be. Something about it being dangerous, but I wasn't really paying attention.

It's best I keep out of sight, so I start crawling back the way I came. At least, I think it's the way I came. It looks different on all fours, long grass hitting me in the face. I nearly impale a hand on some broken railings.

If I can just make it back to the hearse without collecting some *grave* injury (sorry), I can pretend I've been reading something worthy. There's a copy of *From Sibling Rivals to Best Friends* in the car door. The title makes me want to throw up, but Mum's been pushing me to read it ever since she started her counselling course.

My knee crunches down on a sharp stone and I bite my bottom lip to stop from crying out. Crawling hurts. How do

babies do it? I'm rubbing my knee better when two heavily polished black shoes stomp down in front of me.

Uh oh.

"Indigo Smith, what do you think you're doing?"

I stand up. The grass and seeds stuck in my hair and all over my tracksuit bottoms tell Dad exactly what I've been doing.

"I cannot believe you ignored me. Again!"

His face is an alarming shade of purple. That, combined with his grey suit makes him look like an angry thundercloud.

"We're moving the graves from this old churchyard for a reason," Dad continues. "It's not safe. Erosion has turned this whole place into a deathtrap!"

Seriously?

"It's a graveyard. Of course it's a deathtrap—"

"Don't get smart with me. In the car. Now!"

My shoulders slump as he strides off, stiff backed. He doesn't get me at all. When Grandpa died of a heart attack three months ago, all Dad's sense of fun and adventure died with him. Sighing, I trail after him, leaving the bats to their twilight dance.

By the time we reach our driveway, I can barely breathe.

The bunch of lilies in the back stink and my nose has been clamped between my fingers for over fifteen minutes.

Without saying a word, I scramble out of the passenger door and suck in a lungful of fresh air.

Our house is one of the oldest in Greyscar. It sits on its own at the far end of the road, a heap of four-hundred-year-old, weather-beaten stone. On one side is a cliff which drops down to the North Sea and on the other is a big yew hedge separating us from the Blessed family next door and the rest of the street.

I think everyone is happy with this arrangement. You see, there are stories about our house – stories about ghosts and ghouls, creeping shadows and bodiless footsteps. I don't believe any of them, but it comes with the territory when you live on a road called Deadman's Drive and your house isn't just a house, but an actual funeral parlour. We even have a black hearse parked in the driveway and gold writing on the big bay window: *Serenity Funerals – A Family Business*.

Dad gets out of the hearse and tosses me the front door keys.

"Put the flowers in the display window and I won't say anything to your mum about you exploring a derelict and dangerous churchyard."

I groan.

"Got something better to do?"

"Yes." I jut my chin out defiantly. "I'm going to Dexter's to see the badgers."

But Dad's already walking towards the back garden, tapping at his phone.

There's no point arguing with someone who refuses to listen. Holding my breath, I collect the flowers from the car and unlock the door to the funeral parlour at the front of the house.

The walls are painted in a soft pink that reminds me of a dog's tongue. Mum says it's "comforting", but any comfort is cancelled out by the gloomy-looking portraits of our gloomy-looking relatives hanging on the walls. They are all equally hideous, apart from the one of Grandpa, all twinkly dark eyes and knowing smile.

I have two work-obsessed parents and a seriously irritating twin brother, Rusty, so Grandpa was the person I shared everything with. The one who encouraged my love of wildlife; who applauded me, aged five, as I identified a dried fox poo; who bought me my first pair of binoculars and taught me that honeysuckle smells like vanilla and that pineapple weed smells like, well, pineapple. I still can't believe that I'll never share anything with him again.

A weight settles on my chest, and I look away from the portraits towards the heavy oak desk in the centre of the room. There's one flowery chair behind it and two in front. A wooden floor-to-ceiling bookcase covers the back wall. It's filled with dusty old books no one touches, just the way it was when Grandpa was head undertaker.

Dad says he's kept it the same because it's reassuring for customers to find things unchanged. I think it's so Dad can still feel close to Grandpa. He lived here with us and taught Dad everything he knows about the business. He even made time to paint horrible Battle Beast models with Rusty and got him one of those fancy airbrush kits last Christmas. Rusty says he can't use it now because the nozzle is jammed, but I don't think the nozzle is the problem. I saw him getting all teary last time he took it out of the box.

Grandpa was here and then he was gone and none of us can move past the massive hole he's left in all our lives.

Tears are welling up now, so I concentrate hard on the coffin catalogues on the coffee table. The top copy shows a grinning man sitting inside a wicker casket – hilarious and grim at the same time. I know it's the kind of thing that would have made Grandpa laugh. Luckily, it works on me too. Feeling better, I lock the front door behind me and shove the flowers on the windowsill. Dad could easily have dealt

with the lilies himself, but he seems to enjoy torturing me and Rusty with random tasks. Not that I mind him torturing Rusty…

I'm about to head up to my room to get ready for Dexter's when Beethoven's Fifth Symphony sounds in the hallway. I freeze. It's Dad's ringtone. He answers it: right outside the door to the funeral parlour.

There's no way I'm going out there until he's gone. He'll only give me another job and I'm not missing seeing the badgers at my best friend's house because of some pointless chore.

While I wait for Dad's boring conversation to end, I find myself pulling out a selection of books with titles like *Benedict's History of Undertaking* and *The Life and Times of a Travelling Vicar*. Fascinating. Not. I've no idea why Grandpa wouldn't let anyone touch them.

I replace them and as the last book hits the back of the bookcase, the lights flicker as though in warning. There's a *click* followed by a *creak*. I freeze, staring open-mouthed as a coffin-shaped door swings open in the centre of the bookcase.

There's a secret door in my family's bookcase.

A secret door with steps going down behind it…

It's the entrance to a basement. Or a dungeon. Or maybe

it's a bat cave. I let out a nervous laugh, but I'm more excited than scared. I have so many questions. I could – and probably should – get Mum or Dad, but they'll just tell me it's dangerous and stop me investigating…

Or maybe they already know about the secret door and have kept it hidden? A familiar fizz of anger bubbles in my belly. It would be so typical of them to keep something like this quiet. I can hear their disapproving voices in my head: *It's too dark and dangerous and dirty.*

I'm going in.

The doorway doesn't reach down to the floor like a normal door. It's two shelves up, so I have to climb inside, ducking to avoid the clusters of spider's webs dangling from the ceiling. The light behind me illuminates a set of twisting stone steps. I take a deep breath and immediately regret it: the air in here is stinkier than Rusty's bedroom, like dust mixed with sweaty socks.

Halfway down, the stairs twist to the left, a pillar blocking the light from above. The next step down is in complete darkness. I curse myself for not having my phone on me, but heading back up to get it and being caught by Dad isn't an option, so I keep going, holding the wall to guide me. Maybe there's a light switch further down.

Five more steps and I reach the bottom. There's a faint

whispering sound, but it's probably just the pipes from the house. I take a few hesitant, shuffling steps forward and my outstretched hands brush something cold and metallic. The whispering gets louder as I pick the something up. It's the size of a coffee jar and weighs almost nothing.

Intrigued, I shuffle back to the stairs, towards the light. As I climb, the thing seems to get colder. Icy tendrils numb my hands, climbing up my arms towards my heart, leaving me wondering what could be inside.

I round the corner of the basement stairway and a shaft of light from upstairs lands on my hands.

I'm holding a dented, dusty old urn.

The hairs on the back of my neck prickle.

We've got urns all over the place. Why is this one hidden in a secret basement?

As if in answer, the urn lid rattles.

I scream and instinctively throw the urn away. It lands with a clatter somewhere beneath me. The gasping sound that follows chills me to the bone. It sounds like someone taking their first breath in a long time. Heart pounding, I race up the stairs to the doorway pursued by a dry, ash-choked voice:

"*Speak my name.*"

I'm so freaked out I can barely remember my own name,

but I think...I think that voice came from whatever – or *whoever* – was in that urn.

Which means only one thing: I can hear the dead.

2

Not only can I hear the dead, I'm also now surrounded by bits of one of them. A swirling cloud of human ash has filled the basement. It's the grossest thing ever, like being trapped in a hoover bag full of flaky skin. What is going on? How can one urn contain so much ash and why is it whirling? The air is thick, my lungs wheezing, panic raking my chest. Choking, I claw my way up the steps. I want to scream but opening my mouth means inhaling more of whoever I've spilled.

After what feels like hours but must only be seconds, I scramble over the threshold back into the funeral parlour, slamming the bookcase door shut behind me. It's a pointless act. The ash has a life of its own. It seeps out around the door and twists away like a whirlwind, filling the room.

Gasping and whole-body trembling, I stumble towards the window. I push the lilies out of the way and fling it wide open.

As though it's been waiting for this moment, the ash rushes for the window with a triumphant scream. It burns my skin as it blasts past me, roaring its way to freedom, leaving behind a deafening silence and a tang like bonfire smoke.

I gaze around the room wide-eyed, pulse thudding. What just happened? Everything *looks* normal. There's no trace of ash, but my ringing ears and shaking hands tell me I can't have imagined it. I've never dropped an urn of human ashes before, but I'm sure the contents don't usually give orders and fly out the window.

My heart is still hammering when the door handle dips, and Dad pokes his head into the room. For the first time in ages, I'm relieved to see him.

"Dad—" I start eagerly, desperate for someone to give me an explanation for what happened. He holds up a finger, cutting me off, and I notice his mobile clamped to his ear.

His eyebrows knit together as he takes in the open window and the lopsided lilies. He gestures for me to close the window and starts speaking into the phone.

What's just happened is more important than a phone call.

"But, Dad, the bookcase—"

Dad shakes his head. He looks tired, his attention focused on the person at the other end of the call. "Of course, I'm delighted Creep It Real tours is doing well, Miss Chen, and thank you for the offer to 'cut me in' on the profits. However, as I've said hundreds of times before, tours of the funeral parlour are out of the question—"

"The ash!" I try again.

Dad covers the mouthpiece.

"Indigo, I need somewhere quiet to take this call. We can speak later."

Even being attacked by a human ash cloud isn't important enough for him to stop what he's doing. I drop my head. What is the point in even trying to speak to him? He's so wrapped up in the family business, he never makes time to listen to his actual family. Although, I don't know why he puts so much effort into something that doesn't seem to make him happy.

Feeling small, I slip out of the room under the watchful glare of the portraits. I need to find someone who'll listen. I need Mum. I follow the clatter of mugs towards the kitchen.

It's Rusty, the last person on earth I want to see. Ever. We might look alike – dark, curly hair, brown eyes and ugly blue-grey birthmark on our left arms – but we have nothing else in common. He's sitting at the kitchen table, drinking a mug

of hot chocolate and painting some hideous Battle Beast monster model.

"What are you looking at, loser?" he says.

The lights flicker as though warning me not to do it, but my fist is already clenched and I thump him on the arm.

"OW!" yells Rusty, overdramatically in my opinion. I didn't hit him that hard.

"Indigo! Russell! Are you two fighting again?" Mum shouts down the stairs.

I drop my fist. "He started it!"

"I don't care who started it. Stop it right now!" Mum yells.

Life is so unfair, but at least I got to watch Rusty squirm at his full name. It's hilarious how much he hates it.

I kick the back of his chair. As soon as he looks up, I mouth the word "Russell".

Rusty's cheeks flush red and he springs up, ready to thump me back with his paint-covered hands. But I'm too fast. I sprint out of the room and upstairs before he can reach me.

Mum is in her room, getting changed for her counselling course. I hover in the doorway.

"Mum, I need to talk to you."

"I'm listening," she says, turning away to button up a brightly coloured shirt.

I open my mouth and all the words I've held in tumble out in a torrent.

"I found a door in the bookcase. It leads down to a basement and I found an urn and I dropped it. The ash spoke to me, ordering me to say its name, and then it escaped out of the window."

Mum has stopped buttoning her shirt and is looking at me like I've sprouted horns. Which is fair enough, I suppose. I sound like I'm spouting fairy tales. I pull the sleeves of my hoodie over my hands, shifting my feet awkwardly in the doorway.

"Say that all again, but slowly this time."

I repeat it, blushing at how unlikely it sounds.

Mum's mouth twitches.

I cross my arms. "I'm not lying, if that's what you think."

"I didn't say you were." She finishes buttoning up her shirt. "Show me."

Two minutes later, I'm standing in the now empty funeral parlour with Mum. Dad has finished his call and is nowhere to be seen. I glare at the bookcase.

"I pulled some books out and pushed them back in and it just opened!" I say, pulling out and slamming back volume after volume. "Stupid thing. Why isn't it working?"

"Like this?" says Mum, joining in.

It doesn't make any difference.

Eventually, I pull all the books off the middle shelves. But the dark panel at the back of the bookcase shows nothing – no edges, hinges or gaps. No matter how hard I thump my fists against the wood, it's like the door was never there.

Just when I think things can't get any worse, my brother appears. I swear he can sense when I'm in trouble.

"Trying to wake the dead?" says Rusty.

Mum clears her throat. "Indigo was telling me she thinks there's a—"

"No. No, I don't." I'm not saying anything with him here. He'll only tease me. I've got no proof, nothing to show that what I'm saying is true. Not even a single flake of ash.

Mum wrinkles her forehead. "But you were adamant. And what about the urn? You said—"

"Forget it," I snap. "I made a mistake."

"*I made a mistake*," mimics Rusty.

"Be nice," warns Mum.

"Who made a mistake?" says Dad.

Great. The whole family is here. I can't deal with this. Thankfully, I've got an excuse.

"I'm late to meet Dexter."

Ignoring Rusty's grin, which says he's delighted I've just made a fool of myself even though he doesn't know the

full story, I push past them all into the hallway.

Mum follows, putting one arm on my shoulder and leaning in conspiratorially. "Is this a cry for help? Is it to do with not wanting to go to school tomorrow?"

Mum's training to be a counsellor so she can help people with their problems and comfort the bereaved. I think she's got a long way to go, but tonight her inability to grasp what's really going on could work in my favour.

I sidestep her questions.

"Can we talk about it later? I really do need to get to Dexter's." Just thinking about Dexter Vago makes me feel calmer. He'll listen and he won't judge. That's what best friends are for.

"What about dinner?"

"I'll eat at Dexter's."

She nods. "Sometimes it's easier to work through problems with your friends. We'll talk later, though?" She glances at her watch, eager to get to her course. "Be back by nine o'clock."

I nod, trying not to make any promises I can't keep. Then I grab my phone and slip out before Dad can corner me about the mess I've made of the bookcase. I know what I saw and what I heard, and with Dexter's help I'll make sense of it.

3

I hunch my shoulders against the wind and set off for Dexter's. Usually, I'd take my time and study the birds' nests beneath the eaves of the wonky old fishermen's cottages, or the spiders' webs along the railings at the top of Gallows Hill. Tonight, I've got other things on my mind.

There must be an explanation for the way the ash behaved: a draught blowing up from the basement maybe... But that doesn't explain the way it all shot out the window or that creepy voice. And what was that underground room? And where did the door go?

Thumping footsteps interrupt my thoughts. I stop, turning to see Rusty powering towards me.

"Dad tried to get *me* to put back the books *you* pulled out! What were you doing?"