

SHADOW HOUSE

The Gathering

DAN POBLOCKI

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Library of Congress Control Number Available

ISBN 978-0-545-92550-1

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

16 17 18 19

First edition, September 2016

Printed in China 62

Scholastic US: 557 Broadway • New York, NY 10012

Scholastic Canada: 604 King Street West • Toronto, ON M5V 1E1

Scholastic New Zealand Limited: Private Bag 94407 • Greenmount, Manukau 2141

Scholastic UK Ltd.: Euston House • 24 Eversholt Street • London NW1 1DB



CHAPTER 1

WHENEVER POPPY CALDWELL glanced in a mirror, she saw another girl standing behind her.

There were plenty of other girls at Thursday's Hope, the group home where Poppy had lived since age six. But the Girl wasn't like the other girls.

Poppy was pretty sure she was dead.

In the mirror, the Girl always appeared smiling, hazel eyes glinting with playful kindness, long dark hair slanting sharply across her forehead. She always wore the same white pinafore over a dark dress, with large pockets that gaped near her hips and seemed filled with mystery.

Poppy knew that seeing the Girl was odd. Was she a ghost? An angel? Once, Poppy had worked up the courage to ask her

bunkmate Ashley if it was normal for girls to appear behind you in mirrors—girls who couldn't speak, girls who weren't actually in the room with you when you turned around. Ashley had laughed so hard, Poppy had forced herself to giggle too, pretending it was all a joke.

She thought she'd be able to keep her secret. But Ashley didn't like keeping secrets.

Tales of Poppy's visions spread through the dormitory like smoke, and Poppy acquired an unfortunate nickname: *Crazy Poppy*. For a while, she tried to argue, hoping that she could convince the others that the Girl was real. It only made the teasing worse.

Poppy started to believe that she actually *was* crazy.

But whenever things got really bad, when the other girls of Thursday's Hope badgered her ruthlessly, the Girl was Poppy's special comfort—a friend who made her less lonely, less afraid. Sometimes when a mirror caught her eye, Poppy would find the Girl peering back at her, and the Girl would remove an item from one of the giant pockets of her smock and then hold it up as if to make Poppy smile.

The next morning, Poppy would discover the item tucked under her pillow.

The first time, it had been a thin wire twisted into the shape of a finch. Then came pressed flowers, out-of-print comic strips

snipped from yellowed newspapers, a paintbrush with dried green paint at its tip.

Old things.

Surprising things.

Strange things.

At first, Poppy couldn't believe it was happening. But the objects were there—she could hold them in her hand, and that meant they were real. Unexplainable, but real.

Poppy treasured these items, tucking them inside a book she'd hollowed out to keep them secret. But Ashley took particular pleasure in raiding Poppy's belongings, passing the Girl's treasures to the others, who would tear and sometimes destroy them. On those nights, Poppy had nightmares of terrible fires, and watched, screaming, as her bunkmates burned around her. The worst part was that in those dreams, Poppy was always the one to light the flames.

In real life, Poppy didn't know how to fight back . . . until the day Ashley got her hands on a delicate charcoal sketch of five kids in masks and uniforms, all lined up against a stone wall. Poppy had hidden the sketch in a separate place, between the pages of a book she loved, a book she knew Ashley would never, ever read. But Ashley was a better snoop than Poppy had imagined. Poppy found her standing beside their bunks, the drawing held roughly in her hands.



“Is this from your *friend*?” Ashley asked with a thin, flat smile. She tensed her hand threateningly on the sketch.

Something inside Poppy broke. Before she could stop herself, she reached for Ashley’s favorite possession, an ornate mirror on their shared nightstand, and swung it. There was a smash. A scream. Ashley clutched her hand into a fist—but the sketch had already slipped away from her. Miraculously, it landed unharmed on Poppy’s bed.

Poppy just watched as Ashley howled for help.

Poppy had never been sent to Ms. Tate’s office before. Its cold, metal cabinets and big oak desk had always intimidated Poppy when she walked past it. Now she was seated in front of the desk, in the chair for troublemakers. The secretary told her in no uncertain terms to not touch a thing and to wait there until Ms. Tate had checked on Ashley.

Poppy knew she should listen. She was in enough trouble already. But her stomach was churning with so much anger that it burned her usual meekness away. For once, she didn’t hesitate to take the chance she’d always dreamed about. As soon as the office door closed behind her, Poppy was out of her chair and searching the cabinets for her own file. If she was already in big trouble, why not get in a little more?

The room smelled too sweet, as if there was bubble gum stuck underneath every piece of furniture. Sunlight streamed in

through the tall window, illuminating a dust-mote storm that swirled around Poppy as she searched. The filing cabinet stood against the far wall. Poppy found the correct drawer, removed her folder, and placed it on Ms. Tate's desk.

Pawing through the material, a veil of disappointment fell on Poppy. There were report cards and medical records, pictures she'd painted when she was much younger, but not a single thing from before she'd arrived at the group home. She'd wanted to find out about her parents, but as far as the file was concerned, her parents had never existed. Poppy had come from nowhere.

This was highly unusual.

And then it got more unusual.

Near the back of the folder, Poppy found a sealed envelope with her name on it. She turned it over again and again, almost dizzy with excitement.

In the upper-left corner, written in pen by a delicate hand, were the words *Larkspur House, Hardscrabble Road, Greencliffe, NY*. The postmark was smudged, so Poppy couldn't read the date it had been sent.

A letter? The anger flooded her again. Why had Ms. Tate never given it to her?

Poppy slid her fingernail carefully under the flap. Inside rested a slip of salmon-colored stationery with intricate floral

designs lining every edge. It was one of the most beautiful objects she had ever seen. There was a small photograph of a luscious country mansion tucked in the envelope too. Placing that aside, she began to read.

My Dearest Niece,

Oh what a relief to have finally found you! You have no idea what the family has been through, though I'm sure it is nothing compared to the life you've been forced to lead. Poor thing!

You may call me Great-Aunt Delphinia. I live on a grand estate in the Hudson Valley with more room than I know what to do with. It would be such an honor if you would consider coming to stay with me. I will provide the best schooling, cuisine, and clothing—all the comforts that any girl could ever wish for—though I'm sure you understand that those things would be worthless without the loving household that will form the foundation of your new life here at Larkspur. The photograph of the grounds should provide an idea of what you are in for!

I would come down to Thursday's Hope to collect you if it weren't for my health. But please do let me know that you've received this letter, and I shall arrange for your immediate travel from the city. We've so much to discuss!

Yours truly and with love,
Delphinia Larkspur

Poppy closed her eyes as chills brushed her skin, and her eyes flooded with tears. This was better than any treasure the Girl had ever given her. It was like something out of a fairy tale, and not something that could happen to a girl like her. Family! A happy ending!

Somewhere in the office behind her, the floor creaked. Poppy whipped around to find the director standing just inside the doorway.

"And just what do you think you're doing, Miss Caldwell?" Ms. Tate glanced at the folder lying open on her desk as well as the envelope in Poppy's hands.

"I want to ask you about my file," said Poppy, trying to hide the trembling in her voice.

"That file is not meant to be seen by you," Ms. Tate chided in her best *rules-are-rules* voice.

Poppy's face burned. "I found this." She held up the envelope. "A letter. Addressed to me." She made herself look Ms. Tate in the eyes. "Why would you hide it from me?"

Ms. Tate's expression shifted from anger to confusion. "I would never! Let me see that."

Poppy handed it over reluctantly. She watched as Ms. Tate scanned the writing. "Poppy, I've never seen this before. I swear."

"I have a family!" Poppy said.

"Let's not jump to conclusions."

"My great-aunt Delphinia knows all about me." Poppy's voice was small but insistent.

Ms. Tate sighed, looking like she'd seen this sort of thing before. "The return address is vague. There's no phone number. No email. How do you expect me to even get in touch with her?"

I don't, Poppy thought. I'll figure it out myself.

At the look on Poppy's face, Ms. Tate rounded the desk and sat down in front of her computer. Poppy watched, barely daring to breathe, as the director searched the Internet for evidence of this Larkspur House. "I'm not getting much. Just a dozen or so real estate listings from all around the country. And I can't find a thing about a Delphinia Larkspur."

Poppy's chest collapsed in on her. "So that's it?"

"I know the girls have not been kind to you lately." Ms. Tate leaned back in her chair and gave Poppy an apologetic look.

“I think you’re going to have to accept that this was a joke. And in the meantime, you still have your actions to account for. What you did to Ashley is inexcusable.” Poppy was still very much in trouble.

Later that night, when Poppy approached the mirror over the sink in the bathroom, the Girl was not there.

This had never happened before.

Only after Poppy had slipped beneath her sheets, watching the reflected glow of car headlights drift across the ceiling, listening to the wheezing of Ashley on the lower bunk, did she make the connection: *Maybe now that I have the possibility of Larkspur House and Great-Aunt Delphinia, I don’t need the Girl anymore.*

Poppy couldn’t have been more wrong.