

Prologue

She wants to kill you.

Martha's fingers tightened onto the Pentel No. 2 pencil, clutched in her lap like a secret talisman. Dr. Ellijay picked up the stack of test booklets, squared them on her desk with soft raps, and began handing them out. She walked slowly down the aisle, her heels popping on the linoleum.

Not today, Martha thought. Please, Lenny, not today.

Outside the casement windows, the campus was awash in gray, a silent movie, as it had been for days, suspended between fog and drizzle, the dull light suppressing shadows, flattening the neo-Gothic buildings of Ponce de Leon College like a plywood set. Only two o'clock, but outside looked more like dusk.

The quad was empty, except for a lone figure seated on a bench, a man in a tweed blazer taking notes in a composition book. He looked up in Martha's direction, then down at the notebook, then toward her again. To escape his gaze, she looked elsewhere, beyond the campus buildings, above the crenellated rooflines.

It was there again. She had seen it before, on bad days, and now it stretched across the buildings, high above the spires and turrets, gelatinous and nearly invisible except for a network of threadlike capillaries. It pulsed and it heaved, breathing, alive.

Don't look at it, Lovie. Lenny murmured in her ear, his voice moist and intimate. *You know they don't want you to see that, right? Just pretend you don't see it.*

Today Lenny was only a voice, but on some days she could see him. He was tall and gaunt, his skin white and mottled, like the belly of a toad. Spiked hair. Blue jeans shiny with stains. Canvas sneakers, gray and frayed.

Martha felt a touch on her shoulder, jerked around.

"Relax, Martha." Wade leaned forward in the desk behind her. "You look as tight as a piano wire. You'll do great."

You won't do great. You'll die. Lenny hissed. *S'truth. You'll die if you even touch the paper.*

This was the first time Wade had spoken to her in months. In the early weeks of the semester, he had flirted with her, singled her out for special attention. For a while, the attraction had been mutual. She liked his pug nose, his subversive sense of humor. But that was before.

Dr. Ellijay walked to the end of the next aisle, Martha's aisle.

Have a look out, Lovie. 'Ere it comes.

Martha tried to concentrate, to review her mental notes. This was the final. Her grades had been floundering—*that's all part of the plan, innit?*—but Martha had decided she would overcome the plan. She wouldn't let them win.

Don't touch the paper, Lenny rasped. *It's printed with poison ink. It's like them colorful frogs in Ecuador. We learned about that in Biology 101, remember? Beautiful, but lethal. If you touch the ink, you'll die.*

Dr. Ellijay returned to her desk at the front of the room and glanced at her wristwatch. "All right, you have forty-five minutes," she told the class. "You may begin now. Good luck."

Look at 'er. She's watchin' you. She wants to see you fail. Touch the frog poison, and you'll die. Look out the window. The man on the bench, he's watchin', too. They're all watchin'. They've all been waitin' for this moment, doncha see?

Martha stared at the page, paralyzed. She felt a drop of perspiration release from her armpit and crawl down her side. Around her, she heard the frantic scratching of her fellow students' pens. They mingled with the sounds of the rats in the walls, the ones that chewed at the masonry with their sharp teeth, like yellow rice grains. The other students acted as if the rats weren't there.

She glanced at the clock. Six minutes gone already. She looked down at the paper and tried to focus, to form the answers in her mind.

If you fall for it—don't say I didn't warn you, Lovie.

She wanted to cry, or to scream, but she was motionless except for the pounding of her heart.

Don't react. Don't let 'em know. Don't let 'em on to you, right? That's the worst thing.

She heard Dr. Ellijay's footsteps approach and stop next to her desk. She didn't look up.

"Martha? It's been ten minutes, and you haven't even started. Are you all right?"

A swarm of ghostly, amoeba shapes floated in front of Martha's eyes, and she felt as if her head would explode.

"Martha?" Dr. Ellijay placed a hand on her shoulder.

Martha screamed and lunged out of her seat, pushing the desk over, causing books to tumble out.

Run. It's yer only chance—run like hellfire.

She bounded up the aisle, reached the door, and flung it open with a bang.

Run, Lovie.

In the hallway, Martha collided with a student on his cellphone, texting. She turned the corner onto another hallway and spotted the door to the custodial closet. She tried the knob. It opened. She slipped inside, squeezed next to a plastic mop bucket with rubber wheels, pulled the door closed, and slid to the floor.

In the darkness, she could smell ammonia. She heard the rats scurry around her. One brushed against her ankle, another along the back of her neck. Out in the hallway, footsteps approaching.

Voices calling her name. But Martha remained silent, invisible.

This is one thing we're good at, hey, Lovie? Lenny said. *We know how to vanish.*

Chapter 1

Ten months later

Martha sat on an iron bench in front of the Wash-and-Fold and watched a column of ants as they marched away carrying crumbs from the smashed corner of a ham sandwich.

She had made the walk from the Pritchett House to Tobias Avenue in only fifteen minutes, strolling past dew-damp lawns and sprinklers, reaching the business district early. Nothing to do now but wait and watch the town slowly wake up. The morning was hazy, already humid. The rising sun painted sharp, expanding triangles of yellow on the buildings and storefronts.

Martha opened her leather satchel and unfolded the advertisement, the one Vince found on the bulletin board at the Gateway Center. She reread it for the hundredth time.

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

The Historical Society of Amberleen, Georgia, seeks a full-time intern to assist with book project. Must be bright, organized, and detail-oriented, able to hit the ground running. Will transcribe/edit interviews, write introductions, assist with research. Three-month term with stipend.assist with book project. Must be bright, organized, and detail-oriented, able to hit the ground running. Will transcribe/edit interviews, write introductions, assist with research. Three-month term with stipend.

She felt restless, considered moving to the local diner for a cup of coffee, then scrapped the idea. Like so many things, caffeine was no longer admissible.

She wished she'd brought a book to read, or maybe a newspaper. Anything to take her mind off the fluttery feeling in her gut, a sensation that took hold yesterday when the Trailways bus crossed the Intracoastal Waterway and rolled past that sign in the grass median: Welcome to Amberleen. Spacious Oaks, Friendly Folks.

Martha held the leather satchel close to her face and sniffed. The smell calmed her. It reminded her of her father, who kept it bulging with papers as he shuttled between their house and the university. She tilted the satchel and heard a faint rattle from within, a secret sound. The part of herself she would keep hidden.

A Lincoln Continental pulled up in front of the brick building across the street and parked. A tall woman with white hair and an old-fashioned, collared dress got out, unlocked the glass door to the building, and entered. Martha checked her watch—eight fifteen. She took out a mirror, freshened her lip gloss, and brushed a few strands of loose hair from her face. It was time.