



*You can't escape
your inner witch . . .*

TEXAS GOTHIC

ROSEMARY CLEMENT-MOORE

About the Book

Amy Goodnight's family are far from normal.

She comes from a long line of witches, and grew up surrounded by benevolent spirits and kitchen spells. All fairly harmless, but Amy can't wait to get to college and escape the "family business".

But things take a darker turn when she and her sister Phin spend the summer looking after their Aunt Hyacinth's ranch. Amy is visited by a midnight spectre who is clearly trying to send her a message. It seems that the discovery of an old grave on a neighbour's land has been the catalyst for an apparent ghost uprising.

Aided by local friends and Ben, the handsome cowboy who just can't take his eyes off Amy, the sisters investigate. And they soon find that there's something strange and dangerous going on, deep in the heart of Texas ...

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Acknowledgments

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CORGI BOOKS

*This book would not have been possible without Starbucks
and St. Jude, patron saint of lost causes. (Me, not this
book.)*

1

THE GOAT WAS in the tree again.

I hadn't even known goats *could* climb trees. I had been livestock-sitting for three days before I'd figured out how the darned things kept getting out of their pen. Then one day I'd glanced out an upstairs window and seen Taco and Gordita, the ringleaders of the herd, trip-trip-tripping onto one of the low branches extending over the fence that separated their enclosure from the yard around Aunt Hyacinth's century-old farmhouse.

"Don't even think about it," I told Gordita now, facing her across that same fence. I'd just bathed four dogs and then shoveled out the barn. I stank like dirty wet fur and donkey crap, and I was *not* in the mood to be trifled with.

She stared back at me with a placid, long-lashed eye and bleated, "Mba-a-a-a-a." Which must translate as "You're not the boss of me," because she certainly didn't trouble herself to get out of the tree.

"Suit yourself," I said. As long as she was still technically in—or above—her pen, I didn't have much of an argument. When dealing with nanny goats, you pick your battles.

I suppose Aunt Hyacinth could be forgiven for trusting me to figure out the finer points of goat management for myself. And "for myself" was no exaggeration. Except when my sister, Phin, and I had run into town to get groceries, we hadn't seen a soul all week. Well, besides Uncle Burt. But

you didn't so much see Aunt Hyacinth's late husband as sense his presence now and then.

This was Aunt Hyacinth's first vacation in ten years. The herb farm and the line of organic bath products she produced here had finally reached a point where she could take time off. And she was going to be gone for a month, halfway around the world on a cruise through the Orient, so she'd had a lot of instructions to cover. Even after she'd given Phin and me an exhaustive briefing on the care and feeding of the flora and fauna, even while my mom had waited in the luggage-stuffed van to take her to the airport in San Antonio, Aunt Hy had stood on the porch, hands on her hips, lips pursed in concentration.

"I'm sure I'm forgetting something," she'd said, scanning the yard for some reminder. Then she laughed and patted my cheek. "Oh, why am I worried? You're a Goodnight. And if any of us can handle a crisis, Amy, it's you."

That was too true. I was the designated grown-up in a family that operated in a different reality than the rest of the world. But if the worst I had to deal with was a herd of goat Houdinis, I'd call myself lucky.

I gathered my dog-washing supplies and trudged toward the limestone ranch house that was the heart of Aunt Hyacinth's Hill Country homestead. It was a respectable size for an herb farm, though small by ranching standards. Small enough, in fact, to be dwarfed by the surrounding land. To reach the place, you had to take a gravel road through someone else's pasture to the Goodnight Farm gate, where a second fence of barbed wire and cedar posts surrounded Aunt Hyacinth's acreage. We often saw our neighbors' cows grazing through it. I guess the grass really was always greener. A packed dirt road led finally to the sturdy board fence that enclosed the house and yard with its adjoining livestock pens. Sometimes it felt like living

inside a giant nesting doll. Ranching life was pretty much all about fences and gates.

The dogs had kept a respectful distance from the goats' enclosure, but they bounded to join me on my way to the house. Sadie nipped at the heels of my rubber boots while Lila wove figure eights between my legs. Bear, no fool, had already headed for the shade to escape the afternoon sun.

"Get off!" I pushed the girls away from my filthy jeans. "I just washed you, you stupid mutts."

They dashed to join Bear on the side porch. I clomped up the steps, my arms full of dirty towels, and hooked the screen door with a finger. The dogs tumbled into the mudroom after me, then tried to worm into the house while I toed off my boots.

"Not until you're dry. Stay!" I managed to block them all except Pumpkin, a very appropriately named Pomeranian, who had asthma and got to come inside whenever he wanted. Which was pretty much all the time.

I closed the door and sighed—a mistake, because the deep breath told me just how much I stank.

Hot shower in T minus five, four, three ...

The light over the sink in the kitchen went out. Not a crisis, since it was four in the afternoon. However, the soft hum of the air conditioner cut out at the same instant, which *would* be a problem very shortly. A *big* problem, because the only reason I'd agreed to spend my summer on Goodnight Farm—the last carefree summer of my life, before I started college and things that Really Count in Life—was that I knew it had civilized conveniences like climate control, wireless Internet, and satellite TV.

"Phin!" I shouted. I'd lived with my sister for seventeen years, not counting the last one, which she'd spent in the freshman dorm at the University of Texas. I knew exactly who was to blame for the power outage.

No answer, but that didn't mean anything. Once Phin was immersed in one of her experiments, Godzilla could

stroll over from the Gulf of Mexico and she wouldn't notice unless his radioactive breath threw off her data.

Phin's experiments were the reason I was currently covered in dog hair, straw dust, and donkey dung. She had eagerly agreed to house-sit because she wanted to do some kind of botanical research for her summer independent study, and, well ... where better to do that than an herb farm? But while the Goodnight family might be eccentric by other people's standards, no one was crazy enough to leave Phin solely in charge of Aunt Hyacinth's livelihood. She couldn't always be trusted to feed *herself* while she was working on a project, let alone the menagerie outside.

I peeled off my filthy socks and headed through the kitchen and living room to the back of the house, where Phin had commandeered Aunt Hyacinth's workroom as her own. The door was closed, and I gave a cursory knock before I went in, only to stumble on the threshold between the bright afternoon and the startling darkness of the usually sunny space.

Without thinking, I flipped the light switch, but of course nothing happened. All I could see was a glow from Phin's laptop and, strangely, from under the slate-topped table in the center of the room.

"Hey!" Phin's voice was muffled, and a moment later her head popped up from behind the Rube Goldberg-type contraption on the table. Her strawberry-blond hair was coming loose from her ponytail, possibly because she was wearing what appeared to be a miner's headlamp. "I'm doing an experiment."

"I know." I shaded my eyes from the light. "The fuse just blew."

"Did it?" She checked some wires, punched something up on her laptop, then flipped a few switches on the power strip in front of her. "Oh. Good thing I'm at a stopping spot."

“Well, thank heaven for that,” I said, but my tone was wasted on her. Sarcasm was *always* wasted on Phin.

Aunt Hyacinth’s workroom was normally a bright, airy space, part sunroom, part apothecary. Just then, however, it was dark and stuffy, with heavy curtains covering the wall of windows and the glass door that led to the attached greenhouse.

On the huge worktable, Phin had set up her laptop and a bewildering rig that included a camera with some kind of complicated lens apparatus, a light box (which I suppose explained why the room was blacked out as if she were expecting the Luftwaffe), and enough electrical wiring to make me very nervous.

It wasn’t that Phin wasn’t brilliant. The only thing that might keep her from getting a Nobel Prize someday was her field of study. Switzerland didn’t really recognize paranormal research. Neither did most of the world, but that never stopped a Goodnight. Except me, I suppose.

In the dim light, I could see something like electrode leads connected to the leaves of an unidentifiable potted plant. It said a lot about my sister that this was not the strangest thing I’d ever seen her do.

“I don’t think shock treatment was what Aunt Hyacinth meant when she gave you free rein over her plant life.”

“It’s a very low current,” she said. “Just enough to get a baseline.”

Part of me was tempted to ask “A baseline of what?” But the larger part knew that it would result in a half-hour lecture, at least, and I really wanted a shower more than I wanted to know the esoteric principles of horticultural electrocution.

“Did you turn off whatever blew the fuse so I can go flip the breaker?” This was not, after all, my first time at the Goodnight Rodeo.

“Yes,” she said, removing the headlamp and shutting her laptop. “Since I’m stopped anyway, I’m going into town to

pick up some supplies.” The list she recited didn’t mean anything to me until she got to “Vanilla Coke,” at which point I perked up.

“From Sonic? Will you get me a cherry limeade?”

“Sure.” She bent to rub Pumpkin’s belly. He’d followed me in and now lay panting on the cool stone floor, already missing the air-conditioning.

I did a cursory check to make sure Phin was appropriately outfitted for the bustling metropolis of Barnett, Texas. She was, in flip-flops, a UT Longhorns tank top, and a pair of baggy cargo shorts that somehow looked cute on her. Her damp, wavy ponytail said she’d already taken a shower.

“How did you have time to get clean *and* blow the fuse?” I asked, more envious than outraged. We both had, theoretically, an equal amount of work. She took the flora—overseeing the herb farm, tending the greenhouse, plus watering plants around the house—and I took the fauna. But plants were generally pretty obedient, while the livestock seemed to enjoy making my job difficult.

She picked up her wallet and sunglasses from the counter near the door. “You do everything the hard way.”

“Trust me,” I said, with a bit of an edge, “if I could use magic to shovel out the donkey pen, I would.”

“If you could do *that*,” she countered evenly, “you’d be Mary Poppins. I just meant you didn’t have to bathe the dogs.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Yes, I did.”

Opening one of the cabinets, she got down a canister and put it in my hands. In the light from the door, I read *Dry Dog Shampoo. For a mess-free mutt.* Under that was the Goodnight Farm logo and the motto *So good you’ll think it’s magic.*

Aunt Hyacinth had a sense of humor—and a healthy respect for what she could get away with saying on a product label. “This would have been nice to know about

two hours ago,” I said, pretty calmly, considering how dirty and wet I was.

Phin shrugged. “Two hours ago I didn’t know you were going to do a Martha Stewart on the barn.”

Point for my sister. Besides, telling me might not have made a difference. I couldn’t get past the fact that things just didn’t *feel* clean without water. That was just me, though. If the label said something worked like magic, it did. Which was why Goodnight Farm products were so popular, even if people didn’t know *why* they worked so well.

Aunt Hyacinth had put together a binder of instructions, covering everything from what to do if the well stopped working to how to maintain the digestion spell on the septic system. I grabbed it and followed Phin out the front door.

The dogs, except Pumpkin, who hadn’t budged from the workroom floor, trailed us down the path to the wooden gate. Stepping out of the yard, I felt a subtle change in the atmosphere—almost like a shift in air pressure, but not quite. Over the past twenty-five years, Aunt Hyacinth had woven strong protections around the house and yard, a sort of arcane security system. It wouldn’t physically stop anyone, but it did have a subconscious effect on ill-intentioned trespassers.

A lifetime of living with witches and psychics had made spells a routine part of my life. I knew they worked, but I still preferred to put my trust in a locked door. My relationship with magic was like a president’s kid’s relationship with politics: I didn’t participate, but I couldn’t quite escape it. Especially not here, in the White House of the sovereign nation of Goodnight.

Stella, my not-quite-new Mini Cooper, and Aunt Hyacinth’s antique SUV were parked just outside the board fence. “Do you have your driver’s license?” I called after Phin. “Don’t forget to close the outer gate.”

She gave a typically distracted wave of acknowledgment and climbed behind the wheel of the Trooper, looking out of place in the big, battered vehicle. Along with her fair hair and pale skin, Phin had an elfin delicacy, in the Tolkien sense. It was hard to picture Galadriel driving an SUV.

I might have worried more about her if the sun-heated flagstones weren't scalding my bare soles. Instead, I hotfooted it over to the main breaker box to reset the fuse. Phin might have seemed otherworldly and half elvish sometimes, but I had an earthy and one-hundred-percent-human appreciation for things like electricity, satellite TV, and long, hot showers—all of which were in my immediate, blissful future.

2

PHIN HAD USED the very last towel in the bathroom.

Unfortunately, I didn't realize this until I was stripped down to my underwear, staring into the empty linen cupboard. Even more annoying, I'd done laundry yesterday, and downstairs was a dryer full of clean towels that I hadn't yet put away. The fact that this was equally my own fault did not help the situation a bit.

Dammit.

I closed the cupboard and took inventory. Fifteen different kinds of Goodnight Farm soap? Check. Running water, right out of an ancient well and smelling slightly of sulfur? Check. But not so much as a washcloth.

My clothes lay in a filthy heap at my feet. I *really* didn't want to put them back on, and I *couldn't* put on clean ones until I had washed off the dirt and dog slobber. Opening the bathroom door, I started to holler for Phin to bring me a towel ... then remembered she'd taken the Trooper into Barnett.

I drummed my fingers on the doorframe. My only choice was to walk downstairs to the laundry room in my undies. Okay, so every curtain in the house was open. But my underwear, covered in cheerful red cherries with bright green leaves, was more modest than many bathing suits. Plus, there was no one within miles of the house.

There was Uncle Burt, though he generally hung out—when I sensed him at all—downstairs, away from the guest

room. Even as a ghost, he was quite polite.

Too bad he couldn't bring me a towel. When I was a kid, I'd made a game of testing the limits of his ability to move things. He was pretty good at turning lights on and off, but I'd never seen a physical object move more than a few inches, and only out of the corner of my eye. I didn't know if it was a universal rule or just Uncle Burt's, but my eight-year-old self had figured out that ghosts operate best at the edges of your sight and in the space between blinks.

That was before I realized that most of the world didn't see magic or ghosts at all. At least, not that they admitted, if they wanted people to take them seriously. I'd learned *that* lesson the hard way.

In the upstairs hall, the pine floorboards were smooth under my feet. Then down the stairs, through the living room, with its oak beams and limestone fireplace. By chance I glanced out the window to where Stella was parked just outside the wooden yard gate.

And then I stopped, because there was something next to my Mini Cooper, and it was not Aunt Hyacinth's beat-up SUV.

It was a *cow*.

A half-grown calf, really. My aunt didn't have cows, so this guy was trespassing, which was inconsequential next to the fact that it was also *scratching itself* on Stella's bright blue fender. Scratching its *ass* on my graduation/early birthday present to myself, bought with years of savings from after-school jobs.

I leapt to the window and banged on the glass, scaring Pumpkin the Pomeranian, who was snoozing on the couch, half to death.

"Hey!" Bang bang bang. "Get away from my car!"

The calf didn't move, except to keep scratching.

"Son of a—" I whirled and sprinted through the kitchen to the mudroom. Nudging dogs out of the way, I shoved my

feet into the oversized Wellies and straight-armed the screen door, sending it crashing against the wall.

I clattered down the steps. The goats watched me, chewing leaves unfazed as I went flying by their pen. If the cherries on my underwear tempted them, I was too furious to notice.

Varsity soccer had made me fast on my feet, even though the too-big boots slowed me down. When I banged open the wooden gate, the calf looked unconcerned, until it realized I was still coming.

It took off, and I took off after it, running across the pasture like William Wallace in *Braveheart*. Except in panties and a bra, which sounded like a Monty Python sketch but had become my life, thanks to my sister, who had obviously left the second gate open so the neighbors' bovine could mosey onto Goodnight land, and don't think I wasn't going to let her hear about it.

Stupid cow. Waving my arms, I chased the animal almost to our barbed-wire fence, where I realized the calf wasn't half grown at all. It was more like *one-quarter* grown, and its mother was big. Big, and also on our side of the fence, and *pissed* that I was yelling at her baby.

She lowered her head and mooed at me, a long, foghorn sound punctuated by the aggressive swish of her tail. The filed stumps of her horns were blunt but would definitely break a rib, at least, if she charged me. Or she might decide to knock me down to trample at her leisure. We're talking a creature the size of Stella.

And I totally didn't care.

"Don't yell at me, you stupid cow!" I jabbed a hand toward the calf, who taunted me from behind its mother. "Keep your juvenile delinquent away from my car!"

She stamped her hoof and let out another throaty bellow.

"No. *You* shut up. This is my side of the fence." I waved vaguely gateward. "Get your fat ass and your miscreant

offspring back on your side of the barbed wire.”

“Hey! You!”

I froze, with a screech of mental tires and the bug-eyed equivalent of a cartoon spit-take. What the hell?

“You! Crazy girl over there!”

The “over there” jump-started my stalled brain and ground my gears back into motion. It wasn’t the cow talking, then. What a relief.

Slowly, I turned to see a horse, not far away from me, and a guy on the horse, sitting with one fist on the reins and one on his hip, looking down at me like I was insane.

“What the blue blazes are you doing to that cow?” he said.

“Me?” My voice went stratospheric with outrage. “That calf was *violating* my Mini Cooper.”

The cowboy turned his horse in a leisurely circle, scanning the field. I really had run quite a ways from the house. He shaded his eyes to peer in that direction. “You mean that blue toy parked in front of Ms. Goodnight’s place?”

I swatted a fly and sort of glare-squinted up at him. “Goodnight Farm. Yes.”

“I heard Ms. Hyacinth was going on a trip this summer,” he said, eyeing me and keeping his distance the way people did from lunatics. Even his horse was looking at me like I was nuts.

This was not a good time to realize that I was standing in the pasture in a state of highly questionable decency. Maybe if I pretended I *meant* to be out there half naked, he would think it was a bathing suit.

Placing a casual hand on my hip—then dropping it because the pose was ridiculous—I answered, “I’m house-sitting for her.”

Then I called myself an idiot. Like axe murderers couldn’t ride horses. Forget that he was tanned and rugged and had a sexy-young-cowboy thing going on, which I didn’t

need to be invoking in my head, because he was a stranger and I was in my underwear.

“Um, not just *me*, of course.” I cleared my throat and folded my arms. Nice defensive body language. I was a National Merit Scholar, for God’s sake. Soldiering on, I said, “Me and my sister. And our pack of big, ferocious dogs.”

The guy was just close enough that I could see his brows arch, one sardonically higher than the other. “And you’re out here sunning yourself in your skivvies because ...?”

So much for that bluff. God, this bravado thing was tough. “I told you. That cow was scratching its butt on my car. I saw it from the window and ran out—”

He’d raised his chin to look past me, toward the house. “Did you by any chance leave the gate open?”

“No! That was my sister, who—Oh *hell!*” I could hear the dogs barking. Worse, I could hear bleating. Joyful goat chuckles of freedom.

“The goats!” I clutched my head, an absurdly melodramatic reaction suited to this farce. “The goats were in the tree!”

“The ... Wait, what?”

I didn’t stay to enlighten him. For all my cursing Phin for leaving the outer gate ajar, I’d left the yard gate standing wide open. Running toward the house, I could see the dogs weaving mad circles around the field. Behind them were the goats, chasing them just for the hell of it, as far as I could tell.

The horse came up alongside me at a trot. Something dropped onto my head and I screamed and batted it to the ground, then found myself staring stupidly at the cowboy’s worn denim shirt. When I looked up, he called over his shoulder, now covered by just a sweat-blotched white undershirt, “Put that on. You’re getting a sunburn.”

Then he kicked his pinto into a slow lope and directed his efforts at rounding up the goats.

Focus, Amy. Just because he looked great in the saddle did not mean he wasn't an axe murderer.

I shrugged on the shirt, which was dusty and smelled like leather and horse, but I wasn't particular at the moment. Buttoning it up just enough for it to stay closed, I started running again.

The cowboy brought his horse neatly around to head off Gordita and Taco. "Go right!" he yelled, in case I was an idiot who couldn't figure out I needed to go the opposite way. "Get your dogs to help!"

The dogs were headed straight for me. I could see the whites of their eyes. Bear, the big, dumb coward, was moving as fast as I'd ever seen him.

I pointed to the house. "Go inside, guys! Go inside and I'll give you a cookie!"

They knew "cookie," and they knew that "inside" did not contain livestock. Lila, the smartest of the pack, gave an emphatic bark, and they made for the yard like greyhounds after a rabbit.

Most of the goats skipped after them, except Taco and Gordita. They seemed to consider the horse an awesome addition to their game of who-wants-to-be-barbecue-when-Amy-catches-us.

The pinto appeared to be enjoying the game, too, leaping and turning in the air to round up the stragglers, then working close to the ground, never letting them get around him. The cowboy seemed part of the horse, the way the pair worked together. I was a Texan, sure, but I was a city girl. This was new to me. I stood transfixed by the flex of the young man's legs, the effortless shift of his weight as he controlled the horse, until the dust became too thick for me to appreciate details, only the overall aesthetic.

Taco and Gordita ran for the gate and I shook myself into action. Waving my arms—and looking, I'm sure, a hell of a lot less graceful than the rodeo ballet—I chased the goats into the yard and slammed the gate closed behind us.

At the clang of the latch, the cowboy gave his horse some silent command and the pinto relaxed, blowing a deep breath of satisfaction.

No rest for me yet, not while the herd was chasing the dogs and eating Aunt Hyacinth's zinnias. I ran to the pen and opened the feed bucket, banging the metal lid like a dinner gong. The goats trotted right in, as if they'd merely been for a stroll in the park. It was almost anticlimactic, in a way.

The cowboy had dismounted and followed me into the yard. He swung the gate of the goat pen closed, allowing me to slip out first. I latched it firmly, then leaned against the board fence, not knowing if I should laugh or cry, or just have hysterics and do both.

The dogs came running, their fear of the goats insufficient to outweigh their need for reassurance. Sadie spun in circles, and Bear, against all reason, wanted me to pick him up. Lila avoided the crowd and tried to get the cowboy to pet her.

Awkward didn't begin to cover it. Wrestling with goats and dogs, wearing nothing but a stranger's shirt over my underwear? If my mother had a crystal ball, she would be on her broom (figuratively speaking) and on her way over in a heartbeat.

Unable to look at him, I busied myself getting Bear and Lila to behave. "Sorry about the dogs. They weren't much help."

"They're completely worthless," he said, in an exasperated tone to which I could totally relate. "It's a *shepherd* and a *collie* and a—" He floundered when he got to Bear. "I don't even know what that one is."

"None of us do." I staggered as the hairy lummoX bumped the back of my knee. "And they're not worthless. Lila here, she's a search-and-rescue dog." He looked at the border collie trying to climb into my arms like a toddler and

appeared unconvinced. I assured him, “Really. They, uh, just happen to be afraid of the goats.”

“Of course they are,” he said, with a long exhale of annoyance. I caught a whiff of spearmint under the stronger smells of leather and dog and dust. “Leave it to crazy Ms. Goodnight to have a bunch of chickenshit dogs on a *ranch*, for God’s sake.”

“Excuse me?” I’d been fixing to say something else. Another apology, another inanity, I didn’t know—the spearmint had distracted me. His tone, however, brought me up short, and my eyes narrowed to reevaluate him in the harsh sunlight.

He had just been pretty decent—gentlemanly, really, giving me his shirt and all. Up close I could see that he wasn’t soft enough to be cute. He was too young to be rugged. (Which was a relief considering the underwear thing.) His eyes were very blue against his tan, and his teeth very white. But his brows were drawn down in a scowl that, even though it was aimed at the dogs, seemed to cover a lot more.

“It’s just typical,” he said, his tone a razor slice of derision, “Ms. Goodnight owning herding dogs that are afraid of goats.”

“You mean as in typically kind of her to give these useless dogs a home?” The overly sweet question should have been a warning, if he’d been paying attention, but he seemed to take it at face value.

“Doubtless.” His softly mocking snort ruined this admission. “She’s a soft touch. I’m sure these dogs had a sob story to tell her. Ms. Goodnight is notorious around here. Everybody’s kooky old aunt.”

“Oh *really*.” My voice painted a layer of ice on the Texas afternoon. Finally it sank in; his eyes flew to my red hair—a family trait—and I saw the flash of “Oh crap” on his face, even before I finished. “I just thought she was *my* kooky old aunt.”

He could have saved himself—apologized, said that he meant it in the nicest possible way. I mean, no one knew better than me how kooky the Goodnights were by any normal person’s standards.

But what he said, with an up-and-down glance that encompassed my bare legs, rubber boots, cherry-covered underwear, the dogs, the goats, and even the cow, was: “Well, that explains a lot.”

This day kept getting better and better.

Fury erased the rapier reply I *wanted* to make. Even sarcasm failed me, and all I had left was indignation. “You have a lot of nerve,” I heard myself saying, like some vapid Victorian heroine, “insulting my aunt like that.”

The accusation seemed to score a hit. His cheeks darkened under his tan, but he didn’t back down.

“Do you know what she tells people about this place?” He gestured toward the house and barn and Aunt Hyacinth’s acres of herbs and plants, and even *that* managed to express contempt. “Why she won’t sell it and move to somewhere she can have a bigger farm and decent staff to help her?” He paused, and familiar dread curdled in my stomach in the beat before he made his point. “Her dead husband doesn’t want her to.”

I knew where this was going, had to keep my head and try to steer away from the shoals. “So she’s sentimental about his wishes,” I said. “Just because some people have a *heart*—”

His snort ratcheted up my blood pressure, nearly drowning out the cautioning voice in my head. “She says his *ghost* won’t let her sell. She talks about him like he’s still living here.”

“*So?*” I forced a careless shrug, as if this were the worst of our idiosyncrasies. “Lots of people believe in ghosts.”

“I know.” Sarcasm gave way to real anger, like we were getting to the root of his personality malfunction. “A lot of

people now believe there's a ghost on *our* property, thanks to your aunt. As if we didn't have enough problems."

"Everyone's got problems." That didn't excuse his calling my aunt a nutcase. "I fail to see how your ghost is Aunt Hyacinth's fault."

"It's *totally* her fault!" He ticked off the reasons on his fingers, a pompous move that infuriated me even more. "She fed the flames of these idiotic ghost rumors, which only started because we had to build a bridge, which we had to do because she won't sell her land, and she won't give us an easement across her back acreage to cross the river there because it messes with the feng shui of her herb farm or something."

"That's ridiculous." I shook my head, my ponytail swinging. Something had short-circuited my normal instinct of self-preservation. Maybe because we were here, on Goodnight property. Maybe because he'd made me so *mad*, I wanted to return the favor, and channeled Phin at her most aggravating. "Aunt Hyacinth would never say that. She doesn't practice feng shui. She's a kitchen witch."

He opened his mouth, closed it, then scrubbed his hands up and down his face. When he dropped them, his gaze had turned scathing.

"I should have known." He looked me over, and I felt myself flush from head to toe. "From the moment I saw you standing out in the field in your underwear and gum boots, screaming at my cow, I should have known the whole family was crazier than a sack of weasels."

This was something I'd said more than once. Not the underwear thing, the crazy part. And they *were* crazy, not because they were psychics and potion makers and ghost whisperers, but because they couldn't pretend to be normal. They drove *me* crazy, too. But they were *my* family. Only I was allowed to call them nuts, not this stranger who didn't even *know* me. *Us*, I mean.

“Look, you.” Anger burned off my facade of calm, and I poked my finger at his chest, near but not quite touching, because he was bigger than me and I was new at this. I didn’t yell at people. I was snide, sometimes bitchy, but I’d never gone rubber toe to cowboy boot with a guy and glared right into his steely blue eyes, so close I could see the darker blue flecks in the irises and feel the heat of his—wow, really nicely muscled—chest through his thin undershirt. Not just in my jabbing finger but my whole body, the parts of me that were covered and the parts of me that weren’t.

Damn.

Focus, Amy. He might not be an axe murderer, but he was definitely an asshole.

“I don’t care who you are,” I said, pushing aside all those distractions. “If Aunt Hyacinth won’t sell to you, it’s for a good reason. Maybe it’s because this ‘us’ you speak of are all as nasty as you.”

“Is that so?” He hooked his thumbs in his belt and shifted his weight so that somehow, without really moving, he was suddenly *looming* over me, as if he could tell how much that bothered me. I didn’t budge, just set my teeth against the urge to either step back or kick him in the shin. “Since I’m so *nasty*,” he drawled, “next time I’ll just leave you to round up your goats alone.”

“There won’t be a next time,” I snapped, “because I’m going to chop down that blasted tree.”

“Tree?” His brows shot down in confusion. “What the *hell* are you going on about now?”

“The goats!” I said, like he was an idiot.

If possible, he scowled even more deeply. “What does the tree have to do with it?”

“The fence!” I flapped a hand toward the pen, losing the battle for simple coherence. “They climb the tree and go over the fence.”

He eased his weight back and peered down his nose at me. "You have some very strange ideas about livestock."

"Oh my *God*." I dug my dirty fingers into my hair. "Why are we talking about my stupid goats at all?"

"I don't know," he said, more infuriatingly calm the angrier I got. "I just thought maybe you wanted to say thank you for helping you round them up."

Despite the frustration burning my ears, I *still* felt a rush of shamed heat. Gritting my teeth, I forced a chill into my tone to hide that last degree of mortification. "Thank you," I choked, "for rounding up my goats ..."

I trailed off where I would have coldly put his name, if I'd known it. Downright smug at my forced gratitude, he supplied the belated introduction. "Ben." He neglected to offer a handshake. "Ben McCulloch."

"Great, now round up your cows and get off the Goodnight property, Ben McCulloch."

His fingers tightened on his belt, self-satisfaction vanishing. "Fine. And you just keep away from *McCulloch* property, Underwear Girl."

"Can't think why I'd want to go there," I said, lifting my chin and arching my brows.

Hand on the gate, he said with matching disdain, "I don't know. To return my shirt, maybe? I'd ask for it back, but I'm a gentleman."

Past embarrassment, I shucked off the garment in question with reckless fury and threw it at him. Of course, *he* caught it easily. "Thank you for the loan," I said. "See you on the other side of never."

"Here's hoping that's true." Shirt balled in his fist, he slammed the gate, so hard the whole fence wobbled. The horse had been placidly cropping grass, and looked resigned when Mr. Personality swung onto his back and kicked him into a canter. It was a matinee western move that would have impressed me if I hadn't completely, irrationally, irrevocably hated the guy's guts.

3

IN THE SHOWER, I soaped my hair with a minty green shampoo from the collection on the shelf, letting the hot water carry away my anger so I could figure out at what point I had totally lost my mind.

Sure, Ben McCulloch had been a jerk (other than lending me his shirt and helping me round up the goats, I mean). But you don't have a family like mine without developing some defenses. So why had my umbrella of sarcasm so utterly failed me just now? I really didn't want to think it had anything to do with the blue eyes and the biceps.

Austin, where I'd grown up, was a pretty big city, but it could also be a bit of a small town if you lived there long enough. Everyone at my school knew about the Goodnights—possibly due to Phin's blowing up the chemistry lab during her junior year, when trying to enchant the football team's jerseys for indomitability. Something about batch lots and logarithmic synergism, she'd explained while Mom trimmed off the singed ends of her hair. As if I cared about anything other than having to pass the class now that my last name was mud.

Let's get this straight. Magic is a fact. When other kids were chanting "Rain, rain, go away," Phin and I were in the kitchen with Mom, cooking up spells to keep the tomatoes in the backyard from getting root rot. My cousin Daisy's invisible friends were the children of a pioneer family who

died of a cholera epidemic in 1849, and Violet's crystal collection could cure a headache and pick up Mexican radio if she arranged them just right.

Maybe if these things were more flashy, or overt, the Goodnight reality would be everyone's reality. But magic was more about tendencies and probabilities, and, like Uncle Burt, worked best where you couldn't quite see it.

Being in on the secret might be a lot of fun when you're a kid, but not so much once you realize how often life hinges on everyone agreeing—at least outwardly—on the same reality.

Especially if you're the only one in a very eccentric family to realize that.

So now I was walking a tightrope between worlds, pretending I didn't believe in ghosts and magic. And my family? Oh, they were just having fun. The Bell, Book and Candle was just a gift shop with eccentric merchandise. The Iris Teapot sold herbal teas that cheered you up only because they were so delicious. No, of course magic had nothing to do with my sister blowing up the chemistry lab.

I'd become very good at deflecting comments about my family without actually denying anything. Aunt Iris, the most sympathetic of my aunts, said I was too concerned with what other people thought. But it wasn't that I wanted my family to be normal. I just wanted them to be *safe*. Magic might be as real as Copernican revolution, but I was sure Galileo had kin who didn't want him excommunicated over that, either.

God, that made me sound like a coward. A coward and a hypocrite. No wonder my defenses failed me out in the yard. There was no sarcasm shield against the inner saboteur of my guilty conscience.

Oh *hell*. I froze midlather. That little piece of self-awareness was *way* too insightful to be random.

I rinsed my hair, squinting through the sluice of soap and water to aim a suspicious glare at the bottle on the

shelf. *Goodnight Farm's Clear Your Head Shampoo.*

Crap. I picked up the bottle, rubbed my eyes, and read, *We can't say this will sort out your troubles or unknot thorny questions, but it will smooth your hair and untangle your tresses. Instructions: Lather, rinse, repeat with an open mind. Vegan, not tested on animals.*

That was the thing about the Goodnight world. No matter what the label said, you could never assume anything only worked *like* magic.

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Once dressed, I turned my clear head to the next question: What the hell had Cowboy McCrankypants's denim knickers in a twist? And why hadn't Aunt Hyacinth warned me about it?

I chewed it over as I took my filthy clothes to the washer and carried a basket of clean towels to the living room. Even in the Goodnight world, laundry didn't fold itself. Though I wouldn't have minded a crystal ball to tell me what had Phin taking so long, and whether or not I should worry.

Dad once said that Phin didn't have the sense God gave a duck, but this was not true. She had a remarkable homing instinct. I'd never known her to get lost. Not geographically, anyway. But when she got distracted by a project, or a stroke of genius, or a random thought ... For all I knew, she might be building a DNA model out of bendy straws in the Sonic parking lot.

All the same, I called her cell, let it ring until it went to voice mail, then hung up without leaving a message. Phin was notorious for not answering her phone. But right at that moment, I felt convinced she was doing it to annoy me.

I drummed my fingers on the counter, eyeing the door to Aunt Hyacinth's workroom. My laptop was upstairs, but to go up and get it was so ... deliberate. Whereas if I just

wandered into the next room to surf a little on my aunt's computer, and just *happened* to Google a name or two ...

And, I figured, I should at least send my aunt a note to let her know I'd antagonized her neighbor.

It was as good an excuse as any.

The dogs seemed happy with my new sense of purpose and trailed after me to the back of the house, their nails ticking on the tile floor, my own Bremen Town Musicians.

I headed for the desk where Aunt Hyacinth ran the business of Goodnight Farm. With the lights on and the ceiling fans turning, the workroom didn't look much like a sorceress's inner sanctum, though Phin's equipment gave it more of an alchemist's-lab vibe than usual, and I was pretty sure Aunt Hyacinth would have hated the blackout curtains. The room had once been the back porch, but Uncle Burt had enclosed it years ago. Potted plants crowded the space, and shelves of jars and bottles—green and brown and clear glass, all hand labeled—lined the walls, along with books of every vintage. Bundles of drying herbs and flowers dangled from the ceiling, and copper and iron pots hung near a large fireplace, their bottoms blackened by flame. At home, Mom cooked plenty of potions over the gas stove in our kitchen. I'd even seen her use the Crock-Pot. But Aunt Hyacinth was a traditionalist.

The dogs flopped onto the cool stone floor, sighing deeply. Not even I was immune to the peaceful energy that permeated the house and grounds. It was the same at my mom's shop, and my aunt Iris's, too. Positive magic—the only kind that Goodnights do—has that effect. Even people who don't recognize it as supernatural feel it.

This was why I'd been reluctant to come to the farm. It was part of the figurative bubble where my family lived, where magic was reasonable and *tangible*. It messed with my thinking and blurred the lines I'd carefully drawn between my private, family world and my determined public normalcy. It made me do stupid things like get into