

THE  
DOOR TO  
JANUARY

GILLIAN FRENCH

ISLANDPORT  PRESS

# CHAPTER 1

The house was a sad thing in the daylight. It sat on a hilltop, a sagging pile of weathered clapboards and crumbling brick, the gutters stuffed with the refuse of many seasons. It had been grand once, a two-and-a-half-story Colonial built facing the harbor; a huge, swaybacked barn sat on the property in its own private ruin.

Natalie and her cousin Teddy left their bikes at the base of the hill and blazed a trail through the brambles to reach the house. Teddy darted off on his own without a word to her and, within minutes, had completely disappeared.

“Watch out for old wells,” she called after him.

Natalie reached the front door and stopped to catch her breath. Waist-high weeds shot up around the granite step, and will-o’-the-wisps were everywhere, cottony gray heads waiting for one stiff breeze to scatter them apart. She stared at the tarnished gleam of the knob. How many times had she opened this door in her dreams? Approximately one million and three. So why resist it now? Simple. She was chicken.

“Come on, Teddy, where are you?” She waited, hands on her hips, and then called out over the fields, “Last one inside is a rotten corpse!”

With a scraping sound, the door opened inward. Teddy’s elfin face appeared in the gap, fringed by shaggy blond hair, a smudge of dust on one lens of his horn-rimmed glasses.

“You were saying?”

“How’d you get inside?”

“Easy. The back door’s open.” He studied her. “Scared?”

“Crapping bricks.” Natalie took a deep breath. “Let’s do it.”

As she stepped into the foyer, Natalie’s pulse quickened. The stained

walls; the bowed center staircase; the dim and dusty corridor to the rear of the house—she knew it all. Had never set foot inside, and yet, she knew it.

“This is it. This is where I go in my dream.” She smacked his shoulder. “I told you.”

“Come on, most old houses around here probably look like this. Ye Olde Maine Shack.” He lifted a long peel of yellowed wallpaper with the toe of his shoe. “Is it this disgusting in your dream? Because I smell mice. And, like . . . dead things.”

“*This* is the house, Teddy. Fixed up and nice, but this is the hallway. It’s freaky, admit it.”

Her gaze drifted to the ceiling. In the dream, a frosted glass globe hung there; now, a hole gaped where the fixture had once been.

“I admit nothing.” He sneezed and dug in his pocket for tissues. “Nat. Seriously. My allergies don’t need this.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll make it fast.” She rubbed her forehead, thinking, then grabbed his shoulders and steered. “Let’s set up in the kitchen. That’s where the dream always takes me. End of the hall, on the right.”

The kitchen stared back at them, a dingy room with an enamel sink and splintered glass in the cupboard doors. Natalie saw herself reflected in fragments: tall and sturdy, ginger freckles, dark hair curling loose.

She took the digital voice recorder from her pocket and knelt, setting it on the floor with some reverence. She’d been planning this for so many months, imagining how it would be.

Teddy watched from the doorway, his slim arms folded. “You actually think this is going to work, don’t you?”

“If it doesn’t, then I guess we’ll finally know.” He raised his brows. She shrugged. “That I’m insane.” She pressed the RECORD button, and said, “This is Natalie Rose Payson.” Her voice sounded hollow in the silence. “If somebody here is trying to reach me, I’m listening. I want to make contact.” A pause. “Just tell me what you want.”

The recorder remained, taking down the minutes as they slipped out the back door, shooting each other sidelong glances, their steps going faster and faster until it was a race, both of them pounding down the hill through chest-high weeds. Teddy was on his bike and pedaling down the lane before Natalie even reached her own, and she kicked dust after him.

On its perch, the house settled and grew another day older.

That night, Natalie slept fitfully in her aunt's summerhouse. Above her, foxfire was dancing.

Three small lights rose from her body around one a.m., drifting like sparks. They played tag as Natalie frowned in her sleep. Flash, flash, they swirled around the room, casting patterns, signaling to each other in the darkness. The foxfire was as organic to her as breathing, and as unconscious. They were her silent ushers into the land of dreams, her observers during the day.

In time, they drifted across the room to hover over Natalie, their host, then sank into her chest one by one, glowing briefly against the fabric of her T-shirt before vanishing.

Natalie jerked, her fists bearing down against the mattress. The same nightmare was back. Tonight, with a twist.

*She flew, buffeting on cross breezes. Below her, the house seemed to float in a sea of field and forest. Her singular destination. She descended and passed through the front door.*

*It was snowing inside. Flakes drifted down from the ceiling, glittering in the lamplight. Natalie continued on, past a moon-faced clock, a carved rack with a mirror. From another room, music played softly.*

*At the end of the corridor, the kitchen doorway glowed. Natalie went in.*

*China covered every surface. Plates and bowls, teacups and saucers, all brimming with snow, evidence of some Mad Hatter's party. On a woodstove*

*sat a copper kettle. The steam from the spout had hardened into ice.*

*Slowly, she turned to face a door to her left set with six panes of glass. This was the dream's apex; it always ended here, with her own face staring back from the glass.*

*But tonight, there was a shift.*

*As Natalie moved closer to the door, she heard whispers.*

*Girls' voices hissed around the frame. "Natalie," they said. "Natalie."*

*She opened the door to blackness colder than the pits of January.*

## CHAPTER 2

The tourist dad looked at her sullenly. “Look, either you guys have Clamato or you don’t. Which is it?”

“I’m not sure,” Natalie repeated, and oh God, her eyes were burning. Three hours into her first shift, and she was going to cry. “I’ll check.”

“Yeah. You do that. Jaeden, for chrissake.” He grabbed his son’s hand, who’d scrawled crayon from his coloring-page placemat clear across the tabletop. His wife *tsked* and started wiping at the stain with a wet napkin.

Natalie ducked into the kitchen, facing the pantry shelves for a moment so she could close her eyes and breathe, the only remedy she knew for an impending meltdown. She hated being sniped at, she hated being treated like an idiot; so far, waitressing was a blast.

“Ever done anything like this before?”

The punk waitress stood behind her, filling pebbled glasses at the soda fountain. Her name tag read DELIA. She kept her eyes on her work.

“That obvious, huh?”

Of all the things you should never, ever do on your first day of work, Natalie was pretty sure bawling was numero uno. The punk waitress didn’t look like she ever bawled. She looked like somebody who stomped bawlers under her 8-eye Dr. Martens.

“Hey, I’m not ragging on you. The guy at table five’s got that covered, am I right?”

Natalie sniffed, hating herself for it.

“Okay. That’s it. Come on.”

Delia took her arm and led her through the swinging doors into the dining room of Payson’s Grill, all chrome and red leatherette, Early American Greasy Spoon to the letter, complete with locals munching hamburgers at

the counter and a jukebox in the back.

Natalie locked eyes with Tourist Dad, across the room. “He hates me.”

“He doesn’t know you. To him, you’re a mule, get it?”

Delia’s hair was buzzed close to her scalp, her eyes and skin chocolate-brown. She looked to be a couple of years older than Natalie, eighteen or so, but she was a stranger, no one Natalie remembered from the fun times at Bernier Middle School.

“Listen up. None of this”—she gestured to the Grill at large—“is personal. Mr. Table Five is a jerk, and he’ll walk out of your life forever after his predictable slice of blueberry pie à la mode. That’s the great thing about waitressing. Fast turnover.”

Natalie smiled in spite of herself.

Delia nudged her. “You’ll live to serve another table. Cross my heart.”

“’Scuse me, ladies, clear a path.” Bess—forties, huge perm, blue mascara—shoved between them with a tray. It was the third time she’d bumped into Natalie since breakfast, and now she even managed to step on her toe.

“Ow! God.” Natalie watched the older waitress ram through the kitchen doors. “I’m always in her way.”

“Nah.” Delia cracked her gum. “She’s in yours. Oh, yeah, and heads up: If you land a regular who gives good tips, she’ll try to switch tables with you. Just say no. Trust me, you guys aren’t destined to be friends anyway.”

The cook hollered, “Order up!” through the pickup window and Delia looked at the plates. “It’s you. Steak and fries, heavy on the macho.”

As Natalie set down his glass of Clamato, Mr. Table Five frowned over his wife’s fish chowder. “What, you guys too cheap to give out oyster crackers?”

Natalie headed back to the kitchen. Delia grinned as she passed, and Natalie couldn’t help it. She laughed out loud.

Aunt Cilla, Dad’s younger sister, was in the manager’s office counting the weekly deposit when Natalie looked in on her. Cilla was a large woman, tall and roomy through the chest and hips, her dark curls streaked

with premature gray. A pair of wire-rimmed frames balanced on the end of her nose.

It was Cilla's restaurant now, left to her in Grampie's will, but the desk had the same blotter and in/out baskets it had had when Natalie was a kid. The same old photographs hung on the wall—Natalie's late grandparents on opening day twenty years ago, she and Teddy as kids, sitting together at the front counter. That last one struck Natalie—did she really used to be that little girl with the dorktastic pigtails, feet barely able to touch the floor, waiting for Grampie to fix her a milkshake?

Still counting, Cilla glanced up. "Need me out front?"

"I was wondering—should I take my break now? It's past one."

"Oh, jeez, I forgot!" Cilla swept the cash away. "I'll cover your tables." She put her hands on Natalie's shoulders. "How's it been so far? Torture? Wish I could train you myself, but the deposit always takes—"

"No worries. I'm catching on." Training had been practically nonexistent, the old sink-or-swim method.

"Are you okay, hon? Really?"

Natalie smiled wanly. "I didn't get much sleep last night."

"I guess not. Look at that set of baggage under your eyes." Cilla ran her thumbs beneath her niece's lashes. "I'm just so darn pleased to have you here." She chucked Natalie's chin. "Go on. Eat."

After Natalie punched her timecard, she found Delia untying her apron in the kitchen.

"Lunch buddies, huh?" Delia crooked her finger. "Okay, the magical mystery tour continues. Follow."

The cook slapped together two cheeseburgers while Delia drew sodas at the fountain.

"Keep yourself hydrated," Delia said. "Between the ovens and the lobster cooker, it gets mondo hot back here. We don't want anybody fainting."

"Drink a lot. Got it."

They sat on the loading dock together, staring off down the shuttered storefronts of Main Street. Bernier was a fading Maine town, had been ever since the cannery closed ten years ago, leaving much of Hancock County dependent on summer-people dollars.

Delia nudged Natalie's leg. "So. Gimme the dirt. I mean, I know you're Cilla's niece from Lincoln. She's been talking about you coming to stay for the summer since forever. You must really want to earn crummy tips."

Even as Natalie laughed, the nightmare flared again in her mind. Glittering snowflakes. Whispers. A cold so intense it seemed to freeze the air in her lungs. Cue the mundane answer she'd given Cilla and Mom and Dad two months ago when she'd first asked to come here; only Teddy knew the truth, and he was sworn to secrecy.

"I'm saving up for a car. I got my license in May. What about you?"

"Graduated this spring. Taking a year off. My mom's freaking about it, but that's pretty typical." Delia stretched. Her earlobes were lined with silver studs. "You psyched to spend your summer in these"—she laughed—"lush surroundings?"

"It's not so bad. I grew up here. We only moved to Lincoln about two and a half years ago."

"Seriously? Holy ships passing in the night. My family moved here last fall. Wait a sec—you're not saying you actually *missed* living in Bernier?"

Natalie sought out glimpses of the harbor between the shops. "Not exactly." She hesitated, tried to play it off with a smile. "No place like home, I guess."

Quitting time couldn't come soon enough. Bouncing between tables was impossible—somebody was always flagging Natalie down—and she didn't *know* anything. Could you get the turkey club on rye bread with double coleslaw? How well-done was medium-well? Did they have a wine list? (Oh. That was a joke.) At very long last, shaky and sticky, Natalie said her good-byes, punched out, and made for the front exit, nearly

colliding with a boy coming in.

“Sorry.” She sidestepped him. Recognition made her turn back, though it’d been over two years and he’d changed a lot. He was looking at her, too.

Tall and lanky, he wore a Red Sox hat over his dark hair, which grew thick and straight to his shoulders. Three moles were scattered across his deeply tanned cheek like drops of ink. His eyes were hazel, hawkish, and fixed on her.

A run-in like this was bound to happen, but she hadn’t expected it so soon. Her hands curled into fists. As the moment stretched on, he started to speak, then stopped again, daunted by the expression on her face; frowning, looking almost *wounded*, of all things, he went inside. Natalie caught a final flash of his eyes through the glass pane, glancing back, his brows drawn. Lowell Emerick—so changed, yet so much the same.

She squeezed the handlebars as she biked toward Morning Glory Lane, frustrated by the way her grip shook. Stupid. They didn’t scare her anymore, not Lowell or any of the others. And that’s what this summer was about, right? Facing things?

But now that January day returned to her in a series of light-blasted images: Teddy with blood under his nose, his breath crystallizing in the air, tears running down his cheeks. How the muzzle of the gun had slowly traced his jawline and lingered beneath his chin.

*I’m gonna count to ten. And then I want to see how fast you two can run.*

## CHAPTER 3

Nostalgia was thick on Morning Glory Lane. When Natalie and Teddy were kids, Bernier's back roads were their playground, the perfect hiding place. Or so it had seemed. The abandoned house on the hill had always been their turning-back point, the sign that they'd strayed too far from home.

Natalie found her cousin sitting on his bike, one foot on the ground, one on the pedal, posed like a sandpiper as he stared up at the house. His shoulder blades were sharp against his polo shirt, hair stirred around his collar by the breeze.

She braked beside Teddy. He looked over and said, "Man, you stink."

"You're loving this, aren't you?"

"*Pssh*. Try being kitchen bitch at your mom's beck and call." He grinned. "That fish-and-fried-food cologne gets old real fast. Any cats follow you here?"

Natalie rubbed her thumb and forefinger together. "World's tiniest violin."

"Don't even. You know she had to fill out some special paper to make it legal to work me to death last summer, before I turned fifteen?" He sighed. "You know why your dad never wanted to run the Grill? Because Grampie made him work out back, too, when he was my age. PTSD."

Teddy's preppy outfit was rumpled, straight from the hamper. He didn't care about clothes and wore whatever Cilla bought him, khakis and Izod shirts, the sensible old-dude sneakers nobody else their age would be caught dead in. It put a target on his back, but one had always been there; Teddy was exactly who he was, no filter. Somebody who got excited over rare lunar events, and collecting butterflies, and World War II specials on public TV.

Her smile faded. She looked off toward the house. "I ran into Lowell Emerick today."

Teddy was quiet a moment. “They’re all still around, you know. Lowell, Jason, Grace.”

“Cilla talked with my folks about it. They almost didn’t let me stay with you guys because of them. Like it all happened yesterday.” She shook her head. “Craziness.”

“So you’re saying you’re okay with everything? You’re over it. I have to go to school with those guys—well, not Jason, he dropped out—and I’m not over it. Not even close.”

“I’m not over anything. But I’m not going to let it rule our whole summer. We’ve got way more important stuff to worry about. Like, this house? Like the dream.”

Teddy cleared his throat and glanced away. “Right. Message received, zero distortion.”

“Good.” She straightened her shoulders. “The dream changed last night. The door I told you about, with the glass panes in the top? This time, there were voices behind it, calling my name. I think the house knows I’m reaching out. I mean”—she looked at the house, backlit by the afternoon sun—“something’s pulling me to this place. Like, I can *feel* it. Standing this close, I can feel it even stronger.” She put a hand to her chest. “Right here. Whenever I wake up from the dream, there it is. Like I belong here or something.”

“You belong in a rat-infested death trap. Good theory.” He followed her into the weeds and up the path they’d made yesterday. “Unless . . .”

She rolled her eyes. “Go on. Impress me, genius boy.”

“Unless it really *is* just a recurring dream, and all the stuff in it—the snow, the dishes, and now the voices—are only brain farts. You know, symbols or whatever. You said the dream started after you moved away from Bernier. So, maybe it had a lot to do with what happened before you left—all the stress and everything.” He threw his hands up, ready to duck and cover. “Just saying.”

She pondered this, and then shook her head. “No. I know the inside of that house, and it knows me. We’re connected.”

“Uh-huh. Are we quoting *Ghost Hunters* now?”

“I figured it out myself, thanks. But shows like that aren’t that far off. I’ve read all about it, okay? Making electronic voice phenomena recordings is something that lots of paranormal investigators do. You don’t have to use high-tech equipment to capture something, either. One of the earliest documented EVPs was made in Germany by a guy recording bird calls on a Victrola. When he played the record back, his dead wife spoke to him from the white noise.”

“You know what?” Teddy stopped. “This is nuts.”

“No kidding.”

“No, Nat.” When she turned back, Teddy’s expression was uncertain. “Maybe we should leave the recorder up there. I’ll buy you another one, okay? Let’s forget this.”

She looked at him, then at the house. Late-afternoon shadows stretched long. “I’ll grab it and come right back down.”

He checked his phone. “T minus three minutes and counting.”

She went through the back door into the kitchen, scooping up the recorder. Her gaze was drawn to the wall—just a wall, nothing more—where the door to January stood in her dream. Gingerly, she rapped on it, waiting for an echo, some sign of hidden room or passageway. Solid.

When they got back to Aunt Cilla’s, they headed for the summerhouse, where Natalie would be staying for the next couple of months. Teddy’s father Michael Finley, who’d been killed in a car crash when Teddy was three, had built the summerhouse himself. Carpentry was Michael’s hobby; he’d also carved a bird hotel and mounted it outside on a post, where Natalie and Teddy used to leave secret messages for each other when they were little.

The summerhouse had one room. Natalie had moved in a bureau and a cot from the house, stacking the most vital of her collection of parapsychology and ghost-hunting books by the head of her bed. Now, she and Teddy

sat on the mattress with the recorder between them. She pressed PLAY.

First, her own voice spoke: “This is Natalie Rose Payson . . .”—static—“If somebody here is”—*hbssssssh* . . . her tone dipped—“trying to reach”—and the rest of the message faded into static.

The tape hissed on and on. A steady pounding ran beneath the white noise, like a heartbeat. Natalie and Teddy stared at each other. Then, out of nowhere:

“Tell me my regiment.”

Natalie gasped.

It was a man’s deep voice, trembling, as if the recording was very old, degraded.

“Do it.”

“Thirteenth Army Infantry.” A girl’s voice, small and strange. “You walked point.”

“And tell me your name.” He waited. “I want to hear you say it.”

The girl gave a keening whine. Static surged in. Through it cut a hoarse wail that made Natalie raise her hands to her ears.

Scrabbling, like claws against wood. Then *pound-pound-pound* again, endlessly.

The sounds stopped.

After a long pause, Teddy said softly, “What . . . the hell was that?”

It took Natalie a while to find her voice. “I have no idea.”

Dad answered on the second ring.

“Kiddo, how you doing?” Over his shoulder: “I got Nat on the line.”

Natalie pictured Mom sitting in the recliner with her knitting, putting her feet up after a long day cleaning rooms at the Spruce Lodge, the only motel in Lincoln.

“So, how’d your first day at the Grill go?” Dad said. “Knock ’em dead?”

“Vice versa. I suck.”

“Ah, give it two weeks. You’ll be running circles around the best of them. How’s that cousin of yours? Behavin’?”

“Never.”

Natalie held the handset of Cilla’s old house phone to her ear, looking at the photos of Teddy decorating Cilla’s living room. Teddy, receiving gold cups in science fairs and physics competitions, certificates of academic excellence. He was shorter than the other winners, standing apart. Teddy had always been an honor roll student, but after Natalie moved away, he’d developed a drive that was a little scary; at fifteen, he already owned a shelf full of SAT prep books and knew exactly what universities he was going to apply to, MIT being number one on the list.

“Bernier been treating you right?” What Dad meant was, has anyone messed with you yet.

“Dad. I can handle it. Seriously.”

Mom picked up the bedroom extension. “Are you really sleeping in that mildewy old summerhouse? Even though Cilla has a perfectly good guest room?”

“I like it out there. I cleaned it up. It’s actually pretty nice now.”

“Whatever you say. Don’t let the blackflies carry you off in your sleep.” Mom paused. “Miss you around here, baby. Maybe sending you down there wasn’t the best idea.”

This time, Natalie made herself take a deep breath before she answered. Saying she was sixteen, not six, wouldn’t help her case.

“No way. I can make great tips. Everybody back home’s busy this summer, anyway. Kacey and Sam are working in Bar Harbor, Mai’s in summer school . . .”

Dad made a sound in his throat. “Put my sister on.”

Cilla was fixing a cup of tea in the kitchen, and she carried it with her when she took the phone. “Oh, sure. Stick me in the hot seat,” she said. Clearing her throat, she said into the receiver, “Hi, Billy. How’s everything?”

Natalie ran upstairs and knocked on Teddy's bedroom door. He was hunched over his desk, working on a B-19 bomber. He didn't look up as she sat on the bed. Model building was Teddy's passion, along with those horrible thousand-piece jigsaw puzzles that made her eyes cross. Planes hung from the ceiling by strands of fishing line, and tanks and cars cluttered the shelves.

She took the recorder from her pocket and held it in her lap, fidgeting.

"Will you listen to it again with me?" Her voice was soft.

"No."

"But we caught something. I mean, do you know what this—" She stopped herself, took a deep breath. "I understand if you're scared, okay? So am I. But . . ."

Teddy set his paintbrush down with a click. "I am not. Scared."

His gaze was hot, indignant. Natalie looked at the floor for a moment. She should've known better than to go there with him.

He pushed back from the table, screwing the tops back on his bottles of paint.

"It's not real. It's a fake, a joke—don't you know that? That house sat wide open after we left yesterday. Obviously, somebody was either in the house listening to us when we left the recorder, or came in later and decided to mess with our heads."

She watched him. This was Teddy with his back against the wall, digging in. She ran her fingers over the silver case of the recorder. "Will you go back there with me?"

He exhaled through his nose. "I'd never ditch you. Just don't expect me to believe we're listening to ghosts."

That night, as Natalie slept, the three lights emerged from her and danced again. For a time, they clustered at the window, gazing out at the moonlit backyard, whispering together, their energy making faint pinging sounds off the wire-mesh screen.