

SHADOW HOUSE

No way out

DAN POBLOCKI

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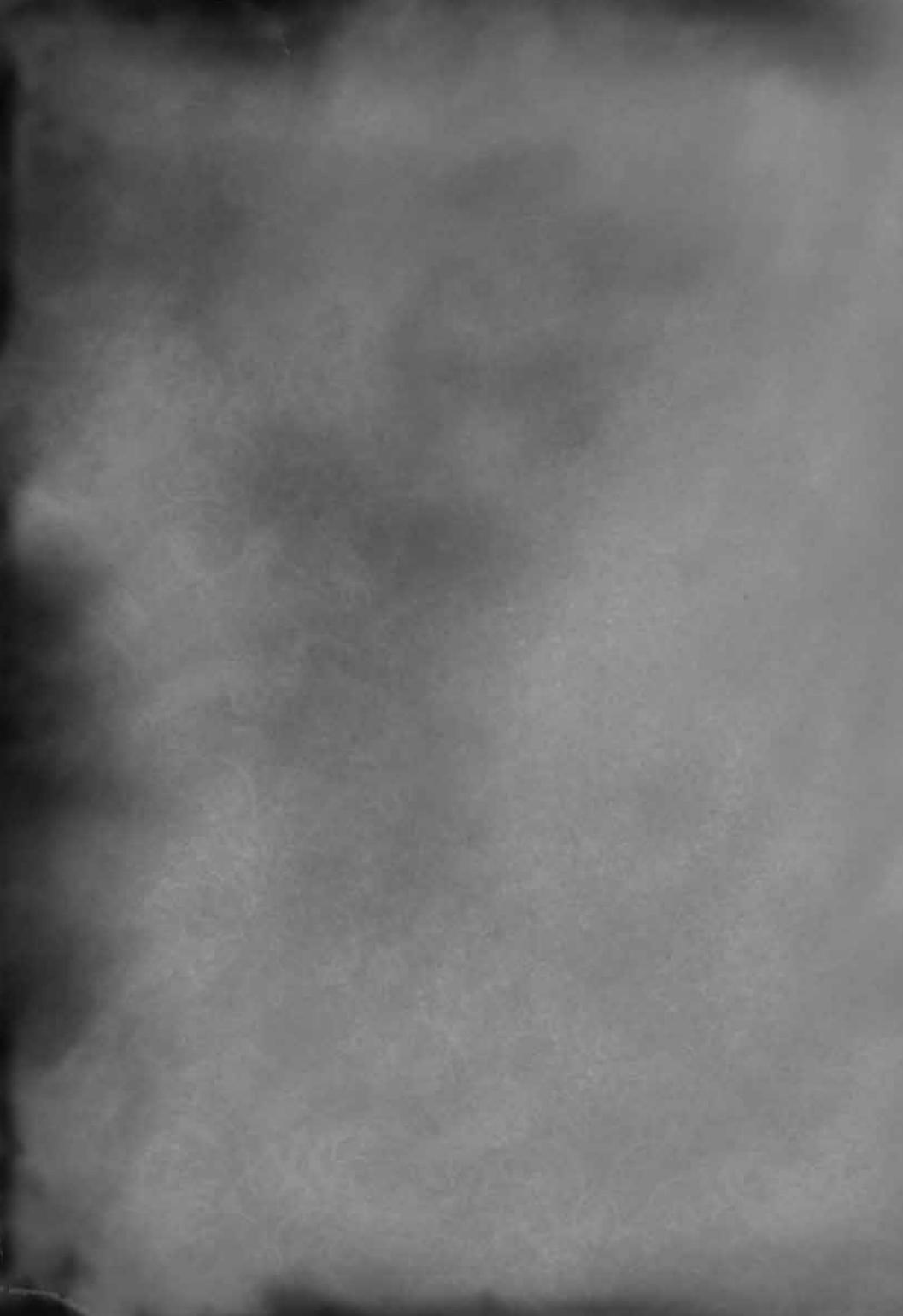
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*For Erin Black, who is a wonderful editor
and much spookier than she admits*





CHAPTER 1

ON THE EDGE of the starlit meadow, Azumi's thoughts throbbed in her head in time with her footsteps. *My fault Marcus is dead. My fault Moriko's gone. My fault we trusted the monster, my fault, my fault, my fault my fault my fault—*

Something snagged Azumi's sneaker, and she tripped forward, the tall grass padding her fall.

Poppy and Dash continued on, unaware that Azumi was sprawled behind them. They marched quickly and quietly, parallel to the dark woods several yards to their right.

Wait! Please—

She tried to call out, but her voice was stuck in her throat. Would calling them even help? Everything here was out to destroy them. What was the point?

My fault—

Larkspur House glared down at her from atop the hill to her left, and Azumi shuddered. Something inside its dark windows wished to keep her there forever. If the hallways could change shape, the wallpaper turn into toxic tendrils, and the greenhouse contain acres of forest, what was stopping Larkspur from catapulting its bricks and glass and metal spikes far into the meadow and pounding her flat?

No. She had to concentrate. She had to stick to the plan, do what Poppy and Dash said.

They were even farther away now—focused and determined to make it quickly back to the driveway and the safety of Hardscrabble Road. Dash limped a little, and Poppy tended to him every few steps. So why hadn't she noticed that Azumi wasn't with them?

Azumi pressed her lips together and was about to stand when something rustled the grass by her feet. Turning back, she noticed the shadow of the thing that had tripped her only a few inches away. Instinct made her scramble aside. But when the breeze rustled the grass, showing Azumi what looked like matted and faded-blue hair glistening in the starlight, panic whooshed into her head like a harsh gust of wind, and she froze, wide-eyed, her chest heaving.

Blue hair . . .

Moriko? she tried to say, but her voice wouldn't come past her lips.

You can't be . . . You're dead . . .

This . . . isn't . . . real.

A trick . . . Just like how the creature dressed as you, like a costume . . .

She forced herself to her feet. From up the hill, Larkspur House loomed. Azumi could feel it grinning at her—another version of that same creature that had pretended to be her sister.

But the house is only a costume too . . . , she thought.

Wood and brick and stone and . . . blood . . .

Azumi shook her head violently, scattering the cobwebs of anxiety that her brain kept constructing around her thoughts. She steeled herself, pushing her fear to the edges of her imagination, then peered at the dark mass that was hidden by the long grass.

It's happening again . . .

You're not really here . . .

Wake up, Azumi . . . Wake up . . . !

A harsh breeze parted the grass, finally revealing the thing that Azumi had tripped over. Her eyes grew wide with horror. It was a body. Pieces of dirty clothing formed the shape of a torso, arms, legs. She knew these clothes. It was Moriko!

Not again . . . please! I don't want to see . . .

The wind caught several pieces of blue hair and lifted them from her sister's withered skull. They rose up like gossamer strands before rushing forward and clinging to Azumi's face. Her vision swirled as she screamed, her voice shattering the quiet night. As she inhaled, the hairs seemed to creep into her throat and up her nostrils, choking her. She scratched at her face, grabbing at the sharp strands, but she was blinded by a stinging sensation in her eyes. She could hear something scabbling through the grass near her feet, and she imagined her sister's fingers clawing their way toward her ankle, while somewhere in the woods the monster heard her and came rushing back to finish its job.

Hands clasped her shoulders and spun her around. She was too shocked to cry out.

Poppy was standing behind her, Dash at her side. "Azumi! What's wrong?"

Azumi blinked, still gagging, but all of a sudden her face was clear, the hair gone. Carefully, she licked at her lips. The blue hair had only been another trick—the house, the shadow creature was still playing with her. Or maybe it was her own mind . . .

Azumi leapt forward and threw her arms around Poppy, pulling her away from the spot where her sister's body lay. "It's M-Moriko," Azumi sputtered. "She's come back." But when

she pointed toward the grass, there was no body. Instead, she saw that the thing she'd tripped over was merely a long tree branch, bleached by the sun.

Her skin flashed cold.

"This branch wasn't here," said Azumi. "It was my sister. She grabbed at my foot. I swear! She wanted to kill me—"

"It wasn't real," said Poppy.

"Shh," said Dash. "Keep your voices down." He glanced over Azumi's shoulder toward the edge of woods. Marcus was back there somewhere, lying beneath the tree where the creature had tossed him. "It could be following us."

"I'm . . . I'm sorry . . ." Azumi covered her face, hiding tears. "It scared me."

"I'm sure it did." Poppy sighed. "But it was fake." She rubbed Azumi's back. "We've got to stay strong. Don't let the house in your head."

"Too late for that," said Azumi. "I don't know how to get it *out* of my head."

"From now on," said Dash, "we have to keep closer together. If anyone trips and falls, or even just sees something weird, let everyone know. Immediately. We can't let the house separate us."

"Okay," said Azumi, wiping at her nose.

Poppy stared into the woods, listening. “If it was still coming for us, we’d hear it, wouldn’t we? Crunching through the brush?”

“Unless it’s changed shape again,” said Dash, “and now it looks like *someone else*.”

Azumi’s skin prickled as the three glanced at one another, suddenly suspicious.

But she could trust them, couldn’t she? They’d been out of her sight for only a second. Not enough time for anything to—

“Let me see your eyes,” said Poppy, stepping in front of her.

“Me?” Azumi’s cheeks tingled with hurt. She scowled, then widened her eyes at the other girl. “*Brown*. Not gold.”

A howling cry rose up from the darkness back near where Marcus had fallen. Azumi slumped her shoulders, trying to shrink down inside herself. Poppy clasped Azumi’s hand, and Dash stepped closer. Their warmth erased some of Azumi’s chill, and she felt grateful—that they trusted her, even after she’d fought them so hard about Moriko; that they understood her fear; that she wasn’t alone.

But you are alone . . .

Azumi squeezed her eyes shut again.

The howl echoed across the grounds, and then died away. The silence that followed was even more frightening. There was no way to tell where the monster was now.

“Come on,” said Dash, tugging at the girls’ arms. “We’ve got a long way to go around the house before we reach the driveway. And I don’t think that thing is giving up anytime soon.”

“Neither are we,” said Poppy, unable to control the quaver in her voice.