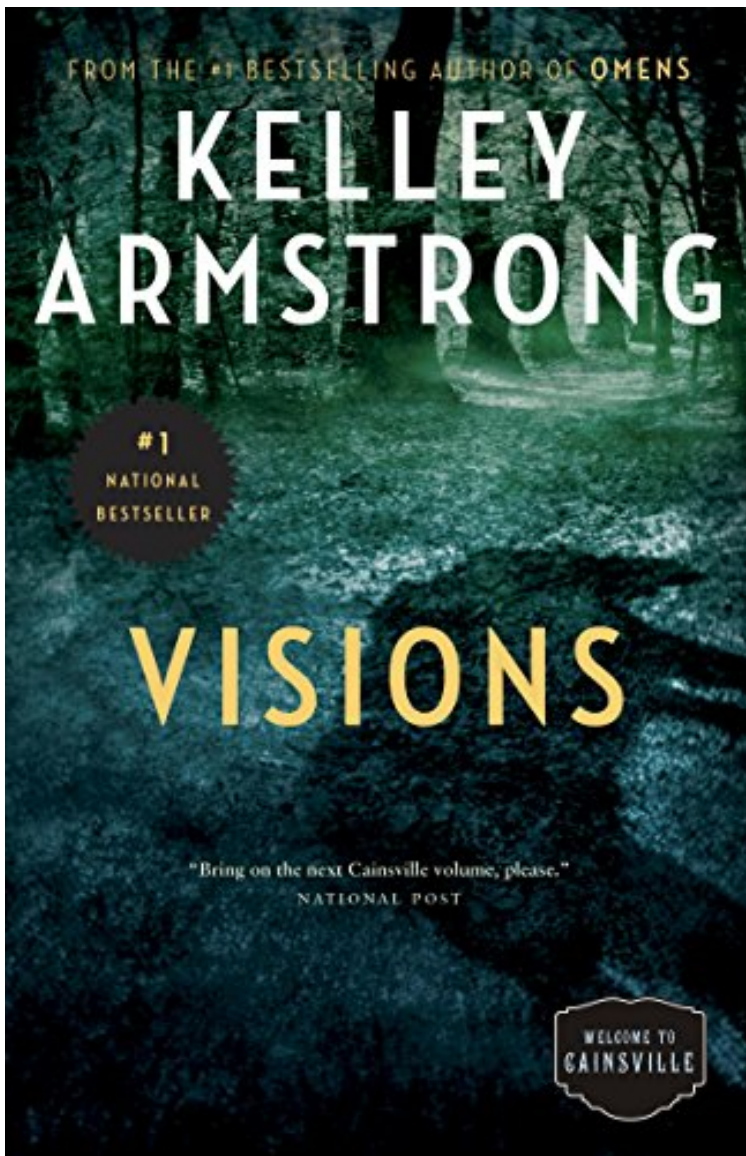


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Visions: The Cainsville Series



*Par Kelley Armstrong
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIn the second book in bestselling author Kelley Armstrong's exciting new Cainsville series, Olivia's newly discovered power to read omens leads to the discovery of a gruesome crime with troubling connections to her hometown. Omens, the first installment in Kelley Armstrong's Cainsville series, introduced Olivia Taylor-Jones, daughter of notorious serial killers, and Gabriel Walsh, the self-serving, morally ambiguous lawyer who became her unlikely ally. Together, they chased down a devious killer and partially cleared her parents of their horrifying crimes. Their success, however, is short lived. While Olivia takes refuge in the old, secluded town of Cainsville, Gabriel's past mistakes come to light, creating a rift between them just when she needs his help the most. Olivia finds a dead woman in her car, dressed to look

like her, but the body vanishes before anyone else sees it. Olivia's certain it's another omen, a sign of impending danger. But then she learns that a troubled young woman with a connection to Cainsville went missing just days earlier--the same woman Olivia found dead in her car. Someone has gone to great lengths to kill and leave this young woman as a warning. But why? And what role has Olivia's new home played in this disturbing murder? Olivia's effort to uncover the truth places her in the crosshairs of old and powerful forces, forces that have their own agenda, and closely guarded secrets they don't want

revealed.***This excerpt is from an advance uncorrected proof***Copyright 2014 by Kelley Armstrong

CHAPTER ONE

The poppies were a bad sign. A death omen. It doesn't get much worse than that. We hadn't planted them. When a gardener suggested it once, my mother had said, They make opium from poppies, in whispered horror, as if her society friends might jump to the conclusion we were running an opium den in our basement. I'd wanted to laugh and tell her they used a different subspecies for drugs. I hadn't. Deep in my gut, I had not wanted poppies in our garden. A silly superstition. Or so it seemed. But when I see omens and portents, they mean something. It'd been three weeks since I'd left my family home, fleeing ahead of the media frenzy that erupted when I'd learned my real parents were notorious serial killers. While I worked on building a new life, I'd decided to come back to the empty house and grab a few things. I tossed my suitcases in the borrowed Buick and headed out back for a swim. I was walking toward the front of the house, raking my fingers through my wet hair, when I noticed a splash of red in the rock garden. Poppies. I reached down and rubbed a silky red petal. It felt real enough. I took out my phone, snapped a picture, and checked the result. Yep, I still saw poppies. Which meant they existed outside my head. Always a good sign. Except for the part about poppies being a bad sign. I shook it off, turned the corner, and there was someone sitting in my driver's seat. I flashed to the poppies. A killer waiting to ambush me? Three weeks ago this would have been laughable. That was before I discovered the truth about my past. Still, I couldn't imagine an assassin waiting, in plain view, in my car. Nor would anyone sneak onto the estate to steal a fifteen-year-old Buick when a half-dozen antique sports cars were garaged around back. The most likely explanation these days? A reporter getting creative. I continued forward, circling around the car. I'd left the driver's window down. A woman sat behind the wheel. The roof cast her face into deep shadow and all I could see were sunglasses and blond hair. Ash-blond, like my own. It even looked like my current cut a few inches long, tousled-curly. Hey, I said as I walked closer. The woman didn't respond. I grabbed the handle, yanked open the door, and she fell out. Toppled, as I jumped back with a yelp, thinking even as I did that I was making a fool of myself, that someone was snapping a picture of this very juvenile prank. She had no eyes. The woman hung out of the car, wig falling off, sunglasses, too. Beneath the sunglasses were blood-crusted pits. I staggered back, my own eyes shutting fast. I was hallucinating. I'd seen this twice before, first on a dead man and then on a woman in the hospital. Both times, it was nothing more than a hallucination, an omen with some meaning I couldn't comprehend. When I looked again, she'd be fine. I did, and her eyes were still gone. Gouged out. Dried blood smeared down one cheek. I'm not hallucinating. This time, I'm not hallucinating. I bent to touch her neck. The skin was cold. There's a dead woman in my car. A dead woman dressed to look like me. I raced to the house, fumbling with the lock. The door opened. I swung in, hit the security code, then slammed and locked it. I reset the alarms, fished my gun and cell from my bag, and made a call. I paced the hall waiting for the sound of a car in the drive. As I passed the front room, I caught a movement through the drawn sheers. I nudged one aside and peeked out to see a dark shape by the gardens. A big black dog exactly like one I'd seen early this morning, fifty miles away in Cainsville. The hounds will come to Cainsville and when they do, you'll wish you'd made a very different choice today. That's what Edgar Chandler said yesterday, before the police took him away, arrested for his involvement in two murders that had been pinned on my birth parents. Only a few people knew I'd rented an apartment in Cainsville, and he wasn't one of them. After the media had swarmed, I'd taken refuge in that sleepy little village in the middle of nowhere. A sleepy little village with disappearing gargoyles, vicious ravens and, as of this morning, gigantic black hounds. A sleepy little village where no one seemed to find it the least bit strange that I could read omens and see portents. I rubbed my arms. I didn't want to see a connection between Chandler and Cainsville. I loved my new town. I loved the safety of it, the community of it, the way it had welcomed me and made me feel like I belonged. I peeked out again. The dog was still there, and it was exactly as I remembered from this morning a massive beast, over three feet tall, with shaggy black fur. There was no way the dog could have followed me fifty miles. Yet what were the chances of seeing another just like it? I took out my phone. As the camera clicked, the dog looked straight at me. Then it loped off across the lawn and disappeared through the trees. A few minutes later, I caught the roar of a familiar engine and ran outside as a black Jag screeched to a

stop. The door flew open. A man jumped out, ducking to avoid hitting his head. Gabriel Walsh. Roughly thirty years old. I've never asked his age. At least six foot four. I've never measured him, either. A linebackers build, with wavy black hair, strong features, dark shades, and a custom-tailored suit, despite the fact it was Memorial Day and he wasn't supposed to be working. He was, of course. Gabriel was always working. When I first met my mother's former appeal lawyer, I'd mistaken him for hired muscle. A thug in an expensive suit.

Three weeks later, I still thought the analogy wasn't a bad one. He'd have a reputation for ripping people apart, though usually only on witness stands. Usually. Gabriel didn't even look at my car or the corpse spilling out of it. His gaze shot straight to me, lips tightening as he bore down. Limped down, I should say. He'd been shot in the leg yesterday. And no, I didn't do it, as tempting as that could be sometimes. Where's your cane? I called. I told you to stay in the house. I only came out when I saw you drive up. A grunt. A quick once-over. Then, Are you all right? His voice tinged with reluctance, as if he really hated to ask. Ah, Gabriel. I'm fine, I said. And no, I didn't call the police. Good. His shades swung toward the Buick. He started for it. If I'd been anyone else, he would have ordered me to stay back. Not because he wouldn't want to upset a client's such considerations aren't given space in Gabriel's busy brain. He'd insist because otherwise that client might get in his way or do something stupid, like leave fingerprints. As of yesterday, though, I wasn't just a client. He'd hired me as an investigative assistant, which damned well better mean I could be trusted near a potential crime scene. I did hang back a few paces. Steeling myself for the sight. I didn't want to flinch in front of him. He reached the driver's side. Stopped. Frowned. Lifted his shades. Lowered them. Looked at me. Did you

. . . ? He trailed off and shook his head. Of course not. I rounded the car to where he stood by the open driver's door. The body . . . The body was gone. CHAPTER TWO No, I whispered. I saw . . . I swallowed. I saw someone in the car, and when I opened the door, the body fell out. I wasn't imagining it. I touched it. I'm sure you did. The question is . . . He looked around and I moved closer, leaning into the open doorway. There's no blood, I said. But the only injury I could see was her eyes. And she was cold, really cold. She hadn't died recently. He nodded. I didn't see any doubt in his expression, but my heart still pounded, my brain whirring to prove that I hadn't imagined it. No, that I hadn't hallucinated it. Poppies, I said. There are poppies in the rock garden. I saw them right before I found the body. I hurried around the garage with Gabriel limping after me. There were no poppies in the rock garden. I took a picture to make sure I wasn't imagining them, I said. There were clearly. My photo showed the garden. With rocks. And ivy. And moss.

And no poppies. They were there, I said. I swear. Am I questioning that? No, but then stop panicking. I'm not. You are. You found a body, and you called me, and now it's gone, and you're panicking because you can't prove it was there. I don't doubt you saw something. We'll figure out what it was. As I led Gabriel to the sitting room, his gaze flitted around, discreetly checking out the antiques, any one of which would pay the annual rent on my new apartment. Yes, this is what I walked away from, I said. I know how you feel about that. I said nothing. But you're thinking something. Only that it's a very nice house. Gabriel knows what it's like to be poor, having been raised by a drug-addicted pickpocket mother who'd disappeared when he was fifteen,

leaving him to survive on his own. A street kid who put himself through law school. So no, he was not impressed by the debutante who walked away from her Kenilworth mansion to work in a diner in Cainsville. Did you collect your things? he asked. I did, including my laptop, so you can have your old one back. Don't worry, though, I'll pay rent for the full week. I smiled, but he only nodded. I walked to the love seat. My dad's spot, where we used to sit together. As I sank into it, I began to relax. Gabriel stopped beside my mother's chair, a spindly antique. That is not going to hold you, I said. Does it hold anyone? Barely. Lovely to look at, but hellishly uncomfortable to sit on. He surveyed the others. They all seemed made for people about six inches shorter than Gabriel. I stood. Take this. No, I said. Put your leg up. You're supposed to keep it elevated. He grumbled but lowered himself onto the love seat and turned sideways to prop up his leg, proving it was hurting more than he'd let on. I perched on my mother's chair. So apparently I hallucinated a dead body. We don't know that for sure. Yeah, I think we do. Otherwise, someone left a corpse in my car while I went for a swim and then disposed of it while I was in the house waiting for you. Highly unlikely.

The fact that she wore a wig to look like me only seems to seal the matter. It was an omen. A warning. I paused. I prefer poppies. A faint frown. If it was indeed an apparition, would it not make more sense that you would see yourself dead in the car? Maybe I see whatever my mind will accept. When he didn't reply, I glanced over. He had his shades off as he stared at the wall, deep in thought. The first time I'd seen Gabriel without his sunglasses, I'd wished he'd put them back on. His eyes were an unnaturally pale blue. Empty eyes, I'd thought. I'd come to see that empty wasn't quite the right word. More like iced over. Still startling, though, that pale blue ringed with dark. I'd been with him many times when he'd removed his shades in front of

strangers, and no one else seemed bothered by his eyes. I wondered what they saw. And, if it was different for me, why? So you spotted the poppies and then the body, he said after a moment. That seems an overload of omens. He wasn't asking. Just working it out for himself. I swore he was more comfortable with my ability than I was. His great-aunt Rose was a psychic in Cainsville, and he'd grown up accepting things like the second sight. Would it not seem that the poppies were a portent for the body? he said. Meaning the body itself was real? I don't think so. The eyes . . . Well, I told you about the eyes. What I didn't mention is that I've seen that before. Twice in the past few weeks. I explained and then said, Both times it was a hallucination. Which seems to prove that this wasn't real, either, and that I shouldn't have called you. No, he said. That is always the first thing you should do under such circumstances. He said it as if his clients found corpses in cars all the time. You came inside to call, and secured the house, correct? Correct, I said. Did you hear any noise from outside? I started to shake my head. Then I remembered the hound and pulled out my cell phone, certain I'd see a photo of our empty front gardens. I didn't. I passed him my phone. What do you see? He looked at the screen. A dog. I exhaled in relief. Is that an omen? he asked. I have no idea. But I saw that exact same dog in Cainsville this morning. I'm sure it was the same one. It's huge. And very distinctive. He tapped the phone, frowning. In Cainsville, you say? He rose. We should speak to Rose. Before we left, I reset the house alarm. You need one of those at your apartment, Gabriel said. I have a gun. And a cat. He gave me a look. I cannot afford a security system, Gabriel. I suppose I could hock some things. I left most of my jewelry upstairs. I could go get it . . . No, you'd be lucky to get a fraction of the value. I'm sure Gabriel had enough experience with pawnshops to know, though most of what he would have hocked as a youth wouldn't have been his to begin with. You need a security system, he said. One of Don's men installs excellent units at very reasonable prices. He meant Don Gallagher, his primary client. Don headed the Satans Saints. It was not a heavy metal band. Uh-huh. A biker who installs security systems? Does he keep a backup copy of the code? Petty larceny is hardly profitable enough for the Saints to bother with if they involved themselves in criminal activity, which they do not. Any system I buy from them would be both secure and affordable. Having survived that fall off the back of a truck without a scratch. I still can't afford it from your pay. Now, I seem to recall you saying once that your father had a garage full of cars? Yes . . . You should take one. I'm not. Let's take a look. He limped off, leaving me to follow.

CHAPTER THREE

Gabriel scanned the two rows of cars. His Jag might reach six figures, but he could have bought two of them for the price of any of these vintage sports models. I stifled any twinge of guilt. Yes, Dad had inherited the Mills Jones department store, but it'd been close to bankruptcy when he'd bought out the Mills family. He'd earned every penny to buy these vehicles, the same as Gabriel had for his. My dad loved fast cars, I said as I walked over. As does his daughter. Gabriel's Jag had five hundred horses under the hood, but for him it was only a status symbol, a mobile business card that said, I might be young, but I'm a fucking genius at what I do. Which is your favorite? he asked. I opened my mouth to say that I didn't have one, but he'd already noticed where my gaze slid. He walked behind the two-seater. A Maserati? he said. Not much trunk space. You don't buy a 1961 Maserati Spyder for trunk space. All right, then. Where are the keys? I can't. Does your mother use these cars? No, but does anyone else use them? No, but you need a vehicle, Olivia. The fact that your mother continues to keep on these suggests she considers them yours, for your use, the same as your laptop or your clothing. I suspect if you checked the will, your father left them to you. If you feel the need to check with her, do that. I don't. But a waitress with a Maserati? That's not who I want to be. Yes, I need a car, and once I'm working for you I'll rent or lease something. Right now whose vehicle is that? He cut in as if I'd stopped talking a few sentences ago. For him, I probably had or at least I'd stopped saying anything worth listening to. I followed his finger to a decade-old VW diesel Jetta tucked behind the Rolls. That belonged to our former housekeeper, I said. She lived in and didn't have her own car, so Dad bought her the Jetta. No one drives it now? I shook my head. She retired and our new housekeeper lives out. Then take that. When I opened my mouth to protest, he said, Is it too ostentatious to drive in Cainsville? No, but do you expect you'd find any leased or used car with lower insurance or better gas mileage? No, but then it meets your standards and overrules your objections. We'll pick it up later. He headed for the door. I looked at the VW. He was right. For now, this would be no worse than borrowing the Clarks Buick. As I came up behind him, Gabriel said, Catch, and tossed his car keys over his shoulder. Take the Jag. If you did indeed have a vision of yourself dead in that car, you shouldn't get behind the wheel. I'll follow you back to Cainsville and we'll speak to Rose. You don't have to. I have business there. When I still hesitated in the driveway, he waved at his car. Take it. Go. I handed him the Clarks keys. Thanks. I wanted to say thanks for more than letting me drive his car. Thanks for dropping everything and coming out here. Thanks for not making me feel like I'd panicked over a

false alarm. But Gabriel doesn't do well with gratitude. He prefers cash. So I settled for that simple Thanks, which he brushed off with a wave as he limped to the deathmobile. Cainsville, Illinois, was an hours drive from Chicago, a perfectly reasonable commuting distance, which should have ensured the town became a bedroom community for the big city. While some residents did work in the city, it wasn't easy. No train. No bus. Not even a local taxi service. Commuters had to drive, which started with a slow twenty-minute trek along a country road that took you in the opposite direction to Chicago but led to the nearest highway exit near being a relative term. Even those who wouldn't mind the commute would have trouble finding a house in Cainsville. Hemmed in by the highway, a river, and marshy ground, there was no room for expansion. It was a small, insular community, still fond of the old ways, as the elders liked to say. Yet every modern convenience including screamingly fast Internet service was available to those who wanted it. A strange little town. And I adored it. Driving back that afternoon, I took it all in, as if I'd been gone for weeks. The only road into town became Main Street, the commercial center of Cainsville . . . if you call a dozen shops and services a center. I would. Almost anything I could want was there, within a few minutes walk of my apartment. Life doesn't get much more convenient than that. Main Street looks as if it belongs in a small town preserved or restored for tourism. Except, without so much as a bed-and-breakfast, tourism wasn't the point for Cainsville. That's just how it looked picture-perfect storefronts, mostly Renaissance Revival architecture. The street was as narrow as it must have been in the days of horses and buggies. In contrast, the sidewalks were wide, and prettied up with overflowing flowerpots, freshly painted benches, and ornate iron trash bins. This was a town for ambling, as those sidewalks suggested. No one was in a hurry. No one was much inclined to take their car, either, not unless they were leaving town or had the misfortune to live too far from the grocery store. There were a couple dozen people out and about, and if some of them didn't wave, it was only because they were too engrossed in conversation with a companion. As I drove in, I looked for gargoyles. That had become a habit. I was too old for the annual May Day gargoyle hunt, where kids competed to see who'd found the most, but I still looked in hopes of spotting a new one, because in Cainsville not every gargoyle could be seen all the time. I turned onto Rowan. My street. I pulled up across the road from my apartment building and Gabriel parked behind me, in front of his aunt's tiny dollhouse Victorian. Rose's car was gone. Gabriel didn't suggest calling her cell to see when she'd be back. If he did, she'd rush home to help him. Rose's relationship with her grandnephew isn't an easy one. Gabriel discourages emotional attachments the way most of us discourage door-to-door salesmen. They're inconvenient, intrusive, and liable to end up saddling you with something you never wanted in the first place, at a cost far higher than you wish to pay. If Gabriel is attached to anyone, it's Rose. Yet when his mother left him, he didn't tell her. When Rose found out, he ran until she stopped looking for him. That's hard to understand, but there was something in Gabriel's psyche, perhaps arising from his family's con-artist past, that said you don't take anything from those you care about. You took only from marks, and marks were always strangers. If Rose had learned that Seanna had abandoned him, she'd have looked after him, and he couldn't accept that. Or maybe he just couldn't believe she'd actually want to. Gabriel stayed at my place for an hour, prowling the apartment, checking the windows, and engaging in stare-downs with the cat. Then he declared Rose wasn't returning anytime soon and stumped off to speak to my landlord, Grace, about the security system before heading back to Chicago. The next morning, I had the seven-to-three diner shift. My fellow weekday server, Susie, has a second job and we work around her schedule. Which means I have a mix of day and evening shifts that my body hasn't quite adjusted to yet. I don't love my job. Oh hell, let's be honest I barely like it. But as impressive as a master's degree from Yale might sound, it doesn't qualify you for shit, especially when you have no work experience and you majored in Victorian literature. If there was one thing I did like about my job, it was the people. The owner an ex-con named Larry was a dream boss. The regulars were mostly seniors I swear half the town collects social security and they'd embraced me like a runaway come home. Even finding out who my birth parents were hadn't changed that. This was my first shift back after Edgar Chandler's arrest. Everyone had heard what happened and they were all so pleased, so very pleased. Which seems a little odd, but in Cainsville a little odd was the norm. Such an exciting adventure, Ida Clark said when I brought her lunch. Ida and her husband, Walter, are probably in their seventies. It was their car I'd borrowed. A terribly exciting adventure, don't you think? she said to Walter, who nodded and said yes, terribly exciting. Liv was shot at, said a voice from across the diner. She watched a man die and had to hide in the basement while being stalked by a killer. I don't think exciting is the word you're looking for. That was Patrick. The diner's resident novelist. Also the only person under forty who'd dare speak to the town elders that way. Ida glared at him. It is exciting. She proved her parents are innocent. For two out of eight murders, I

said. Still, that's grounds for an appeal. But what exactly happened to that poor young couple? The newspapers weren't very forthcoming. Did God, leave her alone, Patrick said. You're monopolizing the only server and some of us require coffee. He raised his empty mug, and I seized the excuse to hurry off. As I filled Patrick's mug, he murmured, Don't tell them anything. I'm sure it's a messy business, and we don't want to tax their old hearts. There was no way Ida could have overheard, but she aimed a deadly scowl his way. He only smiled and lifted his mug in salute. After the lunch rush passed, I brought fresh hot water for the Clarks.

Several others had joined them, most notably Veronica, one of the elders I knew best, though I can't say I knew any of them well, despite hours of chitchat. Mostly, they just wanted to talk about me, and if I swung the conversation their way, they'd deflect. Were old and boring, dear, they'd say. Tell us about yourself. With

Veronica, it was more of a two-way conversation, but only because she'd talk about the town and its traditions. An amateur historian. And, like all the elders, a professional busybody, though I say that in the nicest way. They don't pry; they're just endlessly curious. Veronica had brought in a sheaf of papers. I only caught a glimpse of a dark-haired woman's photo. When I filled their teacups, she said, You're in the city quite often, aren't you, Olivia? Oh, we shouldn't bother her with this, Ida said. With what? I asked. Posting notices for Ciara Conway, Veronica said. I'm sure the police are doing all they can, but every little bit extra helps. Olivia hasn't been around since Friday, Ida reminded her. With everything that was happening, I doubt

she's even heard one of our young women has gone missing. There were very few young women in Cainsville, and I'd met none named Ciara. When I said as much, Ida explained: Her mother grew up here. Meaning Ciara had likely come to visit her maternal grandparents, which in the eyes of the elders made her a

local. That was Cainsville. Gabriel had never lived here, either, and they considered him one of their own. When did she disappear? I asked. Saturday. I glanced at the papers. So you're . . . posting flyers? That's certainly how it used to be done, but these days there are other methods, Ida said. We know. But the old ways are still useful. Veronica pushed the stack toward me. She said something else, but I was too busy staring at the photo on the flyer. Ciara Conway was the dead woman I'd seen in the car. Liv? Walter said. S-

Sorry. I wrenched my gaze from the photo. Sure, I'll take some to the city. I'll be there tomorrow, doing work for Gabriel. Just leave me a stack. I retreated as fast as I could. I took another table's order, but after I'd finished, I stared at the words on my pad as if I'd written them in a foreign language. Olivia? Ida said. Are

you all right, dear? I nodded. As I headed for the kitchen, Larry watched me, his wide face drawn with concern. Liv's been investigating the deaths of young people, Patrick said to the elders. You don't go shoving pictures of missing girls in her face. I said no, I was fine, but Larry took the order pad from my hand and told me to go home and take it easy. The lunch rush was over. He'd handle the rest of my shift. Any other time, I'd

have protested. But I kept seeing that smiling girl on the photo as an eyeless corpse. I'll walk you home, Patrick said. You look a little woozy. We were just heading that way, Ida began. We can get it. Patrick smiled at Ida. Rest your old bones. **BLACK SHUCK** If looks could kill, the one Ida aimed Patrick's way would have drawn and quartered him. Which was far worse than the usual ones that only wished him a swift

and relatively painless death. Olivia's long strides consumed the sidewalk, leaving him jogging to catch up. He wondered what was really bothering her. While he was certain her basement ordeal had been traumatic, resilience was in her blood. She should be over it by now. When Olivia noticed he'd fallen behind, she slowed her pace. Together they passed through the tiny park and on to the walkway that led to her Rowan Street apartment. How's Gabriel? he said. He hadn't meant to ask. He would prefer not to, or if he did, he would like

it to be a show of fake concern. He'd lived a very long time without taking any interest in his epil. Gabriel was different. Or perhaps Patrick was simply getting old. Soft. I heard he was injured in that business at the Evans house, he continued. Shot in the leg. The briefest pause. He won't use his cane. He's going to make it worse. Patrick had to bite back a laugh at the way she said it. First she acknowledged he'd been shot, almost casually. Then she complained about the cane. Worried about Gabriel and loath to admit it. After a few more steps, she asked, What do you know about dogs? Symbolically, I mean. Folklore, occultism, whatever. From

your writing research. Any specific type of canine? Big black ones. He tried not to react. Fortunately, she was still walking with her gaze straight ahead. Mmm, it depends on the culture, he said. If you're looking at the British Isles, probably. Black Shuck. Before he could explain, she nodded. The Hound of the Baskervilles. I did my thesis on Conan Doyle. He based his book on the legend of the Black Shuck. You didn't need to ask me, then. She shrugged and looked uncomfortable. It didn't . . . It didn't seem . . . It didn't seem to fit. Because

the Black Shuck was a portent of death, and she could interpret those instinctively. That was how her old blood manifested. If she'd seen a death omen, she wouldn't have needed to consult him. Is there anything else in the lore? she asked. Besides the Black Shuck? No, he lied. Patrick left Olivia at her building door. Grace

was on the porch, and he knew better than to pass her. Before they parted, he tried to get Olivia to tell him why she was asking about the black dog. She wouldn't. Had she seen acwn? That seemed most likely. She spotted one in Chicago, and realized it was no ordinary pet and no ordinary omen. If she had truly seen acwn, that meant . . . well, it meant trouble. For her. For Gabriel. For all of them.

CHAPTER FOUR
My landlord, Grace, sat in her usual place folding chair on the front stoop. She looked like one of the towns many gargoyles, a wizened imp scowling at the world, daring it to cause trouble. I said a quick hello as I reached for the doorknob. Scone? she said. What? You were at work, weren't you? Where's my scone? No, not an imp.

A troll. A gray-haired lump of a snaggletoothed beast, guarding her gate, one gnarled hand raised for the toll. I forgot, I said. I'm sorry. I'll grab you two tomorrow. With coffee. Her beady eyes narrowed. What's wrong, girl? Nothing. If you're apologizing and offering me extras, something's wrong. I'm just . . . off today. I opened the door and stepped through. Well, get some rest and eat something. You're too pale. You look like

you've seen a ghost. Maybe I have, I thought as the door closed behind me. ____ When I swung into my apartment, TC was perched on the back of the sofa. I dropped my bag with a clunk and he only snarled a yawn, his yellow eyes narrowing as if I'd disturbed his rest. Then he hopped down and wound around my ankles, completely oblivious to the fact that I was racing to my bedroom. I'm changing it to DC, I muttered.

Damn Cat. TC wasn't a name, as I was quick to point out to anyone who asked. It was an acronym for The Cat. I refused to name him because I was not yet resigned to the possibility I might actually be stuck with him. TC was a black cat, which should have given me all the ammunition I needed to get rid of him. Except in some parts of the world, including Cainsville, they're considered good luck. And it wasn't as if I'd let the beast into my home in the first place. He was a stray who'd zoomed in after a mouse and refused to leave. The suitcases I'd brought from home sat in the corner, still packed. I tugged one onto its side, took out each piece, and stacked it. Then I lifted TC protesting off the second bag, pulled out my dresses and wrapped shoes, and made absolutely sure I hadn't stuffed any other clothing in there. Then I looked at the piles surrounding me, searching for something specific, something I wasn't seeing. When I found that corpse in my car, I'd paid little attention to what she was wearing not surprisingly, perhaps. Seeing those missing person posters brought it

back, though. I'd noticed the corpse had been wearing a green shirt. I'd packed a green shirt. Now it was gone. As I twisted, my gaze caught on the row of shoes. Four pairs. Trainers, heels, pumps, and boots. There was one missing. My Jimmy Choo green lace-up sandals. Completely impractical, but I loved them, and I was absolutely certain I'd packed them. I took out my cell phone. Then I set it down. Picked it up. Set it down. Finally I gave in and hit speed dial. The phone went straight to voice mail and I remembered why I wasn't starting my new job with Gabriel today because he had business at the courthouse. Sorry, I said when his voice mail beeped. It's nothing important. Talk to you later. I'd just hung up when I had a call from Howard, my mother's lawyer. He was checking in on me, which would have been very sweet if it hadn't been a duty call on behalf of my mother. That might also have been sweet if she were the one actually calling. Still, I know better than to read too much into it. My mother doesn't handle stress well. Hell, my mother doesn't handle life well. Having the world find out her daughter's birth parents were serial killers? Then having that daughter insist on investigating their crimes? That kind of stress could drive my mother to a heart attack . . . or so she seemed to think. When our early calls had proven difficult, she'd turned them over

to Howard. Once she's ready to speak to me again, she'll be ready to come home. For now, she's hiding in every way. I told Howard to let her know I'd been to the house for my things and I'd borrowed the Jetta. If she wanted to talk about any of that, she could call. She didn't. Next I researched the case of Ciara Conway, what little case there was. As Veronica said, Ciara had been reported missing Saturday. As for when she'd actually disappeared, that was harder to say. Until a month ago, she'd been a twenty-two-year-old Northwestern student, living with her long-term boyfriend. Then she'd left him. Neither her parents nor her ex could provide

a list of friends she might have couch-surfed with, and I got the impression Ciara hadn't actually left her boyfriend. I'd worked in shelters long enough to recognize the clues. Ciara had a problem drugs or alcohol. Her parents and boyfriend had finally resorted to tough love. He kicked her out and told her to clean up. Her parents wouldn't take her in. She found places to stay, while her loved ones made daily check-in calls, until last Wednesday, when she'd stopped answering. By Friday, her phone was out of service, the battery dead. Now her parents and boyfriend were racked with guilt, frantic with fear, and the police weren't much help because they'd seen this scenario a hundred times and knew it was just a matter of time before Ciara came off

her bender, borrowed a phone, and called for money. She wouldn't. Ciara Conway was dead. And the only people who knew that were me and her killer. I was still searching when Gabriel called back. Street noise in the background meant he was hurrying or hobbling somewhere. I'm sorry I called, I said. I forgot you had a

trial today.No trial. Im simply at the courthouse speaking to a few people about your mothers new appeal, which well discuss later. What is it?Nothing urgent. Go ahead and do whateverIm not doing anything right now except obtaining dinner.I told him about Ciara Conway, and my missing shirt and shoes.I didnt see my shoes on her, I said. Hell, I could be mistaken about the shirt. And maybe the dead body only resembled CiaraOlivia.I inhaled. Stop backpedaling, I know. The body was Ciara Con- ways and she was wearing my shirt, which I know Id packed. Still, I cant see how anyone could dress her, stage her in that car, and take her away again.How long were you in the pool? Maybe an hour.And twenty minutes in the house afterward, waiting for me. The yard is private, with both a fence and greenery blocking the road and the neighbors. Its risky, but not impossible. Without a body, there is little we can do, but I want to speak to Chandler.Chandler?If you found a dead body dressed to look like you, that isnt a portent. Its a threat. Edgar Chandler made a very clear one against you Sunday. Ergo, Id like to speak to him. In the meantime, you need to talk to Pamela about omens.Revue de presse#1 NATIONAL BESTSELLER"This is the second book in the Omens series and [it] is just as fast-paced and mysterious as the first." USA Today"A wondrously gothic hybrid horror-thriller in the grand tradition of Dean Koontz and Stephen King." Providence Journal