



The
Unseen

part 1

it begins

RICHIE TANKERSLEY CUSICK

The Unseen

It Begins

By Richie Tankersley Cusik

The Unseen part I

As if trapped in a nightmare, Lucy forced herself to peer down into the gaping hole. She was sure she hadn't imagined the sound this time, certain now that it wasn't an animal.

The voice was all too frighteningly human.

"Please!" it was begging her. "Please ..."

Pressing both hands to her mouth, Lucy tried not to scream. For she could see now that the grave wasn't empty at all, that there was something lying at the very bottom, camouflaged by layers of mudslide and rising rainwater.

As a sliver of lightning split the clouds, she saw the girl's head

strain upward, lips gasping for air. And then the girl's arm, lifting slowly... reaching out to her...

"Please ...is someone there ..."

Lucy stood paralyzed. She watched in horror as the girl's head fell back again into the mire, as water closed over the anguished face ...

To Audrey, Suzie B.J., Lynn, Michele, Victoria and the whole special gang-for your fun, your faith and your friendship. I love you all.

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prologue

She had deceived him!

He realized now with a terrible certainty that she'd deceived him from the beginning-planned this whole thing from the very start.

And she knew everything about him--everything!--what he was and

what he'd
done and all he was capable of doing . . .

She'd sought him out and gained his trust, for one purpose and one
purpose only.

To see him destroyed.

After he'd been so careful . . . so cunning all these years . . .
concealing the very nature of his soul . . . the ageless secrets of his
kind . . .

And he'd trusted her. Taken her. Loved her more than he'd ever
loved anyone.

Tears clouded his vision.

As though he were seeing the future through a dark red haze, a
veil of
blood.

He glanced down at his hands.

His strong, gentle fingers, wielding the power of life and death.

He hadn't even realized he was gripping the dagger, the dagger of
his
ancestors, nor did he remember even drawing it from its sheath.

He was gripping the blade so tightly that a stream of his own
blood
seeped from his fist. He watched it, strangely mesmerized, as it
dripped
onto the cold stone floor and pooled around his feet.

He hadn't thought he could feel such pain.

Not from the knife, for he had borne far worse injuries than this in his lifetime, had suffered the ravages of a thousand tortures. But those scars had faded quickly, like shadows swallowed by night, and the few that remained were points of honor to him now, sacred testimonies to his very survival.

No, this pain was different.

This pain burned from deep within, filling him with rage and a craving for revenge. A craving so intense, he could almost taste it.

She should never have come here.

Not into this deep, dark place, not in this miserable weather . . . and especially not at night.

"A graveyard," Lucy murmured. "What was I thinking?"

But that was just it-she hadn't been thinking, she hadn't had time to think, she'd only felt that sudden surge of fear through her veins, and then she'd started running.

Someone was following her.

Not at first, not when she'd first left the house and started walking, but blocks afterward, six or seven maybe, when the storm had

suddenly
broken and she'd cut through an alley behind a church and tried to
find
a shortcut home.

No, not home! The words exploded inside her head, angry and
defensive.

Aunt Irene's house isn't home, it won't ever be home. I don't have
a
home anymore.

The rain was cold. Even with her jacket Lucy felt chilled, and she
hunched her shoulders against the downpour, pulled her hood
close around
her face. She hadn't even realized where she was going; there was

no
sign posted, no gate to mark the boundaries of this cemetery, just
an
unexpected gap through the trees. She'd heard the footsteps and
she'd
panicked, she'd bolted instinctively into the first cover of darkness
she could find.

But this was a terrible darkness.

Almost as dark as her own pain.

She crouched down between two headstones, straining her ears
through the
night. It had taken her several minutes to become aware of those
footsteps back there on the sidewalk, and at first she'd thought she
was
imagining them. She'd thought it was only the rain plopping down,

big
soft drops, faint at first, but then louder and faster, sharper and
clearer. Until suddenly they seemed to be echoing. Until suddenly
they

seemed to have some awful purpose, and she realized they were
coming closer.

She'd stopped beneath a streetlamp, and the footsteps had stopped,
too.

She'd forced herself to look back, back along the pavement, across
the
shadowy lawns and thick, tangled hedges, but there hadn't been
anyone

behind her.

No one she could see, anyway.

But someone was there.

Someone . . .

She was sure of it.

And that's when she'd run . . .

"I'm afraid you'll find Pine Ridge very different from what you're
used
to." How many times had Irene told her that, just in the one
agonizing
week Lucy had been here? "We're right on the lake, of course, and
the
university's here, so there's plenty to do. And we're only a half-
hour

drive to the city. But our neighborhood is quiet . . . rather exclusive, actually. Peaceful and private, just the way residents like it. Not at all like that old apartment of yours in the middle of downtown."

But Lucy had loved her old apartment, the tiny, third-floor walk-up that she and her

mother had filled with all their favorite things. And the sorrow she'd felt at leaving it only grew worse with each passing day.

She'd been too depressed on their ride from the airport that day to notice much about Pine Ridge; she had only the vaguest recollections of Aunt Irene pointing things out to her as they'd ridden through town. The college campus with its weathered brick buildings and stately oaks. The renovated historical district with its town square and gazebo; its bars, coffee shops and open-air cafes; its bookstores and art galleries and booths selling local crafts. They'd passed farms and fields to get here, and she'd caught occasional glimpses of the lake through dense, shadowy forests. And there'd been frost sheening the hillsides, and she remembered thinking that she'd never seen so many trees, so many vibrant autumn colors . . .

"And it's safe here in Pine Ridge," her aunt had assured her. "Unpleasant things don't happen."

You're wrong, Aunt Irene . . .

Lucy pressed a hand to her temple. That all-too familiar pain was starting again, throbbing behind

her eyes, stabbing through her head, that agony of unshed tears, of inconsolable sorrow . . .

You're wrong, because unpleasant things do happen-anywhere-horrible, bad things-and just when you think they couldn't possibly ever happen to you

"Oh, Mom," Lucy whispered. "Why'd you have to die?"

For a split second reality threatened to crush her. Closing her eyes, she bent forward and clamped her knees tight against her chest.

She willed herself to take deep, even breaths, but the smell of stagnant earth and rotting leaves sent a deep shiver of nausea through her.

Don't think about that now, you can't think about that now, Mom's gone and you have to get out of here!

Very slowly she lifted her head. Maybe the footsteps had followed her in

here-maybe someone was waiting close by, hiding in the shadows, waiting

for her to make the slightest move. Or maybe someone was coming closer

and closer this very second, searching methodically behind every tombstone, and she'd never hear the footsteps now, not on the

soggy

ground, not with the sound of the rain, not until it was too late

Come on, move! Run!

But where? Where could she go? She wasn't even sure where she was, much less which direction to run in.

"Unpleasant things don't happen . . ."

Lucy's heart hammered in her chest. She clung desperately to her aunt's words; she ordered herself to believe them. Maybe she really had imagined those footsteps back there. Maybe it had just been the rain and she'd panicked for nothing. After all, she hadn't really been herself since Mom's funeral. As mechanical as a robot and just as hollow inside, moving in slow motion through an endless gray fog of days and nights, confused by the long, empty lapses in her memory. But shock did that to a person, Aunt Irene had informed her, in that cool, detached tone Lucy was beginning to

get used to—shock and grief and the unbearable pain of losing someone you love . . .

I can do this . . . I have to do this ..

Lucy got to her feet. Steadying herself against one of the

headstones,
she pushed her long wet

hair back from her face, then turned slowly, blue eyes squinting
hard
into the gloom. High above her the limbs of a giant elm flailed
wildly
in the wind, sending down a soggy shower of leaves. The sky
gushed like
a waterfall. As the moon flickered briefly through churning
clouds, she
saw nothing but graves in every direction.

Just dead people, Lucy.

And dead people can't hurt you.

The storm clouds shifted, swallowing the moonlight once more.
Swearing
softly, Lucy ducked her head and ran.

She didn't have a clue where she was going. She'd never had any
real
talent for directions, and now she ran blindly, stumbling across
uneven
ground, weaving between headstones, falling over half-buried
markers on
forgotten graves. She wondered if Aunt Irene or Angela would be
missing
her about now-or if they even realized she was gone.

"Or care," Lucy muttered to herself.

The truth was, she'd hardly seen Angela since their initial-and
totally

awkward-

introduction. Angela-with her perfectly flowing waves of jet-black hair and tall, willowy model's figure-had been slumped in the doorway of her walk-in closet, smoking a cigarette and surveying her extensive wardrobe with a petulant frown.

"Angela, for heaven's sake!" Irene had promptly shut off the CD player that was blasting rock music through the room. "This is your cousin Lucy!"

Angela's eyes had barely even glanced in Lucy's direction-huge, dark eyes ringed with even darker layers of mascara. "So?"

It hadn't been said in a rude way, exactly-more apathetic if anything-but Lucy had felt hurt all the same.

"And get rid of that disgusting cigarette," Irene had ordered, shoving an ashtray toward her daughter. "You know how I feel about smoke in the house. And would it kill you to be civil just once? On Lucy's first night here? After all, you two are the same age; you probably have a lot in common."

Angela hadn't flinched. "You're kidding, right?"

"Fine, then. Very fine, Angela. From now on, I don't care how the two of you handle it-you girls will have to work things out between yourselves."

A careless shrug. "Whatever!"

"Honestly, Angela, you never think about anyone but yourself," Irene had persisted.

Angela had reached over then . . . mashed out her cigarette in the ashtray her mom was still holding. She'd raised her arms above her head, stood on tiptoes, and stretched like a long, lean cat.

And then she'd walked very slowly, very deliberately, out of the room ..

"Of course they won't care," Lucy muttered again.

She hadn't told either of them she was leaving earlier-she doubted if they'd have understood her desperate need to escape the house where she still felt so lonely and unwelcome. All Lucy had thought about was getting away, and so the darkness of empty streets had felt comforting to her then. But now she felt stupid for being so scared, for getting so lost. She should have gone

back the way she'd come; she shouldn't have listened to her
overactive
imagination. "Damn it!"

Without warning she stubbed her toe and pitched forward, landing
facedown in the mud. For a second she lay there, too surprised to
move,
then slowly, carefully, she reached forward to push herself up.

Her hands met only air.

Gasping, she lifted her head and stared in horror. Even in this
downpour, she could see the deep, rectangular hole yawning
below her,
and she realized it was an open grave. She was sprawled on the
very edge
of it, and as she clawed frantically for something to hold on to, she
felt the ground melting away beneath her fingers.

With one last effort, she twisted sideways, just as a huge chunk of
earth dissolved and slid to the bottom of the chasm.

And that's when she heard the cry.

Soft at first . . . like the low moan of wind through branches . . . or
the whimper of a frightened animal . . . faint and muffled . . .
drowned
by the rush of the rain.

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An abandoned cat, maybe? A stray dog? Some poor outcast just as
lost as
she was, wandering alone out here in the dark? Lucy's heart broke
at the

thought of it.

"Here, baby!" Stumbling to her feet, she cupped her hands around her mouth and tried to shout over the tremor in her voice. "Come to me! Don't be afraid!"

A rumble of thunder snaked its way through the cemetery.

As Lucy paused to listen, she felt a sudden chill up her spine.

Yes . . . there was the sound again.

Coming from the empty grave.

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As if trapped in a nightmare, Lucy forced herself to peer down into the gaping hole. She was sure she hadn't imagined the sound this time, certain now that it wasn't an animal.

The voice was all too frighteningly human.

"Please!" it was begging her. "Please . . ."

Pressing both hands to her mouth, Lucy tried not to scream. For she could see now that the grave wasn't empty at all, that there was something lying at the very bottom, camouflaged by layers of mudslide and rising rainwater.

As a sliver of lightning split the clouds, she saw the girl's head

strain upward, lips gasping for air. And then the girl's arm, lifting slowly . . . reaching out to her . . .

"Please . . . is someone there . . ."

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Lucy stood paralyzed. She watched in horror as the girl's head fell back again into the mire, as water closed over the anguished face.

"Oh my God!"

She didn't remember jumping in. From some hazy part of her brain came vague sensations of sliding, of falling, of being buried alive, as the earth crumbled in around her and the ground sucked her down. She lunged for the body beneath the water. She tried to brace herself, but her feet kept slipping in the mud. Dropping to her knees, she managed to raise the girl's head and cradle it in her arms.

"Help!" she screamed. "Somebody help us!"

Was the girl dead? Lucy couldn't tell, but the body was limp and heavy and motionless now, the eyes and lips closed. She could hardly see anything in this darkness-only brief flashes of the livid face as lightning flickered over the girl's delicate features. Ghostly white cheeks. Dark swollen bruises. A scarf wound tight around her neck

"Somebody! Somebody help us!"

Yet even as she shouted, Lucy knew no one would hear her. Not through
this wind and rain,

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not in this place of the dead. With numb fingers, she worked feverishly
at the scarf, but the wet material was knotted and wouldn't budge. In
desperation, she smoothed the girl's matted hair and leaned closer to
comfort her.

"Hang on, okay? I'm going to get you out of here, but I have to leave-just for a little while-and get help. I'll be back as quick as I-"

Something clamped onto her wrist.

As Lucy's words choked off, she could see the thin, pale hand clinging
to her own . . . the muddy fingers lacing slowly between her own fingertips . . .

They began to squeeze.

"Oh, God," Lucy whimpered, "stop . . ." Pain shot through the palm of
her hand. Pain like she'd never felt before.

Waves like fire, burning, scalding through every nerve and muscle,
throbbing the length of her fingers, pulsing upward through her hand,

her wrist, along her arm, piercing her heart and her head. Pain so intense she couldn't even scream. Her body began to shake uncontrollably. Her strength drained in a dizzying rush. Through a blur of strange blue

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light she saw the girl's head turn toward her . . . saw the scarf slip easily from the fragile neck. She saw the jagged gash across the girl's throat . . . the raw, stringy flesh . . . the glimmer of bone . . .

Lucy pitched forward. The girl's body was soft beneath her, cushioning her fall, and from some great distance she heard her own voice crying out at last, though she understood somehow that this was only in her mind.

"Who did this to you? What's happening?"

Listen, the girl whispered. Had her lips moved? Had she spoken aloud?

Lucy didn't think so, yet she could hear this girl, could hear her just as clearly as two best friends sharing secrets.

Dazed and weak, she managed to lift herself onto one elbow. The girl was staring at her now, wide eyes boring into hers with an intensity both chilling and compelling. Lucy was helpless to look away.

Tell no one, the girl said, and her lips did not move, and Lucy

could
only gaze into those huge dark eyes and listen to the silence. Do
you
understand? Promise me you understand . . .

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Lucy felt herself nod. Tears ran down her cheeks and streamed
with the
rain over the girl's cold skin. The hand holding hers slid away; the
dark eyes shifted from her face, to something far beyond her,
something
Lucy couldn't see.

If you want to live, the girl murmured, you mustn't tell anyone . . .
not anyone . . . what you've seen here tonight.

"Don't die," Lucy begged. "Please don't die-" Promise me.

"Yes . . . yes . . . I promise."

The girl's eyelids slowly closed.

But for one split second, Lucy could have sworn that she smiled.

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She didn't remember climbing out of the grave.

She didn't remember running or even finding her way out of the
cemetery-but suddenly there were lights in the distance and
muffled
voices and the wild pounding of her own heartbeat in her ears.

Lucy stopped, gasping for breath.

She realized she was standing on a low rise, with a sidewalk about thirty yards below her. She could see streetlights glowing fuzzy through the rain, and beyond that, the watery reflections of headlights from passing cars.

Oh God, what should I do?

She couldn't stop shaking. She couldn't get warm, couldn't think. Her knees felt like rubber, and it was all she could do to force herself the rest of the way down the hill.

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Maybe it didn't really happen. Maybe I fell into a hole back there and knocked myself out and started hallucinating.

She wanted to believe that. Wanted to believe that with every fiber of her being, because to accept what she'd just seen in the cemetery was too horrifying to deal with. Nothing seemed real anymore, not the rain beating down on her or even the nice solid feel of the pavement as she finally reached the curb and peered to the opposite side of the street. There was a gas station on the corner, lights on but pumps deserted, and the voices she'd heard were actually coming from loudspeakers playing

country music.

Again Lucy stopped. She glanced behind her into the darkness, into the hidden secrets of the graveyard, and her mind whirled in an agony of indecision.

I promised. I promised her.

And yes, it had been real, and there was a girl, a girl maybe her own age lying dead, and no matter how sacred a promise, Lucy knew she couldn't just leave her there all alone in the rain . . .

"If you want to live . . . you won't tell anyone."

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The girl's words echoed back to her, chilling her to the bone. Maybe it wasn't really a warning, she argued to herself, maybe it didn't mean anything at all. She knew people often said strange things when they were dying, when they were out of their heads from pain and confusion and that final slipping-away from the world. Like Mom was at the end. Like Mom was

"No," Lucy whispered to herself. "Not now."

She took a deep breath and shut her eyes, but she couldn't shut out

the
image of those other eyes, those pleading, desperate eyes gazing
up at
her from the girl's bloodless face. Without even realizing it, she
flexed her hand inside her jacket pocket. There was a vague
sensation of
pain, but she was too preoccupied to give it attention. As she
stared
over at the gas station, she suddenly noticed a drive-by telephone
at
one end of the parking area, and she knew what she had to do.

Keeping her head down, Lucy hurried across the street. Someone
was
working under the hood of a car inside the garage, but the lot was
still
deserted and the phone was far enough away that she didn't think
she'd
be noticed. She

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grabbed up the receiver and punched in 911, telling herself she
wasn't
really breaking her promise. It was only a compromise.

"911. What is your emergency?"

Lucy froze.

"You won't tell anyone . . ."

"911. What is your emergency, please?" "Promise me . . ."

"Hello? Please state your emergency." "Yes," Lucy whispered.

"Yes . . . I-"

Without warning a horn blared behind her. Lucy slammed down the receiver and whirled around as a red Corvette screeched to a stop about three feet away. Then one of the windows slid down.

"You picked a hell of a night to run away," Angela greeted her blandly.

Lucy shook her head. Despite the fact that it was Angela, she felt an immense sense of relief. "I'm not running away."

"Oh."

She was sure her cousin sounded disappointed. The thought actually occurred to her to just turn and leave, but then she saw Angela nod toward the passenger door.

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"So get in, already. Don't you know enough to come in out of the rain?"

With a last glance at the phone, Lucy hurried around the car and climbed into the front seat. What am I going to do now? Anxiously she wiped one sleeve over her wet face, then held out both hands to the heater.

"Look at this mess." Angela rolled her eyes. "You're dripping all over

everything."

"Sorry." Scooting back, Lucy angled herself into the corner. She clamped her arms tightly around her chest, but the shivering wouldn't stop. "Do you have a towel or something?"

"No, I haven't got a towel. God, look at my floor."

"I got lost," was all Lucy could think of to say.

Angela grumbled something under her breath. She plucked a lighted cigarette from the ashtray, took a long drag, then blew a thin stream of smoke out through her nose.

"Irene's freaking out," she said at last.

"I'm sorry. I just wanted to take a walk, but then I got all turned around in the storm. I didn't mean to worry anybody-"

"Oh, she's not worried about you," Angela

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seemed mildly amused. "She's freaking out 'cause you've made her late for a meeting."

Lucy bit hard on her bottom lip. She could feel a lump burning in her throat, anger and tears mixed bitterly together, but she was determined

not to cry.

"Well," she managed to whisper. "Of course she would be."

"You should've known better?"

"What?"

Angela rolled her eyes. "If you think wandering off like this is gonna get you any attention or sympathy from Irene, then forget it. You don't know her."

But I want to, Lucy thought miserably, and I want her to know me, too ..

Right after she'd moved here, Lucy had made a habit of studying her aunt's face whenever Irene wasn't watching, longing for just a glimpse of the mother she'd lost. As if somehow her mother's spirit would be reflected in Irene's eyes or in her clothes or in the way she did things-living proof to Lucy that her mom was still with her.

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But there'd been no similarities-no similarities whatsoever between the two women-and as the days passed, Lucy only felt more and more abandoned. No matter that Aunt Irene was her only living relative; Irene and Mom were as different as night and day.

Mom had been so .. well . . . so alive. Fun and free-spirited, spontaneous and creative, with the wildest imagination and the most contagious laugh and the most stubborn determination when her mind was made up about something. Lucy had always admired her mother's disregard for rules and routines; there'd always been new things to try and new adventures to share on the spur of the moment. And she'd always loved hearing how much alike the two of them looked-the same blue-gray eyes and long, thick lashes, the same silky blond hair.

Mom had been a source of pride to her. A role model, an ideal she'd always aspired to. She'd never known her father, but Mom had been the best of both parents, not to mention her very best friend. Her whole world, really.

But now there was Aunt Irene.

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Just Irene, who didn't seem anything like the sister she'd completely shut out of her life. Irene, who barely spoke to Lucy-barely even looked at her if she could help it. Who always acted tense and watchful and guarded, as though she expected something bad or dangerous to sneak up

on her at any second. Irene and her high-profile job at the university .

. . Irene and her endless very important meetings.

"She's self-absorbed," Mom had always told Lucy in those rare moments she ever mentioned Irene's name. "She's always been self-absorbed; she's never thought about anyone but herself. The only thing that makes her happy is getting her own way."

Lucy had never understood the estrangement between her mother and her aunt; Mom had always refused to talk about it. All she knew was that the women hadn't spoken for years, but when Mom was dying, trapped in the last throes of cancer, she'd requested-finally-that Irene be told.

And Irene had come.

To Lucy's shock, Irene had come and stayed-she'd doled out medications, stocked the

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refrigerator with takeout food, obsessively cleaned and tidied, and remained aloof while Lucy kept constant vigil in Mom's bedroom. And then something had happened one night. Something behind the closed door of Mom's room, something between Mom and Irene alone, something never

discussed with Lucy. All Lucy knew was that Mom had suddenly seemed calm and strangely resolved, and the next morning, while Lucy sat beside her holding both her hands, Mom had slipped peacefully away.

Lucy didn't remember much after that.

Over the next few days the funeral had been arranged; over the next few weeks the apartment had been cleared out and re-rented, her things had been systematically discarded, packed, or put into storage—all by Aunt Irene, she supposed, for she'd been too numb with grief even to function. And then Irene had brought her here.

"We're your family now, Lucy," Irene had announced in her cool, businesslike way. "This is your home."

And some home, Lucy had thought in awe,

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laying eyes on the house for the very first time. Compared to the size and comfortable shabbiness of her old apartment, this new place seemed like a mansion, with its white brick walls and tall front columns, its circular driveway, its swimming pool in back. Yet surrounded as it was by thick woods, and only a short walk to the lake, Lucy would have sworn they were in the middle of a vast, lonely wilderness if Irene hadn't

assured her that town was only a few blocks away.

Lucy had decided immediately that her life-and her happiness-were over . .

"Looking for you is not how I planned to spend my evening."

With a jolt, Lucy came back to herself. She had no idea how long she'd been buried in her thoughts or how long Angela had been talking. She glanced at her cousin, but those dark-ringed eyes were focused on the rhythmic movement of the windshield wipers.

"I talked her out of calling the police, you know," Angela added.

"The police?" Lucy's tone was grim. "I

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thought nothing unpleasant ever happened in Pine Ridge."

"Who told you that?"

"Your mother," Lucy mumbled, wishing they could just leave. She didn't want to sit here any more, here where she could see the cemetery right across the street. She didn't want to sit here knowing what she knew, and she didn't want to remember anything that had happened tonight because she was cold and hungry and exhausted, and if her 911 call had

been traced, then she especially didn't want to be here when the police showed up.

But Angela took another long puff and glanced at Lucy with a tight smile. "How funny." "What?"

"Nothing unpleasant ever happening here. And Irene-of all people-saying so."

Lucy frowned. "What do you-" she began, but Angela cut her off, gesturing vaguely toward the parking lot.

"So what were you doing just now? Trying to call somebody?"

Lucy stole a quick look at the phone box outside the car. How long did someone have to

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stay on the line for a call to be traced? How long did it take the police to find someone in Pine Ridge?

"Yes." Her mind was racing; the smoke was making her feel claustrophobic. "I was trying to call your house, but . . . but I couldn't remember the number."

"Well, I don't know where you were walking," Angela said matter-of-factly, "but you look like a zombie."

Lucy cringed. She thought of the girl in the grave. A sick taste of guilt welled up inside her, and she swallowed hard, forcing it down.

"Can we please go?"

"Oh, great. You're not gonna get sick in my car, are you?"

"I hope not."

To Lucy's relief, Angela instantly buzzed down the driver's window and flicked her half-smoked cigarette out into the rain. Then she rolled the window up again, sat back, and turned up the heater full blast.

"Thanks," Lucy said. "I appreciate it."

"I didn't do it for you. I did it for my car." Of course you did. What was I thinking? Lucy

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tensed, listening. Was that a siren she'd just heard in the distance? Or only a muted sound from the radio? Please . . . please . . . let's just leave . . .

"Look, let's get this straight. If you came here expecting money, Irene's not gonna change her will. You're not gonna get one bit of the inheritance." Angela's voice was stony. "Just so you know."

Lucy faced her in surprise. "I didn't come here for your money. I didn't come here for anything, Angela. I didn't even want to come here-it wasn't my idea. Your mother made me come here." She hesitated, then

said, "Just so you know."

"She's not my mother," Angela muttered. "What?"

"I said, she's not my mother. She's my stepmother." Reaching over,

Angela readjusted the heater again, then leaned back with an exasperated

sigh. "My father married her when I was ten. And then he died two years

later, and I was stuck with her. We've never gotten along, Irene and

me—we've always hated each other. And I'm leaving here just as soon as—"

Abruptly Angela broke off. She reached for a

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fresh cigarette, and Lucy could see how she trembled with anger.

"As soon as I turn eighteen," Angela finished defiantly. She held a lighter to the tip of her cigarette, the tiny spark glowing orange in the dark. "As soon as I'm eighteen, I'm taking off for New Orleans," she

murmured again. "That's when I inherit my money, and I can do what I

want. Till then I'm a goddamn hostage."

Lucy gave a distracted nod. No . . . no . . . it's not a siren. It's going away now, in another direction . . .

Taking a deep breath, she tried to focus once more on the girl beside her.

"I didn't know anything about you," Lucy admitted, unsure what else to say. "Not about you or Irene. My mom barely mentioned Irene the whole time I was growing up. I'm really sorry."

Angela's eyes widened, almost mockingly. "Sorry? Don't be sorry for me.

Don't ever be sorry for me-I can take care of myself just fine."

"Angela, I didn't mean-"

"Just forget it. Who the hell do you think you are?"

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I don't know anymore, Lucy thought miserably. I used to know, but everything's different now .. I'm different now .. .

She was beginning to feel sick again. She wanted to leave, wanted Angela to stop talking and start driving. She could feel the girl's eyes upon her, and she could still see the eyes of that dead girl, and there was too much death, death in her past, and death tonight, she was drowning in it, drowning in all this death, and if we don't leave right this minute I'm going to totally lose it and start screaming

"God, what'd you touch?" Angela asked suddenly.

"Touch?" A chill crawled up Lucy's spine, though she managed to keep her voice steady. "What do you mean?"

And Angela was leaning closer now, staring harder, her eyes like
big
black hollows in the shadows of the car.

"There," Angela told her. "There on your hand."

Startled, Lucy looked down.

She stared at the narrow black welts on the back of her right hand
and
between her fingers,

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at the misshapen black stain on the skin of her palm. In one more
quicksilver flash, she saw the girl in the open grave, remembered
the
girl's hand closing around her own . . .

"I . . . I don't know," she heard herself whisper. "When I fell,
maybe.

That's what happened . . . I tripped . . . and I must have bruised
myself when I fell."

For an endless moment there was silence. "That's no bruise,"
Angela said
at last.

She pulled the Corvette back onto the street

and peeled away, but Lucy scarcely noticed. Because the thing on
her
hand really didn't

look like a bruise.

It looked like a burn.

Like something had burned itself right into her skin.

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He'd come back one last time.

Just to make sure she was dead.

Some killers didn't like to come back, he realized, for fear of being seen, being connected in some way, being caught-these dangers, of course, were of no concern to him.

But after he'd done what he had to do, he couldn't get her out of his mind. He'd stood at his window watching the rain, replaying her voice over and over again in his head-her pleas for mercy, her screams of pain. And suddenly he'd begun to grow restless. Restless in a way he couldn't understand, a strange uneasiness in his veins that made him pace in the dark and jump at small sounds and warily watch the shadows.

And so he'd come back.

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One last time.

She was just as he'd left her, naturally, and this soothed him a little.

He'd stood over the crumbling grave and he'd stared down at her, and he'd stood for such a long, long time, waiting to see if she'd speak, if she'd move, if her eyes would open, if she'd look at him in the old familiar way he'd so loved being looked at.

But she didn't move.

And she didn't say his name.

The water and the mud were over her face, from the walls of the grave caving in, and if he hadn't put her there himself, he'd never have known she was there at all, he'd have thought she was just a pathetic mound of soggy earth at the bottom of the yawning hole.

He really was so amazingly clever.

The old graveyard. A violent storm. No one in Pine Ridge would even consider venturing into this place tonight.

So he'd thrown his arms wide to the rain, and his hair had blown wild in the wind, and he'd sucked in the darkness, until it filled him and sated him and consumed him and

And then that restlessness again.

That vague, creeping uneasiness, gnawing in the pit of his soul.

He'd actually felt a moment of doubt.

And so he'd lowered himself into her grave.

He'd knelt down beside her and wiped the mud from her face, and he'd studied her in death, all the while wondering about her final moments of life.

She would have lingered awhile. Been aware of the warm blood pumping from her throat, leaking out between the torn chunks of her flesh, spurting with every heartbeat, then growing weaker . . . weaker . . . until it became merely a thin trickle, melting into the soggy earth.

The thought made him smile.

She was no threat to him now.

She was dead, and he was free.

And so he'd leaned over, oh so gently, and he'd put his mouth upon hers
. . . cold lips together . .

And then he'd kissed her.

One last time.

God, it was freezing in here.

It must be me, Lucy thought, as she slid lower in the claw-footed tub, closing her eyes, trying to relax beneath the bubbles. The bathroom was large and luxurious just like the rest of the house, but even with central heating, and even with the water as hot as she could stand it, she couldn't seem to get warm.

What am I going to do?

She could smell takeout pizza wafting up from the kitchen, and her stomach gave a queasy lurch. She could hear the muffled sound of the TV downstairs, and Angela's rock music blaring from the next room. And though Aunt Irene was now en route to yet another very important meeting, Lucy could still picture that formidable frown waiting for them when she

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and Angela had gotten home. Lucy had been relieved when Irene ordered her straight upstairs and into a hot bath. She hadn't felt like explaining any more details about her evening.

So what am I going to do?

She felt drained and bone-tired. Like her whole body had gone

comatose

and her brain had fizzled out. The cemetery . . . the girl . . . the warning . . . everything seemed like a distant dream now, or something

she'd seen in a horror movie. An out-of-body experience that had happened to someone else's body . . .

"Hey!" Angela banged on the door. "Don't use up all the hot water!"

It was almost too much effort to answer. Groaning, Lucy roused herself and called back, "I'm not."

"And don't go to sleep and die in my bathtub." "I wouldn't dream of it."

"Dinner's ready."

"I'm not hungry."

"Don't you like pizza?"

"Not three nights in a row."

Gently she massaged her forehead. She could imagine Angela leaning against the other side of

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the door, filing her fingernails and admiring the shape of her hands. No wonder her cousin looked practically anorexic, she thought-there hadn't

been a single healthy or home-cooked meal in this kitchen since Lucy had been here.

The music abruptly shut off.

"If you die in there, you'll bloat and be all wrinkled," Angela informed her.

Lucy sighed. She listened to Angela's footsteps fading down the stairs, then she closed her eyes and drifted lower into the water.

I have to do something.

I have to tell somebody.

She couldn't call from here, that was certain. She didn't have a cell phone, and it would be too risky trying to call the police from a phone inside the house-too easy to be traced.

But besides that, something else was bothering her.

And even though she'd forced herself not to think about the obvious truth of the matter, she couldn't avoid it any longer. It had been lurking there in the farthest reaches of her mind, a mocking shadow keeping just beyond

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consciousness, ever since she'd made her gruesome discovery.

But now she had to face it.

Someone killed that poor girl.

Someone had murdered that girl, and not mercifully.

The death wound hadn't been clean or swift; someone had hacked at her throat, leaving her alone and helpless and frightened, leaving her to bleed to death in the rain.

Which meant the murderer was still out there.

And if I tell, he might find out.

And y he finds out it was me, then he'll kill me, too.

Trembling, Lucy readjusted the loose coils of hair she'd pinned on top of her head. She wrung out her washcloth, molded it to her face, and eased farther down into the water, resting her head against the back of the tub.

Could he have seen me? Could he have followed me? Again she thought back, trying to convince herself she was safe: it had been so dark, storming so hard, she'd had the hood of her jacket pulled down around her face. And if the

murderer really had been close by, wouldn't he have stopped her then?

Done whatever he had to do to keep her from leaving?

No, something told Lucy that she and the girl had been the only ones out there in the cemetery. At least for those brief, terrifying moments.

Still . . .

A gust of wind rattled the bathroom window. Lucy jerked the washcloth from her face and sat up straight, her heart pounding.

At least you were with her at the end . . . at least she wasn't alone . . .

As the overhead light flickered, Lucy grabbed for her towel on the rack.

Holding her breath, she waited. Within several minutes the lights slowly regained brightness, so she dried off quickly, pulled on her nightgown, and hurried through the connecting door into her bedroom.

Not my bedroom, she reminded herself grimly. My prison.

For the first two days after she'd come here, she'd simply stayed in bed, sleeping and crying, then sleeping again, missing her mother so

much that her soul felt raw. The containers of takeout food that Irene regularly left on her dresser went

virtually untouched. She hated the stark white walls and carpeting. She hated the sleek white furniture that looked like something straight out of a decorating magazine. She'd been so depressed, she hadn't even bothered to put out any of her favorite personal things. What she'd brought with her was still packed in boxes and suitcases, stored upstairs in the attic, all of them painful reminders of her happy life that had died.

"I'm sure you'll love your room, Lucy," Irene had assured her on the plane ride here. But Lucy had hated it at first sight, hated everything about it, including the sheer-curtained sliding doors that opened side by side out onto a little wrought-iron balcony, making her feel both exposed and accessible. She even hated the giant mulberry tree that grew beside it, the one that scraped and clawed at the railing and eaves and made it sound as though someone were trying to break in and kill her every single night.

God, Mom, what were you thinking, sending me here?

Sighing, Lucy shut off the overhead light and left just the lamp burning on the nightstand by

her bed. She could hear Angela slamming cupboard doors in the kitchen
and then tromping back up the staircase.

Lucy gritted her teeth and counted to five.

Angela's CD player blasted through the upstairs, vibrating the floors,
rattling the windowpanes. Ten ear-shattering seconds of rage and defiance-Lucy knew it was ten, for she'd clocked it many times-before
the volume cut off and silence reigned again, everywhere but in Angela's
headphones.

It's a miracle she hasn't gone deaf by now, Lucy

thought glumly. Rubbing her ears, she walked over and stood in front of
the sliding doors.

Her room was at the back of the house, separated from Angela's by their
adjoining bathroom, and at the opposite end of the hallway from Aunt
Irene. From here she could look down onto the manicured lawn; the brick
patio and terraced wooden deck; the glassed-in hot tub; the swimming
pool, covered now for the winter; the landscaped flower beds and mulched
pathways and discreetly camouflaged woodpile, all coated with a thin

layer of frost. At the rear of the lawn stood a low stone wall

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with a gate, and beyond that, a narrow pathway led through dense woods

to a private stretch of lake. Despite the heavy rain, a pale gray fog had begun to ooze through the trees. Lucy watched it, strangely fascinated, as it wound its way toward the house, smooth and silent as a snake. There was no moonlight. Only an occasional burst of lightning managed to rip the storm clouds and illuminate the landscape below.

Shivering, Lucy started to turn away.

And then she saw something.

What is that?

Frowning, she leaned closer, squinting hard through the glass.

Had she imagined it? That very slight movement just beyond the wall? As

though one shadow had separated itself from all the others . . . as though it were hovering there, like a wisp of pale smoke, just on the other side of the gate . . .

Come on, Lucy, get a grip.

Of course there were shadows out there- millions of shadows out there-and of course things were moving. Fog and wind and rain and- "Some

animal," Lucy whispered. A deer,

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probably. She'd spotted an occasional deer in the yard since she'd been here. Irene hated them, said they caused major damage to her expensive shrubs; she'd forbidden Angela to leave out food of any kind.

"Just a deer," Lucy told herself again, more firmly this time.

And yet . . .

Frowning, she pressed closer to the doors, lamplight soft behind her.

"Peaceful and private" -isn't that what Irene had said about this neighborhood? Yet Lucy could feel a vague sense of unease prickling up her spine. As though something far more ominous than a deer was out there in the woods . . . watching her.

Don't be ridiculous . . . it's because of what happened tonight . . . you're only imagining things.

She thought of the girl. Of her own promise. She wondered again what she should do. She didn't want to stand here looking out anymore, but she couldn't seem to turn away from the dark.

Her breath quickened. She could feel her heart fluttering in her chest.

Only moments ago she'd been freezing, but now a peculiar

warmth was spreading through her, hot liquid in her veins. Her favorite nightgown, much too thin for these unforeseen autumn nights, now seemed unusually constricting. She opened the first three buttons down the front and leaned forward, resting her forehead against the glass.

Something moved on the corner of her balcony.

Gasping, Lucy's head came up, and she peered anxiously out into the night. Just the tree . . . that stupid tree hitting the railing . . . nothing more! But even as she tried to reason with herself, she was already tugging at the doors, sliding them open to the wind.

Rain swept savagely into the room. With a cry, Lucy grabbed both doors and after a brief struggle, managed to lock them in place. Then she backed away and sat on the edge of her bed, soaking wet.

What on earth were you thinking?

She was cold again-cold to the bone-and besides that, she felt unbelievably stupid.

"And paranoid," she reminded herself glumly. "Don't forget paranoid."

As her mind flashed back to the cemetery, she tried to block it out.

No

wonder she was seeing watchers in the woods now, and lurkers on the balcony, and danger in every shadow. And thank God Angela was buried in her headphones right now, completely oblivious to the rest of the world-Lucy wasn't up for any more confrontations or excuses.

Leaving her gown in the bathroom to dry, Lucy toweled off and changed into a warm pair of sweats. Then she shut off the lamp and tried to cocoon herself deep inside her blankets.

She lay there, wide-eyed, too exhausted to sleep.

She lay there feeling numb, and each time a vision of the dead girl floated into her mind, she tried to think of other things. Home before.

Mom before. My perfect and wonderful life before. She'd had friends . .

. she'd been popular . . . she'd had fun, and she'd had ambitions.

What

were her friends doing now, she wondered sadly. She'd withdrawn from

them more and more during Mom's illness, and since she'd come here to

live, she'd scarcely thought about

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them at all-hadn't written, hadn't even called. She'd promised a few of

them to keep in touch, to send them her address-why hadn't she?

Because I hate it here so much. Because I'm so miserable, and I

don't

want them to know how horrible my life is now . . .

Her thoughts swirled and faded. The storm continued to rage outside her

windows, and after a very long time she finally drifted off.

She wasn't sure what woke her.

It was a feeling rather than a sound.

A slow, cold chilling at the back of her neck . . . a vague sense that she wasn't quite alone.

Lucy struggled to open her eyes. She was lying on her side facing the

sliding glass doors, and as lightning flashed beyond the rain-streaked

panes, the room went in and out of shadow.

"Lucy," a voice said softly.

Raising herself on one elbow, Lucy stared. She could see the curtains

blowing in, billowing like lacy feathers, though she knew it was impossible, that she'd already shut those doors,

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already bolted them tight against the wind-"Lucy . . ."

Her eyes widened in alarm. A sob caught in her throat.

"Mom?"

She tried to struggle up in bed, strained her eyes to see. And yes,
the
curtains were moving, fanning out like delicate wings, only there
was
something else there, too-a hazy figure silhouetted against the
glass-she could see it now, though it was flimsy and formless, as
sheer
as those fine gauzy curtains . . .

"Mom!" Tears streamed down Lucy's cheeks. "Mom, is that you?"

"Listen to me, sweetheart."

And it was her mother's voice, but so sad, so sad. Why does she
sound
like that, so terribly sad and hopeless . . .

"Mom-"

"Be careful, Lucy," the voice whispered, and it was already
fading,
scarcely more than a breath. "You're going to a place where I can't
help
you . . .

"What do you mean, Mom? No, wait! Don't leave! Please don't
leave me!"

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Lucy flung out her arms, reaching .. reaching .. .

But the mournful shadow was gone now . And the curtains hung
pale and
soft and deathly still.

A knock.

Two loud knocks, and then another, firm and persistent,
hammering their
way into her warm, cozy dream.

"Go away," Lucy mumbled.

She was decorating the Christmas tree in their apartment. Mom
was baking
gingerbread men for all her fourth-grade students, and they were
both
singing carols at the top of their lungs, and Mrs. Manetti from
downstairs was bringing up homemade soup later for all of them
to share . . .

"Wake up, Lucy. You'll be late."

"Go away," Lucy said again, only this time the dream faded down
a dark
tunnel, and her eyes opened to hazy light and someone standing in
the
open doorway to the hall.

"We've already discussed this," Irene said firmly. "I said I'd give
you
one week to settle in. Today you're going to school."

"Today?" She was wide awake now, the announcement finally
sinking in,

along with a feeling of panic. "But it's Friday-why can't I wait till next week?"

"Because one day will be difficult enough to get through. And you'll have the entire weekend to recover before you start fresh on Monday."

"But it's too soon! I'm not ready!"

"You can ride with Angela, so hurry up."

Irene didn't wait for a response, and this time Lucy didn't give one. She lay there with her face buried in the pillow, too stunned to move.

Her eyes felt swollen, as though she'd been crying . . . her whole body felt achy and stiff. She wondered if maybe she was catching the flu, yet there was a vague sense of uneasiness nagging far back in her mind.

No, not the flu. Something else . . .

Something dark and suffocating . . . something gnawing at the distant edges of her mind . . . something bad that she couldn't quite place . . .

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Something horrible. But what?

Groaning softly, she turned onto her side. Her right hand was aching, as

though she might have wrenched it in her sleep, so she propped herself
on one elbow and leaned over to examine her palm.

Memory slammed her full force.

As every horror of last night came back to her in shocking, grisly detail, Lucy let out a cry and felt the room spin around her. How could she have forgotten-even for a moment! The girl-the grave-my promise

She'd hoped so much to be wrong. That somehow she'd only imagined it in her mind, that it had only been a nightmare, that she'd wake up this morning and realize the whole thing had never happened!

But it had happened.

And now, as Lucy stared down at her hand, she could see the evidence all too clearly, the truth etched deeply into her skin.

It was a strange marking.

Not at all as it had looked last night, for the ugly welts and discolorations had practically faded away. Now there was only the smallest

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reminder-the pale, puckered flesh of a tiny scar-stamped into the exact center of her right palm. It looked like a sliver of something. Like

a
sliver of moon. That's it . . . a crescent moon. So perfectly formed,
it
seemed neither random nor accidental. As if some miniature
branding iron
had been used to sear a pattern into her flesh.

No. No, that's crazy.

Grabbing the blanket, Lucy rubbed it vigorously against her palm.
These
were crazy thoughts she was having, thoughts that didn't make
sense,
because this scar on her hand was just that-a scar-a wound-nothing
more.
She'd tried to help, and in their struggle the poor girl had scratched
her, and eventually this little scar would fade, too . . .

But how did it heal so fast?

Lucy let go of the blanket. Despite the fact that she'd been rubbing
so
hard, her scar wasn't even red. She stared at it in disbelief,
remembering how gruesome her hand had looked last night,
remembering the
excruciating pain she'd felt when the girl had grabbed her in the
cemetery.

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What's happening to me? Am I having some kind of nervous
breakdown?

"Lucy!"

Angela's voice shocked her back to attention. The door from the bathroom flew open, and Lucy saw her cousin scowling at her from the threshold.

"What am I, your private chauffeur?" Angela's miniskirt barely covered her crotch. Her designer sweater looked as if she'd spray-painted it over her chest. She looked like an expensive hooker. "You're not even up yet, and I am so not waiting for you."

"Yes," Lucy nodded, throwing off the covers. "Yes, I'm hurrying."

The door slammed shut. As Lucy sat up in bed, she tried to ignore the sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. When had she eaten last-sometime yesterday? So much had happened since then . . . so much confusion in her head. She couldn't think straight. She couldn't think at all.

She closed her eyes, then opened them. Her gaze traveled slowly around the room. She could see the windows ... the sliding

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doors . . . the slow dawn of an autumn morning struggling to break through.

Mom . . . I saw Mom . . .

Lucy's heart caught in her chest. Yes . . . Mom was here . . . she said

something to me . . .

Her mind tried frantically to remember. She could almost hear the tone
of her mother's voice . . . could almost see her mother's face . . .
but
the words she'd spoken were completely gone.

Frustrated, Lucy got up. She padded barefoot to the sliding doors
and
squinted down at the carpet, as if she expected to see a footprint or
a
distinctive clue, some confirmation of her mother's visit. She ran a
tentative hand down the length of the curtains, and her eyes misted
with
tears.

Of course she wasn't really here. It was just a dream. She wasn't
here,
and she wasn't a ghost either, because ghosts don't exist . . .

Lucy opened the curtains and peered out. A watery sun was
spreading
across the backyard, and she could see Angela recklessly scooping
seeds
into all the bird feeders. The rain had stopped, but beneath a cold
November sky lay

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the widespread destruction from last night's storm-piles of wet
leaves,
splintered tree branches, strewn garbage, uprooted plants, even a
few
wood shingles and a broken shutter-and as Lucy's gaze shifted to

the
stone wall in back, she saw that the gate was standing open.

Her heart clenched in her chest. She forced herself to take a deep breath.

It doesn't mean anything. It was just the storm.

"Just the storm," Lucy repeated to herself. Of course nobody would have been out there watching her window in the middle of a storm-she'd just been feeling overly paranoid last night. As fierce as the wind had been, it was a miracle the gate was even still there at all.

She let the curtains fall back into place.

"Lucy!" Irene shouted.

"Coming!" Lucy shouted back.

She hurried to the bathroom, but couldn't resist checking the clothes hamper first. There were her clothes, right where she'd tossed them last night, totally covered in mud. What did you expect-isn't that scar proof enough for you? Are you still hoping last night didn't happen? She picked up her toothbrush, squeezed toothpaste across the

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bristles. Think, Lucy, think! Why was it so hard to focus this morning?

Why couldn't she brush her teeth without trembling? Maybe I can sneak
out of school and find another pay phone . . . maybe I can pretend
I
have an emergency and borrow someone's cell phone-cell phones
can't be
traced, can they?

Lucy frowned at herself in the bathroom mirror.

I'll have to go back to the cemetery on my own. I'll have to go
back
there and find her. It's the only thing I can do.

Yet she knew in her heart it was pointless. She was certain the girl
was
dead-had been dead now, for nearly twelve hours. Not only that,
but
she'd been lost last night, panicky and disoriented-she didn't have
a
clue where the cemetery was. And even if you do manage to find
the
cemetery, even if you do manage to find the grave-what then?

What if the killer had come back, what if the killer were there?
What if
he really did recognize her from last night-she'd be as good as
dead.

Sighing, Lucy leaned closer to her reflection. She had dark bruises
under her eyes, and her

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normally tan complexion was pale. She'd never worn much

makeup-Mom had always insisted that Lucy had a natural sort of beauty-but today she added a touch of blush and lipstick. Just for color, she told herself. Just for confidence, you mean.

"Angela's right," she sighed. "I do look like a zombie."

She didn't even know what outfit to put on-what did kids in Pine Ridge wear, anyway? She wasn't prepared for the chilly autumn weather here, and she'd never needed warm clothes at home-no matter what she picked out this morning, she was sure to look stupid. She made a face at the mirror and tied her hair back in a ponytail. Then she went to her room, took jeans and a pale blue sweater from her dresser drawer, and pulled on thick socks and sneakers.

"Lucy! Angela is waiting!"

"I'm coming!"

God, this was going to be an awful day. As if everything else weren't bad enough already, just thinking of going into a new school, and being introduced and having everyone stare at her, made her feel sicker than ever.

She could hear the TV as she came

downstairs. Pausing on the bottom step, Lucy listened nervously to a brief review of the local news. Nothing about a murder. No body discovered anywhere. Not knowing whether to feel relieved or not, she started into the kitchen when the sound of voices stopped her just outside the door.

"You can't do this to me!" Angela cried angrily. "It's not fair!"

Then Aunt Irene, cold and utterly calm. "I told you if you got one more speeding ticket, you'd be grounded. You had plenty of warning."

"But the Festival's this weekend!"

"Keep your voice down. You're acting so high-strung-are you coming down with something?"

"Yes. Dreams. I'm coming down with dreams, Irene. Weird, sexy ones, all night long. Send me to the hospital."

"Angela, will you please be mature this morning? Must we go through this-"

"Every single day?" Angela finished. "I have to go to the Festival. Everyone's going! I have to be there!"

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"You should have thought of that before. And you should have

known

better than to think I wouldn't find out about this latest ticket."

"Oh, right, I forgot. Your personal friends on the police force. Or was

it the judge this time?"

"This discussion is over. You can use your car to drive to and from

school, but nowhere else. There will be no social events of any kind

until I say so."

"It's not even about me, is it?" Despite Angela's sarcasm, Lucy could

hear the threat of tears. "It's just about you looking bad in front of your important friends-"

"That's quite enough, Angela."

"If it was Lucy, you wouldn't ground her."

"If it was Lucy, I wouldn't be having these problems."

"Right." Angela's tone was suddenly as cold as her mother's.

"Right, I

forgot. 'Cause Lucy's so goddamn perfect."

Lucy pressed a hand to her mouth. She heard the kitchen door fly open.

"Angela, come back here," Irene ordered. "You have to take Lucy to school."

"You take her," Angela threw back. "It was your idea to bring her here-you take her!"

The door slammed shut with a bang. As tears sprang to her eyes, Lucy flattened herself against the wall and fought down her own wave

of anger. Thanks a lot, Irene. Do you think you can get Angela to hate me just a little bit more?

"Lucy!" Irene fairly shrieked.

Quickly Lucy went back to the stairs, then came noisily down the hall again, as though she'd just arrived.

"Yes, here I am. Sorry."

"Get in the car. We're already late."

"I thought you said Angela-"

"I forgot she had some errands to run before school. I'll be taking you.

Where's your jacket?" "I . . . it got so wet last night, I-"

"Here. Take this jacket of Angela's. She'll never miss it."

"But-"

"Just put it on, Lucy. I can promise you she will never wear it, simply because I gave it to her. And Angela would rather die than be seen

in
anything I pick out for her. I'm sure it will fit you nicely."

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"If you say so."

Irene was silent for the whole drive. It wasn't until they pulled up
in
front of the high school that she finally graced Lucy with a
comment.

"I know classes have already started this morning, but as you
know, I've
spoken with Principal Howser several times. He's assured me that
everything's been taken care of, so all you need to do is go straight
to
his office. He'll be expecting you."

"Thanks. I'll be fine."

"I'm sure you will be. Have a nice day, Lucy."

As her aunt drove off, Lucy stood there on the pavement and made
a quick
assessment of the school: two-story buildings of ivy-covered
brick;
stone benches placed strategically around the wide, sweeping
campus; a
covered courtyard with tables and chairs; an outdoor stage; rows
of
bleachers and an athletic field in the distance. Lots of trees, lots of
windows, lots of cars in the parking spaces, lots of students to face
... .

Taking a deep breath, Lucy took one hesitant step toward the gate.
Then
she stopped.

You don't have to do this now. You can wait and go Monday. You
can tell
Irene you got sick and had to go

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home, and it's not really a lie, and it's not like one more day will
make that much difference ..

Lucy turned slowly, her eyes scanning the sidewalk and street
beyond. A
quiet, residential area; nothing but houses as far as she could see.
But
she'd noticed a post office and a grocery store on their drive
here-someone was sure to know where the cemetery was.

She glanced over her shoulder at Pine Ridge High.

Then she ducked her head and hurried away from the school.

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It didn't take long to find what she wanted.

But then, standing beneath the weathered

sign of PINE RIDGE CEMETERY, she realized it didn't look
anything like
she remembered.

There hadn't been gates where she'd come in before; there hadn't

been a
fence or a sign.

Maybe this isn't the right cemetery, maybe Pine Ridge has more than one.

But the old man she'd asked outside the post office hadn't even hesitated-he'd pointed her straight in this direction. The old part and the new part, he'd explained to her, with the empty old church still standing guard at one end. You were disoriented last night, you were terrified, of course nothing's going to look the same today.

Lucy glanced up and down the narrow, deserted street. Directly across from her was an

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empty lot; a block away, the street suddenly ended, giving way to an overgrown field and a rickety, boarded-up house set far back beneath some trees. There was no traffic here. Not a single pedestrian in sight.

Well, what are you waiting for? Just go in and get it over with.

Lucy began walking. She hadn't expected the place to be so big-much bigger than it looked from the sidewalk-with row upon row of perfectly aligned headstones and carefully placed markers. The grass was spongy, littered with remnants of last night's storm. Plastic flowers lay

everywhere, along with shredded plants and broken vases, toppled wreaths
and even some soggy toys.

As Lucy walked farther, she began to notice a distinct difference in her surroundings. How the ground seemed to be actually sinking, rainwater standing in shallow pools ... how the trees seemed to be pressing closer, weaving their branches more tightly overhead. And yes, she thought suddenly, fear and hope beating together, fluttering in her chest-yes, this all seems familiar . . .

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Back here, so far from the cemetery's entrance, these graves had been forgotten. Patches of dead weeds pushed against tombstones; piles of dead leaves obliterated names. It was colder here, and piercingly damp. Locks hung rusted from mausoleum doors, heavily shrouded in spiderwebs. Stone angels and sleeping children, once meant to be comforting, now gazed back at Lucy with hollow eyes and moldy faces, their tender smiles rotted away. As though weary of their burden, many headstones had slipped quietly beneath the ivy; others were crumbled to dust.

Lucy stopped beside an unmarked grave and lowered her face into her hands.

What am I doing here, Mom? Can you even believe this?

Suddenly she was furious with herself. She must have been insane to come here, wandering around alone in this isolated place instead of being in school! Did you really think you'd find her-some dead girl in an open grave? There were hundreds of burial plots in here-thousands, probably!-how long could she possibly keep searching? Not to mention how enraged Irene

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would be when she found out Lucy had skipped school.

"Bad idea," Lucy whispered to herself. "Very bad idea."

Forget good intentions-she'd leave this place now and find a pay phone.

Promise or no promise, she'd make an anonymous call to the police, and

then she'd get back to the house. She'd go straight to bed, and when

Irene came home, she'd swear she really had been sick all day, but next

Monday she'd be-miraculously! recovered and more than ready to begin her new life.

Resolved, Lucy raised her head. She hunched her shoulders against the cold, dank breeze and turned back the way she'd come.

She was scarcely aware of his shadow.

There were so many of them, really, surrounding her in deep, dark pools

. . . soft and black like liquid, oozing between the graves, seeping beneath the low-sweeping branches of the trees . . .

And later she would wonder how he got there-appearing without a word or

a sound-just suddenly there, his tall shadow figure

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blocking her path, one arm extended in front of her to prevent her escape.

She saw him gazing down at her-eyes without light, face without features-or was it her own fear distorting his image, blurring everything into an indistinct mask? She wanted to run, but she was frozen in place; she heard his voice, but it seemed like some strange, faraway echo.

"She's not here," he said. "The one you're looking for."

Lucy could barely choke out a whisper. "What? What are you talking about?"

And the angels were watching-all around her, Lucy could see their blank, empty stares . . their dead, decaying eyes . .

The stranger was above her now.

Leaning over ... reaching out . . . a sharp black silhouette against

pale, pale light.

"She's not here," the stranger said again. "He's taken her away."

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Someone had ahold of her shoulders.

As Lucy fell back a step, she realized that strong hands were trying to steady her, to keep her facing forward. She willed herself to scream, but all that came out was a frightened whimper.

"Take it easy," a voice said. "Just breathe."

Breathe? Struck by a fresh wave of panic, Lucy began to struggle. The hands holding her immediately tightened their grip, and before she realized what was happening, she felt herself being pulled tight against her captor's chest.

"Stop it! I'm not going to hurt you."

Lucy stopped. With her arms pinned securely to her sides, she looked up to see a pair of dark eyes gazing back at her with calm, cool

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intensity. In a split-second appraisal, she guessed him to be a little over six feet tall, with a strong, lean build, probably about her own age, possibly a year or two older. High cheekbones accentuated the

angles of his face; a faint shadow of beard ran along his chin and jawline and upper lip. His hair was thick and as black as his eyes, falling in loose, tousled waves to his shoulders. And he held himself very straight-though not so much a formal posture, she sensed, as a wary and watchful one.

Lucy realized she was staring. As fear and confusion coursed through her, her mind scrambled for some self-defense tactic, but the rest of her still felt too stunned to cooperate.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said again. "I just want to talk."

He released her so unexpectedly that she nearly fell over. Recovering herself as best she could, Lucy watched as he took three steps back, then he raised his hands into the air where she could see them.

"You ran away," he stated. His eyes narrowed slightly, yet the piercing stare never wavered, even when Lucy began to back up.

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"What do you mean?" she demanded. "I don't know what you're talking about. Who are you?"

Her heart was racing like a trip-hammer, her thoughts spinning in all directions. He knows

about the girl-how could he know? The only way he could possibly know anything is if he was here-if he was the one who

"You tried to help her, but it was too late. And if you tell anyone-anyone at all-you could die." His tone was so even, so matter of fact-which somehow made it all the more frightening.

Lucy's voice rose. "You don't know anything! You don't know-"

"And they wouldn't believe you anyway-" "Who are you?"

"I'm Byron. I want to help you."

"I don't know you! And I don't need your help! Why are you doing this?
Why are you saying these things?"

"Because they're true."

Slowly he lowered his arms. He slid his hands into the pockets of his jacket, and he turned his eyes to the ground, and when he spoke, Lucy could hear the cold contempt in his voice.

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"It's not your fault, you know. You couldn't have saved her. Nobody could."

Tears blurred Lucy's vision. Wheeling around, she was finally able to run.

This is insane! This can't be happening!

She realized she was crying, crying so hard she couldn't see, and her chest was hurting, and her lungs were aching from the cold. She slid on wet leaves and sank ankle-deep in mud. Every breath she took was a knife blade between her ribs.

God, why had she ever come here this morning? How could she be so stupid, what could she possibly have been thinking?

And now, on top of everything else, here was some psycho lurking in the graveyard, acting like he knew her, acting like he knew about what had happened here last night-some psycho who must be the murderer, who else could he be?-he saw me and he knows who I am and now it's a game-cat and mouse-he's taunting me and now he's going to kill me, too

"You're in danger," the voice warned.

Lucy screamed. She hadn't heard him following, hadn't seen him coming, but now

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her back was flat against a tree, and he was standing there, just inches

away, gazing at her with those dark, dark eyes.

"People know I'm here!" she babbled. "They'll be looking for me-
they'll
be worried

if

"I told you, you don't have to be afraid of me. I'm a friend."

"Leave me alone! I don't have any friends!" "But you need one.
Someone
you love is gone now . . . you need one."

Lucy gaped at him. A wave of nausea rose up from her stomach,
lodged in
the middle of her

throat. I'm going to be sick . . . Oh God, I'm

"Sorry about your mother," he whispered.

As Lucy drew an incredulous breath, all feelings of nausea
vanished. She
simply stood there with her mouth open, staring at him in utter
disbelief.

"Someone told you." At last her words choked out, tight with fury.
"Someone had to tell you! My aunt or-or-my cousin-or someone at
school-"

"No one had to tell me. I see it in your eyes." She was vaguely
aware of
a rushing in her

head-a churning mixture of shock and rage and despair-and the tears that wouldn't stop, still pouring down her cheeks. For a moment she couldn't think, didn't even realize that she'd moved toward him, or that her hands had clenched into fists or that she'd shoved them hard against his chest.

"You really expect me to believe that?" she cried.

She saw him shake his head. Saw his hands close firmly over her fists, though he made no move to push her away.

"Some things take time to believe in," he said solemnly. "And right now . . . we don't have a lot of time."

As Lucy stared at him in bewilderment, he eased her hands from the front of his jacket. Then, still holding her wrists, he leaned down toward her, his voice low and urgent.

"Something happened here last night. Something important."

Yes, she thought desperately, a murder. A cold-blooded murder and

"I think something touched you."

"You don't know anything," Lucy whispered.

But "What'd you touch??Angela had asked . . . and the dying girl's hand,
squeezing so hard . . . the pain, the horrible pain, the excruciating pain . . . and "That's no bruise," Angela had said . . . That's no bruise . . .

"I think something was . . . passed on to you," Byron murmured.

Lucy's eyes widened. As she tried to pull Free, Byron's grip tightened,
forcing her closer. With one smooth movement, he turned both her hands
palms-up and gazed down at the tiny, crescent-shaped scar.

"Let go!"

Jerking from his grasp, Lucy stumbled back out of reach. She could feel
her right hand beginning to tingle-ice-hot needle pricks Spreading
out
from the center, out to her fingertips-and she clamped it shut and thrust it deep into her pocket. She told herself it was Just the cold, told herself Byron had just held

too tight, shut off her circulation, but her

d was stinging . . . feeling so strange . . . and it was starting to tremble, just like her knees were trembling, just like her voice was trembling . . .

"Stay away from me!" she burst out. "I don't know why you're

here, and I
don't have a clue what you're talking about, and I'm not afraid of
you!"

For a long moment Byron stared at her. "It's not me you need to be
afraid of," he said at last.

It took every ounce of courage to turn her back on him. Holding
her head
high, Lucy made her way determinedly back through the graves,
and she
told herself that she wouldn't look back.

But when she did, he was still standing there, and she couldn't
help
thinking how very much he resembled some dark angel, some
ominous
messenger in the midst of all that death . . .

"Be careful," he called to her then, his voice as heavy as the
shadows
around him. "Someone won't be glad you're here."

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The whole morning had been a disaster.

A complete, miserable, and utter disaster.

Lucy stood in the doorway of the cafeteria, clutching her books to
her
chest. She let her eyes wander over the laughing, chattering mass
of
students, then turned and walked slowly down the hall. She hadn't
planned on coming to school this morning after her visit to the

graveyard; she'd wanted to find a way back to the house and hide there
and try to make sense of things-until she suddenly remembered
she didn't
even have a key.

She hadn't tried to find a pay phone. "You tried to help her . . . it
was too late . . ." She hadn't reported last night's murder. "You
can't
tell anyone . . . you could die . . . they wouldn't believe you
anyway .
. . ." She'd been so frightened, so

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thoroughly shaken by her encounter with Byron, that she didn't
even
realize she'd retraced her steps back to school. She'd simply
looked up
and found herself standing outside Pine Ridge High, wondering
how she'd
gotten there.

Oh, God. What's happening to my life?

She'd stared at the school, and she'd weighed her options-Could I
spend
the day hiding out in some coffee shop? The library? How about
the bus
depot?-but she hadn't been able to come to a single decision.

He knew things! Byron knew things about last night, he knew
things about
me he couldn't possibly know!

She'd rested her head against the fence while the world passed in a blur. He was a total stranger, but he'd known about her mother. He was a total stranger, yet it was almost as if he'd been waiting for her there, as if he'd expected her to show up there this morning . . .

Maybe he really was the murderer, Lucy thought again. And maybe he really had been taunting her, playing with her, trying to see how

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much she really knew. So why didn't he kill me? Why didn't he kill me right then, when he had the perfect chance?

She hadn't been able to shut out his words: "She's not here . . . the one you're looking for ... he took her away . . ."

His words . . . those frightening, fateful words playing over and over and over again, relentlessly through her brain

"We don't have a lot of time . . ."

"Be careful . . ."

"Someone won't be glad you're here."

She'd stood outside Pine Ridge High, afraid to go in, afraid to go anywhere, until a teacher hurrying into the building had spotted her and ushered her to Principal Howser's office. To Lucy's relief, the man had

actually believed her story about being sick that morning. He'd welcomed her warmly and offered deep condolences for her loss; he'd praised her high grades from her former school, and he'd talked about how wonderful Aunt Irene was. He'd gone on and on about some Festival the school was having, and how he hoped she'd enjoy living in Pine Ridge. Then he'd handed her a schedule,

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assigned her a locker, given her a tour, and escorted her to class.

"Here we are, Lucy. I believe your cousin Angela has Miss Calloway this hour, too." Wonderful. My morning's complete.

He'd interrupted a pop history quiz to introduce her, leaving her to stand like an idiot at the front of the room while Miss Calloway tried not to look annoyed and all the kids had stared. She'd felt flushed and panicky and embarrassed. Some of the kids were laughing, she'd noticed-some of the girls whispering to each other, some of the guys whistling loudly. And then she'd spotted Angela, sitting in the very back row, snickering loudest of all.

It wasn't till she'd run to the bathroom afterward that Lucy realized she had dead leaves stuck in her hair and mud spattered over her clothes. She'd stared at her sorry reflection in the mirror and felt so

mortified, she'd actually considered hiding in there the rest of the day.

Wonderful, Lucy, just wonderful. Leave it to you to make a great first impression.

But at least the humiliation had distracted her.

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At least it had kept her from dwelling on the cemetery . . . the murdered girl . . . Byron . . .

Thank God lunch was over now; she had only a few more hours to get through.

By the time Lucy found her next class, her head was pounding.

Dull

ribbons of pain crept down one side of her face and unfurled behind her

eyes. She was achy and stiff, her shoes and socks were damp, and she

still hadn't had anything to eat. Her mind was worn out from worrying;

her brain had turned to mush. She didn't have a clue how she was going

to make it through math. Like a robot, she slid into her assigned desk

and saw Angela sitting right beside her. The dark raccoon eyes fixed on

her accusingly.

"I've been thinking about that jacket of yours," Angela frowned, leaning

toward her.

Lucy braced herself. "What about it?"

"It looks really familiar to me. In fact, I have one exactly like it."

"I know." Lucy kept her gaze lowered. "Irene said I could borrow it."

"And you didn't even ask me?"

"You were already gone. And she said you never wear it anyway, because she gave it to you?"

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"I can't believe this!" Angela pulled back as several kids squeezed between them, book bags swinging dangerously. "Look at it! It's totally ruined!"

Someone bumped Lucy's desk and murmured an apology. She glanced up to see the back of his faded jacket as he leaned over the desk in front of hers. Then Angela snapped her back to attention.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"I heard you," Lucy sighed. "I'll pay to have it cleaned, okay?"

"You'll pay to buy me another one, is what you mean. God, who do you think you are?"

To Lucy's relief, Mrs. Lowenthal called the class to order and instructed them to take out their books. Then, while the woman droned on and on about numbers that made no sense, Lucy tried to ignore the venomous looks Angela kept shooting at her from across the aisle. Don't let her get to you . . . right now Angela's the least of your worries . . .

"-announcements regarding the Fall Festival," Mrs. Lowenthal was saying. Fall Festival? When had they finished with math? When had they stopped working problems on

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the chalkboard? Lucy didn't know . . . hadn't been paying attention.

Something soft hit her foot. Glancing down, she saw what looked like a necklace lying there on the floor, but she had no idea where it had come from. Her eyes did a quick sweep of the class, but everyone was focused on the front of the room. Lucy scooted the necklace closer with the toe of her shoe, then picked it up to examine it.

It was a simple piece of jewelry-nothing expensive, elaborate, or even professional, she thought. Just a single strand of tiny beads, dark green glass, that looked rather childishly handmade. Pretty,

though, in
a plain sort of way . . .

"-want all of you there early if you're working a booth," Mrs.
Lowenthal
continued.

Lucy put her left hand to her forehead. Was it just her, or was the
room
getting hotter by the second?

"-big fund-raiser of the year, as you all know," Mrs. Lowenthal
said.

It was getting hotter in here, Lucy was sure of it. She could feel
drops
of sweat along her hairline; she shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

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"-those volunteers will meet this afternoon in the library-"

Maybe I'm coming down with something-getting a fever-God, I'm
burning up

"-be sure to check the schedule to see which shifts you're
working-"

Lucy slid lower in her desk. Her head was way past throbbing
now-it felt
like it was going to burst. She wound the necklace around her
wrist,
twined it between her fingers; she could feel the tiny beads cutting
into the tender flesh of her palm

"-can use my car to transport some of the food-"

For a brief second the room shimmered around her. A tingling pain shot through her hand, and Lucy tried to brace herself against the desktop, tried to prop herself up, but her wrists were so limp, so useless . . .

What's happening?

She couldn't hold her head up anymore. She couldn't hear . . . couldn't see-yet at the same time she could see everything, hear everything, everything all at once, every single sense wide open-

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What's . . . happening?

The classroom vanished. The warmth building steadily inside her now burst into scalding heat, searing through nerves and muscles, throbbing the length of her fingers and upward through her hand, along her arm, exploding inside her head.

I've felt this before-oh God-just like last night

And then they came.

Lightning fast and just as merciless-images so vivid, so sharp, her body reeled with the force of them-

Hands-such powerful hands-eyes glowing through shadows-lips
on her neck,
her throat, and blood flowing, life flowing, "Could have been
different
... could have been perfect . . ."

Wind! Ah, the cold, sweet rush of it, taste of it, caress of it-night
smells night sounds damp and cold! And fog so thick . . . woods
so black
. . . black and deep as

"Death," Lucy murmured. "I'm not afraid to die . . ."

And "Lucy?" . . . someone saying her name, over and over again,
"Lucy .
. . Lucy . . ."

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"Lucy?" Mrs. Lowenthal's voice, anxious and loud. "Lucy, are you
all right?"

Lucy's eyes flew open.

She was slumped on her desk, both arms pillowing her head. She
was
clutching something in her right hand, and her whole arm felt
numb and
prickly, as if she'd been shot full of novocaine.

"Lucy?" Mrs. Lowenthal said again.

Very slowly Lucy lifted her head. She could see that the classroom
was
there again, along with the faces of the students, all of them

staring,
and Angela smirking beside her, and Mrs. Lowenthal leaning over
her with
a worried frown.

"You're so pale, Lucy, are you ill? Do you need to be excused?"

Lucy tried to answer, but couldn't. Instead she opened her fingers
and
stared down at the necklace in her hand.

"I'll have someone take you to the nurse," Mrs. Lowenthal
decided.

"Angela can help you. Here, Angela, let me write you a pass."

But Lucy wasn't paying attention anymore to Mrs. Lowenthal or
Angela or
the curious stares of her classmates.

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As the guy in front of her turned around, she saw that he'd taken
off
his jacket. She saw the thick black hair falling soft to his
shoulders,
and the calm gaze of his midnight eyes. And then she saw him
reach back
and slide the necklace from her hand.

"Thanks," Byron said quietly. "I must have dropped this."

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She knew she was going to be sick.

As Byron faced forward again, Lucy got to her feet and rushed up the aisle to the door. Then, ignoring an alarmed Mrs. Lowenthal, she hurried down the hall in search of a bathroom.

She finally found one near the stairs, barely making it inside before dry heaves took over. She left the stall door open and fell to her knees, sweat pouring down her face, her insides like jelly. She dreaded Mrs. Lowenthal coming to check on her-or even worse, sending Angela.

"This might help," a voice said softly.

Lucy was too weak to lift her head. She felt a cold, wet paper towel on the back of her neck . . . a gentle hand smoothing her hair back from each side of her face.

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She heaved again, but there was nothing in her stomach but pain.

"Thank you," she managed to whisper.

"No need," the voice whispered back to her. "The first time's always the worst."

Lucy lifted her head.

Turning around, she stared out at the bare floor, at the row of sinks

and the dingy mirror stretching over them, reflecting nothing.

"Hello?" she called shakily. "Who's there?"

Her voice echoed back to her from the bathroom walls. With trembling fingers, she took the paper towel from the back of her neck and got slowly to her feet. One by one, she moved down the row of stalls and opened each door, but they were all empty.

"The first time's always the worst . . ."

Without warning a group of girls came giggling in from the hallway. Was one of them the kind-hearted stranger? But none of the girls even glanced her way, so Lucy ran fresh water onto the paper towel and blotted it over her face. Mrs. Lowenthal was right-she was pale frighteningly pale. Think, Lucy, think! Try and calm down . . . try to put things in perspective . . .

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Perspective? How could she possibly be calm or rational about all the things that had happened to her in the last twenty-four hours? She was way past confusion now-way beyond frightened. Something had taken hold of her back there in the classroom-something had consumed her back there in the classroom-something she didn't understand and certainly

hadn't
been able to control. Something had crept over her and through
her,
transporting her to another place and time-she'd seen things, felt
things-horrible things, intense and painful and terrifyingly real,
and
yet . . .

And yet there'd been no complete picture, Lucy realized. Nothing
like a
carefully posed photograph or neatly framed painting or smooth
sequence
of movie scenes running logically through her mind.

No, this had been different.

Just flashes of things, glimpses of things, puzzle pieces spilled
helter-skelter from a box. Things without order, things that made
no
sense, though she felt they should make sense, and did make sense
somehow, if only she could put them together . . .

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Frowning, she stared down at her hand. The strange crescent scar
stood
out sharply against her palm, and there was a faint, lingering ache
along her fingertips.

The necklace.

Lucy shut her eyes . . . opened them again . . . drew a slow intake
of
breath.

There was darkness . . . and death . . . and it started when I picked up that necklace . . .

The bathroom door swung shut. As Lucy turned in surprise, she realized that all the girls had left, and that Angela was now standing beside her.

"I've been looking all over for you." Angela gave an exasperated sigh.

"What the hell happened back there?"

Lucy couldn't answer. She watched dully as her cousin leaned toward the mirror and primped at her hair.

"Well?" Angela demanded.

"I . . . felt like I was going to pass out," Lucy murmured.

"I've never seen anyone shake like that before they passed out," Angela said, casting Lucy a critical glance. "God, you look even worse now

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than you did last night. Whatever you've got, you better not be contagious."

"Who's the guy in class?" Lucy asked tersely. "What are you talking about?"

"The dark-haired guy sitting in front of me." "Byron?"

Lucy nodded, tight-lipped.

"Well, what about him?" Tilting her head, Angela gave her hair one more fluff. "Oh, please. Don't tell me you're interested."

Lucy merely shrugged.

"Right. Another smitten female falls under the spell of the mysterious Byron Wetherly," Angela announced. Then her lips curled in a dry smile.

"Well, yeah, he's gorgeous. And sexy. And so very, very cool. But . . . you know . . . every girl in school is after him."

She paused a moment, as if considering a matter of great importance.

Then she lifted one eyebrow, amused.

"Frankly, Lucy, I wouldn't bet on your chances."

Ignoring the remark, Lucy pulled a fresh paper towel from the dispenser.

"What do you mean, mysterious? Why is he mysterious?"

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"Well, who knows anything about him, really? He keeps pretty much to himself."

"Maybe he's shy."

"He doesn't talk much. But with a face and body like that . . . why would he need to?"

"I see." Lucy played along. "The quiet, secretive type. That's what makes him mysterious."

"Not just that. His family, too."

"So his family's mysterious."

"They're poor." Tilting her head sideways, Angela studied her profile in the glass. "And extremely weird. I mean, the word is that Byron must be adopted or something-he's the only normal one in the whole bunch. He lives with his grandmother-well, takes care of his grandmother; she's an invalid. His mother's been locked up for years."

Lucy looked startled. "Locked up?"

"As in loony bin? As in institution?" Angela

pointed to the side of her head and made wide circles with her finger.

"As in psychopathic maniac?"

"Yes, Angela, I get it. What's wrong with her?"

"She murdered her kids."

"Come on . . . you're not serious."

"Burned down the house with them in it. Oh, for God's sake, it happened years ago. I'm not sure anyone around here even remembers the woman personally-it's just something everyone knows about." Angela paused, thought for a second, then once again faced the mirror. "You know. Like a campfire story. Or one of those urban legends."

"But what about Byron?" Lucy asked.

"Well, obviously he got out, didn't he? Him and his crazy sister. Are you finished in here?"

Lucy nodded. She ran some water over the towel, squeezed it out, then pressed it against her cheeks, stalling for a little more time.

"So . . . is the mom in prison?" she asked.

Angela rolled her eyes. "No, just in a straightjacket for the rest of her life. Poor Byron. I mean, can you even imagine? Everyone knowing your mother's a cold-blooded killer? And, like that's not bad enough, that sister of his was turning out just as bad-it was only a matter of time before she got carted off to the funny farm. Lucky for everybody,

she ended up

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leaving town before anything really horrible happened."

"I guess that was lucky," Lucy agreed quietly. "So tell me about the sister."

"She saw things." Another dramatic sigh. "Well . . . at least that's what she wanted people to believe. She saw things."

"You mean . . . like hallucinations?"

"Call them whatever you want-she called them visions."

Lucy's heart caught in her chest. She was feeling colder by the second.

"What kinds of visions?"

"How would I know? I never saw her have one." Angela sounded impatient.

"Telling-the future-and-talking-to-the-dead kinds of visions, I guess. I mean, the girl was way creepy."

"So she never had a vision in school?" Lucy's voice was scarcely a whisper.

"She didn't go to school. She didn't go anywhere, really. I mean, nobody ever saw her."

"Then if nobody ever saw her . . . how do you know she even

existed?"

Angela gave a sniff of disdain. "Well . . . nobody normal ever saw her.

Nobody I know

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ever saw her. But there were stories, you know?" Leaning closer to her

reflection, she rubbed at a tiny smudge of lipstick on her tooth.

"Sometimes people would drive past the Wetherly place at night, and

they'd see her watching from an upstairs window with bars on it.

And

sometimes, people just going down that road at night would hear screams

coming from inside the house. That's why they never let her out.

She was

totally dangerous."

Despite her uneasiness, Lucy frowned. "Sounds like old wives' tales to me."

"Whatever. But she ran away last year, so that was a big relief to everybody. Especially to Byron, I imagine. I mean, God, how humiliating-so not cool for his social life. Now there's only him and

his grandmother." She paused, her brow creasing in thought.

"Good thing

he's so gorgeous-he certainly doesn't have good breeding going for him."

"Then how can you really know him?" Lucy asked tightly. "How can you be

so sure he's not like his mother? Or his sister?" How can you be sure he doesn't stalk unsuspecting victims, or murder girls in cemeteries, or see into a person's mind . . .

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p

"Well . . ." Angela's look was blank. "That's just silly."

"Why is it silly? You said he keeps to himself . . . that no one really knows him-"

"God, what is this whole obsessing thing?"

"What about his life away from school? What about his private thoughts?
What about his feelings?"

Angela made no effort to hide her amusement. "His feelings? Oh, I'd like to feel him, all right-in places besides my fantasies. Just like every other female around here."

She stepped back from the mirror. She ran a slow gaze over Lucy, then shook her head in mock disappointment.

"Poor Lucy . . . take my advice, okay? Forget about Byron. As a matter of fact, forget about anybody. You look like you've been run over by a

bus. And you just had some kind of weird fit-not to mention nearly throwing up-in the middle of class. I mean, it's so embarrassing. Everyone already thinks you're a freak, and it's only your first day."

It took all Lucy's effort to compose herself. She wadded up her paper towel, tossed it into

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the trash, and carefully smoothed the front of

her sweater. "You know what? I'm actually feeling much better. In fact, I don't think I even need to see the nurse now."

"Then why'd I waste my time trying to find you?"

Biting back a reply, Lucy followed Angela back to class. Byron didn't even glance at her as she slid into her seat, didn't seem to feel her eyes boring into him as she tried to ignore the stares and whispers around her. He was out of his chair as soon as the bell rang, and though Lucy hurried to catch up with him, he'd already disappeared into the crowded hallway by the time she reached the door.

She didn't see him again the rest of the afternoon, neither in class nor on campus. As though he'd vanished from her life just as quickly as he'd appeared.

By the time the final bell rang, Lucy was never so glad to have a day
end-it took every last effort just to drag herself to her locker.
Everywhere she turned, there was talk about the big weekend
ahead,
exciting plans for the Fall Festival, but all she planned on doing
was

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Locking herself in her room and staying in bed. She was just
rechecking
her homework assignments when Angela showed up, greeting her
with a
sullen frown.

"Hurry up," Angela complained. "I have better things to do than
stand
around and wait for you all day."

"You just got here. You've been waiting for-what? Two whole
seconds?"

"Do you want a ride or not?"

Lucy slammed her locker door. Lowering her head, she did a
quick
assessment of her books, oblivious to the kids shoving past her till
she
felt a quick, light pressure on her arm.

"What?" Startled, she looked up. Angela was standing several feet
away,
watching her with growing impatience.

"What?" Angela echoed.

"Did you just touch me?" Yet even as she asked, Lucy knew it hadn't been Angela. Somehow, in that precise moment, she knew it was the girl who'd come to her aid in the bathroom. That's impossible . . . how could I know that?

"What are you talking about?" Angela frowned. Immediately Lucy stood on tiptoes, anxiously

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scanning the corridor. It was packed with students eager to start the weekend, but none

of them seemed to be paying any attention to her.

This is just crazy.

"Someone touched my arm," Lucy insisted. Puzzled, she turned to Angela, who was now

making an exaggerated show of checking her watch.

"You think?" Angela threw back at her. "I mean, there're only about a million people

around here bumping into each other." "No, but . . ."

"But what?"

"This was different. It wasn't an accident. She . . ."

"She, who? She, what?"

She wanted me to know. The realization came to Lucy with warm, calm clarity. She did it on purpose because she wanted me to know she was here, that she was real, that I didn't imagine her

"You're not gonna have another fit, are you?"

Angela was regarding her warily. "Because if you are, I'm leaving."

"No," Lucy murmured, taking one last

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puzzled look around. "No . . . I'm ready." "Then let's go."

For once, Lucy didn't mind Angela's music blaring-in fact, she hardly even noticed it at all. While her cousin sang loudly off-key all the way home, Lucy leaned her head against the window and tried to sort out all the troubling events of the day. Explanations? None. Logic? None. Worry factor? Definitely rising. And Byron . . .

She could still see those dark, dark eyes searching hers . . . hear the edge in that low, deep voice . . . feel those strong hands on her shoulders. It was his ominous warning that had finally convinced her not to report the dead girl . . . at least not yet. She'd been frightened of him, still was frightened of him-only now that fear was tempered with an almost fascinated curiosity. He had answers-she was sure of it-but answers to things she wasn't sure she wanted to pursue. As the car pulled into the driveway, Lucy wished she could ask her cousin more about Byron-but she didn't dare. Her life was complicated enough already without having Angela any more involved.

The house was empty when they went in. As

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Lucy shut herself in her room, she thought she heard Angela scrolling through the messages on the answering machine . . . thought there might be one from Irene, though she couldn't make it out. She stood for a moment with her back against the door, eyes closed, weary relief flooding through her body.

And then her eyes opened with a start. What's that smell?

A very faint fragrance . . . and pleasantly sweet . . . yet nothing she recognized, nothing she could recall ever having smelled before . . .

Frowning, Lucy dropped her stuff on the desk and walked to the

sliding

glass doors. She opened them all the way, letting in crisp fall air, then she stepped out onto the balcony and stared off across the lengthening shadows over the lawn.

The woods still looked menacing, even in the last few hours of daylight.

A slight breeze was blowing, and as Lucy gazed into the trees' shifting

patterns of darkness and fading autumn colors, a shiver crept slowly up her spine.

That feeling again . . .

That feeling of being watched . . .

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"Bad habit," Lucy muttered. "Get over it, for crying out loud."

Irritated with herself, she turned back into the room.

She took a few steps, then stopped abruptly by the bed.

That's strange . . .

Despite the fresh air blowing in, she could still smell that aroma . . .

delicate . . . sweet . . . and . . . something else . . .

Lucy tilted her head. Breathed deeply and

long.

The fragrance flowed down easy . . . soft and smooth as wine . . .
velvet in her veins . . Intoxicating.

Yes . . . that's it. Intoxicating.

Light-headed, Lucy reached out a hand toward her bed. She sat
down
unsteadily, then lay back and closed her eyes.

The scent floated from the covers.

Like an exotic perfume, it rose up around her, enveloped her from
every
side-sheets, blankets, pillows, comforter-even her nightclothes,
which
she'd carelessly tossed across the headboard that morning in her
hurry

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to dress. It seeped into the pores of her skin, and brushed softly
across her eyelids, and tingled along the fingertips of her right
hand . . .

And that's when Lucy realized.

That's when it hit her full force that someone had been in here
today.

In her room . . .

And in her bed.

,

I

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"Lucy! What the hell are you doing?"

Lucy could hear Angela shouting at her from the bathroom doorway, but she didn't care. She didn't care, and she didn't stop-she kept right on stripping the linens from her bed.

"Lucy! Did you hear me? You know we have a cleaning lady who does that!"

"I don't care about the cleaning lady-I don't want to wait for the cleaning lady. I want these off now. I want them washed. I want clean sheets. I want a new bedspread. I want-"

"Have you totally lost your mind?" Angela yelled. "Florence was here today! Everything already is clean!"

Lucy froze. She stood there like a statue, then very slowly turned around.

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"Today?" she murmured. "You mean . . . the cleaning lady-"

"Florence, yes, our cleaning lady. She always comes on Fridays-"

"That's not true. My room's different. Someone was in my room."

"You've hardly come out of your room since the first day you got here,"

Angela reminded her sharply. "Irene told Florence not to go in there till you felt better. So today she cleaned it."

No . . . that's not right.

Lucy stared at her cousin with a puzzled frown. Of course it made perfect sense . . . of course it must be true . . .

"There's . . . a smell," she finished lamely. Angela came farther into the room and sniffed.

"Well, yeah-probably air freshener. Or furniture polish. Or stuff she puts in the carpet. Florence always sprays everything around here. Especially when we've been sick or something."

No! That's not right!

"You are so weird." Angela glowered at her. "Didn't anybody ever use air freshener where you came from?"

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Lucy didn't answer. She sank down on to the foot of the bed and gazed in bewilderment at the sheets and blankets piled around her on the floor.

"Put on something warm," Angela said then. "We're going to the Festival."

"What?" Lucy looked up just in time to see her cousin disappear into the bathroom. "We're doing . . . what?"

"Going to the Festival!" Angela's voice hollered back to her. "It's Friday night-I can't stand to be here one more second!"

"But you're not supposed-" Lucy began, then stopped. Not a good idea to let Angela know she'd eavesdropped this morning, that she'd heard Irene grounding the girl. But not a good idea either, aiding and abetting a criminal . . .

Your choice. Get out or stay in this creepy room.

She heard the shower running, so she went over and shut the door. Then she crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back against the wall, studying her bed as though it were some unwelcome alien dropped in her midst.

I don't believe you, Angela. Why don't I believe you?

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Lucy was beginning to think Angela might be right-that maybe she truly was losing her mind. Some sweet-smelling air spray had sent her into a complete tailspin-she'd jumped to the most ridiculous conclusion.

Someone in her room? Well, of course someone had been in her room-Florence had been in her room, simply doing her job!

And yet . . .

Lucy chewed mercilessly on a fingernail. Something inside her-deep

inside her-still felt uneasy . . . uneasy and unconvinced. Why?

She'd

always been so sensible, so logical, always prided herself on her level

headedness. But that was before the cemetery, she reminded herself now.

Before the girl in the grave . . . before all the other crazy things that had happened to her, before I started jumping at every shadow and

letting my imagination spin entirely out of control

"Florence," Lucy said firmly to herself. "Florence, Florence, Florence.

Florence the cleaning lady."

But, no, her mind answered her, without the slightest hesitation . . .

No, not Florence . . . Someone else.

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"Lucy!"

Startled, Lucy looked up to see Angela glaring at her from the doorway again.

"Irene has a very important meeting tonight that'll last till at least

eleven. If we leave now, we can beat her home."

Lucy couldn't resist. "And why would we want to do that?"

"I've been having some car trouble." Angela didn't miss a beat. "I promised her I wouldn't be out on those dirt roads after dark. Just, you know, in case something should happen."

"I see."

"So if we're back early, she won't have to know about it. I mean, I wouldn't want her to worry."

Lucy shook her head. "Of course not." "So come on!"

The door slammed between them, and Lucy gazed at it for a few seconds, wrestling with her conscience. It would be better than staying here in this room right now. And since she wasn't supposed to know Angela was grounded, she certainly wouldn't be the one in trouble if Irene discovered they'd gone out. Besides, Lucy

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reasoned, doing this for Angela might help make a truce between them.

It was just the Fall Festival, after all.

And what could possibly happen to them at Festival?

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He'd been fascinated when he'd first seen her-that beautiful girl at the window.

p He hadn't been able to turn away, gazing at her through the trees, through the rain-he hadn't expected anyone to be there, hadn't even realized there was a house at the edge of the woods. Once his work was done at the graveyard, he'd needed a safer, darker sanctuary, and so instinct had driven him deep into the moonless shelter of the forest.

He often prowled after he'd killed.

City streets . . . neighborhoods . . . country roads . . . any convenient place to work off those lingering effects of restlessness and release.

He hunted unhindered. Undetected. Unseen . . .

It amused him to stand over people while

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they slept . . . people who didn't know he was there, people unaware that their lives were in his power. With one quick decision he could determine if they awakened tomorrow, or if they languished for hours or days on end, or if their hearts stopped suddenly, midbeat, without the

slightest warning.

Just as his heart had had no warning when he saw her there at the window.

He'd watched her curiously, the light glowing pale behind her, the outline of her soft, sweet curves beneath the flimsy fabric of her nightdress. At one point he thought she might have seen him, too, for she was peering at the woods, at the low stone wall . . . but he was always much quicker than a glance. He'd been a shadow for a while, and then a wisp of fog. He'd watched her unbuttoning her gown, the delicate swell of her breasts as she'd leaned forward against the glass, and then he'd been outside on her balcony as she'd slid open the doors and gotten drenched from the rain. He'd reached out and touched her cheek, but she hadn't known; he could have gone inside with her, but he'd waited.

He didn't need an invitation-not from her,

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not from anyone-he went where he pleased, when he pleased.

How he pleased.

But her sorrow had stopped him.

Like a fragile aura, it surrounded her and flowed from her-he could feel the palpable grief, the vulnerability and despair, and though it

would
have been so easy, so pleasurable, to take her then, he'd decided
against it.

He'd taken the other girl instead.

The other girl had left her window open just the tiniest crack, and
he'd
slipped through the screen, slipped right inside on the cold, wet
breeze, and he'd stayed till nearly dawn. Even in slumber she'd
reeked
of anger and rebellion, and he'd found this exciting, this wild,
defiant
nature so very much like his own.

She'd thought she was dreaming, of course. When he'd pulled
down her
covers without

the slightest disturbance . . . when he'd

caressed her naked body with his eyes, his

hands, his mind . . .

Her thighs had parted, her back had arched, such a delicious
nightmare,
inviting him to join

her.

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He usually came as a dream.

At least the first time.

A dream that lingered long past waking .. . like a deep, slow
burning
that could not be satisfied.

And when he'd finally left her, languid and sated with his memory,
he'd
waited in the woods behind the house.

He'd waited for the sun to come up and the house to be empty, and
then
he'd willed himself onto that balcony and let himself in through
the
sliding glass doors.

Her name was Lucy, he discovered.

Lucy...

He'd found it stamped on an airline ticket that she'd tossed on her
dresser; he'd seen it written on a luggage tag still attached to a
suitcase full of clothes.

Lucy. Lucy Dennison.

He hadn't expected an interruption. He'd paused and listened,
mildly
annoyed, as the back door unlocked, as the kitchen cupboards
banged open
and shut, as the cleaning lady made her slow, labored journey up
the
stairs and down the hall.

But still, he'd had time to walk around Lucy's
room.

To touch Lucy's things.

And, in those last few seconds before taking
his leave, to lie down . . . smiling . . . in Lucy's bed.

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"Why don't you drive?" Angela insisted as she opened the garage
door.

Lucy paused beside the little red Corvette, her eyes wide with
feigned
innocence. Good one,

Angela-now you can honestly say you didn't drive your car
anywhere
except back and forth to school.

"Me? Oh, no, I'd rather you did. I mean, if you've been having
trouble
with it-"

"The thing is," Angela said quickly, "is that I'm sort of getting a
headache."

"Oh. Well then, maybe we'd better stay home."

"I can't. I mean, I shouldn't. I mean, I promised my friends-you
know,

I'm supposed to be working one of the booths tonight at the fair, so I have to at least show up and help."

Was she telling the truth? Lucy doubted it, but told herself it didn't matter anyway. What

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was more important right now was just getting out of the house and getting along with her cousin.

"So what exactly is this Fall Festival?" she asked, as Angela guided her through the neighborhood and toward the opposite end of town.

Angela slumped down in her seat and sounded bored. "It's the school's biggest fundraiser, and they have it every year."

"That's it?"

"It's like a fair, okay?" The girl gave an exasperated sigh. "They do it every year. Anyone can participate, so the school rents space to set up booths and then we get to keep whatever money we make. Lots of people come in from other towns, and there's, like, this little carnival, and they have food and stupid crafts for sale, and dumb games and prizes and stuff."

Lucy was only half listening, driving with one hand, using the

other to
fiddle with the radio. "Sounds fascinating. So where do you
work?"

"Hey, that's my favorite station!" Angela complained. "What do
you think
you're doing?"

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"I just wanted to catch the news. Just for one second, okay?"

"One."

"Thanks. Now . . . where do you work?" "Pin the nose on the
scarecrow."

"Really?" The announcer was highlighting the day's local
headlines. Fall
Festival . . . daycare facility closing . . . fender bender on the old
highway. . . "You make scarecrows?" No mention of dead bodies,
no girls
in open graves, no murders in Pine Ridge. I couldn't have
imagined it
all, could I? Did I imagine Byron, too? And the necklace in
class . . .
and the girl in the bathroom . . . and the scar on my hand

"Watch out!" Angela yelled. "What is wrong with you?"

Startled, Lucy swung the car back to her own side of the road.
"Sorry."

"Well, it might help if you stopped looking at your hand and kept
both

of them on the steering wheel, for God's sake."

"Sorry." Lucy's brain struggled to reengage. "What were you saying about scarecrows?"

"I said, of course I don't make scarecrows. It's a game. You blindfold people and spin them

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around, and then they have to stick this ridiculous nose on the scarecrow."

"Like pin the tail on the donkey?"

"Exactly. And if you get the nose in the right place, you win a prize. Except we use Velcro, not pins?"

"What kind of prize?"

Angela sighed. "A scarecrow doll, what do you think?"

"Well . . . it sounds kind of fun."

"Yeah, if you have no life. Turn here."

Lucy did as she was told. They followed a narrow strip of blacktop for about ten minutes, then turned off again onto an even narrower dirt road, this one winding off through thickly wooded countryside for several more miles.

"That's it up there," Angela finally announced.

To Lucy's relief she saw the fairgrounds up ahead, a noisy carnival bright with lights and busy with activity. Across the road and a good walk away stretched a large unlit field where kids with flashlights directed traffic and motioned them to their parking spot.

"Okay," Angela said, unstrapping her seat belt.

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"Why don't we just meet back here about ten-thirty?"

Lucy looked doubtful. "You're sure that's enough time to . . . to not worry Irene?" she remembered to say. "I mean, how can you know for sure how long her meeting will be?"

"Trust me. It's a stupid disciplinary committee, and they never end before eleven. Night's the only time they can get everyone together without having other very important meetings to go to."

"What kind of discipline?" Lucy couldn't help asking.

"A bunch of stupid frat guys. They're always such jerks, and they're always in some kind of trouble. I mean, you'd think they'd learn by now that it's not cool to get drunk and act like total idiots in the cemetery."

Lucy's hand froze on the door handle. "What . . . about the cemetery?"

"Some guys went into the cemetery last night and got drunk and were messing around. And I guess somebody saw them and complained."

It was all Lucy could do to keep her voice casual. "What were they doing, do you know?"

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"The usual stuff, probably. Breaking things . . . stealing things . . . spray-painting the headstones . . . just your usual damage to private property. Oh-and I always love this one-making out with their girlfriends on the graves."

"So . . ." Lucy could barely choke out the words, "it was just a . . . a joke?"

"Well, they thought it was. But they're gonna get suspended and their fraternity will get put on probation." Angela thought a minute, then gave a wry smile. "That's the part Irene really likes. The punishment part."

But Lucy wasn't listening anymore. As she got the door open and climbed out, her mind was spinning with rage and disbelief. A joke! Kids drunk

and playing pranks! No wonder there hadn't been any news coverage . . .
no murder investigations . . . no reports of missing girls . . . And all
the agony she'd suffered . . . the terror . . . the guilt and regret and horror and

"Are you coming?" Angela was waving at her from the other side of the car. "The Festival's this way. God, I can't believe they made us park way out here in all this mud!"

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Yet that still didn't explain her encounter with Byron that morning, Lucy reminded herself, following Angela through the field. Still didn't explain the things he'd said . . . the things he'd known . . .

Unless he was part of the joke, too. Unless he was there last night with those other guys, and he guessed I might come back this morning, and he wanted to scare me into not saying anything . . .

"If tell anyone . . . you could die . . . they wouldn't believe you anyway . . ."

"Did you hear me?" Angela snapped.

"What? Sorry-what?" Still doesn't explain Byron . . . still doesn't explain a lot of things

"I said, let's just meet back here at the car. Are you listening to

me?"

"Yes," Lucy murmured. "I'm listening. Ten-thirty. Here at the car."

She felt betrayed. Mortified and furious at being the butt of such a cruel, twisted joke. How those guys must be laughing at her right now-if, in fact, they even remembered the sick charade they'd carried out last night.

"Okay," Angela said. "See you later."

They parted at the main gate, but Lucy

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stood on the sidelines for a moment, taking everything in. It was after six now, and the Fall Festival was in full swing. Angela was right about one thing, she noted-it seemed the whole town had turned out for the event-the whole town and a whole lot more. The place was packed with people in the mood for fun. Lines were already long at the concession stands, and the air throbbed with loud music and the wild rumble of rides, the carousel calliope, and barkers hawking games of various skills and staminas. Lucy could smell food from every direction-hot dogs, doughnuts, cotton candy, barbecue. For the first time in hours she actually realized how hungry she was; she'd barely eaten anything

since
yesterday.

She bought a greasy hamburger and a watered-down Coke and ate while she walked. It had been years since she'd been to anything like a carnival, and it brought back happy memories of her childhood, of her and Mom off together on their special adventures. Despite the tasteless food and poignant memories, she actually began to feel better. And despite the

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pain and embarrassment of her entire day, she felt herself almost smile.

She tossed her trash into a bin and kept walking, squeezing her way in and out through the crowds. The night was chilly, the breeze sharp but not unbearable in her flannel shirt and oversized parka. She was glad she'd opted to leave her purse at home tonight-with her money and ID tucked tightly into the pocket of her jeans, she felt a lot safer. Safer . . . that's funny. For some reason, the irony of that nearly brought another smile to her face.

She paused at a booth selling candy apples. She bought one and bit through the hard, sticky sweetness, and then she headed back into the crowd.

The slow, shivery prickle at the back of her neck had nothing to do with the cold.

Lucy stopped, and three people ran into her from behind. She felt a sharp burst of pain as her upper lip split between the candy apple and her two front teeth.

Mumbling apologies, she worked her way over to a booth and stood with her back to the wall. She could feel the blood swelling from the

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cut, and she wiped it carelessly with the back of her hand. Her eyes roamed anxiously over the teeming mobs of people.

Someone's following me. I feel it.

Just like last night . . . when she'd run from those footsteps . . . when she'd run from one nightmare, straight into another . . .

She didn't see anything suspicious, of course-in that solid mass of faces, how would she? And after all that had happened in the last two days, Lucy wasn't even sure how much she could trust her own instincts anymore.

She dabbed at the blood on her lip.

She took another survey of the crowd.

You're imagining things. Enough's enough. Pull yourself together,
for
crying out loud.

She was almost past the carousel when she saw him.

He was moving quickly, shoving his way toward her through the
mob, and
as she recognized his face, Lucy instantly turned and headed the
opposite way.

"Lucy!" she heard him yell, but she didn't answer, didn't even
acknowledge him, just kept walking.

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"Lucy! Wait! We've got to talk!"

She thought she could outrun him, but Byron caught up with her
easily,
grabbing her arm and forcing her around. Dropping her apple,
Lucy
twisted furiously from his grasp.

"Haven't you done enough already?" she exploded.

The look he gave her was grim, his voice low and urgent. "Come
on, we
can't talk here-"

"You've had your fun, okay? Now leave me alone!"

"Fun? What fun? What is this-?"

"Those frat guys playing jokes at the cemetery-and you were there,
too-that's how you knew I'd come back! Well, are you proud of yourself?"

"I don't have a clue what you're talking about, but please, just listen
to me-"

"I've listened to you enough. Now I'm going."

With one smooth movement, Byron caught her shoulders and steered her
over to a booth. Then, pinning her flat against the wall, he leaned
down
over her, his black eyes narrowed.

"There are things you need to understand."

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p

"No, you need to understand!" Lucy tried to break free, but he only held
her tighter. "If you don't leave me alone right now, I'm going to
scream
as loud as I can and have you arrested!"

"Look, I know you're scared-you have every right to be. What happened
last night was horrible, and you have no reason in the world to
trust
me. But you have to. You have to meet me tomorrow-"

"I'm not meeting you anywhere-"

"-the old church-nine o'clock-"

She opened her mouth to scream. She felt his fingers dig into her shoulders as he gave her a firm, quick shake.

"You saw something today," he said. His lips moved soft against her ear;
his voice dropped to a whisper. "When you touched the necklace,
you saw
something happen. You know it . . . and so do I."

This time when she struggled, he let her go. Lucy bolted into the crowd,
frantically shoving her way through, not caring where she ran,
only
desperate to get away.

She looked back once and thought she saw him following.

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Instinctively she veered from the midway, cut behind the Ferris wheel,
and raced down a narrow path between two busy picnic shelters. It
took
her a minute to realize she'd lost him. Another minute to catch her
breath and get her bearings. She bent over, hands on knees, and
took
deep gulps of air, waiting for her heartbeat to return to normal.

Then slowly she lifted her head.

That smell . . .

Frowning, Lucy glanced at her surroundings. It was darker back here, and though several groups of people had congregated nearby to socialize, the booths had thinned out, giving way to weeds and trash Dumpsters and a tall wire fence. Great. I must be at the back of the fairgrounds.

The night seemed colder. Without the insulation of the crowds, Lucy felt the sting of the wind and tugged her parka tight around her. Even the air felt different, she realized-softer

and heavier and mysterious somehow, ripe with the scent of woods and fields and deep lake waters . . .

And that other smell . . .

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She could feel her heart quickening again in tier chest. Her throat constricting. The blood

chilling in her veins . . .

That other, familiar smell . . .

That sweet, lingering smell that had filled her

room and her bed.

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She had to follow it.

Despite the sick fear coursing through her, Lucy knew she had no other choice.

She had to follow it, and she had to find it. But where?

It didn't seem to be coming from one particular spot, or even from one specific direction, but rather permeated the air around her like a fine, invisible mist. Very deliberately this time, Lucy breathed it in . . . sweet like before . . . delicate like before . . . only this time stirring something deep within her, as though long-dulled senses were struggling to awake.

Several girls walked by and gave her strange looks. Didn't they smell it, Lucy wondered? How can they not smell it? Such an unusual

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fragrance . . . tantalizing . . . weaving its way through the festival, separate and distinct among the millions of other aromas hanging in the thick night air . . .

She didn't go back the way she'd come. Instead she passed bumper cars and a petting zoo, and then she began walking faster, making her way

behind a barn where an auctioneer competed with enthusiastic
bingo
players. She could smell fried chicken and fried pies, popcorn and
cotton candy, and still, still, that heavenly fragrance, wafting just
out of reach . . .

She turned a corner and walked faster. Past country singers on
makeshift
stages. Games of darts. Tables of homemade pickles and jams.
The smell
was getting stronger now-she could feel that it was close. As she
broke
into a run, she suddenly spotted a big orange tent ahead of her,
with a
huge display of scarecrows around it.

Scarecrows . . .

She could see the whimsical sign over the

entrance-PIN THE NOSE ON THE SCARECROW-

and the boisterous line of kids waiting to take their turns. Isn't this
where Angela's supposed to be working?

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Mumbling apologies, Lucy pushed her way to the front. It didn't
make
sense, but the fragrance actually seemed stronger here, more
tangible
than any other place she'd been so far, almost as though she could
reach
out and touch it and hold it in her hand. If only she could find
Angela,

she was sure her cousin would confirm it-how could anyone forget that
curious aroma once they'd breathed it in?

"Hey, get to the end of the line!" A solemn-faced girl stopped her at
the door, holding up one hand while trying to blindfold two
squirring
kids with the other. "Aren't you a little old for this game?"

Lucy hurriedly identified herself. "Sorry, I'm Angela's cousin-
Angela
Foster? Do you know where she is?"

"I thought you looked familiar-you were in some of my classes
today."

The girl nodded, though her expression didn't change. "Angela's
having a
smoke."

"I really need to find her."

"Go around back. I just saw her talking to some guy out there a
second ago."

What a surprise. "Thanks."

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Lucy didn't waste any time. As she slipped around the side of the
tent,
she saw that it backed up to a fence, with just a narrow grassy
space
between. Thick woods pressed so closely from the other side that
some of

the trees hung over, their branches practically sweeping the ground. In spite of the festivities going on in front, it felt weirdly isolated here, shadowy and claustrophobic.

"Angela?"

Turning the corner, Lucy stopped. The light was dim at best . . . yet she thought she saw the glimmer of a cigarette at the opposite end of the tent.

"Angela? It's me . . . Lucy."

Without warning, something soft slid over her forehead . . . covered her eyes. With a startled cry, Lucy reached up and felt something like cloth-felt it being tied snugly at the back of her head-and realized it was a blindfold.

"Angela, cut it out! This isn't funny!"

"Did you come to play?" the voice whispered. Lucy stiffened. She could feel someone now, a

body standing close behind her, someone tall,

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someone strong, pressed lightly against her back.

Someone who wasn't Angela.

"This isn't funny," she managed to choke out. Kids playing pranks!

Friends of Angela maybe-or just a case of mistaken identity-that's it!

They think I'm someone else-they must think I'm Angela

"I'm not Angela," she said, more forcefully this time. "You've got the wrong girl."

"On the contrary . . ." the voice murmured, "I've got exactly the girl I want."

Her body turned to ice. Her mind fought for calm. There were people only yards away, yet she was alone. She could scream, but she doubted anyone would hear her over the noise of the fair. Should she scream anyway? Try to run? She could feel his body, the lean, firm length of it, touching hers, yet not forcefully, not threateningly, she realized with slow surprise.

He wasn't even holding her.

He was only holding the blindfold at the back of her head, and as Lucy's heart hammered wildly in her chest, she tried to keep her voice even.

"I think you've made a mistake," she said. "I'm not from here, and I don't know anyone. I'm just trying to find my cousin."

"But you haven't. It seems you've found me instead."

Again her mind raced. Had she heard that voice before? Did she recognize it-anything about it? He was talking so softly, as though his lips barely moved . . . a low whisper from deep in his throat ... warm and resonant . . . thick and smooth as . . . what?

Lucy's breath caught.

His hand slid leisurely down the back of her neck . . . lingered upon her left shoulder. Every instinct told her to break away-to tear off the blindfold and run-yet her body felt strangely paralyzed.

"Where's Angela?" she demanded. Her voice had begun to quiver, and she knew he could hear it, though she tried to disguise it with anger. "They said she was out here with someone-you must have seen her!"

Something brushed gently across her mouth. "You're bleeding," he murmured.

She'd forgotten the cut on her upper lip, but

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now she felt it swell . . . felt the tender skin split open. A warm

drop
of blood seeped out and began to trickle down.

Lips closed over hers.

A kiss so tender that time faded and stopped . . . so passionate, it
sucked her breath away.

Lucy's senses reeled. Searing heat swept through her-pain and
pleasure
throbbing through her veins. With a helpless moan, she leaned into
him
and realized with a shock the kiss had ended.

At last she ripped the blindfold from her eyes.

The scent that had lured her here hung heavy in the night, though
its
fragile sweetness now held a trace of something more . . .
something
musky and faintly metallic . . .

Trembling violently, Lucy stared into the shadows.

But she was alone.

And she was cold.

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It can't be ten-thirty.

As Lucy paused outside the scarecrow tent, she shook her wrist,
tapped
her watch, then held it to her ear and listened. Yes, it seemed to be

working fine . . .

But there's no way it can be ten-thirty already!

"It's ten-thirty," the serious-faced girl said again. She was still trying to blindfold kids and maintain order at the same time, and as she frowned at Lucy, she added, "Did you have an accident or something?"

"Accident?" Lucy echoed. "No-what do you mean?"

"You're white as a sheet. And your lip's all swollen."

Lucy put a hand to her mouth and immediately winced. The skin on her lip felt pulpy and

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tender; she could feel a thin crust of dried blood.

"Are you sure Angela's not here?" she asked weakly.

"I told you, she left at ten-thirty. She said she had to meet her cousin-you-at the car." "Right. Thanks anyway."

Her knees had turned to rubber. She wasn't sure she could walk three feet, much less the entire distance back to the parking lot. Her insides wouldn't stop shaking; she felt strangely disoriented. She'd stepped right into a dangerous situation with her eyes wide open, and she'd simply stayed in the middle of it, simply allowed the rest to

happen.

What in God's name is wrong with me?

She was probably lucky to be alive. The stranger-whoever he was-
could
have done a hundred horrible things to her-and what did I do? I
stood
there and let him-I let him . . .

Shame and confusion flushed through her. She could still feel his
hand
on her neck . . . on her shoulder . . . his body touching hers. And
his
kiss. That unexpected moment, senses reeling, his low whispery
voice,

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intimate somehow, almost as though he knew her . . .

Her memory groped back-searching, searching. Trying to recall
someone-anyone he might have been. The guys from the cemetery
last
night? Had they followed her here, intent on more jokes? It
seemed
highly unlikely, given the disciplinary meeting tonight. Some guy
at
school she didn't know? Byron? Byron had a low, deep voice, but
Byron
had seemed agitated when she'd seen him earlier, he'd been tense
and
upset, and why follow her and frighten her when he'd already
asked her
to meet him secretly tomorrow?

And what about the smell?

Just thinking of that brought a fresh wave of panic. Because there was no explanation for it . . . none she could possibly think of . . . none that made any sort of sense. Before, she'd been almost willing to consider the air-freshener theory, but now . . .

As Lucy wandered out of the exit gates, she wished she had someone to leave with. The Festival was still in full swing, and only a handful of people were straggling toward the parking

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lot. Within minutes they'd located their cars, leaving her to walk the rest of the way alone.

The lights grew dim behind her. The noise began to fade. Out here in the field it was eerily quiet.

Now where exactly did we park?

Lucy stopped, cursing herself for her horrible sense of direction. It had gotten her in major trouble last night; she wasn't about to let it happen again. She glanced around, trying to find some sort of landmark, but all she could see was row after row of cars.

Why hadn't she thought of that earlier? Picked out a checkpoint to help her find her way back?

Frustrated, Lucy went on, trying to dodge puddles and sinkholes in the dark. Maybe Angela was in the car waiting for her-hadn't that girl at the tent said she'd already left?

"Angela!" Lucy called. "Angela! Are you out here?"

No answer. Just her own voice drifting back to her on the chilly breeze.

Lucy tried to walk faster. Why hadn't anyone thought to put temporary lighting out here? Why hadn't she thought to bring a flashlight?

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Why hadn't she and Angela agreed to meet somewhere inside the Festival where it was bright and crowded and safe? God, it's really, really spooky out here . . .

She dug her hands in her pockets and felt the keyless entry to Angela's car. Of course!

Pulling it out, Lucy immediately hit a button. She could hear the blip of a horn in the distance, and she thought she saw the faraway flicker of headlights. Well, at least I'm headed in the right direction.

With the help of the mechanism, she finally spotted the Corvette, still

about ten rows away, right on the end near the woods. The ground was even soggier out here, forcing her to walk close to the treeline. As she tramped her way through the weeds, she suddenly lifted her head to listen . . .

What was that?

She was sure she'd heard a sound just then . . . a faint scuffling off through those trees to her right. As though some animal were moving invisibly through the darkness . . .

A deer. Just like last night when I thought I saw something, just a deer in the woods. That's all it is.

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Lucy stopped.

The noise stopped, too.

Very slowly she turned her head, eyes probing the bare, shifting branches of the trees . . . the deep, black underbelly of the forest . . .

Or maybe it's a bear-bears live close to lakes, don't they? Or a wolf? Or

She broke into a run.

Because suddenly she didn't want to think what else it could be,

this
invisible presence keeping pace alongside her, skulking through
the dark
where she couldn't see.

It was last night's horror all over again.

With a burst of speed Lucy veered off between the cars, away
from the
woods, punching the entry over and over again, so the horn of the
Corvette kept blasting and the headlights kept flashing on and off-
on
and off-

God-oh God-help me

But it was behind her now-she could hear it thudding over the
ground,
gaining on her-coming closer-closer-

"Damnit, Lucy!" Angela yelled. "Wait up!"

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With a cry, Lucy whirled around, just as her cousin closed the
distance
between them.

"Angela, you idiot! You scared the life out of me!"

"I did?" Braking to a stop, Angela tried to catch her breath.
"You're
the one running away-I thought something was after you!"

"Well, I thought something was, too!" Lucy

exploded. "Were you in the woods just now?" "What would I be doing in the woods?" "I heard something in the woods."

"Oh, for God's sake-there's, like, about a million things you could've heard in the woods!" Angela gestured angrily toward the trees. "And where the hell have you been? I waited and waited by the car, but you never came. And you have the damn keys!"

Lucy thought quickly. There was no way she was going to mention what had happened back there at the tent. Not now . . . not ever.

"Sorry-I guess I lost track of time."

"I guess you did. Come on, let's get outta here."

Nodding, Lucy followed her to the car and got in, but not without a last anxious look at the

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woods. Had something really been there, following her? During the last few days, she'd lost so much faith in her instincts, she didn't know what to believe anymore.

She locked the doors and windows, but even after leaving the parking lot, Lucy still couldn't relax. The narrow, winding road was even

harder

to maneuver now that full night had fallen, and it took all her concentration to miss the endless potholes. Even Angela seemed edgier

than usual, Lucy observed, watching the girl light up one cigarette after another, then mash them out half-smoked.

"Are you okay?" Lucy finally asked her.

Angela pointed to the clock on the dashboard. "I just want to get home

before Irene does, that's all. Thank God she's going out of town tomorrow night, so I can have some peace. Lucy-hurry!"

"I'm hurrying."

"Well, hurry faster."

Glancing at her, Lucy sighed. "With all these stupid holes around here,

if I hurry any faster, we're likely to bounce right off and-"

"Look out!"

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As Lucy's eyes shot back to the road, she saw a quick streak of darkness

in front of them. Jerking the wheel, she swerved the car sharply to the

right, then slammed on the brakes as they slid dangerously along the

shoulder. Angela gaped at her in alarm.

"Did you see that?"

"I saw something. But what was it?"

The Corvette had stopped now, and the two of them peered nervously out into the darkness. There was nothing on the road. Nothing moving in the beam of the headlights, nothing stirring at the sides of the car.

"We didn't hit anything, did we?" Angela finally asked.

"I don't think so. I didn't feel any sort of impact, did you?"

Angela shook her head. "It looked big. I mean, I only saw it for a second, but it was big."

"A deer, maybe?"

"No. It didn't seem like a deer. And it was so fast-just there and gone.

I mean, what could move so fast that you can't even see it?"

"I don't know," Lucy answered uneasily. She

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made a quick check in the rearview mirror. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I just hope my car is."

For my sake, I hope so, too. But the minute Lucy hit the accelerator, she heard the furious spinning of the tires. "Oh, great," she muttered.

"Oh, great, what?"

"We're stuck."

"Stuck?" Angela seemed incredulous. "How can we be stuck?"

"Because there's about a foot of mud out there, and we drove right into it."

"No, you drove right into it." Shifting around, Angela unlocked her door. "If you've scratched anything out-"

"Stop," Lucy said. "Don't open it."

As Angela turned toward her in bewilderment, Lucy reached out slowly . . .
. . . put a hand on her arm.

"Lock your door," she whispered. "Now."

Even in the dim interior, she saw Angela go pale. She waited for the click of the lock, then leaned slowly toward the windshield.

"What is it?" Angela asked tightly.

"I saw something."

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"Are you sure? Where?"

Lucy pointed. The car had skidded at a forty-five-degree angle, its headlights slicing off through the trees at the side of the road. As

Lucy watched the illuminated pocket of woods, she felt a chill
creep up
her spine.

"Something's out there, Angela. It's watching us . . . don't you feel it?"

The girl's eyes widened slowly. Then she gave a forced laugh.

"Come on,
Lucy, you don't really expect me to fall for that, do you?"

But Lucy's tone was dead serious. "Do you have your phone with you?"

"Well, sure, but-"

"Call 911."

"Stop it. This isn't funny, and I don't believe you anyway."

"Well, you better believe me, because I'm telling you, there's something
out there. And . . ."

As Lucy's sentence trailed off, Angela threw a quick, wary glance
out

her window. "Look. You're just shook up because of what
happened. But

I'm telling you, that thing was moving fast! Whatever it was, it's
long
gone by now-"

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"Give me your phone," Lucy said tersely.

Before Angela could stop her, she grabbed the girl's purse and started rummaging through it, but Angela quickly snatched it back.

"What are you doing?" Angela snapped at her. "That's mine!"

"Your phone, Angela-your phone!" Lucy's voice was louder now, thin with rising panic. "Hurry up! Call 911! Do it, Angela, call for help!"

But she could see now that it was finally sinking in, Angela's eyes the size of saucers, her hands digging through her purse, tossing things out, searching for her cell phone. "This is sick, Lucy, do you hear me? This is sick!"

"It's coming closer! Make the call!"

Lucy's heart was racing. She could feel something out there-something furtive-something evil-a sense of danger so intense that every nerve vibrated with terror. It was standing just out of sight, standing just beyond the trees, one with the woods, one with the darkness, and it was waiting to strike . . . waiting to see what they would do . . .

"Oh, God," Lucy whispered, "Oh my God-"

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"What is it!" Angela shouted, thoroughly frightened now. She

dumped her
purse upside down, the contents spilling everywhere, shaking it
back and
forth, helplessly close to tears. "I can't find it! I can't find my
phone!"

"It's too late!" Lucy cried.

Something hit the side of the car. As both girls screamed, the
Corvette
rocked from the impact, and there was a frantic clawing at
Angela's door.

"Get down!" Lucy yelled, even as she grabbed the girl and forced
her to
the floor.

"What is it?" Angela shrieked. "I can't see anything!"

Once more something lunged at the side. As the car swayed and
slid, they
heard a scratching at the door handle, as though something were
trying
to wrench it open. Terrified, Angela huddled beneath the
dashboard,
while Lucy whirled around just in time to see a dark shape dart
behind
the car. Oh, God, it's coming to my side! She leaned on the horn,
the
harsh sound splitting through the night, and then she gunned the
motor.

The tires spun in the muck. Without even

thinking, Lucy shifted forward, then back, forward, then back-tires whining, horn blasting, Angela screaming

The car lurched free.

Without warning, it popped from the mud and skidded sideways onto the road. Clutching the wheel for dear life, Lucy floored the accelerator, not stopping, not even slowing down till they'd reached the main highway once again.

"Stop it, Angela," she said then, quietly. "We're safe now."

"Safe?" The girl was practically hysterical. "Safe? How do you know we're safe? What was that thing?"

Lucy shook her head and said nothing.

"Then how do you know it didn't follow us? How do you know it's not sitting up there on the roof right now? Or-or-riding back there in the trunk?"

"Because it's not." Lucy's lips pressed into a tight line. "It's not. I just know."

As they paused at a stop sign, she shifted in her seat and took a long, deliberate look through every single window,

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How do I know? she wondered. How do I really know?

There were houses around them now, and quiet, tree-lined streets.

And the peaceful silence of neighborhoods settled in for the night.

But Angela was crying.

And Lucy's heart was still beating wildly in her chest.

1. How did I know that thing was out there to begin with?

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It was a miracle they got home before Irene.

The girls pulled into the garage with just minutes to spare, leaving no time to examine the car or discuss what had happened back there on that dark country road. Not that Angela would have wanted to anyway, Lucy figured-which was perfectly fine with her. Trying to rationalize it

to
herself was hard enough.

She stood in the shower, trembling beneath the hard spray of the water.

Still badly shaken from the attack on the car . . . still badly frightened from her encounter with the stranger behind the tent.

Only
frightened? Again she berated herself for being so careless, for putting
herself in such a dangerous situation . . . yet at the same time she could still hear that

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low, whispery voice . . . feel the gentle urgency of that kiss . . .

How could cold, stark fear be so alluring at the same time? She was
furious with herself for even considering such a notion. What's
wrong
with me?

She turned the water as hot as she could stand it, washing her hair,
her
face, her lips, every inch of her body, as though she might be able
to
wash away every memory, every horror, every single event that
had
touched her in the last two days. All she wanted to do was crawl
into
bed and have a peaceful night of dreamless, uninterrupted sleep.
So it
surprised her when she heard a soft knock on her bedroom door
about an

hour later and saw Angela peek in.

"We need to talk," Angela said.

Lucy nodded and motioned her inside. She'd been sitting up, too, unable to relax; now she scooted over so Angela could plop down beside her. The girl's dark raccoon eyes had been wiped off for the night, her long hair braided down her back. She was wearing a polka-dot flannel nightshirt and looked almost normal.

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"I can't stop thinking about what happened," Angela blurted out. Her expression seemed strained and almost embarrassed. Her hands twisted nervously in her lap. "What do you think that was? I mean . . . really?"

"I don't know. I've been thinking about it, too . . . and I honestly don't know."

"Well, it must have been a wolf," Angela announced flatly.

"Are there wolves around here?"

"Well . . . usually farther north, but sometimes they leave their territory, right? I mean, like if they're hungry, or certain areas get too populated, I've heard of animals doing that."

Lucy wanted to believe her. "It's possible, I guess."

"But . . . it could have been a bear, too, maybe," Angela mused. "I was thinking maybe it was wounded. When an animal's wounded, it makes them kind of crazy, and then they attack things they wouldn't normally attack, right? I mean, haven't you heard that?"

Lucy nodded. "It makes sense."

"So if something was hurt . . . and hungry . . . and smelled us in the car . . ."

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Angela paused, her eyes almost pleading. "It could've happened that way. Right?"

"Sure. Sure it could."

"Great." Angela let out a huge sigh of relief. "And it's probably not a good idea to tell anyone else about it, do you think? Just so we don't cause a panic or something. And especially Irene. Because of her worrying, I mean."

"Absolutely. Our secret."

Another relieved sigh. Angela stretched her willowy limbs, then hopped off the bed. "Great. Good night, then."

"Good night."

Mildly amazed, Lucy watched her go. How did Angela do it, she wondered?

How could she make something go away so easily-or not even exist at

all-just by refusing to accept it?

But isn't that what you're doing?

"No," Lucy mumbled to herself. "That's different."

Is it?

And in that very instant, razor-sharp images began strobing through her

mind-images of Byron at the cemetery, Byron at the Festival, Byron

trying to talk to her, to warn her about

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something: "I want to help you . . . some things take time to believe in

. . . we don't have a lot of time . . . something happened . . .

something important . . . touched you . . . was passed on to you . . .

you need to understand . . ." As Lucy pressed her hands to her head, it

was as if she could suddenly feel all those crazy puzzle pieces tumbling

through her mind . . . falling into place . . . beginning to make a frightening kind of sense.

Could it possibly be true? Could there honestly be a connection between

Byron's warnings and the bizarre events that had begun to darken her life?

"

. . . no reason in the world to trust me . . . have to meet me tomorrow
. . ."

"You're right," Lucy mumbled again. "I don't have the slightest reason to trust you."

"Did you say something?" Angela asked.

Lucy jumped and stared at the door. Angela was back again, propped in the threshold, smoking a cigarette and frowning at her.

"I didn't say anything," Lucy muttered.

Her cousin shrugged. "You'll need to get my car washed in the morning."

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"I will?"

"Well . . . yeah. Irene didn't see it tonight 'cause someone picked her up and she didn't go in the garage. But tomorrow she'll probably be using her car-and if she sees the shape my car's in, she's bound to know we were out tonight."

"But what about the damage? How are you going to explain all those scratches?"

"Vandalism happens in the school parking lot, Lucy." Angela gazed down at the floor, her expression bland. "It happens all the time. So just take it to the car wash, okay?"

"And who was your servant this time last year?"

Angela rolled her eyes. "Very funny. Just do it?"

"No, I won't do it. If she sees your dirty car, too bad." Grumpily, Lucy stacked up her pillows and fell back on top of them. "And you can stop giving me all these excuses about Irene worrying-I heard you two this morning, and I know you're grounded."

Angela stared. A flush went over her face, though from anger or embarrassment, Lucy couldn't tell. She hesitated a moment, as if trying to decide what to do. Then with a sound of exasperation, she tossed her cigarette into

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the toilet, walked back to the bed, and flounced down on the edge.

"If you knew, then why'd you take me tonight?" she demanded.

"Because I thought it would help things between us. I wanted us to be friends."

"That's stupid. How could we ever be friends?"

"My point exactly. Which is why I'm not going to get your car washed tomorrow."

"If Irene finds out I left tonight, she'll cancel my credit cards!"

Lucy shrugged. She reached over and flipped off the lamp. Angela flipped it back on.

"Fine!" Angela pouted. "Look, if I tell you something really important and really secret about someone I met tonight, then will you wash my car?"

Lucy stared at her. Really important? Really secret? What could be more important than being stalked, than girls in graves, than hungry predators on lonely roads? What could be more secret than strangers with blindfolds, and painful visions, and disembodied voices in bathrooms?

She'd had enough. She switched off the light.

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Angela switched it back on.

"Okay," Angela sighed. "I'll be your friend. Are you satisfied?"

"Angela, you don't know the meaning of the word."

The girl looked blank. "Friend? Or satisfied?" "Neither one. Now get out of here and let me go to sleep."

This time when she reached for the lamp, Angela grabbed her arm. "I'll tell her you took my car. I'll tell her you stole my keys, and I didn't know anything about it. And if you deny it, I'll tell her you're lying . . . that you . . . that you . . . sneaked out to meet somebody!"

Lucy gave a humorless laugh. "Yeah, that's a good one, Angela, I'm sure she'll believe that. And while you're at it, be sure to tell her about the wild orgy I had out there behind the tents."

It slipped out before she even thought.

She saw Angela's eyes go wide, her face go red, saw her cheeks flinch as she drew in her breath.

"You bitch," she muttered. "You were spying on me!"

"What? Angela, no-I wasn't!"

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Shocked at her cousin's reaction, Lucy tried to take her arm, but Angela was already halfway across the room.

"I was joking!" Lucy insisted. "I was joking about myself-I don't even know what you're talking about!"

"The hell you don't," Angela said furiously. "How long did you stand there watching, anyway? And it wasn't an orgy!"

"I wasn't watching anything! I was just making fun of myself!"

She saw Angela turn toward her then, a range of emotions flickering over the girl's face-indecision, guilt, embarrassment and the horrible realization that she'd just given herself away.

"Well . . . well . . . me, too!" she announced, with a forced little laugh. "I was just joking, too. I just wanted to see what you'd say."

Lucy stared at her as though she'd lost her mind. "Okay," she offered tentatively. "So we're even, right?"

"Right." The laugh again, almost brittle. "Okay, then. Great jokes. Good night." "Good night." Lucy paused, then, "Angela?"

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"What?"

"How late does Irene sleep on Saturdays?" "Till around ten. Why?"

"I'll get your car washed. But I want to leave early, just in case she gets up."

"Like, how early?"

"Like, before nine."

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It was no problem slipping out of the house the next morning.

Everyone else was still asleep, and since Angela had already given her the keys and explicit directions to the car wash, Lucy was away in no time at all.

The car wash hadn't opened yet. Checking her watch, she saw that it was only eight-thirty, so she made a quick run through a fast-food drive-through, then sat in the parking lot, trying to digest both her food and her thoughts.

This is really stupid. Byron probably won't even be there. And if I do go, and it really is another joke, I'll never be able to show my face anywhere in Pine Ridge again.

But obviously he'd gotten there before her.

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As Lucy drove slowly past the church, she noticed an old Jeep pulled alongside the curb in front, but not a soul to be seen. Strange that

Byron would park here in plain sight, she found herself thinking. Especially since he'd made this meeting sound so secret and so mysterious . . .

Still, this was an abandoned church, and it was in an abandoned area-not like there's going to be anyone around here watching us or wondering what we're up to. Besides, seeing his Jeep out here in the open made her feel a whole lot safer.

Lucy parked, then made her way slowly up the crumbled walkway. The church had looked so spooky that night of the storm, and here in the daylight, it didn't look a whole lot better. Like the original section of the cemetery stretching off behind it, tall weeds had taken over, and shadows lurked beneath the gnarled branches of giant old trees. The steps to the door were rotted. The belltower didn't look at all sturdy. Several stained-glass windows were broken, and dead ivy crept over the walls.

It was very still. No breeze this morning, and frostily cold. Lucy's breath hung in the air as she

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glanced nervously back at her car. She'd parked close for a quick getaway. She told herself to go inside, then stopped with her hand on

the door. You're doing it again-walking right into an isolated,
unknown
place-have you completely lost your mind?

When girls in movies did this, they always got killed, she
reminded
herself. But this wasn't a movie, this was real life-my life!-and she
needed answers, and right now it seemed that Byron was her only
chance
at getting those answers.

She saw then that one of the large wooden doors was slightly
open. That
there were muddy footprints on the steps, leading inside.

Very slowly Lucy inched open the door. "Hello? Is anyone here?"

The silence was unnerving. Again she glanced back over her
shoulder, but
nothing moved within those calm, black shadows.

"Byron?" she called softly. "Hello?"

Lucy strained her ears through the quiet. Had the door creaked
then,
just ever so slightly? As though someone might be pushing it from
the
other side?

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Instinctively she released it and stepped back. "Hello?"

Why wasn't he watching for her, why wasn't he out here waiting to
see if

she showed up? It had been his idea, after all-if he'd wanted her here so badly, why wasn't he coming out to meet her?

But it was very cold, she reasoned, and it made perfect sense that he'd probably go inside to wait. And these doors, made of such thick solid oak, surely muffled any sounds from outside. Don't be so paranoid . . .

Angela knows him . . . apparently all the girls at school are in love with him . . . it's not like he's some total creep that nobody's ever heard of . . .

Still, Lucy suddenly wished she'd told somebody where she was headed this morning. Just in case.

Okay . . . here goes.

She took a deep breath and yanked hard at the door. As it moved on rusty hinges, a low groan echoed back through the vast interior of the church.

She smelled dampness and old stone. Cold, stale air, long unbreathed, long undisturbed.

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Shivering, Lucy stood there a moment, her eyes trying to adjust to the gloom. As the door swung shut with a dull thud, she moved farther

into
the vestibule.

"Byron?"

The church was still sadly, hauntingly beautiful. In the muted stained-glass light, Lucy could see saints gazing down at her from niches along the walls, their painted faces filled with loving concern.

Wooden pews stood empty, sifted with dust, and high in the rafters of the arched ceiling, doves fluttered gently as she passed beneath them.

Lucy walked slowly up the center aisle. She could see the main altar ahead of her, draped with a dingy white cloth, decorated with arrangements of long-dead flowers.

Despite the eeriness of the place, Lucy felt strangely fascinated. She

stopped before the altar, trailing her fingers over the musty cloth, over faded droplets of candle wax, over brittle chrysanthemum petals.

Even her heart seemed to echo in here; she could hear the faint beat of her pulse.

God, it's so cold . . .

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Blowing on her hands, Lucy turned in a slow circle and glanced uneasily at her surroundings. Was it her imagination, or had the temperature

dropped about ten degrees just since she'd walked through the door? You are imagining things. Yet as she blew once more on her hands, she could see her breath forming, a soft vapory cloud right in front of her face.

"Byron?"

Her own voice whispered back to her from the shadows.

The doves stirred restlessly with a muffled beating of wings.

"Come on, Byron, if you have something to say, you'd better say it-now!"

This is stupid. He's not here, and he's obviously not going to show up, and all you're doing is creeping yourself out.

With growing anxiety, Lucy gnawed on a fingernail. Not again . . . not again! What did you expect, anyway? Haven't you learned your lesson by now?

But she'd wanted this time to be different-she'd wanted so much to believe that Byron could help her. She'd wanted to prove to herself

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once and for all that it wasn't just her, that there were reasons and answers and explanations for the things that were happening, that she wasn't just making up dreams in her mind--

Something's here.

Lucy gasped as a sliver of dread snaked its way up her back and lodged at the base of her neck. Something's here!

Instantly her eyes swept over the walls and ceiling, the massive wooden cross above the altar, the partially shattered glass of the crucifixion behind it, the confessionals in the darkened aisles along the side . . .

The confessionals . . .

A soft sound slithered through the church. A

sound like . . . what? A sigh of wind? A flurry of feathers? Or . . .

Breathing.

Lucy's body stiffened, every nerve electrified. No, it can't be . . . there's no one here . . . no

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one . . . no one . . .

Yet she could feel herself moving across the cold stone floor, moving steadily toward the confessionals, almost as though something were drawing her forward, some force against her will.

She tried to stop, but she couldn't. Tried to resist, but the pull seemed only to grow stronger.

She stopped outside one of the doors.

Byron?

She tried to whisper, but the words stuck soundlessly in her throat. She could see the door cracked open, barely an inch, but she couldn't see what was inside. And yes-yes!- there was the sound again . . . like the faintest breath, the most feeble attempt at a sigh.

Steeling herself, Lucy jerked open the door.

The space was cramped and narrow, murky with shadows, and as she stepped tentatively across the threshold, she could see the small priest's window to the left, the bit of screen and gauzy curtain concealing it from the other side, the kneeler beneath it on the floor.

The compartment stank of mildew; it was covered thickly in dust.

No sins had been confessed here for a long, long time.

See? Nothing. Just your imagination.

Almost weak with relief, Lucy turned to walk out.

And saw the door slowly creak shut.

Startled, she stared at it a moment, then gave it a push. The door didn't move. She pushed harder, then leaned into it with her shoulder.

It wouldn't so much as budge.

That's strange . . . She couldn't remember seeing a latch on the outside of the door, and it hadn't stuck when she'd yanked it open. Trying not to panic, Lucy tried it again, harder this time, then harder still, but the door refused to give. Dust swirled into the air, choking her, irritating her eyes. She yelled and pounded on the walls. The space seemed to be growing smaller, the dust thicker, the high walls closing in-Oh God-let me out of here!

The thought briefly shot through her mind that no one would find her, maybe not for days and days, maybe not ever-she'd simply die here in the dark, in this tiny dark space, trapped in an upright coffin.

"Byron!" Lucy screamed. There was a car parked outside, for God's sake, somebody must be around! "Please! Please, somebody, I'm stuck in here-let me out!"

"Have you come to seek God's forgiveness, my child?" the voice murmured.

Lucy went cold. Her fists froze upon the door, her mouth gaped in a silent scream.

Her eyes turned fearfully to the wall . . .

She could see the priest's window, only now it was open. The curtain had been pulled back, and beyond the small screen was the dim outline of a face.

A face . . . yet somehow . . . and even more terrifyingly . . . not a face.

"Who are you?" Lucy choked out. Her back was against the door now, her knees so shaky she could hardly stand. It took every ounce of willpower to focus on that window and the featureless profile beyond. "Who are you?"

"Your salvation."

And she knew the voice, and he seemed to be all around her now, in the air, in the dust, in the echo of her heartbeat, in the thoughts inside her head, in the ice flowing through her veins . . .

"You were at the Festival," she realized. "Behind the tent, you were the one-"

"Meant to save you," he whispered. "No more sorrow . . . no more pain. Reprieve from the lifetime of loneliness that awaits you.

Redemption
from yourself."

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"Please-"

"I know how lost you've been without your mother."

Tears filled Lucy's eyes . . . trickled slowly down her cheeks.

"Why?

Why are you doing this?"

"It's no longer a matter of why. It's a matter of when. Of how."

"I don't understand. I don't know you . . . I haven't done anything
to

you. Why won't you just leave me alone?"

"But you have done something to me. We have a connection, you
and I."

The voice sounded mildly amused. "So let me ask you again . . .
have you
come to seek God's forgiveness?"

"Forgiveness for what?" she cried desperately. "For the places
your
heart will take you . . . where your soul cannot go."

Without warning the door came open.

As Lucy stumbled out into the aisle, she grabbed the door of the
priest's compartment and flung it open.

But the darkness inside was empty.

And the dust not even disturbed.

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Lucy stood there, unable to move.

Like a distant observer, she watched herself staring into the confessional, felt her slow-motion shock and disbelief-yet at the same time, felt oddly detached from reality. As she wheeled around to run, a tall figure suddenly materialized from the shadows behind her, sending her back with a scream.

"Hey, sorry!" he laughed. "Didn't mean to scare you! Guess I should've yelled or something, right?"

Before she could even react, the young man stepped closer, right into a narrow beam of light angling down from an overhead window. He had a friendly, boyish, dirt-streaked face and an equally friendly smile. Mid-twenties, probably-broad, solid shoulders . . . slender

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build . . . thighs and arms leanly muscled beneath skintight jeans and the pushed-up sleeves of a grimy sweatshirt. His eyes were deep blue, fringed with long dark lashes. His thick brown hair, though dusted with

cobwebs, still showed a few golden streaks of fading summer sun. He was slightly out of breath and carrying a large cardboard box, which he immediately wrestled down to the floor.

Lucy gazed at him with open-and hostile-suspicion.

The young man merely grinned. "Is there something I can help you with?"

Lucy's gaze hardened. The stranger seemed oblivious.

"Matt," he said, reaching toward her. "Oh, wait. Sorry." He swiped his hand across the back of his jeans, then offered it again. "Matt. Well . . . Father Matt, actually. Well . . . Father Matthew, really. But you can call me Matt."

Lucy was dumbfounded. "You're . . . a priest?"

"Hmmm . . ." He glanced around in mock concern. "Should I apologize?"
And then, as she

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continued to stare at him, he added, "Hey, it's okay. I'm out of uniform. And you are-?"

Lucy said nothing. Matt gave a solemn nod.

"Speechless," he said.

"Lucy," she finally whispered.

"Nice to meet you, Lucy. But I hope you weren't planning on confessing anything today, because as you can see, we're slightly out of service at the moment. Have been, actually, for years."

Lucy's eyes narrowed. Was this guy for real? Was he telling the truth?

She tried to concentrate on his voice . . . what would that voice sound like, low and deep and whispering?

"Listen, are you okay?" Matt's smile seemed genuinely concerned.

"Would you like to sit down?"

"Where were you just now?" Lucy murmured. She saw his smile falter, but only for a second. "Sorry?"

"Just now. Where were you?" Her voice was trembling from aftershock; she fought to keep it steady. She watched his glance flicker toward the confessionals . . . the altar . . . the empty pews behind him.

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"Just now?" This time he gestured vaguely with one arm. "Going through some closets in back. Sorry, I didn't know you were here-otherwise I'd have been a lot more hospitable."

"You didn't hear me yelling?"

"Yelling?" Matt frowned. Then, as though a thought had just occurred to him, he pulled some headphones from the box and dangled them in front of her. "I've been lost in Mozart. Just pulled these off when I saw you standing here. What were you yelling about?"

"I was . . ." Lucy's mind raced. "I was yelling . . . to see . . . if anyone was here."

Matt's smile widened. "Well, now you know."

He must be telling the truth . . . he wouldn't have had time to run from the confessional and grab that big box from somewhere and come back without me seeing him or hearing him or

"Is it my face?" Matt asked, deadpan. "Or are you having a religious experience?"

Lucy snapped back to attention. "What?"

"You're staring at me like I have horns growing out of my head or something."

Flustered, Lucy looked away. "Are you alone here?"

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A one?"

I

"Is there someone else here with you?" Matt's eyes made a quick survey of the church. "Not that I know of. Why?" "Nothing . . . I . . . I just thought I heard something, that's all."

"Now you're making me nervous," he teased, though once more his eyes swept the room. "It was probably just me rummaging around back there. There's a major echo in this old place, and-"

"No. No, it . . . it wasn't like that. It was a voice."

"A voice? Well, what did it sound like?"

Lucy shook her head. He seemed sincere, but how could she know for sure? And if he really

was who he said he was, then how could she

explain something so totally unbelievable? For an instant she dug deep into her memory, trying to recall the exact sound, the exact tone of that voice in the confessional . . . that voice at the fair. It could be Matt's voice disguised . . . just like it could be anybody's voice disguised.

Or maybe it wasn't disguised at all . . .

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Lucy wrapped her arms about herself, suppressing a shudder. "I must have

imagined it. I thought I heard someone."

This time Matt turned and took a good hard look toward the entrance.

"Well, I didn't lock the door behind me this morning. So I guess it's possible someone could've sneaked in. Kind of like you did."

This seemed to amuse him, especially when a slow flush crept over Lucy's cheeks. Quickly she stammered out an explanation.

"I was . . . supposed to be meeting someone." "Ah. A clandestine rendezvous. How intriguing."

Flushing hotter, she mumbled, "It's not what you think."

"No? And how do you know what I think?" Matt's eyes sparkled with humor, and he ran one hand back through his hair. "Maybe it was this friend of yours you heard. Maybe he really did show up, but he thought you weren't here."

And maybe I was a total fool for believing what Byron said and for coming here to meet him. "I don't think so."

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"Well, maybe it was burglars," Matt said practically. "And when they realized there wasn't anything to steal, they got disappointed and left."

Lucy was ready to change the subject. "What happened to this place, anyway?"

"Don't you know?"

"I'm not from here. I just came a few weeks ago, to live with my aunt."

"I see." Matt leaned back against the wall, crossing his long legs, folding his arms casually

across his chest. For a second Lucy thought he was going to ask her some personal questions, but instead he said, "All I know is that a bigger, fancier church was built in the center of

r

town, and that's when this place became . . . shall we say . . . a sort of ecclesiastical warehouse."

"So you must remember when this place was really beautiful."

Matt shook his head. "Actually, no-I'm not from Pine Ridge either. And in theory, I'm only supposed to be here temporarily."

"In theory?"

"Well, that's what Monsignor's telling Father

Paul at the moment. That I'm only here till he gets back on his feet."

"Who's Father Paul?"

"The priest at the real church," Matt explained. "He's old-no, let me rephrase that-he's ancient. And very set in his ways. He's been refusing to take on an assistant for years, but I guess you could say he finally got a dose of Divine Intervention."

"How's that?"

Matt chuckled. "He fell down a flight of stairs." Then, at Lucy's look of alarm, "No, no, he's fine-but now that he's got a broken leg, it's forced him to slow down and listen to reason."

"And how does he feel about you being here?"

Again Matt laughed. "Let's put it this way. Since he's been here for about a hundred years and has a very particular way of doing things, I obviously am a complete and total moron. And just trying to wade through his particular way of doing things is probably going to take me the rest of my natural life."

Pausing, he gave Lucy a helpless look

"If he doesn't kill me before then. Like right now, I'm supposed to

be
looking for some

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statues he swears are stored down here in one of the cellars. But I can't seem to find the right doors-or the right keys."

He looked so distressed that Lucy couldn't help smiling. But as she caught a sudden movement from the corner of her eye, she gasped and spun toward it.

"Hey, easy," Matt soothed her, "it's just one of the cats."

"Cats?"

"Yeah, there're a bunch of them in here-the cleaning lady's always bringing them in. Just call it environment-friendly rodent control."

As Lucy nodded uncertainly, he frowned and lifted a hand to her forehead.

"You know, Lucy, maybe it's just this bad light, but you sure don't look like you feel very well. Why don't you sit down, and I'll get you some water."

His touch was firm, but gentle. His fingertips skimmed lightly over her skin and carefully brushed a strand of hair from her eyes. With no warning, Lucy felt a strange, slow warmth pulse softly at her temples .

. . flow like liquid to the back of her brain . . .

1

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Flowing ... flowing . . . blood flowing . . . a dark red pool of blood
on . . . on . . . a floor and something-something-sharp !-cutting!-
pain
and blood and anger-

"You hurt yourself," Lucy said. She stepped back and saw a look
of
dismay on Matt's face. "You hurt yourself, and it was very painful,
and
you bled for a long time."

The throbbing in her head was gone now, but her body felt shaky
and
drained. She watched as Matt frowned at her, as he lowered his
hand. As
he stared at the long, narrow cut on his palm and cautiously flexed
his
fingers.

"Well, yeah, but it's okay now," he assured her. "I mean, it
happened a
few days ago . . . it's not infected or anything, if that's what you're
worried about."

Lucy took another step back, her emotions whirling. He thinks I
saw it,
she realized, only I didn't see it, not the way he thinks-not with
my
eyes, but somewhere inside my head-and not exactly what

happened-just
those flashes again-flashes and feelings and colors and

"-broken glass," Matt was saying, as she tried to quiet her mind,
focus
in, act normally. "From

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one of those windows . . . it sliced right through me. It hurt like
hell."

"I'm . . . I'm sorry." Flustered, Lucy pointed to the front of the
church. "I'm feeling better now. I need to go."

But she could tell Matt wasn't convinced, even as she began
walking away
from him.

"What about your friend?" he asked her. "Is he supposed to pick
you up?"

Lucy shook her head.

"Well, how are you getting home?"

"I have a car."

Look," Matt said kindly, "I'd be more than happy to drive you.
Someone
can come back later for your car."

"No. I'm fine, really. But thanks."

She was almost outside when he stopped her. She heard him call

her name,
and she turned to see him running after her, waving something in
his hand.

"Lucy," he said again, catching up with her at the door. "I think
you
must've dropped this."

Lucy stared down at the thing he was holding. And felt her eyes
widen in
alarm.

L.

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"I don't know anything about it," she said quickly. Too quickly?
Because
she could see the way he was looking at her now, that quizzical
expression on his face, as though he knew she was lying, as
though he
knew and was waiting for her to confess . . .

She backed away, trying to put distance between them. "Sorry. It's
not
mine."

"Oh, that's too bad." Matt shrugged. "I found it on the floor near
the
altar. I just assumed it must be yours."

He gazed down at the necklace he was holding.

A single strand of tiny green beads.

"No," Lucy said again breathlessly, "no, it's not mine."

"Well, I guess I'll just leave it, then. Just in case whoever lost it comes back."

"Yeah. Maybe."

She hurried down the walkway, and she didn't once look back.

But if she had, she would have seen him still standing there . . . watching . . .

Watching her . . . even as he slipped the necklace casually into his pocket.

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Lucy couldn't get into the car fast enough.

She locked the doors and fumbled the key into the ignition, turning it, pumping the accelerator, but the engine only coughed uselessly.

"Damn !"

Leaning forward, she rested her head on the steering wheel and alternately struggled to catch her breath and not give in to tears.

So Byron had been at the church. He must have been; otherwise, how would the necklace have ended up there? Yet she couldn't imagine him leaving it behind. Even from her brief encounters with Byron, it was obvious the necklace was important to him, that it tied in somehow to that girl

in
the cemetery. And Lucy had definitely experienced something
when

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she'd handled it yesterday-and Byron had definitely known.

What if something's happened to him?

A million thoughts ran through her mind. Could he have left it as a message to her? A warning? Or could it even have been some sort of trap?

But a trap for what?

Like so many other things these last few days, it didn't make any sense to her, didn't fit into any concept of logic or reality.

Lucy groaned and lifted her head. As she reached out again for the key, she suddenly saw a movement in the rearview mirror. With a shocked cry, she spun around just as Byron clamped a hand down on her shoulder.

"Ssh . . . it's just me," he said tightly. "Look, I really need your help."

Furiously, Lucy flung his hand away, then fixed him with a glare.

"What the hell do you think you're doing!" she shouted. "You nearly gave me a heart attack!"

"Then lock your doors next time." He frowned back at her. "Are you listening to me? The necklace is gone."

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"Hat?"

Byron's jaw stiffened. "It was gone when I got home last night."

"After the Festival?"

At Byron's nod, Lucy gave him a puzzled look. "But I just saw it."

"What do you mean you just saw it?" "In there. Matt has it."

"Who?"

"Matt . . . uh . . . Father Matt," Lucy stammered.

"Who's that?"

"The priest. The new priest at the church." "What new priest?"

Lucy bristled. "How should I know? Father Paul's new assistant-he's here helping out because Father Paul broke his leg."

"So that's who was in there," Byron muttered. "Well, did you get it from him?"

"No, I didn't get it from him. It's not my necklace. Why would I get it from him?"

Facing forward again, she redirected her glare to his reflection.
She
saw him rub a hand across his forehead; she saw the visible strain
upon
his face.

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"Are you sure it was the same necklace?" He sounded almost
accusing.

"That just doesn't make sense."

"He said he found it on the floor."

"But that's impossible, I didn't even have it when I was in the
church."

Lucy couldn't keep the sarcasm from her voice. "And speaking of
that-why
exactly weren't you in there? If you were supposed to be meeting
me?"

"Because I heard someone come in. Because I didn't know who it
was, and
I wasn't sure it was safe."

"Well, you were right. It wasn't safe. But, hey, it wasn't you being
scared to death, so why were you even worried about it?"

"What do you mean?" His glance was sharp. "What happened?"

"I don't know what happened!" Lucy could hear herself getting
louder,
could hear the edge of hysteria in her voice, but couldn't seem to

stop
herself. "I don't know why I even came here today! I don't know
why I'm
even speaking to you! Get out of my car!"

"Drive," he said.

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"What?"

"Just drive. I'll tell you where."

"No, I'll tell you where! Nowhere! I'm not moving one inch till
you get
out of this car." "I'm not getting out until we talk." She felt his

hand on her shoulder again. His voice softened, tired. "Please.
You have
to listen to me. You're the only one I can talk to."

Lucy lowered her head. She chewed anxiously on her thumbnail,
then shot
him another look in the mirror.

"I can't go. The car won't start."

Byron stared at her a long moment. Then a faint smile played at
the
corners of his mouth.

"You flooded the engine, that's all. Try it again."

This time when she tried to start it, the car sprang to life.
Grumbling

under her breath, Lucy headed off down the street.

"So what happened in the church?" Byron asked again. He'd scooted closer to her now, leaning in between the bucket seats, and Lucy could feel the faint pressure of his arm against hers.

"If I tell you," she answered wryly, "you won't believe me."

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"I doubt that. Turn here."

"Where are we going?"

"Someplace private."

Lucy cast him a sidelong glance. "I can't believe I'm doing this. Why should I even trust you?"

"Because you have to trust somebody. Because I'm guessing your life's suddenly been turned upside down."

Lucy tried to keep her expression blank, tried to ignore her shiver of apprehension. "I'm not sure that's an answer."

"Okay. Then for the same reason I have to trust you," Byron replied flatly. "We're the only ones who know about the cemetery. The only ones who know that something happened."

Lucy gave a terse nod. "So you're telling me that what I saw wasn't the fraternity prank I heard about. That what I saw was-"

"Real. Yes."

"So that girl . . ."

"Was murdered."

"But . . . by who?"

"That's why we have to get the necklace back. So you can tell us!"

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"So I can tell us? Tell us what?"

"Who killed her."

"Oh, now, wait a minute-"

"Hey, watch the road," Byron warned, as the car veered sharply into the wrong lane. "I'll tell you everything when we get to where we're going. Even the stuff you won't want to hear."

Lucy gripped harder on the steering wheel. "And how do I know you didn't kill her?"

She hadn't known she was going to say it; the words burst out before she

could stop them. She felt his steady gaze upon her, and her
I heartbeat quickened in her chest.

"Just drive," he said tersely.

Yet with a start, Lucy realized how very sad he sounded.

Following his directions, she drove several miles outside of town,
then
turned off onto an isolated road that followed the curve of the
lake.

After another half hour, they finally pulled up to a cabin nestled
among
tall green pines, with a breathtaking view of the water.

"This is so beautiful," Lucy murmured. "Is it yours?"

"No. Somebody's summer home."

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"Somebody's?"

"It's locked up now for the winter, but I have the key."

"And how did you manage that?"

Byron turned and glanced out the back windshield. With a twinge
of
uneasiness, Lucy wondered if he was afraid they'd been followed.

"Just park the car," he told her. "Over there behind those trees."

It wasn't until they were inside-door securely locked and bolted-

that

Byron seemed to relax a little. The cabin was very cold, and as Lucy stood rubbing her hands together, Byron went into the adjoining room, returned with a quilt, then motioned her into a rocking chair beside the fireplace.

Lucy sat. "Will you please just tell me what's going on?"

"Do you promise to believe me?"

"Probably not."

She thought a reluctant smile might have tugged at his mouth. He tossed her the quilt, then waited while she snuggled beneath it.

This is insane, Lucy thought. This is completely insane. With everything else that's happened to me, I

194can't believe I'm sitting here in a cabin in the woods with some stranger who's asking me to trust him. If he murders me right now in this rocking chair, then I guess I deserve it.

As Byron leaned down over her, her breath caught in her throat. His stare held her for an endless moment and then he slowly straightened.

"You still don't trust me. I see it in your eyes."

Lucy didn't miss a beat. "I don't believe you can see anything in my eyes. When I first saw you in the cemetery, you knew my mother had died, that I was alone. But you go to school with Angela-anyone could have known that."

"You're right. Anyone could've known, because Angela told everyone you were coming. Except . . ."

"Except what?"

Byron stepped closer. "Except I didn't know what you looked like. I'd never seen any pictures of you . . . never heard any descriptions. And I didn't know when you came to the cemetery that morning, that you were Angela's cousin."

Again that tiny shiver of apprehension; again cy tried to ignore it. "So . . . what are you

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trying to prove? That you have some sort of supernatural power? That you can know things about people just by staring at them?"

She wanted to laugh, to make light of it, but she suddenly realized that Byron had taken her hand, her right hand, that he was lifting it

toward
him and placing it over his heart.

"What do you feel?" he murmured.

And without warning, a whole range of emotions surged through
her-warmth
... gentleness ... fear ... pain ... sorrow-all in a split-second
rush that made her numb, that made her dizzy-anger ... loss ...
love

With a cry, Lucy jerked her hand from his grasp and cradled it
against
her chest, staring at him with wide, shocked eyes.

"You've been given a gift," Byron said solemnly. "And your life
will
never be the same."

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Chapter 20

"Do you think this is easy for me either? Having to say all these
things
to you-somebody I just met? And knowing how crazy it all
sounds? And
knowing-understanding, even-that the last thing in the world you
want to
do is believe me?"

Byron stopped ... shook his head. There was bitterness in his
tone.

"And why would you believe me? I mean, why would anyone

believe any of
this?"

Lucy couldn't do anything but stare. She watched as he crossed to the other side of the room, as he began pacing, slowly, back and forth between the fireplace and the door.

"That night at the cemetery," Byron's voice was low. "Try to think, Lucy. Try to remember."

But still Lucy sat there, paralyzed.

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"Remember when I told you that something had been passed on?" Byron asked her.

At last she managed a nod.

"This gift you have . . . I think it was passed on to you from the girl who died. I suspected it . . . but I wasn't really positive till you picked up the necklace in class yesterday."

As if from a distance, Lucy heard herself ask, "I don't understand. Not about any gift . . . not about the necklace-"

"It was her necklace. She never took it off. So I know the only possible reason she did was to leave a clue behind. To try and tell me who killed

her. To tell you who killed her."

"No. No . . . wait a minute. This is too much, this is-"

"True." Byron paused and shot her a level glance. "It's true, and no matter how much you want to forget about it, you can't. You have a responsibility now. You have-"

"A responsibility to who?" Lucy's voice went shrill with anger. "I don't have any responsibility to anybody-not to you-not to-"

"She had powers," Byron insisted. "She had powers nobody understood-and most people

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didn't believe in. And she used them for good, and she used them to help others when she could. But at the same time, she suffered for them her whole life. And now-now she's given them to you."

Lucy's lips parted soundlessly. For a second, Byron seemed to recede into some black void, then reappear again at the side of her chair.

"She could sense things," he said urgently. "See things that had already happened-sometimes even things that hadn't happened yet. By touching. Do you understand?"

Lucy shook her head. She wished he would stop talking, would leave, would just go away, but he knelt on the floor in front of her, where she couldn't ignore him.

"It didn't happen every single time-that's not the way it worked. But when it did happen, it was very powerful. She could never anticipate when the visions might come-sometimes they came from a person, sometimes from an object, just some little thing you'd never even think about."

Again Lucy shook her head. "So these visions she'd have . . . what were they, exactly?"

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He stared at a spot beyond her, deep in thought, choosing his words carefully. "When she tried to describe it to me, she always said there weren't complete pictures. More like . . . like quick images or feelings. Sometimes colors or smells or sounds. She said it was like all her five senses had been peeled open, and raw, and they just kept absorbing all these impulses, with nothing to protect them."

His focus shifted back to her. Lucy saw his face through a fine mist and

realized that tears had filled her eyes.

"Oh my God," she whispered. "Yes ... it is like that . . ."

"You mean . . . , like when you held the necklace?"

Without answering, she began to rock . . . a slow, gentle rhythm of self-comfort.

"Why'd you go there that night?" Byron asked quietly.

Lucy shut her eyes . . . tried to will the pain away.

"Please tell me, Lucy."

And so she did . . . recounting every moment from the time she'd left
the house till Angela

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picked her up and took her back to Irene's. She told him everything,
still feeling as though this were all some strange, distorted
nightmare
... still wishing she'd wake up, safe and warm in her mother's
home.

Still wondering why she was taking a chance with this mysterious
young
man she didn't know . . . why she was here trusting him and
believing
him, and in some painful way, feeling so grateful for his
company . . .

And when she'd finally told her story, she realized that he'd taken

her
hand . . . spread her fingers wide apart ... was gazing down at the
tiny
crescent scar upon her palm.

"She had a scar just like this," he said, not meeting Lucy's eyes.
"In
the same spot ... on the same hand."

"It hurt," Lucy acknowledged numbly. "When she grabbed me . . .
the pain
I felt was unbearable-not like anything I'd ever felt before."

Nodding slightly, Byron placed her hand on the arm of the rocking
chair.

"I was supposed to meet her that night. She'd been away, and I
hadn't
seen her in nearly a year. Then I got this

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message from her-just out of the blue. Something important, she
said.

She told me to come alone, she'd be waiting at the old church. I
could
tell from her note that she was really scared. Only . . . she never
showed up."

"So . . . I just happened to be walking past there at the same time?"

"I think the person following you that night was me.

Byron rocked back on his heels, his expression thoughtful. "I'd
just
gotten to the church when I saw you running away. And it was

storming so
bad, I couldn't really see anything. For a minute I thought it might
be
her, so I went after you-but then you turned under the streetlight.
And
when I realized it wasn't her, I went back."

"And that's when I ran into the cemetery. Because I thought you
were
stalking me."

"I should have known it was something bad." Byron's eyes were as
hard as
his voice. "When she didn't show up on time, I should have left
right
away-I should have looked for her then. But I just kept thinking
maybe
it was the storm, she was having trouble getting there, but that

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she'd be there, just five more minutes, she'd be there . . .

He paused. Drew a sharp breath.

"I don't think I wanted to believe it. Even when I got in my van
and
started driving around, looking for her. I didn't want to believe
something had happened to her. And that's when I saw you again."

"Me?"

"You were coming out of the cemetery, and you ran across the
street to
use the phone. And you looked terrified."

Lucy's heart gave a sickening lurch. How easily those feelings of terror returned, just from talking, just from remembering. She watched as Byron stood up and walked to the window. He propped his hands upon the sill and leaned forward, his shoulders stiff with tension.

"I knew," he mumbled. "I mean, there you were, scared and muddy and soaking wet-and suddenly I just knew. I knew it had something to do with her."

For several long moments there was quiet between them. Only the patient creak of the

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rocking chair upon the wooden floor. The muted songs of birds outside the windows. Until at last Byron spoke again.

"I tried to get over to you . . . to see if you needed help. But by the time I got the van turned around, you were gone. So I went back to the cemetery. And I looked for her." Byron's head lowered. "I never found her."

Lucy stopped rocking. She stared at his back with a puzzled frown. "But when I saw you the next morning-the things you said-how could you have

known those things if you never found her? If you weren't actually there?"

"Because she told me."

"She . . ." Lucy sat straight in her chair. The quilt slid down to her waist, and she impatiently pushed it aside. "What do you mean, she told you-what are you saying?"

"In a dream that night. She told me in a dream."

He turned around to face her. As Lucy held

his steady gaze, she slowly shook her head. "You know something, Byron . . . you're

asking me to believe a lot."

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"Haven't you ever had a dream so real, you knew it was more than a dream?"

"Yes, but . . ." Lucy's voice trailed off. Until that moment she'd almost forgotten her own dream of two nights ago . . . her mother at the window, sounding so sad . . .

"But what?" Byron persisted.

"I did have one like that," Lucy murmured. "That night, after I got home from the cemetery. My mother came back to me. It was like . . .

like she
was trying to warn me about something."

"What'd she say?"

Lucy's voice faltered. "She said . . . that I was going to a place
where
. . . where she couldn't help me."

Byron gave an almost imperceptible nod. His eyes shone even
darker.

"So your mother shows up with a warning. On the very night a
dying girl
touches you and leaves this scar on your hand. Doesn't that seem a
little more than coincidence?"

"Oh God . "

"When I finally went to sleep that night," Byron said tightly, "I
dreamed she was in a

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grave. I saw the storm. I saw her covered in blood . . . and I saw
her
reaching out."

"But . . . you didn't see who killed her?"

"No. She was talking to me . . . she wanted me to know that she
was
gone. And that she hadn't been alone when she died. She told me I
should
go to the cemetery the next morning and wait for someone. And

then she
said, 'Help her . . . now you must help the one who helped me.'

Lucy didn't know how to respond. As Byron fell silent, his sorrow seemed
to fill the room, yet at the same time she sensed his own defenses
struggling to pull it back.

"So . . . what you're saying," she stammered, "is that I have
these . .
. these powers now. And I'm going to start having visions . . .
and . . .
and feeling things I don't want to feel just because I touch
something?"

But when Byron didn't answer, Lucy's tone grew almost pleading.
"Are you
absolutely sure? Are you positive it was her? I mean . . . maybe
she
didn't even show up that night. Maybe she was never here in town.
Maybe
it was just some girl you didn't know, who just happened to be in
the
wrong place at the wrong time-"

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"Lucy, stop," he said tightly.

"But it could have been, right? I mean, it could have been a
mistake and
maybe she's still alive somewhere, maybe she-"

"She's not alive."

"Then where's her body? Where's the grave? If she's really dead, you would have found her-you would have found something-"

"Lucy, stop!" His voice struck out at her, cold and final. "There are just some things you know, because every part of you feels it, because you have a bond with somebody that's special and unique. And she and I had that kind of bond. So . . . no. No. It wasn't a mistake."

He raked a hand back through his hair. His face twisted in pain.

"She's dead, Lucy. She's dead."

Lucy's heart ached at the sight of him. "You really loved her, didn't you?" she whispered.

A muscle clenched in his jaw. He turned stiffly back to the window. "Yes."

"So . . . she was your girlfriend?"

"No. Katherine was my sister."

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"Your sister?" Lucy echoed. "The one who-" She broke off, flustered, as he shot her a cold glance over his shoulder.

"Was crazy?" he finished sarcastically.

"I was going to say . . . the one who went away."

"Well, you have been in Pine Ridge awhile. Time enough to have heard all the gruesome stories about my family, I'm sure."

"I'm sorry." Lucy's cheeks reddened. "I haven't heard that much."

"It doesn't matter. Actually, it's not so bad, being part of the local folklore. People tend to leave you alone."

"Is that what you want? To be left alone?"

He leaned back against the wall, folding his arms across his chest, fixing her with

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another intense stare. "I guess that depends on who it is."

Lucy dropped her eyes. She heard him move to the fireplace and sit down upon the hearth.

"Are you sure you want to hear the rest of it?" he asked pointedly.

"Can it get any worse?" She gave him a wan smile, and he almost-but not quite-returned it.

"These . . . powers ... forces . . . psychic abilities . . . whatever you want to call them," he began tentatively, "they run in our family.

At least that's what my grandmother says. When I was little, I thought

she was magic. Sometimes she could tell us things before they actually happened."

"What kinds of things?"

"Well . . . like when a certain neighbor was going to knock on our door-and then they would. Or who'd be on the other end of the phone before she even picked it up. Just simple things like that. She could tell you where to find things you'd lost . . . or that a storm was coming when there wasn't a cloud in the sky. And I never thought it was strange. It was normal to me."

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Intrigued, Lucy leaned forward. "So all of you had psychic talents?"

"It was always so obvious with Katherine. From the time we were little, she was already having visions and seeing things nobody else could see. It was just a part of who she was. But mine was different. I was older the first time it happened. Probably around ten or so. And a woman-someone I'd never met before-had come to see my grandmother, and I remember she was so sad."

He hesitated, as though reluctant to venture too far into the past.

"I remember she was sitting at our kitchen table, waiting for Gran to come downstairs. And I sat down across from her, and suddenly she just looked at me. Looked me full in the face, and her eyes were so big and so desperately unhappy."

Byron's voice lowered. A poignant blend of sorrow and awe.

"I stared right back at her. Right back into her eyes. Deep, deep into that terrible sadness. And I said, 'I'm sorry about your little girl; I'm sorry she drowned.' And I remember she tried

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to smile at me, but she couldn't smile-all she could do was cry-and I felt so bad for her."

Again he paused. Then he met Lucy's gaze with a level one of his own.

"There was no way I could have known about her or her daughter; she didn't even live around there. Gran told me later that I'd had a glimpse of her soul."

"Eyes," Lucy murmured. "Eyes are supposed to be windows to the soul."

"Some people say so," he agreed. "I couldn't explain it then, and I

don't even try anymore. But if that's true-about windows to the soul-then the daughter she'd lost was the most important feeling in her soul that day. And I had a glimpse of it."

"Is it like"-Lucy struggled for words-"looking beyond pain? Or seeing something that's even deeper than grief?"

His shoulders moved in a shrug. "It's nothing like Katherine could do-nothing that clear or sharp. No smells or sounds or things like that.

It's like . . . looking through a veil. There's fog . . . mist . . . no definite features or details. Yet somehow I'm able to pull something out of it."

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"Like . . . through a curtain . . . or a screen?" "Sort of, yeah. Lucy? What is it?"

But as the memory of the confessional flashed through her mind, Lucy hurriedly shook her head. Not now. Not yet. This isn't the right time . . .

"Nothing," she assured him. "Tell me more about Katherine. About this gift of hers."

"A gift sometimes. But also a curse."

The edge was back in his voice, and Lucy felt a prickle of apprehension

as he continued with the explanation.

"As she got older, she didn't want to use it anymore, because it scared her too much. She'd get nervous and embarrassed because she never knew when the visions would hit her-how strong they'd be, or how frightening-and most people didn't understand. Most people didn't even try to. All they knew was that she was different, and that sometimes she acted strange. And so some people laughed at her, and some made fun of her. And others were just plain scared."

Byron pressed both hands to his forehead . . . gently massaged his temples.

"But of course, she couldn't just not use it

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anymore-that was impossible. It's not like switch she could just turn on and off whenever she wanted. It was part of her; part of who she was. So it got to where she wouldn't even leave the house. Gran and I were the only ones she trusted; home was the only place she felt safe?

Lucy frowned, taking everything in. "But ii that's true," she asked carefully, "then why did she end up leaving?"

She saw him tense . . . saw the briefest flicker of indecision over his

face. She sat up straighter in her chair as her voice grew suspicious.

"There's something else," she accused him. "Something you're not telling me."

Byron stood up from the hearth. He pulled her from the rocking chair, then turned and strode purposefully to the door.

"Come with me," he said. "And I'll tell you the rest of the story."

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It was a relief to get out.

Despite the coziness of the cabin, Lucy was beginning to feel claustrophobic. As if every new revelation of Byron's cast a dark, uneasy shadow over her heart and her mind.

The crisp, cold air felt wonderful. As they walked together toward the lake, the pungent fragrance of pines swirled through her head, almost making her forget, almost sweeping the doubts and fears away.

"It's so beautiful out here," Lucy murmured. She followed him to the shore, to the wooden dock stretching out over the water. A boat was tied at the end, bobbing peacefully upon the barely rippled surface, and with one smooth movement, Byron helped her down into the bow and slipped the

rope free.

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Here I go again, Lucy thought ruefully, watching the dock glide farther and farther from view-getting myself into another dangerous situation.

And yet, out here in this pristine wilderness, surrounded by such stillness,

w

atching Byron rhythmically work the oars, she felt a sense of peace that she hadn't felt for days.

"Don't ruin it," she said suddenly, and felt her cheeks flush as Byron gave her a curious look. "What?"

"The mood. The minute."

He cocked his head . . . lifted an eyebrow. A playful wind tugged at his hair, streaming it back from his face. "I'll just keep rowing, then."

"So much has happened," she tried to explain, her words tumbling out in a rush. "Too much-too much to comprehend and understand and try to believe. And from what you're telling me-and maybe from what you're going to be telling me-things might be getting worse."

He didn't answer, but still, she could see the seriousness in his eyes.

"So just give me this one minute, okay? To breathe? And be away from everything that's

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bad? And see the world in a way that makes some sense to me."

Lucy's voice caught. She turned from him abruptly and fixed her gaze on the distant shoreline . . . on the woods and the hills and the endless blue sky above. For a long time there was only the sound of the oars dipping water . . . the music of the birds . . . the soft sigh of pine-rich breezes. Lucy shut her eyes and pretended wishes came true, and she wished this could last forever.

But wishes never come true. At least not mine. At least not the good ones.

As she felt the boat jar, her eyes came open. A second later the dinghy was scraping up onto a narrow stretch of beach, and Byron was out of the boat, anchoring it securely between a small shelter of trees.

"Grab those blankets under your seat," he said, reaching for her hand.

"We'll go this way-I think you'll like the scenery."

"What is this? Some kind of island?"

"No, just another side of the lake. We could have driven-there's a road off that way about half a mile-but I think the boat ride's much nicer."

"How do you know about these places?" Lucy asked, as he pulled her up a steep rise and on to a stretch of level ground.

"I grew up here, remember? And I take care of a lot of these cabins off-season. And in the summer I do some maintenance work."

"What kind of maintenance work?"

"Handyman stuff, mostly."

"So that's how you had that key."

"I have all the keys."

Taking the blankets, he led her along the beach for another five minutes, then suddenly veered off again toward the shore. After maneuvering several more rocky slopes, Lucy found herself in a small, wooded cove with a breathtaking view of the lake.

"You're right, it is beautiful," she said appreciatively, gazing out across the shimmering expanse of water.

"And private." Byron shook out a blanket and spread it over the ground.

"Sit down . . . wrap this other one around you. It's pretty cold out here."

Lucy did so. She watched as he sat beside her, his eyes narrowed intently on the opposite

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horizon. She hugged her legs to her chest and rested her chin on her knees.

"Do you believe in evil?" Byron asked.

Lucy turned to him in surprise. Somehow, surrounded by all this peaceful beauty, his question seemed almost laughable . . . and far more than ominous.

"Evil?"

"An evil that can transcend time and space? An evil so obsessive that you can't escape it, no matter how hard you try?"

Her brow creased in a frown. She drew back from him and stared harder.

"You're really serious."

"You told me you thought you were being stalked the other night, when you ran from the church. Do you remember how you felt?"

"Of course I remember. I was terrified."

"Well, that's how Katherine felt all the time . . . like she was being stalked by someone. Except she couldn't outrun him. And she couldn't hide. Because he was in her visions and in her dreams."

"Byron-what are you talking about?"

But he wouldn't look at her, just kept staring

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out across the water, at the play of light and shadow off the woods across the lake.

"They started about three years ago," he said gravely. "When she was sixteen. And they weren't like the other visions she'd had her whole life. These were like the worst kind of nightmares. Nightmares she couldn't wake up from. Nightmares she couldn't escape. Things more horrible than you could ever imagine."

With an unconscious gesture, Lucy pulled the blanket closer around her.

The breeze off the beach had nothing to do with the sudden chill in her veins.

"She said it was like looking at the world through the essence of evil .

. . . as though she were inside his head, thinking out through his thoughts and seeing things through his eyes."

"Sort of"-Lucy was struggling to understand- "like a camera taking pictures?"

"Yes, capturing every gory detail as it happens."

Despite the blanket, Lucy felt even colder. "Did she tell you what these things were?"

"Never. Only that they were inhuman. So violent and hideous, she couldn't bear them

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anymore. Never knowing when they'd come . . . or how long they'd last.

And worst of all, never being able to stop them. Just having to stand by and watch, over and over again."

"So where were these visions coming from?"

"From the mind of a monster. From someone sick and twisted, who enjoyed causing pain and watching his victims suffer."

"My God . . . so you think . . . you think this person was real?"

Byron's expression turned grim. "Katherine did. And she was convinced he'd keep right on killing and brutalizing people, and that he'd never get caught. Because she was the only one who knew about him."

"And she didn't have any idea who he was?"

"None. She never saw his face. Because she was always seeing things from his perspective."

Lucy could feel goose bumps along her arms. Could feel a cold, stealthy uneasiness gnawing at the back of her mind. Determinedly she tried to force it away, tried to concentrate on what Byron was saying.

"-a connection," he continued. "But why? We never knew."

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"You mean, a connection between their minds? Between their thoughts? Like the bond you had with Katherine?"

Byron's face went rigid. "How can you even compare the two? That's-"

"No, I'm sorry, that's not what I meant," she said quickly. "I'm just trying to understand this. So Katherine could see these . . . these atrocities this guy was committing. As he was committing them?"

"Yes. Forced to watch him. But helpless to stop him."

"Then . . . was it someone she knew?" "Impossible."

"Someone she met just one time, maybe? Someone with psychic abilities as exceptional as hers, who was somehow able to lock into her

mind?"

"You mean . . . sort of like a psychic parasite?" "Exactly."

"She hardly left the house. And this is a small community-people tend to know each other around here. I can't think of anybody who fits into an evil mode like this one. And believe me . . . I've tried."

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"But you said she sensed things-saw things-by touching. So maybe she bumped into him in a crowd . . . I mean, he could have just been passing through town, or visiting somebody Here. Maybe he dropped something . . . or ..

or accidentally left something of his behind. And Katherine just happened to pick it up."

Byron sounded weary. "I've thought of that, too. And I guess it is possible . . . except I think she'd only have felt a connection to it when it was in her hands. Just when she touched it. Not on and on for three years."

"But maybe she kept it. Maybe she found something, and took it home with her and didn't realize."

"She'd have realized, Lucy, believe me."

Lucy went silent. She watched as he leaned back on the ground,
propping
himself on his elbows. He stared far out at the opposite bank, and
his
gaze narrowed, hard as steel.

"Katherine was such a gentle person. Probably the only truly good
person
I've ever known in my life. And that's what made it so much
worse. The
way she suffered . . . her fear and her pain . . . There were times
she
really thought

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she was losing her mind. And sometimes I think . . ." His voice
faltered
. . . softened. "I think maybe . . . finally . . . in a way . . ."

A shadow seemed to cross his face. After a moment of uncertain
silence,
Lucy gently touched his shoulder.

"Wasn't there anyone she could talk to? Someone who could help
her?"

"And who would that have been? How do you explain something
like
that-especially in a town like this? Hell, everybody here already
thought she was crazy."

"But maybe someone who has experience in-"

"Ssh!" Jerking upright, Byron grabbed her shoulder. "Did you hear

something?"

Lucy's heart took a dive to her stomach. As she slowly followed the direction of his gaze, she listened hard through the quiet.

Wind sighing through trees . . . water lapping gently at the shore . . .
her own pulse pounding in her ears . . .

"What?" she mouthed silently. "What is it?" But she could feel his grip relaxing now . . . his body easing back down beside her. His hand

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slid away from her arm, though his expression remained wary.

"What?" she asked aloud, but Byron only frowned and turned his attention back to the view.

"Nothing. Just jumpy, I guess."

Lucy glanced nervously over her shoulder. Strange . . . she hadn't really heard anything, yet she could feel a tiny sliver of dread at the back of her neck.

"It's okay," Byron reassured her again. "This is one of my secret places . . . and nobody's around here this time of year anyway."

Lucy wasn't entirely convinced. She picked up a broken twig and nervously began scratching circles in the dirt.

"What about your grandmother?" she asked then. "Does she know about Katherine?"

His mouth twisted in a rueful smile. "There's not much Gran doesn't know. But I haven't told her, if that's what you mean."

"So . . . do you think she believes Katherine's dead?"

Byron fixed her with a calm stare. "When Katherine left home a year ago-that was before

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Gran had her stroke-Gran told me I'd never see Katherine alive again. I didn't want to believe that, of course. I should have known better. Maybe if I'd tried harder to stop Katherine from going . . . or maybe if I'd gone with her, maybe she'd still be alive now. That's why you have to listen to me-maybe we can stop it this time-before you get hurt-"

"Before I get hurt?" Lucy shrank back in dismay. "What do you mean-"

"Because maybe he hasn't realized it yet-" "Byron-"

"-hasn't realized yet who you are-" "Stop it! You're scaring me!"

"You should be scared, Lucy-you need to be scared! It might be

the only
thing that keeps you alive if-

He broke off abruptly, his body tensing, his glance shooting once more toward the trees. As Lucy followed the direction of his focus, she felt that fine prickle of fear again, though now it was creeping down the length of her arms.

Very slowly Byron got to his feet. As Lucy started to follow, he shook his head at her and held a finger to his lips.

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"No," he whispered. "Wait here."

"Where are you going?" Thoroughly alarmed now, Lucy watched him disappear into the woods. She stood there, heart pounding, listening to the faint rustle of branches as Byron moved away from her. But even that sound faded within minutes.

All that remained was silence.

Dangerous silence.

Should she call his name? Ignore what he'd told her and go after him?
Lucy didn't know what to do. With the lake on one side and the woods on

all others, this spot that had seemed so idyllic just five minutes before, now seemed more like a . . .

Trap.

That's it. I'm going.

Lucy started toward the trees, toward the exact spot where Byron had gone in. Surely he couldn't be that far ahead of her-it should be easy to catch up. But what if she got lost? She'd be of no use to him then, and someone had to be able to go for help.

She wished she had a weapon. Quickly her eyes scanned the shore, coming to rest on a

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large branch dangling over the water. With some effort, she managed to wrestle it loose; she could use it as a club if she had to.

"Lucy!"

Lucy froze. She hadn't imagined it, had she? That voice calling through the trees . . . "Byron?" she yelled back.

It had sounded so faint, that call-distant and muffled. Oh God, maybe he really is hurt. Why had he just gone off like that, anyway-what a stupid

thing to do!

Lucy squinted off through the shifting shadows of the forest.
Cupping
her hands around her mouth, she shouted as loud as she could.
"Byron!"

No answer.

I didn't imagine it-I'm sure I didn't imagine it!

Yet at the same time the hairs lifted at the back of her neck, and
her
nerves went taut as wires. Just like I didn't imagine that voice in
the
confessional, that voice behind the tent at the fair ..

She wished now that she'd told Byron about that voice-why hadn't
she
told Byron about it?

"Byron!" she called frantically. "Byron, where are you?"

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The wind blew a long cold breeze in off the lake.

It wrapped around her like a damp caress. "Lucy!" the voice
seemed to
echo, ghostly

through the hills. "Please, Lucy! I need you!" "Oh, God . . . oh
God . .
." She knew then

that something must have happened to
him-something bad-something terrible-and
it was all she could do to hold her panic in
check.

"I'm coming!" Lucy shouted.

And ran headlong into the woods.

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"Byron! Where are you?"

But she hadn't heard him call in several minutes now, and she
knew she'd
be hopelessly lost if she went much farther.

Frightened and frustrated, Lucy stopped and yelled one more time.
"Byron! Please! Answer me!"

Even the breeze seemed to have stopped. Even the trees seemed to
hold
their breath around her.

Maybe he'd been injured so badly that he'd lost consciousness by
now.

Mauled by some animal. Lying broken at the bottom of some
ravine. Slowly
and steadily bleeding to death. Oh God, what should I do? If she
ended
up lost in these dark woods, it wouldn't do either of them any
good.

Instinctively, Lucy turned and raced back to the beach. Had there been a radio in the boat? A cell phone? She didn't remember seeing any, but she hadn't been paying much attention. As she broke through the trees, she suddenly halted in her tracks and stared in shock at the lake.

A small boat was floating some distance from the shore.

An empty boat.

Our boat?

"No!"

Lucy couldn't believe it. A thousand menacing scenarios rushed through her head, muddling into a numbing darkness. Fearfully she spun around and peered off into the forest.

"Byron!"

Her shout echoed back to her, mocking.

She had to think . . . think what to do. Try to find help-but where? She didn't have a clue where to go-and what if Bryon roused again and called for her? Still, he was familiar with this place . . . perhaps even now he was on his way to safety . .

The road!

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Lucy suddenly remembered-hadn't Byron mentioned a road when they'd first gotten out of the boat? A road about half a mile from here?

Praying she could find her way back to the cove, Lucy tried to retrace the route they'd taken earlier. She'd noticed a pathway, a narrow trail leading back from the beach and angling off through the woods. As she finally reached the place where they'd originally docked, Lucy could see the path clearly, and she took it without hesitation.

The trail wound mostly uphill, and though she'd been chilly when she first started out she soon grew sweaty and out of breath. She was thankful she'd worn her sneakers. More than once she was forced to scale fallen logs and sharp boulders that blocked the rugged terrain.

, She wasn't sure when she began to be aware of the quiet. It seemed to slip up on her gradually like shadows stalking through underbrush. 'As she stopped to listen, Lucy realized that the birds had stopped singing, that there wasn't a breath of wind.

The forest filled with an eerie silence.

Just like it felt back there when I was looking for Byron...

Her heart fluttered beneath her jacket. She forced herself to keep walking, to keep her thoughts carefully focused on the emergency at hand. Find help. Find Byron. She couldn't let herself think of anything beyond that. She just hoped he wasn't hurt

"Maybe we can stop it this time-before you get hurt-"

Lucy's eyes widened as his words sprang unexpectedly into her mind. No.
No. I won't think about that; I refuse to think about that .

"Because maybe he hasn't realized it yet-hasn't realized yet who you are-"

And Byron had started to tell her something, something important, had been trying to warn her about something, when the sound had come, when he'd looked so startled and so

wary, when he'd gone into the woods and never come out again .

"You should be scared, Lucy-you need to be scared! It might be the only thing that keeps you alive if-"

Lucy broke into a run.

233

And the silence was so loud, so dangerous, threatening her from every side, silence like shadows, silence like stalkers ..

No-no-it's just my imagination

Silence like evil .. .

No!

Silence like death

Her feet slid off into nothingness; her body hurtled down through an endless black void .. She didn't even have time to scream.

Just fell farther and farther , . down and down . . . into the silence .
..

And finally lay still.

234

She was so beautiful.

Beautiful in this brief spell of sleep . . . lost in her dreamless drifting .. .

Is this what peace looks like? he wondered.

The way she'd looked that night at her window, and the way she'd looked at the Festival . . . her face tilted, smiling, bathed in the glow of

the lights, just so . . .

And now . . . as she lay here on her back, unconscious from falling,
sprawled before him in innocent slumber . . .

He could do anything he wanted to her at this very moment,
anything he
pleased, for she'd be helpless and completely unaware . . .

But time enough for that later.

Right now all he wanted to do was look at her.

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At her hair spread around her head like a halo, her lashes soft
against
her cheeks. Her fingers curled in upon her palms, like flower
petals
unopened, and her arms wide in an empty embrace, half buried
beneath the
leaves that had cushioned her fall.

She was still wearing red.

He loved her even more when she wore red.

It seared into his soul, this brand-new image, like the pink of that
very first night . . . like the blue of the Festival . . . and oh, how
he'd loved the deep bloodred of her panic and terror at the church
just
this morning . . .

He'd carried those sights of her, those smells of her, deep in his

heart
through every single hour since then.

Like a seductive dream, both sleeping and waking.

It was sheer luck that he'd tasted her, as well . . .

He'd picked up the apple she'd dropped at the fair, and she'd never suspected, never stopped to look back, never even realized he was near.

And ah, how it tasted just the way he'd

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imagined . . . the blood from her lip still fresh on the fruit . . . so luscious, so sweet, with its red candy coating.

He'd savored the juice of it inside his mouth, and then he'd lured her
to a dark, hidden place.

She'd caught his scent, and she'd come to him . . .

He loved how she loved the scent of him. The way he always smelled after
he killed. For blood, as he'd come to learn through the
years, was a very personal thing.

It mingled with one's own essence . . . and tempted . . . like expensive
cologne or perfume.

She'd followed him there, and she'd found him there, and when he'd

sucked the blood from her lip, her heart had beat wildly, as
frantically
as his own . . .

And after that-especially after that-he vowed that nothing would
stop
him from having her.

Only . . . not now.

Not now.

Now he would simply watch and admire . . . For this was the
sweetest
torment of all.

237

The ache of her loneliness . . . the pain of her grief . . .

He fed off emotions such as these, they called to him like shining
beacons in pitch-black rooms.

They made him dizzy with longing, and they made him want to
possess her
totally.

Soon, he told himself. Soon . . .

He had to be patient with this one.

Not arouse suspicion . . . gain her trust. That was how these things
were done . . . slow and methodical . . . and he was nothing if not
methodical.

It was a fine art he'd perfected through these many years-that
when he
desired something, he'd do anything to get it.

Say anything . . . be anything . . . no matter how deceitful, no
matter
how ruthless. It was his nature.

And he could wait for however long it took. No need to hurry, he
reminded himself. No need whatsoever to rush.

After all . . . he had eternity on his side.

238

"Lu-cy . . ."

"Mom?" Lucy mumbled.

She always sounded like that when she'd locked herself out of the
apartment, standing down on the street corner, yelling up at Lucy's
bedroom window . . .

"Lu-cy . . ."

It was ridiculous; she was always telling Mom how ridiculous it
was, a
grown woman forgetting her keys all the time, leaving them at
work or at
the grocery store or on the kitchen table: I mean, one of these days
I'm
not going to be here, I won't be here to let you in, and then what
are
you going to do?

"Lucy!"

"Hang on, I'm coming . . . I'm . . ." Cobwebs drifted through her mind,
but they

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were getting thinner now, almost transparent, and there was light coming through . . . "Coming . . ." she murmured.

Lucy sat up so quickly that the world spun around her and the cobwebs burst like bubbles.

She didn't realize at first what had happened.

Not until she shook herself out of the leaves and squinted up at the walls of the ravine and saw a shadowy blur of trees and sky high above her.

I was running just a minute ago . . . how'd I get down here?

She ached all over. Her clothes were twisted around her, and she was covered with dirt. This is starting to feel normal, she thought disgustedly, stretching out her arms and then her legs. At least nothing seemed to be broken or sprained. So far, so good .

Byron!

It all came back to her then-why she was out here in the middle of the

woods, what must have happened. She should have been paying attention, watched where she was going-now what was she going to do? If Byron were still out there somewhere, wounded or even dying,

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she'd never get help back to him in time. Gazing up at the steep incline, she wasn't even sure she could help herself.

"Damnit," Lucy muttered, fighting down panic. "Damnit!" Her body winced with pain as she tried to stand up. She hobbled over to one side of the gorge, then suddenly noticed the outline of a head hanging over the ledge above her.

"Lucy!" Even from down here, she could hear Byron's sigh of relief. "Are you okay?"

"Am I okay?" her voice shot back to him, dangerously close to tears. "Do I look okay? My God, Byron-where have you been?"

"What are you doing down there?"

"Trying to save you!"

He leaned out farther over the edge. Lucy heard the sarcasm in his voice. "And a fine job you're doing, too."

"Get me out of here! You scared me to death!" "I'll be right

down."

Lucy sagged back against the wall of the escarpment, wiping furiously at her eyes. By the time Byron finally worked his way down beside her, her nerves were raw.

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"I thought you were dead!" she exploded. "Where were you? Why didn't you answer me?"

Byron regarded her solemnly. "I could ask you the same question."

"What are you talking about? I'm not the one who was lost!"

"Then who have I been looking for? I heard you calling for help, but I couldn't find you anywhere."

"I'm not the one who called for help-you're the one who called for help!

You're the one who disappeared!" Lucy was trembling now, with anger and relief. "You're the one who went off and left me! I called and called, and the boat floated away!"

Byron's eyes narrowed. "You mean, you didn't take the boat?"

"Why would I do that? It was out in the middle of the lake! Then I tried

to find a road-so I could get someone to look for you! And then-"

"Lucy," he interrupted, taking her shoulders, giving her a gentle shake.

"Lucy, listen to me, I'm telling you the truth. I heard your voice, but

it was so deep in the woods-and you kept

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saying my name, calling for help. You sounded like you were crying, like

you'd been hurt. But I looked and looked, and I couldn't find you.

I've

been searching for three hours!"

Lucy stared back at him, calmer now, but bewildered. "But . . . I heard

you, too-and I thought you were hurt-"

"You heard me? When?"

"Right after you went into the woods! I was so scared and-" She broke

off abruptly at the expression on his face. "What? What is it?"

"I didn't call you, Lucy. I never called you. I was . . ."

"What?"

"I was afraid for you." For a second he seemed almost angry. He clenched

his jaw, and something dark flickered far back in his eyes. "I didn't want anyone to know you were here. So I didn't call you."

Lucy hadn't realized she was trembling again. Taking her arm,
Byron sat
her on the ground and knelt beside her.

"Then who did?" Lucy whispered. "Who did?"

Byron shook his head, his gaze lowered. Then

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finally he said, "I was trying to tell you when I heard something in
the
woods."

"What's going on, Byron? I don't understand."

The lines of his face went hard. "The truth is, I brought you here
to
warn you."

"To . . . warn me? Why? About what?"

"Lucy, the night Katherine left home, she woke me up and told me
she
couldn't stand to see Gran and me hurting for her anymore. And
that she
was going to go wherever she had to, and do whatever she had to,
to
learn the truth

about those evil visions. She swore that no matter what it took,
she'd
put them to rest, once and for all."

"So you think she actually tried to find that evil person who was

connecting to her thoughts?"

"I think she did find him. And I think he killed her."

Lucy watched the carefully controlled rage in his expression . . . the muscle working tightly in his cheek.

"Katherine was wearing that green necklace when she went away. It was a present I'd given

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her years before, and she never took it off. But yesterday morning I found it in the cemetery, so I knew-I knew then for certain-that she was dead. She'd never have taken it off otherwise. Never."

"So you think it came off in the struggle?"

"I think she took it off because of the struggle. To leave a clue behind . . . and a warning."

He paused a second, chewing thoughtfully on his lower lip. Then he turned to Lucy with a grave frown.

"I think Katherine's murderer touched that necklace while she was fighting for her life. And I think she left it there on purpose because he'd touched it, and I think she passed her power on to you, so someone would know who killed her."

Lucy went pale. "So you're saying . . . that when I held the necklace, I was actually seeing her . . . her death?"

Without another word she jumped up and started pacing.

"

"Lucy!

"No, I don't want this-I don't want any part of this-I didn't ask for this-I-"

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"You don't have a choice." Byron was on his feet again, beside her in an instant. "You are part of it now, whether you like it or not. There's nothing you can do but accept it."

"And anyway, when I did hold the necklace, I didn't see anyone!" Lucy babbled, as though she hadn't heard a single word Byron said. "I didn't see the face of any killer! I just felt wind and there were eyes and hands and blood and . . . and . . ."

He reached out for her and held her at arms length, forcing her to look at him. "I told you, sometimes it doesn't happen all at once. The next time you touch it, you might see something else, something more-"

"There won't be a next time! I'm not going to hold that necklace!
I'm
not going to touch anything!" Angrily, Lucy broke free from his
grasp.

"You don't even know if the guy in Katherine's visions and the
guy who
killed her are the same person! You don't even know for sure if the
guy
in her visions was real! I mean, maybe she truly was . . . was . . .
sick, and she couldn't help it. I'm sorry, but it is possible-people
can
be sick-"

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"Like my mother." Byron's tone was frosty. "I'm assuming that's
who you
mean?"

"I . . ." Lucy looked at him helplessly. Everything was wrong,
everything
was falling in on her, the world was falling in on her, and she was
all
alone, and she couldn't get away. "I didn't mean-"

"I want to show you something," Byron said.

Lucy watched him reach into his pocket and pull out a crumpled
piece of
paper, ragged and soiled around the edges, as though it had been
folded
and unfolded, read and reread many times.

"This is the last message I got from Katherine. She asks me to
meet her

at the church. She says she needs to talk to me about something important. And then she ends it with this."

He thrust it out to Lucy. Reluctantly she looked down at the note, where two words had been hastily scrawled at the bottom of the page.

HE LIVES

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A feeling of numbness crept over her.

She handed the paper back.

"I'm going now, Byron. I'm going to climb out of here and find the road and go home. Even if I have to walk all the way back to town."

"

"Lucy-

"No. Don't talk to me. I just want to go."

Somehow she made it up the embankment. As she reached the top, she was surprised to see cuts and scrapes all over her hands, and rips in the knees of her jeans. Dusting herself off as best she could, Lucy started walking. From somewhere behind her, she was vaguely aware that Byron was following. But it wasn't till he yelled after her that she stopped.

"But you can't ignore it, can you? Because things have been

happening to
you, haven't

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they? Other things besides the necklace? Things you can't explain?
And
they're scaring you, aren't they? They're scaring you to death!"

Lucy spun around, enraged. "Leave me alone! You don't know anything!"

"Then tell me! Why don't you tell me? I want to help!"

"How can you help?" Tears brimmed in her eyes and she fought to keep her voice steady. "You couldn't even help Katherine! You couldn't even keep her from dying, could you?"

She saw his face, the anger and grief in his tortured expression.

"Don't you think I know that? Don't you think I've been tormented by that? Do you have any idea how horrible it was, watching her go through that? Watching somebody you love suffer like she did, with no explanations and no help?"

His voice quivered with rage. His dark eyes flashed with helpless frustration.

"And the same thing will happen to you. You'll try to warn people, but

they won't believe you. You'll try to save people, but you'll fail.
You'll see tragedies that you won't be able

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to prevent, and you'll feel every single human grief and suffering
and

sorrow like a knife thrust deep in your heart. I saw what it did to
her.

Day by day, and tragedy by tragedy, it wore her down, it poisoned
her

mind. I know in my heart she was happy to die in the end . . . she
was

glad to be free from that gift of hers."

Lucy stood there, unable to move, watching the anguish pour out
of him.

It was like watching a dam break in slow motion, and then, finally,
wondering how it had ever held up for so long.

"Oh, God, Byron," Lucy whispered. "I'm so sorry."

She moved toward him at last. She reached out and gently touched
his

cheek, and for a brief moment, the walls remained down and
unguarded.

"All right," she murmured. "I'll tell you everything."

With almost numb detachment, Lucy recounted every strange and
frightening event of the past few days. They sat together on a low
outcrop of rocks, facing each other while she admitted her doubts
to

him, questioned her

reasoning and wild imagination, allowed for the possibility of coincidence.

Byron listened attentively . . . but it wasn't until she'd finished that he finally allowed himself to comment.

"You can't really believe you imagined all that." His tone was slightly incredulous. "You can't believe those are coincidences. And especially after what just happened now in the woods."

Lucy let out a weary sigh. "I don't know what I think anymore."

For an endless moment silence settled between them. Then Byron said quietly, "Katherine warned you not to tell anyone, didn't she? Because your life could be in danger."

"Yes." Reluctantly Lucy nodded. "So . . . why? Because she was afraid he'd kill me, too?"

"What did he say in the confessional? When you asked him who he was?"

She shuddered, merely thinking about it. "He told me he was my salvation."

Byron looked thoughtful. He ran his fingers slowly along his chin. "You said he wasn't there

when you found Katherine. He may not ever realize yet that she passed her powers on to you, In fact . . . he might not even know you were there at all."

"If that's true, then why is he suddenly se interested in me?"

"I'm not sure. But I think if we can figure out what his connection was to Katherine, that might help us figure out what his connection is to you."

Lucy's shoulders sagged. Lowering her head, she covered her face with her hands and groaned. "And what if we don't? What if we never do?"

"He could have been here today," Byron speculated, dodging her question.

"Tricking us into getting separated. Untying the boat. Hoping you'd be alone . . ."

"So what you're telling me is, he could be anywhere. He could be anyone.

Watching me. All the time."

"That's why we have to go back and get the necklace. I think we need to start there. It'll give us a clue to who killed Katherine. And why."

"I just hope it's still there at the church," Lucy said glumly.

"You said some priest had it?"

She nodded. "Matt. Father Matt."

"And what'd he do with it?"

"He just said he was going to put it back where he found it-by the altar. In case whoever dropped it came back for it. But if you want to talk to him, I think he's going to be there all day, going through storage closets and stuff."

Byron hesitated. "I don't think we should go back till he leaves."

"Why not? Why would he think anything about it?"

"You're the one who heard voices in the confessional. You tell me."

Then, at Lucy's distressed look, he said quickly, "Look, I just think the less people who know about any of this, the better. Doesn't that make sense?"

"You're right," she agreed. "And by the way, how did you get into the church this morning, if Father Matt wasn't there yet?"

Byron raised an eyebrow. "Gran used to be the cleaning lady at the church. I have a key."

"So you weren't lying. You do have all the keys. To just about everything."

She thought he almost smiled at that. He stood and pulled her to her feet.

"Do you really think the necklace is going to help me?" As Lucy gazed up into his face, her eyes were almost pleading.

Byron stared down at her, a faint frown creasing his brow. Then, with wary tenderness, he lifted his hand and lightly touched her cheek.

"Only if we find it before the killer does."

Luckily, they didn't have far to walk.

As they finally came out on the other side of the woods, Byron recognized the driver of a passing pickup truck and flagged him down for a ride.

"Well, Byron, what brings you up today?" The old man greeted Byron with a grin.

"Just checking some cabins, Ray." Byron introduced Lucy, then added, "Do you think you could help me out? I borrowed Mac's boat, and it came

untied back there at the cove. I don't have time to look for it 'cause I need to get Lucy back to town."

Ray gave them a wink. "Don't you worry. I'll tow it back, and nobody'll ever know it was

gone.?"

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

As they neared the cabin where Lucy had

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left the car, Byron casually asked if anyone had noticed any suspicious activity around the area.

"Haven't seen anything like that," Ray said anxiously. "Why? Something wrong?"

Byron's answer was casual and calculated. "Just wondering. It looks like someone might have tried to break into the Millers' place."

"Well, I'll sure keep a lookout," Ray promised. "If I see any strangers, I'll be sure and report them right away."

Squeezed tightly together in the front seat, Lucy gave Byron a grateful smile. When Ray let them out at the cabin, they waited till he was

out
of sight, then locked up and headed back into town.

"How about I pick you up around seven?" Byron asked her. "The church should be locked up again by then."

"I think we should meet somewhere," Lucy suggested instead. "Angela's way too nosy, and Irene's been in a horrible mood. I'd rather not borrow more trouble."

Byron agreed. "What about the Festival, then?"

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"Well . . . I'm pretty sure Angela will want to go back. But she's supposed to be grounded, so I'll have to see if we can sneak out again."

"Can you lose her once you get there?"

"No problem. The less she has to be with me, the more she likes it. Besides, I think she's been hanging out with some guy there she doesn't want her mom to know about."

"Perfect. I'll meet you at the carousel."

After letting Byron out at his house, Lucy went on to the car wash. She hadn't realized how exhausted she was, but now, with the turbulent morning behind her, she could feel all her emotions letting down

at

last. She drove through the car wash, relishing the blasts of water and churning brushes all around her, feeling in some strange way almost as cleansed as the Corvette.

It gave her time to collect her thoughts. Angela would demand an explanation when she got back; that much she could count on. She told herself she had to act normally, think clearly, come up with some logical excuses for being so late. She remembered the few times Irene had suggested that Lucy go shopping for

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new clothes, mentioning stores where she could use Irene's accounts.

Yes. Good cover. Glancing down at her stained jeans and jacket, Lucy thought how funny that was. On a whim, she stopped at the same fast-food restaurant she'd stopped at that morning, and slipped into the women's restroom. Using bunches of paper towels, she did her best at a hasty cleanup, then ran a comb through her hair. Fine. That'll work.

Driving home, her thoughts kept wandering, even though she tried to keep them in check. Thinking too much was dangerous to her now, she decided-the slightest little thing might send her over the edge. How

could a day start off so innocently, then turn so deadly? How
could your
life change completely in a matter of seconds? And how could she
and
Katherine—a girl she'd never met and would never even know—
become so
tragically intertwined?

So much for fate, Lucy thought wearily.

How strange it was, the way events wove themselves together,
pulling
innocent people into the middle of darkness, into the middle of
bad
surprises. If only she hadn't gone for a walk

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the other night, none of this would have happened. If only Mom
hadn't
died, I wouldn't be here in the first place. If only . . . if only . . .

No use going there, she told herself sternly. There was nothing she
could do about any of it till tonight. Except drive yourself crazy
with
worrying.

She heard the battle before she was even halfway in the back door.
Irene
and Angela in the kitchen, voices raised at fever pitch. Angela's
furious tears, and Irene's unyielding authority.

"You were seen there last night, Angela!" Irene was livid. "I told
you
you were grounded, and you deliberately disobeyed me!"

"It wasn't my fault!" Angela whined.

"Did you actually think it wouldn't get back to me?" Irene countered.

"In this town where I know so many people? I can't trust you for a minute, can I? But I told you what would happen, and now you have to accept the consequences. No car. Period. Not to school, not anywhere. And your credit cards-as of right now-are canceled."

"You can't do that!"

"I just did."

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"I'm not giving them to you!"

"Angela, it doesn't matter. I have all the numbers right here in my briefcase, and it's as good as done. Now go upstairs."

"Daddy would never have treated me this way!"

"Well, he's not here. And if he had treated you a little more this way, you wouldn't be so selfish and self-indulgent."

"I'll run away!"

"Oh, Angela, don't be ridiculous. You couldn't survive for one night without all the comforts of home. Just once I'd like to be able to walk

out this door and leave this house without having to go through all these theatrics."

"I swear I will! I'll run away where you'll never find me-"

"It was my fault," Lucy announced.

Irene and Angela both turned in surprise. Lucy took a deep breath and came boldly into the room.

"It was my fault," she said again. She could see Irene's mask of a face, her look of perpetual disapproval.

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"Lucy?" Irene raised one suspicious eyebrow.

"I wanted to go to the Festival last night, and I didn't know how to get there." Lucy squared her shoulders. "And you know how horrible I am at directions. And Angela told me she was grounded, but . . . but I begged her."

Irene wasn't to be swayed. "That's no excuse. Angela should have known better."

"But it was my fault," Lucy insisted again. "Angela didn't even stay. She dropped me off there, and then she came back to pick me up later."

And . . . I forgot where we were supposed to meet, so she had to come and look for me."

Irene gave an impassive nod. "I see."

Lucy glanced at Angela. Angela's expression was stubborn and defiant.

Irene looked at one girl, and then at the other.

Finally she said, "Lucy, I also expect you to abide by house rules."

"I know." Lucy nodded contritely. "I'm sorry." "Both of you go upstairs."

"What about my credit cards?" Angela demanded.

"I told you," Irene said. "Canceled."

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With a cry of rage, Angela stomped up to her room. As Lucy stood by uncertainly, Irene gathered her overnight bag, briefcase, her purse and her coat.

"I've left the hotel number by the phone. I

should be home early tomorrow afternoon." Lucy nodded. As Irene passed through the

door, she gave Lucy a frosty glare.

"That was very noble of you, Lucy. It's admirable of you to want to protect your cousin . . . but in the future, I won't tolerate lying. Even if you are trying to be noble."

Lucy made a hasty exit, bracing herself against the blast of Angela's music that shook her bedroom walls. After a while she heard Irene leaving and the music promptly shutting off.

She lay down across the bed and buried her face in her arms. She wanted to sleep. She wanted to sleep and sleep and just forget . . .

She drifted. She heard the kitchen door open and shut several times, Angela going up and down the stairs, but she was too tired to wonder about it. She wondered instead how she could rearrange the evening now, how she'd

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manage to get out of the house. Irene had not only issued orders, she'd confiscated Angela's car keys. It would be tricky now, getting back to the Festival.

She shouldn't have worried.

"Come on!" Angela announced several hours later, bursting through the door. Lucy nearly jumped out of her skin.

"What do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

"What do you think? Going to the Festival!" "Angela, are you insane?

After that major blowup with Irene?"

"Do I look like I care?"

"If someone saw you there last night, they're bound to see you again

tonight! Irene's probably hired spies! She'll be furious!"

"Trust me . . ." Angela said mysteriously. "Irene will never know."

"Angela, what-"

"Don't ask questions. Just get in the car." "But the keys-"

With a Cheshire cat grin, she dangled an extra set between her fingers.

"Do I look that stupid to you?"

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"Angela-"

"Do you wanna go or not?"

Lucy thought about how much trouble they'd be in. And then she thought

about the necklace and all that was at stake.

And then she nodded and grabbed her jacket. "Yes," she said. "I

definitely want to go."

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Despite Lucy's reluctance-and the fact that Irene had confiscated her license, as well-Angela insisted on driving. Lucy spent the whole ride slumped down in the seat, as though by making herself invisible, no police would dare to stop their car. Unfortunately, Angela wasn't in such a law-abiding mode-she couldn't wait to do every single reckless thing she could think of, now that Irene had left town.

"I have a bad feeling about tonight," Lucy said, but Angela just laughed.

"Trust me. I will not get grounded for this." "Angela, you've lost your mind. You truly have."

"I will not get grounded or punished in any way, shape, or form, thank you very much." "If you say so."

265

"Come on, Lucy-just have a little faith."

Lucy breathed a sigh of relief when they arrived at the Festival. As the

two of them walked through the gates, she didn't even have to come up with an excuse. Angela flipped her a wave and headed straight into the crowd.

"Meet you same time same place," Lucy said.

Angela beamed at her. "Hey! Don't count on it!"

"Angela?" Lucy shouted, but the girl just ignored her. "Angela!"

What is she up to? Lucy didn't have time to worry about it, though.

Byron was waiting for her, as promised, right by the carousel.

"Ready?" he asked.

"As I'll ever be."

Taking her arm, he steered her toward the exit. Lucy couldn't help noticing some of the looks they got on their way-girls eyeing them with

a mixture of curiosity and blatant envy. When she was certain he wasn't

looking, she stole a look up at Byron's face-the handsomely chiseled

features set off by that guarded, mysterious stare. Now she found herself wondering if anyone else really understood that

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expression, the way she'd come to know it today. She doubted if he'd

ever shown such vulnerability before; she doubted he'd ever be so

willing again.

Still, seeing the wistful looks cast in their direction she couldn't help but get a warm feeling inside. She was only human, after all. Nothing like calling attention to yourself Lucy. Her appearance with Byron Wetherly would be all over school by homeroom Monday morning.

The world lay shrouded in black. There were no stars tonight, only a bloodred moon, full and round. As they drove through town to the old church, Lucy watched it, fascinated, as it seemed to follow them through the pale tattered clouds.

"Full moon," Byron said, noting the focus of her stare. "No wonder things have been so strange around here."

Lucy suppressed a little shiver. "I've never seen the moon that color before-it's creepy."

He glanced at her sideways, but said nothing.

The church looked ominous as ever when they pulled up and parked. Byron cut the headlights, and they sat there a moment,

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listening to the muffled sounds of the night. The sky flowed like thick

oil overhead . . . a light mist swirled through the graveyard.

"Nice horror movie," Byron commented dryly.

Lucy nodded. It was the only church she'd ever seen that made her feel
so unsettled. And she didn't feel any less unsettled once they'd
gone
inside.

They stood side by side, their eyes readjusting to an almost
stygian
darkness. Byron took a flashlight from his jacket pocket and
quietly
flicked it on. They seemed to be alone. Their footfalls echoed
hollowly
as they walked up the aisle, and Lucy could hear the faint
scurryings of
mice darting beneath the pews. As they neared the altar, a fiendish
howl
suddenly rose up, disembodied, from the gloom. It echoed back
from the
damp stone walls . . . wafted through the shadows . . . shivered
down
along her spine.

Instinctively she grabbed for Byron's arm.

Then let out a nervous laugh.

"Cats," she mumbled. "Matt said they keep cats in here. For rodent
control."

Even Byron seemed momentarily unnerved by the spectral howl.
As a large

black cat slipped

268

around the end of the altar, he shone his flashlight on it, causing it to freeze instantly. It arched its back and hissed, then crouched down again and slunk away.

"Not very friendly," Byron murmured, putting one hand on her back, guiding her gently forward.

"Well, he sure didn't seem to like you much."

Byron ignored the remark. "Do you see it?" he asked her, squinting through the blackness.

Lucy, too, strained her eyes, running her hands over the dusty altar cloth. "No. But he said he'd leave it right here."

"Maybe he forgot."

Lucy sighed. "Then we'll never find it-he could have put it anywhere. He could have taken it with him, for that matter."

She turned to see Byron standing by the confessionals, and her heart gave a fearful twist.

"Is this where it happened?" he asked softly. "Where you saw . . . well . . . whoever he was you saw?"

Lucy nodded reluctantly. As if merely conjuring the memory might bring it back again in all its terror.

269

"He must have been in here already," Byron mused. "Before you showed up.

From where I was sitting, I would have seen him go in."

"He could have come through some other way though. Matt mentioned some cellars. In these old places, there could be lots of entrances, right? Even secret ones."

"Possibly."

Byron's voice echoed, empty and toneless. Even the shadows seemed to slither away from it, skulking along the walls and ceiling, worse than any cats. She watched uneasily as he opened one of the confessional doors. As he shone the light in and skimmed it over the dark, cramped space.

"And when you came out from here . . . it was just the priest," he murmured.

Lucy wished they could talk about something else. "But it couldn't have been him," she said, almost defensively.

He lifted an eyebrow. "I didn't say it was."

He opened the priest's compartment, following the same slow ritual with his flashlight. He opened the door on the opposite side.

270

All of them, empty.

"Byron," Lucy said suddenly, "let's go."

He turned to her in wary surprise. "What's wrong?"

"I . . . I don't know. I just . . ."

Her voice trailed away. She cast a nervous look around them, down the center aisle, the intersecting pews, the dirty linen altar cloth.

"Please," she whispered. Was it getting colder in here? Just like the time before . . . just like the last time when she'd heard the whisper . . . followed the voice . . . seen that malevolent shadow behind the screen . . .

"Byron . . ."

And she could see him looking now, too, trying to follow the direction of her eyes, trying to see what was wrong. And somehow she knew what would come next . . . she was expecting it-was ready for it-and yes, she realized with a shock, longing for it, as well, like the scent of a favorite flower or the warmth of a favorite memory that

transported the
spirit back to sweeter times . . .

Without another word she turned and ran for the doors.

271

"Lucy! 'Wait!"

She could hear Byron shouting at her, but she didn't stop. She put
her
hands against the doors and pushed, but they wouldn't open.

"Oh, God!"

She struggled against them, pushing, pushing, and she could see
the
crazy arc of the flashlight sweeping the ceiling, over the faces of
the
saints, the broken shards of agonies and ecstasies and long-
forgotten
prayers . . .

"Lucy-for God's sake-"

With one last effort, her body fell against them, and the doors
burst
wide and welcomed the night in.

Screaming, Lucy toppled right into a strong pair of arms.

And a very shocked expression.

Shielding himself from her flailing limbs, Matt tried to steady
Lucy and

keep his balance at the same time. The next thing she knew, Byron had
ahold of her, both his arms around her, restraining her and pulling
her
back.

"Lucy-what is wrong with you?"

She stopped struggling. She stared at Matt, who was staring back
at
her-tousled hair, easy

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grin, only now the grimy jeans and sweatshirt had been replaced
with
black pants, black shirt, and a priest's collar.

"Lucy!" He gave a relieved laugh. "I didn't expect to see you in
here! I
thought I saw a light-thought maybe someone was breaking in."

She clamped her arms across her chest. Byron had released her
now, but
she could feel him, the warm, lean strength of him, pressed against
her
back.

"So," Matt was trying to peer around them into the darkness. "Is
there
something wrong? Is there-"

"Byron," Byron said quickly. "Byron Wetherly."

The two stared into each other's eyes. Held each other's gazes for

an
extended moment. Exchanged handshakes, firm and slow.

"Oh, Byron, hello. Matt."

"The new priest," Byron said.

"Well, more of a gofer right now."

Their hands unclasped and slid away.

"Well," Byron said politely. "Welcome to Pine Ridge."

"The necklace," Lucy blurted out. "Do you still have it?"

273

For a second Matt looked puzzled. Then his grin relaxed.

"Right! That green necklace I found this morning. What happened-did you suddenly remember it was yours?" At Lucy's wan smile, he moved his shoulders in an apologetic shrug. "But . . . I'm so sorry . . . somebody else already came by for it."

Lucy and Byron traded glances. "Who?"

"Well . . . I don't know, actually." Another gesture of apology. "I left it by the altar like I said I would. But I had to leave for a while, and the cleaning lady was here. She said someone came by to claim it."

"But you don't know who it was?" Lucy persisted.

"I sure don't, sorry."

"What about the cleaning lady? Would she know who it was?"
Byron asked
casually.

"Well . . . from what I understand, she knows just about
everybody
around here. Do you know Mrs. Dempsey?"

"Sure. Come on then, Lucy." Byron nudged her from behind. "We
better go."

Nodding, Lucy looked back over her shoulder,

274

making one last survey of the church. No cold now . . . no
fragrance.
But her heart was still racing, and her blood still had that chill . . .

"Sorry we worried you," Byron mumbled, pushing past Matt onto
the steps.

"I wasn't worried," Matt said.

Lucy glanced up into his face as she passed him. His smile was
still
warm, still teasing. He gave her a conspiratorial wink, and she
quickly
glanced away.

As they reached the sidewalk, Matt suddenly called them back.

"Hey, wait a minute-I do remember something she said." At Lucy's perplexed look, he added, "The cleaning lady. When the guy came for that necklace."

He was quiet a moment, thinking. Byron's fingers dug sharply into Lucy's shoulder blade.

"Right." Matt nodded. "A guy. That's what she said, a good-looking guy . . . he said he'd gotten it as a present."

"A present?" Lucy echoed. "For what?"

"Not what . . . who. For a girl." Matt chuckled. "He said it was a present for a girl he'd met at the Fall Festival."

275

Lucy froze. A sick taste of fear rose slowly into her throat.

"Did he . . . did he say what her name was?"

Matt cocked his head and thought again. "Just . . . oh, now I remember. Something about New Orleans."

Lucy spun and stared up at Byron.

"Oh my God," she choked. "Angela."

276

"Wait-slow down! You're not making any sense."

"Hurry! We've got to get back to the Festival!" "Lucy, calm down!
Will
you please tell me what's going on-"

"I don't know what's going on, okay? Just drive! All I know is that
Angela's in some kind of trouble."

"How do you know that? And start from the beginning."

Lucy leaned toward him in the front seat, her voice tense with
anxiety.

"Remember when I told you she was hanging out at the fair with
some guy
Irene didn't know about? He must be the guy who picked up the
necklace."

"That's impossible. The necklace doesn't have anything to do with
Angela." Byron's hands

277

tightened on the steering wheel. "What possible connection could
Katherine's stalker have with Angela?"

"I don't know-I don't know! But that's why we have to find her!"

"You don't even know if it is Angela this guy picked up the
necklace for."

"He said New Orleans! And Angela wants to go to New Orleans!"

"So? Lots of people want to go to New Orleans. I wouldn't mind going to New Orleans-"

"Call it a hunch then. Just please hurry."

They reached the Festival again in record time. Leaving Byron to follow, Lucy went immediately for the scarecrow-game tent and shoved her way to the front of the line amid irate kids and their equally irate parents. At the entrance she recognized the same girl who'd been there last night, the one with the serious face.

"Where's Angela?" Lucy asked breathlessly.

"Huh! Wouldn't we like to know! She left just the two of us here tonight with twice as many brats!"

"But have you seen her?"

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"Yeah, a little earlier, but-"

"Please-it's important!"

The girl shrugged. "She said she was going with some guy."

"Going? Going where?"

"I don't know. Getting a ride? Or going away? Or-"

"Was it the same guy she was with last night?"

This time the girl rolled her eyes. "How would I know that? They were pretty busy, if you know what I mean. It's not like I could really see his face."

"Can't you remember anything about him? Anything at all?"

"I think he might have been tall. Maybe dark hair ... but you know, they were back in the shadows."

As Byron caught up with her, Lucy spun to face him. "We have to go after her."

"After her where? How can we go after her if we don't know where she went?"

Lucy looked so desperate that the solemn-faced girl sighed sympathetically, then called out to her coworker. "Did Angela say where she was going tonight?"

279

"You mean, with that guy?" the other girl called back.

"Yeah."

"Uh . . . something about New Orleans, I think."

"Did they say how? Driving? Flying?" "Maybe driving. I heard

something
about a bus."

Again Lucy whirled to face Byron. "We've got to stop her."

As Byron attempted to calm her down, they heard the second girl speak up.

"Oh, hey, wait a minute? Are you Lucy?" Lucy nodded. "Yes."

"Well, somebody left this for you."

"Was it Angela?"

The girl planted herself in the tent doorway, grabbing some rowdy children, trying to establish some semblance of order. "You know, I'm not really sure, okay? Just somebody left it for you. See? It's got your name on it."

The girl handed her a small manila envelope. Lucy's name was printed across the front, and with trembling fingers, she slid open the flimsy seal across the back.

280

"It's the necklace," she murmured, her eyes going wide. "I know it is ... oh, Byron, I can't do this ... I can't-"

Byron grabbed it away from her and ripped open the flap.

Out fell Angela's car keys.

281

He hadn't meant for it to come to this.

At least not with this one . . . and especially not this soon.

He always enjoyed playing with them awhile ... luring them . . .
teasing
them . . . manipulating them with praises and with promises . . .

And this one had been so easy, so predictable. But sometimes, he
simply
grew tired of them.

Sometimes, after a day or a week or a lifetime, he simply
discovered
they no longer fit into the well-ordered chaos of his world.

She'd been shocked, of course.

That instant of disbelief-that depth of betrayal in her eyes.

"But don't you remember what you told me?"

282

she'd pleaded, as he'd tasted the tears of her sorrow. "Don't you
remember what you said?" "Of course," he'd soothed her, "of
course I

do . . ."

"Don't you remember you promised?"

And he'd pressed her against his heart, and plunged the dagger through her throat, and twisted it with cold, calm ease.

And then he'd smiled.

"Of course I remember, Angela . . . but I lied."

283

Lucy stared in disbelief.

As she glanced over at Byron, she saw him hold the envelope upside down and give it a shake. If she hadn't been so stunned, it would have been comical.

"I thought . . ." she stammered, "I really thought-"

"Me, too. But are you sensing anything?"

Trying to break the tension, Lucy bounced the keyless entry in the palm of her hand. "Yeah. I've got a sense these are keys."

"Your psychic abilities are impressive," he deadpanned. He balled up the envelope and tossed it into a trash can, then gave her a curt nod. "Come on."

"Where are we going?" Lucy asked, hurrying to match his long stride.

"You heard her. Let's try the bus depot."

They were there in ten minutes. Not only was the place small, but the waiting room was practically empty. While Byron checked the schedules for southern destinations, Lucy questioned the clerks at the ticket counter. No one remembered Irene Foster's daughter buying a bus ticket today, but after thinking a moment, one of the clerks remembered a young couple bundled in coats and hats and sunglasses who'd taken a southbound express about an hour before.

"I think it's worth a try," Byron decided. "They don't have that much of a head start, and they'll be making stops along the way. It should be easy to catch them."

Lucy felt sick. Sick to her stomach and sick at heart. As she climbed up beside him into the van, she shot him a look of desperation.

"What if you're right?"

"How so?"

"What if this whole thing with the necklace has nothing to do with Angela? I mean . . . what if she's really and truly found the love of her life, and they're going off to live happily ever after, and we're

going after them and being stupid?"

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Byron put the key in the ignition. He stared thoughtfully at the dashboard.

"Then," he said carefully, "at least we know. Then we turn around and come back home. And they have their lives . . . and we have ours."

Lucy sighed. "I can't help it, though. I just still feel something-just here." She clamped her arms around her midsection and fixed him with a worried frown. "I just feel like something about this isn't right. It's just this awful nagging feeling, and it won't go away."

"You're probably feeling a lot of things right now," Byron reminded her.

"You thought you had the necklace, and you'd psyched yourself up to face it."

"So did you," she said quietly.

He shrugged. "Emotional roller coaster." "You're right. I don't know whether to be scared now, or relieved."

"How about a little of both? It's okay, you know, to feel both."

She tried to smile at him, but her emotions were at full pitch. As they sailed along the highway, she leaned against her door and stared out the

window of the van. Everything's flowing

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tonight, she thought vaguely . . . flowing road . . .flowing van . .
.flowing curves . . .flowing hills . . .

She could still see that strange red moon watching her through the
clouds. The color of rust . . . the color of decay. A stain of old
dried
blood on the wrinkled flesh of the sky.

Shivering, Lucy hunched her shoulders and burrowed deeper into
her
jacket. It felt like it was getting colder, both outside and in. And
the
moon . . . that eerie red moon . . . actually seemed to be growing.
Growing and glowing among the tops of the trees, like some
forgotten
Christmas ornament.

Lucy frowned and burrowed deeper. Why did full moons like that
make her
feel so weird? Make her think of creepy things like . . . like . . .

Prey . . .

"What?" She sat up straight and looked at Byron, who looked back
at her
suspiciously. "What?" he echoed.

"Did you just say something?"

"Yeah, I said, just pray my brakes hold out." "Oh my God, don't
tell me

that-your brakes?"

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"Well . . . all these curves sure aren't helping
my van."

"Thank you, Byron. That definitely eases my mind, your sharing
that with
me."

She saw that slow half smile working at one corner of his mouth.
She
realized that she really loved it when he smiled like that. She
wished
he'd do it more often.

"Stop staring at me," he said, and, grinning, she turned back to her
window.

She closed her eyes. The hum of the motor, the rocking motion of
the van
on the road . . . she could feel herself drifting off. That pleasant
state between sleep and attention, when everything seemed soft
and warm
and safe. She forced her eyes open and searched for taillights up
ahead
of them, but the road was so twisted, she couldn't see a thing.
There
wasn't even traffic out tonight, she suddenly realized. But she
could
see the slow, pale curls of fog beginning to creep in over the
highway
. . . blurring the yellow line . . . swallowing the road ahead of them.

That feeling again. Gnawing at the pit of her stomach.

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"Byron," she said uneasily, "be careful." He cast her a sidelong glance.

"Always." "No, I mean it. Please."

"Are you okay?"

"Yes . . . just . . . I don't know. Restless. Nervous."

"If you want, we can stop for some coffee the first place we see. It might be a good idea."

She gave a distracted nod. She gazed out into the darkness ... out at that bloody moon. She wished it would go behind a cloud for the rest of the night . . . she wished it would just go away.

She sensed something beside them on the road.

Something she couldn't actually see, something just out of sight off the shoulder, something moving swiftly through the tall weeds, keeping pace with the van.

Strange . . .

Lucy looked over at the speedometer. Sixty. Yet she was sure-she was certain-that something was out there running, running even faster

than
the van could go, running even faster than the wind could go . . .

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"Byron," she mumbled.

"What?"

She saw him turn toward her.

Saw his hand slide across the seat and reach for her.

She looked into his eyes . . . deep and black as midnight . . . and in
that moment she could see in their depths all the truths and
emotions
that she'd felt that morning with her hand upon his heart.

A sob went through her.

Byron opened his mouth and started to say her name.

But he never got the chance.

As the dark shape came out of the fog, Byron hit the brakes, the
tires
screeching, the van skidding, sliding, going into a spin. As they
whirled around and around, Lucy could see it there-the huge,
black shape
silhouetted against the fog, standing on all fours, statuelike in the
middle of the road. Watching them . . . watching them . . .

She tried to reach for Byron-reached desperately for Byron

But her head slammed the window, and the

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So this is what it's like to die . . .

Lying there on her back in the grass, all alone in the darkness, she could sense the wet, runny mask of her face-tears? blood?-she couldn't be sure, couldn't be sure she even had a face, couldn't be sure about anything except that her body screamed in pain each time she tried to draw even the shallowest of breaths.

I can't move . . . help . . . somebody, help me . . .

With a ragged cry, Lucy tried to lift her head, tried to peer through the thick, endless night surrounding her. As in a dream, she could see the faraway sky blazing bright, lit by a giant fire-and along with those sickening smells of pain and fear and despair that threatened to choke her, now there was the gasoline . . . burning rubber ... white-hot metal . . . and

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something else . . . something dear to her heart ..

Byron!

That's Byron's van!

She'd been sitting in the front seat beside him, and she'd been
staring
at the moon. That bloodred moon hovering there behind the trees
and
glowing out through the dark, shredded fabric of the clouds. She'd
been
staring at the moon, and then she'd jolted with the first sharp
swerve
of the van. Confused and groggy, she'd heard Byron's shout, the
piercing
shriek of brakes and tires; she'd felt the road give way to air
beneath
them as they dove off the shoulder and off the crest of the hill, and
out through the foggy night, plummeting down and down into
nothingness . . .

Byron? Can you hear me?

She knew somehow that she hadn't spoken aloud, knew somehow
that her
thoughts had burst free of her pain, only to fall silent among the
shadows. It was so dark out here. So dark, so frighteningly still,
except for those flames leaping and glowing against the distant
horizon . . .

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Something ran in front us.

With a moan, Lucy struggled to shut out the pain, struggled to
focus her
hazy thoughts.

Byron tried to swerve, he tried to miss hitting it, but something ran
in

front of us . . .

She wished she could remember. She wished she could remember what it was that had caused the accident. But there was only the briefest glimmer of memory in that last fatal second, only the briefest image of something caught in headlights as the car veered and left the road.

What was that?

It seemed so familiar somehow . . .

But her thoughts were fading . . . fading . . . and she knew she was slipping away. In desperation she stared up at the trees overhead, great gnarled branches etched thickly against the black dome of the sky. And then she noticed that moon.

So full and round. So red like blood. Caught in a web of tangled limbs, oozing out through the clouds, wine stains on velvet.

Byron, I'm so scared! Please help me!

And that's when she heard it.

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The soft rustling sound, like wind sighing through grass. Except that she couldn't feel any wind, not even the faintest of breezes, in this heavy night air.

The sound was close by.

Coming even closer ..

Oh God!

Once more she tried to lift herself, to call out for help. But the rustlings were in her head now, in her thoughts and in her pain, like so many urgent whispers, whispers of great importance.

As Lucy's head turned helplessly to one side, she saw shadows all around her, shadows slinking along the ground and through the trees, slivers of black, and pale, pale gray, and sparks of amber light . . .

Terror exploded within her. Even through the paralyzing numbness of pain and shock, she sensed that these were animals, and she sensed why they were here. Instinct told her that she was surrounded, though one stood closer than the others. She could hear the slow, calm rhythm of its breathing as it watched her from a place she couldn't see.

295

Oh, God, don't let me die like this!

She thought of Byron. The vision burst inside her brain with such force that she choked and gagged and vomited blood in the grass. In that one

instant of agonizing clarity she saw his midnight eyes, heard his
calm,
deep voice, telling her not to be afraid. Now she remembered how
he'd
turned to her in that last split second of his life, his eyes desperate
with helplessness and disbelief as he'd reached for her hand. Did
he
touch me? The thought drifted through her mind, light as a feather.
Did
we touch one last time?

But the whispers were louder now, and the fire was brighter than
ever,
and she was so weak . . . so tired.

Please . . . please . . . just let me die fast . . .

Night swayed around her. As tears ran silently down her cheeks,
something huge and dark leaned in over her, blocking her view of
the sky.

She steeled herself for the end. Felt hot breath caressing her
throat .
. . smelled the faint, familiar scent of something sweet . . .

Byron . . . I'm so sorry.. .

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"Byron has gone," the voice murmured.

"Only I can save you now."

Who are you? What are you?

Down ... down she sank into the endless-
ness of time.

And that voice . . . fading far into nothing-
ness . . .

"Oh, Lucy . There's no name for what we
are.

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rest in peace

by RICHIE TANKERSLEY CUSICK

The Unseen

Part 2

Rest in peace

Stalked by an unseen force and plagued by unspeakable visions,
Lucy
feels she cannot carry on for much longer-especially now that
Byron, the
one person who understood what she was going through, is gone.
No one
else believes her. She is still alone. And still in grave danger . . .

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RICHIE TANKERSLEY CUSICK is the author of more than

twenty books for young adults, in addition to several adult novels. She lives with her cocker spaniels, Meg and Audrey, outside Kansas City, where she is currently at work on her next novel.

299

What is happening to Lucy?

Overwhelmed with grief over the death of her mother, Lucy spends her days sleeping, her nights out walking aimlessly. One rainy night, she becomes convinced that someone is following her, and frantically ducks into a cemetery to try to lose the stalker. Panicking she slips and stumbles into an open grave, only to discover she is not alone in there.....

Almost immediately, Lucy begins having terrifying visions and dreams--as though someone, somewhere, were trying to tell her something--and she can't shake the feeling of an unseen presence, always watching, waiting to make its move...