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**Black Water Tales:
The Secret Keepers**

Smashwords Edition
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For my two best friends,

My great grandmother, Joyce Garrett, who planted in me a thirst for learning which is further explored with every word that I read and every word that I write.

My grandmother, Marion “Bunny” Garrett, who would go off to “see a man about a dog,” but not before leaving me with a bedtime story filled with golden stars, dark caves, fairies, and fantasies of the like to parade in my imagination and keep me company until the sun came. All of these years later those characters are still with me and perch atop my shoulders when I sit down and pick up my pen. Thank you for giving light to my imagination.

Chapter 1

Opening its mouth wide as the young woman pushed through the oversized swinging doors, the lonely room swallowed her whole. Her body felt weighted; 130 pounds of flesh and bones and two tons of guilt dropped heavily into a rigid metal chair. Above her head, the incessant buzzing of a bulky rectangular light drew her red eyes before they fell to the clean, white tiles that covered every inch of the floor. Attesting to its age and disrepair, the dying light flickered spontaneously, barely managing the dim illumination of the uncaring room. Successive spurts of obscure light, then darkness over the dull gray walls gave the space a glum greenish hue that Regina had not noticed on this night because her eyes were buried deep in the palms of her blood-splattered hands. Blood painted her forearms and left some spatter on her neck. Desperately, Regina fought for a moment of clarity, a second of peace from the drone of the light that now harmonized with the ultra maddening ticking of the clock, which on any other night would have been barely audible, but this night sounded like battering a ram repeatedly threatening to cave the wall. Noise clamored inside her head and it filled like air into a balloon, growing larger; the symphony of sound fast driving her to the edge of what little sanity remained.

SWOOSH

The double doors drove open once again and Regina lifted her head to see her boss standing over her.

“We can’t save them all, Regina.” Dr. Younghill snapped while popping cheese squares into his mouth. The young doctor lowered himself into one of the cold chairs and pulled one of his legs up over the other. By now the ER was so second nature to him that after a patient he could easily, wash up, change scrubs, and grab a snack all while on his way to give his star nurse a pep talk in a matter of ten minutes. Regina eyed the character with one eyebrow raised, then pressed her palms against one another, forming a steeple on which she rested her lips and stared into the empty wall. Regina positioned her lips to speak, but stopped herself.

Don’t you care? She wanted to ask, but dared not, especially since she already knew the answer. Dr. Younghill was one of the best, which is why at the precious age of thirty-two he was the head emergency room doctor at one of the city’s most prominent hospitals.

“Wash your hands, Regina,” he told her. Offering no hesitation, she lifted herself from the chair and made her way to the sink. The doctor was always playful with his staff, but she was certain by the deepening in his voice that he was now giving her a direct order. First making sure that the water was as hot as possible, she then pumped

countless gushes of pink foam into her palm, and for several agonizing minutes, she stood there washing away the blood of the child. When she turned to face Dr. Younghill again he was brushing his hands against one another, orange crumbs littering the sterile floor.

“You win some, you lose some,” he said. Regina had no response to such perversely logical reasoning.

“I learned that in my medical ethics class,” he added. Regina smiled.

“I know, Doctor. I just didn’t want to lose this one.”

“You don’t make those kinds of decisions; they pay someone named God for that.”

Regina sighed at the mention of the phantasmal spirit that was now obligated to take the responsibility because humans had failed in preventing this tragedy.

“Listen, Regina.” The handsome doctor’s face tensed as he focused on her. “We are the best at what we do, we get in there, we do everything that we can, but after that we have to let it go so that we can be ready to save the next life. Most people get into this field because of their heart, but now that you’re here, I need your head.” He spoke, thought for a moment, and then giggled at himself like a schoolboy. Regina’s shoulders sunk from their stringent posture as she snickered and again took the chair next to Dr. Younghill.

“That came out totally wrong,” he said, still tittering to himself. It was those carefree, sometimes verging on sexual harassment comments that made him so damn likeable to the people with whom he worked. People respected Dr. Younghill because he was undoubtedly one of the most talented doctors in the city, the women liked him because he was dark and handsome with black wavy hair and everyone liked him because he never took himself too seriously. From day one at First Methodist Hospital, Regina wished that the nurturing, smart, not to mention hot doctor would ask her out. Her self-imposed rule about never dating anyone with whom she worked would have been forced to take a leap if he had ever decided that he wanted to see her outside of the pressure cooker, mile-a-minute environment, in which the both of them spent most of their time. Years earlier, Regina’s first day at the hospital had not yet ended when she realized that she had the same implausible dream of every other hospital nurse female and even some males. As a result, she put those feelings to rest long ago, but over the years she and the doctor had grown close, he had taken a special liking to her because she was almost as good at her job as he was at his and he had long admired her skill and dedication. Their relationship had never been anything more than platonic, but during intimate times like this Regina wished that it had been.

Dr. Younghill placed his hand on her knee and drew his face close to her.

“You have got to stop taking it so personally.” He spoke almost in a whisper.

Regina let his soft words flow over her, his sweet breath caressing all of the soft curves of her face.

“How can I not take it personally, Doctor? Patients come here as a last resort. When I have a bad day at work, I don’t get a customer complaint about cold fries; the inventory sheets are not a little off. When I have a bad day at work, people die. How...in the hell

can I NOT take that personally?” Regina could feel hot tears brimming on the lower lids of her eyes. Dr. Younghill wrapped her hand in his before he spoke again.

“I know,” he said in the calm manner for which he was famous. “But you have two options, you can make this job about death or you can make it about life. Don’t let death rule you. This happens to lots of people in our line of work, but you can’t let it happen to you. Take some time off; see the hospital psychologist. You need to straighten this out,” Dr. Younghill told her as he swiftly made his way toward the double doors after hearing his name over the PA system with a beckoning for him in a patient room.

“I’ll be fine.” Regina attempted to soothe his worries, wiping away the single insolent tear that had somehow escaped.

The young doctor turned back to Regina who was still seated. “Take some time off. People are noticing. You have time; take it. I need you back, Regina,” he said before slipping out the door.

Her mouth dropped at the recognition of yet another order; this one completely unexpected. Regina rolled her eyes as she lifted herself from the chair, sighed, and slapped one of the double doors hard on her way out.

Midshift, Regina found herself in the nurse’s locker room and it harbored an uneasy quiet that filled her with yet more sadness. While loading all of her belongings into her duffle bag, she wondered what she would do with her newfound free time. Over the years, she had taken a day here or there from work when she was dangerously exhausted, but had never taken anything that remotely resembled a vacation. With some thought, she resolved that a couple of weeks off did not have to be such a bad thing, maybe she *would* see the counselor, though she doubted that it would do any good at all. Some yoga, meditation, and solitude were probably just what she needed.

“Good night, Glenda,” she said to the lumpy nurse at the front desk as she made her way toward the sliding glass doors. Glenda glanced at her watch.

“You out early tonight,” the nurse said vibrantly.

“And it’s well deserved,” Regina told the woman as she waved and continued at a leisurely pace toward the door.

“I hear that,” Glenda, in her electric blue scrubs, confirmed.

Regina was about to say good night to the fully uniformed security guard that stood at the doors when she heard a voice call out behind her. Turning, she was delighted to see Dr. Younghill jogging up the corridor.

“I wanted to catch you before you left.”

“Well, so far you’re doing a good job,” she informed him.

Rows of white teeth showed in his elegant smile.

“I was thinking that when you get back that maybe we can have dinner or something?”

Regina’s chest rose in surprise. His timing was perfect because as exciting as the possibility of a date with the doctor was, being ordered to take time off still dampened her mood and the combination of the two made her seem open, but not excited and there

was no better reaction to a man's request for a date.

"Sure," she said, quickly turning and passing through the double doors that glided open just for her.

"Good night, Otis," she said. Carl Otis was the old pop-bellied security officer that guarded the ER entrance of First Methodist.

"Good night, nurse!" he said with a knowing smile that followed Regina out the door and then settled tauntingly on Dr. Younghill.

"Get back to work, Otis!" Dr. Younghill instructed with a laugh.

"Don't mind if I do, don't mind if I do," the officer said as he strolled out into the night.

Hundreds of miles away brisk October breezes were rumbling over the hills of a relatively unremarkable town in the Midwest where the population was small, the meals were big and tolerance was somewhere in the middle. In the house at the end of Weeping Willow Road, the heat was on, but Nikki Valentine's bedroom window was wide open. Nikki enjoyed the cold; it helped her sleep. Despite the fact that her room felt like an icebox, she was warm under a thick cotton sheet and a fluffy white comforter decorated with olive green vines, chocolate branches, and blossoms of golden amber flowers. Her eyes would not remain closed for more than a few seconds before a churning in her stomach caused her eye lids to rise again. Tossing in her bed was aiding in getting her to sleep no more than the two mini bottles of tequila that she had gulped down not even thirty minutes before. Finally, she sat up in bed and threw the thick comforter back with a huff, watching it fall over the end of her bed.

This is going to be a cold, cold winter, she thought, feeling her skin prickle with goose bumps.

Nikki Valentine leaned out of the bed and flipped the light switch, which brought to life the delicate chandelier that hung in the middle of the room, but also the golden wall sconces that were placed to both sides of the massive white fireplace. Over the fireplace hung an ornately framed mirror, which reflected the powder blue walls, making her room look even greater than it actually was. Before she had gone to bed, her father offered to build a fire, considering the nights were cold now. Mr. Valentine knew that she liked her room cold, but he also knew that she found it hard to resist the romantic setting that the roaring fire created. As her feet sunk into the plush carpet that matched her walls she was grateful once again as she was every morning that she had been able to talk her father out of making her have, in her room, the same hardwood that surfaced every other floor in the grand home. The carpet was soft on her bare feet. Nikki made sure her door was locked before she went to the fireplace where she dug her hand up into the inside feeling around on the inner fireplace walls until she found the treasure that she had buried there not so long ago for safekeeping. Her hand searched wildly for the edges of the tape and when she found them, she worked carefully with her cheek pressed up against the rococo surface of the fireplace that showed in the room. A grin spread wide across her lips as she plucked the tape from the wall, causing the small object to tumble into her palm. She

pulled it into the light and was glad to see her dependable Mexican friend. There were two more of the same treasures there that she worked just as carefully to release from their hiding space. Gathering all three in her hand, she then sunk into one of two chairs and placed the bottles on her small accent coffee table. Nikki held up the mini bottle of tequila and was thrilled that her father had not insisted on building her a fire tonight, possibly exposing the new stash space that she had found for her old bad habits. One bottle after the other she drank in several swigs, activating every wrinkle in her face with each chest-burning swallow. Her stomach burned. Inheriting her mother's stomach problems was bad enough, but when she then coated the vital organ with such potent elixirs on more than a regular basis, it made for disastrous gastro intestinal functioning. With great purpose, the alcohol flowed through her veins and she could feel each part of her body slowing, settling into the cushion of the chair. The fluttering of her eyelids crept to a sluggish movement and her heart began to beat with a leisure that could be accomplished only under this euphoric intoxication. A pseudo peace settled upon her and she mistakenly took solace in the thought that this time would be like the rest and soon she would drift off into a place of unconsciousness, where nothing mattered and she had no worry of feelings, but she was wrong. Soon she could feel the thump deep in her chest.

Please stop, she begged silently.

The pump grew savage in response to her weak cry for mercy; it was in her stomach now swimming around. The alcohol fought with it, but was no match for what was now in her thighs causing them to tremble. Her eyes plucked open and were set on the dark cherry wood dresser that sat underneath the window and drew her to it. She stood in front of the billowing blue and white drapes and stared into the dark hills. There was something coming, in the dead, deep dark of the night, there was something coming. Nikki stared and could not see it, but she could feel it. She opened the top drawer of the dresser and pulled out a pair of white lace underwear that she had recently purchased. Nikki held the underwear up in front of her inspecting the lace that had never been worn; she then pulled out the other three pieces of new underwear, which left none behind. Balling them up between her palms, she sulked out of the bedroom and went down to the large garbage can in the kitchen where she shoved them as far down into the trash as her arm would reach. When she was done, she stood lifelessly over the trash can in wait of the calm that would tame the wild wretch inside her and allow her to sleep through the night.

The driver of the shiny black car cursed the endless potholes that dotted the parking lot of the Backdoor Bar, which was positioned in a no-man's-land on the outskirts of Johnson City. After pulling into a parking space, neither too close nor too far from the front door, Natalie Weston put the car in park and pulled down the visor in order to study herself in the mirror. Using bright red lipstick, she re-coated her pursed lips, then rubbed them together, ensuring that her face art was perfect. Matching red fingernails combed through her hair, then adjusted the black lace bustier top of her fitted dress to make sure that her cleavage sat at its highest. When her primping was done, she emerged from the

car and broke into sultry strides toward the door.

Cigarette smoke stung her eyes as she entered the den of usual suspects and rugged outcasts. The exotic-looking, ample-bodied young woman immediately drew all the attention. Her dark hair fell down below her naked shoulders in soft curls and her alluring dark eyes, which sat under sleepy lids, crawled over each of the few patrons. The bar occupants had fallen under the temporary trance of the seductress that released them only once she passed them by, on the focused journey toward the object of her intentions. He would be waiting at the bar, but beyond that detail, her knowledge of him was slim. She needed not know much about him; it was unnecessary and, in fact, sometimes got in the way.

At the bar, there were only four men from which to choose. One was wearing jeans, a dirty T-shirt, and a baseball cap.

Nope, she thought to herself as she passed.

The next man was wearing a wrinkled business suit, his tie had been hastily loosened at the neck, and his head rested crookedly on his palm over a watered-down whiskey.

"No", she whispered, moving on to the third man who wore a crisp, white-collar shirt and dark, pressed-denim jeans. It was he and there was no reason to go any farther.

"You must be Carl," she said as she slid unto the bar stool next to the bald man who could have easily been ten years older than her.

"Lola?" he said. She smiled. "You're beautiful." His traveling eyes made their journey halfway down her body before he caught himself.

"Gin and tonic with lime," she said to the bartender in a voice so melodious it almost sang.

"Nice place you chose," her date joked, eyeing the smoky carcass of a shack that may have once been a nice bar.

"Thank you." Her inviting eyes beamed. "It's not much, but I like it," she went on.

As it usually did with the salivating deviants that she met on raunchy dating Web sites, the date went by in a wanton wash of liquor, and after a couple of hours the pair burst into room 17 at the Star City Motel that sat only blocks from the Back Door. They moaned in arousing attempts to rip the clothes from one another as they clawed ferociously. With one zip, her dress hit the filthy shag carpeting, he pushed her down on the bed and the two invited each other with erotic glares before he pounced on her and they succumbed to a perverse passion that ended in the deep howling of both wretched animals. Their chests heaved up and down under a layer of carnal perspiration and they could see only the cunning outlines of the body of the other in the strip of light, hued by the red neon sign, that filtered through the gap between the scratchy drapes. She dismounted the man like an injured horse, no more good for racing and immediately he became part of her history.

"Why don't you stay awhile?" the old horse offered as she stepped into her black costume.

Looking up, her eyes settled despondently on the stranger that was speaking to her.

“I don’t even *know* you!” Her facial expression disintegrated to aggravated disgust. After shoving her underwear into her purse, she disappeared into the night.

Chapter 2

The Towers apartments were usually dismal at this hour on Sunday nights, but tonight it was especially so. Regina despised the fact that the garage at her apartment building was so lightless. Also, she hated that she had not purchased a reserved parking space for the extra \$100 per month, particularly on nights like tonight where the closest parking spot still left the elevator too far for her to feel completely comfortable. As she did every time she was forced to park too far from the elevator she resolved to spring for one of those coveted parking spaces when the leasing office opened in the morning. She heaved her duffle bag from the trunk and looked up to make sure that the security cameras were watching her as they were supposed to. She was relieved to see the red light of mechanical life beating a pulse. Her footsteps sounded bristly on the dirty cement. A car door slammed somewhere in the parking lot, she turned casually but saw no one and heard nothing more; the elevator was closer now. Regina looked into the lens of the upcoming camera.

No red light.

“Awesome,” she whispered sarcastically. Regina stopped and turned cautiously at the sound of quick-paced steps, but once she made herself silent, her immediate surroundings mimicked her silence. She shook her head, benignly attributing the footsteps to the auditory deceptions of an overworked nurse. Surely, her sense of hearing was deceiving her, but still her stride picked up incognizant speed. The elevator was deceptively close. Regina pressed the elevator button multiple times, staring into the thin black rift between the elevator doors, willing it to come faster.

Hurry. Her inner voice summoned the dangling metal box as the pressure built against her abdomen walls. Now she was nervous; she had to pee.

Again footsteps tapped on the ground and whispers echoed off the cement walls of the parking tomb. Regina was not hallucinating. She waited impatiently for the hanging carriage to come to her rescue. The young nurse scrutinized the level full of parked cars of all colors and sizes and she felt small, as if she were just a piece in an insignificant game.

Ding

The elevator sang announcing its, by Regina’s standards, tardy arrival. She slipped inside before the doors were fully open. Her finger pressed 18 over and over until the doors began to close with a leisure that seemed unfair. The scene of empty cars condensed from her view with every passing second, when one strong hand inserted itself swiftly between the almost-closed doors; Regina was startled by the hand and her own

cry. She pressed her back hard against the far wall of the elevator, but the brawny hand did not belong to the monster that Regina pictured. The clean man of average height came into full sight. He was normal or at least he seemed so, the same way that Dahmer, Gacy, and Bundy must have appeared to numerous people who then dropped their guard only to have their foolish trust dashed brutally back into their own faces. Calming blue ocean eyes lurked behind his brown-rimmed eyeglasses. Despite the fact that it had not rained in Texas in weeks the man seemed wet.

“Hey,” he greeted her as he shuffled clumsily into the elevator.

“Hey,” reluctantly, she responded. Remembering the old adage of her college roommate who was adamant about campus safety, *stranger danger*, she would always say. The concept was completely new to Regina, a girl who came from a town where hardly anyone was a stranger, where even the strangers were not strangers due to the less than one degree of separation that was prevalent in towns like hers.

In one hand he grappled with a black suitcase that he finally got to lay against one of the elevator walls, he pressed 25. Regina’s stomach flipped. On the twenty-fifth floor there was a gym, a place to play billiards and a self-serve coffee bar among a few other amenities that entertained the young professionals that paid a ridiculous premium for the superficial diversions, but there were no apartments on twenty-five. She squeezed her thighs tighter together to relieve some of the pressure that sat in her pelvis. One by one, the numbers on the panel flashed to life as they ascended past each floor into the purple sky. The stranger appeared almost as nervous as she; Regina could tell from her sporadic glimpses at the potential psychopath. She noticed that something sat at his side, moving and making short excited noises and she finally gave into a conspicuous investigative stare to find that he carried a tiny puppy. Subtly, the watching man held the puppy out an inch more for the expected adoration, a tactic, Regina had learned from countless television shows, to disarm the unsuspecting victim. A cold Regina turned her attention back to the numbers that seemed to light themselves sluggishly now. The stranger swept two of his fingers underneath his glasses to wipe moisture from his cheek. His depraved eyes swept over her body from head to toe with skillful precision and she swallowed hard.

Sixteen, seventeen, eighteen. She counted off the last three floors silently. Regina tightened her grip on the duffle bag strap that hung over her shoulder. Through the opening doors, relief tumbled into the steel box like an avalanche covering her completely. Moving out of the elevator, she felt safe until she heard the floundering behind her. Abruptly, he had decided to abandon the elevator. Regina turned to face the man in the desolate hallway; so close to her front door.

“Hey,” he called with a bizarre lull. He was standing in the hallway with one foot keeping the double doors from closing. This time Regina did not respond she just eyed him carefully and rooted her feet into the carpet positioning herself for a fight.

“Are you on television or something?” he asked, still drowning in the culpable perspiration.

“No”

“Oh, you look like an actress or something.” He moaned, trying hard to keep the conversation moving. Regina was not charmed, it was 10:15 p.m. and she was just returning home after a long shift in the ER, the last thing that she looked like was an actress, unless she was playing the bride of Frankenstein. The seconds felt like hours as they watched each other like two boxers trapped in the ring.

“No” Regina confirmed.

Deciding at once to be the decision maker, she took several steps back, then turned and began rapidly treading down the hall toward her doorway.

As she came to the corner of the hall, she heard him yell again.

“Hey!” His voice chased and her quick stride became a frenzied gallop that carried her to her door at the end of the hall. She had her keys in hand, but had trouble unlocking the door while still watching the corner, waiting to see the shadow of the stranger emerge and catapult toward her. Her eyes toggled back and forth from the far corner of the hallway to the silver doorknob until the pinnacle moment that she felt the lock release and the door glide open. Within seconds, she was slamming the door behind her, forcefully throwing the locks, then racing to the bathroom.

Regina decided that first thing tomorrow she would talk to security about the strange man and then head straight to the leasing office for a parking space, but she knew herself and by tomorrow she would probably have reasoned that the parking space was just a waste of money and the stranger was just an awkward man doing a very bad job at coming on to her.

Considering she was never home, her apartment was immaculate that night as it usually was. She poured a glass of wine then put a frozen meal in the microwave to heat. Regina plopped down on the couch and flipped on the TV, falling asleep before getting out of her scrubs or having her late night dinner. Regina woke up on the couch several times before deciding to make the exhausted journey down the hall and bury herself in her queen-sized bed.

Two bulky, black plastic bags sat next to one another on the muddy forest ground. An array of voices filled the spaces between the trees in uneven, rhythmless tones, along with the sporadic feedback from two-way radios. Emerging seamlessly from the fog, Regina found herself running. Her feet pounded the pavement in a stable beating sequence alongside the sound of her pulsating heart thudding against her chest. Taking long elegant strides, she could feel every part of her body.

Classical music began to fill the brisk fall air, dramatically drumming with its fantastic highs and lows to an orgasmic climax, invading every corner of her confused mind. More thuds fell rapidly on the highway behind her; someone was chasing her. Beats came faster and faster, from her heart and from two sets of hunting and hunted feet. Reducing her speed by even a second, to turn and look back was something she dared not do; there was no time. Just ahead at the edge of the forest, yellow-raincoat-draped police officers trailed in and out of the woods that sat east of the highway.

Please turn around, please look up and see me, Regina thought, frantically trying to invade the thoughts of the focused police officers.

Regina took particular note of the trees and the way they sat, she observed the details of the highway. A deer crossing sign sat just beyond the metal railway that guarded drivers from gliding off of the cement and into the creek and there was a single bullet-hole at the bottom left corner of the bright yellow warning that had been there since she was a child. Her heart dropped as the grisly realization set in that this was the highway that guided people into the town of Black Water.

She was home.

Regina opened her mouth to scream, but everything fell ominously quiet and she could force no hellish shriek from her vocal chords. Faster, she ran but her stamina threatened to abandon her completely. Despite the goal she was trying to reach or the monster she so desperately hoped to escape, she could only run so far and she could only run for so long. Regina threw her hands up like flags waving for the help that was flaunted in the band of officers just ahead of her. Again, she opened her mouth, wider this time, but the gaping hole of silence still gave no sound. Regina could only hear the heavy pounding, but it was no longer in her ears, it was in her head, like a headboard against a wall, it banged. The harder she ran toward the safety of the police gathering, the farther away they stretched before her until they were tiny points of color at the end of a gray stretch of lonely highway. There was no choice but to turn around, no choice but to face the force that hunted her down, for she could no longer outrun it and the journey was calling for an end. She halted, spun around, and a loud clap crashed down on her head, instantly collapsing her to the hard asphalt road like a house of cards elegantly toppled by the wind.

The dream violently spit the girl back into reality with a sharp jolt that threw her promptly into an upright and defensive position. Chang, her pudgy, black cat who had been sleeping restfully at Regina's feet screeched as he elongated his body in a lightning-fast spring from the bed and away from the unhinged girl whom he mistakenly thought he could trust. A twice-startled Regina threw herself away from the spooked animal, forcefully thrusting her head back into the wooden headboard. Regina clenched her pain-filled head with both hands, squinting at the platinum moonlight, which was the only soothing presence on a ghastly night such as this.

Sleep would not find Regina twice in one evening. She contemplated getting out of bed to watch more television, but she was comfortable and a change of location seemed an unnecessary hassle. Regina tossed until she found the slightest bit of solace on her side and she lay there staring at the alarm clock by her bed. Emerald green numbers stared back at her, the only company she kept on an evening when the twisting in her stomach warned her that something on this peculiar night would surface, cold and bloated with secrets. The green lines on the clock flickered signaling the movement of time from one day into the next—midnight. Shrill ringing from the telephone exploded into the room. Regina shot up, jerking the phone to her ear before it could complete its first ring.

“Hello?” Regina spoke in a cracked whisper. On the other end of the phone, she heard a delicate gasp, a few moments of silence and then a voice spoke to her.

“Regina? Is that you?” the raspy voice croaked.

“This is Regina, who is this?” Regina asked, pushing the covers from her bed, pulling her legs closer to her.

“They found her, Regina...they found her.” The voice on the other end of the phone vomited the harsh news, causing her to remove the phone from her ear and frown at it like some alien artifact.

Regina muffled a powerful sob before returning the phone to her ear.

Almost six years had passed since Regina had heard the gravelly voice on the other end of the line, but there was as little need, now, to inquire about the identity of the person on the other end of the phone as there was to inquire about “who” had been found.

Nikki Valentine was calling to tell her that Lola Rusher had been found.

Years before when balmy summers seemed endless and unfettered laughter was traded over school cafeteria tables, Regina Dean, Nikki Valentine, Lola Rusher and Natalie Weston were best friends, soul mates, almost sisters until the day, eight years ago, when Lola Rusher vanished. The disappearance of Lola Rusher devastated her friends, their families, and the entire town of Black Water. One day she was there and the next day she was gone with such finality one could almost think she never existed. Some said that Lola ran away, but popular theory stated that one of the many shady truckers that made their course through the town on I-48 abducted her, but without a trace of evidence, they could never prove anything and soon Lola was just a beautiful memory. Lola Rusher walked out of the Black Water library one evening and nobody saw her again.

“Her body was buried on the DeFrank estate,” Nikki told her.

“WHAT?” Regina found herself almost yelling. On the other end of the line, Nikki replied with a deep exhale before continuing.

“The Madsen kids were playing out in the woods, they got onto the DeFrank property where one of them saw the top of a garbage bag that was buried. They started digging. They thought they had found a treasure.”

“What?” Regina repeated; no other word in the human language could express her complete disorientation.

“So she was just stuffed into a garbage bag and buried on DeFrank’s land?” Regina asked.

Nikki forced herself to breathe in an attempt to stop trembling enough to speak.

“First, she was cut up and then buried,” Nikki revealed. Regina could feel herself beginning to hyperventilate at the gruesome thought of someone mutilating her friend.

“No,” Regina moaned as her eyes began to glaze over with tears.

“Her family is having a funeral. I feel like I’m going crazy. You have to come back, Regina...please, I’m begging you. Come back,” Nikki pleaded with the girl who was once her best friend, whom she now barely knew.

Black Water was a distant, but intimate series of recollections for Regina. Lola had

disappeared eight years ago and Regina left Black Water two years later when she turned eighteen. All of the good times filled her memory, but once Lola disappeared, everything fell apart and all she wanted was out. With Lola gone, it felt as if the walls of Black Water were closing in on her; she found it more difficult to breathe there with every passing day. There was something in the air. As soon as she was able, she fled to college and never returned. Regina had not gone back even to visit her parents. In the past, her parents had visited her in Texas, but she would not go back to Black Water. Over the years, it was made clear that she had absolutely no intention of returning, but saying no now seemed like a farfetched option. The very thing that had sent her away was now calling her back and no excuse was feasible. She could tell Lola's parents or herself nothing that would justify her absence.

"OK. I'm coming." She announced to herself as much to the woman on the other end of the phone. She had a hard time believing the words that she was sure had just tumbled out of her mouth. Her throat throbbed as she swallowed and her stomach was churning at the dreadful thought. Both girls rested comfortably in the momentary silence.

"I'll be there soon." Regina confirmed the self-treasonous decision.

"You promise, Regina?" Nikki pushed. She had to know that Regina would be there.

"Yes. I'll be there soon." Regina's words assuaged the unnerved woman and without another word between them, both women let their phones fall back to their cradles. Both aware that there was nothing more to be said, there would be no exchanges of common courtesies or traditional inquiries. The only thing between them was the distance that was no longer able to help Regina run away.

Regina could feel the darkness in the room inching closer. Wandering through her small apartment, Regina flipped switches until every light bulb in the apartment glowed. The girl dropped into her couch and leaned back, exhaling deeply at the sight of the future that was plowing her way.

She had to go. Destiny was setting in motion a chain of events that would lead her back to the place she came from and either free her forever from the chains of the history in Black Water...or bury her there.

Chapter 3

Murky raindrops spattered down from the charcoal sky and Regina could feel the chill of the liquid on her forehead through the thick glass of her mother's car window.

"How you doing, angel?" her father broke the silence that was beginning to thicken in the car.

"As good as can be, considering the circumstances." Regina explained never moving her forehead from the backseat window or taking her eyes off the landscape of trees, their leaves the color of far-off desert sands, a brilliant harbinger of the glacial months that were sure to soon follow. All of the farmlands appeared forsaken under the leaden light of the sky. The scenes whirled by her as the sedan sped down Culliver Parkway, dragging her back to Black Water. Regina looked solemnly down at her hands that were dry and beginning to crack and she wished that she had worn gloves. Somehow, she had forgotten how cold Black Water was in the fall.

"Of course, we hate the circumstances, but we are so glad that you are home. It's been so long." Her mother added to the conversation. Three times in the past six years Regina's parents had been to Texas to visit her, but she had never, not once, returned to the delicate rolling hills of the Midwest that her parents and their parents before them and so on and so on had called home for as long as anyone could remember.

"Yeah," Regina responded to her mother with the involuntary eye roll that had become an automatic response to her mother's guilt trips. "Did you hear anything new this morning?" Regina inquired.

"We left town pretty early to head to the airport so we didn't get a chance to talk to anyone before we left. If you're hungry we can stop by the diner to get lunch, if there is anything new to know, we will hear it there." Mrs. Dean told her daughter.

"Especially if Michelle is working." Mr. Dean added with an eye roll identical to the one that he had passed down to his only daughter. Charles Dean allowed most things to slide inconsequently off his back with a nonchalant eye roll or shoulder shrug and Regina had always wished that she could have been more like her father who was always easygoing. If there were ever an instance of bad restaurant service or being overcharged at the store it would be Regina's father who would have to calmly point out the incident and bring it to resolution because her mother was usually too quick to irritation to handle the situations with much finesse. Her mother never failed to get the job done, but whether she had a friend after always remained to be seen. Regina ended up with a temperament somewhere in the middle.

"Yeah...I guess I could go for a burger or something." Regina answered her father

after thinking. In her stomach, the rumblings consisted of dread as much as they did of hunger pains.

Old Country Diner or the OC as she and her friends had referred to it in high school was still her favorite. All the way to Texas and back, and Regina had to admit that the OC still had the best burgers, fries, and shakes of any place on the map. The burgers were always a little drippy with grease and the cheese perfectly melted down the side of the patty, caramelized onions, fresh lettuce and tomatoes, mayonnaise and mustard—just thinking about it made her mouth water. Black Water was not a place where people worried too much over their weight; besides, country living consisted of several outdoor activities that easily burned a burger off in a couple of hours. Regina would pass on the shake since she was not the same effortlessly light-weight that she had been in high school and she no longer took much to country living. The young woman remained thin in her early twenties, but what had been simple before, now took a concentrated effort.

Regina was so focused on the anticipated lunch that she took no notice of the deer crossing sign with the bullet-hole as the car sped past.

Dreaming of the burger and sugared fries while listening to the euphoric classical music that played on the radio took Regina away. She closed her eyes and did her best to forget where she was and why she was there. When she opened her eyes, she could see the old Waterford factory. Once bright and promising, the building was long ago abandoned and now covered in a layer of smut that reflected the fact that no one loved the place anymore. Most of the windows were broken out and graffiti tattooed the walls. She sat up straight and moved closer to the window to get a better look at the landmark on Culliver Parkway that told her, no matter how much she despised the idea, she was home. Seeing the old place meant that she was now only a few minutes outside of Black Water, minutes away from Oakley High School where she had once laughed uproariously in the hallways, minutes from the Fairview two-screen movie theatre, where she and her friends had spent several Saturday nights eating popcorn and watching movies, minutes away from Klein park where she and the girls would sneak away to conduct secret girls club meetings.

“Such a shame,” her father interrupted. With his words, Regina looked up to see that they were now passing the DeFrank estate. Wheezing for air, Regina withdrew from the window as if she had seen a ghost. Yellow tape was strung around the gates and trees that served as the perimeter of the property. The sight hit her like a brick wall.

“You OK, honey?” Regina’s mother was watching her closely in the rearview mirror as she drove; her father unbuckled his seatbelt and turned completely around in the passenger seat to ensure that Regina was not too disturbed by the surprisingly tranquil scene.

No longer were there trucks, police officers, or a dead body, just an empty shell of a home that sat far back in the distance across a massive field of browning grass and tall stretching trees on the verge of shedding their leaves.

Drumming out of the radio, a robust classical piece of music continued rising

frantically in her ears. Through the breaks in the tall trees that were scattered throughout the football field that the DeFranks had once called a front yard, Regina eyed the forlorn monolithic mansion, two vast stories of cold, unmoving panel and brick. The music drove full speed toward a climactic finish as the dormant domicile sat across from Regina, challenging her. It laughed at her. Lola was trapped there, on that unholy ground and it would not release her. Regina's ears were pounded with the beats of the abusive music grappling toward crescendo. She pressed her fingertips against the cool window and suddenly she heard her own voice shrieking.

"TURN IT OFF! TURN IT OFF! PLEASE STOP!" Regina barely realized that she was now banging her fists against the thick glass. Charles Dean reached into the backseat trying to pacify his little girl as her mother pushed the radio station buttons hysterically hoping to relieve her daughter of the sounds that tormented her.

"I'm so sorry, honey," her mother was chanting loudly, trying to drown out the sorrowful cries of her daughter. Regina's father joined her mother in the soothing.

"We never thought that you would react this way to seeing the house," her father assured her and with good reason. Regina Dean had always been one to push her emotions deep down inside, her stoic manner masking her true sentiment.

Minutes later, Regina found herself breathing steadily in the back of the car, listening to the remnants of her parents bickering, her mother restating her theory that it would have been best to go all the way around and come into town directly on I-48, rather than taking the most common route on Culliver Parkway. Her father apologized profusely but loyal to his reasoning that it would have taken them an hour out of the way.

Regina shrunk deeper in the soft leather of the seat trying to tame the embarrassment that she felt at the episode that had just taken place. Somehow, she had lost all control and became only a helpless onlooker as the mental deterioration unfolded. Showing her emotions was something that she hated to do because emotions were a sign of weakness and once people knew your weakness you were at their mercy; a position in which she never wanted to find herself. Being at the mercy of another was the gate to a mind hell.

Regina was relieved when they finally pulled up in the gravel drive in front of the oblong building that was the town diner. Her muscles were cramped and stiff from the long ride from the airport. The brisk fall day released a salvo of wind upon Regina's smooth skin as she stepped out of the car in front of the OC diner. She squinted her eyes against the October wind that was drying her face. Main Street was nothing like it had been when she left, but almost the same way it had been when she was child. Peering up and down the street, Regina stretched while trying to familiarize herself with a past that she knew all too well.

She pulled her cellular phone from her jeans pocket to make sure that the hospital had not tried to contact her. Disappointment racked her when she saw that she had no missed calls.

Her eyes swept up and down the clean sidewalk until they hung on a strange man. A tall, anomalous creature with his black pinpoint pupils trained on her. Even as she took

notice of his stare, he never blinked, wanting her to know that she was the object of his full attention. The shadows of the shade under the store awnings made it difficult to definitively document the details of his face, but there was no doubt that he was set on Regina Dean. His mouth twisted in an ominous sneer and his eyes seared through her with electrifying exactitude. Regina's first thought was to be angry with the shameless derelict scrutinizing her, but the sensation of the hairs raising on her body gave her a second thought and she began backing away. Regina stumbled upon her father's feet as he came up behind her, she was jolted, and then watched in slow motion as her \$400 phone fell into a foul puddle of leftover rainwater. She quickly retrieved the phone from the water and shook it rapidly while cursing herself.

"What is it, Regina?" her father asked. Regina returned her eyes to the bold stranger, who still studied her. She tried, but failed to break the trance that the glowing eyes cast upon her.

"That man!" her voice quivered.

"What man?" her father demanded, stepping closer and leaning forward for a better look into the inconspicuous crowd of people that paraded up and down the sidewalk.

"Right there..." She pointed a shaking finger. "...He is staring at me!" she insisted.

Charlie Dean peered down the street ready to set straight any man who was making his daughter feel uneasy. Any other day Mr. Dean would have allowed the incident to pass without much thought and instructed his daughter to follow his lead, but considering the fragile state of his little girl the least he could do was ensure that she felt safe. Mr. Dean laid eyes on the shady character, but quickly returned the focus back to his daughter with a soft smirk.

"Are you joking with me, little girl?" he asked as he began to laugh.

"What?" she asked, annoyed by the fact that her father was questioning her when some freak was stalking her like jungle prey.

Regina looked back and forth between the creepy man and her father several times, growing more aggravated with each glance by the fact that her father seemed unmoved.

Regina took a few steps toward the man only to reveal that the grotesque character was not a man at all but a life-size figure of some gory horror movie villain. Seeing the statue with new eyes, Regina scolded herself for being so silly since the monster did not even look human to her anymore. Regina and her father broke into laughter.

"I'm sorry, Dad. This whole thing has just got me so wound up that I feel crazy." Regina's words were muffled through the hand that she had thrown up to cover her mortified face.

"I understand. It's just good to see you smiling at least," Mr. Dean told his daughter.

How could I have forgotten? Regina wondered. Halloween was due in three days. With everything happening so rapidly and all of the thoughts racing through her mind, Regina forgot that a major holiday was just around the corner, a holiday that had been one of her favorites. Halloween, like most holidays were of great significance in the country, frankly, because it's difficult to get excited about cows, chickens, corn and a

two-screen movie theatre all year around. Holidays were important and people from towns like Black Water tended to do them big.

As if a veil had been lifted, Regina quickly took to admiring the holiday spirit that infected the town. Her creepy stalker served as decoration that had been placed outside of 24/7 Dry Cleaners. Regina jumped back as a string of children sped past her yipping and laughing on their bikes, the leader of the bikers wearing a cartoon mask. Eerie-faced pumpkins loomed in several of the store windows, while the bread store had a poster in their window marketing their “killer” sale on all Halloween cakes and candies. Clark’s Antiques and Sculptures needed no decoration, for the melancholy stone angels and ornamented crucifixes that regularly dressed the windows served to be creepy enough all on their own. Maybe Black Water wasn’t going to be as awful as she had imagined. She smiled as her father placed his arm around her and she snuggled into his shoulder.

“Are you guys coming?” Regina’s mother had returned to the door of the diner to look for her husband and daughter.

“Yes, dear,” her father answered in a mocking tone.

“My phone is ruined,” Regina told her father as she held up the dripping device.

“Trick or treat,” Charlie Dean teased.

Regina and her father made their way up the cement stairs still cuddled together.

Full of oil, loaded with everything and a side of those sugar seasoned fries, Regina’s burger came just as she ordered it and she felt her jeans tightening just looking at the gluttonous meal. Exaggerated ecstasy costumed Regina’s face as she chewed one of the ketchup-dipped fries.

“This is my one food treat while I am here,” she declared to her parents before she tore into her burger like a ravenous animal.

“You trying to convince us or yourself?” her father joked. Regina tried to laugh, but her mouth was stuffed and she didn’t want to risk a mound of fresh flesh going down the wrong tube so she settled for a mocking facial expression.

“You look thin. You don’t need to be on a diet.” Her mother instructed. “I can see your collarbone. You’re not supposed to be able to see that on a person,” her mother lectured with a raised eyebrow.

“It’s not a diet, Mom; it’s a way of life,” Regina responded.

“Fine, I’m just saying a burger every once in a while never hurt anyone.”

“Nah, never hurt anyone to have a burger, but I understand where Regina’s coming from.” Her father refereed the situation with his usual charm. He patted the protrusion that fell slightly over his belt. “I need to get a new way of life so that I can get rid of this. Come Christmas time, I may be able to get some part-time work playing Santa Claus.” Charlie winked at his daughter.

“So do you want to talk about it?” her mother cut the silence, skillfully regaining control of the conversation. Her father looked at his wife wondering if he should encourage or discourage the conversation at this time.

Regina sighed through the chewed pieces of burger.

“Not really, but I guess we kind of have to at some point.” Regina responded.

“Doesn’t look like Michelle is working today so I guess we just have to work with the information we have.” Her father commented.

“We were just devastated when we heard and the worst part was having to call and tell you the news,” her mother said.

That fateful night came streaming back, Regina’s parents had called her several times after her surprise call from Nikki Valentine, but Regina lacked the strength to pick up the phone and hear the devastating words all over again. Regina had just laid in bed, curled up like a child, crying until her tears dried under the rising sun. When she was finally able to pick up one of her parents’ calls her response was robotic.

“Hello?”...

“Yes.” To the first question.

“No.” To the second question.

“There was a storm; there was trouble with the phones.” Regina fabricated the weather.

When her mother got to the reason for her call, Regina gave a weak, but truthful reply.

“I can’t believe this.” Her eyes had been dry for some time at that moment and she managed to numb her emotion just enough to make it through the day. Regina withheld the fact that she had known for hours now that the body of her long lost friend was found buried in the dirt that belonged to Glen DeFrank.

Regina forced down another bite of the burger that was now dripping oil down the corner of her mouth, she wiped her face with one of the white cloth napkins.

“Yeah it’s pretty terrible.” Regina admitted.

“We didn’t want to tell you all of the details, but hell we’re in Black Water, you can’t flush before everyone knows you took a crap around here so we thought you better hear it from us,” her mother explained.

“She was dismembered,” her mother blurted out causing that inevitable lump to catch in Regina’s throat. She struggled to cough the piece of flesh into a place where it could go down the proper tube. Fortunately, it resituated itself in a safe place with the first forceful gag. Of course, Nikki had given her this information over the phone, but the hideous detail mowed Regina down again as if she was hearing it for the first time. Regina placed down the less than half of a burger that remained on the blue ceramic plate. Scanning the room, Regina noticed that people were staring at her and she sunk back into her seat holding her hand up to her head to cover her face, hoping that would keep people from realizing that they were discussing what everyone in Black Water was discussing.

Regina took several swallows of her water before speaking.

“What do you mean?” she asked, wanting to find out if her parents had any more facts than Nikki had been able to supply. But her parents’ horrified expressions made her speak again to relieve them of the anxiety that she could see was crawling up inside them

at the thought of having to explain that sentence in any more detail.

"Never mind, I know what you mean. I...I...just don't understand why someone would want to do that to Lola," she said as an expression of deep thought spread across her face.

"Oh, honey, why would anyone want to do that to anyone is the question, but it happens all the time," her father told her.

"There are just some plain ole sicko psychos out there!" her mother confirmed.

"Do they have any suspects?" Regina asked.

"Nah!" her mother spoke rashly, dismissing her daughter's question with a prompt swipe of her hand. "Nobody around here, at least. People are thinking that it could have been some trucker going through town, attacked her and then buried her somewhere out in that massive forest that the DeFranks called an estate on his way out of town.

DeFrank

Regina thought to herself. Regina remembered the DeFrank home well yet so many of the memories remained lost in an ancient blur. She supposed that there were just some things in everyone's past that were more vivid than others. Catherine and Don DeFrank barely held any memory in her brain anymore. Despite the fact that she and the girls were at their home every Tuesday evening for piano lessons with their seventeen-year-old-son Glen, she barely ever saw Mr. and Mrs. DeFrank. Whenever one of the girls would inquire as to the whereabouts of Mr. and Mrs. DeFrank on one of their lesson nights, they were informed that they were working, as they usually were, at the Waterford factory

Glen DeFrank began giving the girls piano lessons when they were seven years old. Glen was nice; he was funny and it didn't hurt that he was not hard on the eyes.

Natalie Weston loved the piano; it had been she who showed initial interest in lessons and it was known that the DeFrank boy played the piano very well. A job for Glen DeFrank was hardly necessary since the DeFrank family was what most country people thought of as rich. Nice cars and a massive home were just some of the perks of being one of the DeFranks, but they still valued hard work and when asked, thought the job of piano teacher would add to their son's character.

Natalie informed the other girls of her new adventure and being that they had always done everything together, the girls hoped that this would be no exception and it was not. Natalie took the piano seriously and Regina discovered a natural aptitude for the instrument; with her love for music with much practice, she turned out to be a decent player, but the Tuesday night ritual became more of an entertaining weekly outing for the girls. It was a chance for them to get out of their houses on a school night, go to the DeFrank mansion and drool over Glen DeFrank for an hour. Regina remembered how much they looked forward to their Tuesday evening all week. It was thrilling that some of the other girls at Redding Elementary had even been jealous of their standing date with the tall high school senior.

Once or twice, the girls had encountered Glen DeFrank's parents in the spectacular home, and they were always perfectly hospitable. His mother had even made them

chocolate chip cookies once, that they had eaten at the kitchen table after their lesson. On that particular day Regina recalled seeing the DeFranks' daughter who would frequently skulk about the house alongside the housekeeper or nanny when the girls were there for their lesson. The DeFrank girls' name escaped Regina, but she was a couple of years younger than Regina and her friends and by that fact alone was deprived of most of their attentions. Just after their second year of lessons Glen DeFrank's parents died.

Regina let the DeFranks wander out of her thoughts as she sat back in the booth and looked away from her mother and father, trying to signal that she was almost at her end with this conversation.

Unable to muster the stomach fortification to devour another piece of meat, she picked up one of her fries, dipped it into the vanilla shake that she had promised herself she wouldn't have and took a bite.

"Is that it?" she asked dryly. "Do they know anything else?" It was amazing that just talking about something so incredibly heinous could emotionally exasperate one to the point of being physically tired.

"Nope, that is it for now. Sheriff Handow is rounding the troops to go back over the case, asking more questions, but I guess we'll just have to wait and see."

"...And by troops you mean goober, step-goober, and goober-in-law?" Regina had somehow regained some of her humor at the mention of the Black Water police force.

Her father laughed before confirming that Sheriff Handow had his son, his stepson, and his son-in-law, the only officers in Black Water, on the case. Despite her friendly name calling, Regina actually liked Sheriff Handow's son, Lawson. In high school he had been a sweet boy, but not particularly bright.

"Jesus," Regina sighed, indicating her lack of faith in the team of authorities that was working the case.

"Ready to go?" her father asked before they all pushed themselves out of the booth. Regina could take no more of this conversation, but still she feared getting into the car that would take her deeper into the shaded streets of Black Water.

Chapter 4

Black Water was a small town. Once you gave a street name with a description of a nearby landmark, such as on Elm Street by the library, your Black Water native could almost pinpoint your location exactly. Every street in the entire town, with the exception of Main Street, had been named after a tree or flower and; as a child, Regina had always wondered who made that decision. The home of Charlie and Patricia Dean sat several blocks off Main on Pine Street. Gentle fall winds slipped in through the cracked window of the car as her father turned onto their block, which smelled of pots bubbling with delicious concoctions and fresh loads of laundry that people hung on the lines in their backyards until the snow came. A number of houses looked older now, while some were fresh with updates, but they all fit together perfectly like the pieces of a bizarre puzzle.

The Queen Anne-style home beamed in the colorful fall landscape, with its rich maroon and forest green accents. The curved porch made the home a romantic kind of place where one would want to waste away slow evenings sipping coffee and watching their children grow. Oversized bay windows on the second floor brought the nostalgia as she remembered all of the nights that she sat in her room looking out her window, watching people go by. One of her great, great grandfathers had built the home in the early 1900s and it had passed on from generation to generation until it was bestowed upon her mother. Two green rocking chairs swayed back and forth on the broad porch, pushed tenderly by the autumn winds, one of the same rocking chairs that her mother rocked her in when she cried as a baby. Regina stepped out of the car and admired the four walls that encompassed her childhood, she sighed deeply as her eyes dragged over all of its memory-evoking parts. The dread began to drain out of her stomach, as the arrival had not been the awful torment that she had anticipated. She had been afraid of visiting her old haunts, fearful of the effect that encountering all of the places that she had spent time with Lola, Nikki, and Natalie would be too overwhelming for her, but she was starting to think that she had been wrong. Actually, she felt almost comfortable on the street where even after all of these years, she still knew every house, every tree, and every old rusted swing set that sat in some of the backyards. Mr. Dean grabbed Regina's bags from the trunk and began to make his way up the drive before he looked back to his daughter who was still set in marvel.

"You OK?" he asked. Her mother stared, waiting patiently from the porch for her daughter's answer.

"I'm fine; it's just been so long. I think that I will go over to the Rushers' first, if you guys don't mind," she told her parents, who looked to each other, worry etched deep into

the surfaces of their faces. After a wave of pregnant silence, her mother spoke.

“OK,” her mother agreed. “I am going to start dinner in a bit, lasagna, your favorite,” Mrs. Dean tempted.

Regina smiled. “OK, Mom. Don’t worry, OK. I’m fine. I’ll be back shortly.”

Regina tried her best to shove her fingers in her skinny jean pockets as she turned and walked back down the drive. She didn’t look back, but she knew that her parents had not moved from their positions, like statues, and probably still had their eyes attached to her. She didn’t look back.

Everything was different here, even the crisp, late-afternoon air smelled foreign as she filled her lungs with a heap of it.

Regina Dean was not sure what to expect at the Rusher home and her mind was beginning to wander.

How would Lola’s parents react to seeing her?

What had her family been going through since the body was discovered?

Lola’s home was a couple of long country blocks from her own, but the streets were wide and lined with animated trees and she took comfort in the certainty that the neighborhood overall would make for enjoyable scenery. Another block still lay stretched out in front of her when she heard a crackling behind her; the breaking of a thin switch underfoot. The girl stopped and turned around to face the gray gloomy street. For a moment she felt the eerie sensation that came with the realization that one may not actually be alone when they assumed that they had been. Goosebumps emerged on her arms in intimidating numbers. She wished that she had dressed for the weather that she was coming into instead of the weather that she had left behind. The rain had never come but a sporadic drizzle kept the air moist.

After scanning the street and rubbing her arms to create a friction that would relieve the chill, she turned and continued to her destination. *Nothing to be afraid of*, she thought, *just ghosts*.

As she walked, she could feel the eyes; someone was watching her, they could see her, but she could not see them. Regina slowed her pace as her instinct directed until she was completely still.

“Lola,” her heart stopped for just a beat when she heard someone call out to her. Regina looked around and pinpointed an arm waving wildly.

Mrs. Landcaster.

“I mean Nikki...” Mrs. Landcaster sputtered. “I mean, Regina, is that you?” after several failed attempts, she was able to match the correct face with the name. Regina remembered how Mrs. Landcaster always used to call out at least three or four names before she could fish out the right one for the person with whom she was speaking. For many years now, the older woman had been planted on her porch. Every afternoon and evening, the old woman sat there sipping steaming hot coffee. Regina wondered how she could even blink, let alone sleep at night when she drank coffee until evening every day. In fact, it had been a running joke that Mrs. Landcaster didn’t sleep because she was on

her porch as soon as the sun came up and she was always there when it set. The woman had always claimed to love the fresh night air and it was possible that she did, but it hardly seemed a coincidence that she started spending all of her time outside the house after her husband left her years before. Some people said she hated being in the home where they had spent their happy years together, while others speculated that the trauma sparked some severe hoarding behavior that made her house unlivable; nevertheless, it was well-known that it was more than the night air that she hoped to encounter every evening as she sat outside. Mrs. Landcaster was a mix between the Black Water news and neighborhood watch. She saw everything that happened on her block and had a photographic memory about every car that had driven up and down the block, at what time, and everyone who was in it, but somehow still regularly misplaced her keys and had trouble remembering where she parked when she went to shop on Main Street.

Regina jogged up the stone walk so that she could greet the older woman. Mrs. Landcaster was wearing fitted denim jeans over her slim body; she wore a white T-shirt with a long-sleeved denim collar shirt over it. Her hair was short and brushed back and several gold bangle bracelets ornamented her wrists. The woman that, Regina guessed, was in her mid-sixties always wore the same set of gold rings on her fingers, between which she usually clamped a cigarette.

"I am sorry; you know that I know your name, but I just get them all confused sometimes," Mrs. Landcaster said. "Besides, you girls used to be so close it became difficult to tell you apart, except that you look nothing alike." Mrs. Landcaster spoke with a laugh before bringing her cigarette to her lips and sucking furiously, which amplified all of the lines around her mouth.

Regina laughed. Mrs. Landcaster's face was marked with hundreds of lines created over the years by age and cigarettes.

"How are you, Mrs. Landcaster?" Regina asked.

"Oh...fair to middlin'...fair to middlin'," Mrs. Landcaster responded. Regina had not heard that phrase since she was a child and her grandfather was alive.

"That's good," Regina said. "It's kind of chilly out here." Regina commented. "Well it doesn't much matter to me; I sit out here every day, all day...because I enjoy it," Mrs. Landcaster said with a certain lack of enthusiasm that failed to convince Regina of her sincerity. The weather was quite icy and she eyed the cup of coffee that Mrs. Landcaster was sipping. The older woman must have seen Regina's longing gaze fall flatly on the cup.

"Would you like a cup?" Mrs. Landcaster offered. Regina knew that she should be on her way, but it was cold and she did not want to disappoint the old woman.

"Sure," Regina answered. Mrs. Landcaster smiled; she placed her cup of coffee on the porch railing and pulled out a ring of keys that jangled with abundance. She searched through the keys one by one, studying each with an analytic eye before flipping it over and moving to the next. Her cigarette was cocked up at one side of her crinkled mouth. After locating the correct key, she opened the door just wide enough for her thin body to

snake through. Moments later, she returned with a second cup of coffee. Regina was excited at the sight of the steam rising off the top. Mrs. Landcaster handed her the white ceramic cup and then brought out her keys once again to lock the door behind her.

Regina's eyes narrowed as she watched Mrs. Landcaster's strange ritual with the locks and keys. She blew her boiling coffee before raising it to her chapped lips.

Both women looked up, noticing one of the Black Water police cars driving by the house, but the dark tints on the windows made it impossible to make out the person inside. Mrs. Landcaster held up a hand in greeting.

"Nosy son of a gun." Mrs. Landcaster muttered to herself with her hand still up before the car had fully passed. Regina snickered at the lady's ornery response to the town's police authority.

Pot, have you met kettle? Regina thought to herself.

"So you here for Lola's funeral, are ya?" Regina was sure that Mrs. Landcaster already knew the answer to that question. If Regina remembered correctly, it was rare that Mrs. Landcaster asked a question to which she did not already have the answer.

"Yes, I am," Regina told her.

"Yeah," the spinster dragged her word out to linger on the afternoon air.

"Terrible thing, terrible thing." Mrs. Landcaster shook her head, her eyes momentarily wandered to a dark place, before the resilient old woman re-brightened.

"How are you?" she asked. "Haven't seen you in so long, you look good, real pretty...lost a little bit of weight...you look nice, real nice." The cigarette-smoking woman had a way of repeating herself that others probably found annoying, but Regina found it comforting.

"Thank you. I'm great. I live in Texas. I'm an ER nurse, just work, work, work." Regina gave her only the information that she figured safe since she was sure that once Mrs. Landcaster had breakfast at the OC tomorrow morning everyone would get the scoop on one of their return residents.

"OK, OK," the lady said. "A nurse, wow. I bet you make good money?"

"Yeah, I do OK." Regina responded.

"Well that sounds good, real good," Erma Landcaster told her visitor.

Oddly enough, Regina felt relieved that Mrs. Landcaster appeared pleased with the status of her life. The women spoke about life and Black Water, among other things before Regina determined that she had spent enough time delaying her journey.

"I should be going, I need to get by the Rusher's house and make it home before it gets too late." Regina ended the meeting and headed back toward the street, placing her half-empty coffee mug on the railing. She said farewell to Mrs. Landcaster with a quick good-bye and a wave.

"Nice seeing you. You be careful. This town just isn't the same anymore." Mrs. Landcaster warned. "Hasn't been for a while," she added hesitantly as Regina galloped across her lawn. Regina turned back to the woman as a swell of wind blew through Black Water, shaking the trees. She heard a deep wailing that she swore came from inside the

home that continued the shudder in her body that the gale wind had begun. Regina's frightened expression fell on Mrs. Landcaster.

"Just the wind," the woman said, taking a long, relaxed puff on her cigarette. Regina turned back and scuffled into the street before she turned again for one last look. Mrs. Landcaster was gone.

A somber cloud passed, blocking out the sun, making the sky abnormally stygian for early afternoon and Regina felt that Black Water was the only place in the world in that moment where the sun was not shining.

She approached the country farmhouse-style home, where she had been to more sleepovers and pool parties than she could count. Despite the traditional style of the home, it was surprisingly modern; the house was a clean charcoal gray with bright red trimming. All of the lights were on inside of the several square windows that faced the street giving the home an inviting glow. Regina took a deep breath as she stood before the old rickety wooden gate that surrounded the property and whose depressed state did not match the clean lines and vibrant rejuvenation of the home that it enclosed.

Her hand shook as she depressed the small circular button that initiated a series of dings and dongs that sang through the house. Behind the door footsteps shuffled across the floor; she sucked in as much air as possible and held her breath until the door drew open, letting the light spill out unto the gray porch.

"Regina." Mrs. Rusher said Regina's name as if she had been expecting her all of this time, all of these years, just waiting for her to return.

"Mrs. Rusher." Regina responded, not sure whether she was making a statement, asking a question, or answering one. She could not sense, in her own voice, if she was sad, sorry, mad, or scared, but before she could make the final determination Mrs. Rusher's entire body heaved high up before it came crashing down in an implosion of emotion.

Mrs. Rusher had not cried once since Lola's body had been discovered. When the news came she had been preparing an elaborate meal for her husband in order to celebrate nothing but the fact that they still loved each other after so many years when Sheriff Handow showed up with Pastor Reed to deliver the unimaginable news. Mrs. Rusher had intimate experience in the field of death and knew that when the Sheriff and the pastor showed up to the door that it could not be a good thing.

Not again, she thought.

First, she assumed that they were coming to tell her that she had somehow lost her husband too. He had not yet made it home from work. Maybe a car accident or a mysterious shooting, but they assured her that her husband was fine. Next, her thoughts raced to her son Leo, to lose one child was hell, but to lose two would be unbearable. When they told her that Leo, too was fine the woman stood in the doorway with her eyebrows drawn in complete confusion with one open mitted-hand holding the door and a spatula in the other.

"Well, what is it? Tell me, for God's sake before I have a damned heart attack, Joe,"

Mrs. Rusher said to the Sheriff whom she had known her entire life.

"It's Lola, Gloria," He told her.

"What?" she asked. Gloria Rusher had no need to look down; she felt her heart drop out of her chest and she was sure that it was now laying next to her feet, with its blood splattered across her pedicured toes, pulsing in disbelief.

"She's dead," Sheriff Handow told her before the excitement of the possibility of a living daughter had a chance to fill her, which would have been unnecessary cruelty. Gloria stood in the purgatory of her foyer with her spatula still in hand, a million hands grabbing ravenously at her, pulling her in every direction, threatening to rip her into as many pieces as stars in the sky. Closing her eyes, the woman steeled herself, fighting off the growling, spitting demons of guilt, doubt, and helplessness.

"How?" Gloria needed to know.

Sheriff Handow adjusted himself by shifting his weight to his other foot and wrestling to get his gun belt in a more comfortable position. The weather was filled with the threatening chills that foretold winter, but somehow the Sheriff's forehead still glistened with sweat. He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and patted his forehead three times from right to left.

"Maybe we should wait until Bert gets home." Desperately the Sheriff tried putting off the unbearable news.

"Joe, you tell me how my daughter died, right now." Gloria told her high school classmate without the slightest expression of emotion.

Joseph Handow swept his eyes across every surface wanting them to fall anywhere but into hers.

Cheese n' crackers, why in God's name did I ever take this job? He secretly asked himself.

"Right now looks like blunt force trauma to the head and she may have been stabbed." He finally mustered the courage to tell her.

Gloria pictured her daughter being hit over the head, screaming, before hitting the floor and then begging for her life.

"And..." The Sheriff had debated in his head over the past several seconds whether to tell her everything and had determined that no matter how bad, she had a right to know and in Black Water, she would find out sooner rather than later.

"And..." Gloria repeated him, goading him mercilessly to speech.

"Her body was dismembered." He spit before he had any more time to think about it. Gloria Rusher felt the heat begin churning in her chest until it was a full blaze inside of her head making her eyes burn. It was difficult for her to hear anything that was said after those words. He spoke and she watched as his lips moved, laying out all of the known details of the murder of her daughter, but she was already gone.

"Do you want me to pray with you?" Pastor Reed finally asked her after Sheriff Handow finished speaking. Gloria Rusher fixed her eyes on the man of God.

"No." Gloria responded resolutely. She would speak to God when she was ready.

“Please go now. Come back tomorrow when my husband is home.” She instructed the two bearers of the news as she closed them out of her home politely. The woman walked into her formal dining room that had been set for a beautiful dinner with her husband. With a piercing battle screech, she used the spatula to topple the champagne glasses, sending them shattering to the floor. One at a time, she drove the plates into the dining room walls with a scream for each dish. Gloria destroyed everything in the room that she possibly could before sliding down one of the walls until she sat with her legs spread out against the hardwood floor. In the next room, a beautiful dinner sat untouched on the stove. Gloria reviewed the damage that she had done and despite the fact that she did not feel one ounce better she still did not cry.

Despite all of the phoned-in condolences, despite all of the depressing flower bouquets with apologetic cards, despite the barrage of dry casseroles and flavorless meatloaves that had arrived at the front door, Mrs. Rusher had managed to keep the tears inside. She managed to push all of the memories, the rage, the sorrow, the hopelessness, the helplessness far enough down inside that she could pass the time in the day without thinking of the many ways to bring her own suffering to an end.

A gunshot would be simple, but too messy, slicing her wrists just seemed too dramatic; maybe she would just hold her head under the water in the lake, she thought. Before she could get too precise in the planning, she would see her husband, a man whom she did not always see eye to eye with, but who had always been there for her, provided for her family and had been her best friend since they were teenagers.

Mrs. Rusher saw the face of her son, the beaming brown-eyed boy who was now a man and had already had to endure too many years being on his own while she chased a ghost, a man who now had a son of his own. As much as she loved Lola, somewhere along the line, she had realized that Lola was gone, but that she herself was still here; that her family was still here. All of these years she thought that it had been the not knowing that was worst of all, that at least finding her beloved daughter or knowing what happened to her would make the situation better somehow, but now she knew that was bullshit.

She spent years chasing the dragon of closure, but now that she had cornered it, walked upon it and laid her eyes on it, there was nothing but a puff of smoke.

Losing a child was like being an alcoholic; you just have to live with it, fight with it, sleep with it, and struggle with it every day, she concluded. The first time around, Mrs. Rusher had been forced to deal with the fact that her daughter was gone, but now she was forced to live with the fact that she was dead, dead, mutilated, and had been buried not even fifteen miles from her front door step all of this damn time.

That was the killer part!

Her daughter had been right under her nose and she had not even smelled her rotting corpse.

Lola was not here, but the fact that Regina was now standing at her doorstep just made the situation real all over again. It replayed in Gloria Rusher’s head from beginning

to end in a flash. Though Mrs. Rusher still had not come to full terms with the discovery of her daughter's mangled body, she had learned the most painful, but most enlightening lesson of all; that life was for the living and she was glad that Regina was alive and that was the reason she finally cried.

Bert Rusher hurried into the foyer when he heard his wife's cries, the cries that he had been waiting for, the ones that told him that his wife was not stone cold, the ones that confirmed that she was still human. He held his wife for a moment and allowed the relief of his wife's tears to wash over him.

"Regina," he called when he saw her. Both of them grabbed Mrs. Rusher, as it seemed her legs would give out any moment, and helped her past the stairs and into the living room, comforting her until she was able to gain some semblance of composure.

"Oh, Regina," she cried.

"I know, I know." Regina knew nothing, but she felt it was the right thing to say, she realized that somewhere along the way she had begun to cry as well as tears streamed down her soft freckled cheeks.

"I am just so happy to see you." Mrs. Rusher spoke while dabbing her red-rimmed eyes with a white Kleenex.

"I am so happy to see you because I just can't help thinking that I'm glad it wasn't you. Not that I wanted this to happen to my daughter, but...but...it could have just as easily been any one of you and I am just glad that you are alive." Mrs. Rusher experienced the deepest sorrow and the most gleeful joy in one agonizing and triumphant, all-consuming moment.

Tears burst into Regina's palms as she hid her face in her hands, and now, Mr. Rusher sat comforting both women holding, grappling at the last strands of his own diminishing countenance.

After a barrage of tears and decaf coffee, the trio was able to actually exchange words not drowned in complete and overflowing grief. The mourning mother took an elegant sip of her coffee before setting it down on the table and clasping her hands in front of her chin.

"Leo is here." Mr. Rusher smiled heavily.

"How is he?" Regina's face lighted at the memory of the crush she once had on Lola's older brother.

"He is good. He has a wife and a son. They're at the park. He will be so glad to see you."

"Wow, it *has* been a long time. Leo with a little boy..." Regina fought back the tears evoked at the thought of all the lost time.

"I'm glad you came." Mrs. Rusher cut her off as if she had to get the words out before they got stuck in her throat.

"She would have wanted you here, Regina." Mrs. Rusher looked into Regina's glittering rusty brown eyes.

"You were her best friend." She affirmed.

"I had to come." Regina replied simply.

"Regina, let me ask you, do you remember anything? Anything about..."

"Gloria." Mr. Rusher's voice was firm. He placed a comforting, but restraining hand on his wife's back.

"Bert," she shot back. "I just have to ask."

"It's OK," Regina assured them both.

Gloria finished "You were her best friend. Did you notice anything different about her? The way she was acting? Did she say anything to you? I know we have been over all of this a million times, but I can't help but ask."

Regina closed her eyes and thought with intensity before she responded, she searched every corner of her brain, every shadow in her heart, every pit in her stomach, every crease in her soul. Her eyes fluttered rapidly under her soft lids, she searched and searched, questioned, reflected, and debated before opening her eyes, her quivering lips opened slowly and the words that she waited to hear waltzed on the tip of her tongue as the Rushers' hung on every breath, blink and sigh.

Regina was jolted when a series of noisy dings and dongs infiltrated the rooms of the house.

"I just don't recall anything like that." Regina's words exploded into the air and she was crying again. Mrs. Rusher pulled her close as Mr. Rusher hurried to the door.

Stifled voices were exchanged in the foyer. From the couch, Regina could see Sheriff Handow and a short, stout woman in a navy blue suit with a purple sweater underneath coming down the short hall and into the living room.

"Gloria," Sheriff Handow greeted the woman with a hug.

"Joe," she responded.

"Mrs. Rusher," said the stout woman as she wrapped the other woman in a sincere, but somewhat awkward embrace.

"Mayor Parks." Mrs. Rusher accepted the hug.

"Regina, correct?" Sheriff Handow looked Regina over.

"Yes, I am Regina."

"I recall now. Good to see you home." He told her.

Regina gave a slight nod.

Sheriff Handow had questioned her when Lola first vanished. He questioned loads of other students at Oakley High School that knew Lola, but everyone's story was the same. Almost everyone Lola knew was at the home of Stephen Mitchell for a party that night and no one wanted to hurt Lola Rusher.

Now Sheriff Handow stood before her once again and had hardly aged in the past six years since Regina had left the town.

"Regina, this is Mayor Parks. Mayor Parks, this is Regina, she was one of Lola's best friends. They were friends ever since they were children. She has come home for the funeral." Mrs. Rusher introduced her to the mayor of Black Water instantly reminding her yet again of the size of this speck on the map that they called home, considering the

mayor came to your house personally if someone died.

“Nice to meet you.” The short blonde woman shook Regina’s hand lightly, using the same smile that she had undoubtedly used while she was running for mayor, one much too pleasant for this occasion.

“Would anyone care for some coffee?” Mr. Rusher offered. Both visitors needed coffee to brush off the freeze of oncoming winter and the grizzly circumstances of the matter at hand. Mr. Rusher retrieved mugs from the kitchen, poured two new steaming cups of coffee, and topped off the others.

“Is there something new?” Mrs. Rusher asked.

“Well, no.” Mayor Parks looked over all of the parties, allowing her gaze to linger on Regina a second longer than the others.

“It’s OK,” Mrs. Rusher assured her, perceiving her hesitation. “We don’t have anything to hide from Regina; she’s like family.”

Mayor Parks seemed relieved. Sheriff Handow cut into the conversation.

“Gloria, there is nothing new, but Mayor Parks and I were talking and thought about maybe calling off some of the Halloween festivities this year in light of everything that has happened. Everyone knows and everyone is discussing Lola’s discovery. Of course, the children would still trick or treat, but maybe the parade or the festival. I just...We just...” Sheriff Handow couldn’t quite figure out an acceptable way to end the sentence.

“We just don’t want the memory of Lola to be associated with Halloween and turn into some insensitive town ghost story.” Mayor Parks finished. Mrs. Rusher abruptly rose from the couch and walked around it to stare out the large window that overlooked the pool in the backyard.

“We don’t want to take Halloween away from the kids.” Bert Rusher argued.

“My husband is right. Lola is already a town ghost story; she has been since she disappeared eight years ago. Besides, she loved this holiday. We wouldn’t dare.” Mrs. Rusher turned to face her guests and was now speaking faster and more matter-of-factly. Mayor Parks allowed the silence in the room to gel before speaking.

“Well OK then. We will respect your wishes,” the mayor said with a forced smile.

“Do you mind if I go up to Lola’s room?” Regina asked Lola’s parents, trying hard to extract herself before she had to be part of one more round of the depressing conversation.

Everyone stared at her for what seemed like hours before Mrs. Rusher answered.

“Sure, go ahead.”

Regina could still hear remnants of the cancelation of Halloween conversation as she climbed the stairs, which moaned occasionally under her feet. She looked around the home as if this was her first time seeing the place. It had recently been remodeled; as a result, everything was new and beautiful, but she knew, as the groans under the stairs confirmed this was the same old house. Lola’s door was cracked open; Regina walked in and was startled by the figure on the bed.

Chapter 5

A sixteen-year-old Lola sat on the bed with her head phones plugged into her ears, painting her toenails a bright tangerine color, layers of coruscating black hair lay flat against her shoulders, her white teeth were shifted slightly from their straight position since she had recently lost her retainer as she did at least once a year. Lola's gentle face lit up at the sight of her best friend and Regina flounced across the foot of her bed as she had done hundreds of times. Regina closed her eyes and took ecstasy in the moment, but upon opening them, she was alone in the dark, haunted room.

Lola had vanished again and it was no less devastating the second time.

Regina looked around the room once more for the first time in so many years and unlike the rest of the freshly remodeled house, this room remained exactly the same. Her walls were a delicate garden green accented with mellow yellow drapes framing the windows where the sunshine used to pour in during the summer months. Sunlight probably came nowhere near this room now. The green comforter with white polka dots was fluffy and fresh as if it had been washed just a week ago, which it probably had been. Regina gathered all of the discombobulated parts of herself from the bed and strolled over to the dresser where she caressed Lola's intimate possessions, her silver jewelry box and her hair brush. On the corner of Lola's dresser sat her favorite perfume, La Beaute, which Regina had banned her from wearing while in her presence because it made her cough uncontrollably.

I'm allergic to you! She always teased Lola when she insisted on wearing the perfume whose aroma was a heinous mix of rotting roses and Irish bar soap.

From one end of the room to the next, Lola had strung clothesline, and used clothespins to attach Polaroids evenly along the lines. Regina admired the photographs that had hung on that clothesline unmoved for years. Some of them were beginning to fade into a yellow fog, distorting their doppelganger images, threatening to choke them out of the pictures altogether. In one photo a younger Lola was leaning over her mother, who sat in a chair on the front porch, Lola was smiling wildly in her usual excited, cheerleading personality.

How was it possible to be so happy? Regina wondered.

Another was a picture of Lola, Regina, Nikki, and Natalie, taken one Sunday afternoon at the lake when they were just girls. They looked jovial but their faces were drawn in subtle expressions, tiresome and wilted. Regina could still smell the summer flowers. The sun was fiery that day, but a cool breeze brushed over the land a couple of times every hour making the afternoon bearable.

Lola's father was at the barbecue pit giving instructions to Regina's father on how wonderfully tender he was able to make the ribs. At a picnic table, the wives sat chattering. Gloria Rusher was handing out paper plates and napkins. In the glow of the July sun, she looked vibrant; she wore a brightly colored scarf around her head to keep her gleaming black hair from tumbling down into her jovial face. As a young bride she had begun having her children early and was a few years younger than the other mothers at the table, but she fit in so well it was seldom that anyone remembered the age gap. The other women hardly noticed the difference in Gloria's age, but the girls did. Mrs. Rusher was cooler than their mothers, not better or more loving, but more exciting. The Rushers had a trampoline and they would let the girls jump off the roof onto the trampoline, causing them to flare with exhilaration. Lola's mom and dad did things that the other girls' parents would not have given second thought to and the girls loved every second.

Natalie's father was absent and had been for a long time. He went to work one day and never came home. Later Natalie's mother, Carla Weston, discovered that he had not gone to work at all that day, and that their bank account was suddenly empty. Natalie and her mother, Carla, had to move back to Black Water where Carla could depend on the help of her own mother who was ailing, but still more help than a phantom of a husband. Mrs. Weston loved her daughter, but was never able to relate to her, which created a wedge between them that grew over the years until her mother could barely find words to say to Natalie that would not send her into an uproar. Recently, Carla Weston had been sick and looked a bit haggard in the summer heat as she gripped a Kleenex in her hand, coughing often.

Nikki's mother, Fayleen, was beautiful, with brown shoulder-length hair. The year before she had been their cheerleading coach, but had given the position to a younger and much more eager replacement. Over the years, sadness had crept up on her, seeping in through the emotional cracks. She did her best to hide it and was actually quite successful in front of others, but not in the mornings or at full night. In the evenings when the sun began to set the feeling that came with the draining of light and the onset of the dark was more than she could bear and the shadows would take over. At the table she laughed and smiled occasionally, but had insisted that the barbecue be early in the day, for she knew what would come as the sun disappeared behind the hills.

Finally, Regina came to her own mother, funny but serious, stern but approachable. Everyone loved her mother, despite her reputation for being almost mean. Mrs. Dean was a delight to be around, she was the woman that the other women went to when they had a problem to which they needed solution. She would listen while drinking her coffee, staring into the cup intently, and then she would think for a long time before speaking, which made people uneasy when they first met her, but once they got to know her, she made them feel the security that came with advice from a person who actually listened and thought before speaking.

The girls were picking through the grass not far from the gathering of their families searching for rocks worthy of a good game of hopscotch. They talked as they prodded

through the grass, keeping their eyes to the ground. Soon they were far from their parents, at the lip of the trees. Lola held up a smooth round rock.

"This is a good one," she stated while still examining the rock carefully in the light.

"Yeah." Natalie looked up and agreed after laying eyes on the perfect stone.

"Smooth, but not too smooth," Nikki added. Regina put another rock candidate in her pocket and sat against a tree to rest.

Lola noticed her friend resting and took the opportunity to address her acolytes.

"I been thinkin'..." Lola spoke, allowing her voice to trail off. Nikki looked up to hear the rest of Lola's statement while Natalie continued to move dirt and sticks around on the ground in a focused search. Regina was comfortable against the tree throwing one of her stones up into the air and catching it again.

"About what?" Nikki asked. By this time, Natalie stopped her search and was listening intently, wanting to hear what Lola had been thinking that was so important that she had to make an announcement. Lola was nervous under the eyes of her best friends. It was apparent that she had to take a deep breath and swallow hard before she could speak the words that throbbed just inside of her throat.

"I can't sleep anymore," Lola said, still not revealing the subject matter of her dilemma, but all the girls had a pretty good idea.

Regina could still hear Lola's squeaky voice as if it were replaying in stereo. Regina dared not delve any further into that day, preferring to shut down her memories before they were allowed to creep too far inside.

She took the picture off the clothesline and softly settled back onto the bed, the mattress squeaked jolting a childhood memory. Regina laid the foggy photo on the comforter and knelt by the bed, lifting the mattress high above her head. She smiled as she laid eyes on the object she had been seeking. Regina pulled the red velvet journal from the place where it was buried. Lola's room had probably been searched, and surely, this journal had been given to one of the Handow boys as evidence. Most likely, Mrs. Rusher had asked for it back when they concluded that the journal was not evidence and Mrs. Rusher placed it back in the exact place that her daughter had left it, as it appeared Mrs. Rusher had done with everything else, just in case her little girl came home one day.

But of course, they found nothing in this journal because Lola kept it in the one place that she knew her mother would look. Regina's eyes dazzled, and as she recalled the crafty charm of her friend, she flipped through the pages.

Dear Diary,

Trigonometry, I hate it!!!!!! The worst class I have ever had to take in my life. My parents were really pissed after Mrs. Lincher called to let them know that I might fail if I don't get passing grades on every assignment left in the class. What do I know about math? I'm a photographer. My mom won't let me use her car until I pass the class and I am sure that I can just forget about a party for my birthday. This blows! But I am going to work as hard as I can to bring my grade up so that I can get the car back and because

I hate disappointing my parents.

Sincerely,

Lo

Nothing too interesting in the “mom” diary, Regina thought with a sly smile as she turned and peered into the open closet upon a space where an imaginary X marked the spot. Lifting the mattress again, she replaced the diary with expert precision. Regina let the mattress fall, re-tucked and smoothed out the sheet and comforter. Back on her feet, Regina entered the extended gloomy closet cautiously and proceeded to the far back right corner. She picked up the empty clothes hamper and placed it behind her; she then pressed her foot down on the carpet in the exact spot, if she remembered correctly. The floor cried softly. Regina sat and dug her fingers into the floor at the edge between the carpet and the molding of the wall; the carpet came up with ease.

When the girls were freshmen in high school, Lola had to stay in the hospital to get her tonsils removed. For days before the scheduled surgery Lola had spoken about how terrified she was, she hated hospitals and begged her parents through wretched sore throat not make her go through with the operation. Mr. and Mrs. Rusher assured her that she was being silly and that there was virtually no risk in her routine surgery, but that did nothing to assuage Lola’s fear. Regina knew her best friend better than anyone, and when she saw the opportunity to alleviate her anxiety she did. The night before her surgery Regina gave her a green crystal that hung on a thin silver chain. The amulet had been a gift from Regina’s boyfriend and she had been told that it offered protection. Lola was a big believer in all of that meditation, artsy stuff and Regina knew that the necklace would soothe her and she was right. Lola was thrilled when she received the crystal that night and placed it in her sacred, secret hiding place for safekeeping until the next day when she would put it on just before heading to the hospital. The following morning at the hospital, she realized that she had forgotten the good luck charm and sent Regina to retrieve it from this very place.

Regina swept the dust off the damaged wood panels that lay under the carpet and slammed her fist down hard but quietly on one end of a particular panel, just the way Lola had instructed her to do years ago, the other end popped up just as expected and Regina gave a satisfied breath. There was a small treasure hidden just beneath the surface, a \$100 bill, a best friend bracelet that all of the girls had made and exchanged.

Bingo. A violet cloth journal with flowers painted on the front.

Regina reached her hand into the unlit hole and lifted the book into the dim light of the closet. The book was thick and Regina held it up, causing a shower of white envelopes decorated with crimson hearts to flutter to the carpet.

“Regina,” she heard a sweet voice call from the hall. Surprise knocked the wind from her. Suddenly, the woman’s heart was pounding in her ears as she frantically swept the envelopes back into the journal; she swept everything back into its tomb, replaced the wood panel and let the carpet fall back into its place. Regina tripped over the hamper that

she had placed behind her as she tried to scramble through the cluttered space.

“Shit,” she cursed as she threw the hamper back into its proper place just in time to meet Leo at the threshold of the closet. The two greeted with a strong embrace. She sighed restfully, in the comfort that came with having a man wrap you in his arms lovingly; the same sigh half-filled with relief that she had not been caught in Lola’s secret place.

Why do I feel the need to hide it still? She wondered...still feel the need to keep Lola’s secret?

“What are you doing in here?” he asked.

“Just looking at some of her things; her clothes, I loved the way she dressed.” Regina gave a lie and the truth in the same sentence.

“This is just crazy, I know,” He said as if reading her mind.

“I know,” Regina commented. Leo released her from his grip and took her hand, leading her to the bed.

“How are you, Leo?” Regina asked. “I heard that you have a family of your own now,” She prodded sweetly.

“Yes, I do. They’re beautiful,” He said thoughtfully. “I’ll introduce you when we go down. The pair took a moment to smile at one another before having the conversation that was inevitable, but Regina was anxious to begin the conversation only because it meant being closer to the end of the conversation, her stomach was tumbling like a slinky.

“So what do you think happened?” Regina was anxious to know what he was thinking. Leo thought for a long time. He knew what he wanted to say, but he pondered what was appropriate before he spoke.

“Honestly, Regina, I loved my sister, but I just can’t do this again. She is dead, she’s been dead all of this time and despite her body being discovered and all the new uncertainties one thing is still unchanged.”

“She’s dead.” Regina finished his thought sorrowfully and he smiled a smile that lacked any kind of joy, but appreciation of her understanding.

“She’s dead.” He repeated dryly while nodding his head. Leo leaned over, placing his forearms on his legs and dove deeper into his private thought vault. Regina just sat being still in the moment, knowing it was best to leave him undisturbed. Moments later, he lifted and looked inside of her as if he was trying to determine something.

“Do you want to know another reason why I want this whole situation to be done and over with?” he asked. Regina studied his features trying to figure his puzzle.

“Why?” Her voice instinctively dropped to a whisper. She had no idea what Lola’s brother was going to say, but somehow knew that it called for no one outside of this room to hear.

“Because I lied,” he said. Regina’s eyes widened in suspense. “I lied to the police, to my mother, to everyone,” he finished sullenly. A terrified Regina began to pray that the boy who had always seemed like a loving older brother did not have some degenerate

side that he was about to divulge.

“About what?” Regina was still speaking in a whisper.

The way Leo stared at Regina made her uncomfortable as if he were laying his eyes upon her body naked. He then looked down, wondering if this was a secret that he was ready to reveal or if it should ever be revealed at all.

“I did speak to her that night, after she left the library.”

“What? What did she say, Leo?” Regina could hear nothing now, but the sound of Leo’s voice as if the two of them were a million miles away from everyone and everything.

Regina could see the tension rising in Leo’s stern face. She teetered on a mental tight rope in fierce anticipation of his next words.

“She sent me a text message. I had gone to bed early that night and the phone woke me up. All she said was that she was going to be home late and to leave the back door unlocked for her. I figured that she was going to try to sneak off to that party. I was so tired I never even got up to unlock the door. I meant to but I fell back to sleep before I could get up. I was just so damned tired.” Leo’s face was beginning to streak with tears as he silently chastised himself.

“When she was not home in the morning, I knew something was wrong, I knew but I never said anything. I never...said...a...word. I was afraid that my parents would blame me, I was afraid that it was my fault, that maybe she had come home and when the door wasn’t open she went somewhere else and got hurt. I was so afraid. Why didn’t I just get up and open the door? I don’t know why I am still keeping this secret. Even now, I can’t tell my parents.”

“It’s not your fault, Leo. Your parents won’t blame you.” Regina assured him. He nodded slightly. Regina grasped his hand tight and pressed her head against his in a sincere gesture of platonic intimacy.

“The guilt just eats away at me. My wife was the first and only person I ever told. After a while, she was finally able to convince me that it wasn’t my fault, but I still don’t have the heart to tell my parents. I still can’t tell the truth.” Anguish was bubbling inside of him. “Does that make me a bad person, Regina?”

Regina was shocked by the question, she could barely speak. She had absolutely no answer for him because she was unsure herself.

Who else was keeping secrets? she wondered.

“No,” she told Lola’s brother. “No, it does not make you a bad person at all.” She consoled him.

“All I want to do is lay her to rest. Grieve this situation. Move on,” he stated as he swept his flat hand through the air swiftly, illustrating the simplicity with which he wanted to complete this chapter of life. Regina nodded in agreement as she looked over the unchanged room again and was not at all disturbed by his cold distance from the heart of the situation.

“It took my mother a year to stop pulling her covers down at night. Once, I talked

about Lola in the past tense and she slapped me so hard. I will never forget the look on her face. For a long time, my mother was not my mother; she was the mother of a ghost. Before, we never used to keep the porch light on at night, but after Lola disappeared she started leaving the porch light on every night because it would make it easier for Lola to find her way home.” Leo snickered; he was no longer talking to Regina, but to himself, to his mother and maybe even his sister. “Lola was not coming home, ever and somehow everyone knew that but Mom.” Regina squeezed his hand tighter.

“I wanted to miss her too, you know? But with Mom, there was no room for anyone else to grieve because she took all of the sorrow for herself.” He looked at Regina. “So that’s why I’m here. Hopefully this funeral will lay all of our hearts to rest...finally,” he finished as they began to leave the room.

“Yeah, I hope so too.” Regina told him. They hugged again. “Everything will be OK, Leo. Whatever happened, she is in a much better place now.”

“Regina,” Leo began, but Regina could easily read the worry on his face.

“I won’t say anything,” Regina promised to keep his secret.

In Black Water it seemed that everyone knew something, but no one knew everything, which was the subterfuge that held it together and kept it sick at the same time.

Regina returned to Lola’s family and met Leo’s wife and son. Profusely, she refused dinner in response to their many invitations. The sun was beginning to set and Leo offered to walk her home, even tried to insist, but after assuring him that she needed the time alone, he understood her wishes and she was able to emerge from the home without any dinner and alone. The day had grown into evening and the sun was beginning to fade rapidly leaving the street dark under the added cover of the trees. She trotted down the steps of the porch and was on the street when she turned to see the front porch light of the Rusher home flash to life. She looked up and down the street waiting for Lola, but was strangely disappointed when she did not see the sixteen-year-old ghost bouncing up the sidewalk and just concluded that despite the fact that old habits die hard, once you die, you’re dead.

Chapter 6

Lasagna was Regina's favorite and she was overdoing it at her mother's dinner table. After gorging herself on pasta and cheese and TV with the parents, Regina settled in for the night. She was tired but knew her body well enough to know that she would not sleep after the eventful day unless she unwound. Her workout clothes stared at her from her open suitcase on the floor, she undressed and slipped into a purple tank top and cotton leggings. Regina kicked her suitcase into the closet and found a wide-open space on the hardwood floor where she was comfortable. She stood erect and wiggled her toes, feeling them against the hardwood. Regina let her body weight sink into her feet, rooting her to the floor like a strong tree. With her focus on deep breaths in and out, she lifted her arms out to her sides, and then farther until they were pointing toward the ceiling. Regina exhaled deeply as her upper body took a swan dive toward the floor and her fingertips touched her toes. The young woman reveled in the release that she felt while stretching her muscles. Regina lifted her body gracefully, raising her upper body one vertebrae at a time until she was standing erect once again.

Regina coughed lightly noticing a chill in the room. Again, she lifted her arms from her sides with the grace of a ballerina, an angel spreading her worn wings. When her fingertips pointed toward the sky, she exhaled and let her body fall with methodical choreography to the floor until she was touching her painted toenails. Her mind cleared itself and again she began to lift herself from the yoga position when she felt a tremendous weight on her back, she gasped in discomfort, feeling herself being pushed down farther toward the floor. Discomfort gave way to pain as the tops of her palms were now touching the floor and her body was still being pushed lower. Trying to scream, the woman was stifled by a position that kept her from being able to eject a full breath through her throat for sound; instead, she managed only spontaneous awkward squawks. Something was pressing her down farther and farther into an unnatural position that would soon break her. Her palms were now completely on the floor and her upper body was steadily descending, threatening to collapse her upper body completely to her lower body. Regina's forehead was touching her knees and getting lower with every second that passed. The torture was now excruciating. Regina had lost all control of her body and the only thing that she could give were involuntary gasps of pain. Her blood flow pulsed behind her eyes, she could hardly breathe at all and she heard a pop that initiated from somewhere in her lower back. Only moments away from losing consciousness, suddenly her body released itself, unlocking all of her joints and muscles, and her limp frame collapsed to the floor. Regina's mother was there holding her.

“Regina, are you OK?”

Regina took in several panicked gasps before she was able to speak.

“I’m, I’m fine,” she stuttered, finally feeling the blood beginning to circulate through her limbs again.

“I heard you in here shuffling and spitting, I thought you were having a seizure or something.”

“I was just doing some yoga stretches before bed.”

Her mother’s face was rife with alarm. “You must have had a muscle spasm or something.”

“Yeah, a muscle spasm,” Regina repeated hopefully.

“OK. Well go ahead and get into bed. Maybe we should get an appointment with Dr. Duval tomorrow.” Her mother said as she helped her daughter into the bed.

“Mom, I’m fine. Really!”

Mrs. Dean smiled on her resolute daughter, remembering that she was a grown woman and capable of taking care of herself.

“Good night,” her mother said, staring at her daughter for a moment longer before pulling the string on the lamp sucking all of the light out of the room.

“Good night,” Regina responded weakly as she pulled the covers up to her chin and turned onto her side with a cough, smelling the aroma of dead roses and soap that followed her mother out of the room.

“I’m allergic to you.” Regina whispered as she closed her eyes.

A thick fog blurred Regina’s vision as she carefully made her way through the trees. She wore an Oakley High School T-shirt and gray gym shorts with no shoes at all she noticed, but experienced no discomfort. Thunder growled through the sky and at once, the rain came down. Through the trees, Regina could feel hard pellets of dark water beat her forehead. The trees parted and she came upon two black garbage bags beside a dug grave. Two shovels lay rested next to mounds of dirt that were beginning to soften with the rain. The earthy aroma unleashed by the oncoming storm infiltrated her nostrils. Regina stepped carefully toward the hole in the earth, her toes sinking into the malleable mud. No longer able to register anything else around her, with a few precise steps she was standing at the edge of what she now saw was Lola’s burial site. The cold body lay still, infected with the blue hue of death. Her head, cocked at a wretched angle, displayed the atrocious gash on the right side of her head; dry black blood painted that side of her face like a deforming birthmark. On the other side of her head was a smaller but more severe wound that had crushed in a portion of her skull. Regina jumped back when she thought she witnessed Lola’s fingers twitch, her eyes fixed on the phalanges daring them to move again. Lola’s purple mouth dropped open and took in a slow, but long whistling breath. Regina was rooted into the ground as she watched Lola’s arms reach for the clean and alive air that was just outside of her dirt grave, her arms reached up and her fingers stretched in a pathetic attempt to grasp any kind of life. Regina dropped to her knees and extended her hand in a dismal bid to save her dead friend, but her hand was just out of

reach. Regina's eyes blurred with heavy tears as she stretched her upper body to the absolute limit. Regina stretched harder with Lola's hand inches from her until finally she could feel the cold corpse fingertips against her own, then the hand. It was too late; by the time Regina realized that she was falling into the grave there was no way to help herself. Someone had pushed her into the arms of death.

Regina's body exploded to life, safe under the quilt that her aunt Charlene had made for her when she was a child. Regina looked down to see her chest heaving up and down through the Oakley high school t-shirt. She looked toward her bedroom door at the sound of the classical music floating into her room from down stairs. What possessed her mother to play the piano this late, Regina thought, as she looked toward the bedroom door, where she saw a shadow. Someone was standing in the door silhouetted by the light in her parents' room down the hall.

We don't have a piano. Regina suddenly thought to herself.

Blood pumped through the veins in her temples; she rubbed her eyes harder this time, telling herself that she was still dreaming. She looked again and the shadow had gone as quickly as it had come. Regina leaned forward in the bed to be sure and her eyes widened when she felt a draft of air prick her legs as someone lifted the cover to climb in next to her.

She turned her quaking body and was face-to-face with what she knew was her best friend. The skull had been collapsed on one side; the lush head of black hair was now just dusty and jagged strands. Most of the smooth skin of her beautiful face had rotted, leaving only the skeletal remains, one of the pieces of torn skin that remained hung from the bottom left corner of the mouth revealing teeth and bone. Despite all, her eyes remained the same; Lola's dark round eyes glittered kaleidoscopically as the two rows of teeth moved up and down.

"Regina," the stinking corpse spoke in a broken wiry whisper.

Regina gasped violently as she shot upright in her bed safe under that same quilt that her aunt Charlene had made for her when she was a child.

"Jesus," she called with a relieved breath as she grasped her chest through the purple tank top that she had put on before bed.

Regina grappled in her bed all night long. She wanted to sleep, but had no desire to meet with the ghastly Lola again that night. The stars dazzled her room, and she moved to the window seat and stared out at the landscape of the cold empty street and the vast and unending night sky. She lamented her return to this tortuous place, a place that held a vast emotional chamber of memories for the woman who now felt like a girl. Regina sat in silence, every other moment seeking out each creak and whistle of the old house before resolving it to natural noise and focusing her attention back to the outside world.

Trees swayed in the October breeze, most of their leaves already having abandoned them. The wind chimes that her mother put on the house years ago sang a soothing melody. Regina could see through the branches and watched the stillness of the dead houses along the block; her eyes were focused on the Laney home at the far end of the

block when she saw their porch light flicker to life. She wondered why someone would be turning a light on at this godforsaken time of morning, but before she could think too much the light on the Garretts' front porch lit up, then the light on the next house and the next. The invisible energy that awakened the lights was making its way up the block, headed straight for Regina's home. Regina couldn't take her eyes off the parade of illumination until a moment after the bulb on the porch of their next-door neighbor burst to light. Regina turned her head slowly to her bedroom door; she was sure that the porch light on their home had come to life and there was something downstairs at the door, she waited for the bell to ring, her heart pounding as she waited.

The buzzing of the bell effortlessly raised the hair on her body. Regina anticipated the sound though that did nothing to curb its devastating effect. It rang and rang; the buzzing was continuous, never conceding to silence. A moment later she realized that the sound was not the doorbell at all, but the alarm clock in her room that she had used in high school. Regina shut off the alarm and quickly turned back to the houses on Pine Street. All of the porch lights were still on and she wondered if they had been that way all along.

The rising sun allowed its golden colors to bleed out into the sky and Regina could recall only a few other times in life that she had been more relieved. Now she could sleep peacefully and somehow the sunlight that poured into her room would protect her.

Spirits would have to shrink back into the shadowy corners, not allowed to step into the truth of the light because the fictional components of their existence forbade it. Regina crawled into the cool sheets of her bed and within moments of giving up the fight, she drifted into a sound and, thank God, dreamless sleep.

The hands on the old-fashioned alarm clock indicated that it was 10:00 a.m., which seemed impossible because it had been 6:00 a.m. when she finally drifted off and her exhausted body felt like it could not have been sleeping for more than fifteen minutes. The sounds of morning were coming from downstairs. Regina could not recall the last time she had been able to sleep in. Her father had taken vacation days in order to be home with his daughter; she could hear the television and was sure that her father was front and center on the couch catching up on all of the shows that he never got to watch since he was never at home during the weekdays. Her mother had been finished cooking for hours, but Regina still smelled the strong aroma of fresh country bacon that sat thick in the air. She stretched under the sheets before she balled up in the fetal position and tried to rekindle her unconscious state. It was as if she was sixteen all over again and for a moment she was glad of it, Regina enjoyed the feeling of not having anything to do or anywhere to be. Soon her mother would have her father in the yard cutting the grass, she knew.

"Might as well get it done so that you don't have to fool with it on the weekend." She could hear her mother saying to her father.

"Pat, don't drive me crazy today, please!" he would shoot back in the voice he used when he was trying to convince people that he was not the total pushover that he was.

“Regina,” her mother’s voice crept into the room, disturbing her innocent thoughts. The girl poked her head from under the sheets.

“I thought I heard you moving around in here. You hungry, you want some coffee?” her mother offered.

“Yes and yes,” she said hardly recognizing her voice, which had reverted to a childish squeak.

After tossing two or three more times under the weight of the quilt, Regina was finally able to rouse herself from the comfortable bed and walk down the drafty hallway toward the bathroom. She stopped in front of a mirror that decorated the hall. Regina admired the ornamented woodwork that framed the glass and was relieved that all of the mirrors in the house had been restored to the walls. A cramp wrenched Regina’s gut at a memory of the day when they had all been broken. After that day, her father never replaced the mirrors and the house was almost completely free of them still on the day that Regina left for college. Regina placed her palm in the center of the mirror as if she had missed it personally and admired her reflection before continuing on to the bathroom.

She used her hand to pull back the blue and yellow shower curtain and sighed at the sight of the bathtub; she could not believe that people still had these old-fashioned claw-footed tubs. Admittedly, there was something romantic about them, but she wished that her parents would update. In the mirror, Regina looked into her own tired eyes, with one hand testing their puffiness and with the other she brushed her teeth hard.

As Regina leaned over the sink to spit, she could hear the lawn mower revving to a start and she giggled.

“How did you sleep?” Mrs. Dean asked her puffy-eyed daughter as she entered the kitchen squinting to protect her eyes from the abundance of sunlight that poured in through the windows.

Regina was honest as she sat down to the plate that was already sitting on the table. “I had nightmares.”

Regina dug into the plate of eggs and buttered toast with peach jam. “How can you eat that stuff?” she asked her mother who sat across the table eating toast with pepper jam. “I never understood pepper jam.” Regina added.

“The same way that you eat hot sauce on everything,” her mother shot back.

“Well, I do that because it tastes good which cannot possibly be the reason that you eat pepper jam.” Regina teased her mother while arching one side of her upper lip in sync with the lift of her eyebrows.

“I just developed a taste for it,” her mother told her.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Mrs. Dean asked.

“About what?” Regina gurgled her words in a mouthful of coffee. Regina could already see what was coming. Her mother was too dramatic, always feeling the need to talk about everything and Regina was the opposite or at least somewhere in the middle. Her mother actually wanted to discuss things because she thought it would be for the better, her father never wanted to discuss things because he let them go just as quickly as

they came about. Regina was somewhere in the middle, not because she was sometimes serious about things and sometimes she let them go, but because she was always serious about things, but always pretended to let them go. Most of the time she was just confused about how to feel.

“Your dream, Regina,” her mother interrupted her thought.

“Not really. This whole thing is just creepy, you know,” Regina finished. Her mother nodded as if she agreed.

“I don’t think that it’s creepy so much as it is just tragic,” Her mother explained.

“How are the Rushers?” Pat asked her daughter.

Dropping her toast to her plate, Regina was no longer able to maintain her appetite. The night before Regina had been able to get out of this conversation simply by telling her parents that she didn’t want to talk about it, but it was doubtful she would get that lucky twice. Regina pushed hard to swallow the lump of chewed food that was in her mouth; it stuck in her throat.

“They’re as great as you can be when the body of your daughter who has been missing for eight years turns up chopped to bits.” Regina spoke the words with half-frustrated bite, half-dark humor.

“Regina!” her mother scolded her by saying her name with that calm but penetrating strike that all mothers had mastered, like a mother lioness clawing at her inexperienced cub.

“They’re wrecked, Mom! Is that what you want to hear?” Regina shaped the fingers on both of her hands into claws and dragged them through her short, straight, stylishly cut hair. Fighting the irritation that Regina felt at being forced to discuss this with her parents was becoming impossible.

“No, of course not, but I can’t take sarcasm right now.” Mrs. Dean clenched her jaw and moved her hands around nervously in the pockets of her robe.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” Regina apologized. “I’m gonna go and put on some clothes. Thanks for breakfast.”

Her mother didn’t respond. The banister was hard against Regina’s hand and she used it to balance herself as she trotted up the stairs. She pulled her suitcase out of the closet, threw it open on the floor, and began searching for something to wear.

Today, she needed to see Nikki and that was the only thing that she knew for sure. As she pulled pieces of clothing out of the case, she thought, *What will I say to Nikki? What will Nikki say to me? Would she be angry? Happy to see me? What?*

Nothing was certain and the knots that were now forming in her stomach only furthered that uncertainty.

Regina laid her favorite pair of jeans across the top half of the bag, a pair of distressed skinny jeans with a silver zipper that went from the top of the calf down to the ankle. She paired it with an old sweatshirt out of which she had cut the collar, causing the top to fall lazily across one shoulder. A soft scratching caused her to glance up at the window. Two brown, naked tree branches were scraping the window. Regina got up,

walked over to the window, and pressed her hand against it; it was cool. Her mother had taught her to do that in order to get a rough estimate of the temperature outside before dressing. She looked over the houses that lined the desolate street. Trees blew in the wind, but the houses were so still, there was no movement in or around them at all which caused Regina to feel as if they were empty inside.

Empty.

Nothing moved on Pine Street. They had all been forsaken. The drab room was quiet. Regina backed away from the chilled window and felt something brush up against her back, she felt air. Someone was breathing on her. Regina turned to see a face, tired, used; the face of Nikki Valentine. Her skin lacked the flawless teenage luster it was once full with; her eyes had been glazed by the undesirable sight of a world with no direction. The once high shine of her hair had faded into a listless glimmer caught only when under a perfect light angle of the sun. She was an older and more experienced Nikki Valentine. Regina hugged her friend and smelled the odor of alcohol that had been left on her sometime that morning. Regina pulled away from the girl so that she could look her over.

“So what I had a shot in my coffee, sue me.” Nikki read her mind, speaking in the same lush and scratchy voice Regina heard on the phone a couple of nights ago. Before Regina could respond, she felt her lips spreading in wild delight and then threw her arms around the troubled girl once again. Even in her apparent anguish, she was still the funny girl that Regina had always known and loved. Regina couldn’t explain it, but felt a great relief at the sight of her old friend. Possibly because Nikki could actually anchor her to a reality of the situation and it would no longer be just a ghastly nightmare. Or maybe just because despite everything that had happened Nikki was her friend, one of the only true friends that she had ever had in the world and just being near her was a tremendous comfort that she never knew she missed before.

The reasonable period for a friendly hug had long passed and Regina was aware of this fact, but just couldn’t bear to let Nikki go. Nikki held her friend gratefully and took in the scent of tropical coconuts that wafted from Regina’s hair, she felt her eyes beginning to tense, but managed to hold back the storm of tears that threatened to erupt from her with distracting thoughts and two deep breaths.

“If the big city has turned you into a complete lesbian, I’m OK with that, but I’m starting to get a little claustrophobic,” Nikki teased.

Regina wedged herself from her friend, her eyes dilated, her conservative nature causing her immediate reaction to register as surprise quickly dissolved into raucous laughter as she looked at the face of her friend. She could never be quite sure of what was going to come out of Nikki’s mouth, but that was one of the things she loved about her. Her friend wore a purple velour jogging suit accented with rhinestones that fit snugly against her curvy body, which made Regina look down at her own thin frame with a new discontent. Nikki’s oval-shaped green eyes looked tired and were set just above smooth dark circles. Her dark curly mane was parted in the middle and on both sides the front patches of hair were twisted back and around the sides of her head like a crown until they

let out into a free flow of hair in the back, a style she had often worn when they were in high school. She smiled and her white teeth were the only thing that had not aged and there was something about her that made her seem just like the flirtatious girl that she had been just a few years ago.

“How are you?” Nikki Valentine asked. “You look great, all grown up.” Nikki added with a flash of a smile.

“I’m OK, but I’ve been better.” Regina responded. “You have hardly changed a bit,” Regina added.

“I’m glad you came.” Nikki let the words flow out with an exasperated breath that told Regina that she was absolutely sincere. Nikki unconsciously picked at the hot pink polish on her nails. Regina was not sure if Nikki had too much to drink or not enough.

“Me too,” Regina agreed.

“How are you?” Regina wanted to know. Nikki gave her an acrimonious look causing Regina’s eyes to cast immediately down to the carpeted floor.

“What happened to her, Nikki?” Regina inquired.

“How would I know?” Nikki spit with an acidic tone. Regina had not meant for her question to sound accusatory, although it did.

Regina apologized and the wall of defense that had immediately gone up with her last question came tumbling back down. That was how it was between friends sometimes.

“Can we not talk about this just yet?” Nikki pleaded. “I’m just not ready. I know it sounds crazy, but can we just pretend for a little while that we are not here for the reasons that we are here? Can we just...just...” Nikki’s voice was hesitant. “Ignore it.” She was finally able to get the words out. “Just for a little while.” Nikki assured Regina. Regina digested Nikki’s words and their meaning and she had to admit that it did not sound like a completely heinous idea.

“I was on my way to visit Mom. Can you come with me?” she asked. Regina hesitated, but could not turn down such a request, especially when it came from a dear friend.

“Sure, just let me put on some clothes,” Regina told her.

“I’ll wait for you outside,” Nikki said as she hurried out of the room and down the stairs. Regina lay back on the bed clutching the clothes that she had picked out for the day, her stomach churning fretfully. Regina was happy to be reunited with one of her best friends, and wondered why she had felt the need to be as far away from all of them as possible. But it didn’t take her long to remember how perverse it felt to hang out with all of her friends the same way she did before Lola vanished as if nothing had changed. She was ashamed at the thought of pretending that Lola had never existed.

As Regina bounced down the stairs, she saw that the front door was open. Nikki and Mrs. Dean chatted and Regina could see her purple outfit clearly through the screen door that creaked as she pushed it open. It was chilly outside, but that didn’t keep the sun from shining down and casting just enough warmth to make it a pretty day. Mr. Dean was in the yard gathering all of the grass waste into black garbage bags. Mrs. Dean was

sweeping off the porch.

“You going with Nikki?” her mother asked with subtly raised eyebrows.

“Yes, we should be back soon. I have my cell phone,” Regina told her mother. “Aw, wait a minute, no I don’t. I dropped it in water yesterday and I got so sidetracked I forgot to put it in rice when we got home,” Regina said before she cursed herself under her breath.

“You dropped your phone in water?” Nikki repeated. Regina nodded her head begrudgingly.

“That sucks,” Nikki assured her as she rose from the porch steps and dusted off her bottom.

“We’ll just have to get you another one,” her mother told her.

“Yeah, I guess,” Regina griped.

“You can use my phone while we’re out if you need to,” Nikki told her.

“You should put something on your shoulders. You’ll catch...”

“Death of pneumonia,” Regina finished her mother’s sentence as she stepped out into the yard. “I will be fine, Mother.”

Mrs. Dean shook her head and went back to her chore. Patricia Dean worried due to the reputation that Nikki Valentine had created over the past couple of years, but Regina was a grown-up and despite the current status of Nikki’s life, Regina probably needed her now.

The two girls waved good-bye to Mr. Dean who threw his palm up and waved it heartily.

Regina looked around and noticed that there was no car.

“Where is the Mustang?” she questioned her friend. Regina could still remember how excited they all were when Nikki received a brand-new bright yellow Mustang for her sixteenth birthday.

“That Mustang is long gone. I have a Mercedes now, I love it,” Nikki informed her. She noticed Regina’s eyes wandering the street and she thought she should answer the question before it was asked.

“I have a DWI and since my father bought the car, he decided to take it away. What can I do? I live with him. That was almost a year ago, I get my car back tomorrow. Hallelujah!” Nikki brightened, trying to make light of the matter. To her, it was a light matter, everyone knew her situation, and therefore it did not cause much embarrassment on her end, and besides, having the last name Valentine in this town was meaningful.

“Sheriff Handow gave you a DWI?” Regina’s mouth dropped.

“Yeah, he’s a douche, but it was the third time that they pulled me over for the same thing. He talked to my father and they decided that it may be a good thing for me.” Nikki sighed. “Can you believe that? Can’t even trust your own father.” Nikki smiled.

“Can’t trust anyone,” Regina agreed sarcastically.

“We can use my mother’s car,” Regina said as she began to call out to her mother before Nikki stopped her with a look of underlying mischief.

“Don’t you still have your bike?” Nikki asked. Regina was sure that her face registered some expression of confusion in response to that question, especially since Nikki was now laughing.

“Are you kidding? I mean, I do ride an exercise bike at the gym, but it has been awhile since I have used one for actual transportation.” Regina spoke words jumbled in laughter.

“Mom,” she called in a raised voice. Mrs. Dean looked up from her work on the porch.

“Do we have a bike?” she asked. Her mother paused and thought for a moment.

“Your father has one in the shed, I believe. Do you want to take my car?” she asked. The girls looked at one another.

“Nah, it might actually be fun to ride. It’s a nice day.” Regina was getting used to small-town living again in the short period of time that she had been home. Her father had one of those boy bikes with the large bar that went straight across from the handlebars to the seat.

“Geeze, that’s a vagina disaster waiting to happen.” Nikki announced.

Once Regina was able to stretch her legs, tight in her slim jeans, over each side, she felt secure and they set out down the rolling streets of Black Water.

Fall breezes fluttered Regina’s hair and she thought it felt great to have the brisk air washing over her face. The girls talked and laughed as they passed all of the places that were a distant memory to Regina. Regina closed her eyes for just a moment allowing her to breathe deeply and she could remember the days when all four girls would set out on their bikes on Saturday morning and would not return home until the sun had begun descending into the West. They would race up and down the residential streets, stop off at Klein Park for a couple of rounds on the swings, or a game or two of hopscotch. Marrying all of the money that they had been able to snaffle the night before from the couch cushions or forgotten change left on the kitchen counter from that afternoon’s errands in order to buy snacks, candies, and cakes from the bread store. Occasionally, they would take a break at one of their homes to use the bathroom, maybe get a drink of water and then it was on the road again.

Regina was snapped from her sweet memories when she realized that they were suddenly face-to-face with the dead.

Chapter 7

As they passed under the beaten metal entrance of Rose Thorn Cemetery, the girls dismounted the bikes and pushed them along the narrow gravel path that led into the heart of the sacred ground.

Cemetery visits were not one of Regina's favorite ways to pass a morning, but at least Rose Thorn was peaceful, almost welcoming, and Regina did not regret agreeing to come along. Brightly colored fresh flowers were placed in front of several of the run-down tombstones that huddled close together under the shade of the tall trees.

"I wish they would put a real road through here," Regina thought aloud.

"Who?" Nikki chuckled. "Mayor Parks and Sheriff Handow? Yeah, right. Don't hold your breath," she snapped.

"It's not too much farther. You remember, don't you?" Nikki asked.

"Yes," Regina lied. She had been to this cemetery a few times to visit the gravesites of her grandparents, but only once for an actual funeral, which was that of Fayleen Valentine, Nikki's mother. When Regina's grandparents died she had been too young to attend the funerals, but she was ten when Nikki's mother died and Mrs. Dean struggled with whether or not to allow her to attend the funeral. Mrs. Dean hated to expose her to such a thing especially with Nikki's mother committing suicide, which made it even less of a situation that Mrs. Dean wanted to open up for discussion, but she knew that if she took her daughter to the funeral, she would have to answer any questions that came up as a result.

"She is old enough, Pat. She will have to experience the rituals of death at some point in time. It may be better for poor little Nikki to have Regina there. That is my opinion, but I will support whatever you decide," Mr. Dean told his wife when she asked him.

No one ever knew exactly what happened that snowy winter morning in the Valentine home. The family was getting ready for church as they did most Sunday mornings. As they settled in the car and began to pull out of the snow-blanketed driveway, Fayleen stopped her husband; she had forgotten her purse. Without a word to her daughter, she left the car and disappeared into the home to retrieve the missing bag and when she had been gone for over five minutes Mr. Valentine assumed that she had misplaced it, as she had misplaced several things lately. He began to tell his daughter to go and find out what was taking her mother so long, but in a sudden change of heart decided to go himself. He advised his daughter to stay in the car as he stepped out. The sound of the winter wind whipped the trees and there was the resounding fire of one

lonely blast. From the car, Nikki could see Mr. Valentine's eyes fill with horror before he entered the home. Nikki sat in the car for ten minutes not knowing what was happening inside, but sure that it was something awful. Soon she heard the sirens wailing in the distance, and only seconds later, the police cars crashed down on the house. There was too much commotion for her to make anything solid of the event, but she heard Sheriff Handow as he spoke to one of the EMTs.

"A single shot to the heart."

"To the heart?" the EMT asked, scratching at the wrinkles that emerged in his forehead.

"To the heart," the officer confirmed.

"Odd..."

The funeral was only days later.

That day was a blur in Regina's memory; the only thing she could recall vividly was the itch of the decorative white lace collar on the black velvet dress that her mother had purchased for her to wear.

Mrs. Valentine was buried several feet off the gravel path and the women dropped their bikes and walked the short remaining distance through the grassy graveyard aisles. A huge tombstone with a stone angel perched just on top keeping constant vigil over the fallen soul read the name of Fayleen Valentine. As they approached the tombstone, the sun ducked demurely behind a bundle of clouds and the platinum sky bore its silver rays down on them.

The girls stood next to one another at one side of the burial bed. Nikki looked down solemnly on the rectangular patch of dirt in front of the tombstone where her mother lay rotted under six feet of dirt and grass. Regina stared down at her black and white Converse tennis shoes, her hands intertwined tightly behind her back. The young nurse wondered how she could be so comfortable in the emergency room so near death and yet so uncomfortable here in the graveyard with death in all its grand finality. Regina followed Nikki's lead when the girl slid to her knees and began pulling weeds that were growing from her mother's dirt. Regina had never visited Mrs. Valentine's gravesite before and she wanted desperately to offer comforting words to her best friend. But she found her mouth extremely dry every time she cracked her lips to say anything. Even if she could summon enough saliva to allow her to speak words that were not hoarse with discomfort her mind offered not one organized and effective thought and she decided to focus on the lesser task of breathing, which seemed to be enough of a challenge at this point.

"You haven't asked about DeFrank," Nikki said, still not taking away any of the attention that she was giving to the maintenance of her mother's grave.

Regina swallowed the lump in her throat, figuring that Nikki was now ready to talk about death since they were surrounded by it.

"I have just been taking this thing one creepy, horrifying step at a time," Regina told her. "Have they questioned him? Do they really think that he had anything to do with it?"

Regina asked.

"I don't know, maybe, but considering the fact that he's dead I doubt they would ever be able to prove anything one way or the other," Nikki said without even looking up, as she was now sweeping the dirt off the sides of the tombstone. A light gasp escaped Regina. After picking all of the weeds Regina sat back on her heels and brushed her hands against one another to rid them of the excess dirt. The wind carried the faint sound of dragging footsteps through the cemetery. A startled Regina looked over her shoulder at the landscape behind her, realizing that she was more spooked than she thought she had been at the news of Glen DeFrank's death. She scolded herself silently for having such a morbidly creative imagination before resuming the conversation with Nikki.

"What's wrong?" Nikki asked.

"Nothing. Glen DeFrank is dead?" Regina asked again as if she had not heard the first time.

"Yes, *he* is," Nikki repeated with ice on her tongue. She stopped grooming her mother's grave in order to review the concerned look on Regina's face.

"Don't tell me you're upset about this, Regina? After his parents died he became a weirdo and he probably put Lola in that hole," Nikki argued. Unharnessed frustration rose in Regina's chest and was on the tip of her tongue before she was able to find the root of it and tame her reckless emotion which resulted in her not being able to get any words out at all only a vexing stutter.

"I...I...I am not upset...it is just, Jesus!" Regina spit, shuddering. "This just keeps getting more and more interesting, for lack of a better term." Regina quieted herself so that she could hear more clearly the voices that were mingled with the abrupt gusts of wind that billowed the leaves across the cemetery ground. Nikki read her friend's face and jerked her head around in both directions trying to get a quick overview of their surroundings.

"What?" Nikki raised her voice. "You are *FREAKIN'* me out, Regina!" Nikki scolded.

"Sorry. I just thought that I heard something," she fired back.

"Heard what?"

The two stared at each other in silence for a moment listening for something, some validation that neither of them was going crazy. A moment before they resumed their sanity they heard a rushed scrambling noise that made them both jump. Their eyes focused on a flash of movement to their right. Two squirrels were chasing each other around one of the old trees. Both girls sighed and they may have even laughed if their conversation had not been so heavy.

"How did he die?" Regina asked.

"Some kind of condition, he had a stroke or enlarged heart or something. It took about a week for anyone to even find him. His sister moved to Johnson City a couple of years before it happened and she would come to visit him on the weekends sometime. When she came home one weekend, he was laid out on the couch, cold, or at least that is

how Michelle tells it. You know Michelle couldn't hold water if she were a bucket. You would think after all this time, that Handow would not talk business in front of his niece for not wanting the entire population of Harrisburg County knowing all of the details of his investigations. DeFrank had become a total recluse by then and had gotten really..." Nikki took her index finger and made circular motions around her ear to finish her point.

Regina raised her eyebrow at the politically incorrect charade.

Across the grounds, Regina pointed out a man, probably in his late forties, wearing dirty jeans, a denim jacket, and a trucker hat. Even from where they sat, Regina and Nikki could see that the man's lower face was covered in hair that needed to be shaved. A cigarette hung limply out of the corner of his mouth. Behind him, he was dragging a long canvas bag and telling from the amount of effort he put into the feat, it must have been weighty.

"I'm sure those are just his tools." Regina said, comforting herself.

"Yeah...his tools," Nikki agreed still not taking her eyes off of the slovenly man as he marched across the field of death.

The eyes of both girls caught one another and Regina felt an undeniable sense that she, Nikki, and the gravedigger were no longer alone. Maybe she had heard a hard step on the ground nearby or heavy breath close in the air, but she was sure that there was something evil near. Regina looked across the field again and the gravedigger was gone.

Nikki's shrill screams rang out in the cemetery. Cold, strong hands grabbed both women from behind and Regina looked up over her head to see a dark man standing over her with a sharp metal tool that he had raised high into the dank cemetery air that was now coming down straight toward her head. She closed her eyes and waited for the pain, the inevitable stillness that was to come.

When no immediate pain came, Regina opened her eyes to hear the gruff sounds of attack melt into childish whoops.

"Assholes!" Nikki screamed as she wrenched herself out of what they were sure, just moments ago, were the hands of death. Nikki regained her balance with aggravation firing on all circuits as she dusted dirt off her colorful jogging suit.

Regina stood up on her own rejecting the hand that one of the laughing men extended. It was Barron Forte, Regina's high school sweetheart and his younger brother Carter. Barron's boyish good looks had grown into dead-on handsome and she knew that he knew it. He was tall and of medium build, his skin was smooth, but bristled with a goatee that he had been growing; his lips were full and opened every now and then to reveal the smile fit for a game show host.

"Barron." Regina yelled as she jumped on the refined young man wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist. He whirled her around. She was so thrilled to see him that she almost failed to notice how disrespectful such glee seemed in a place like this and immediately released the man from her grips.

Carter Forte held his hands stiffly out in front of him and moved toward Nikki like a zombie and managed to chant, "We're coming to get you, Barbara." One good time

before breaking into laughter again.

"I second that asshole comment," Regina said, directing her quip at both men. Barron was holding a long silver screwdriver in his hand.

"What are you doing with that?" she asked, pointing at the weapon.

"We went to get it from my grandmother's house, we were putting together an entertainment center for my mom, but we needed a screwdriver so we had to walk over to my grandmother's to get hers," he explained, directing his head toward his grandmother's home, which was just on the other side of the cemetery.

"We always cut through the cemetery," Carter reminded them.

"You guys are too old to be jumping from behind tombstones and scaring people. I almost peed my pants!" Regina scolded them as she punched Barron in the chest playfully.

Barron's little brother Carter was still bursting with laughter as he held his stomach.

"You two are NOT funny! I'm trying to grieve my mother. Don't you idiots have any respect for the dead?" Nikki was still pissed and took a girlish swing at Carter, missing.

"Awwwwww, c'mon Nikki. Of course, I respect the dead, but when we saw you two here, we just couldn't resist. I apologize." Barron said, bowing at the waist in a charming gesture. Everyone settled down, but they retained slight grins as they were on the edge of crazy laughter, but managed to fight it back so as not to get cursed by Nikki again. The group stood in silence waiting for Nikki's forgiveness. After a few seconds, she rolled her eyes and spoke in a calm and collected manner.

"Fine, but you guys are still idiots." Nikki narrowed her animal-like green eyes at the men.

"Awwwwwww, don't be that way," the two brothers wailed as each of them covered the girls in bear hugs.

"Since when are you two such handymen anyway?" Nikki asked.

"A man knows his tools," Barron spoke with an exaggerated arrogance.

"Especially if he *is* a tool." Nikki joked. "What are you guys doing here?"

"I told you we had to go to my grandmother's house," Barron said. Nikki rolled her eyes deeply.

"...In Black Water, genius?" Regina clarified.

"Lola's funeral, what do you think? She was our friend too; besides, my mom asked us to come." Barron explained.

"This is crazy, huh?" Carter intervened. "So Glen DeFrank killed her?" He asked.

"Yes." Nikki answered his question quickly.

"We don't know that for sure." Regina corrected her friend. Regina put her hands on her shoulders and rubbed them to create some heat. She was starting to get a chill and wished that she had listened to her mother and put on a scarf. Barron must have noticed her discomfort.

"You want my jacket?" he offered.

“No, I’m OK. Let’s get out of here,” Regina said to the group.

“You guys want to get some coffee at the OC?” Carter offered. “My treat.”

“You always were a big spender,” Nikki joked.

“Sounds good,” Regina confirmed.

“We just have to drop this screwdriver at home, get the car and we’ll meet you guys there.” Barron outlined the plan. The Forte brothers set out across the cemetery toward their mother’s home, which was just on the other side of the cemetery, opposite their grandmother’s house. Regina picked up her father’s bike and walked alongside it following Nikki down the gravel path; she stopped for a moment and turned and looked one last time for the gravedigger and his bag.

Chapter 8

Regina could hardly wait to wrap her thin fingers around a steaming cup of coffee to melt the frost that had covered her body on the bike ride over. Slumped over the counter was a fiery-headed waitress that Regina instantly recognized as Michelle Sears. In high school, Michelle was well known because her mother and father ran the OC and her uncle was the sheriff but it would have been hardly accurate to call her popular. She had been the editor and number one reporter for the *Oakley High School Times*. Lusty venetian red hair sat on the top of her head in a tussled bun, her green eyes lacked sparkle and were more matte like brambles of a forest. More than anything she loved to talk and was known to not be able to keep a secret even if her life depended on it, which was just another reason why people liked being around her, but no one really wanted to be friends with her. Getting the secrets from her was one thing, but telling her one was like writing your business on a billboard.

Michelle must have recognized Regina because she fondled her lightly with her eyes, but was much too proud to immediately reveal unfettered recognition of Regina with a wave. Michelle nodded subtly, letting the girls know that it would be a moment until she came over, acknowledging them nonetheless. Regina gave her a slight wave and struggled to muster half of a sincere smile. The girls sat in a booth along the wall of windows so that they could people watch on Main Street, which is something that they had often done as kids, it was something everyone does in places like Black Water. An eighteen-wheeler truck zipped by the popular eatery, sending up a massive wind that ruffled everything on either side of Main Street. Nikki stared out the window for a moment before turning to her friend, leaning forward and piercing Regina with the scintillating green eyes that told of her French Creole heritage.

“It’s Halloween, you know,” she said in a seductive whisper.

“I know.” Regina reeled back in her booth cringing in anticipation of what words were about to spring forth from the lips of the infamous Nikki Valentine.

“Well...” Nikki said as she unlocked the tension in the moment and relaxed back against the booth. “I think you got your seasons mixed up, little girl,” she said.

“Do tell?” Regina tempted, leaning over the table. Nikki hummed to herself in a low bewitching tone before allowing the words to slip off her lips like honey.

“You sure lit up like the Times Square Christmas tree when Mr. Forte put his arms around you,” she taunted. Regina pulled napkins from the dispenser and threw them at Nikki, feeling a warm burning sensation of embarrassment fill her cheeks.

“Noooooooo!” She rebutted playfully. Nikki broke into a grossly exaggerated

imitation of her friend.

"Oh Barron, what bright eyes you have." Nikki began.

"The better to see you with." Regina furthered the joke at her own expense by assisting her in the recounting of the fairy tale in a monotone voice.

"Oh, Barron, what nice teeth you have." Nikki began again.

At this point Regina could see exactly where her friend's sick humor was going. She had not changed; even in high school, her personality encompassed a likable perversion.

"The better to *eat* you with." Regina finished the joke before both girls were consumed in an adolescent guffaw.

"You are absolutely sick, you know." Regina laughed with the back of her hand covering her mouth, as if that would reduce the level of girlish immaturity.

Just as they had in the graveyard, the Forte brothers appeared out of thin air and they were sliding into the booth next to the girls before they had even a moment to quell their snickering.

"What's so funny?" Carter asked.

"Little Red Riding Hood," Nikki told them, revealing at least one layer of honesty.

Both girls began giggling again.

"What?" Barron asked before the conversation was interrupted.

"Well, well, well, look at the little crew all together again." Michelle stood over the table tapping her lower lip with the pen she held in her hand. The tall girl eyed the group enviously.

"I think I remember you kids." Michelle's words struck as slightly condescending, considering all four of them were adults.

"Did someone order a redheaded slut?" Nikki spoke first. The entire table burst into simmered laughter. Regina pressed her hand over her face amusingly exasperated by the fact that this petty feud continued into adulthood. Nikki and Michelle had become sworn frenemies when Michelle began dating one of Nikki's high school boyfriends before Nikki had a chance to break his heart by dumping him when the relationship began to get serious, as was her routine method of operation. The group did their best to sweep up the laughter that was left lingering in the air after a couple of seconds. Michelle eyed a Nikki that appeared very proud of herself for making the group laugh.

"Always a pleasure to see you, Nikki. What can I get you for breakfast? A cup of coffee with a shot of brandy and eggs with a side of lifelong regret?" Michelle fired back as if she had been prepared for the trivial battle before approaching the table. As awkward as Barron, Carter and Regina felt being caught in the cross fire of this conversation, it was undeniable that they were sincerely entertained.

Nikki flashed a captivating smile. "That coffee sounds great, but I will have a shot of Bailey's in my coffee instead of brandy and hold the food."

"I would ask to see your ID, but since you look forty, I'll chance it."

"Michelle, such a dirty little mouth! I'm starting to believe all of those high school football team rumors about you."

Michelle gave Nikki the finger in a silent reply.

"Maybe, but I am going to need about twenty cups of coffee with Bailey's for that." Nikki sneered sarcastically.

"Ah, yes, now I recall it was Lola who was the nice one." Michelle stated.

"Oh it's just playful banter." Nikki squeezed her face in an embellished smile directed at Michelle. Michelle eyed Nikki carefully before brightly returning her attention to the rest of the group in a complete change of expression that was flawless.

"Looks like you're only missing Natalie. I'm sorry about Lola. Absolutely sick what happened to that girl. She didn't deserve that." Michelle said and everyone nodded in reflective agreement.

"So what does sheriff think?" Regina abandoned all subtlety in her quest for information. Michelle took a long and calculated look over both of her shoulders. In a flash of expression, Regina thought she recognized what could only be described as genuine terror in Michelle's eyes. After deciding that no one outside of the chosen group inside the booth was listening, Michelle leaned into the table so that she could whisper. The booth of enthused listeners leaned forward; all sets of eyes were close and upon Michelle as if she was telling the most intriguing ghost story in a tent at a childhood camp-out.

"I am only telling you guys this because you were her friends," Michelle informed them. Regina listened intently. There was an isolated silence at the table, with the noise of the diner far away, smothered under the pounding of their hearts.

"Well, as you know..." Michelle turned her head to one side in a downward tilt, her gossiping position. "Her body was found buried on the outskirts of the DeFrank estate. From the initial review of the remains it appears that she was stabbed, among other things."

"Stabbed?" Both Regina and Nikki interrupted at the same time with the same inquiry.

"Yeah, stabbed..." Michelle answered, frustrated at the interruption.

Barron raised an eyebrow. "How can they tell that she was stabbed after all of this time? Wouldn't she just be bones?"

Michelle became more peeved at their lack of forensic knowledge.

"There were cuts on her bones. It is possible that some of the cuts were caused during the dismemberment, but it's possible that she was stabbed before she was mutilated. Whoever did this was pissed. Whoever did this hated Lola. Some of the stabs that pierced her body hit bones and the marks are still there. Blunt force trauma to the head, and then placed into two black garbage bags. Someone really did a number on her. Because of all the trauma to her body I even heard some talk of a ritual killing, but that's just a theory."

"How did the Madsen boys find her?" Regina had already heard one version of the story, but wanted to know everything that Michelle knew.

Michelle took a deep breath and peered over both of her shoulders once again before

revealing more secrets.

“Jonathan Madsen and his two brothers were out there playing around. If you remember, the Madsen farm borders the DeFrank land. While they were playing they crossed over onto Glen DeFrank’s land as they have many times before, I’m sure. Jonathan Madsen spotted the top of the plastic bag sticking up out of the ground. They thought that they found a buried treasure so they went back to their house, got a shovel and dug up the bag. You can imagine their surprise when they opened that bag expecting to find rubies and gold or whatever it is that ten-year-old boys expect to find in treasure, maybe a library of dirty magazines or something, but you get what I am saying. They found bones and shoddy scraps of her clothing. They told Old Man Madsen and he called my uncle.” She finished as she observed the scowls of awe and disgust that were creased into the faces of every member of her audience, which gave the storyteller in Michelle a sick delight.

Several seconds, which registered as minutes on the consciences of every member of this country diner horror group, passed before anyone could say a word.

“What about suspects?” Nikki asked.

Michelle shrugged quickly as if that were a silly question to ask. “Well, right now they are thinking Glen DeFrank, unless it is some great coincidence that she was buried there.”

“It doesn’t have to be a great coincidence. With all of that land that they had anyone could have buried her there.” Carter reasoned.

“Sure, but you know that before he died he had become very strange. If you ask me, that’s one heck of a coincidence.” They all looked to Carter for his rebuttal and, though it was hardly a slam dunk case, he had to relent that it did seem strange. He tangled his mouth in an arch of begrudging defeat.

“Michelle! Unless you’re interviewing the queen over there can I get you to deliver some of these sausages?” Michelle’s younger brother yelled out of the food window from the kitchen.

“Sausages; her specialty.” Nikki cracked unable to bear the intensity of the situation any longer.

“Hold your horses!” Michelle yelled to him. “Christ!” she bellowed, turning back to the table. “Lemme get orders.” In a rush, Michelle took the orders of the table, three coffees and one with a shot of Bailey’s.

Nikki wasn’t kidding, Regina thought to herself as she listened to Nikki’s order. “Got it!” Michelle left the bunch and hurried into the kitchen. Regina could not wait for her to get back with her coffee; the details of her friend’s murder had filled her from the inside out with ice. Everyone at the table studied everyone else, wondering how to feel, what to say, but nothing would change what was and what had been. Longingly, Regina gazed out the window and watched the families stroll up and down Main Street. Everyone else was happy and Regina spotted the twinkles of carefree joy that glinted in the eyes of the children, heightened by the coming of one of the town’s most favored holidays.

Barron invaded Regina's thoughts, "So do you guys think Glen did it?" he asked in what was almost a whisper.

"Yes," Nikki answered without hesitation, barely allowing Barron to finish his question, then sitting back and folding her arms against her chest in a satisfied manner.

Michelle appeared with four cups of coffee.

"This one is yours." She placed one of the coffee cups in front of Nikki. Also, on her tray was an enormous slice of chocolate cake with four forks.

Barron wasted no time, snatching up a fork, gormandizing the layers of chocolate.

"The cake is on me." Michelle winked. "Thank you" Regina said before taking a long sip of the coffee. It ran down her chest warming her whole body and she reluctantly returned to the conversation and the reality that she now wanted only to escape.

Barron shoved another gluttonous forkful of milk chocolate into his mouth and Regina rolled her eyes playfully at the fact that Barron had always been able to eat whatever he wanted without any regard to his weight. In high school, he worked out, he was not an athlete by any stretch of the imagination, but he never encountered problems with weight after devouring an entire pizza, candy bars, or an entire piece of chocolate cake and Regina was jealous to no end that he had apparently been able to preserve this gift into adulthood.

Theatre was Barron's trade and he was skilled at his craft. The dynamics of popularity had begun to change when they were in high school, where at one time it was the all American football player that was the star of the campus, it was now the talented actors and singers that claimed the high school notoriety and Barron harvested the fruits of that shift in social status. Just as Barron had always dreamed, he moved to LA right after high school and was still working on blazing a trail to stardom.

"I don't know," Regina said finally taking her eyes off of Barron. Regina leaned forward, resting her arm on the table and placing the side of her head against her palm.

"There are just so many possibilities." She explained her hesitation to jump on the bandwagon of believers. Desperately, she longed for someone to fill the empty space with words, but when no one did, she had no excuse not to divulge the things that weighed heavily upon her.

"I dreamt about her last night." Regina blurted out nervously before she had time to decide whether it was something that she should have disclosed. Her three friends eyed her strangely.

"I've dreamt of her before, but this was different. Frightening. It's like she wants me to know something," Regina guessed, trying not to sound too freaky.

They watched each other nervously.

"I know it sounds crazy," Regina stated as if getting to the punch before anyone else would somehow take the sting off.

"What happened? Did she say anything to you?" Carter asked.

"She said my name, that's all, but it was not like a regular dream. It wasn't some smoky montage of scenes. It was as if she was there; I experienced her with all of my

senses. I could see her, hear her, touch her...I could even smell her.” Her voice had degraded into a tortured whisper.

Barron’s eyes went wide with excitement at the grotesque detail. “What did she smell like?” he asked.

Regina moved her eyes to focus on Barron in a dull and scolding manner. Two words.

“Not funny.” Regina told him.

She noticed Nikki fingering the gold crucifix, a confirmation gift from her mother that hung around her small neck.

“Sounds bad, but it was just a dream, Regina. You’re in Black Water now, where the two of you spent so much time together and you are dealing with trauma, so it is not surprising that you are dreaming about her.” Barron said finally taking Regina seriously.

“Yeah,” Nikki spoke one word of agreement before excusing herself to the bathroom.

Barron looked at Regina unable to hold back the question anymore.

“...And just what drug is she off to the bathroom to do?” he asked.

“Not drugs. Just the drinks, I believe.” Regina sighed as she corrected the man. Barron looked into Nikki’s coffee cup, shaking his head after seeing that it was empty. “She probably has mini bottles in her bag or something.” Regina gave him the most honest answer that she could.

“I should have gone with her, I need a drink too. All this talk about ghosts and murder is not good for my mental health,” Carter injected himself into the conversation.

“I really don’t know. She still seems pretty functional and she doesn’t look *that* bad, so maybe it is not too hardcore, you know?” Though she couldn’t explain why, she needed to rationalize her friend’s bad habit.

Barron shook his head disapprovingly again.

Ten minutes later Nikki returned to the table appearing more relaxed.

“You OK?” Regina asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Nikki responded quickly, the next-best thing to brushing off the question altogether.

“Is Natalie coming back?” Regina asked, changing the subject.

“Natalie?” Nikki spoke as if Regina had asked a ridiculous question.

“She’s been back for months now.” Nikki told them as she picked up a fork and dug into the miniature mound of cake that Barron left on the plate.

“What? I thought that she was a teacher or something in Cedar?” Regina questioned.

“She was, but you guys remember how Mrs. Weston started getting ill years ago?”

Everyone nodded with a flare of indifference.

“Mrs. Weston had been suffering all of these years and last year she became bed-ridden.

At first Natalie hired a nurse for her because she didn’t want to come back, but I guess it just got to the point where she couldn’t afford it full time anymore and she had to

come back and help.” Nikki finished her story and the rest of the cake in the same breath.

“Did they ever figure out what was wrong with her mother?” Carter asked.

“Not for a long time, but they are now saying that she has some rare form of cancer or something. I don’t know. They don’t think that she will make it much longer,” Nikki added.

“Any more good news?” Regina asked dryly.

“Wow, things just keep getting better and better in Black Water. Everything on the outside seems perfect, but it’s when you get into the cracks of the foundation that you see that everything is coming apart at the seams.” Barron added.

“Are they having any visitors?” Regina asked. “Let’s go see Natalie and find out if she needs anything,” Regina said to Nikki.

Nikki scoffed sarcastically. “Regina, if you want, I’ll go with you, but she doesn’t want to see us. She wants nothing to do with us.”

“She wants nothing to do with *us*?” Regina’s disbelief was apparent in her tone. “Why?”

Nikki sighed and began the second part of her story. “When she first came back to Black Water, I was ecstatic. I went to see her, but she was as cold as ice. I hugged her and it was like hugging a freakin’ mannequin, she had absolutely nothing to say to me. I don’t know why she’s so mad at us or maybe it was just me. It’s like we all just fell apart.” Nikki reflected mournfully on the childhood bond that she thought could never be broken.

“Ouch” Barron interjected. Regina shot him a dirty look.

“Well, we need to get going. We told our mother we wouldn’t be long, if we don’t hurry up and finish her entertainment center we’ll never hear the end of it.” Barron and Carter began gathering themselves to leave after dropping a crumpled ball of money on the table.

“Thanks. I guess we should go too.” Regina agreed.

“You guys off to see the ice queen?” Barron asked, causing Regina to give him a playful but hard punch in the shoulder. Regina looked to Nikki to get the answer to Barron’s question.

“I guess it can’t hurt to try.” Nikki reasoned reluctantly.

As they walked outside, Regina huffed at the sight of the bikes and massaged her temples. She had forgotten that they had been traveling by this childhood mode of transportation and she noticed for the first time that her vagina was on fire from being perched on a hard seat for so long, just as Nikki had predicted.

Barron called to her as the girls were straddling their bikes.

“You wanna do something tomorrow?” he asked.

“Like what? Cow-tipping?” Regina joked.

“Maybe...” He laughed.

“I’ll call you, house number still the same?” He shouted. Regina nodded.

He recalled aloud “555-1807.”

She smiled, unable to believe that after all of these years, he still remembered her home phone number by heart and she wondered if the fluttering that she felt in her stomach was more than nerves about seeing Natalie, as inappropriate as the timing, she couldn't help but hope that it was.

"Nothing changes in Black Water," she yelled to Barron before taking off on her father's bike.

Chapter 9

Natalie's 1920's colonial home was sided with slate-colored New England panels. As they rode up the sidewalk on their bikes, Regina's eyes were drawn to the trellis that led up the side of the house directly to Natalie's bedroom window. It had once been lush with roses of all colors, but was now tattered and choked with disobedient vines. The frame of the front door and windows were accented in a once vibrant white with navy shutters. One of the scuffed shutters hung off the side of the weathered window and foretold the potential damage that lay inside. The grass was high in some places and beginning to yellow. Trees and brush grew tall on both sides of the front yard, isolating it from its neighbors, making it more desolate than any of the other homes on the street.

Regina and Nikki stood awkwardly on Natalie's porch after ringing the doorbell. It was several minutes before they finally heard footsteps scrambling inside the house.

The door opened, revealing a short woman in her late thirties; her blonde hair with its black roots was flipped up and sat high on the back of her head with a styling clip. She looked comfortable in scrubs that consisted of purple pants and a top decorated with colorful cats.

"Yes?" the lady asked.

"Hi, is Natalie here?" Regina asked. Nikki stood behind her not saying a word, which was customary for Nikki who was a firecracker with people she knew, but quiet in uncertain situations.

"Sure, come in," the blonde lady instructed them.

"Thanks" The girls answered in unison as the blonde led them into the home. Nikki turned and closed the door behind them. Right off the front hallway they passed through French doors that led them into the living room that was deprived of light by the heavy drapes that hung limply in the windows.

"Are you the nurse?" Regina asked.

"That's me." The lady said pointing to herself with sarcastic glory. "I will get Miss Weston." She said before disappearing out the glass doors and shuffling up the stairs. Regina could hardly breathe in the house filled with stale and stagnant air.

"It smells like death in here." Nikki muttered to herself.

Regina knew that it wasn't polite to meddle with things in the homes of others, but she felt overwhelmingly claustrophobic and decided to open one set of drapes before she passed out. Regina made her way to one of the vast windows at the front of the room and threw the bristly curtains in opposite directions. Light burst into the room and millions of dust particles swam through the dark shadows that were now struck by the harsh rays of

autumn light, like lost souls floating aimlessly through the air. Regina shot a couple of quick breaths out through her nostrils to keep herself from sneezing.

"Regina." Nikki called her name while moving across the room to be closer to her friend.

"What?" Regina asked as she followed Nikki's nervous stare to several objects around the room. Before the room had been so black and she had been so focused on breathing that she had not noticed the legion of paintings that littered the room, some sitting on easels, others on the floor, a few leaned against the couch and many hung low on the walls. Regina gasped and sucked in as much of the dusty air as her lungs would allow.

"You have got to be freakin' kidding me," Nikki whispered.

Regina's eyes traveled the room, finding that the gruesome paintings decorated almost every free space in the living room.

The first painting she noticed was a young girl sitting at a piano. Her tiny body sat upon a wooden bench and her stocking-covered legs hung down, unable to touch the floor. She wore gleaming black Mary Jane shoes and a dark purple dress with a white collar, fingers poised artfully over the piano keys as if she were banging out a masterpiece. To Regina, the painting would have been beautiful if the girl's eye sockets had not been ponderous round empty swirling vortexes of blackness. Regina grimaced as she studied the soulless piano-playing girl.

"Oh my God," she heard herself moan; Nikki was standing so close now that if Regina moved an inch she would have stumbled upon her friend.

In another painting two young girls were surrounded in darkness created by charcoal smear. The two girls were standing at the edge of a stygian forest, the trees were bare and the skinny branches reached up into the midnight sky. Only their backs and the sides of the girl's faces were visible and they appeared to be leaning forward, peering into the depths of an obscure forest blackened with the heart of every evil creature that lived within. If one looked just close enough, there was the tiny red glow of two eyes in the mass of black as if what they were looking for stood watching them, but it was impossible to tell whether they were going to the evil or if the evil was coming out to get them.

Regina traveled to the wall slowly, in a quest to view the most powerful painting and to put some space between her and Nikki, which was of no use because she could feel Nikki mimicking her every move with the precision of a reflection.

The painting illustrated a cult of naked girls; some knelt down with their foreheads pressed to the ground, while others danced with solemn faces around a gargantuan beast, symbolized in the ways that traditional versions of him cause people to manifest his image in their brains. He sat as tall as the trees that shaded the ungodly ritual that was taking place out of the sight of God-fearing men. No horns, but his entire body was red and not the cherry lipstick red that he is shaded in cartoons or other satirical replicas, but the color of rich rubies. His eyes were black and they glowed into and instantly

captivated the soul of those who dared to look into them, let go and allow themselves to get lost. Exceedingly long arms stretched from his statuesque torso, warning that no one was out of reach. His arms were muscular and high above his head he dangled one of the naked girls over his enlarged mouth. The girl cupped her hands together over her abdomen, with eyes wide open; she seemed neither happy nor unhappy in the face of her impending fate, but appeared perfectly resolved to it. Bloody rivulets dripped out of the mouth of the beast as if he had been devouring vulnerable little girls all day long; seductive bastard. Regina was amazed at how real the blood looked on the portrait. The entire scene was almost three dimensional and emerged from the canvas. Regina directed trembling fingertips toward the artwork to touch the drippings that ran from the lips of the beast; the closer her fingers traveled to the face of the wild animal the more real he became to her until her hand was less than an inch from his feral mouth.

“The devil.” A voice spoke.

The girls had been so engulfed in the painting, their eyes so glued to the images, their bodies so rigid with tense morbidity, that when the voice startled them, Regina took a clumsy step back, crushing Nikki’s foot. Unable to hold her ground, Nikki lost balance and grabbed Regina who grabbed aimlessly as both girls tumbled to the floor taking an easel down with them in the colossal collapse.

Both girls scrambled clumsily, getting to their feet again only to meet the cold eyes that shared no similarities to the eyes of the Natalie Weston that they had known years ago.

“Natalie,” Regina said enthusiastically. She wanted to run over and hug the unmoved woman, but the thought of the paintings dampened that feeling and the apathetic expression on Natalie’s face washed it completely away.

“Do you ever think about the devil, Regina?” Natalie asked. A disturbed Regina pondered the question.

“Uh, no...” Regina shook her head. “I suppose I don’t,” she finished.

“I do,” Nikki interrupted, her voice broken down to a childlike whisper by the emotionally draining tension that filled the room.

“Do you know why the angel Lucifer was cast out of heaven?” Natalie asked her next question gently fiddling with her bangs. Natalie’s chocolate brown hair fell over her left shoulder in a thick, neat braid. She wore a long-sleeved white shirt, fitted jeans, and brown riding boots; her eyes sparkled behind her dark reading glasses.

Regina and Nikki exchanged a look.

“He was cast out because God told him that angels were to serve man and in his arrogant pride, he refused. He and other angels who agreed with him were cast out of heaven. Once exiled, the fallen angel decided to take his revenge by tormenting man, his proclaimed enemy. God and the devil have been in a bitter battle over our miserable souls ever since,” Natalie lectured as her copper-colored eyes glared at them from behind her dark-rimmed glasses.

Nikki’s mouth dropped open and she was breathing methodically.

“Why does God allow the devil to touch us?” Natalie asked into the air as she crossed the room and peered into her own painting.

“Because we have free will just like those angels did,” Nikki told her. Regina shot Nikki a fierce look that scolded her for taking part in this ghastly oration.

“I know that.” Natalie snapped venomously. “...But why should we even have a choice? Why doesn’t God just do away with him?”

“Because the devil is powerful.” Regina was not sure this was the right answer, but injected herself into the exchange in order to get through this conversation as soon as possible.

Natalie, who was not even a foot away, turned to face her friend.

“...And doesn’t that scare the shit out of you?” Natalie hissed.

No one spoke. Natalie turned again to face the painting.

“That’s why I paint these. If I explore the abyss, if I get there before he does and I get it all out of me, there will be nowhere inside of me for him to hide. Does that make any sense at all?” she asked as she picked up the brush, adding skillful detail to the artwork. Regina took a deep breath and let her eyes float to the floor before returning her gaze to Natalie.

“I suppose it does,” Regina answered.

“What do you want?” Natalie abruptly changed the conversation.

“I just wanted to see you, to see how you were, to say I’m sorry about your mother.” Regina told her. Natalie motioned to the couch and Regina sat, Nikki followed sitting as close to Regina as possible. Natalie took a seat on the chair that sat on the other side of the coffee table. She noticed the unzipped duffle bag that contained her dirty secret at the end of the couch where Regina and Nikki sat and prayed neither of them would spot it.

“You don’t want to talk about Lola?” A question, to which, of course, Natalie knew the answer, but wanted to hear the truth out loud.

“We want to talk about Lola too,” Regina answered.

“We need to talk about Lola,” Nikki joined the conversation.

“Of course. What is there to talk about?” Natalie threw her palms face up into the air and spoke as if she were exasperated by a conversation that had barely begun. For a moment, her eyes were drawn back to the duffle bag that guarded her one last connection to Lola, the only way that she could be with her.

“What do you think happened to her?” Regina asked.

“Do you think that DeFrank had anything to do with it?” Nikki asked.

“Anything is possible,” Natalie answered.

“Well why did he bury her so close to the highway? Wouldn’t he have buried her closer to the house? From what I understand, he became a recluse. Hardly anyone ever visited him. It would have been a much better idea to bury her closer to the house or not on his property at all,” Regina theorized.

“Maybe he didn’t want to have a corpse too close to his house so he buried her as far away as possible, but still on his land so that he did not have to feel like he was giving

her up. Psychopaths are funny that way.” Natalie guessed with a dull tone that inferred an irrefragable indifference. She tolerated the conversation only to pacify the two women’s needs to reason something that was utterly unreasonable.

Both Regina and Nikki glanced at one another, the heinous paintings on the wall and nervously down to the floor, anywhere but at Natalie, who had become beautiful, but frightening.

Regina’s forehead creased with frown lines.

“I don’t know, I guess I just think that is too easy, it’s too obvious. I feel like we’re missing something.”

“Why do you care so much?” Natalie’s anger was now apparent. “Why is this so important now?”

After a long period of silence where Regina took several moments to contemplate the very question that Natalie asked.

Why do I need this so much?

“I don’t know,” she finally admitted to herself as much as to the girls she sat with now.

“...But the question should not be why I care so much; the question is why don’t you care at all?” Regina snapped back, surprised by the spitefulness that had risen in her so quickly.

Natalie’s eyes narrowed in sheer rage.

“I don’t care?” She spoke in a controlled manner, with a climbing rhythmic melody that foreshadowed the coming climax.

“I don’t care?” She repeated lifting her index finger like a gun and pointing it directly at Regina. “You are the ones who don’t care, neither of you.” Her voice dripped with bitter resentment.

“What are you talking about?” Nikki asked.

“I cared about her as much as you did, if not more. I cared about all of you and you abandoned me at the time when we needed each other most. You two left me! We were supposed to do everything together. We were all supposed to go college together. You, you, me, and Lola.” She pointed her finger at Nikki, then Regina, and to herself to drive her point.

“...But then Lola left us, she abandoned us. After that, you two just threw me away.” She looked at Nikki. “You decided to go off to state.” Next she pointed to Regina. “And you ran off to Texas and it was just little Natalie left, like some charity case.” Tears were pouring over the brims of her eyes.

“We never thought of you as a charity case,” Nikki assured her with an expression wrung with confusion.

“Natalie, it was never like that. We were all, always friends. After everything, it was just too painful to be around you guys,” Regina explained.

“Well, who in the hell told me?” Natalie was out of her seat screaming now. “I went away to college *alone* and I cried myself to sleep almost every night for the first year. I

waited for the phone to ring, hoping it was one of my *friends* calling to say that they were coming to see me, that they were alive, that they gave a shit about me at all, calling to say ANYTHING...and guess what?" she asked sarcastically. "...Anybody?" she asked. "... No answers, OK then, let me tell you. The phone never rang." The hysterical girl finished. "IT NEVER RANG!" She spit demonically.

Regina flew into a rage that pulled her off the couch. "I DID EVERYTHING FOR YOU!" Regina was disappointed to hear herself yelling.

"Please stop..." Nikki jumped up from the couch and inserted herself between the two women.

"GET OUT!" Natalie fumed in a wicked shout.

"Natalie..." Regina immediately calmed herself and tried to reason with the life battered woman that used to be her friend.

"I said get out! I don't ever want to see either of you again," she warned in a low moan.

With no other choice, Regina and Nikki were forced from the house.

Natalie crossed to the couch, grabbed the black bustier top that lay over the top of the duffle bag, shoved it deep inside, zipped the bag, and threw it behind the couch. Staunchly, she stood, arms folded in the middle of the room studying her paintings through the curtain of tears that blurred her vision.

Regina hated leaving the house that way, but she could not deny the relief she felt being outside, breathing fresh air again. The wind rustled the naked trees and blew the leaves to new and different places.

"What was that?" Nikki asked as if she had been there, but not understood anything that had taken place.

"I don't know, Nikki. I guess she is right, in a way. We did abandon her...we abandoned each other," Regina told her friend.

"Yeah, but...it was like we all needed to be apart from each other, I think. It was just too much to handle," Nikki confirmed.

"Natalie was always the weaker one. She needed us and we just walked away," Regina said, feeling disappointed as she looked up and focused on the sun that was taking on a burnt orange shade as it began its creeping decent from the highest point in the sky.

"I'm going home. My mother is probably worried," Regina said, not taking her eyes off the mesmerizing image of the sun.

"Me too. My dad and I have a standing dinner date on Thursday nights. You wanna grab dinner with us?" Nikki invited.

"Nah, I'm sure my mom is cooking, she'll be devastated if I eat anywhere else and besides, this day has been exhausting. I just want to lie down."

"All right, see ya later."

"Yeah, later." The young women said their farewells before taking off in opposite directions.

Regina's brain was much too small for all of the thoughts that were now fighting for

space inside her head. After an entire day of riding the bike, her legs were dead weight and she felt every cycle in each muscle of her legs and thighs. The air was fragrant with the spices of Midwestern home cooking that were wafting through open windows and screen doors and settling perfectly into the fall evening. She wondered what her mother was cooking; focusing her mind on any trivial detail was better than thinking more about Natalie.

Barron's face came to mind once again. She smiled at the thought of the thin mustache and beard that he had grown on his face that did not make him look older, but only made him look like a young man who wanted to look older. His horsey white smile made her heart beat faster and she wondered what it would be like to kiss him after all of this time.

Main Street buzzed with the excited energy that was typical of a small town Thursday evening. It was not quite the weekend, but close enough, still, to celebrate with the rewarding movie rental or ice cream outing. Just up ahead a girl standing under the awning of the video store caught Regina's eye. Regina made a concentrated effort to watch the path of her bike while still keeping an eye on the mysterious stranger. The sun was beginning a gradual dip at the back of the shadowed girl and her silhouette was the only thing visible. She was about five five, with long, straight, dark hair. Regina's gaze was more drawn to the girl when she saw that it appeared the girl was watching *her* too. Still she was unable to make out the subtle details of the girl's face, but she could see that it followed her as she approached. Closer now, Regina strained, desperate to see the girl's face but it was obscured by the shadows and was just another mask, in and out of visibility in the moving parade of faces that dotted the bustling sidewalk. Regina tried to keep her eyes on the road ahead of her, but at a certain angle, a shimmering sparkle of the romantic sunlight fell upon the curious girl and she caught the quickest sight of the dazzling, dancing eyes as they burned into her soul in all of their enigmatic glory.

It was Lola.

Chapter 10

“Lola” she burst, no longer able to dam the damned name in her throat. Regina’s feet drug along the asphalt and she let the bike clamor to the ground. She looked down, clumsily tripping over the inconvenient bar that stretched across the middle of the bike. As soon as she was sure of her balance, she looked up to find that the girl had vanished again. She stepped over the bike taking several eager steps toward the place where she had spotted her friend.

“Lola,” she called her name again in a queasy low whisper, not wanting anyone in the vicinity to know that she was seeing a person that everyone knew was dead. Lola was gone. Regina grabbed her chest while searching all of the faces that buzzed up and down the street, in and out of the shops, but she was gone. She backed away, leaving her eyes on the place where she had last seen Lola, when suddenly she felt burly arms close in on her tightly. Regina spun around with a startled squeal.

“Mr. Flowers.” She recognized the huge hairy man on sight. Mr. Flowers was the town butcher and owned the butcher shop on Main Street where her mother still got fresh meat every Sunday for dinner.

“You OK?” bellowed the man who spoke with the rasp of a person that had trouble catching his breath for all of the extra body weight he was carrying. “I saw you fall off of your bike. You OK? You look familiar, do I know you?” he asked with a grimace as if he wanted to smile but was unable.

“Regina...Regina Dean,” she stammered, picking up the bicycle.

“Regina,” he said, looking at her intently, studying the features that had been passed on to her by her mother, her oval-shaped brown eyes and full lips.

“Yeah, that’s right. How are you?” he said as he looked her over again, up and down as if to make sure she was OK. Regina’s gaze wandered to the hands that gripped her arms and she scowled at the fingernails caked with dark purple dirt. She felt her stomach flip when she realized that the butcher’s fingernails were not caked with dirt, but dry blood. She tried hard not to allow the disgust that was forming in the hallows of her abdomen reveal themselves in her rich features, but they had already begun to show before Regina could reel them back in and cover them with artificial delight. He recognized the reaction.

“Still working at the shop, but a man has got to eat!” He laughed heartily, pointing back at the OC Diner where he had been having a quick bite before returning to his shop. Regina breathed a deep sigh of relief.

“Yes, of course.” She laughed awkwardly as she mounted the bike unsteadily.

“How is your family?” she managed to get out.

“They’re surviving.” He laughed again.

“Bye, Mr. Flowers.”

“Bye.” She heard him say as she began pedaling fast down the street ignoring the burning sensation that pumped through her thighs.

Mr. and Mrs. Dean were sitting in the living room in front of the TV when Regina returned home. The TV trays were decked out in front of the them with a glass of soda, the can right next to it, white napkins and two plates of food. Regina rolled her eyes at the sight of the space heater that her father always used to save money on heating bills.

“I made chicken!” Her mother raised an enthusiastic eyebrow along with a chicken leg when she saw her daughter standing aimlessly inside the front door. Regina loved her mother’s chicken, but after the events of her day, she wished that she could just crawl into bed, curl into the fetal position, and pull the thick quilt over her head, but it was much too early for that. Regina could not help but smile, acknowledging that she had not seen her parents in years and she knew that they wanted only to spend time with her.

“OK, just let me wash my hands,” she told her mother as she ran up the stairs and into the bathroom. Regina washed her hands thoroughly in the way that all nurses did even when they were not working. She grabbed a rag from the towel closet and soaked it in cool water. After placing the chilled rag on her face, she sat down on the toilet lid.

“You have got to calm down, Regina. It is just your imagination,” she spoke to herself. “It is just your imagination,” she repeated while she studied her beguiling reflection in the mirror.

But what if it isn’t? What is happening? What does she want from me? Maybe she’s angry because I left her, just like I left Natalie...just like I left everyone or maybe coming back here is just making me lose my mind, just I like I feared.

The barrage of thoughts was driving her mad and she could feel her heart beginning to pound through her shirt. Again, she wet the rag, rung out all of the water, placed it on her face and tried not to think of anything that she had heard or seen that day.

“Regina,” she heard her mother call. Startled, Regina accidentally let the rag fall to the floor. “Your food will get cold.”

“OK, Mom,” she called back. Regina hung the towel up, walked down the hall to her room where she took off her shoes before bouncing down the stairs, grabbing her plate out of the oven, and sitting down in front of the TV with her parents to watch, if her adolescent memories served her correctly, reruns of her father’s favorite mystery show.

That night sleeping was easy, especially after the long day and the heavy dinner that pressed her lower into the mattress. Regina slipped into unconsciousness almost as soon as her head hit the pillow.

Shrill lifeless cries drove into Regina’s ears as her dead body rose to life in one hard jerk. She reached out aimlessly pressing her hand wildly in the air. Someone had set the alarm clock and she woke to the radio playing classical piano music at the height of a particularly dramatic piece. Finally, she felt the small clock under her hand and pounded

it angrily against the nightstand so that the music would stop. The house was silent again except for the symphonic chirping of the crickets that buzzed through the walls of the house as if they were in superior quality surround sound. She laid her head back on the pillow and up through the incessant chirping she heard the sounds of the music emerging once again and filling her ears. Blinded by darkness, Regina felt around the nightstand, but soon realized that it was no longer coming from the radio. She sat up in bed listening intently for several moments to make sure that the sound was not coming from inside her own head. When she was sure the music was produced by a source outside the confused brain that had been causing her so much trouble lately, she followed the alluring melody out of her room and into the drafty hall. The light in her parents' room was off. She stepped lightly so as not to activate any of the creaks, which she knew by heart from the old wooden staircase. At the bottom of the stairs she flipped on the light in the kitchen, looked around, and then went back out and into the living room where she stared at a piano. No one was seated there and the keys did not move, but the soft melodious keystrokes compelled her further still. Regina allowed herself to be summoned out the front door. Her jersey nightgown fluttered in the night wind. Down the forsaken street, she followed the song that called to her. Regina was not sure what led her, but with every step, she knew that she was closer to the origin. The young woman made her way down the middle of the wide street, looking at every house on the right and left as if she had never seen any of them before. Tonight they were all foreign to her. In every window an invisible entity watched her; she could feel the eyes slithering all over her body like poisonous snakes, waiting for the perfect moment to sink their venom into her flesh. Everything on the street was bathed in gray, with just enough light from the white moon to allow the tricky shadows to stalk her stealthily up the block as she allowed her crooked heart to lead the way. At the end of the block, there was a house with a light burning in every window and the music was louder with every step she took toward the house of light. Regina stood cemented into the sidewalk for what seemed like hours on the misty street and she listened to the music that came from inside Lola's house before she unlatched the rickety gate. In a flicker of movement, Regina looked up to see the drapes in one of the front windows swinging. Someone was watching her.

"Lola," she said as she felt an arcane grin creep across her face. The door of the lit house swung open slowly, the music beckoned to her and Regina climbed the porch and stepped inside. She proceeded through the front hall that opened up into the living room and there behind the grand piano, she saw a shadow that appeared to be hard at work with fingers fluttering wildly across the keys. Regina tilted her head to one side to get a better view of the piano player but was still able to see nothing but an unidentifiable figure. She crossed the living room to a place where she could have full view of the person and she stumbled-back grasping, spread fingers over her mouth as if that would keep in the terrible gasp that escaped her. Tiny, black patent leather Mary Jane shoes, covered in filth, swung below the piano bench not quite touching the ground. It was the corpse child from Natalie's painting in the early stages of decay, her little body bent awkwardly over

the piano, her wrinkled fingers mapping a song on the white piano keys. The purple velvet dress had become tattered and her white stockings were browned with the dirt that covered her in death. Her head, empty of eyes used to see the world. The little girl's song ended and her fingers came to a rest. The dead skin on her neck wrinkled as she turned her head in a slow, deliberate manner until the eyeless sockets in her head were trained on Regina who was beginning to gag. With no eyes, she stared, the two black gaping abysses threatening to pull Regina across their event horizon, sucking her into an unknown blackness from which there was no escape. Slowly the decrepit child slipped one leg after the other onto the ground and stood in a bent fashion as if her bones were no longer in their proper places, some slumping into unnaturally limp positions while others were fixed awkwardly at amazing jutting angles. Everything was wrong. With calm calculating steps, Regina backed away, toward the door and with every step she took back the corpse girl took one step forward. Within seconds, Regina conceded to a neck-breaking bolt toward the door with the dead thing sprinting behind her in giddy laughter. Regina flew through the front door, uncontrollably sliding across the leaf-covered porch, grabbing the banister to steady herself. Dashing through the gate and out onto the street, she could still hear the fast tap of little black patent leather shoes close behind her at an unnatural speed. The frightened girl was running down the gloomy street, screaming for someone to help her, but the night did not stir, no light illuminated inside a window, the tranquil trees watched without a word, and the moon was silent and no help at all.

"Please, someone help me!" she shouted, and with that call for help he appeared at the end of the block, he was tall and strong and his arms were outstretched to her. She plummeted forward and leapt into the man's arms. He grasped her tightly and spun her around. Momentarily, a deep sense of relief settled over the girl; then she realized that she no longer heard the shoe tapping behind her at a runner's pace, she moved her hands on the man's back and realized that he was wet. He felt slimy to her. She slid off him, backed away from the man and stepped out of his shadow into the white light of the moon and looked down to see that the front of her night gown was covered with blood, her arms were coated with the red liquid and the intense smell of iron filled her nostrils. As blood ran down her legs and was beginning to dry on her feet, she looked up; a thunderous cry escaped her when she saw that she had run into the arms of Glen DeFrank.

"Glen," she spoke. He looked down but never spoke, not one dead man's word. Regina stumbled backward and turned to run, but was met by the corpse girl. Regina faced forward, only to see Nikki and Natalie waving to her from the porch of a house in front of her, their faces stretched in the unnatural grins of circus clowns, fit only to entertain in the rings of hell and Regina knew that she could not even run to her friends. Evil met her at all three corners and left her no avail but the forest. The trees of the Langford woods loomed tall behind her as she stared at the people who watched her. She looked over every one of them, unsure of where to turn, frightened by all of them.

"What do you all want from me?" she screamed frantically.

The corpse girl took one step forward, causing Regina to turn and race into the mass of trees. Regina ran deep into the woods until the street was no longer visible. Nothing made a sound behind her. Wild branches attacked her as she pushed through the trees. Her eyes narrowed when she spotted shades of orange color. Smoke filled the air in a clearing that lay just in front of her. Perspiration dripped through her thick hair as she jerked her head back to look over her shoulder, thinking that she had heard the pitter patter of the squeaky shoes behind her. She gaped into the darkness, but there was no one. Her nose began to burn with smoke and reminded her to focus her attention back on the scene that lay ahead of her. Girls were bent at the knees, their foreheads to the ground, their naked backs rounded against the night. Some danced, twirled, and jumped around the fire, looping and weaving in and out of the girls that remained bent to the ground in undistracted devotion. They danced to the music of their bare feet pounding the ground. The fire was noisy with its seething whistle and the night air that had begun whipping intensely around them. For the first time Regina felt cold despite the fact that she stood just in front of a blazing fire that reached up almost as high as she stood. Past the fire, she could see the massive, snarling animal and upon laying eyes on him she knew that she must be in the grips of a terrible nightmare, but it served as no relief and failed to alleviate the terror that filled her chest and was rising into her throat. Her eyes followed the long arm of the beast high into the sky where she saw that he prepared to devour a young girl that he dangled over his throat. The pounding of the dancing girls' feet grew louder in her ears and mixed with their delighted laughter as their naked forms paraded before her, behind her, all around her until she became caught up in the festival of heinous chaos, completely consumed by it. Regina stared at the girl that prepared to be gulped. The meal of a girl was still, with her eyes closed, but something was not right. This girl should have been familiar to her and for some reason she was not until the moment that her feet began to disappear into the bizarrely wide throat of the monster when her eyes popped open, their eyes met, and Regina realized that she was staring into her own soul.

Regina's eyes popped open and blinked rapidly against the brilliantly offensive sunshine that was pouring in through her bedroom window. She sighed and rubbed her eyes, the birds were tweeting uncontrollably, and daylight had never seemed more welcoming. She blinked several more times and with every passing moment the details of the dream became less clear until they were just a series of vague, strange and sporadic images making no sense and telling no complete story. Regina lifted herself from the white sheets and sat up in bed when she noticed a red smear across her pillow. She reached out a shaky hand to touch the pillow, and her eyes widened at the sight of her hand. She wrenched the other hand from under the pillow and was unable to make a sound as she looked down at her hands covered in dried blood, the purple blood was caked under her short fingernails, she opened her mouth to scream, but nothing came out.

Chapter 11

“Regina,” her father called as he stepped into the bedroom. The sound of her name shocked her. Regina turned to face her father lifting her blood-covered hands up into the air with her palms facing him so that he could see the terrible thing that had happened.

Warmly, he smiled at her, came over, and slapped both of his hands against hers in a double high-five. The shaken girl gawked at her father, then back at her hands; clean hands, nails covered in metal blue nail polish, she turned the palms to face her and the blood was gone completely, she balled them into fists and thrust them against her forehead gently in frustration.

“You OK?” her father asked.

She waited before she answered. “Yes, I just have a headache,” she lied.

“Breakfast is ready. I will have your mother get you some aspirin.” He left the room and stood in the hallway thoughtfully for a moment before poking his head back into his daughter’s room. “Do you want to go to church this afternoon? I’m just going to go and put in a prayer or two.” He smiled.

“Maybe tomorrow, Dad,” she countered still not fully recovered from her hallucination. He started to speak, but stopped himself and departed.

Regina sat for a moment listening to the birds chirping spiritedly before the ringing phone interrupted them. She dragged her fingers through her tousled, sweat-matted hair. Reaching across the bed, Regina grabbed the receiver of the phone she had used when she was a teen.

“Hello?” she spoke.

“Good morning.” She recognized Barron’s melodious voice.

“Hey.” She smiled. At the sound of his voice, Regina could feel the anxiety in her stomach melting away.

“You still sleep?” he asked, apparently hearing the grogginess in her voice.

“I just woke up. Don’t judge me,” she joked. “Is this how early they wake up in Hollywood?”

Barron laughed. “In Hollywood and the rest of America, I think people find 10:00 a.m. a good time to rise and shine.”

“What?” She croaked as she craned her neck to see the alarm clock. The small screen showed the time at 10:12 a.m. Regina moaned in disbelief. “I can’t believe I slept so late again. But, what the hell? I’m on vacation. A gruesome vacation, but a vacation nonetheless.”

“You wanna do something today?” he asked, finally getting to the point of his early

morning wake-up call.

“Yeah, sure. Maybe we can get some coffee or something,” she suggested.

“You still need your coffee every morning?”

“Of course. Do you remember how you used to bring me coffee every morning in high school?”

“Your mother stopped making it because she said you were too young to be drinking coffee.”

“Lola would frown on it every morning saying that it would stunt my growth.” Regina laughed out loud. “I was already five seven.”

“I remember.” Barron spoke as if he were reminiscing the moment in his thoughts. “Those were the good old days.”

The phone fell silent while they allowed the past to float back to the space in the backs of their minds where it should be.

“I can’t wait to see you.” Barron told her. Regina felt the butterflies awakening and taking to flight in her stomach.

“Me too,” she added.

“Hey?” Regina spoke, a thought suddenly taking hold of her.

“Yeah?” Barron answered.

“Can we go by the police station first? I just want to see if they have learned anything new.”

Regina felt the hesitation on the other end of the phone.

“Honestly, I don’t think that they will be able to tell you anything new, but if it will make you feel better, let’s do it,” he relented.

Regina realized how much she had missed Barron. When Lola vanished and everyone went their separate ways, not only had she left Natalie, Nikki, her parents...she left everyone, including Barron, in her selfish need for distance from the tragedy. Since Barron, she had hardly dated, but she had definitely not dated anyone who was as caring, sensitive, and devoted to her as he had been.

“I’ll be over to pick you up in about an hour,” he said.

“OK, great.” Regina held the phone until it clicked to a dial tone.

After some insignificant puttering around her bedroom, Regina made her way downstairs. Her mother was leaning against the counter in front of the coffee machine in her oversized yellow terry cloth bathrobe sipping from a black mug.

“Good morning.” Regina eyed her mother, carefully studying her aging features under the bright light of the late morning sun. Her skin tone was that of rich cherry wood. Mysterious coffee bean pupils centered in almond shaped eye sockets under thick batting lashes.

“Good morning,” Mrs. Dean responded.

Regina made her way across the kitchen and poured herself a steaming cup of coffee before sitting down to take it at the table.

“I see all the mirrors are back up.” Regina commented.

“Things are not like that anymore,” Patricia assured her daughter.

“I’m just making a note of observation, Mother.” Regina challenged.

The two women eyed one another carefully as if they were coming to the dramatic end of a duel as mothers and daughters often did.

“Things haven’t been that way for years, I told you that.”

“I know what you told me. I was just saying...is that OK?”

“I suppose,” her mother said as she took a seat at the table.

“So you’re better now?”

“I am much better and I never did apologize to you for what happened,” her mother said.

Suddenly, Regina felt remorse at ever bringing up the sordid subject. She wanted only to make sure that her mother was OK and had no desire to have to confront this situation yet again.

Both women looked up as the garbage truck came rattling down the street.

“You don’t have to...” Regina began, but her mother raised her hand and cut her off swiftly.

“I do. I did, and I do need to apologize for everything, but especially for what happened that day. I know it frightened you...it frightened me. It was an awful, awful thing.”

Regina could feel her limbs stiffening and her eyes began to sting with tears that threatened to overflow. In the years that she had been away, she had never had to confront these issues, never had to feel these emotions and that was the best part of being away.

You are twenty-four years old, Regina. Don’t cry about this! It is over, it is in the past. Don’t let this get you upset.

“I’m sorry, Regina. Can you forgive me?” her mother asked sincerely.

“Yes, yes, of course I forgive you. I told you there was no need to apologize in the first place.” Regina said, rapidly wiping the flowing tears away from her eyes. She hated to get emotional. Especially, she hated to cry about things in the past and she was ashamed that they still pulled at her heart as they did. It felt sinful to continue to hold on to matters of history.

Mrs. Dean could see the pain that this conversation was causing her daughter and thought it best not to push. She reached out and touched her daughter’s hand, which Regina pulled away to wipe more tears.

Regina’s father came stumbling into the kitchen in his pajama pants and white T-shirt with a newspaper in hand.

“Now that I have taken care of the after breakfast duties, I can sit down and read my paper,” he said, rubbing his rounded belly.

Regina cringed.

“You don’t have to make an announcement every morning, Charlie,” her mother snapped. Regina’s father stopped and looked up as if contemplating his wife’s statement.

“No, I don’t. But I like to keep you informed.” He laughed at his own stale wit. His laugh was contagious and soon his wife and daughter could no longer hold out and were laughing along.

“Gross,” Regina stated.

“You want to see a matinee with your father and me today?” Mrs. Dean asked.

“Oh. Barron is on his way over to pick me up; we’re going to get some coffee or something.”

“You’re having coffee now,” her mother said, pointing out the obvious.

“Yes, but having coffee with my mother and a father that announces every bowel movement that he has is not quite the same thing as having coffee with a handsome, starving Hollywood actor, now is it?” she questioned, her father’s jovial mood infecting her as it usually did.

“That *does* sound more glamorous.” Charles Dean told his wife. Mrs. Dean rolled her eyes at her husband almost automatically before returning her focus to her daughter.

“Regina, you have not been home in years and your father and I have hardly had any time at all to spend with you. I know you miss your friends but...”

“I know, Mom. I’m sorry. I’ll be home early and we can do something.”

“The Halloween parade is tonight, we can go to that.” Mr. Dean offered a solution to his girl’s dilemma.

“Great. Sounds perfect, I feel like a kid all over again,” Regina exaggerated as she swallowed the remnants of coffee in her cup and hopped up from the table.

“You don’t want any breakfast?” her mother asked vexingly.

“No thanks, Mom. We’ll get something while we’re out. I need to take a quick shower before Barron gets here,” she said as she jogged up the staircase.

Barron was driving his mother’s gray Suburban. Regina wondered why she still had such a big car considering that she no longer had any small children in the house.

“Nice catching up with you, Barron.” Regina’s father gave his farewell from the front door as the pair made their way down the front porch stairs into the chilly October day. Regina had decided to follow her mother’s advice this morning and she wore a thick sweater over her long-sleeved gray T-shirt. She felt warm and comfortable under the winter clothes.

“You too, Mr. Dean.” Barron flashed his white teeth, the skin crinkling deeply at the edges of his eyes as he threw his hand up in a stylish farewell gesture.

“My mother wants to see you,” Barron informed her as they climbed into the truck.

Regina laughed. “Your mother was always so funny, I love her. I may come by tomorrow.”

“Please do because she won’t stop asking about you,” he said. “So how did things go with Natalie yesterday?”

“Not...well.” Regina answered, her mood suddenly dampened.

“She’s terribly angry at Nikki and me for leaving after Lola died. I had no idea what to say to her. What could I say? After what happened...I just...I just had to get away,”

she reasoned.

“You can’t blame yourself. Natalie was a big girl,” Barron told her.

“No,” Regina responded. “She was broken, but I didn’t care. I didn’t care about anyone, only what I needed.”

“Everyone responded differently. Hell, you were broken too. We were all hurt and you dealt with it. It may not have been the best way, but it was the best way you knew how,” he stated.

“Yeah...but that doesn’t change the fact that I feel terrible about it.”

The two sat in silence for the rest of the trip to the small police station that was at the far end of Main Street, just on the outskirts of downtown.

This day had been much colder than the day before and Regina wrapped her arms around herself as she departed the truck. The station was an old brick two-story building with the police station on the first floor; the second floor served as a storage space. A dirty red awning hung above the entrance and a pole just above it jutted out from the bricks and from it hung a swinging sign, *Police*. The sight was frightening and comforting at the same time, either the town was so safe that the police station was barely used or the police force was just a weak authority that no one in Black Water paid much attention to. Barron held the door open for Regina as she walked into the drab building with its shabby inside.

“Lawson,” Regina recognized Sheriff Handow’s son sitting behind the front desk with his freshly polished shoes propped up on one of the desks.

“Regina, I heard you were in town. Long time, no see,” he said, getting up and coming from around the desk to hug her.

“Barron,” Lawson greeted the man in a more conservative manner.

“Lawson, good to see you.” Barron extended his hand before Lawson tried to follow through on the embrace it seemed he was preparing to give.

“Terrible about Lola,” Lawson began, obviously sensing the reason that they were here before they had a chance to express it.

“Yes. Actually I was just stopping by to see if you guys had been able to get any more information on what happened,” Regina asked.

Lawson scratched his forehead. “Well, Regina I’m not really supposed to say anything with it being official police business and all.” Lawson spoke shyly, but with a sweet distracted grin that told Regina that she needed only to push a little more to get what she wanted. Lawson had always been a sweet boy, but was plagued with an incredibly shy personality that labeled him as somewhat of an outcast. He was a little younger than Regina and for some reason she had taken a liking to his affable manner in school and befriended him. Due to the influence of his lumbering older stepbrother, his reporter cousin and his sheriff father, Lawson Handow was never bullied, but was still shunned. Regina was not the most popular girl in school, but bolstered enough influence to bring Lawson into a realm of social comfort that allowed his time in school to be much more enjoyable than it would have been otherwise. She offered the gentle tutelage of an

older, confident sister.

“Can’t you tell us anything?” she pleaded, pursing her puffy glossed lips.

“Well,” he said in a long dragged-out groan as he went through all of the pros and cons of revealing any of the secret information in his head.

“Just the people that I wanted to see!” a hearty voice thundered behind them. Both Regina and Barron were startled by the words as they turned to see Sheriff Handow coming into the door of the police station with his barreling stepson, Cliff.

“You wanted to see us?” Regina asked gesturing to herself.

“You mind following me back into my office?” he asked, pushing open the small swinging door that led to the back of the station and holding out one hand as if leading the way. Butterflies began to play tag inside of her stomach.

What was he going to tell them?

Barron sighed as the two walked back into the square office that belonged to the sheriff. The floor was dusty and the room had three, floor-to-ceiling windows acting as walls. Barron and Regina sat down in the two chairs that faced the wooden desk. Sheriff Handow closed the door behind him and he moved around the desk, took a seat in the chair and leaned back to get comfortable in a sequence of purposeful maneuvers.

“Sheriff, I was actually coming to talk to you. I wanted to know if you had found any new evidence,” Regina started before he could begin.

“Everyone seems to be convinced that DeFrank did it since she was found on his property, but not you?” he asked, his eyes carefully fishing through her expressions.

“I don’t know. I just want to know the truth.”

“So do I, so do I.” Handow sang his words into the air as if he was not talking to the two people in the room at all.

“So did you find anything?” she asked desperately.

“I can’t really go into details until we complete our investigation,” he answered.

“So why did you want to see *us*?” Barron wanted to know.

“Just ask a few questions. Nothing to worry about, I am just going over the facts again with everyone who saw her that night,” he said.

“But we didn’t see her that night. We were at a party and she was at the library studying for her final,” Regina told him.

“Ah, that’s right. When was the last time you saw her?” Sheriff Handow asked.

“I saw her the previous day at school,” Regina said and Barron agreed to the same last sighting.

“I spoke to her on the phone the day she disappeared, about the party and she said that she had to study. She had to pass her exam or her parents would be angry. I went to the party, Lola went to the library, and that was the last thing I heard from her.” Regina felt her breath getting shorter as she recounted the story.

Sheriff Handow’s features softened.

“Do you know of anyone who would have wanted to hurt her? Did she ever mention that someone was bothering her? Following her? Anything like that?” He asked his

questions in rapid succession. Regina shook her head back and forth feverishly.

“No. Nothing like that.”

Barron reached over to hold Regina’s hand.

“I just want to know what happened to her. I just need to know.” Regina cried.

Sheriff Handow sighed and turned his gaze to Barron.

“Do you have anything to add?” he asked.

“No, sir” he answered.

“You knew Glen DeFrank, didn’t you?” Sheriff Handow asked.

“Yes,” she stammered, almost unable to get the word out.

“He gave piano lessons. He gave us all piano lessons, me, Nikki, Natalie, and Lola,” she answered.

“Did he seem, to you, like the type that would have killed her?” Sheriff Handow asked, leaning forward and intently staring at Regina. It seemed like all of the air in the room had been sucked into a vacuum as they all waited on the words that lingered at the tip of her tongue.

“No.” She finally sighed. “He was afraid of her.” Her mouth added words that her mind had not approved. Barron shot her a confused look.

“What?” Sheriff Handow asked leaning forward in his chair and settling his forearms into the desk.

Desperately, Regina tried to fish the tangled words out of the air of the room. The words echoed repeatedly, but it was too late. The words were spoken; therefore, they had been heard and could not be unheard and she cursed the metaphysical certainties that God had placed inside of the world.

“He paraded her.” Regina had never been more unsure of herself. “She was the best at piano and he lauded her all of the time to us girls. I don’t think he would have killed her.”

“That’s not what you said, Regina,” Sheriff Handow said sternly.

“What did I say?” Regina cursed herself for asking this question because she did not care to hear the mistake made spoken into reality yet again, but her mouth was too many steps ahead of her brain and she fought to slow it down, but had thus far been losing the battle.

“You said that he was afraid of her,” Sheriff Handow repeated.

“Oh,” Regina said; a stall tactic she was implementing, as she tried to sync her mouth with her brain. “Why would he be afraid of her?” she asked out loud.

“Well, I don’t know, Regina, you tell me,” Sheriff Handow pressed.

“I’m sorry, I made a mistake. I meant to say parade, not afraid,” she confirmed.

The sheriff narrowed his eyes at the girl and settled back into his seat. He leaned back in his chair still not taking his intent gaze off the girl as he rubbed his hands one over the other in front of him, his hands mimicking the tumbling of the thoughts in his head. Barron noticed that Regina was trembling.

“Is there anything else?” Barron asked impatiently.

"Nope, not just now. If I think of anything, I will give you guys a call or stop by," Sheriff Handow assured them. Barron gave Regina a slight nudge, prompting her from the chair. Regina grabbed her purse off the floor and headed toward the door of the office.

"Regina," Sheriff Handow called to her. She turned to face the policeman who had risen from his squeaky chair.

"I'm sorry you lost your best friend. I'm going to do my best to figure out who did this," he told her. Regina nodded her head and croaked a thank you before passing through the door of the office.

Sheriff Handow opened the manila file on his desk, and flipped through the pictures of the remains thoughtfully.

As they headed toward the front door of the station, Regina noticed a red piece of paper tacked to a bulletin board.

"Regina," Barron called. She did not acknowledge Barron, but instead, studied all the missing person posters attached to the board and, for the first time, realized just how many people in and around Black Water had gone missing.

Regina wondered how she had never noticed before that Lola had not been the only missing loved one in Black Water.

Ann Princess Ivey, 5, Missing

Regina swept her fingers across the little girl's smiling face, noticing the block letters under the photograph indicating that she had disappeared two years before Lola.

"Ann Ivey. Did you know her?" Lawson asked.

"No," Regina said not taking her eyes off the picture. "What happened to her?"

"That's a good question," Lawson said. "Her mother was Marion McGee. Did you know her?" Lawson asked.

"No. I don't think so," Regina responded.

"Marion's father, Daniel McGee was the preacher at First Baptist Holy Church out on Magnolia Road."

Regina continued to study the photo. The church name rang a bell, she had not known them personally, but she remembered driving by the church several times as a young child on their way out to pick seasonal fruits at Fairfield Farm.

"Well Marion got into all kinds of trouble as a girl and had Ann by some no-good from Edgerton, who had been in and out of prison. Right before Ann went missing, Marion was trying to put herself back together and get that guy out of her life. She had gone to court to try to keep him from seeing Ann. Shortly after that, Ann went missing while playing in the front yard. Marion said that she had left her for only a second. After that, she never saw her daughter or the girl's father again. He had family in another country though. I think he might have taken her there, but we just don't know," Lawson finished his story.

"That's no good." Barron said.

"And her..." Regina caressed the unsmiling one-dimensional face of another young

girl, a girl that she knew. In the photograph that appeared to have been taken while she sat outside on a blanket. The girl in the photograph was unhappy.

"Cynthia Tolah," Barron read the name. "She went to high school with us."

Regina's interested eyes caught Barron's. "She did?"

"Yes." Lawson jumped into the conversation. "She was new in town; she had been in school only for a year."

"I don't remember her," Regina admitted reluctantly.

"She kept to herself," Cliff added.

Regina closed her eyes, thinking hard to dredge up some memory of this forgotten girl. Cynthia's face looked familiar, but Regina scolded herself for not being able to solidify one good memory of the melancholy girl.

"She didn't take to the move very well. One day her parents woke up and she was gone, just missing from her bed. It was odd; they didn't even make a really big fuss out of it. She was most likely a runaway," Lawson explained.

"Who are her parents?" Regina asked

Lawson appeared to be in deep thought.

"Bev and Thomas Tolah." The four looked up to see Sheriff Handow had come striding into the room. "They stayed in Black Water for about a year after she ran away and then they moved. Don't know where to, though," he added.

"This was weeks after Lola. How come we never heard what happened?" Regina asked.

"Well, there is not a whole lot of searching that goes into seventeen-year-old runaways. She hated it here, everyone knew that and she would have been eighteen a couple of months after her disappearance; therefore, we didn't want to make much ado about nothing."

Regina peered back at the photo one last time before dashing out of the station without a good-bye.

A gale wind glided up the sidewalk and ruffled everything in its path including Regina. She pulled her sweater tighter around her body, trying to nullify the effects of the oncoming wintry weather that was attacking her from the outside, but there was no relief for the arctic cold that was breeding deep inside. Before she opened the door of the truck, she turned to look up and down the street unable to shake the feeling of eyes burning into her, watching her.

Chapter 12

Under the cover of thick sweaters, people bustled up and down Main Street. Regina scrutinized the storefronts, observing the mannequins inside, their dull eyes helplessly watching the lively movements of the people just on the other side of the glass. Regina looked at the unending darkness that lurked just behind the life-size dolls and she wondered. That wonder turned quickly to thought, and it turned again until she was in a trancelike state of contemplation fixated on what was just beyond the threshold of darkness.

The Coffee House was only a couple of blocks from the police station in an area of Black Water that everyone referred to as Middleton. It was the perfect hideaway for Barron and her to shelter themselves against the stinging gusts of cool wind with a blazing fireplace. The brick building had sat in this spot for as long as Regina could remember, but during her childhood, coffee was just a routine part of any restaurant menu and had not carried enough importance to have its own trendy building. The place that was now the Coffee House in simpler times had been a gas station. The aroma of burnt coffee and an obnoxious sense of intellectual superiority greeted them as they entered.

“Grab a seat and I will get us something. Let me guess. Large coffee, three creams, four sweeteners, whipped cream on top?” Barron asked her.

“Hmm...” Regina pondered, the description of her high school coffee order, barely able to tame her excitement at the fact that he remembered.

“...And a coffee cake. I left the house without eating breakfast.” She now remembered since her stomach was emitting a sonorous growl. Regina found a small table near the fireplace and allowed herself to relish in the momentary peace that she felt. She looked around at all of the smiling, chattering faces and wished that her life could be as charmed as theirs appeared, but her life likely appeared the same to them. People always assume that the grass is greener on the other side, and sometimes it is, but who cares about the grass when it’s the house that is important? It’s the house one should be looking at because no matter how green the grass is on the outside and no matter how shiny and clean the panels on the house, it’s what lies beneath that is determinant. What people should have considered was what happened when dusk settled over the lawns and everyone went inside and closed the doors behind them. Despite the ivory paint that disguised the outside of the house, what happened inside of those four walls was not greener, not brighter, not better, just bad.

After her talk with Sheriff Handow, deleterious memories of that night kept trying to creep into her head and she made a conscious effort to chase them out every time. She

wondered with whom else Sheriff Handow had spoken and if he had uncovered any new evidence. They would probably never figure out what happened to Lola, and Regina would probably never know the whole story herself.

“Coffee and coffee cake,” Barron announced as he set the plate and mug down in front of her. He jogged back to the counter to grab another porcelain black mug and plate, which he then sat down on the table in front of himself. Regina looked into his smoldering brown eyes and was glad that he had come back.

“I would offer up a toast, but in light of everything I guess we don’t have that much to be happy about right now,” he said, his eyes dulling a bit.

“I don’t know about that.” Regina smiled. “I’m glad that you came back. You’re probably the only thing that is making me feel sane right now.” She placed her hand on top of his and sipped her drink. Barron grinned and made a motion with his finger letting her know that she had a dollop of whipped cream on her nose. Regina rubbed her nose and they both laughed.

“I never stopped thinking about you after we all went off to college. I called your parents a few times and they always said that they would have you call me, but I never got the call.” He sounded disappointed.

“I’m sorry, Barron. I just couldn’t figure out a way to deal with my grief and I ended up hurting a lot of people in the process. I never meant to hurt you or anyone else for that matter.” Regina shrugged helplessly. “Can you forgive me?” she asked, her mood suddenly as shy as her manner flirty.

“Of course,” he said, leaning into the wooden table, lacing his fingers into hers. Regina’s heart jumped, jolting her brain and she began to feel guilty about the fact that her first priority should have been her friend’s murder, but here she was initiating some Harlequin romance in a coffee shop. In only a couple of days Black Water and everything in it would be a distant memory once again; she struggled to understand her motivation for even hinting at an attachment and she could not understand his either. Regina settled on the idea that she was just a lonely woman in an awful situation and needed someone to be there for her and he probably needed the same. Quickly, she dismissed any thoughts of a long-term affair and her mind found Lola once again buried far down under her thoughts of this romantic interlude and the distraction must have been written all over her face.

“Go ahead.” He sighed playfully, almost reading her mind.

“I apologize, Barron, it’s just so hard to get her out of my head.”

“It’s OK. What’s on your mind?” He grinned lovingly.

“I just feel like I have to know what happened. I have to know and if Sheriff Handow can’t figure it out, maybe I can.” She insisted. Barron’s face twisted with anxiety as he regained memory of his ex-girlfriend’s insistent personality.

“How are you going to do that?” he asked. He seemed excited to see what kind of plan she had cooked up.

“Well, I will just do my own investigation!” She told him with a false confidence. “I

will start by going to Glen DeFrank's house myself and taking a look around."

"...And what exactly are you hoping to find?" he asked, still unconvinced about the merit of her proposed emprise.

Regina took a deep involuntary inhale and her eyes widened as if his question had filled her with more problems than she could possibly solve until she finally spit, "I don't know. Something, anything, nothing, I have no idea. I will just be looking."

Barron's eyes sat heavily on her, unmoved by her unimaginative, but truthful answer.

"You going to the burial site too?" Barron asked.

Regina reeled back in disgust. "I don't think that I can quite handle that just yet, but if he did do it maybe he left something behind...in the house."

"Don't you think that the police have already looked into that?" Barron asked.

"Maybe, but they don't know Lola, I do. And they don't know Glen DeFrank either." Regina reasoned.

"...And you know Glen DeFrank?" Barron asked with a hint of incredulity.

Regina sighed hopelessly, she wanted to get angry and yell and scream in frustration, but she couldn't because Barron was right, she was hardly a detective.

"I am not saying that I *know* him, know him. I am just saying that I have been around him and I probably know more about him than the police."

"All I'm saying is it's possible that they could have missed something, right?" Regina pleaded.

"It's possible, but this just sounds crazy, Regina. You don't need to be poking around up there, just let Sheriff Handow do his job." Barron said. Regina sat back in her chair and contemplated Barron's words while rapping her fingertips on the small round table. He smiled, sure that he had done little to curb Regina's urge to take on this investigative mission. Countless years before she had given him the same look, right before freshman year in high school when he told her that there was no way that she would make the varsity swim team as a high school freshman. A grueling summer followed as the determined girl practiced for hours every day and made him eat his words come fall; her fire was one of the things he adored most about her, but there were times that it frustrated him to no end. He laughed to himself remembering how she had declined the offer to join the varsity swim team citing the fact that she had only set out to prove a point and had no interest in swimming competitively.

"You ready to get outta here?" he asked with a grin. "I told my grandmother that I would drive her over to Edgerton today to shop at the mall. You wanna come?"

"Nah!" she replied. "I told my parents I would spend some time with them today too." She finished as she put her arms back into the sleeves of her sweater and prepared for the frigid fall weather that awaited her just outside the thick glass door.

"Do we have time to stop by Nikki's house before you drop me off?" she asked as she approached Barron at the door.

He studied her carefully, trying to figure out what she had up her sleeve.

"Sure."

Nikki's was one of just a few houses that sat high upon Black Water Hill. On the way up the hill, they passed the home of Grayson Clements, where Grayson's father was working in his yard. Regina and Barron waved in passing. They had gone to high school with Grayson, but he was an athlete and not exactly in their circle of friends.

Regina was glad, at that moment, that Barron's mother still drove her oversized truck; Weeping Willow Road was fairly nice but once you turned off onto Nikki's property the ride instantly became rough on the gravelly drive that extended farther up the hill. Her home was as beautiful as Regina remembered it, a massive country-style home, constructed of stone and rock with a wide wraparound porch that featured colorful potted plants hanging down every couple of feet. The grand plantation shutters that framed the windows across the front of the house were painted a fresh garden green.

"God, I almost forgot how beautiful it is up here," Regina said as she admired the landscape.

Barron looked around, but did not respond as he parked in front of the home. As Regina jumped out of the truck, she saw Nikki sitting on the front porch in one of the four rocking chairs that were spread out along the porch.

"Hey," Regina greeted as she hopped up the stairs. Nikki was wearing a pair of oversized boyfriend jeans that were cuffed at the bottom with a dark blue university sweatshirt, reminding Regina that even when Nikki dressed down she seemed to be at the height of a fashion trend.

"Hey," Nikki sang in what seemed an alcohol-induced euphoric daze. "I called your house," she told Regina.

"I went to breakfast with Barron," Regina told her as Barron stepped up onto the porch.

"What's up, Nikki?" he asked, although he could see for himself.

"Nothing much. What's up with you two lovebirds?" She laughed lightly. Regina could feel her chest begin to warm in reaction to Nikki's words.

Considering her current state, Regina wondered if this was an appropriate time to be talking to Nikki. She flashed a concerned look at Barron and he nodded anxiously in a go-ahead for her to do what she had come to do. Nikki appeared somewhat lucid and who knew what she would be like the next time Regina saw her.

Regina looked nervously through the storm door to make sure that no one would hear the conversation. Nikki noticed.

"My dad went out of town on business, but he'll be back for the wake," Nikki assured her.

"Nikki, I want to find out what happened to Lola," Regina said.

"Don't we all?" Nikki said as she looked down in order to flick something off her shirt.

"Yes, we do," Regina agreed. Nikki shifted in her chair seeming slightly more serious.

"What do you mean what happened to her? We know what happened? Glen DeFrank

chopped her up and buried her under one of his trees! Mystery solved!” Nikki had become upset within seconds. Not only did Regina want to talk about this sickening event, she was also blowing Nikki’s high at the same time.

“How do we know?” Regina asked.

“How do we know?” Nikki mocked Regina with a look of repulsion.

In response, Regina sighed. “All I am saying is that we don’t know for sure that he was a murderer and I think that we owe it to her to finally figure everything out.”

Nikki turned away and wiped her hand over her face as if she was wiping something away.

“What is your suggestion?” Nikki relented all too easily, as she usually did.

Regina sneered at Barron when she saw his face light up, she knew that Barron was sure that Nikki would think that her idea was as crazy as he did. He put up his hands in playful defeat as Nikki watched the exchange.

“What?” she said, looking back and forth between Regina and Barron waiting for the bomb, that she sensed, to drop.

“I...” Regina spoke trying to build up her confidence to be struck down again. “I was thinking that maybe we should go up and take a look around the DeFrank estate ourselves.”

“What?” Nikki’s eyes widened larger than Regina had ever seen before and in the next breath, Nikki was out of her seat with a stumble.

“NO WAY! NO WAY! NO WAY! I am not going out to that old place.” She spoke loudly, using hand and arm action to solidify her stand against the idea.

“I am not going there. My skin is crawling just thinking about it! Everything that happened there...DeFrank died there, now Lola. No, No, No!” Nikki finally stood still facing Barron and Regina with her arms crossed in front of her with a face that expressed an unchanging mind. Right away Regina saw that there would be no convincing Nikki.

“Why can’t we just let Sheriff figure it out?” Nikki wondered aloud. Regina knew that wasn’t the best idea, but didn’t feel like trying to explain it to her friend right now.

“I just feel like we should be doing something. Don’t you?” Regina stated.

“No! I don’t. I feel like we should be grieving, eating, drinking, and doing our best to be freaking merry with any free time we have between those things.” She spoke directly as if she needed no validation that this was the correct attitude.

Regina’s emotions were twisted tightly, secured in ways that were hopeless when it came to the idea of ever being free of the tie that bound her and it showed on her face. Nikki regretted the way that she had overreacted to Regina’s proposed plan of action and she found her seat again in a gesture to reduce the tension, her head fell into her palm.

“I’m so tired of this whole thing. I know that sounds messed up, but it’s the truth,” Nikki admitted with calm, almost cruel honesty.

“I’ll help you, of course, I will, but I’m not doing that. I had not even seen Glen since we were kids and I do not plan on returning to that place now.”

Regina peered at her friend. Black Water was not the smallest town on the map, there

were even two high schools, but it was sure as hell not a place where residents didn't see each other for years. Nikki read her friend's face.

"Well, I have seen him, but you know...not anywhere near him or talking to him or anything. Creepy." She cringed.

"So, besides going up to that place, what do we do?" Nikki asked as the group concentrated their attentions on Regina.

She suddenly became nervous. "Give me some time to think about it. I'm not Angela Landsbury."

Barron and Nikki tried to take their eyes off Regina sensing her discomfort.

"What time is the wake tomorrow?" Nikki asked, changing the subject.

"Eleven, I think." Barron answered. They all sat in silence for a couple of moments.

"We better get going. I promised my grandmother I would take her to Edgerton," he explained to Nikki. Regina stood up from the porch steps. "Guess I will see you later. You coming to the parade tonight?"

"I doubt it," Nikki replied.

"Yeah, I know how you feel, but my parents want to hang out. I have no choice. I'll call you tonight."

"Later," Nikki responded, watching her friends depart.

Barron and Regina headed toward the truck. After climbing into the leather seats, Barron spoke before starting the engine.

"I know that you are going to go anyway so can you just wait until tomorrow so that I can go with you?" he asked without even looking at Regina.

"Yes." She smiled, her heart instantaneously lighter. She rested the side of her head gently on the glass of the passenger side window comfortable in the notion that Barron knew her all too well. As Barron started the engine, Regina put her hand up, spread her fingers, and wiggled them stiffly in farewell to Nikki who waved back with a quick and empty smile before returning her eyes to the rolling hills that lay out before her.

Nikki wished that she could jump off the porch and begin running. She would start at a leisurely trot, she imagined, admiring the trees and the landscape that unfolded grandly on any side of her. Then she would notice that she was breathing harder as her jog picked up speed until she was running so fast that she could hear nothing but the beating of her own heart, rapidly leaving everything behind, over one hill, and then the next, and the next until she was flying and there was nothing and no one.

Regina melted at the fact that Barron knew that she would go to the DeFrank estate with or without her friends and she desperately wanted him by her side, but a part of her felt there was no time to wait.

Barron pulled the lumbering truck into Regina's parents' driveway. The powerful engine gave a low hum. "Thank you, Barron," Regina finally spoke.

"For what?" the gallant man asked, turning in his seat to face the girl who immediately lit up with a smile.

"Just for being there for me; for not thinking that I'm totally crazy," she said.

“Now that is where you’re wrong. I do think you’re totally crazy,” he corrected.

Regina laughed and slapped his shoulder playfully. “I know, I know. Let me rephrase that. For being supportive even though you think that I’m totally crazy.” They both laughed. “No, I don’t think that you’re crazy. You’re just grieving, that’s all.” He said in the calm manner that made him so easy to talk to.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Everyone grieves differently and for you I think that you just need to feel like you are doing something, like you are helping your friend. This is the way that you are dealing with the pain; by not dealing with it...in a way, by focusing your attention on something else,” he explained. “Wow that is pretty good.” She started to laugh again and soon they were both laughing at his amateur, but clever analysis of Regina’s behavior. Barron’s rolling laughter winded down and he leaned toward Regina and looked into her eyes.

He’s going to kiss me, Regina thought as she began to close her eyes and purse her lips entrancingly in preparation for them to meet his. She opened her eyes fully when she saw that he stopped just short of the intimacy that she anticipated and he spoke.

“It’s guilt,” he said. The subtle smile faded from Regina’s excited face. Barron sat unmoving.

“What?” Regina lurched back in her seat almost bumping her head against the glass. She had been expecting a passionate encounter, but what came from his mouth sounded almost like an insult. The vexed expression cemented itself in her face before she could even begin to try to hide her true emotion. The man sighed and leaned back in his seat as if he did not want to say what was coming next, but he trudged on through the heavy conversation.

“You were her best friend. You felt like you should have been there, like you should have protected her, but you weren’t and now that she is back, in a weird sense, you are doing all that you can to make it up to her. You’re trying to make amends for what you didn’t do eight years ago, but you can’t blame yourself, Regina. This is not your fault; whatever happened to Lola is not your fault. There was nothing that you could have done about it then and there is nothing that you can do about it now.”

Regina was still in a rigid position with her head against the glass of the passenger door. She had been unable to move the entire time that Barron was speaking. Regina’s mind wandered for a while. She brought one of her palms to her cheek as if trying to check her own temperature. Barron actually made sense, but Regina was still as confused as she ever was.

“I’m sorry, Regina. I didn’t mean to upset you.” Barron’s voice blew all of the slowly forming thoughts and images in her head into meaningless ashes that swept out of her mind like clouds of smoke billowing from a fireplace on a winter night, dissipating and leaving no trace behind. Regina grabbed Barron’s hand. “It’s not you, Barron. It’s not you.” She thanked him again and climbed out of the vehicle.

“Regina, are you OK? I should have just kept my big mouth shut.” He scolded

himself.

"I'm fine, Barron. Really, I'm OK." She confirmed with a weak smile.

"All right" he finally accepted with reluctance. "I'll see you tonight," he continued.

Regina turned to make sure that she had heard him correctly. "I should be back in town tonight for all of the Black Water holiday festivities." He lifted his eyebrows with sarcastic excitement. "I will see you downtown."

"Ok, bye Barron."

"Regina," he called out of his window. Regina turned.

"I'm sorry."

"It's OK." Regina conjured a smile.

"Bye," he said before rolling up his window and rolling back down the driveway.

"Mom...Dad?" Regina called as she opened the creaking storm door.

"We're in here," she heard her mother yell from the kitchen. Her parents were seated at their breakfast nook with the cool sun shining brightly through the kitchen. They sat across from one another, both wearing their reading glasses and staring down at the game with its little square pieces strung to create a precise puzzle of words across the board.

"Wow, vortex." Regina read on the board as she plopped down on the cushioned bench next to her father. "This must be serious," she joked.

"Damned right it's serious. Today is the day that I whip your mother's butt."

Her parents had been in this board game war ever since she could remember. Her father could never beat her mother no matter how much he tried. Her mother was an intelligent woman, but her father was no idiot and at times Regina even thought that on occasions when he could have won, he decided to not change the tide of the triumphs because he enjoyed seeing her mother's exhilaration much more than he enjoyed winning a board game. "That will never happen," her mother informed her calmly. "I'm just killing time, trying to put off cleaning the basement for as long as possible." Mrs. Dean added.

"How was your date with Barron?" Her father asked. He kept his eyes on the seven square pieces of wood that were spread out in front of him on the long wooden holder. Every second or two Regina noticed her father's eyes narrow the way that they always did when he thought he may have a good word.

"It was good. We went to see Sheriff Handow." Both of her parents looked up from the board.

"Why?" her mother asked.

Regina shrugged. "We just wanted to see if they had learned anything new."

"Have they?" her father asked.

"Not really. Sheriff Handow just kind of gave me the runaround without actually telling me *anything*. I guess that is just what detectives do. They think that maybe Glen DeFrank had something to do with it."

"Glen!" Her mother's voice rose and she was visibly upset.

"My God! Are they sure?" she asked her daughter.

“Don’t get so upset, Mom, the body was found *on his property*.” Regina sarcastically re-informed her mother of the facts, but immediately felt guilty for being rude.

“No, Mom, they’re not sure of anything. They just think that because the body was found there...that’s all.”

“I hope to God it wasn’t him!” Her father spit.

Regina was surprised at her father’s sudden exponential rise to anger.

“I knew that they found Lola there, but I never thought that Glen DeFrank could be responsible for something like this. Regina he didn’t ever try to hurt you or anything, did he?” Her mother asked. The room became soundless as they waited for her response.

“No!” Regina scowled. She could see the relief that spread through the faces of both of her parents.

“He never tried to murder us while we took piano with him, Mom, if that’s what you’re asking,” Regina said. “...Unless of course we hit a sour note.”

“That’s not funny, Regina!” her mother snapped.

“Sorry,” Regina said with a whimper. “I guess I am just trying to make light of everything.”

“Well don’t! I would never be able to forgive myself if something would have happened to you. I don’t know how Gloria is dealing with this. I should go by there today. I will bake her a cake,” her mother said.

A cake. Great! That will ease the pain of her daughter being brutally murdered, Regina thought to herself.

“Maybe it was him, maybe it wasn’t. Maybe it was someone else. They just don’t know.” Regina said.

“He was always such a sweet boy, handsome and popular, but after his parents died...he was just never the same. But even then I never thought that he was capable of anything like this. I wish Sheriff Handow would get a hold on this thing,” her mother thought out loud.

“They don’t know shit!” Her father spat, even when he was angry he still seemed like a big old teddy bear in Regina’s eyes. He leaned over and grabbed Regina’s wrist, rattling it gently.

“I’m just glad it wasn’t you. It could have happened to anyone so I think that every family in Black Water that had a daughter Lola’s age at the time should be thanking their lucky stars,” her father said returning his gaze to the impossible array of tiles that were arranged on his holder.

“Did you know a little girl named Ann Ivey?” The question slipped out of Regina like a belch she never felt coming.

Her parents glanced at one another thoughtfully for a quick moment.

“Hmm,” her mother moaned as she thought. “Wasn’t she Pastor McGee’s granddaughter? Her father kidnapped her or something, right?” Mrs. Dean spoke to her husband trying to jog his aging memory.

“Right.” Regina nodded.

“Where did you hear about her?” Regina’s father asked, keeping his eyes on the wooden tiles that mocked him mercilessly.

“Just saw a missing poster for her at the police station and I was wondering.”

“They keep them up for that long?”

“I think they just want to keep her memory or something,” Regina guessed. “C’mon, honey, no matter how hard you stare at them the tiles won’t change their letters,” her mother teased.

This conversation had suddenly whet Regina’s investigative appetite again and she sat uneasily thinking about what might be behind the walls of the DeFrank estate. She rapped her fingers on the table thoughtfully.

“What’s wrong? Are you hungry, do you want a sandwich?” her mother asked, pointing to a pile of sandwich triangles that were arranged on a plate on top of the stove. Regina had made up her mind and tomorrow was just too late.

“Can I borrow the car for a little while?” Regina asked.

“You just got home...I thought that we were hanging out tonight,” her mother questioned with disappointment.

“We are, Mom. It’s early, I won’t be gone long. I just want to cruise around town for a while,” Regina lied.

“Sure, honey.” her father said, squinting at the same useless wooden tiles.

“Charlie!” her mother snapped.

“Pat, Jesus. The girl has not been home in years. She wants to see some of her friends and hang out a bit. What’s the big deal? She’s twenty-four years old, we can’t keep her locked up here. Besides we’re all going to the Halloween Festival and the party at the Jamison’s tonight, right?” he said, looking to his daughter.

“Right, Dad!” she agreed quickly and the pair stared questioningly at Patricia Dean. It was two against one. Her mother’s face drained of enthusiasm, but it was nice having her daughter back in the house, even if her daughter and her husband were ganging up on her.

“The keys are by the fridge.” She waved.

Delighted, Regina jumped up from the bench, kissing her father on the cheek, then her defeated mother.

“I won’t be long,” Regina promised as she grabbed the keys from the place that they had always hung since she was a kid. On the way out, she grabbed one of her mother’s sandwiches. “Thanks, Mom!” she shouted, not wanting her mother to be upset with her. Before they heard the front door, Regina poked her head back into the kitchen.

“By the way, Daddy, if you use the e at the bottom of Mom’s word sage, you can make edacious.” She said with half of a bologna sandwich triangle shoved into her mouth. His face illuminated with the light of a star-filled sky.

“Regina!” Her mother’s voice chased her out of the house.

Regina kept both hands glued to the wheel at ten and two, a habit that manifested itself out of situational tension. Her mom’s old blue Buick crept slowly down the street.

She paused at a neighborhood stop sign and noticed Sheriff Handow's car parked at the side of the street farther up the next block. Regina glided through the stop sign and as she got closer, she could see that his car was parked in front of a familiar home. Mrs. Landcaster and the sheriff were in a deep conversation; his features were drawn to the back of his face in a tight expression of concern, which, for a moment, worried Regina until she remembered that he always looked that way. As she drove by, the two raised their hands to her, and she waved back. They eyed her eerily for as long as she could see them in her rearview.

Regina cruised through the heart of town along Main Street watching all of the mothers with their babies and men bustling in and out of restaurants on their lunch hour. She knew every stop, every light, and every house because almost none of it had changed in the past and twenty-four years of sameness was burned into her head. After downtown she passed more houses, most of them, decorated for the holiday. Some sported amber-colored wreaths on their doors, while other yards were more elaborate, displaying the grinning jack-o-lanterns that kids had carved for the occasion while a few resembled full-on haunted houses with ghosts flying from the trees and fake tombstones sticking up from the ground reading, RIP. Regina smiled as two young boys and their mother warred playfully in a pile of freshly raked leaves.

The intersection at I-48 and Culliver Parkway was cold and forsaken compared to the residential neighborhoods of Black Water. On the other side of the intersection, farther down the road, there was an old white house, a darker color now from years of lack of maintenance. To her left was an open field. Immediately to her right was an old gas station that had become run down over the years, but was still open for business mostly because it was part mechanic shop.

For fifteen minutes, she sat in the car contemplating whether or not she should go sneaking around the DeFrank estate despite everyone's warnings. Maybe she should just turn around and go home, go to the wake tomorrow, the funeral the day after, get on a plane back to Texas and make another vow to never return again. Regina adjusted the rearview mirror to ensure that there was no one behind her waiting while she contemplated the options. The mirror confirmed that she was alone. She gripped the steering wheel tighter, laid her head back, closed her eyes, and secretly wished for some kind of sign.

Cotton grew in her throat until she found it hard to breathe. Regina grunted furiously trying to clear her scratchy vocal chords; her eyes darted to the gas station. It would provide relief for her minor throat irritation, a distraction and purposely elongate her decision-making process. With closer study, Regina could see that the gas station was in better condition than she had initially concluded, although the paint was beginning to chip and the windows could have used an intense encounter with some Windex. The door handle was grimy and Regina struggled to open it with the tips of her index finger and thumb. After a struggle she got the door open wide enough for her to slide through without having to expose too much of her bare hand to the gritty surface. As she entered

the candy aisle and made her way back to the buzzing coolers that held the sodas, over her shoulder, she noticed a burly man slip through the door behind her. He stood staunchly in the middle of the aisle watching her and waiting.

Chapter 13

Regina could feel his eyes on her back. She looked up in search of surveillance mirrors, but there were none.

“Dammit,” she whispered to herself. Regina turned her head slightly to make sure that the man was not directly upon her and he was not. She could see the figure of the corpulent man, but she dared not turn far enough to make eye contact with him. Her hand was shaking as she reached up to grab a diet soda. Regina swallowed hard, closed the cooler door, and pivoted on her foot to make her way back to the register.

Regina gasped at the sight of the man still standing at the other end of the aisle facing her, his eyes locked into hers.

“That gonna be it for ya?” the man asked. He was covered in grease and must have been the mechanic that owned the place.

“Yes,” Regina exhaled, her heart pounding rapidly. She could feel beads of sweat forming under her arms.

I’m going home. She thought, fearfully, feeling like a kitten in a thunderstorm.

As she got closer, she could tell that he was younger than he looked. Maybe years of manual labor had taken their toll on him.

The man looked at the soda, then began to punch numbers into the cash register.

“You from Black Water?” the man asked.

“Yes.” Regina smiled nervously. “I’m Regina Dean, my parents live in Black Water. I’m just visiting a friend out here.” The light conversation should have made the awkward situation more bearable, but did not. Regina paid for her soda. “You work here?” Unable to bear even a second of silence between them she asked a question that she immediately thought ridiculous since it was apparent that he did work in the shop.

“I own this place,” he grunted.

“Oh, great,” Regina responded before she began edging her way toward the door.

“Jonathan Torch.” He introduced himself by only speaking his name. Regina smiled and nodded before turning and executing her escape, when suddenly her entire body became rigid and her abdomen felt as if it sunk to the floor. She turned back to the dirtied man.

“Torch? You had...have a daughter, Valerie?” She spoke meticulously as if she were pulling knives and not words from her throat.

“Yea, you know Valerie?” he asked.

Regina felt disoriented. “Yes, I, uh, I, my friend used to tutor her when we were kids.”

“Who is your friend...” That was the last that she heard of Mr. Torch’s sentence before she dashed out the door. “I’m sorry, I have to go.”

Regina walked rapidly to her car, jumped in, put on her seat belt, and started the engine in almost one move before she sped out of the drab station and unto the cold road. Regina drove without thought or direction for many minutes until her pulse was racing so fast that she had to pull over before she lost control of herself and the car. Regina pulled the Buick over to the side of the road and put it in park. She sat back in the seat, closed her eyes, and fought away the overpowering sorrow that clung to her. Regina opened her eyes and realized that she was on Culliver Parkway headed straight for DeFrank’s home. She was on the path for which she was meant.

The only thing left to do was to sink her foot into the gas pedal and let the car carry her up the road a few miles until she saw the turnoff for the house. Regina laid her head upon the steering wheel, then allowed the weight in her foot to settle into the gas pedal and the car began to edge forward before Regina even took her head off the wheel. She lifted her face and put her eyes to the road that guided her.

Richly colored trees hovered at each side of the asphalt road as the old car crept along Culliver Parkway. Regina passed a field of cows, some of whom lifted their heads sluggishly to eye her doleful journey. The fall scenery made her nostalgic for the childhood that had been rife with school plays, slumber parties, holidays, and swimming.

How had life become so complicated? she wondered to herself, feeling her heart skip a beat as she rounded a familiar curve. The house was closer now. Her foot was steady on the gas pedal and she let her eyes wonder to the left and right of the road, scurrying up to the ocean of a sky decorated with clouds of stretched cotton, then cascading back down along all of the eruptions of color that burst from the fall foliage. She focused on anything that would keep her mind from the DeFrank house as long as possible, which by the looks of the natural landmarks was not much further. Regina checked her rearview mirror again to make sure that there was no one behind her. She was still alone, completing her journey in secret, and she liked it that way for now. It would do no good to excite anyone the way she had that afternoon with her ideas. Once people made up their minds on a subject, there was no changing it, a character trait that she herself had mastered. The DeFranks’ dusty, ornate mailbox came into view at the side of the road, signaling to her. Long ago, the thick wooden post that held up the mailbox had been planted in a variegated excess of colorful flowers that were now just a heap of pathetic dead leaves and unnamed brown things. The car came to a cautious stop at the side of the highway. Regina craned her neck laboriously until her eyes were set on the DeFranks’ antiquated gate, just on the other side of the country road. There, less than ten feet away, was an alternate dimension of the universe, where things were backwards and upside down, where left was right and right was wrong, where heaven was hell and hell was... everywhere. Here, outside of its pull, she was safe, but once she crossed into that yard her sanity was fair game, she knew.

Windblown yellow tape was strung around the gate that enclosed the vast piece of

land. Regina breathed deeply, sucking in every ounce of air possible and her chest trembled violently as she released the air back into the car.

No. No. No. Stop it, Regina, Regina silently chanted to herself.

Almost thirty minutes passed as she sat quietly in the car, her eyes focused intently on the road straight ahead, her mind focused on breathing in and out.

It was like getting into a pool—it's difficult at first touch, as you dip your toe into the icy lapping waters, then retrieve it quickly, but you just have to keep going, cringing with the submersion of every new body part until the end when you are up to your shoulders, feeling the chills race up and down your body and you finally take a deep breath and go under. Go under. Once you re-emerge, you're fine.

You're fine, Regina, just get in, she thought to herself.

For the last time she looked into her rearview, she looked at the road straight ahead, then whipped the steering wheel, crossed the oncoming lane and pulled up next to the DeFranks' mailbox. Regina smashed the brakes abruptly and leapt out of the car barely having time to put the car in park. She approached the gate in a panicked and fast-paced stagger, ripped down the yellow tape and fumbled with the enormous latch until it came undone with the rattling squeaks of time and rust. Grunting, she pushed the heavy gates open and stood at the entrance.

The gates of hell are open, she thought.

Regina drove her mother's car just inside of the gate and was forced to exit the safety of the vehicle once again to close the gate behind her just in case anyone was to drive by the dilapidated property. Nosy was a required character trait if you wanted to live in Black Water and if someone drove by and saw the gate of the now infamous DeFrank property open Sheriff Handow would be up here before she could sneeze. Lately, it had been so windy that people would feel comfortable assuming that Mother Nature had knocked the tape to the ground, but Mother Nature had certainly not pushed the massive gates open. After closing the steel gates, she rested her head on them in hopes of mentally distancing herself from the idea that she was now imprisoned here, like Lola. After a brief meditation, Regina hopped back into the car, locked the doors, and turned the heat up a notch. She ran her hands over her arms in an attempt to warm her shivering body.

"There is nothing to be afraid of Regina...there is nothing to be afraid of." Regina recited to herself as she swallowed the lump in her throat, hoping that would wash away the spiders that were now making complex webs throughout her abdomen.

"Crap, crap, crap, crap!" She pounded the steering wheel with frustration as she cursed herself. Her chanting failed to calm her and the pressure in her lower stomach was partly because she had made herself so nervous that she now had to pee. She could see chunks of the house not far down the narrow road through the breaks in the towering trees that grew out of the lot. It was as if she were creeping up on an old friend, about to pop out at any moment, SURPRISE!

It was now or never, she had no intention of taking her pants off anywhere near that weird house; besides, there was probably no plumbing.

Regina began searching, she pulled down the visor above her head and then the one above the passenger seat, she reached over and opened the glove compartment box and slammed it shut. Her last resort was the center console.

“Jackpot,” she sang.

Regina reached in and pulled out a handful of fast food napkins. A few feet up the drive, she spotted the perfect tree, not close enough to Culliver for anyone to see if they drove by, but still not close enough to the house for it to see her.

After the overwhelming rush of relief that washed over her just as she finished, she returned to the car and found a plastic bag in the backseat where she disposed of the napkins. She could have haphazardly cast the unclean things into the overgrown, polluted lawn, but she feared the consequences of angering the house. It was odd, but the house felt alive to her. Regina turned the key in the ignition rattling her mother’s old car to life once again for the last leg of this foreboding journey. The car bounced up the long drive until it entered the small clearing in front of the house that opened up to the light of the sky and she was so close that nothing stood between her and the intimidating structure.

Chunks of her chocolate hair blew across her face and into her eyes as if trying to shield her vision from this forsaken place as she stood between her car and the home, but still she inspected the strange manor and its many windows peered back down at her. Regina had not thrown the napkins in its yard, but the house was still angry with her; she could feel it. Inanimate objects could not have emotions, she assured herself, but she could not shake the feeling that the house was waiting anxiously for her stride through its double doors so that it could snap shut its jaws, never allowing Regina to emerge again. The house’s devilish grin created by the crooked set of long porch steps would be heightened as the place would be cunningly amused with itself.

The eyes of the home were naked where they were once draped by floor-dragging crème-colored curtains. Years ago, the home had been a muted blue color, but was now gray from its losing battles with wind and dirt. Pieces of the paneling were missing from the decoratively carved wood that constructed the porch; the steps had deteriorated over the years, now so feeble that Regina feared walking on them. Straight ahead was the window that used to look into the spacious open living room, it was colorless on the inside now. On the right side of the first floor was the window that saw into the grand piano room, where the girls used to play during their lessons and on the second floor was a host of windows that accessed a vast number of rooms. Regina stared at the repugnant structure and realized that it was not hair-raising to her anymore. Regina had grown bigger; the house had stayed the same and now it was simply a lonely and pathetic hangover from lives that were now transformed, new, or ceased altogether.

Regina tapped her foot tenderly on the first step of the porch as a test of its strength before she felt comfortable enough to rest her full weight upon it. The last thing she needed was to break her ankle and be stuck out here with no one knowing where she had gone. Wind howled through the trees of the yard and Regina took one last look around the property in the light of day before she stepped into the darkness. Her nose burned

with the rank odor of must, mildew, animals and only God knows whatever else that was causing the stink. What lie inside the house was no better than what she had seen outside.

The piano room was her first stop.

Several Tuesday nights had been spent in that room with the girls playing simple versions of Ode to Joy, multiple sonatas and if the girls were lucky a new song or two that they had heard on the radio.

“Oh,” Regina drew her hand to her mouth, but it was too late to muffle the involuntary gasp that escaped her at the surprise of running into an old friend.

The piano was still there. Like an old dog unable to leave the only property that it knew, the black instrument sat staunchly in the middle of the room. Making a calculated circle around it Regina made mental note of every scratch and scuff and how they looked from every direction. Surely it had been years since these walls heard music and she contemplated arranging her fingers against the keys and playing something, anything that would allow her to pound out whatever lingering life remained in the keys with her fingers, frantically fighting the instrument with each note, a battle to the end of wills, until she reached a triumphant halt, taking the last breath of the old dog with her coup de grace stroke. She swept her fingers along the smudged ivory keys, but could not bring herself to extract a note from the musical corpse. Regina gazed out the window where the light forced its way in through the soiled surface and offered some relief from the shadows. Golden leaves covered the desolate lawn; the branches of the trees hung low and the drab, but beautiful fall scene outside offered a considerable contrast to this deep inside place.

A resounding emptiness strangled every room of the house. The floor, once a surface of sparkling marble was now a sea of soda cans, pieces of dirty clothing, broken picture frames, and a constellation of other miscellaneous garbage. On the walls, there were empty squares of light where family photographs had hung proudly in a time that now seemed like antiquity. In the next second, she could hear the music drumming up in her ears, but fled the room before it had a chance to pound deep inside of her.

In the formal living room, she walked to the fireplace that stood taller than she. The only thing that remained in the room was the tattered couch that used to welcome visitors and comfort the family. Regina sat down on the couch; it was uncomfortably soft and drooped into the frame. She was running her hands over the dirty and rough surface of the fabric when she suffered an astonishing revelation.

It smells like them! She thought wildly, feeling the muscles in her throat tense, she struggled to swallow.

Families and houses always had particular smells characterized by routine uses of perfume, cigarettes, clothes detergents, or even sometimes spices used in family dinners, depending on the habits and tastes of one's particular family; the scent of the DeFrank family was embedded in this couch. As soon as Regina sat she could smell them, all of them and suddenly they were inside of her, a ghastly virus. She shot up from the sagging piece of furniture and stood fumbling her hands, nervously spinning so that she could see

every part of the room several times over again to ensure that despite the presence of their scent that the DeFranks were gone. The room was so filled with so many things other than air that Regina began to suffocate; she scrambled over to one of the smudged windows. Regina reached out to the window, but jerked her hands back against her chest when she saw the collection of lightning bugs that lay dead on the wooden window seal. Regina drew her face closer to inspect the bugs, wondering how they had all gotten in, but had been unable to get out. Now she could hardly breathe at all, she pushed down her repulsion so that she could put all of her energy into lifting the splintered window that had been shut up for years. Regina heard herself grunting as she tried with all of her power to lift the window that refused to budge. She checked to make sure that the window was unlocked and it was. Taking a moment, she stepped back, caught her breath and went in again with two hands pushing hard upon the windowsill for three...four...five seconds when with a loud sigh and billow of dust the window shot up, letting in a swell of cool air. Regina looked at the ceiling that had creaked just a moment before in symphony with the noisy window. She coughed violently to rid her chest of the dirt that she had sucked in while opening the window.

“Hello,” she was finally able to choke out. The house responded with silence. She crossed back over into the expansive foyer and peered up the mahogany staircase that led to a landing, she allowed her eyes to stroll up through the slats of the staircase that led from the middle landing to the next landing on the second floor. The exquisite home flaunted two staircases that led to the first landing, one from the foyer and another on the other side from the hall.

“Hello,” Regina yelled again. Regina listened until she was sure that she was alone and the only things that she heard were the inevitable moans of an old house. Regina’s eyes wandered along the ceiling until they came to the chandelier that hung in the middle of the foyer. Some of the bulbs were missing and many of the hanging crystals had fallen and still lay sporadically strewn about the floor. She flipped the light switch on the wall, which triggered no luminous reaction.

Regina had been mesmerized by the hanging luxury her first time in the DeFrank home. Her eyes had been drawn to it immediately when the double doors swung open and the foyer burst with brilliant, swirling light. Everything about the DeFrank home had seemed stunning to her as a child. Mrs. DeFrank had been wearing a teal caftan dress that draped her elegantly and she smiled brightly at the enthusiastic girl that stood on her doorstep. Her daughter, Eden, stood behind her mother grasping at the dress and eyeing Regina suspiciously.

Regina sighed at the current condition of the house. She noticed sunlight pouring in from one door in the hallway that was wide open.

The study.

Regina took focused strides toward the study, but could not resist stepping into the guest bathroom that sat on the left side of the extended hall. The bathroom was dark, but she could see that the room was a nest of filthy chaos complete with some type of dead

rodent stiff under the toilet and she was glad that she had peed outside. Before she stepped out of the bathroom, a graceful shadow glided across the hall behind her. Tingling seized Regina's body as the hair on her body rose to fine points. Regina whipped around dubiously looking back into the foyer.

After cursing herself for being unreasonably jumpy, she turned back to her original destination. Her eyes were wide when she crept into the study and noticed that as empty as it appeared, it seemed to have retained the most life of any room that she had seen yet. Mr. and Mrs. DeFrank had an office upstairs and Glen had most use of the study as a place to complete his schoolwork. Glen's chair sat hauntingly in the stream of sunlight that came in through the window. A lamp that had once sat on a desk that was no longer in the room sat unplugged on the floor. Regina's eyes stalled on a paper cup and she walked over to discover that it was half-filled with coffee. She wrinkled her face in mental anguish at the thought that someone sat here not long ago drinking coffee, hours ago or maybe days. She listened to the house, for the creaks of someone walking upstairs, she listened for the strained cry of a rusty hinge on a door, but she heard nothing.

There is no one here, Regina!

Her rational mind spat reasoning, fighting hard against the rising emotions that were serving only to keep her terrified.

An old bookshelf stood next to the window at the far end of the room and she was drawn to it. The girl traced her delicate fingers over the old bindings of several classic titles. Her finger settled on a leather-backed, limited edition of Dante's *Inferno*. She opened it and began flipping through a couple of pages before she could no longer stand the hellish images and slammed the book to a close.

Regina reached up to return the literature to its place when she noticed a photograph that had been stuck in between the books. The thin piece of glossy paper was wrinkled and torn at one end. She turned it over to an image that she could not bring herself to admit was printed there on the paper. Regina gasped in horror, letting the weighty book that she still held in one hand crumble to the floor. The photograph revealed Nikki with Glen DeFrank. An adult Nikki Valentine stood next to the slumped man that she said she had not spoken to since they were children. Regina shook her head slightly to throw out any hallucinations that might have crept in, but this was no hallucination. Thought tumbled over thought in Regina's head.

Footsteps crept along the floor in the hallway. Regina's heart found a new home in her throat. Picture still in hand, Regina scrambled across the room and looked out into the hall toward the back door where she had heard the footsteps.

"Hello?" she cried, her calls were no longer that of a cautious investigator, but the cries of a frightened little girl. "Nikki? Barron? Sheriff Handow?" she called as she stepped out into the hall and looked toward the stairs. Regina peered up into the slats of the staircase and her mouth dropped open at what she saw.

Chapter 14

“What the...” she began, but stopped short when she felt the tremendous pressure of something heavy connect with the back of her head. All of the light began to recede, her knees buckled, and she dropped to the floor. Regina lay there on her back as consciousness began to fade. The little girls watched from the staircase, smiling and giggling as darkness settled over her. Wrapping the mahogany slats in their delicate little hands, they poked their sneering faces through so that they would be the last ghastly sight Regina would see. Their glowing eyes plowed into Regina’s eyes, piercing them and burrowing farther down into the head of the girl that was fast losing awareness. The four little girls whispered demonically to each other between the vicious glares that they cast down on her. Regina drifted further and further away, susurrus noise haunting her until she was in a place of total blackness and total silence.

The sun began to set on the run-down house at the end of the lonely road that turned off of Culliver Parkway. Leaves rustled gracefully about the lawn, but everything inside of the house was unmoving, dead with silence, until the halls shook with Regina’s struggle for her first conscious breath since she had been attacked. Regina inhaled deeply the second time and irritating dust particles tickled her nose to a sneeze. Searing pain shot through Regina’s head from temple to temple, as she moaned into a foggy consciousness. Her eyes fought for sight. Lights and shadows began to dance and play hide-and-seek in and out of her vision, she lifted slightly. Automatically, her hand felt for the source of pain that was at the nape of her neck.

“Owwww,” she groaned as she looked at her fingers that were covered in drying blood. On the stairs she saw the glittering eyes still penetrating down into her. Regina squinted to get a better view of the evil girls, their dresses straight and pressed, their hair, gleaming silk, lips painted red with the corners of their mouths turned upright, their faces pulled tight in unchangeable expressions of false delight.

“Dolls,” Regina whispered. She laid flat again, closing her eyes in momentary relief. They looked so real, staring down at her from high upon the stairs. Most likely, they had once belonged to Glen’s little sister. Mesmerized, Regina sat for a moment staring at the dolls that she had thought were little demons set on her demise. In an instant, she realized that she might still be in danger and she jerked in every direction, making sure that there was no one there to harm her. She pulled herself into a corner, cupped her hands over her nose and mouth, and took several deep breaths.

Regina looked down to realize that her hand was empty. The photograph was gone. Frantically, she searched about the floor.

It was hard for Regina to think, her head was a painful cloud of unorganized thought, she imagined a tiny monkey inside of her brain trying to dig its way out with a chisel and hammer. Her parents would be worried; Regina saw through the windows that the sun was dipping low. She got to her feet and dashed out the door, jumping down the porch stairs and sprinting to her car, making sure to keep her eyes open for the person who had attacked her. Regina started the car and sped down the driveway. At the gate she stopped and scrutinized the landscape before jumping out of the car. Her hands trembled with fear as she fought with the latch because she was sure that at any moment Glen DeFrank or Lola's gruesome corpse was going to come stumbling out of the trees, barreling stiffly toward her with arms outstretched just like in all of the zombie movies. When the latch was undone, she threw the gate open, jumped back into her car, and sped out onto Culliver Parkway in a turn so sharp that her back tires skidded, causing Regina to lose control for a brief moment. As she flew down the open road, back to the town of Black Water, there was only one thing on her mind.

"Nikki," she whispered.

Night began to fall over the eerily festive town of Black Water. The lights of town soon burned into view and she was strangely relieved to be back to this place. Main Street was blocked off in anticipation of the annual parade. After turning onto a side street, Regina pulled her car into the parking lot of a fast-food restaurant, put the car in park, and ripped her shaking hands from the steering wheel. Sinking into the bucket seat, her wall of strength crumbled and the bank of emotion erupted from her in a tidal wave of tears that she had been struggling to hold back all day. Regina cried so violently that her chest heaved up and down ejecting uncontrollable sobs from her throat. A brief brain synaptic fire instructed her to calm herself, but she swiftly rejected it, reasoning that if she did not get it out now it would erupt in the near future at some most inopportune time. Regina tolerated the cries and the tears until they were tuckered out. Several deep breaths circulated the blood more efficiently in her body allowing her to regain some air of tranquility. She wiped away the final party of tears and reviewed her wrecked face in the rearview mirror. Her first thought was to go to Sheriff Handow, but that was quickly dismissed as the last remnant of irrationality leftover from her emotional breakdown. There were many reasons why going to Sheriff Handow was not a good idea. What would she say? Regina thought to herself.

Ah yes, Sheriff Handow, I was somewhere that I had no business being, looking for God knows what, and someone hit me. Did I see anything? Uhm, no, I have no idea who it was, but my best friend since elementary school, Nikki Valentine, may have had something to do with this whole mess, but quite honestly, I'm not sure of anything.

Regina played and replayed the conversation in her head a million different ways, none of them leading in a direction even remotely beneficial. Besides, she thought, it could have just been some homeless person wanting her out of his or her space. Whoever it was just wanted her to get out of there, if they had wanted to kill her they could have done it. No, there was no good reason to go to the police, she decided.

A breath and a gulp of saliva tangled awkwardly in her throat, causing her to choke at the phantasmal appearance of a ghastly figure standing in the center of her headlights. The demon child's eyes rolled around in her head, black jumbo-sized lacquered marbles, until they finally came to an abrupt halt that focused on Regina. Greasy hair was flat against her pale brilliant white skin that became purple and blue around the sockets of her sunken eyes, but most gruesome was her smiling mouth, her unnaturally wide grin that was painted with the blood of some unsuspecting victim. The candy apple blood covered her baby teeth and drenched her chin right before it began to drip down unto her veined neck. Regina was forced to look away from the child's all-seeing eyes.

When Regina looked up again the demonically disguised girl was laughing with two of her friends, one of them dressed like a witch and the other a vampire, which was an absolute contrast to the sheepish woman that followed closely behind them who must have mothered at least one of the little devils. The common-looking woman smiled and waved at the girl in the car, which was the normal form of greeting to friends and strangers alike in Black Water. Regina looked at the dashboard clock, which now blinked 5:32 p.m. People were headed for the parade, which probably began at 6:00 p.m. Regina had to get home.

Regina waved to the mother hesitantly, still in wonder as to why any rational adult would allow a child to look like such a wild fiend even on this holiday. A chill coasted up Regina's spine as she threw the car into reverse and whisked out of the parking lot.

As Regina cascaded into the driveway, she saw that the lights were on in the living room as well as in her parents' room. She prayed that they were in their bedroom so that she could clean herself up before they had a chance to see her in such dilapidated condition. The woman crept up the porch steps and tried to open the storm door with soundless precision. She pressed her ear to the front door and heard nothing on the other side. The door hardly made a sound when Regina finagled her key into the lock. In the doorway, she took a quick look around before she heard her parents' muffled voices upstairs in their bedroom. Regina closed the door quietly behind her and began an absolutely noiseless journey up the staircase. Her legs were strained from her effort to be weightless and it took her three times as long as it usually would have to get up the stairs. On the top step, she saw her parents' bedroom door swing open.

"Regina," her father greeted her.

"Hey, Dad. Sorry I'm late, just going to take a quick shower and I'll be ready." She spat as she leapt into the hall bathroom before her father could focus his vision. Mr. Dean had no chance to respond before the girl slammed the door.

Regina stood with her back against the bathroom door.

"Was that Regina?" She heard her mother's garbled voice through the walls.

Regina moved to stand in front of the mirror and tried to contort her head to a position where she could see the back of her neck while still keeping her eyes to the mirror. There used to be a handheld mirror in the towel closet she remembered as she opened the closet door and shuffled through one of the plastic bins finally fishing out the

old, cracked mirror. Regina turned her back on the wall mirror and used the handheld to get a good look at the back of her head. She lifted her hair slightly to reveal a blotch of dry blood a little smaller than a fist on the back of her neck. Separating the hairs on her scalp, she could see the wound that lie underneath her thick mane.

She winced in pain when she pressed her fingertips too close to the wound. Luckily, it was no longer bleeding and she could forego formal medical treatment. In the closet, she found pain relievers and popped four into her mouth as she turned on the shower. Steam rose in the bathroom until Regina was barely able to see her naked reflection in the mirror as the last piece of clothing dropped to the floor. She sucked the warm air deep into her chest. For years, she had been making her showers so hot that she could barely stand them. As a nurse, her first order of business when she got home after a long shift was to place herself under a waterfall of scorching, plump, fast-paced droplets of water to burn from her skin all foul impurities that she may have picked up in the hospital—bacteria, dirt, remnants of some kind of virus, but most importantly blood. As conscientious as Regina tried to be about washing thoroughly after dealing with a trauma patient there were days—bizarre, other-dimensional lapses of time—when she would return home from work, step into the shower, and in the ritual of cleaning every part of her body in the systematic order that had become routine—first her face, next her arms, after that her abdomen, finally her legs and feet—on rare occasions she would spot the culpable droplet of blood that had somehow slipped under her scrubs and dotted her belly or left a small strike across her chest, and the sight was maddening. On those occasions, she would scrub every inch of her body with the force used in decontamination.

“Out,” she whispered to the blood.

Regina took a somber look at her cloudy reflection in the bathroom mirror of her mother and father’s home; she found an inconspicuous new line making its soft trail across her forehead, then noticed a freckle on her face that she had never seen before. It sat low under her left cheekbone, a foreigner among the natives. Through the steam, she could see only the faint glimmer of one of her brown eyes, sporadic bits of her image reflected through the fog, revealing a bewildering duplication of her. She pressed her fingers into her face shifting the splintered pieces to slightly different positions, which did nothing to permanently change the archetype, but at last, she surrendered to the certainties, waving her white flag in the face of herself and stepped into the scalding water. The fiery soak cleansed her. While a horizonless time passed, she dangled helplessly under the water.

“Regina,” her mother called with three swift knocks on the door, smiting the nurse back to the shower, inside of the bathroom, inside of the house, in Black Water.

Regina’s heart jumped.

“Are you OK?” her mother added.

“I’m fine, Mom, just another minute,” she demanded.

She pinned her short hair up with a clip, lathered the soap in a rag and began washing away the dried blood at her neck. The pain-killers began to take their effect.

Regina squeezed her rag and pressed it against her face long and hard one last time before hanging it on the towel rack and cutting off the water. She dried and wrapped herself in a fluffy towel. Once more Regina placed herself in front of the mirror and inspected her neck to make sure that no sign of the menacing blood remained.

In Regina's room, the light was on and her mother was standing over the bed. Mrs. Dean's face lit up as she saw her daughter gliding down the hall, she made a quick movement and held up a black cat suit with one hand, and in the other hand Mrs. Dean held a headband with kitty ears. Regina could not hide the grossly questioning expression that she was sure was apparent on her face.

"Isn't this cute!" Her mother seemed excited and was making a statement rather than asking a question. "We saw it in town and I just had to get it for you. I thought maybe you could wear it to the parade tonight."

"Uh..." Regina bit at her bottom lip lightly. "Mom, I'm not sixteen anymore."

"I know, I know, but we always dress up and I thought it would be fun."

Regina hated to dampen the spark that flickered in her mother's eyes, the flare that had been ignited by her little girl being home, but even more she hated the thought of walking around all night in a glorified onesie. Mrs. Dean was dressed as a cowgirl and Regina secretly thanked God that her mother's costume was not too ridiculous. A pair of fairly fitted dark denim jeans, a cowboy shirt, cowboy hat and cowboy boots made up her mother's simple costume.

"You look really cute, Mom, but..." Regina started to defend her stance on not wearing a costume when her mother cut her off.

"Just try it on, OK? Your father and I will be waiting downstairs. Hurry up!" She smiled before she laid the suit across the bed again and scurried down the hall. After closing the door, Regina sighed and flounced unto the bed, burying her face in her fabric-softened quilt. She lifted her head and did another exasperated review of the cat suit that lay next to her on the bed and sighed again. For sure, she was not wearing that abomination, there would be absolutely no negotiation on that fact, but she thought that maybe she could still appease her mother by finding something festive.

Fifteen minutes later, Regina plodded down the stairs to her parents that were watching TV in the living room. A brief moment of disappointment crossed her mother's face when she saw that Regina was not wearing the fun costume that she had purchased, but it was superficial and faded fast. Regina wore a tight, long sleeve black shirt with dazzling rhinestones in the shape of a skull across the front; she wore fitted black jeans with the bottoms tucked into a pair of leather riding boots.

"Sorry, Mom, your costume gave me a major camel toe."

Her mother frowned.

"A what?" Her father's face was rife with confusion.

"Never mind, Charles let's go."

The streets of Black Water were a jungle, wild with titillating amusement. Regina's father parked about a block from Main Street. As they began to make their way on foot

toward the nucleus of the celebration, the happenings that unraveled all around them were stimulating enough to appease all the senses. Streetlights marked every corner, lambent points of navigation adding to the romantic draw of small town U.S.A. Whoops, hollers, screams, and shouts penetrated the night as children of all ages laughed, frolicked, and crisscrossed the friendly streets. Regina inhaled the unmistakable aroma of funnel cake, which made her smile. Happy clowns, evil clowns, angels, and super heroes overflowed the sidewalks, jumping, wiling, and moaning. An expressionless Michael Meyers eyed her hungrily through the two black eyeholes and Regina was amused by the costume, but she still recoiled when he suddenly reached out for her, causing him, his friends, and even herself to explode into laughter. Mrs. Dean purred at a rotund infant dressed as a bumblebee.

Regina forgot her reality and drowned in the magical world that unfolded, swept around, and enraptured her. The entire town had shown up for Lola's macabre welcome home party.

People that Regina had not seen in years greeted her with inviting smiles and open arms as she and her parents engaged in lively conversations with many passing couples and families that they knew. Regina noticed a vibrating hum emanating from a white mobile trailer where a nun stuck her head out of the window.

"CUPCAKES, GET YOUR SWEET CHOCOLATE CUPCAKES!" The ragged nun yelled with the curbed enthusiasm that was expected from a person that performed the same job year after year.

Charlie Dean bought himself and his two favorite girls chocolate cupcakes with orange icing and candied spider webs. They continued to stroll along Main Street until they found a comfortable nook along the side of the street under a tree to set up their lawn chairs.

Just before the parade began, Regina scanned the crowd looking for any sign of Barron, Nikki, or even Natalie, but unless they were under the cover of one of the many masks that danced deceptively past her, none of them was there. Reality dealt its hard blow again as she contemplated the idea that even if they weren't under a mask, she still did not know them anymore. Her neck began to throb.

Drifting along the breeze were the sounds of the high school band marching up the street playing a hideous symphony, seconds later they came into view. The Oakley High School band dressed in tight black outfits with skeletons painted on the fronts of them. White paint covered their faces and black makeup circled their eyes, cheeks and mouths. Regina gazed up into the sky at the silver dollar moon that occasionally masqueraded behind slivers of dark clouds as it floated silently across the sky; she shivered and rubbed her hands together.

"Ouch." Regina was startled when she realized that she was being pelted by small colorful objects. She looked down into her lap to see colorful pieces of Bubble Gum and Tootsie Rolls that were being tossed off of one of the passing floats. Her eyes caught her mother's as they were both reveling in the little joys, but her mood darkened quickly

when she peered over her mother's shoulder and into the mass of people farther down the sidewalk. A hooded monk stood no more than twenty feet away and with one alluring hand motion it summoned her.

Chapter 15

The monk's head was lowered and his face was shadowed by an oversized hood. The draped figure was short, small in frame and its bulky taupe gown covered it completely. When Regina lifted from her chair to get a closer look, the figure beckoned to her once again, then turned and fled into the alleyway, the bottom of his gown billowing behind him in the wind.

Regina's father grabbed her hand.

"I'm going to the bathroom," a distracted Regina told her father as she moved up the street, compelled to the covert character.

"OK, you want me to walk you?" Mr. Dean asked with concern.

Regina declined with a headshake, never looking back.

"Hurry back," her father told her as she walked toward the port-a-potties that lay just ahead of her.

The chaotic cluster of noises that was wailing all around her faded into a distant murmuring and Regina could hear herself breathing hard as she came to the corner where the monk had stood only seconds before. Down the alley, she could barely see the door of Clark's swinging to a close with just enough time for the swell of the brown gown to slip inside. She looked around at the streets whose unconventional activity now made her feel like she was inside a funhouse. Her head was spinning and she rested against the brick wall for a moment before leaning forward and placing her hands on her knees trying to catch the breath that now eluded her.

"What the hell?" she whispered to herself when her eyes fell to the ground. Regina dipped to pick up the photograph. Regina ran her fingers along the jagged edge of the photo where it had been torn. Nikki smiled awkwardly at her from the picture, but Glen was now gone, ripped away.

Initially, logic discouraged her from following the cloaked creature, but in the end it was the same logic that changed her mind and made her decide to pursue the stranger. Because in this hour, in this place, nothing made sense, but she reasoned that in a world where nothing made sense, everything made sense and just inside of that door at the end of that dark alley were some answers that she needed.

Regina jogged down the alley, her boots thudding on the concrete.

She stopped in front of the door where she contemplated the consequences of crossing this point of no return.

Running away was a viable option, but then what, she wondered. How much longer could she run? She couldn't. Despite what may happen, she just wanted the running to be

over and end the treadmill hell. Regina swung open the metal door and stepped into the gloomy showroom.

“Hello? Mr. Clark?” Regina spoke out.

Silence; nothing but stiff, throat-clogging silence.

Regina walked the room cautiously.

“I know you’re in here,” she said to the stranger.

“I just want to know what you know. You want me or want to tell me something, so here I am.” Regina waited for an answer that never came.

In the light of day, Mr. Clark’s angel sculptures were serene, they offered a certain peace, but in the obscurity of the shade of night, they were different creatures altogether. In the dimly lit rooms of the store, these angels appeared to be sorrowful mourners. The same cold stone hands that reached out to save one in the golden sunlight of high noon now reached out to pull one to a place of uncertainty. Regina had expected a confrontation, a fight and she had prepared herself for such, but this quiet, this deadly stillness was making her more frightened than any animalistic brawl.

Her attention was drawn to an angel that stood backlit at the far end of the store, the statue’s intricately detailed wings were partly outstretched. One of her arms was reaching for something that stood in front of her, her fingers were spread and her mouth was open, narrowly, as if she were trying desperately to warn her subject. Regina walked closer to the sculpture so that she could be in the light with it; she peered up into the upstairs corridors of the open showroom. Regina heard a rustling in a corner near the storefront window that faced the crowded street, and then turned her back on the angel whose outstretched hand brushed against her shoulder. Effortlessly, she slipped out of the grasp of the angel and ran toward the noise, throwing her hands on the glass counter and lifting herself to see if there was anyone on the floor of the other side.

Nothing.

She whipped around to see the person that she was sure stood behind her, but again she was alone.

“I’m here!” she yelled, fear giving way to frustration.

“Tell me what you want.” Regina changed her tone, trying to speak calmly as she walked back toward the statue hoping her adjustment of inflection would convince the person to reveal him or herself in a manner as peaceful as her voice. She was back at the other end of the room before she heard a quick movement behind her and felt powerful hands thrust into her back, sending her reeling into the arms of the same stone angel that had tried to warn her. All of the wind came swooshing out of her in a terrifying screech. She hit the floor hard and grunted at the weight of the monk plunging down on top of her. The cloaked figure wrenched Regina onto her back with a jerk so powerful Regina thought she heard a snap in her neck. Hard fists pounded into Regina’s chest. Straight black hair tumbled out from below the hood and the only thing that Regina could see was the occasional sparkle of the rich dark eyes as they caught in the faint light of the room.

“Lola, no! Please!” Regina managed to choke out between strikes of the fists. She

was unable to breathe, but not just because of the beating that was raining down on her thin frame, but because it was Lola who sat on top of her, screaming and flailing in a furious rage. Regina was still unable to see the face of her attacker in the blackness of the store, but she knew it was Lola. Regina did her best to shelter herself from the attack, but she could not bear to fight this person that she had once loved so dearly, this person that had succumbed to unspeakable, unfair tragedy. Regina curled and protected her body as best she could with the mad woman on top of her when a kaleidoscope of color filled her eyes and she saw an array of metal- and glass-ornamented crucifixes that had tumbled to the ground when both girls had fallen to the floor. Lola was in such frenzy that Regina's strategy had gone unnoticed as she lifted one of the heavy metal crucifixes and bashed it against the side of the hooded figure's face, causing her to go flying sideways to the ground. Regina had only a moment because within seconds the damned monk was scrabbling back to her feet. Regina hit the girl once more and dashed for the door. Lola was the last person she wanted to hurt, but she had to stop her. The dead girl was so close upon her that Regina could hear Lola's breathless cries behind her. Regina slipped out of the door with the crucifix still in her hand. She stood in the cold alley rooted against the door, her chest heaving as the wild animal, formerly known as Lola, pounded on the other side of the door screeching. Regina looked to the sky and closed her eyes tightly, praying for the strength to be able to keep the deadly spirit contained.

"Help," she yelled out to the people she saw passing on the street at either end of the long alley, but the excitement of the night, the anxious voices and thundering sounds kept her from being heard. Lola was now taking a running start toward the door and banging it with her entire body, but Regina figured the banshee's strategy and altered hers to match. Regina timed the blows to the door and began anticipating the exact second of Lola's collisions with the door; Regina threw her weight into the door on the opposite side at the exact same time, each time. Seconds passed sluggishly and it seemed like hours when the banging finally stopped and she listened to the nothingness. With her next breath, she took her chance and dashed up the alley toward the street, where she could see people walking, talking, and eating. Only a little bit farther, she told herself as she heard the door clank against the brick wall as it blew open clamorously. Regina screamed as she saw the monk burst into the alley with such force that she ran into the next building hitting it hard. Regina tried to run faster, but she was beaten and could muster no burst of energy. She pushed her trudging body along and the bright lights of the street drifted closer with every labored step until she reached the goal, running directly into the arms of Barron Forte.

"Barron," she yelled as her limp body crumpled in his arms.

"Whoa," he said, bending to catch her.

She took a breath and gathered the little power that she had left and pulled him a step back to the mouth of the alleyway, where nothing moved and everything was quiet. The hooded monk was gone and seemed to have never even been there.

Barron looked up and around the alleyway before returning his gaze to an awed

Regina who still carried the crucifix in her hand.

“What is it?” he asked. Regina pointed a shaking finger, but could do little more. “I just saw your parents and they told me that you had come this way to use the bathroom. Regina? Regina?” Barron spoke, but Regina could not take her eyes from the alley. Barron wrapped his arms around her shoulders and pulled her in close. He was warm as he kissed her on the side of her forehead and she could hold it no longer. It was rising in Regina’s throat like warm sewage, bubbling and choking her with foul odors and tastes until it sat densely in her mouth just behind her perfect rows of teeth and there was nowhere left for it to go, but out.

“We killed Lola.”

Chapter 16

“What?” Barron spewed the word like vomit. His face contorted in confused horror. “Lola?” he asked. Her shame-filled eyes shifted to the ground before finding Barron again and there was no need for Regina to repeat the name.

“We killed her and now she’s back and she wants to hurt me,” Regina said, her body shuddering with earthquake vibrations.

“Calm down, just calm down. Let’s get out of here.” Barron rubbed her shoulders delicately before escorting her through the crowd. Before Regina had a chance to protest, Barron herded her into his truck.

“I’ll tell your parents that you’re not feeling well or something,” he said before he disappeared back into the mass of people. When Barron returned to the car neither of them said a word. Regina felt a sickness growing inside of her. Barron maneuvered the vehicle up and down the detoured streets until he pulled up in front of the local bar.

“I’m going to need a drink for this.” He sighed. Regina pushed her door open. The crunching of the rocks in the gravel parking lot was loud under her feet, giving everyone forewarning that a murderer was coming their way. The bar was a sad hodgepodge of a few rambunctious bikers gathered around a pool table, rough-edged housewives enjoying a couple of beers for girls’ night while their teenage sons did God knows what and an older couple at the bar that had probably been drinking together since they were teens. Regina and Barron sat at the far end of the bar where they were sure not to encounter any unsolicited disturbances. Barron ordered two shots of tequila and they both slammed them down upon arrival. After that, he ordered bourbon and Coke and Regina ordered a glass of wine. The drinks were placed in front of them and Barron took a long swig before he was able to speak again.

“So...” His statement lingered in the air, taunting her. Regina took a gluttonous swallow of her wine, almost finishing it in a single swig. With a lackadaisical hand motion to the bartender, she ordered another. Her empty gaze met Barron’s eyes briefly, and then traveled to one of the bottles on the shelf behind the bar. Regina stared into the brown liquid inside the bottle and allowed her mind to go to a place she rarely allowed it anymore. She refrained from thinking too much because she was sure that if she did her mouth would lock up and she would be unable to get a word out. Regina opened her mouth and let the words crawl out like disgusting insects that had been slowly gnawing away at her intestines for the past eight years.

“We did see Lola the night of the party. Natalie, Nikki, and I left Mitchell’s party early because we had been drinking and we all wanted to sober up a bit before we had to

be home. Nikki thought we should drive by the library to see if Lola was still there. I remember the night being so clear. It was cool and my window was down so the breeze could hit my face. The music was loud and Nikki and Natalie were laughing about something that happened at the party. When we got to the library, Lola was walking out between the tall lamps that lined the cement. Nikki slowed the car at the curb and Lola ran up, she was so happy to see us. She was wearing a bright jade-colored maxi dress that dragged the ground and she had pulled her hair up into a tousled ponytail, the way she always did when she was studying or thinking hard and her tote bag was slung across the back of her shoulder.

“Hey!” Lola gushed as she bent down by the passenger window. Regina could see in her eyes that she wanted all of the juicy details of the party.

“Hello, beautiful,” Regina responded, with maudlin greetings following immediately from Natalie and Nikki.

“How was the party?”

“I’m not telling you! You should have had your butt there,” Regina teased her. “God, I wish I could have gone. My parents are so upset with my grade. Where are you guys going?” Lola asked.

“Just driving around before we head home, wanna ride?” Nikki asked. Lola peered down the street questioningly, knowing that she should get home.

“Don’t be such a party pooper!” Natalie said with a sigh from the backseat. “C’mon,” Nikki urged. Lola bit her lip.

“All right! You twisted my arm.” Lola sang. All of the girls began giggling wildly and Regina got out of the car to let up the seat.

“Jesus Christ, Natalie! How much did you drink?” Lola asked with an exaggerated pinch of her nostrils as she climbed into the backseat of the sports car.

“Not that much! Oh my God, I really smell?”

“Uh, yes!” Lola told her. Nikki and Regina snickered.

“My mother is going to kill me.” Natalie was beginning to panic. Nikki glanced into the rearview mirror to see Natalie attempting to smell her breath by placing a cupped hand in front of her mouth, then lifting her shirt to her nose to determine whether she could detect the odor of alcohol.

“It’s not your clothes, Nat, it’s coming out of your pores.” Lola informed her through bouts of laughter. Natalie was charged with anxiety.

“Calm down! We can go to my house. You can take a shower and drink some water,” Nikki told her.

“But...” Natalie began.

“Don’t worry; my dad is out of town for work. There is no one there,” Nikki told her.

“Are your parents going to freak, Lola?” Nikki asked.

“No. They’re probably already asleep. So how was the party?”

“Amazing!” Regina spoke first. “The music was incredible, everyone was dancing. There were a ton of drinks. We are probably all going to get it tomorrow. Some idiot is

going to go home drunk and the word will be spread between all of the parents that there was liquor at the party,” Regina said.

“Dad, I swear I didn’t drink. I didn’t even see any beer!” All of the girls burst into laughter listening to Nikki’s sarcastic recital of the monologue that she would give her father when he got back into town and heard the news.

Dust rose in front of the headlights of Nikki’s car as they drove up into the gravel driveway. The house was completely dark. The girls stumbled out of the car into the fresh air of the night, joking and playing before they stood for a moment on the hill looking out at all of the rolling blackness that had them surrounded. None of them could have known that only three of them would come out of the house alive that night. Nikki went into the house first, turned off the alarm, and flipped several switches, bringing the slumbering giant of a home to full vitality. Regina and Lola fell upon the couch and Natalie spread her limbs out across the cream-colored carpet and closed her eyes.

“I am so tired,” Natalie proclaimed. Nikki went up a step into the kitchen that overlooked the living room and pulled out several bottles of water, which she began tossing to the girls. “Heads up,” she yelled. Regina caught the bottle that came at her. Lola tried to catch the fast-moving bottle that whipped by her, almost hitting Natalie on the floor, but instead landing with a thud close to one of Natalie’s arms.

“Hey! I’m not a football player, you know!” Lola teased as she finished typing something into her phone.

“Sorry,” Nikki said as she soft pitched another bottle across the room.

“Speaking of football players...” Nikki started. Lola made a sarcastic face already able to discern the direction of the conversation. “Carter asked about you tonight.” Nikki told her. “He was very disappointed that you were unable to attend the party.” Regina added with a taunt.

“Ugh. Carter freaks me out! What is with him?” Lola asked.

“I like him!” Regina countered in his defense.

“I guess he’s OK, but he is just not my type, and besides, he is younger than us. At first, I admit, I thought he was cute, but now it is just getting weird,” Lola told them. Regina sat up on the couch and looked at her friend. “What do you mean?” she asked. “I don’t know...it’s just like...like...like...he is a little puppy or something following me around and yesterday he left a flower on my locker,” she confessed. “What?” Natalie broke in as they all fell into cackling laughter.

“A flower?” Nikki asked. Lola could not help but join the laughter.

“Hey! Stop laughing at my boyfriend’s little brother!” Regina said, barely able to curb her own guffaw. “So what, he’s a little awkward. He is a perfectly sweet boy,” Regina told them.

“You guys are feeling good and I’m stone cold sober. Do you have anything?” Lola looked to Nikki who raised her eyebrows in intrigue.

“Well, well, well, aren’t you being sassy tonight?” Nikki teased her friend who usually did not drink as she opened the refrigerator and dug her head inside. “We have

beer and vodka,” Nikki announced with her head still inside the refrigerator.

“Beer,” Lola answered.

Nikki came out with a bottle of beer and walked it over to Lola.

“I need some air.” Lola said suddenly becoming serious as she cracked open the bottle and took a lengthy sip. The girls followed her outside where they all convened around a picnic table. Long pieces of wood were strewn about the yard.

“Be careful,” Nikki warned. “My dad has been back here building.”

“Your dad built this?” Regina asked as she stepped up to sit on top of the table. “Yup! Renaissance man, I tell you!” Nikki joked. Regina and Lola sat on top of the table while Natalie and Nikki spread their bodies on the benches. Lola gazed into the sky while taking another sip of her beer.

“Do you guys know Valerie Torch?” Lola asked. All of the girls were silent for what seemed like hours. “Is that the girl that moved here from Edgerton?” Natalie asked.

“The one who doesn’t wear underwear?” Nikki asked. All of the girls looked at Nikki unable to hide their inquisitiveness. “What?” Nikki said defensively with a sly smile. “She told us in gym once when we were changing, I mean she had to give us fair warning, right?”

“You are a pig in lipstick,” Regina said as she threw a piece of grass down on Nikki that she had been fiddling with in her hand.

“No,” Lola snapped. “Not the girl from Edgerton that does not wear underwear!” Nikki and Regina exchanged a comedic smile in response to Lola’s scolding.

“She is a little girl that goes to Redding Elementary, I tutor her in English. Her father owns the gas station at I-48 and Culliver,” Lola informed them.

“So?” Nikki asked.

“Yeah, what about her?” Natalie wanted to know.

Lola swallowed hard. “Yesterday she told me that she just started piano lessons with Glen DeFrank.” Immediately Natalie and Nikki sat up and the four girls sat facing each other like the four corners of a moral compass. Natalie dug her head deep into her palms and tried to massage away all of the atrocious thoughts that were now creeping into her brain.

“I thought he wasn’t taking any more students. We were the first and the last.” Nikki’s voice quivered with every word.

“He hasn’t taken any students since us, but who said that he was never going to take any again?” Lola asked.

“So did Valerie tell you that...” Natalie began.

“No!” Lola quickly stopped her before she was able to finish. “She hasn’t told me anything, she’s only had one lesson, this past Wednesday. She goes back next Wednesday,” Lola explained.

“Well we don’t even know if he is going to do it to her,” Natalie wondered out loud.

“Of course we know!” Lola shot back with a fierceness that was fresh and feral. Natalie’s eyes dimmed and she sunk, unnoticeably, back into the garden landscape.

“What are you suggesting?” Regina asked, leaning close to Lola trying to read in her the things that her lips would not say. The crickets chirped, frogs made their calls, and the barrage of country insects sang in a steady buzz that floated innocently in the air. Lola’s eyes darted to each of her friends before she spoke.

“We have to tell,” she said, feeling the despair that began to vibrate within each of them. A low groan escaped Natalie.

“No!” Nikki jumped into the air. “No, we can’t tell. We can’t. We cannot!” she declared into the night. Nikki pointed a stiff and direct finger at Lola and moved toward her slowly. “I will never tell anyone! Do you understand?” Her face knotted in anger at every point.

“Well what do you suppose we do, Nikki?” Lola questioned vehemently, she was now on her feet as well with her chest pressed firmly against Nikki’s shaking finger.

Regina’s nerves began to round themselves up, her anxiety plainly marked in the few wrinkles of her teenage face.

“Maybe we should just let a bunch of new little girls go out there and get raped, huh? Is that what you think?” Lola antagonized. All of the anger that was being held in Nikki’s face suddenly drained, leaving only dramatic creases of sadness into which her tears began to flow through like depressing rivers down the sides of her face before emptying onto her chest. Lola instantly felt pangs of remorse for spewing her heartless words and did her best to atone for it by comforting her now weeping friend.

Regina stood up. “Wait, just wait! Calm down. Let’s just think about this for a minute. Maybe...maybe he felt bad about what he did to us. Maybe that is why he stopped for so long. Maybe he can control himself now, right?” Regina looked around at the girls, hoping desperately that someone would confirm her theory.

“Right! We don’t even know that anything is going to happen to this girl, Lola. For all we know we could come out with our story and the police would not even believe us.” Natalie finally gave her opinion.

“Yeah, Black Water is a small town, everyone will know what happened. I can’t take that, Lola, please. Can you imagine what it will be like when everyone finds out all of the sick and dirty things he did to us? The stares, the whispers, my father will die. He barely recovered after my mom killed herself, he felt he didn’t protect her; he won’t be able to live with this, not one more thing. Listen, Lola, I’m sorry for that little girl, but I can’t tell and if you do, I will say it’s all lies!” Nikki threatened.

“Quite honestly, I don’t give a shit about this kid.” Natalie spoke harshly causing everyone to take notice of her change in demeanor.

“I am not about to ruin my life because Valerie Torch is taking piano lessons! Our senior year is next year. It has been years since what happened to us and it is over! Do you understand me? It’s over and I for one do not want to relive it because you all of a sudden decide to grow a backbone!” Natalie’s voice was calm and unwavering. Regina’s eyes were the size of the moon now as she witnessed the transformation that was taking place before her eyes. Nikki’s mouth dropped open. Natalie was shedding her usually

quirky self and emerging from the falling skin was a dark figure that frightened Regina. Natalie was always calm, but there was a stillness in her voice now that was unnatural.

“Neither do I,” agreed Nikki. All of the girls’ attention focused on Regina as they waited for her answer; the deciding vote. The world was on the shoulders of Regina Dean, or at least she felt it was there, teetering, threatening to fall, hit the ground, and shatter into a million pieces. Lola’s eyes pleaded with her for reason and Regina ached with the compulsion to give it to her, but there was something holding her back. Regina felt the muscle paralyzing uneasiness surging up through her legs, into her stomach and finally in her throat.

“Neither do I, Lola.” She released the words that became a nuclear bomb that would blow them all away from each other forever.

Lola opened her mouth to a stutter, barely able to speak her words without them tripping over one another. “I cannot believe you guys! I can’t believe you. Glen DeFrank is a sick bastard and you don’t want to tell anyone about what he did to us and possibly save a child from his sick crap because you don’t want to ruin your senior year? Because you don’t want people to whisper about you in the cafeteria? What kind of monsters are you? You’re just like him!” Lola said, holding up an accusing finger that she swung across the night air like a pendulum laying it upon every one of them. “He made me keep it a secret for too long because I was scared, but I won’t let you keep me silent too. Don’t you see? You guys are just buying all of his lies.” Lola told them. “*You can’t tell anyone. No one will believe you. People will think you’re disgusting,*” she mocked. “You’re just continuing to believe everything that he told you, that he shoved down our throats. Well I can’t do it anymore. I have got to tell, I can’t keep this secret anymore. It is eating me alive!” Lola screeched clawing at her own neck with the wretched fury of a wild animal.

“Don’t you understand?” Lola asked. And they did understand. Each of them fought her personal battles with the demons that made their calls upon the girls when night fell, when they thought too much, when they dreamt, or even when they encountered the most innocent of scents, melodies, or scenes that offered even the slightest reminder of the DeFrank home. But they wanted to continue fighting them in the isolation of their own skin because inside of their skin the atrocity was not visible to the naked eye.

Regina stepped toward Lola in a gesture of comfort, but Lola erupted into a flaming rage, throwing Regina onto the ground with a scream, succumbing to gravity herself in the process. Her black hair was matted against her tear-soaked face. She lifted herself back to her feet in a swift move and began retreating from the girls who were more strangers to her and her to them with every backward step.

“You won’t stop me!” Lola warned the girls.

“No!” Regina screamed as she saw the thick piece of wood come cutting through the night air. Lola turned to face her attacker just in time for the weapon to make contact with her skull with a sickening crack. Lola was propelled several feet across the grass, her feet stumbling one over the other, unable to brace herself against the surprise assault. Regina squeezed her eyes closed at the sound of the second crack that sounded as Lola’s head hit

one of the jutting rocks that decorated Nikki's yard. Blood began gushing from both sides of Lola's head.

"Natalie!" Nikki yelled. Regina crawled across the dewy lawn, grass staining the knees of her white jeans. Regina drew an unconscious and bleeding Lola into her arms. "Lola! Lola, please!" Regina cupped Lola's lifeless chin between her thumb and index finger as she screamed her name.

"What did you do? What did you do?" Nikki was screaming in the frenzied chaos that surrounded them.

"We couldn't let her tell." With the deadly weapon still in hand and blood splattered across the side of her face, Natalie spoke with the same thrilling calm.

Regina's mouth gaped open at the sight of the empty shell of a person that Natalie became in a matter of seconds as her soul escaped from her there in the garden.

As she sat there cradling her friend, whose body was beginning to cool, Regina could not believe the result of the opening of this Pandora's box that Lola had so delicately attempted to orchestrate. Years of suffering bottled up into a few moments in time exploded leaving the bloody remnants of what had once been a delicate balance of functional dysfunction in its rearview.

"Oh my God!" Barron's throaty voice ripped a hole in the fabric of the dream state in which Regina had cloaked herself in order to be able to reveal the Caliginous secret. Regina poured the remaining wine from her glass into her mouth, where it sat at the back of her tongue until she rallied the muscle to push the bitter liquid into her throat where it bounced twice before trickling down into her chest, soon entering her bloodstream where it toiled to disconnect her from the pain of the memories.

Another. The bartender came over.

"Two more shots, please," Barron told the short girl with unnaturally black hair and a tattoo of a skull framed in colorful flowers on her hand. The little glasses of white liquid arrived in front of them and they both chugged them with no toast. Regina winced at the gruesome flavor of the elixir, but not as much as she had the first time. A magnificent euphoria was settling over her now like an obscure fog.

"...And then what?" he questioned. Regina cherished the sensitivity that Barron displayed by not asking her to revisit the Tuesday evening occurrences of the DeFrank estate. Barron's reception of her heinous past made her heart malleable like clay and she wanted to kiss him, she wanted him to wrap her up, she wanted to step inside of him and have his compassion absolve her of all evil and emerge from him, pure gold, but that baptism was a fairy tale and the demon secret with which she was pregnant was a nightmare. She did not embrace Barron in any way; instead, Regina allowed her eyes to wander back to the bottle on the shelf across from her where her mental film began to play once again against the backdrop of the brown liquid plunging her back into the abyss of mental despair like a caver on a last desperate descent to save someone that is already finished.

"What do we do?" Nikki asked. Regina's expressionless face glowed in the soft

honey brilliance of the garden lights. Regina studied Lola's features. The injured girl lay against her forearm and was becoming more unrecognizable with every new stream of blood that cascaded down her sleeping face. Regina opened her mouth to speak ideas that had formed in her brain, but they had gotten lost somewhere inside of her before they had the chance to tickle her tongue to actual speech and she substituted with a grim exhale.

"People will think we killed her," Natalie spoke to herself out loud.

"We have to call the police," Regina whispered quietly as not to wake up Lola.

"You did kill her!" Nikki shouted over Regina, leaping onto Natalie with an uncharacteristic delirium. Both girls toppled to the ground; Nikki fell hard on top of her friend as the two began to struggle. Regina made no attempt to stop the match that clamored on before her eyes; she could marginally gather the potency to inflate her lungs every couple of seconds but any feat beyond that seemed a phenomenal task. Nikki and Natalie grumbled and screamed hysterically throughout their brutal competition. Natalie was on top of Nikki, showering her balled fists upon any open part of Nikki's body. Regina felt the guttural growling of the sky burrowing into the ground around her. With one of her wild swings Nikki landed a stalwart strike high on Natalie's cheek, sending her glasses sailing into the rose bushes at the edge of the garden. Momentary shock hindered Natalie's fists and in milliseconds a flashing tidal wave of pain began to sweep through the side of Natalie's face. Nikki struggled to loosen her legs from under the girl who straddled her; she bent them and kicked Natalie with thoroughbred power. Natalie's body came to a painful stop when her back collided with the wooden end of a picnic bench and the fight was over. Nikki moaned as she rubbed her shin, which was already beginning to swell to what would soon become a nasty bruise.

"I didn't kill her! He did it, he killed us all a long time ago, and we have just been living through it, somehow bearing our existence through all of the suffering. Pretending to be resilient teenagers who don't remember, who have gotten over it. Well I remember...I REMEMBER! Every day I think about it. He raped me and you and you and her. Why would she want to tell people that? We're all suffering, just being eaten away a little at a time, prisoners of our insecurities. Tonight we all drank, but how many times have you drank this week, huh, Nikki? A little more every year, right?"

The skin under Nikki's eyes was now puffy, red, and drenched with tears. Nikki sniffled, wiped her dripping nose with her wrist, her green eyes pleading with her accuser for an end to the hellish speech.

"And what about you, perfect little Regina? I haven't quite figured the wicked by-product of our piano lessons that controls you yet. You don't seem to drink much."

"Stop," Regina warned her.

"No!" Natalie screamed.

"And what about you, Natalie! What about you? What do you do?" Regina sneered.

Natalie's face softened, tears streamed from her eyes and she spoke angelically. "I just become someone else. I disappear and someone else takes over."

"You know, I read about a girl, once, who had been abused by her parents and as she

became a teenager she began to get minor acne. The girl began popping her pimples and the pain felt so good to her that it became an obsession. She loved the pain and she loved the way she looked when she had gotten rid of yet another blemish. Soon she was picking at pimples that were not there and finally just picking chunks of skin out of her face until she was a gruesome reflection of a girl just trying to disappear.” Natalie told them.

Nikki was listening intently to the story about the girl who differed from her only in the sense that with drinking she attempted to make herself disappear from the inside out.

“But that’s not you, right, Regina?” Natalie spoke with a new venom Regina had never heard inside of the sheepish girl before.

“You’re too vain for that, too vain even for any vice, maybe just a personal torment...nightmares,” Natalie added, a light springing to life inside of her as she stumbled upon a treasure that had eluded her with its mystery for so long.

“Shut up!” Regina scolded her.

“And we all know what Lola did...” Natalie was delirious with pain and vengeance. She stumbled laboriously as she spoke.

“What?” Nikki asked in all of her blissful ignorance.

“Natalie,” Regina pleaded to no avail.

“You didn’t know?” Natalie asked with remorse finally filtering into the hurricane of emotions that swept over her as she peered down into Nikki’s face.

“She started wearing those dresses to cover the cuts in her thighs.” Natalie revealed as she threw up Lola’s dress unveiling a batch of healed, healing, and fresh slices in Lola’s thighs.

Nikki erupted with a whole new batch of useless tears.

“Natalie!” Regina screamed as she scrambled to cover Lola.

“I’m probably the only person with enough heart to have finally put her out of her misery. Maybe we should just all put ourselves out of our miseries.” Natalie’s battered body sunk into the living grass with a definitive thud. Nikki looked to Regina who dropped her head in the sheer despair of the moment.

“We’re all dead! We’re all already dead,” Natalie encouraged. Regina knew that there was something innately wrong with the thing that Natalie was proposing, but she had dealt with the pain of her past for years now and there were days when even getting out of bed was a battle. With Lola now gone at their own hands Regina knew that digging up enough self-worth to be able to even move her body would be damn near impossible.

She was tired. They were all tired.

A pang of guilt shot through her when she realized that she, in a moment of utter disconnect from the raw reality, was envious of the peace that only Lola had now. Nikki cried, but there were no new tears, this cry trickled out of the ghost of the little girl that she had once been. The cry of the girl who was entombed in the unfathomable depth of Nikki’s being reached out for her with a cry that was, at first, intimate and pleading, but had grown into the ravenous ranting of her lost soul. Nikki fought with her limbs in a laborious struggle to pull herself up from the ground; she limped toward her house, still

wounded from the fight.

“Nikki?” Regina called after her.

“Just wait here,” she whimpered and they waited. Lola waited because she had no choice, Regina waited because she had no strength, and Natalie because she had no cause anymore.

Minutes later Nikki returned with a piece of black metal. As Nikki moved closer, Regina saw that it was a gun. Nikki raised it to Regina’s face. Just as Regina was about to throw her hands up in defense, Nikki dropped to her knees and held out the weapon for Regina to take. Regina reached out and grabbed the gun with her left hand while she let Lola slide out of her arms onto the ground. Natalie moved closer to the girls. The wind was developing strength and began blowing their hair in wild circles. No one spoke, but they had no need for such simplistic dealings; they were married of mind, and words were useless voice box retching in the light of the shared experiences, so perverse, so clandestine that speech could be only an impediment, for their hearts spoke directly to one another.

Regina gripped the cold metal object in her hands, lifted it slightly to feel the weight on her wrist. Regina passed the gun to Natalie so that she could hold it, so that she could touch it, feel it in her hand, and smell it as if they needed to become intimately familiar with the instrument that would soon take from them the only things they had left; life and one another. Having death so close was eerily comforting. The weapon passed hands once more until it was back to Regina. Calm settled over all of them. Regina lifted her head and she could smell the rain in the air.

“How shall we do it?” Regina asked the girls. All of them eyed one another carefully, wondering how something that had been said on a ranting whim had become reality so easily, but there seemed to be no turning back. They prepared themselves to die for this most vital sin and did their best to forgive the sin committed against them.

“Can you do it?” Nikki asked her friend pleadingly for one last favor. Regina looked at Natalie who nodded in agreement that she wanted a similar end. Nausea flooded into Regina like a hurricane plowing down the seawall and crashing every bit of normalcy in its emotionally unreasonable rampage. She imaged the world as it would be in the next couple of seconds with her there, gripping an unfeeling object in her feeling hand as her three friends lay on all sides of her, dead.

“Can I say something?” Nikki interrupted.

“OK.” A lethargic Regina released her grip and let her weapon-toting hand rest on the ground.

“For a long time, I have been angry with my mother. I couldn’t understand how she could leave behind the people that she claimed she loved most, but I think I understand her now.” And with that, Nikki took a long shuddering exhale, she maneuvered her body to a comfortable position and closed her eyes resolutely. Regina’s hand began to tremble under the weight of the gun as she tried to lift it, she had never before seen Nikki be so brave. By the time Regina had the gun to Nikki’s face, full-on, waves of anxiety pulsed

through Regina's arm, her hand was beginning to cramp and she needed to pee. Nikki moved not one muscle when she felt the cold metal press tightly against her forehead. Natalie participated in the living funeral with her reflective silence. Regina closed her eyes, turned her head away and tightened her finger around the heavy trigger and then... BOOM, BOOM, BOOM.

Chapter 17

A rapid succession of deafening claps of thunder rang out as a series of lightning bolts reached down from the sky striking the earth in crooked purple needles of electric fury. Nikki's eyes were squeezed tight, anticipating a transient moment of pain that never came. Natalie thought that the sound of the gunshot was lost in the beautifully chaotic tumult of the storm. When she opened her eyes, she saw the metal still pressed tightly against Nikki's unafflicted forehead. Nikki was next to open her eyes and her hands shot up to her forehead where she searched frantically for blood that was not there. No blood, no hole, she was relieved and disappointed.

Regina was the last to open her eyes and all six orbs were drawn to the open sky, which gave another vibrant display of nature's exquisitely wicked fireworks. Nikki had been quite resolved to the unknown fate, but Regina was not so sure.

What good would another sin do? Regina wondered to herself. It would have been a death much more honorable than the one that they now deserved.

Regina let her hand fall slowly to the ground, the sky opened up and the rain began to fall on them in bulbous drops. Nikki gripped the golden crucifix that hung protectively around her neck.

They could not finish what they could not begin.

Nikki and Natalie each grabbed one of Lola's arms and Regina grabbed her legs. Once inside the house they wrapped her in a comforter that Nikki retrieved from her bed. They struggled to get the heavy body out the front door and into the trunk of Nikki's pint-sized sports car. Blood matted Lola's straight black hair, but her face still maintained a somewhat mortal hue. The three girls stood over the trunk peering down at the secret that they would keep in this trunk, in that house and most eternally, in their hearts. The rain fell down on top of them and dripped over their shoulders falling insensitively into Lola's face. They draped the top of the comforter over her and closed the trunk, casting her down into full blackness.

The girls sat silently in the car as it rumbled down the hill bumping up and down, each bump making the girls stomachs tense up at the thought that Lola was somehow feeling the pain of the jolts against her lifeless body. At the bottom of the hill, an eighteen-wheeler noisily rumbled across their path. They sat with no directional inclinations until Regina spoke.

"Left," Regina said and Nikki pulled the steering wheel to the left without any questions. With one- and two-word directions, Regina directed Nikki back through town under the dark of night, cloaked in the storm. They went south until Nikki could see the

place that they were approaching.

“Langford woods?” Nikki asked as she pulled into one of the parking areas at the start of a trail.

“Someone will find her here,” Natalie cried out.

“That’s the point.” Regina said dryly as she opened the car door and stepped into the thundershower. Natalie jumped out of the car, meeting Regina at the trunk.

“We said we’d always take care of each other, Regina, remember that? We promised.” Natalie spoke loudly enough to be heard over the steady pattern of rain hitting everything around them.

“Are you serious, Natalie? You killed her.”

“She was going to destroy us!” Natalie screamed hysterically. Regina was relieved that Natalie was finally exhibiting the kind of emotion that made Regina consider the fact that she may not still be the unfeeling psychopath that was with them in the garden.

“You killed her and I am helping you. I am not going to go to the police, but if you think that I am going to bury Lola or dump her somewhere where no one will ever find her body, you are wrong! Soon someone will find her and...and...I don’t know what will happen then, but whatever it is...we will deserve it!” Regina said, her face now less than a foot from Natalie’s. With a click, the trunk popped and Nikki emerged from the car. “Let’s just do this!” She screamed over the roar of the thunder.

The girls pulled the corners of the comforter up in a fashion allowing them to lift the body from the trunk. Natalie scanned the dark surroundings, but there was no one anywhere. Taking occasional breaks the girls followed the trail about a hundred feet into the wooded area. When they could not carry the bulky cargo any longer, they changed their direction, taking the funeral procession a few feet off the path into the brush where they let the makeshift body bag come to a rest on a heap of wet brown leaves that covered the ground. The oversized white comforter was now painted with lavish blotches of red where Lola’s head had rested against the sides.

“She doesn’t look dead.” Natalie reported. Though Lola’s lips were beginning to turn purple, her skin was still a rich chocolate color.

“What do you want to do? Kill her some more?” Nikki snapped.

“Maybe I’ll just kill you this time!” Natalie’s hand flew up to cover her mouth as if she could not believe the words that had just come out of her mouth. Nikki’s face contorted in an exaggerated mask of surprise at Natalie’s harsh words.

“Rude!” Nikki shot back disapprovingly.

“Both of you shut the hell up!” Regina barked. Regina eyed both girls with reprove before kneeling down shakily. She tried to get as close to Lola’s face as possible without getting her knees in the blood. Nikki moved her fingers over her own body, making the shape of the cross from her forehead down her chest and then from one end of her shoulders to the other. Regina began to lower her ear to Lola’s slightly open mouth; her chest ached from her labored breathing. When her ear was inches from Lola’s mouth, Regina did her best to quiet her own breath so that she could check for Lola’s. Nikki’s

and Natalie's eyes were glued to Regina and charged with fascination and hope.

Regina was still and it was difficult to isolate the sounds of rain, wind, and animals from the breathing. She listened and she prayed. She waited, then listened harder, then prayed harder.

Through the gray streaks of rain, Regina looked up at the dark silhouettes towering over her.

"Nothing." Regina finally told them.

The rain was dying down to a soft pattering now.

"Check her pulse," Nikki told her. Regina shot her friend a look of frustration, appalled by the audacity of a request coming from a person who had taken the luxury of completely opting out of the necessary task.

"I don't know how to check a fucking pulse!" Regina spit venomously, more frustrated by feelings of helplessness.

"Just put your fingers to her neck." Nikki held out her index and middle finger as an illustration. Regina rolled her eyes, took a deep breath, and held out two imitating fingers. The rain had washed away the blood that covered her best friend's face and she was not the victim anymore, she was just Lola. Regina's stomach turned at the sight of the deep gash on one side of Lola's head and she could not look at the other side where her skull was collapsed. She did not want to touch her. Not too long ago, Regina had held Lola but in hopes that she was alive, the fear was that Lola *was* now dead and there was something quite different about touching death. Lola's skin was cool to the touch and had the texture more of clay now than of human skin. She pressed her fingers on Lola's upper throat as she had seen done several times in movies. Regina felt nothing but the shaking of her own hand, though she was not sure what she was supposed to feel, some type of beating maybe.

"Nothing" Regina told them as she got up from her knees inconspicuously wiping her fingers on the jeans that she was wearing. Nikki's face twisted in frustration.

"She's dead," Natalie announced as her eyes became glazed behind her black-rimmed glasses, new droplets of water appeared on her cheekbones and Regina wondered if Natalie was crying or if her own psyche was using the effects of the storm to play tricks on her.

"We should pray." Nikki suggested.

Regina hung her head, not for the prayer, but in shame for there was no amount of prayer that could wash away the blood that was now upon her hands. She glared hatefully at the deceptive green crystal that hung from Lola's neck.

"Our father..." Nikki began the prayer.

The trip back to town was one of guilty mourners, solemn and beastly in its uncivilized calm. Natalie's road was moonless and slick with rain. The yellow Mustang pulled up just short of her house and she climbed out of the backseat. Regina and Nikki watched as she climbed the rose trellis that led up to her second-floor bedroom window. Regina almost laughed aloud at the irony of the fact that they were sitting in the car,

making sure that Natalie was all of the way in her window safe before they pulled away. They didn't want anyone to sneak up on her, murder her, kidnap her, she supposed, but on a night like tonight that would probably have been best. Once she was inside, the car pulled back into the street and turned a few more corners before it sat in front of Regina's home.

"You sure you don't need my help cleaning up?" She spoke sullenly as she studied her mud-caked shoes.

"No, there won't be much. The blood in the garden should be washed away and I will burn the wood and the comforter." Nikki Valentine spoke with a monotone articulation that distinguished her from the girl that was at Stephen Mitchell's party hours before and Regina grieved for the part of her that would be gone forever. Regina sat unmoved in the car; she was determined to be dragged from this spot kicking and screaming. She didn't want to clean up the remnants of a murder, but even less did she want to get out of the car. It wasn't too late, she could still change things. Inside of the car, somehow, she was still within the bubble of this event in time, but once she got out of the car that bubble would be popped with all of the contents instantaneously dissipating into time and space; it would be history and there would be no changing history.

"OK," Regina said, shoving the car door open. They exchanged no farewells. She began walking up the driveway on shaking legs in stained clothing. Hopefully, her parents would be sleeping because she didn't want them to see her covered in blood, she cared not for herself anymore, but the pain it would cause them to know that their daughter was a despicable killer was too much for Regina to digest. If they did see her, then she would have to tell them the truth. Everything would be done and she could drop the five-thousand-pound weight that she had been carrying for the past couple of hours and regardless of what happened after that she would be fine.

Regina walked onto the porch, pushed the key into the lock, and found herself in her home, which offered some, but little comfort. Against the backdrop of the storm, her childhood home was a carnival of shifting shapes and arcane racket. She slid off her filthy shoes and held them in her hand. Up the stairs she calculated every step more than the one before so as not to wake her good parents. From the closet in the hall bathroom she retrieved a towel and patted her hair as she made her way stealthily down the hall to her room, her bare, wet feet leaving an easy trail to follow. She undressed, stripping herself of one piece of bloody clothing at a time and throwing it to the floor. Naked, she began to crawl into the bed when a thought hit her. Regina got back out of bed and stood over the pile of wet blood-stained clothes glowering dubiously down at them before kicking them underneath the bed. Regina scrubbed the rainwater from the floor with the towel and hung it over the back of her vanity chair, thunder ripped through the room with lightning fast on its tail and Regina caught a striking glimpse of herself in the mirror and the girl on the other side scowled at her triumphantly. Regina shuddered under the eyes of that girl who was not good and filled with the white-hot glow of something evil. The eyes

of the malevolent girl were still watching her as she turned and crawled under the fresh, white cotton sheets that her mother had placed upon her bed. The lawless weather woke her parents and they began to stir. A moment later she heard the door of her parent's bedroom open and tired, house-shoed feet came dragging down the hall. Regina listened intently and closed her eyes softly as the final foot step rested just outside of her bedroom door. With a soft creak, Regina's door opened and her mother peeked in to find a soundly sleeping Regina. Mrs. Dean smiled and glanced into the mirror that offered only her reflection.

The girl in the mirror was gone, but the real monster was right under Mrs. Dean's nose.

Natalie failed to stifle the tremendous, body-shaking cries that began in her chest and penetrated through every limb of her body. She didn't want to wake her mother. The water from the shower head poured serenely over her, chasing away the dried mud and some splotches of blood that were left behind from transporting the body. Every part of her cringed and released violently and she realized that it was she herself that was voluntarily causing the convulsions. She wanted to be free of herself so badly that she felt her soul was physically trying to claw its way out of her skin.

"Natalie!" The sound of her sick mother's voice hammered her. Ms. Weston had been so ill that she was unable to get herself out of bed. Just then the sound of her screaming, suffering voice was enough to make Natalie fold up inside herself and she allowed her entire body to slide down the wall until she lay in the fetal position on the floor of the tub under the shower with her hands pressed against her head so tightly that it was beginning to ache.

"Natalie!" her mother bellowed for her again. There would be no relief for her inside or outside of her skin.

In Nikki's living room, a roaring fire emblazed the otherwise completely dark living room with a hellish orange glow devouring the evidence of all of the wickedness that had poured forth from the girls that evening and telling of the destruction of the last bit of innocence that any of them could ever hope to claim. Tonight she poured twice as much vodka as she had ever poured before into a tall glass and watched as the clear liquid tumbled over the clean ice cubes in mesmerizing waves. Nikki lowered herself onto the couch and allowed the fire to watch her as she drank until all of the things that had not made sense an hour ago somehow found meaning and a place inside of the alcohol-induced pseudo reality that made living bearable.

That night they all watched the world outside of their windows painted with the black and white chaos of the once again raging storm, all of them fearing that the ostentatious show of bedlam was put on just for them by an angry God who now despised each of them, deservedly.

Someone kicked the jukebox at the back of the bar waking it from a cobweb-covered sleep. Regina and Barron were distracted for a second, before she continued, anxious to finish gorging herself of the emotional poison.

“The next morning we went back to Nikki’s house and burned our clothes. Everything was gone, but Nikki was terrified. She thought that her father would come home that evening, walk in the door, and know every detail of the event as if he would smell the death just as easily as if the purple corpse of Lola Rusher was lying bloated in the middle of his living room floor under a swarm of circling flies. The house was sweltering from the heat of the fire that had been burning all night and kept roaring right into the next morning. I stood in the living room looking out through the glass doors that opened up onto the back yard, the crime scene and it was now a different place than the land where we used to spend evenings running and playing hide-and-seek. It was a different place; a place of new memories. We talked, but never made any kind of official pact to keep the secret, but it was understood because the secret was already embedded so deep within our chests, so much so it seemed hard to breathe. Later that morning, as we all sat together in Nikki’s living room, we received calls from Lola’s parents and we all confirmed, one by one, that the last time that we had seen her was at school that Friday.

No, Mrs. Rusher, Lola was not at the party. She said she was studying at the library.

No, Mrs. Rusher I have not seen her since school yesterday. I hope she’s alright.

Regina’s lips began quivering as she recounted the exchanges with Lola’s mother and father. Sheriff Handow came and asked us the same questions.

The last time that I saw her was at school. No, I didn’t notice anything strange. Do you think that she is OK?

“Those phone calls and visits came, but the ones we were waiting for...I mean the ones we longed for every single day never came and I was almost angry with the Sheriff. How stupid he was. Anyone should have been able to tell that we were stupid little liars! Amateur murderers!” Regina’s voice unconsciously rose in anger.

“For several weeks, we waited in agony for the phone call saying that Lola’s body had been found. We waited for the knock on the door, the police wanting us to come down to the station, the handcuffs, the suspicious glances, and hateful whispers. The hours ticked away like individual grains of sand slipping through an hourglass one at a time and we just sat there staring at one another until the sun set and so it did that day, the next day, and every day after that.

“So you just left her at Langford?” Barron asked, his eyes fluttering in confusion. Regina could see it in his face; he thought she was leaving things out. He thought she was a liar. If he had been listening, she knew the obvious questions would come next.

“Yes!” Regina stated with unwavering conviction. “We just left her there.”

Barron jumped from his seat nervously and paced a short invisible line that was strung from his bar stool to hers. First, he tried shoving his hands in his jean pockets, but they rested there for only a second until they were on top of his head. His eyes darted to different points on the floor, looking for answers.

Regina felt a thick knot beginning to tighten in the middle of her throat.

He stopped in front of her, his hands set in a disarranged pose of disquietude. He lowered his voice and looked around before speaking.

“How did she get cut up? And how did she get to the DeFranks’ house?”

“That’s what I don’t know, Barron, I swear. I did not cut her up and I did not bury her. I wouldn’t have, I wanted her to be found. I don’t know what happened,” Regina explained barely able to control her emotion enough to get the words out.

“Regina, that just doesn’t make any sense.”

“You think I don’t know that? This is why I came back. When Nikki called me and told me what happened, I know it sounds crazy, but I felt like this was my chance.”

“Chance for what?”

“It’s just like you said, this is my chance to make things right! I didn’t protect her that night, I didn’t help her, but now I have a chance to change things and make them right again for everyone, the truth has to come out, all of it. That is the only way that anyone will have any peace. The fact is that when we left her she was in Langford, but a few days ago she was found on the DeFrank estate. What if she was just unconscious when we left her at Langford and she got up and walked away? I have to know the truth,” she told him.

Barron was still standing in front of her, listening to her desperate pleadings. He gently placed his hand on her arm.

“And what if she didn’t wake up? What if she was dead when you left her and then something happened?” Barron asked. He hated to hurt her, but it was a question he knew she would have trouble asking herself.

Regina swallowed deeply, all of the skin tightening around her neck.

“Then I have to know that too.”

“You could go to jail,” he sang his brokenhearted warning.

Regina wiped her nose which was now running.

“I don’t care.”

Barron let out a long wind. She had made up her mind and he knew that once she had her mind set there would be no changing it. The only thing that he could do now to help her would be to stay as close to her as possible in order to bring this crazy ordeal to some type of resolve without her being in too much danger. “So what do you think happened? You think Natalie did it?”

“I don’t know, but I know that someone...someone here in Black Water does not want me to find out. Once I figure out who that person is, I can figure this thing out. And maybe...maybe, even if it’s in a jail cell I can close my eyes and not see her.” Barron said nothing for a few moments.

“Are you sure?” he asked. Regina was confused.

“About what?” She asked.

“About this whole thing!” Barron tried to quiet himself, but Regina could see that he was filled with aggravation.

“You think I’m making this up? You think I’m crazy? Why would I make this up?” Both of their voices had grown, in a matter of seconds, too loud to be ignored. They noticed that they were being watched. Regina lowered her voice.

“Barron, please. I have waited for years; years to tell this story. You have to believe me. I need you to believe me.”

Barron thought and then raised his hands in a show of surrender. “I don’t think you’re crazy, I’m just saying that this is the wildest thing I’ve ever heard in my life! You guys aren’t capable of killing a fly. Maybe you’re just under a lot of stress and this is just a way of making things make some kind of sense to you.”

“I’m not crazy, Barron,” Regina said in a strained whisper through clenched teeth as she leaned in to speak to him.

“I am not making this up. We killed her! I think,” she said with a sigh of defeat. Barron raised a thick eyebrow before rolling his eyes. “Look, Regina, I don’t think that you are crazy. It’s just that...it’s just that...” Barron thought for a minute and changed his approach.

“A wise man once said that the only way that two people can keep a secret is if one of them is dead. It’s just not likely that the three of you and whoever else you suspect might have been involved kept this under wraps for all these years.”

“You are the only person in the world that I’ve ever told about this. You can ask Nikki and Natalie if you need to. You are the only person that I have and I need you to believe me. I need your help.” She pleaded.

Barron looked into the brown eyes that had captivated him years ago and the tension in his face softened.

“Please, Barron.” As she spoke he watched her pursed lips move seductively drawing him into this morbid carnival of death; haunted houses, deceptions, and funhouse mirrors. She wrapped her arms around him and he hugged her tightly, his eyes were drawn out the window to the disguises of the children that chased one another and played hide-and-seek behind trees and cars. There were monsters and demons, a teenage girl dressed as a vampire, but she was just a mortal girl with no special powers, and an older woman was in a white dress with a halo around the top of her head, but he now knew that she was no more an angel than the vampire was what she pretended to be. Everyone was wearing a costume. Regina was still speaking but her voice was miles away and he knew it would be better if our reality was not reality at all but just a harmless battle; a board game and we, just the pieces, our movements initiated under the tutelage of a higher intelligence in a range of complex and sometimes unexplained strategy.

“I believe you,” Barron finally said as he released the girl from his embrace.

“Are you going to go to Sheriff Handow?” she wanted to know next. “I would not blame you if you did, but I just need some time.” Regina meant every word that she said. For so long now she had been waiting for the chance to reveal this burdening secret and she would not be the least bit angry if Barron decided to do the right thing and take everything that she said to the police. In fact, that is probably what she wanted; although, in recent years she found it more and more difficult to be sure of her maze of feelings.

“No. I won’t go to the sheriff; besides, there is probably no evidence anymore that points to any of you girls. If you did not have anything to do with the new crime scene

there will be nothing there and even if there was it would be tainted by whatever happened after you did *whatever* it is that you think you did or didn't do. Anything that was ever in Nikki's backyard or fireplace is probably long gone," he reasoned.

There was no reason anymore to hide any details. Regina recounted the events of that sinister afternoon, the DeFrank estate, and the photograph. She told him how she was attacked at the festival, but she recanted her idea that it was Lola that attacked her and credited the delusions of a terrified girl with her previous accusation. Barron was already beginning to question her mental health and she didn't want to provide him with any more ammunition by standing firm on her idea that a dead girl had attacked her.

Barron pulled up to the curb on the side of the street that was opposite Regina's house. The lights were on in the kitchen.

"What if this person comes after you again?" he asked. Regina beamed at the concern in Barron's voice. He was beautiful and the love that she once had for him, which for years lay gray in the same forsaken corner of her heart where Black Water resided, had just come back from the dead like a flower growing to full bright pink bloom.

"I'll be fine with my parents here. Once you get over the devastating fear that comes from facing the darkness and you step inside, it isn't so bad," she revealed.

Barron raised an eyebrow and Regina regretted revealing her newly discovered revelation and thought that she better back it up with something less abstract.

"I'm not scared anymore." She said. "Besides, whoever it is wants me to stop, they don't want to kill me. If they kill me they start a whole new investigation that would threaten to reveal who they are."

"Yeah...well..." he said, looking into the rearview and then scanning all of the windows. "It's still pretty early so I'll just hang out here for a while," he said. Regina leaned across the seat and kissed him long and aggressively, pressing his face closer to hers with her hand on the back of his neck. Everything around them faded into a blur of useless sights and sounds and they were the only two people in the world. All of the fear and frustration drained from her and she felt as light as air for the minute that she was in rapture with him. This kiss was the one that she had been waiting for and it was everything that she imagined it would be. She felt close to him, which is something that she had been missing.

Regina jumped out of the truck and scrambled across the street. Her parents were in the kitchen having coffee in costume.

"Regina, you OK? Barron said that you weren't feeling well." Her father spoke first.

Regina plopped down on one of the chairs at the kitchen table. "I had a couple of drinks. I just needed to relax." Regina told her parents.

"I'm starting to think that you don't want to spend any time with us." Her mother said half-jokingly, but the hurt was apparent.

Regina pressed her fingertips to her forehead, exacerbated by her mother's guilt and feeling the oncoming of a massive headache.

“Mom, this has nothing to do with you, OK? I know that I have been a little checked out, but can you understand, Mom? Can you understand?” Regina asked.

Her father sighed, dreading having to get in the middle of this conversation.

Mrs. Dean sensed her husband’s anxiety. “I just want you to grieve in a healthy way is all.”

Regina took a moment to actually think about the words that her mother was saying before brushing them off simply based on the fact that they were the words of her mother. She wanted so badly to tell them everything, to tell them that this was not just simple grieving for a friend lost, it was so much more. Mr. Dean gave his wife a disapproving glance.

“I’m sorry, honey.” Her mother came over and stroked her hair.

“It’s not you, Mom. You’re right. I just needed to have a couple of drinks tonight, but I promise I won’t deal with it like this.” Regina relented. Mr. Dean reached around the table and held his wife’s hand. Regina fought back the tears.

“You hungry?” Her mother asked.

“No. I just need to get a little sleep.” Regina confessed.

“Do you want to talk?” Her father pressed.

“Maybe tomorrow dad, I just want to sleep. Are you still going next door to the Jamison’s?” Regina asked as she rose from the table.

“Well...” Her mother began with concern.

“Uh.” Her father’s stuttering fell over that of her mother’s.

Regina laughed lightly and sniffled. “Go”

“Maybe we should just stay home; I’m kind of tired anyway.” her father said.

“No, you’re not!” Regina challenged. “You go to their Halloween party every year. Go, I’m just going to go to sleep anyway,” she urged.

“Are you sure?” Her mother asked.

“Yes, Mom. I’m a grown woman I will be fine.” Regina said feeling confident with Barron standing guard.

“Well, we’ll be right next door if you need anything.”

“We won’t stay very long,” her father promised.

Regina retreated upstairs to the bathroom where she took another shower in an attempt to wash away the dirt, the dirt that had been waiting for years to be cracked by the truth. Regina was warm in her robe as she crept down the hall into her room and looked out of the window to see Barron staring directly up at her through his open car window. Relief settled her stomach and she gave him a quick wave. It was doubtful that any stranger was coming for her that night, but there was something overwhelmingly romantic about having Barron there. His watch-keeping made her feel like a princess being protected in her tower, while the valiant prince kept the monsters away. She slid into bed and sleep swept her away.

Pain sliced through Regina’s head as her groggy eyes opened to reveal a room full of the clouded remnants of a dream and she immediately wished that she had taken some

aspirin before bed. Someone was at the front door pounding out another loud series of bangs. “What the hell?” she muttered to herself, one hand on her forehead trying to massage away the alcohol-induced pain, the other hand lifting the alarm clock to reveal that it was only 9:45 p.m.

More violent pounding permeated the house.

“Jesus Christ! I’m coming.” Regina gave a soft yell loud enough for them to hear, but not loud enough to agitate the pain that was swimming in her head.

“Who is it?” She yelled again as she shakily made her way down the stairs.

No answer, just another series of thunderous knocks. Abruptly the circumstances of her current life came floating back to her in a wave of haunting reality and she froze.

Chapter 18

She stood on the last step listening intently, but heard nothing. Regina fell back on the stairs at the sound of a cat squealing on the porch and then a sudden rustling, in her startled movement her ankle collided with one of the hard steps.

“Ouch!” Regina gave an injured cry.

“Regina!” A voice yelled before another string of loud blows to the door. Regina dashed into the kitchen and pulled out the drawer full of knives of all shapes and sizes in a menacing jangle of metal. Regina wrenched out one of her mother’s favorite utensils, a dangerously sharp steel butcher knife. She held it up and admired the gleam that flashed across the shadowy kitchen. Regina raced back to the door and stood with her ear pressed tightly against the wood.

“Who is it?” she yelled, blowing out all of the air in her chest so that her voice would sound strong.

Silence.

“Natalie!” the voice yelled. “Open the door. Please hurry!”

Regina’s breathing slowed.

Natalie? What the hell was she doing here?

Though Regina had kept company with Natalie only once in the past six years she knew that she hardly sounded like herself. Her voice was different; higher.

“Natalie,” she confirmed as she released a relieved exhale. Regina unchained the door and turned the lock. Yanking open the door, she was dumbfounded by the shadowy figure that floated on the porch a few feet from the door. It stood limp and dangling, its head hanging low.

“Natalie,” Regina spoke as her fingers felt along the wall until they found what they needed. Regina’s fingers flipped the porch light switch and she gasped. Natalie was battered and disheveled, some of her hair hung out of her ponytail, her lip was bleeding, and she had a colorful bruise on the side of her forehead.

Natalie began to walk toward Regina. Regina raised her hand to cover her mouth. Natalie reeled back at the sight of Regina’s fierce weapon. Regina realized that she was still holding the knife that hung clumsily in her hand.

“What is that?” Natalie asked.

“I’m sorry, but you didn’t answer when I asked who it was.”

“I didn’t hear you. I didn’t hear anything.”

“Sorry” Regina apologized for greeting Natalie with a knife.

Natalie moved quickly, snatching the blade and brushing by Regina into the house,

she slammed and locked the door behind her.

"It was Lola!" Natalie stated. "Lola tried to kill me."

"What? When?" Regina blurted.

"Not long ago, about an hour. I was outside in my garage storing some things and I had the garage door open. She just walked right in! We fought and I managed to get away and get into the house and she ran. She never said a word. I waited to make sure that she was gone; then I came here."

"How do you know it was Lola? Did you see her? Did you see Lola?" Regina asked like a detective arriving at the clincher of an interrogation.

"I didn't actually see her. She was wearing this sort of cape thing, but I know it was her."

A cape? The monk.

All of the evening's events came flooding back to Regina; the monk had attacked Natalie too. Regina's eyes lit up as her brain fired off rapid thoughts that began to connect, she noticed the large bruise on Natalie's forehead getting darker by the moment.

"What is going on?" Natalie said now pointing with the knife. Natalie's fear was disintegrating rapidly into anger.

Regina could feel a nerve in her thigh begin to twitch as she realized that Natalie's bruise was in the same place that she had hit the monk with the crucifix earlier in Clark's that night. Natalie's eyes burned into Regina.

"What?" Natalie gasped. Regina was trembling. She was locked in a house with someone who may be the person that wanted to hurt her. Regina backed away from the frantic girl.

"Don't you believe me?" Natalie pleaded, the blade of the knife moving wildly in accordance with her animated words. Regina jumped as the point of the knife was now inches from her chest.

"I believe you, Natalie, I do."

Natalie's eyes glazed over in a brief moment of rage and then turned to a haughty smile as if she knew something that Regina did not.

"You don't believe me, do you? You think it was me, don't you? You think I cut her up, buried her." She used the point of the knife to conduct her story only inches from Regina's face. Natalie moved closer, the point of the knife so close now that its gleaming tip was almost a blur. "You blame me for everything, don't you?" Natalie asked.

Both girls screamed at the sound of incessant rings through the house.

The doorbells rang again almost immediately after the first round. Regina felt relief flood her quaking body. Natalie looked back toward the door nervously still not moving the knife.

"I gotta get the door, Natalie," she insisted.

"REGINA!" She heard Nikki's strained voice through the door.

Both girls recognized the voice. The tension drained from Natalie's stiff posture and she moved aside to give her friend a path to the door. Natalie went into the kitchen to put

the knife away. Regina scrambled to the door and flung it open to reveal a battered Nikki, she had a thick red bruise around her neck and her eyes were bloodshot. Regina could see Barron jogging up the walkway behind her.

“He attacked me!” She blurted out throwing herself upon Regina. Confused, Regina embraced her friend. She looked over the shaking girl’s shoulder at Barron who shrugged.

“It wasn’t me. I just saw Natalie come in, and when I saw Nikki I figured I should find out what the hell’s going on.” Barron told her.

Nikki turned and was shocked to see Barron.

“Natalie’s here too?” Nikki said unlocking herself from her friend. Natalie appeared in the foyer once again and Nikki then threw herself upon Natalie who had no time to react and barely knew how to respond considering she made it a point to avoid public displays of affection.

“What’s wrong?” Natalie asked.

“Someone attacked me,” Nikki told her. Natalie’s eyes immediately went to Regina’s in an expression of anxiety.

“Everyone come in, go into the living room. Barron, lock the door. I’ll be right there.” Regina said as she slipped into the kitchen. She opened one of the cabinets and took down a small bottle. She winced and rubbed one of her temples before opening the bottle and popping two pills with nothing to drink.

In the living room, the three were locked in uncontrollable chatter. Barron and Natalie sat on the couch and Nikki was propped on the piano bench.

“When were you attacked, Nikki?” Regina asked trying to avert the stare that was now upon her from Natalie.

“Just now! At the festival, I came straight here. I didn’t know where else to go.”

“Are you happy now, Regina? I know what you were thinking. I was not lying.” Natalie boasted. Regina shot her a quick look, but said nothing because Natalie was right about what Regina had been thinking.

“What are you talking about?” Barron asked. “Nothing.” Regina answered.

“All right, so we were all attacked.”

“You were attacked too?” Nikki asked.

“Yes” Regina said with a sigh.

“And you thought I did it?” Natalie accused; she looked hurt.

“No, not at first, but then I saw the bruise on your head and I thought...maybe...” Regina explained.

Natalie shook her head. “Un-fucking-believable.”

What happened to you, Nikki?” Regina asked with a sigh.

Nikki used her shaking hands to pull her wild hair back into a tight ponytail before speaking.

“I went to the festival looking for you. There were so many people there and I didn’t see you so, after a while, I crossed over to the park to have a drink. I was just sitting on

the swing when I heard someone behind me, but before I could turn around, they had something around my neck.” Her voice began to shake as she lifted her hand to massage the red bruise that marked her throat. Her story was choking on the sorrowful cries that were now flowing from her.

“They dragged me off of the swing and pulled me behind this tree. I was kicking and I was, I was trying to scream, but I couldn’t get anything out. There was no air. I couldn’t breathe and everything was starting to go black, I was gasping and then he just let me go. The rope slid from around my neck and he ran away. I just laid there for a while because I couldn’t move. I was so scared; I thought I was going to die. When my head started to clear and I started breathing normally again, I don’t why but I came straight here. It was someone in like a priest costume or something,” she reported while using her hand to illustrate the flow of the gown. Tears streamed down her face.

Regina, Natalie, and Barron sat speechless.

“And you think it was Lola?” Regina finally asked.

“Lola?” Nikki asked looking startled. “What do you mean it was Lola? I never said it was Lola.”

“Lola?” Barron questioned, a mystified glaze transforming the features of his face. “So you *do* think that it was Lola that attacked you?”

“Lola attacked you?” Nikki shrieked her mouth gaping in horror.

“She attacked me,” Natalie inserted.

“Lola attacked you?” Nikki asked Natalie, becoming more hysterical with every word spoken.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait!” Barron put his hands up to halt the girls, as he could see that this meeting was rapidly dissolving into a summit of frenzy.

“Regina, you said that *someone* attacked you, not Lola,” Barron said.

Regina looked to Natalie and hated to tell the truth, but had no choice. If she couldn’t trust the people who sat in this room right now, there was no one to trust.

“It looked like her.” An ashamed Regina admitted.

“You said you didn’t see their face.” Barron insisted.

“I didn’t!” Regina spit, aggravated by the mentions of her own potential delusions.

“I didn’t see her face, but it looked like her,” she confirmed.

“The eyes.” Natalie said. “I didn’t get a good look at her either, but it was her eyes.”

“Are you saying that it was Lola that attacked me?” Nikki spoke almost in a daze as she grabbed at her skin that was now crawling with thousands of worms slithering just beneath the surface. She got up and went to the window, drew back the drape a couple of inches and stared into the dark night, the omnipresent silver eye just behind black tree branches floated between two bodies of midnight blue clouds and stared directly back down at Nikki.

“Lola is dead!” Barron stated firmly.

“How do we know that?” Natalie asked. Six eyes simultaneously stabbed her with bewilderment. “They think those bones were Lola’s, but have they confirmed it?”

Nikki turned from the window sheer dread raging in her eyes, like a wild animal trapped in a net.

"I don't think that they have," Nikki realized.

"Of course they have." Regina interjected hopefully.

"Is there an official confirmation yet? Natalie asked.

Barron could see the gears in all of the flighty girls' heads spinning like a hamster wheel and rolled his eyes with a sigh.

"Is everyone here on their period or just crazy for no reason at all?" His voice boomed.

"The corpse is the same age as Lola was, they found her clothes. I don't care if there is an official confirmation or not. That bag of bones out there is Lola. Lola is dead!" He persisted.

"Well, if she's dead who in the hell is trying to hurt us?" Regina asked.

"It's her." Natalie was not swayed by Barron's sound reasoning.

"It isn't!" Barron declared forcefully. "It's impossible."

"Well how do we find out?" Regina asked.

"Oh my God" Barron sighed.

Silence fell on the room.

"A séance." Nikki's voice broke the fragile quiet in the room.

"What?" Barron spit.

"A séance?" Natalie spoke appearing slightly interested.

"No. If Lola is dead..." Regina saw the look that Barron was giving her and amended her sentence. "...And I am not saying that she isn't, but if she is...I sure as hell don't want to bring her here." Regina finished.

"She makes a very good point," Natalie agreed.

"Are you guys serious! We are not kids anymore. What sane adults have séances trying to conjure the spirits of old high school friends?" Barron chuckled, giving up almost all attempts at reasoning at this point.

All of the girls looked to one another. "We do." Natalie answered. "Besides, if we have a séance and her spirit comes she can't hurt us as long as we don't break the circle." Nikki informed them.

"Uh, another good reason why she can't hurt us....SHE'S DEAD!" Barron reminded them.

"Barron, please." Regina reached out and touched him; the tension immediately emptied from his face and within seconds was washed completely away.

"Well if she's so dead *little Bear* what are you so afraid of?" Natalie teased him in her best baby voice with a nickname that she had given him in high school, a sweet and fuzzy play on his actual name, which Barron hated.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," Barron said as he lowered himself to the floor from the couch; he crossed his legs Indian style and held out his hands. All of the girls just stared. "So how do you do this thing?" he asked. Regina and Natalie followed Barron's

lead and waited for Nikki's guidance.

Thank you. Regina mouthed the words to him.

"I have only done this one time before, but I saw my mother do it all the time," Nikki said as she lowered herself to the floor with everyone else.

"I feel like I'm at a Boy Scout camp-out," Barron grumped.

"Please save it 'cause that doesn't really make me want to hold your hand, if you know what I mean," Natalie fussed.

"What?" Regina said in complete confusion.

"Well, we all know the number one activity of boys that age, Regina," Natalie told her.

"Regina, get your friend," Barron instructed.

"Gross," Nikki added.

"Can you both just stop, please?" Regina interjected feeling as if she was in high school again having to break up the sometimes not so playful banter between her best friend and boyfriend.

"We all just hold hands," Nikki spoke loudly and Regina was grateful for her interruption. "Everyone must meditate on the subject and I will call upon her, but in order for this to work everyone has to believe."

"Believe what?" Regina asked.

"That she will come," Nikki told her. Attentions immediately focused upon Barron.

"I'll do my best," he said in response to their dull stares.

The group formed a chain with their hands all folded into one another.

"Close your eyes," Nikki told them. "Wait!" she said. Everyone's eyes popped open once again. "I forgot; the most important thing to remember is not to break the circle. The barrier that we have created by connecting our souls through our physical bodies is the only protection that we have, the physical against the spiritual. It's what keeps them out."

"Hell of a thing to almost forget," Barron grumbled. Regina squeezed his hand tightly.

"Could you try for one night, not to be such a douche?" Natalie asked.

"How about I try not to be one and you try not to need one?" he shot back.

"All right, c'mon. Let's just get this over with!" Regina interrupted.

"Everyone close your eyes," Nikki said with a calm that brought their eyelids sliding down.

Regina closed her eyes, remembering the last time she and the girls sat in a circle this way, in the garden, and the powerful tears began to overflow the ducts of her eyes almost instantaneously. Natalie's palm was warm and soft in Regina's hand.

Nikki called upon the soul of their lost friend in a melodious voice that sung to the spirit world. Regina did her part by letting her mind float far away to a place and time that belonged only to Lola, Nikki, Natalie, and herself.

It was one of the first beautiful days of spring and all of the windows of the DeFrank home were open to let in the romantic breezes. The girls had shown up to the home for

their usual lesson. Glen DeFrank answered the door and his face was twisted in an agitated scowl that Regina was starting to believe was not just an expression, but becoming the regular map of his features. The girls trudged silently into the piano room. In keeping with the usual routine each girl was on high alert for any unusual sounds in the house, they prayed to hear the shuffling of one of the housekeepers, called in on an off day for a special project, the part-time nanny or anyone who was not a part of the normal landscape of the DeFrank home, but on this day the house was ominously silent as it was most Tuesday evenings, especially since his parents had died.

Glen first pointed to Lola who then climbed upon the dark wooden piano bench, as was always the job of the first girl picked. Everyone's breath stopped as his eyes crawled over each of the other girls, like a hairy multi bug-eyed spider, deciding to whom his finger would fall upon for the second duty. His breath was harsh and too labored for such a young man. The hair that had once been waves of silk was now greasy and knotted. He was beginning to look old many years before his time. All of the girls were as still as statues in the fear that even the smallest movement may entice the monster to choose them. Natalie's lip began to quiver as she felt his eyes settling on her, his pointed finger followed. She stood like a prisoner being chosen to face the death squad and walked down the hall toward the study. None of the girls said a word as he turned and limped along behind Natalie. Lola flinched when Glen snapped his fingers, sharply, signaling her to play. She had been lost in a daze when her eyes fell into the inconsolable orbs that Natalie used to look back on them before disappearing completely around the corner.

Nikki and Regina waited for Lola to play and she did. Her classical piece began slow and steady. The beats of Regina's heart followed the music obediently into the steady rhythm that composed the middle of the song. Lola focused on her fingers hitting the keys as if she were trying to decipher a puzzle as she played, with every keystroke her mind unlocked yet another complex piece.

With the climax of the composition approaching, the beats began to come faster and the three girls could hear the gusts of heavy breaths that began swimming out of the study and finding their unchaste ears. Lola tamed the keys mercilessly as the style of musical selection called for it and as it served the second purpose of deafening them to the sounds of the study that had become all too familiar.

Regina's mouth was drying out and her stomach was flipping rapidly, she looked to Nikki who had lie back against the couch and was staring aimlessly up at the ceiling and Regina knew that Nikki had gone somewhere far away. Regina was frightened; she could sense something nearing.

Regina closed her eyes no longer able to separate the pounding of the piano keys from the raucous moans emanating from the room off the hall. The music from the piano was dynamically intense yet controlled and precise and the beats were coming so swiftly now that Regina thought her head would explode and she just wished for the beautiful song to be over. Regina's eyes sprang open at the harsh sound that suddenly pricked needles in every pore of her body. Nikki had been snapped back to this place and vomited

violently onto the floor. Lola was still captivated in the robust performance of the classical rendition, but it was now accompanied by her shrill scream.

“Lola,” Regina spoke, barely audible over the rumbling music and the high-pitched continuous shriek. Lola took no notice of Regina’s voice; her mouth was wide, releasing a haunt that had been submerged far down inside of her for years now. Her eyes, glowing moons, far away and empty of life disappeared under their lids, but she played on, her screams never ceasing. Something powerful was coming out of Lola and Regina wanted to lift her feet from the floor, pull them close to her and bury herself as far back against the couch as possible to get away from it.

There was a clattering of feet in the hall as Glen came bursting into the room. He stood astounded at the doorway, nervously buckling his belt. His eyes impaled Regina as if she was somehow responsible for the ghastly phenomenon that was unfolding in the room. She was helpless. Natalie came straggling into the piano room after him her face stained with the tears of suffering.

Glen grabbed Lola by the waist, yanking her from the noisy instrumental alarm and she became savage, throwing her arms and legs with such force that he could not control her. She screamed, growled, grunted even barked. The feral child slipped through his now graceless and unsure grasp. Lola kicked him hard in the shin. A bone damaging crackle sent chills up Regina’s spine. Glen’s knees buckled and he hit the floor hard. Before the complete shift of earthly reality could fully register on his face, she struck out at him, slashing his face, leaving four deep scratches in his cheek. Red blood began to emerge from the fresh wounds and he was now completely defenseless in front of the girl who still subdued him with her hellish screams. Her arm was still outstretched in front of her, poised like a claw only inches from his face with his flesh embedded under her fingernails. The girls found a place behind Lola as her feet backed toward the front doors. Natalie turned the crystal door knob, pushed the heavy doors and they all stepped out into the golden light of evening where Lola finally ceased her cry just as suddenly as it had begun as if the shine of the bright burning sun had broken the spell. Glen never moved from his position on the floor, terrified of the girl who stood no more than five feet tall. Lola looked him in his eyes as she pulled the door closed and left him alone inside of the darkened walls.

Once the girls heard the click of the door, they all turned and began to run as fast as any of them had ever run before. They ran until they reached the gate of the DeFrank estate and once they walked out they all knew that none of them would ever return and Glen DeFrank knew it also.

Chapter 19

“Lola, if you can hear us please...come to us.” Nikki said. Regina opened her eyes to her living room and saw that everyone in the circle still had their eyes closed tightly as Nikki called to the spirit world again. Regina wondered what memories of Lola each of them was rekindling in these moments of meditation.

“Come to us,” Nikki chanted.

Howling winds beat the walls, Natalie recoiled as a soft rumbling ran through the house. Another choral gasp erupted from the group as the lights blinked and the house went black.

“The heat.” Regina said as she took her hand from Natalie’s and pointed toward the ceiling where the old damaged heating unit lumbered to life several times during the day and night.

“The wind must have knocked out the lights,” Barron said.

“I guess that’s that,” Nikki said to the group who appeared disappointed.

“You little girls didn’t really think that Lola was going to come knocking on the door did you?” Barron teased.

Natalie formed her lips to speak, but they all froze when someone beat her to it, all of their eyes were drawn up to the ceiling simultaneously. Low whispers infected the halls and rooms on the second floor.

“What is that?” Nikki whispered. Barron wanted to make a joke, but even he had no explanation for the whispers that rained down on them. No one could articulate the exact words that were being spoken, but someone or something was up there.

“What the hell is that?” Nikki asked again looking to Barron for comfort.

“I don’t know!” Barron was becoming aggravated at the insinuation that he should have the answers to everything.

He got up from the circle and went to the bottom of the stairs; Regina was quick on his heels. She stood behind him at the foot of the stairs as they listened.

“Children” Regina said. Still, she could not make out their words but she could hear now that the soft voices were those of children. Barron hauled into the kitchen and grabbed the butcher knife that Natalie left on the counter. He returned to the foot of the stairs where all of the girls now waited.

Barron began up the stairs; the girls huddled closely at his back. Cautiously, they made their way to the top of the stairs. Everyone’s breath was heavy with exhaustion from the night.

“If I should die before I wake I pray the Lord my soul to take.” The children finished

the prayer before beginning again. "Now I lay me..."

"They're praying?" Nikki spoke. Barron pointed the knife toward Regina's room, identifying the place from which the prayers were coming. Her bedroom door was ajar and the moonlight streamed out and onto the hallway floor. The four inched toward the opening.

The children continued to pray with steady pace and rhythm. Regina could feel her body beginning to perspire more and more with every step toward the unexplained. Using the blade of the knife to push the door open, Barron stepped courageously into the room.

Barron gasped and grabbed his chest at what he saw sitting on the bed.

"What is it?" Regina questioned deliriously stepping into the room preparing herself for whatever devilish sight awaited her.

"You guys and your damn Halloween séance crap got me all messed up! It's a damn toy," Barron barked at the girls.

Regina could now see the toy that lay on her bed, a little machine with two plastic children kneeling in front of a bible.

"Oh my God." Regina said as she plopped down on the bed and turned the toy off. "My mother got this for me when I was little, it teaches you the prayer. She must have found it when she was going through the basement today," Regina said, holding up the small toy to her friends.

Barron sank into the chair in front of Regina's vanity. "It must have been set off by the wind or something."

Nikki came and sat down on the bed next to her friend and took the toy into her hands. "This is just creepy."

"I have never seen anything like that before in my life." Natalie added.

"Actually it is not that creepy at all, I used to love this thing," Regina explained.

"So what's next on the schedule?" Barron asked. "Maybe we should go and say Bloody Mary in the bathroom mirror three times."

Natalie released an exaggerated exhale.

"I don't know about you guys, but I just need to sleep. Maybe we should just figure this out in the morning," Natalie offered.

"No way, I'm not going home by myself," Nikki countered.

"Everyone just stay here tonight, OK? And we will figure out what we need to do in the morning." Regina saw that Barron appeared a little reluctant to oblige another superstitious request. "Barron, will you stay, please?" she asked.

"I guess I'm on the floor," he said.

Regina pulled several thick blankets from the hall closet and everyone managed to find a comfortable spot somewhere in the living room. Regina pushed back in her father's recliner and pulled her blanket up to her chin. Barron was already sound asleep on the pallet that Regina made for him on the floor. Nikki and Natalie lay foot to head under a comforter on the couch, their eyes were closed. Natalie's breath was long and steady. Nikki tossed trying to find the gateway to unconsciousness, which Regina found with

abrupt unexpected pleasure.

Regina woke before morning came. She looked to the DVD player for the time, but it was blank and non-telling. She shifted her body in the recliner, but would not be comfortable until she used the bathroom. Everyone was still asleep and Barron was snoring. Her parents had probably returned home hours ago. With everyone here she even felt safe enough to retire to the comfort of her own bed instead of trying to find rest in this contraption of a chair. Regina threw the blanket from herself and set the chair upright as quietly as possible. Rubbing her eyes she made sure to clear Barron's broad body as she leapt over him and began making her way up the stairs. In the bathroom, she didn't bother turning on the light, while she felt her way to the toilet, peed quickly and washed her hands.

The praying toy still lay on top of the bed as she stepped into her room. Her abdomen clinched at the sound of fumbling in the dark hallway behind her. She turned but it was hard to see in the heart of night.

"Mom? Dad?" she whispered. There was no response from her parents, but she became hypnotized at the sight of the hall closet door drifting open with a wicked creaking.

Regina wanted to call out again, but knew that it would be futile, she was just frightening herself.

A blast of air from somewhere must have nudged the door open, Regina thought to herself, desperately trying to make the incident rational.

...But from where, damn it, from where?

Regina steeled herself against the fantastic thoughts that gripped her. In the movies, these were the times when she always yelled out at the stupid woman for not screaming, for not calling out to someone, but being in the moment herself now, she realized how silly it felt. There were just no such things as ghosts. She walked confidently toward the open closet door, listening to every sight and sound of the night with every step. She took a moment after she got to the door and stood in the shadow of the darkness, then she grabbed the door knob and opened the door wide, hoping there was nothing, but still expecting...she held her breath...

Nothing

The small walk in closet was the same quiet quarter it had been when she had taken blankets from it earlier that night, but she had to be sure. In order to quell her fears altogether, she released the doorknob and stepped into the pit of the cave. She stood on her toes reaching for the thin silver chain that dangled from the naked light bulb. The chord made a tingling noise after she pulled it and released it back into the air. "Damn," Regina cursed forgetting that the power was out. The door behind her began to creak to a slow close and Regina lunged for the door holding it open and keeping the slivers of platinum moonlight in the closet from receding anymore. Quickly, she stepped out and turned and closed the door. Once again, she was alone in the hall. Regina returned to her bedroom and upon reaching the threshold of her door, she did not turn to see, but could

hear the closet drag open once again. Paralysis struck her. In the mirror on her vanity, she saw the dark shadow slip out of the opening of the closet door. Every muscle in Regina's body tensed so violently that it was almost painful for her blood to flow.

Please God, please God, please God. Regina turned on the ball of her foot in a tornado of apprehension, not wanting to see what she was sure that she would see when she turned the second time. She peered down the hall once again.

Nothing

Regina sprinted down the hall and slammed the door closed. She turned back to her room and an unidentifiable sound escaped her vocals as Lola's rotting corpse stood at the threshold of her bedroom.

"You called?" the corpse retched in a surly voice that sounded amplified in the long stretch of hallway.

"No." Regina cried softly to herself. She closed her eyes praying that the sight would disappear, but when she opened her eyes Lola was inches from her face and Regina could smell the stench of rotting flesh. She screamed violently, hoping to wake her parents who should have been asleep just down the hall; she stumbled back falling right out of the grip of the dead girl. She grabbed the side table that was against the wall, making it tumble to the floor while helping her to get to her feet again. Regina could feel the fingertips of the corpse grasping her shirt as she ran toward the stairs; the corpse reached her just as she found the top of the stairs. Regina grappled to get a grip on the banister, but the force from behind propelled her out over the stairs before she could steady herself and she tumbled down helplessly. The first blow to her bones was a harsh crackling of her skull and after that, she could no longer feel anything. Regina's vision was a broken montage of the staircase, the front door that lay at the bottom of the staircase and the angry dead that stood watching with satisfaction from the top of the landing. Regina's mangled body came to an abrupt stop somewhere at the foot of the steps.

She opened her eyes and light streamed into the slits upon first blinking into consciousness. In waking from her nightmare, bits of dream and reality floated like lost puzzle pieces through her mind before she spotted the figure that was emerging from her closet with a cloak of darkness before it.

"Is this what you're wearing?" Her mother asked holding up a black wool dress. Regina blinked a few more times before being able to discern her surroundings; she dug her fingertips deep into her eyes in an attempt to wipe the sleep away.

"Yes," she answered.

Her mother held up the dress and reviewed it with narrowed eyes.

"OK, well, I am going to knock some of these wrinkles out. You need to be getting up soon; the wake begins in an hour and a half," her mother said as she left the room with Regina's dress. Regina turned over, lifted the alarm clock, and pulled it close to her eyes.

"Nine thirty," she spoke to herself sleepily; she shot upright in the bed looking around and touching the parts of her body that had been broken in the dream fall. Relief swept her. Soreness plagued her body, but nothing was broken, she was still alive and had

survived another visit from Lola.

Her eyes wandered toward the window and she hopped out of bed, the hard wooden floors were cold. She stumbled to the window surprised to see the black truck in the same place it had been the night before. Regina dug under her bed and pulled out a pair of house shoes. She crept to the stairs and before descending, took a long look down the hall to make sure that her parents were still in their room. Down the stairs and out the front door, Regina slipped soundlessly. On the porch, she stopped herself and walked back into her home to make sure that Nikki and Natalie were not asleep on the couch, to ensure that they had never been there the night before, the séance, the hellish ghost had been only a dream. The living room was empty and she was relieved that her night had ended when she went to bed after her talk with her parents and with Barron stationed in his truck, where he stayed all night.

Outside the air smelled clean and was brisk and prickly on her skin, she broke into a jog across the lawn and froze up as if the wind had penetrated her skin and surged right to the bone when she saw Barron's body slumped over the steering wheel.

"Barron?" she cried out softly. Her heart pounded feverishly in her chest as she pressed her palms up against the window and brought her face closer to get a better look, his body was cement. "Barron!" Regina began to bang her palms against the window when his limp body jerked to life. His tired eyes looked at her as if she was a stranger. In the next second, he jerked the door open and leapt out of the car looking around.

"What's wrong?" he said, pulling her close to him. His eyes darted around touching several points in every direction.

"Nothing, nothing. I just...I just thought...nothing, everything is fine." She confirmed with embarrassment.

"You sure?" He asked still looking around, his chest poked staunchly into the air.

"Yes...I was just surprised to see you still here." She lied. Barron took a few deep breaths.

"Yeah?" he asked as if she should have already been aware that he would stay the entire night. "Well after you got attacked last night there was no way that I was leaving you alone."

"You look tired," she said, pressing her fingers gently against the bags that were beginning to form underneath his eyes. "I'm about to get dressed for the wake, are you coming?" she asked.

Barron leaned against the truck, not speaking. He completed a quick mental inventory of himself before he answered her. "I don't know. I'm tired and my back is killing me. I may have to sit this one out."

Barron's face was ragged and the texture of the steering wheel was imprinted on his cheek. Regina felt terrible that he had slept in his car just to keep watch over her.

"OK, I understand. I'll call you later." She said as she wrapped her arms around him and buried the side of her face into his broad chest. He squeezed her tight and she relished every moment.

“Thank you for staying,” she said.

“No problem,” he assured her. “That’s what ex boyfriends are for.” He laughed.

“Thank you for everything,” she told him, lifting herself up to her tiptoes to kiss his lips. He was surprised, but delighted by the unexpected show of raw affection. Regina was pleased with the fact that she had been able to please him and her mind briefly shot to the end of this ordeal and she wondered how it would work for them and if she would have to leave Barron again, her stomach wrenched and she pushed the thoughts of the culmination away.

“You’re welcome. I’ll see you later,” he said as he climbed back into the truck. He watched her grab the newspaper, wet with the morning dewdrops, from the lawn.

“Hey, Regina,” he called to the woman from the open window, he had forgotten something. Regina turned to face him. “Send my condolences to the Rushers,” he said.

Regina nodded, watched him pull away, and then headed back toward her front door.

“Regina” She heard a strong voice speak her name with a boom. Nausea washed her from head to toe when she turned to see the white police car slowing to a stop at the curb.

“Sheriff” Regina greeted. She glanced back at the house to make sure that her parents had not come out.

“How ya this morning?” he asked. He smiled in a failing effort to disarm the young woman.

“Fine.” She returned the concocted smile of a blameless girl.

“You got a few minutes?” he asked, turning off the car. Again, she looked back at her calm home.

“OK,” she agreed, not actually answering the question asked.

“Should we go inside?” he asked as he emerged from the patrol car.

“Probably not,” Regina answered. “We’re getting ready for the wake and the mood is pretty thick.” She reasoned with surprise at her quick thinking.

Sheriff Handow grinned sympathetically. “Of course. Well, just a quick question.”

Regina nodded impatiently.

“I was speaking to Mrs. Landcaster yesterday and I don’t know how, but we got to talking about Lola’s disappearance,” he informed her, and then allowed a chilling silence to linger in the air.

“OK,” Regina spoke, knowingly taking his bait, hating him more and more by the moment for now trying to do something that he should have done years ago. She spoke every word with the reserved precision of chess master fingering a chessman before moving it to a square elevating his leverage in the game; one step closer to victory. Regina swept her short hair back behind her ear.

Sheriff Handow eyed her carefully and swept his fingers across his lips in a deliberate movement before he answered.

“Well, she says that she saw Nikki Valentine’s car pass by her house that night, as if it were coming here.”

Regina let her eyes fall to the grass for split a second before looking into the eyes of

her interrogator.

"She probably did. I told you years ago that Nikki dropped Natalie and me home that night." Regina spoke perfunctorily.

"You did tell me that, didn't you?" he confirmed quietly as if he were speaking to himself.

"But you told me that you girls left the party at about 10:00 p.m. that night."

"We did." Regina shrugged and relaxed her shoulders in an effort to release the tension that had built up inside of her and was now coming out in a frustrated voice that she knew would hardly serve her.

"Mrs. Landcaster said that she saw Nikki's car coming up the street at two in the morning." He repeated the information that he had gotten from Mrs. Landcaster with no hesitation. An invisible fist the size of Mississippi punched through her abdomen.

Checkmate.

Seconds seemed like hours while the world spun around her and she was no longer inside of her own body, she floated above the scene watching herself standing face-to-face with Sheriff Handow on the misty morning of Lola's wake.

"She's mistaken," she asserted devoutly. Sheriff Handow's expression turned serious, his eyes burned into Regina. Regina giggled girlishly then spoke again.

"Now if Mrs. Landcaster would have told you the sky was blue you would have denied it just because...well...because, you know...she's a little...whoo hoo." Regina gave the animated sound effect while rolling her eyes into her head playfully. Her breath was coming shorter now, she could feel the tremendous blow of every heart beat so far into her chest that her neck began to ache. Time moved so slowly in those seconds that Regina was sure it was moving backward.

Sheriff Handow laughed just a little before agreeing with Regina. "Yes, I suppose you're right."

"Yes," she agreed. "Anything else? I really should be getting dressed." She informed him as she began to step back toward her home.

"No, that's all." He assured her with a nod, but refused to remove his eyes from his subject.

Regina turned and began taking long strides across the cool grass when she felt her legs buckle at the sound of Sheriff Handow calling her name once again.

"Regina."

The woman turned without saying a word. She could see the question forming on his lips, everything was about to fall apart, collapse right in front of her.

The uniformed cop let the thought swell in his mouth and Regina was sure that she would faint until she sensed his momentary vacillation.

"Yes?" Regina answered standing as tall as her bones would allow.

"Nothing," he said quickly before getting into his car and pulling away from the curb. Regina stood on the lawn unable to move until the police car had disappeared into the thick fog of the disturbing morning.

Regina gasped as she entered the house and encountered her mother in the doorway facing her, dead-on, as if she had been anticipating a face-off.

“There you are; I’ve been calling you. What were you doing?” Mrs. Dean asked her daughter. With a trembling hand, Regina held up the plastic-covered paper with a smile in answer to her mother’s question. “Oh, Charles, the paper is here.” Her mother called up the stairs. “Your dress is ready. Hurry, I’m going to make a quick breakfast, but we have to be going if we don’t want to be late,” Mrs. Dean told her daughter.

“What is it?” Regina asked when her mother stood still for a moment inspecting the foyer.

“It’s odd.”

“What?” Regina asked.

“It just feels like spring instead of fall.” Mrs. Dean told her daughter.

“Spring?” Regina asked. Her mother shrugged with a quiet laugh that infected her daughter.

“Lately, it always smells like roses in this house.” She added as she disappeared into the kitchen.

Chapter 20

“Who has a wake on Halloween?” Patricia Dean asked as they pulled up to the Eternal Peace Funeral Home. The Dean family was almost late and only had a precious few moments to converse with the other guests before they were being herded into one of the rooms to be seated. Regina examined the crowd of darkly dressed mourners of melancholy mood hoping to lay eyes on one of the people she termed loosely as friends. Her hopes that Barron would show were unfounded, but it was Nikki that she needed to see, it was Nikki who still owed her a good explanation. Regina’s mind still ran crazy with wild explanations for why Nikki had been keeping company with Glen DeFrank and why she had lied about it. Her mind would not rest, nor would her soul until she had the answer to every question that was unfolding at every point along this journey in the microcosm of obscurity called Black Water.

Voices of sorrow and words of comfort died into a swell of whispers that surged through the room and left behind only silence. Regina sat in the second row behind the Rusher family. Leo Rusher held his son in his lap. The room smelled sterile, but dusty. Mrs. Rusher’s eyes were swollen, stained with the tracks of tears and red from the constant friction with tissue paper. Mrs. Dean put a loving hand on Mrs. Rusher’s shoulder, which caused the grieving mother to moan even louder. Guilt rose up in Regina’s throat as the scent of Mrs. Rusher’s perfume sailed into her nostrils making her feel the urge to vomit, she put her fist to her lips in an attempt to fight back the puke. Regina felt a slight palpitation in her heart, and sensing something, she turned in her chair. Nikki was sitting on the other side of the aisle a couple of rows back, her father sat next to her holding her hand. Nikki was watching Regina and their eyes met when Regina turned in her seat to scrutinize the dismal room. The girl gave a weak smile and held her palm up to Regina, wiggling her fingers weakly. Regina returned no gesture of greeting to Nikki, she just lay her hand on the pocket of her dress where the torn photograph lay hidden. Regina turned farther back to glance at the audience once more and saw Natalie standing against the far wall of the room. Regina’s eyes widened in disbelief, she assumed that Natalie’s insensitive words on the subject of Lola’s death were a sure sign that she would not be paying her respects, but obviously, she had been mistaken. Natalie’s eyes met Regina’s and she shifted them snappily, training her focus back on the preacher at the front of the room. Prayer began the ceremony and it went on at length, encompassing Lola’s vibrant life, the snuffing out of her youthful light, the hopes that the evil person that committed this crime would be caught and the wish for peace for all of her family and friends. It was several seconds after the prayer ended that Regina was able

to lift her head, she noticed the vibrancy of the flowers, bouquets and wreaths that speckled the room, colors of crimson and violet with bursts of yellow and orange that seemed so out of place among the faces of the dejected. Inside of the funeral home it was spring, a season of life and color and awakening, despite the dreadful fall that was a reality outside in the real world filled with brown and stiff dying leaves and naked, fragile easily broken trees.

A wake, Regina thought, was an absolutely miserable ceremony to have to be subjected to after the death of a loved one; it was like having two funerals, a pre-funeral and then the final funeral, two heartbreaks, two floggings, when one was enough.

“Dad?” She whispered. “Why do people have wakes?” Regina asked her father under the resounding voice of the fat lady in a maroon colored suit that was now singing. Her father reacted with surprise, no one had ever asked him that question before and she would have not even thought to ask it if this experience had not been so wretched to endure.

“Well,” he started, scrunching his face, deepening all of the wrinkles that were activated when he was thinking. “Long time ago medical science was nowhere near what it is today and when a person was thought to be dead they would lay the body out so that people could come and view the body to be sure. Loved ones would take turns sitting with the body all hours of the day and night to watch and wait.” He explained.

“...for what?” Regina asked with a genuine cluelessness.

“Wait for the body to wake...to get up and walk again.”

“What?” She scowled.

“They had to be sure that the person was not just unconscious with fever, in a coma or anything like that. If after a few days the person was still unconscious they figured it was OK to bury them. People came to a wake in hopes that person would wake up and walk again. Now it’s just an obsolete, but endearing tradition.” Her father looked at her to make sure that she had been satisfied with the answer. Regina was sure that his answer was a clever medium between truth and fiction as most of the historical and scientific explanations that he had given her since she was a child tended to be. No one knew everything, but her father was good at pretending that he did. Regina’s curiosity had been more than quenched by his answer. Of all of the reasons that she had suspected a wake was a relevant part of the ceremony of death the explanation that her father had just given her, despite the obviousness of the name, had never occurred to her or played any part in the possible explanations that she had recounted to herself. Her father’s definition of a wake did not make the ceremony any less miserable, but did give her new hope for the outcome. Regina glued her eyes to the gleaming black casket and waited.

Clouds passed over the sun that gave light, but offered no warmth and a grim shadow filtered through the windows of the house of the dead. Her dream from last night had been too active, too vivid and she felt as if she had not slept at all. Regina leaned her head on her father’s shoulder; he wrapped his arm around her.

Violent shaking in the room startled the dozing young woman. A deep lumbering

wail plowed through the funeral home and everyone looked to the pastor for guidance, he looked to the sky for his direction, but no knowledge rained down. Regina's heart swelled as the locks on the black casket snapped open with a raucous clank. The lid of the casket opened slowly and a pale hand, half eaten away by time and other life forms, with a spiny almost skeletal finger crept over the side of the casket as a brace to lift the lifeless body out of the death bed. The air around them was whipping like an angry tornado. Regina's body was compelled to stand, and she was drawn toward the aisle. Carefully, she stepped over people who looked on seeming to no longer notice their surroundings and were just lifeless place markers in timeless space. There was no other movement in the room until Regina saw that two figures suddenly walked at her side. Nikki and Natalie were summoned as well. Three helpless girls marched toward the casket. None of them wanting to go, but called and resolved to obey their obligation. The trembling girls were pulled to their knees in front of the casket by the spirit that controlled them. Lola moved with rigid jerks, but still methodical and with precise intent. The stiff corpse placed one foot on the carpeted floor and then the other and pushed itself until it was fully free from the casket that contained it. Lola laboriously moved one foot in front of the other until she was standing before the girls who were kneeling before her in some perverse allegiance to the soul that they had sacrificed. Lola gasped hoarse breaths through the mouth that was chewed away at some parts of the lips. The girls recoiled at the full sight of the thing and person that they most loved and feared. The dead thing made an attempt at a scream with a strained wheezing through the rotted mouth and the whirlwind became stronger and faster and she lunged forward on top of Natalie, toppling her effortlessly.

Regina was bucked into consciousness by Natalie's screech, which tore through the room like a butcher knife ripping violently through silk. Everyone's head snapped back to see her tumbling out of the doorway onto the floor. Natalie was scrambling backward on her legs and the palms of her hands. Regina stood to see the bath of terror that stormed Natalie's delicate features. The terrified girl got her feet beneath her in a series of clumsy moves and sprinted down the hall. The room collapsed into frantic whispers of horror. Mr. Rusher stood up; his concerned eyes meeting Regina's at once.

"I'll go after her," she said.

"Is she OK?" Mr. Rusher asked.

"She'll be fine," Regina replied.

"Do you need me?" Regina's mother asked as Regina stumbled over the people in her row and into the aisle.

"No, stay!" She instructed, barely looking back. Regina caught a glimpse of Nikki on the edge of her seat as she sprinted after Natalie.

The strong chill of cold air hit Regina hard as she burst out the front doors of the funeral home.

"Natalie!" Regina yelled to the woman who was already slamming her car door and starting the engine.

"Natalie, please." She hollered into the early afternoon of the gray fall. Regina

dashed into the parking lot, but it was no use; Natalie burned out on screeching tires. The entire incident knocked the wind from Regina and she took a minute to regain her proper breathing before turning to go back into the funeral home. Nikki had followed her and was standing outside of the glass entry doors. At the sight of Nikki a bubble of frustration inside of Regina burst and anger began pulsing through her veins as efficiently as if an IV of the emotion had been inserted directly into her arm. Gears switched from one unexplainable incident to the next and Regina charged toward the timid looking woman pulling the ripped photograph out of the pocket of her dress and holding it up directly in front of Nikki's face.

"What the hell is this?" She asked unexpectedly breathless again. It took Nikki only a second to recognize the photo and she recalled the full spread of it even though the only part that remained held up between Regina's fingers was an image of herself. Nikki swallowed hard trying to get the golf ball out of her throat. Before Nikki could offer a word, Regina spoke again while backing Nikki into the glass.

"You told me that you had not seen him since we were kids, but here you are taking pictures with him. Why did you lie?"

"I can explain," Nikki said in a weak voice as if she was about to faint.

"I'm...listening," Regina growled.

"I saw him only that one time," Nikki said. Skepticism dimmed Regina's face. "I swear," Nikki added.

"Why, Nikki? Why did you need to see him at all?" Regina asked, feeling her patience slipping from under her in a way that she had never experienced before.

"I don't know," Nikki exploded. "I just needed to talk to him. I needed to know why, Regina. All of the disgusting things that happened to us, all of the times I had to come home and push my underwear down to the bottom of the trash so that my father would not see them, I needed answers!" Nikki pleaded.

Regina's anger dissolved like air from a popped balloon, she stood next to Nikki with her back against the glass while Nikki continued.

"Sometimes even now, when I feel the anxiety creeping up inside of me, when it begins permeating every orifice of my body and I can no longer stand to be inside of the skin that contains me and the alcohol isn't enough; I get a pair of my underwear and shove them deep down to the bottom of the garbage, where no one can see them; only I know that they're there. It's the only thing besides the liquor that gives me even the tiniest relief. It makes me feel like it is over for the day or maybe even for the week and I can sleep."

"Oh, Nikki." Regina sighed.

"Not including him, I'm still a virgin," Nikki revealed. "I know I talk a lot, but it's all just talk, you know?"

Silence ruled while the knots of the shared misery made themselves known in the stomachs of both women.

"I just can't do it. Then after what happened to Lola...I lost everything,

EVERYTHING because of him and I just wanted to know why, Regina?” She was beginning to disintegrate into an emotional mess like an ice cream cone in summer, under the harsh rays of sunlight, slipping through the fingers that held it, drip by drip.

“Was he sick? Was it done to him? Was he bullied? Did he enjoy it? Could he control it? All of these questions with no answers until one day I just had to know so I called him. We met at the fair because I couldn’t stand the thought of being alone with him. I asked him and do you know what he said?” Nikki looked to Regina.

“No,” Regina said in a low voice filled with the guilt of having ever suspected Nikki of anything so horrible as all of the things that she had suspected when she saw the photo.

“No, I don’t know,” she repeated. Nikki’s smile warned Regina that the words that were about to pour forth from her mouth would be as vexing as her Mona Lisa grin. Nikki reached into her purse and pulled out a mini bottle of vodka, opened it and took a gulp before holding it out in front of Regina. Regina grabbed the bottle and finished its contents.

“He denied it,” she stated solemnly. Regina recoiled with involuntary exaggeration.

“Yup!” Nikki laughed in an attempt to hold back the tears.

“Never happened. We were young and he was our teacher. Naturally we had a crush on him, imagined such scenarios so much until we convinced ourselves they were true.” Nikki imitated.

“What?” Regina said unable to hide her sheer disgust.

“One of the people from the fair just happened to come by and snap that picture, they sell them.” She finished the explanation. “I guess he bought it later. Where’d you find it?”

“Yesterday, I went to the DeFrank estate.” Regina told her friend.

“Alone?” Nikki asked.

“Yes. I know that I shouldn’t have, but it’s just like you said, the questions that I had just could not wait any longer. I found this picture of you and him on a bookcase in the old study. It got ripped”

“There’s still stuff there?”

“Not much, but some. Someone attacked me while I was there.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know, Nikki. I didn’t see them. They hit me from behind. Yesterday night when I went to the parade someone lured me into Clark’s sculpture store and I was attacked again.”

“By the same person?”

“I would assume so, but I don’t know. They were wearing some type of cape.”

“A brown one?” Nikki asked.

“Yes, you saw them?” Regina was relieved at the thought that she was not alone, that she was not crazy; someone else was seeing the same thing.

“I noticed someone at the parade last night with a long blowy cape-like thing, I saw them several times, but I didn’t think much about it.”

“You were at the parade?”

“Yeah, I looked for you, but I couldn’t find you. Someone was following me?” Nikki asked.

“I don’t know, but I doubt it was just a coincidence.”

“Do you think that it has to do with Lola?” Nikki asked.

“It must. Why else would someone want to hurt me and watch you?” Regina asked her friend whom she could see was becoming more nervous by the moment.

“But no one else knows what happened,” Nikki argued. “I didn’t tell anyone.”

“Whoever buried her on Glen DeFrank’s property knows what happened.”

“What are we gonna do?” Nikki asked.

“I’m not sure yet, but whatever it is we have to do it quick.”

“Quick?” Nikki questioned.

“Sheriff Handow came by my house this morning. He said that Mrs. Landcaster saw you bringing me home on the night of Lola’s death at 2:00 a.m.”

Nikki’s face mutated into a mask of horrific surprise. “...But that’s hours after we told everyone we were home.”

“I’m aware of that, Nikki. I told him that Mrs. Landcaster is crazy and that she was mistaken.”

“Crap!” Nikki spit.

“Just stick to the story for now, Nikki, and we’ll be fine. We just have to figure this out before Sheriff Handow and before any of us get hurt.” Regina said as they felt the glass doors began to push against them.

Everyone filed out of the funeral home and began communing in small groups before finding their cars and beginning the procession to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Rusher. The weather had become icy and uncaring and it terrorized the guests. Regina was holding Nikki’s hand when their parents walked out of the funeral home.

“Nikki, would you like to ride with us?” Mrs. Dean asked. Both girls looked at one another, and then Nikki looked to her father.

“Why don’t you ride with them? I will meet you there.” Nikki’s father said rubbing her arm. As they walked toward the car, the girls embraced one another around the waist and snuggled their heads together as they made a way through the crowd. Approaching her mother’s car, Regina saw a piece of canary yellow paper stuck to her mother’s windshield. Regina looked at the other cars in the lot to see if they had received a similar flyer or ticket, but they had not and she felt the nausea instantly. She loosened herself from Nikki and trotted up to the front of the car. Regina got close before she realized that what she saw was not a ticket at all, but a note. She ripped the piece of paper from under the windshield wiper and unfolded it, struggling to keep it still enough despite the forceful winds long enough to read the short scribbled message.

STOP DIGGING!

She pulled the brilliantly colored paper to her chest as she looked around searching for the offender that was long gone.

“What?” Nikki called out nervously as she rushed forward and grabbed the note from her friend. Nikki searched the parking lot full of people, trying desperately to see beyond the guise that the guilty perpetrated in front of others and searched deep within their souls, but in this place, everyone was very good at keeping their secrets hidden.

Mrs. Dean tried hard to get her daughter to eat something once everyone had made it to the Rusher family home, but Regina was unable to stomach anything. Her mother removed the plate of lasagna when she saw that Regina could barely stand looking at it.

“Is Natalie OK?” Regina looked up to see that Mrs. Rusher had entered the room.

“Yes, of course, Mrs. Rusher. She’s OK. She was just a little freaked out by everything, but she did tell me to apologize to you for her.” Regina lied; she had already lost count of how many lies she had told since she had been home.

“It’s OK,” Mrs. Rusher said, collapsing into an armchair. “We’re all a little *freaked out*, I suppose. I was happy to see her though. I haven’t seen her in so long, it was nice to see her there, real nice.” She stared at Regina. Mrs. Rusher began to speak, stopped short, sighed, and began again, “I just hate that Lola’s disappearance seemed to come between you girls.” Regina’s breath held in her throat. Mrs. Dean was nodding her head in solemn agreement. Mrs. Rusher started again, “Lola would have hated to see what this whole thing did to you girls. If anything, I think that it should have brought you closer together. You have to stick together, you know? I don’t know, I suppose I just wish things could be the same is all,” she finished. Regina allowed her eyes to wander up and meet Nikki’s.

“So do we, Mrs. Rusher, so do we.” Nikki’s voice trailed off as she put her hand on Regina’s shoulder.

The harsh air dried Regina’s lips and they burned as the girls stood on the porch finally alone after thirty minutes of waiting for all of the migrating parties to move into the house.

“I need to talk to Natalie.” Regina said to Nikki as they stood alone together.

“Why? Do you think that she is doing this?”

“I don’t know, but I have to talk to her.”

“Ladies.”

Both women were startled by the interruption of their conversation.

“Sheriff Handow,” Nikki spoke first in a voice that was obviously too tense for her normal character, but could easily be passed off as a result of being in their current location.

“Hi, Sheriff” Regina greeted him with two personalities, the one that prayed that he was not here to grill her with more secret facts and haul her numb body off to the penitentiary, but the other Regina just wished he would pull out the handcuffs already. Sometimes it was hard for her to determine which one she was from one moment to the next.

“I would ask how you all are doing, but that would be a stupid question, huh?” He said, the rhythm of his voice oozing out in a compassionate flow.

Both girls forced an enigmatic grin.

“Yeah,” Nikki said.

“I’ve been working day and night trying to find new information on this case, you know? And it’s just a mystery. So many questions,” he stated.

“Let us know if we can do anything to help in any way.” Nikki glowed.

“Well there is something.” Sheriff said.

Regina’s stomach fell out, she was sure of it, so much so that she was afraid to look down because surely all of her innards would be laying there on the cold porch. Finally she looked down, but there was nothing, her stomach was still inside of her but she felt her hand move up to massage the wound at the back of her neck that suddenly gave her pain.

“What is it?” Nikki asked cautiously.

“I’m sure it’s not important, but I just have to ask every question even if it doesn’t seem relevant,” he explained.

“Sure,” Nikki agreed.

“For some reason I just remembered Grayson’s father mentioning to me that you had a fire going the morning after Lola disappeared and of course, I didn’t think much of it then, but something has just been gnawing at me about it and I have to ask. You were burning a fire? In that warm weather? Is that right?” His head was now cocked and his eyes were strained in disbelief.

Regina saw Nikki’s chest swell and her mouth gape open as if she prepared to send words through it, but it continued to serve only as an empty gathering space for air. Nikki was a bad liar and Regina hated to do it, but was much better at the task.

“Yes, she did.” Regina stepped in swiftly. Sheriff Handow’s eyes settled on her.

“You remember.” Regina stated to Nikki. “You weren’t feeling well that morning. You said that you were coming down with a cold or something and had an unreasonable case of the chills.”

“Oh yeah, I remember...and I wanted to build a fire.” Nikki inserted carefully, watching Regina for approval.

“I told you it was silly.” Regina released a laugh that spread to Nikki, but not to the sheriff. The laughter faded and the three stood in a thick pool of tension, trying to move but getting nowhere.

“You have a good memory, Regina.” Sheriff Handow stated as a matter of fact.

And Regina countered him with a strong reply that held honesty in every word.

“It was the most memorable event of my life. I will never forget it.”

“I imagine you won’t.” He said as he tipped his hat and disappeared inside the door of the Rusher home.

Nikki’s body collapsed against the porch railing.

“Do you think he knows?” she whispered.

“No, but if he talked to me and now you, that only leaves one more...” Regina answered.

“Natalie.”

Both women leapt off the porch running directly into the last set of arms they expected.

Chapter 21

“Carter!” Nikki was startled with his sudden presence in front of them like a wall.

“Hey, where are you going?” He asked.

“We’re going to check on Natalie.” Regina told him. “Yeah, she kinda freaked at the wake,” Nikki added.

“I saw you talking to Sheriff Handow.” Carter said. Regina was not sure if he was making a statement or asking a question.

“He just had a few questions.” Nikki added.

“Like what?” Carter pushed.

“Just stuff, Carter. Why weren’t you at the wake?” Regina asked changing the subject.

“I was there, but I was in and out, you know. Those kinds of things give me the creeps,” he told them.

“Where is Barron?” Regina asked.

“Home, he was out cold when I left.” Carter answered. “I just wanted to tell you guys that I’m really sorry about Lola. I know how much she meant to you and this has got to be really hard.” Carter told them.

“Thank you.” Regina responded expressionlessly.

“Well she was your friend too, Carter. There’s no reason to apologize. We were all hurt by everything that happened, not just us.” Nikki told him. “I know. I really cared for her and I still miss her even today.” Carter said.

“Ok” Regina said. She made a swift move to maneuver around the man when he grabbed her wrist tightly.

“I’m...really...sorry.” He murmured; his grip on her wrist so tight now that the webbed skin between his thumb and index finger was going white from the drain of the blood. Regina winced and leaned forward in order to whisper to Carter.

“Carter, do you know something?” She asked, feeling a morbid excitement rising within her at the thought of possibly bringing this ordeal full circle without taking one more step.

“No!” Carter immediately released her wrist almost throwing it away from him. All three of them stood back in order to inspect one another. Regina pushed past him and began jogging toward Nikki’s car. Nikki shrugged her shoulders at Carter and hurried after her friend.

“Regina? Wait!” Nikki called out as she ran down the tree-lined street with golden yellow leaves crunching angrily under each footfall.

“Regina! Regina!” Nikki spoke loudly to her friend who was now only several feet in front of her. Regina came to an abrupt halt and turned to face Nikki.

“I just don’t know who to trust anymore!” Raising her arms and then throwing them down once again in an expression of frustration.

“I don’t know who to trust and it is just driving me crazy. I feel like I am losing my mind.” She confessed feeling the edge of sanity inching toward her.

“I understand. We are in this together and we’re gonna figure it out,” Nikki promised.

“I don’t know about this one, Nikki. I just have a bad feeling.”

Natalie’s street was decorated with thin trees whose branches canopied into one another blocking out the sun with the imitation fire of flaming orange leaves that fluttered to the ground with every strong gust of wind. Despite the brilliance of her community, Natalie’s home was dark. The two girls seemed tiny standing in front of the intimidating home. Desperately, the walls needed to be power washed and the front lawn was even more choked with weeds than it had been the day before.

“You’re dead!” Someone yelled. Regina turned at once to see two costumed children, one chasing the other down the street in a spirited game of some sort.

Regina shielded her eyes from the cold rays of the sun as she turned back to the house.

“Do you think she’s home?” Nikki asked.

“Only one way to find out.” Regina responded. The cement walkway that led from the street to the front door was broken and lifted in places as if an earthquake had disturbed the once new and perfect workmanship. They stepped onto the porch that was bare except for an old chair with a broken leg and a beat up tackle box. Regina knocked hard on the front door. Nikki walked over to one of the draped windows and peered inside, there was a gap and she could make out a shadow on the couch in the living room.

“She’s in there.” Nikki said.

“You see her?”

“Yes.”

Regina knocked again.

“She’s not moving.” Nikki said. Regina made her way over to the window; she put her hand on the glass and placed her head up against it in order to shield her eyes from the reflection of the sunlight as she looked in through the window. Regina knocked on the pane of glass, but the figure still failed to move.

“Natalie! We are not leaving until you talk to us. So come over here and open the door.” Regina yelled. After a few moments, the body shifted almost unnoticeably. The figure placed something down, got up from the sofa, and came over to the door. Regina and Nikki walked back to the front of the door where they heard locks clicking and suddenly the door flung open wide, revealing a visibly depressed Natalie standing there, still in her wake dress.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“Are you OK? We were worried,” Nikki said.

“Can we come in?” Regina asked. Natalie could put up a fight no longer. When the girls walked in they saw her laptop, open, on the couch where she had been sitting. “Natalie, we need your help. Has Sheriff Handow come by here?” she asked.

“No.” Natalie responded. “Why would he come here?”

“He’s just been asking a lot of questions is all.” Regina began. “Someone attacked me twice and someone has been following us. Have you noticed anything strange?” Regina asked. Natalie’s chest sank for a brief moment before she looked back to the girls.

“No,” she responded.

“Do you know anything about what’s going on?” Regina asked more directly without quite accusing her.

Natalie snickered maliciously.

“No, I didn’t attack you. No, I didn’t go back and cut Lola up and no, I did not bury her on the DeFrank estate, but even if I did do those things, what does it matter Detective Dean?” Natalie asked resolutely.

Nikki sat looking nervously back and forth at each girl as if she were watching a brutal tennis match.

“What do you mean?” Regina asked.

“Does it really matter Regina? I killed her. Who cares who cut her up and put where she was found. In case you haven’t noticed, the major point of this story is that she is dead!” Natalie told her. Regina’s eyes lit up.

“...But don’t you see? We have to know the truth.” Emotion flooded her voice as she became caught up in the whirlwind analysis. “If someone hurt her after us, maybe she wasn’t dead after all. Doesn’t that make you wonder, doesn’t that give you some kind of hope? What if she wasn’t dead? She got up and ran into someone in the woods and *they* killed her. What if when we left her in the park she was still alive?”

Natalie chuckled arrogantly at the ignorance of her friend, “*but don’t you see?*” Natalie mocked Regina.

“Even if she was alive when we put her there and someone came after us, it is still our fault! We killed her just the same! It is our fault that she was there and met up with this phantom of absolve that you have created. Once she got into the car that night our fate had already begun traveling toward the gruesome end that we didn’t see coming and were powerless to stop. It doesn’t matter, none of it matters!” Natalie spoke again. Nikki’s face fell into her palms, her hopes of somehow abdicating responsibility dashed by Natalie’s keen reasoning. Natalie took a seat again in front of the canvas that was in the room and began painting.

“Over the years I’ve thought about this a lot,” Natalie told them.

“About Lola?” Nikki asked. Natalie whipped her neck glaring at Nikki sharply.

“About how evil we are.” Natalie replied.

“Evil? Us?” Nikki questioned.

“We’re NOT evil.” Regina interrupted.

“Aren’t we?” Natalie asked. “Ever since that night I have been trying to figure out what happened out there, that night, in the garden. There are many theories, but I think that I have figured it out.”

“It’s the devil.” Nikki offered her simple theory.

“Precisely, darling; gold star for Nikki. But the question is why? Why would an all powerful God allow the devil to tempt us to evil in this way?” Natalie left a gap of silence allowing the anticipation to build in her story telling.

“I told you the story of the devil, right?” Natalie probed, never removing her eyes from the new perverse masterpiece that she was composing on the innocent white canvas.

“Just get on with your story, Natalie,” Regina commanded.

Natalie smiled cunningly.

“As I told you before, God created the devil, Lucifer, the angel, and told him that he must serve man, but Lucifer refused, therefore God cast him out, but did not destroy him and in fact calls upon him every now and then to do his bidding.” Natalie told them. Regina sighed at the surprised expression that dominated Nikki’s face, an obvious indication that despite the countless days that Nikki had spent in church she was ignorant of the last part of Natalie’s tale. Natalie noticed too.

“Yes, my dear Nikki.” Natalie continued. “Lucifer is one of God’s children and God just cannot bear to destroy him, therefore he allows him to go about causing mischief because God knows that in the overall compilation and progression of the earth, life and space that this is really of little consequence.”

“No,” Nikki whispered as she caressed the crucifix that hung around her neck.

“Yes” Natalie insisted with a sneer. “Like a mother and father with many children, but the one child that is an absolute fuck up and always the center of mischief. Do the mother and father turn him out? No. In fact, they usually give him more attention in all of their wickedness because what mother or father, full of love is able to destroy their own child, even when he causes pain to others, even his siblings? Very few. In the great scheme of things...our suffering is petty. Regina, I am surprised that you of all people are working so hard to try to put this sin upon another person. What we did was wrong and it was our sin, no one else’s. We birthed it and now it’s ours forever.” Natalie’s words were haunting.

It took Regina several moments to process all of Natalie’s religious ravings and put them in context.

“I am not trying to put this upon anyone. We did what we did and I will never, not accept responsibility for my part in that, but if there was someone else involved I want to know. Someone else had some hand in this. Someone tried to hurt me last night and let me tell you it was not your mischievous devil!”

“Did you tell anyone?” Regina asked.

“No!” Natalie snapped with such fierceness that Regina had no problem believing her. “Maybe it is just your guilty conscience that is haunting you.”

“This was real!” Regina stood up unable to control her anger. Natalie was still sitting

calmly.

“Regina, the devil is playing tric...” Natalie began, but Regina’s loud roar truncated the sentence that Regina was sure would be ridiculous and unnaturally long. Regina knocked the painting and easel to the floor in a wild thrash.

“THERE IS NO DEVIL AND THERE IS NO GOD NATALIE. IT IS JUST US, RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW, JUST US!” Regina’s chest was heaving up and down through her black dress.

“We owe it to her to figure out what happened! You can sit here with your haunted house paintings, spouting your ridiculous religious, philosophical crap, but you and I both know that you loved her. You can hide the events of that night under some divine supernatural cloak of evil, but what happened out there that night was not evil; it was just a terrible, TERRIBLE mistake. We were her friends or don’t you remember that!” Regina finished.

“SHE WAS MY FRIEND!” Natalie yelled back standing to face her friend, but suddenly calming. “I loved her, just like you. I never wanted what happened that night to happen! I never wanted her dead. Never! I know what happened, but I just...can’t... figure it out.” Natalie sniffed hard trying to keep mucus from running down unto her lips.

“I know, Natalie, but just help us,” Nikki pleaded.

“Why? What do you need me for?” Natalie asked.

“Because we were the only ones that we know of that were there that night, every detail, anything that we remember could be the key,” Regina explained.

“What do we do?” Natalie asked.

“We have to go back to the DeFrank house, to where they buried her.” Regina was sure.

The dreadful procession to Lola’s burial ground faired to be the most solemn occasion yet. Nikki drove while Regina had climbed into the backseat in a desire to be alone and Natalie was forced to take the passenger seat. Quietly, Regina admired the innocent landscapes of Black Water that passed her window mockingly. With every mile, the friendly atmosphere of Main Street mutated into the forsaken stretches of I-48. Massive trucks barreled by them every couple of minutes going to and thru the place they were trying to escape. The long cement highway seemed never ending as it curved into a canopy of trees, heaven painted in yellows, greens and reds. Black Water Lake sparkled underneath the deepening afternoon sunlight and glittered luxuriously as if it were covered in millions of floating diamonds. Far back on a hill the old McNally barn sat in a state of disrepair, the two windows at the top were tired eyes, those of a wise man giving warning about the brutal realities of life that sat waiting for us around each unsuspecting corner. As they turned onto Culliver Parkway, Regina noticed that the gas station was abandoned early with no other explanation but the vague sign in the door that read “closed.” A swinging tire hung from a strong tree in the front yard of a modest home they passed. Two little girls and a baby boy played wildly around the swing laughing and smiling and throwing leaves. Their mother, a thin, pale woman in her thirties emerged

from the front door and called for them to come inside. A strike of envy seared through Regina's chest as she watched, wishing to be those lighthearted children. Regina eyed the fragile woman again and saw the deep lines in the woman's face and the emptiness of her eyes and she could not help but wonder what the woman's secrets were, what she feared, what lie in the darkness just beyond her front door and Regina felt her invidiousness dissolve. None of the girls looked up as they passed the DeFrank home. They pretended that they did not see it, pretended that they had never seen it before.

"Up here, right?" Nikki asked.

"I think so, there's a turn off somewhere right here." Natalie answered. Nikki turned off onto the unfinished side road that served as one of the perimeters of the DeFrank property. The dirt road was broken and they bounced violently around the car, down the path toward the end of the tunnel of trees with no hope of light at the end.

"Look, up there." Regina pointed out a few small remnants of yellow tape that had been previously hanging from trees; they flapped frantically in the wind that bristled through the forest. Nikki brought the car to a stop and they became fixed on the small opening between two trees that led to Lola's burial ground. Regina felt discombobulated in a way that made her bones soft, her body wobbly, she slithered out of the car and it was difficult to locate the balance to stand on her feet. Natalie ejected herself from the car and stood with her two friends facing the mouth of the forest. Nikki took the first step forward, Regina tried to move her feet but realized that she had gone from wobbly mess to statue and she was unable to lift her heavy legs in any attempt to move forward.

Nikki turned to face her immobile friends. "Well are we doing this or aren't we?" She asked sternly. Regina and Natalie took a quick look at one another before following Nikki and being swallowed by the trees.

"I cannot believe that we are doing this," Natalie huffed.

"What exactly are you expecting to find?" She wanted to know. "I don't know... anything." Regina answered as she worked to keep the branches of small trees and bushes from slapping her in the face.

"Anything like what?" Natalie pushed.

"Natalie, I don't know. We may find something and we may not, but if we don't look we find nothing." Regina explained.

"This is creepy shit and..." Natalie began.

"Guys?" Nikki, who was in front of them, came to an abrupt stop. Regina and Natalie both looked up to see that they had come to a clearing in the trees. They were so soundless and rooted to the ground that a bulldozer plowing the forest would have been impotent to move them. The shallow hole in the ground captivated their imaginations. Nikki brought her hand up to her mouth, trying to entrap the gasp of horror.

"Oh my God" Natalie called out. Terror surged through them like lightening. The thought that Lola had been out here alone made Regina feel a pain that she could not describe, when it was dark, when it was cold, when it rained, when the mysterious sounds of the forest rose up in thunderous waves and covered everything, she had been alone.

“She must have been so scared out here.” Nikki read Regina’s thoughts aloud. “Let’s just hurry up and look around you guys so that we can get the hell out of here.” Natalie broke into the conversation. The girls broke out into three separate directions. Regina began walking the perimeter of the wide hole, keeping her eyes glued to the ground in the unlikely hope of possibly finding something that the police had missed. Nikki found it hard to concentrate and could not take her eyes off the morbid cavity in the ground. Untamed shrieks of the wilderness rang out all around them and the wind hissed incessantly.

Nikki looked up into the trees, the arching branches stretched up high in elegant sun salutations toward the sky, which now seemed like the only way out of this pit, but was unfathomably out of reach. Nikki watched as Natalie and Regina crept softly around the gravesite guarding every footfall and studying the ground carefully. Natalie bent to sweep her fingers across a suspicious site in the dirt. A stringent twinge cramped Nikki’s throat as she felt wrinkled fingers straining hungrily up out of the dirt, wrapping themselves around her ankle, she screamed as she sailed to the ground. A maniacal Nikki grappled at the fingers that were wrapped around her ankle.

“Get off. Get off.” She was articulating between unintelligible screams. Natalie raced over and dove into the dirt fighting off the hands that were trying so desperately to pull Nikki down into the damp ground. Regina gripped Nikki’s shoulders in a gesture to quiet the hysterical woman.

“Nikki, calm down, please,” she screamed. “It’s just some roots; it’s just some roots,” Regina explained. As Natalie freed Nikki’s ankle from the complexly woven mass of roots, Nikki witnessed the cadaverous fingers turning to dirty, crooked, harmless roots right before her deceiving eyes. Natalie held up the handful of roots in a clenched fist.

“It’s just some roots that were sticking up from the ground; your foot was tangled in them.” Natalie said, her frustration deepening with every passing second. Shame swept Nikki in response to her exaggerated reaction caused, not only by the lugubrious setting, but more so by the guilt of the truth.

“I’m sorry.” She apologized for the outburst that had startled the already unnerved posse of hapless detectives. In a nervous gesture, she wiped her face, leaving a smudge of dirt under her eye. Regina rose slowly; there was something in the trees just beyond the make shift grave; her breath trembled in her chest before it came out with each exhale. Regina pointed a shaking finger into the shadows, where she saw the figure approaching stealthily through the maze of tousled forest brush. Natalie turned and Nikki peered over Natalie’s shoulder and all of their eyes were upon the figure that now stood in a blackout formed under a particularly lush growth of forest greenery. She watched them as they watched her. The thin girl spoke no words, her body stood stiffly and the only part of her that moved was her thick dark hair that fluttered seductively in the wind.

“Lola” Natalie called to her in a longing voice filled with dread. All of the girls huddled against one another. Natalie took a step toward the figure that raised her by taking her own step toward them, a challenge causing Nikki, Natalie and Regina to jump

back several feet. The figure took another calculated step forward and they watched anxiously as her face became illuminated by the unfriendly sun.

Chapter 22

It was not, as they had expected, the face of a decaying, re-animated corpse. The face was that of a pretty young girl. There were no skull fractures, no maggots slithering from the empty sockets of eyes, no bloody matted hair. With Lola she shared sparkling, round, brown eyes, shaded so deep that they were almost black and sleek black hair, but she was not Lola.

“What?” The girl asked. They knew her, she was a familiar stranger. She was different now; her lips were full with the romance of young adulthood, her frame stood taller with more life, but her eyes were unchanged. Those eyes were the same ghostly orbs that had been watching Regina in front of the video store.

“Eden,” Regina spoke through a filmy consciousness as if remembering some illusive detail of a dream.

“Eden?” Natalie repeated looking at Regina and then back to the girl trying to resolve the name with the person that was standing before them.

“Eden DeFrank?” Nikki asked.

“You remember me?” She asked as she stepped into the clearing. Eden wore a long gray dress that fluttered around her; the strap of her bag was strung across her chest.

“Yes, of course. What are you doing here?” Regina asked.

Eden raised an eyebrow at the audacity of Regina’s question. “This is my family’s land. What are you doing here?” Eden returned the question.

“It’s a crime scene,” Regina told her.

The ends of Eden’s mouth curved into a mischievous smile. “Technically this is not a crime scene; this is only where they found her body, not necessarily where any crime was committed,” Eden informed the girls.

“My God, I have not seen you in so long!” Nikki spoke.

“It has been awhile.” Eden agreed. “When I turned 18, I moved to Johnson City, but my brother and I still owned this land.” Eden told them.

“You own this land?” Natalie asked.

Eden snickered, “Of Course I own this land. It belonged to my parents, and when they died it passed onto Glen and now it is mine.”

“Why are you here now?” Nikki asked her.

“For the same reason as you, for sweet, sweet Lola.” If Eden had wanted their attention, it was all hers now.

Why in the hell did she care about Lola? Regina thought.

“How did you know about Lola?” Regina asked.

“Word travels fast. Now it’s my turn, what are you doing here? You shouldn’t be here,” Eden told them as she stood up against a massive tree trunk, her thick mane fluttering around her face.

“Uh,” Regina stammered. “We just needed to take a look around, that’s all,” Regina told her. Eden narrowed her eyes, attempting to analyze Regina’s answer.

“Kinda morbid, don’t ya think?” she asked, beginning to bite her nails casually.

“Tell me about it,” Natalie agreed with exasperation.

“I mean...if my best friend was murdered and chopped to pieces, the last place on earth that I would want to be is in the place where her body was dug up.” Eden said. Regina’s attention shot to Nikki as she groaned a deep gurgling burp and grabbed her stomach as if she was about to lose her lunch.

“Nikki?” Natalie lurched to Nikki’s side in comfort. “You OK?” Natalie asked, pressing the back of her hand against Nikki’s cheek, which was burning hot. Nikki moved her hand from her stomach to her mouth for a second before thrusting over to release a burst of a yellow slimy liquid. When she was finished, she wiped her mouth with the sleeve of her dress.

“Sorry,” she said and burped again.

It was not long before Eden regained their attention. “Did you find anything?” Eden asked them slyly.

“Like what?” Natalie asked.

“I don’t know, a chainsaw, an axe, a note? Anything?” Eden’s voice darkened with the last word of her sentence.

“Should we have found something?” Nikki wanted to know. Eden turned away from them to face a piercing beam of white light that shined down on the drab forest floor through a break in the trees.

“I know what happened; I know what he did to her.” Eden spoke to the sky, her eyes peering into the heart of heaven from this deep place. Regina’s heart sank slowly, a jagged and insignificant rock sinking quietly to the bottom of a body of water without a fight. All of the things that she thought she wanted to know seemed a cross too big to bear and she feared that she would collapse under the pressure.

“What did he do to her?” Natalie asked, she begged. Eden rotated gracefully to face the girls that she knew so little, but so very intimately.

“The very same thing that he did to all of you.” She answered. It was hard for Nikki to swallow, especially with dry bile now corroding her throat.

“You knew about that?” Natalie spoke, her lips quivering.

“Yes,” Eden responded bluntly. Eden tilted her head and lifted her shoulders in a shrug.

“Well...I didn’t know at first of course, but after a couple of years, I figured it out. I was home most of the time when you had your lessons. He would always tell me to stay in my room until the hour was done, but sometimes, I would sneak out and I would watch through the staircase banister. Sometimes, I would line my dolls up so that they could

watch too.” She chuckled to herself incoherently.

“Soon, I noticed how he would always take one of you into the study.” Nikki interrupted Eden’s story with an involuntary groan as she raised her hand pressing the bottom of her palm to her temple trying to push away the memories that threatened deluge. There was no need for Nikki to express what she felt; the other girls knew the exact sights and sounds that plagued her. Each of them had created a prison in their mind in which to store the haunting memories and here was Eden standing before them with a key they never knew existed.

The booming strokes of the classical music that began in the pit of Nikki’s stomach, crawled through her chest, echoed in her ears and now escaped into the air around them and overtook the sounds of the forest, a disturbing lullaby guiding Eden’s story along.

“One of you would just play and play until my brother came from his study. Every now and then when there was a break in the music I could hear the sounds from that room. It was years before I realized what was happening. I was a child like you and even when I did figure it out...what could I do?” Eden asked.

And with an explanation so unsophisticated and pure, Regina wondered how she had ever lacked the same understanding.

What could she do? What could any of them have done? They were just children.

“Did he do it to you?” Natalie asked. All of the girls were still fixed on the beautiful young Eden.

“God no!” she hissed. Natalie gasped as if she had been stabbed in the abdomen. “The guilt had been eating away at him for years and when Lola disappeared it became too much for him and he confessed to me everything that I had already known. It was not his fault; he was sick.” Eden protected her brother.

“Sick?” Nikki asked.

“What did he do to Lola?” Regina asked.

Eden wrinkled her brow in confusion, “I already told you. He...”

“You know what I mean!” Regina cut Eden’s sentence with her frustrated interruption.

“I’m afraid I don’t.” Eden said lifting her chin slightly in order to look down on Regina. Regina was brimming with a blustering rage that would not allow her to speak again without her words erupting in a barrage of frenzied berating therefore she used only her hand and pointed sharply at the hole in the ground. Eden’s gaze followed her finger to the hole and her eyes widened with mocking innocence as if she had never seen the grave before.

“Oh,” Eden said as she took a quick breath. “You mean, did he bash her head in, chop her up and conceal her broken body on my father’s land?” Eden asked. Regina summoned every power in heaven and hell to keep her from thrashing Eden and dumping her into the same hole.

“Yes,” Regina said, seething with anger. Eden squared her body with Regina’s, “You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Open and shut; bittersweet victory,” Eden said. “That is

precisely why I have returned to this God forsaken town. I knew what you people would be up to. I knew you would come back. My brother did a bad thing to you and he may have been a whole lot of things, but a murderer was not one of them. My brother did not kill Lola Rusher,” she confirmed.

“How do you know?” Nikki asked.

“BECAUSE HE WAS MY BROTHER!” Eden responded in a roar. “He told me that he didn’t kill her and I know he was telling the truth.” Eden’s eyes filled with tears.

“He was sick Eden.” Nikki did her best to reason with the unreasonable girl.

“He *was* sick, I know that. Everyone was after the explosion.” Eden revealed. The girls looked to one another in utter confusion.

Eden was sick herself; she was not making any sense.

“What explosion?” Regina asked. “What are you talking about?” she added.

Eden’s eyes dilated with uncontrollable excitement at their ignorance.

“At Waterford. You don’t know, do you? Eden asked.

Regina remembered that there had been some type of emergency at the Waterford facility when she was a child, but it was nothing she remembered in great detail.

“You probably don’t remember, but I do. Do you want to know why? The mischievous girl asked.

“Why?” Lifelessly, Natalie played along.

“That was the day that my parents died, they died in that explosion.” Eden answered. A bolt of memory flashed through Regina and she recalled the death of Mr. and Mrs. DeFrank with clarity. It was not that she had forgotten their deaths, but simply that she had no cause to remember them. The memories of the Waterford incident floated back to her in a foggy parade of panicked sights, racing cars, sirens and broken pieces of animated dialogue and Regina realized that it had seemed much less monumental to her as a child than it did now.

“Our lessons began before your parents died, Eden,” Nikki told her.

“I know that!” the girl snapped. “But when did the private encounters in the study begin?” she asked.

Each girl took several seconds to dig into the memories that they had spent so many years burying, each coming to the grim realization that before the death of the DeFranks, their son had never hurt them. It was captivating, but hardly a definitive victory for Eden; she continued.

“It was the explosion itself that changed Glen. It changed lots of people. The fire started in the factory, but the explosions it caused blew the factory and the lab, which released the gas that burned and burned for days. The fumes, they changed people,” Eden told them.

Regina’s eyes darkened as she did her best to sort through the fog of that day and extract a logical progression of events.

Her mother hurried into her bedroom grabbing her duffle bag out of the closet and began dumping clothes into it. *What’s happening?* Regina called out to her mother

several times before Mrs. Dean replied that everything was fine and that they were just going away for a couple of days. Once on the road Regina recalled the sound of cars zipping by them, crisscrossing the streets as her father sped out of town on I-48 with his wife in the passenger seat and his daughter crouched in the back. The world was moving faster than it had ever moved in the past.

In days, they returned to their home where one would have been hard pressed to even hear the topic brought up again. Regina had let the incident pass as a small emergency that resulted in a little vacation with little more thought than that. It soon became an event only spoken in whispers on the phone between housewives and hushed conversations amongst brooding men. Regina looked into the eyes of the other two girls and could see the firing of synapses sparking recollections similar to her own as they stood glued to the forest ground.

“The company paid everyone what a country family thought was a tidy sum in exchange for their signatures on the dotted line and they moved on, within a month it was as if that place had never been here. There was only one problem, the waste they left behind. Some people weren’t the same after that day, those of us that it did not affect directly it affected indirectly. It changed my brother. He was no pedophile. Before that day he had never hurt anyone in his life. But after a couple of months I began to see that he was different. At first I just thought it was the death of our parents. It was having its effects on him the same as it would on any person who had lost their mother and father and was then forced to raise a young child, but it was bigger than that, he was sweet, but easily agitated, sensitive, but surly. It got to a point where the sunlight began to hurt him, he craved water, but had trouble drinking, and his muscles would retract so tightly that he would have trouble walking. His struggle was with something much darker than the loss of our parents. But it was a long time before he gave in to what infected him and had been growing inside him, touching and killing every part of his soul, even longer before I realized what was happening. It wasn’t just physical, it was mental. He never hurt anyone else.” She told them as if that should assure them in some way.

“You don’t know that!” Natalie fired back.

“Shut up, Natalie,” Regina barked at her not wanting Natalie to accidentally reveal any incriminating information to the girl that was set against them.

“Ask your parents, they know what happened,” Eden snipped.

Regina tried to steel herself against the whirlwind of bizarre notions that Eden had let loose to attack her, but the fact that Eden was right almost brought her to her knees. She could not validate the truth of all of Eden’s words, but there was one thing, of which, she was sure; people were different after that day. Her own mother had been different after that day. Regina cringed at the thought of the mirrors.

Soon after their return to Black Water after the explosion, her mother developed a condition, in which, the sight of her own image in the mirror was maddening. At first, Mrs. Dean shied away from the sight of her reflection, then she covered the mirrors with towels and light blankets, but soon even that was not enough to ward off the compulsion

to cast away the sight of herself. A sharp wind cut across the forest, a wind not much different from the summer breeze that cooled Regina years ago one afternoon when she returned home after bike riding. After stepping into the foyer of her home her eyes were immediately drawn to the sharp pieces of glass that gleamed on the floor in the afternoon sunlight, her eyes moved to the wall where an ornamented mirror had hung just before she left the house. Regina called up the stairs to her mother while taking them two at a time. She screamed for her mother again as she threw open the door to her parent's bedroom, but there was no one there, just the hangover of some terrible act illustrated in jagged pieces of glass from the mirror that had been on top of her parent's dresser that now littered the carpet like insignificant pieces of paper.

She had once seen a documentary that showed the effects of bomb explosions on peoples bodies, there were pictures of the organs that had once been solid working things, but had been instantly pulverized and on that day she was sure that her organs were as the ones in the TV show, just slushy, disassembled, life force slime. Regina burst into the hall bathroom and there on the floor she looked down into her broken reflection at discombobulated parts of herself. She crisscrossed the upper level of the house in a crazed search.

"Mom!" She yelled again fearing the worst. Someone had come into their home and committed some horrendous crime against her mother. She ran down the stairs so furiously that her feet tangled underneath her and she slid down the last couple of steps. Her twisted ankle throbbed, but she hobbled forward screaming for her mother through the living room and the kitchen. The last room of the house was her father's office and the slow strides of caution possessed the movements of her body as she feared what she knew was waiting for her just beyond the frame of the door.

"Mom" Regina heard herself cry out weakly as she crept toward the threshold of the door. The moment she saw into the room her mouth dropped open in a gruesome awe at the sight of her mother. Regina's mother sat in the middle of the hardwood floor of her father's office, still clutching the hammer that had disassembled every image of her. Patricia Dean sat, unable to speak; sucking deep gulps of breath every few moments, her bathrobe hung down and had fallen to the floor around her waist. Blood covered her completely and was dripping to the floor from the deep cuts that she had made all over her chest, arms and wrists. The white bathrobe soaked up pools of red liquid. Her lifeless eyes never moved. Regina took a step toward her mother, but her legs were no longer able to support her, the room was beginning to fade and her swirling surroundings put her in the vortex of a psychological tornado. Regina's arms flailed trying desperately to grab a hold of anything that would keep her on her feet, but it was a failed attempt and she hit the floor hard. Her vision was completely black, but for a brief moment she still heard the chirping of the birds and the smelled the fresh cut grass before she was gone completely.

"My mother!" Nikki's words sliced into Regina's thoughts and pulled her from her conscious nightmare. Regina was cold again in the heart of the forest.

"She would have never killed herself," Nikki said.

"I always wondered, Regina. I knew she wouldn't do that," Nikki confided in her friend.

"My brother was just as much a victim as you were." Eden intruded triumphantly.

"You guys don't really believe this do you?" Natalie asked. Regina felt disappointed in herself at the fact that she couldn't determine the truth one way or the other. Believing this story had the power to make sense of the senseless and that was what they all wanted. Sense was reason and reason was peace. Actions without logic just made chaos, but even the bad things; if they had meaning could be endured. Without this theory, they were just living in a place where evil things happened because they were embedded in the sometimes calamitous design of nature and with that logic they would never be safe, but if there was a reason then it could have been predicted and it could have been prevented and that prevention was the hope that would fuel the future, it was their only salvation.

"How do you know this?" Regina asked Eden.

"My parents; my father was a chemical engineer and my mother worked for the same company as biomedical researcher, she was a doctor. She was pioneering something great and if it were not for the idiot Black Water workers, the fire would have never broken out and the explosion would have never occurred." Eden explained. "My parents were brilliant people and had they never come to this miserable town they would still be alive. My brother became a monster and then died alone and now you want to blame him for the death of your friend. Well, I won't let you. I won't let you or this town muddy the name of my family. Once her body was found here, I knew that you would blame Glen, call him a murderer, but he wasn't and that is just what you want to prove by coming here, isn't it?" Eden looked furiously at Regina; her eyes that once sparkled with innocence now sparkled with blind rage as she angled her head. Eden dragged her fingers through her heavy black hair to reign in the strays that had fallen into her face revealing a purple bruise beginning at one of the temples of her forehead and proceeding back beyond the line of her hair.

Regina fell back, cupping her mouth before she spoke.

"It was you, wasn't it? At the house yesterday and at the parade? It was you that attacked me!" Regina accused wildly.

"No," Eden answered with a low demonic hum. "If I said it was me you would just go run to that ridiculous sheriff of yours, right? Hmmm, therefore it definitely was not me, but I will tell you that I will not let you ruin my brother's name anymore than you already have." She warned them as she took a step forward. Regina, Nikki, and Natalie all stepped back closer to the path, which they had taken to come through the trees. "Eden, just calm down." Natalie told her. "We never said it was your brother, OK. We just wanted to come here and see this place for ourselves."

"Well now you have seen it so leave!" Eden cut off Natalie's sentence and began yelling. "Leave! Get off my land! Go!" Eden moved toward them quickly while reaching into the bag that she carried. The women turned and sprinted back up the path toward the car before they could see the object of Eden's search. They heard only the fierce

breathing of one another, the cracking sounds of the twigs as their shoes crashed down on them and the sounds of the branches being broken from the trees as they slapped them with their hands and arms. All three women blew out of the trees and into the bumpy dirt road so forcefully that Nikki lost balance on her heels and almost slid under the car. She gathered herself back unto her feet and was bent over by the front tire of the car breathing ferociously. Regina was resting her back against the side of the vehicle, her hand pressed tightly to her chest in a vain attempt to calm her heart and Natalie stood at attention toward the trees making certain that Eden had not followed them.

"Oh my God," Nikki stated. It felt as if they had just stepped back into reality from the harsh, fantastic and twisted dimension that was just beyond the trees in the shadows of the forest.

"She's fucking nuts," Natalie spit.

"Let's get out of here," Regina told them. "I'll drive." Regina caught the keys as an unopposed Nikki tossed them to her and climbed into the backseat. Quietly, each woman gathered the tattered pieces of their misshapen existences as the car climbed out of the darkness and back onto Culliver Parkway. Regina peeked into the rearview mirror. Nikki had spread out in the backseat, her forearm rested over her eyes. Dense white fog had set in and was beginning to roll through the fields on either side of them as Regina navigated the cloudy road.

"So...what do you think?" Nikki spoke from the backseat not bothering to remove her arm from her eyes.

Regina sighed deeply. "I don't know."

Natalie broke in harshly, "Aww, come on! Don't tell me that you believe that explosion secret evil mist bullshit!" Natalie roared; her hair had fallen from the elegant bun that it had been at the wake into tousled disorder.

"Well it happened, because I remember it now. I don't remember everything, but we all know it happened. I remember going to my aunt's house and I remember talk about... about something." Regina felt defeated, unable to recall any specific details of the event.

"So you don't really remember anything," Natalie stated triumphantly.

"No, I remember it too." Nikki chimed in. My father took us to a hotel in Johnson City. It was rushed and there was so much going on that I didn't ask a whole lot of questions. My mother and I hung out by the hotel pool for a couple of days, went to some restaurants, shopped, and then we came home. After that, I never really thought about it too much," Nikki told them.

"So let me get this straight...your big revelation *Nikki* is that you don't really remember anything either, right?" Natalie gloated.

"You don't remember, Natalie?" Regina asked. Natalie seemed startled by the question and shook her head from left to right, but was unable to muster the words to confirm her notion.

"You do remember!" Regina told her.

"Regina, I don't remember anything, but some explosion at that place does not

necessarily translate into *Top Secret Experiment Devastates Town*.” Natalie spit her sarcasm. “Besides, if there was any kind of major health threat it could not have been just swept under the rug that way” Natalie finished.

“It can if you pay enough,” Nikki said. “...if you have enough power.”

“When did your mom start getting that cough?” Regina asked.

“No, no, no, no, no, no, no,” Natalie groaned in exasperation.

“It was soon after this wasn’t it? It was.” Regina stated using her own memory without needing Natalie’s confirmation.

“Are you listening to yourself? You sound as fucked up as Eden DeFrank.” Natalie told her.

“Do you think that just because you curse at people you will get your way?” Regina asked finally at her limit with Natalie’s harsh treatment.

“No,” she answered.

“Then why do you do it?” Regina inquired.

“It’s a style choice,” Natalie responded dryly. Nikki and Regina sighed in unison.

“What if this is what caused my mother to kill herself? What if it did make Glen... you know? What if it even made you kill...hurt Lola?” Nikki asked all of these questions with such hope that it almost hurt Natalie to rebut, but she had no choice.

“And what if it didn’t, Nikki? What if your mom was just miserable? What if Glen is just a sick disgusting fuck and what if I am just evil!” Natalie finished her sentence feeling as empty as if she had just thrown up one hundred times and had nothing left inside of her.

Nikki took the words like a punch in the face; she pressed her head up against the window and stared out into the dense fog.

“You’re grasping at straws,” Natalie stated as she rolled her eyes.

“Fine, all of the bad behavior in Black Water was not caused by the explosion, but what if what Eden says is true and there were some effects after the explosion?” Regina asked.

“So let’s say you go and investigate this explosion theory, how are you possibly going to be able to tell what actions were caused by possible infection of some toxic voodoo gas and which were just bad for no reason at all?” Natalie asked with an expression that reflected the fact that she knew that Regina could not answer her question with any level of satisfaction.

“There’s always a reason.” Nikki moaned from the backseat.

“When it is all said and done, nothing is going to bring Lola back. Nothing will give us our innocence back. Nothing will bring Nikki’s mom back and nothing will make my mom well again. Don’t you get that?” Natalie asked Regina before she turned to look out the window. Natalie could feel the compulsion that she despised coming on and she knew that she would have to bring Lola out just long enough to put her to rest again and she hated herself for it. A tear formed in the corner of her eye at the thought of having to travel to another seedy bar, but it was the only way.

“Well, I don’t know about you, but if there is anything to find out about the death of my mother, I want to know it.” Nikki stated.

“Fine!” Natalie scoffed, “But leave me out of this. I’m done with your wild ghost chasing fantasies. You guys are crazy and I just can’t keep re-living this. If you want to investigate this conspiracy theory, go ahead. If you want to go to Sheriff Handow and tell him everything, go ahead. But you’re just torturing yourselves,” Natalie said as they pulled up in front of her home that was barely visible as the fog thickened. With no farewell, she departed the car and disappeared effortlessly into the mist.

In front of the Dean residence, Regina climbed out of the driver’s side door, while Nikki slid out on the other side. They hugged each other tightly as they passed at the front of the car.

“I’ll call you,” Regina said when they finally released one another. As Nikki’s car pulled away, Regina turned to face her home where she found a warm light burning in the kitchen and she knew that her parents would be waiting. Regina raised an eyebrow and stormed toward the home for a confrontation that was long overdue.

Chapter 23

Regina blew into her childhood home like some kind of natural disaster and slammed the door behind her, before marching into the kitchen. Her parents were shocked when they laid eyes on her.

“What happened to you?” her father inquired as he shot from his seat. Regina stood there fighting down the urge to vomit as all of her apprehensions churned in the pit of her abdomen like a witch’s brew.

Her father was about to speak again before Regina cut him off.

“What happened at Waterford?” She moaned.

Regina was alarmed at what she thought was the subtle shift in their expressions, she prayed that she was mistaken and it was a dislocation in the angles of light and shadow in the room that made her parents’ appearances grow grisly at the mention of the old factory. Mr. and Mrs. Dean took their eyes off the thrashed girl only to eye one another carefully, communicating without words.

“What happened?” Regina repeated herself. Her mother’s face brightened in an artificial expression of lightness.

“Regina, honey, where is this coming from?” her mother wanted to know.

“What happened there?” Regina asked a third time not allowing her mother’s question to distract her from her mission to dig up a truth that she was not leaving the room without.

“Nothing happened there, for Christ’s sake!” Her mother’s voice was louder now and her father’s eyes traced some invisible object on the floor.

“Patricia.” Regina spoke her mother’s name calmly as she took another step into the room. “I want to know what happened.” She finished.

Charlie Dean gave a nonverbal go-ahead to his wife, but they were all silent for a long time before anyone spoke.

“There was an accident there years ago,” her mother admitted.

“That’s all?” Regina baited her mother, like cheese to a sniffing rat; she watched and waited for the curious animal to come to the trap.

Her mother studied her before she spoke again.

“People were hurt, a few were killed. Why are you asking these questions?”

“Because, Mom, they’re important.” Regina could feel herself beginning to get choked up but still no less direct in her interrogation.

“Why?” her father asked.

“Can you just tell me what happened?” Her parents could see her frustration

building.

Her father began. "There isn't much to tell, Regina."

Regina's eyes glowered with a fury that was increasing exponentially by the moment with every attempt of her parents to understate the happening.

"Daddy, please," Regina pleaded.

"Sit down." Her father consoled her, preventing the explosion that he predicted may take place in this room if he continued to hold back what he knew. Mr. Dean grabbed his daughter's hand gently and she allowed him to lead her to one of the wooden chairs at the breakfast table.

"It was a Sunday afternoon when we heard a series of deafening booms, the house shook. No one knew what was happening." His words gave license to the booming that came crashing down in Regina's head as the memory floated back to her.

"You remember my good friend Mike Dixon, he worked at Waterford. I knew him since we were kids." Her father's words were interrupted with a deep-rooted grief for several seconds before he regained composure.

"I was standing at the window, just watching as people began to filter out of their houses to figure out what was going on when another series of explosions shook Black Water and then the phone rang, it was Mike. He didn't have time to explain, he just told me to get my family out of Black Water. Later, after talking to his wife, we discovered that was the second and last call that he made, the first was to his wife." Her father sighed, releasing all the air from his body. Mrs. Dean listened compassionately then lifted the burden from him by taking over the story.

"We packed up some of our things and took off to Aunt Charlene's in Edgerton. By the time we bundled into the car a black fog was spreading through the sky mixing with the clouds and before we knew it, the bright day had become night. It was the most terrible thing I had ever seen, people were running and screaming. It was like a natural disaster. I remember your father yelling for us to close the windows and the air conditioning vents. I thought it was the end of the world, but I jumped out of the car and ran through the smoke, back into the house to get my mother's bible. It was awful, no doubt about that. Once we got to Edgerton, we stayed several days. When we received the OK to come back to town, your father came first to be sure that things were safe and then we came shortly thereafter. Parts of the facility were completely destroyed, but it hadn't been the end of the world and we were all grateful for that, at least. What clean up could be done after such a thing was done and the company moved on. People were devastated, lives had been lost, jobs were lost and no one was sure how Black Water would recover but it did." Regina's mother finished her much too tidy recounting of events.

"Did they pay you?" Regina asked the last question that either of her parents had expected; her father sighed.

"Regina, I really don't see how any of this..." Her mother was interrupted by Regina's sullen voice.

“Did...they...pay...you?” Regina asked again.

“They did.” Her father admitted reluctantly.

Regina could feel the hopelessness that was creeping up inside her at the mere thought that Eden was not as crazy as Natalie had suggested.

“Why, Daddy?” Her trembling voice hinted at the possibility that she would be unable to hold it together for much longer.

“Why did they pay you?” Regina pushed.

“There was damage to the town, people lost their jobs, some people were hurt. There were several reasons.”

“Was there any damage to our home, Daddy? Did you lose your job? Were you hurt?” Regina asked the series of questions, to which, she already knew the answers.

“No,” he answered.

“So why did they pay you?” Regina asked with a cry.

Regina and her father made eye contact and he could see that hurt was the emotion that fueled her most, not anger. Charlie Dean could not lie to his daughter.

“They said that there may be some temporary and minor side effects from chemicals, but that it was nothing to worry about. The money was just a token of their apology for all of the inconvenience. Once everyone found out that the plant would not reopen, people were scared. What would happen with the loss of jobs? So of course people signed the confidentiality agreement and took the money. What else could we do? After a while we noticed some changes in people, some people were more to themselves, some people left town, some melancholy but it could have been because of the hard economic times, the deaths, it could have been anything. There was nothing so noticeably drastic as to blame it on the explosion itself.

After a few years Riley Co. built the candy factory and the town was finally able to start getting back to normal.” Her father explained further. His naiveté would have been sickening to Regina if it had come from any man besides her beloved father. Normal was the last adjective that Regina would have thought of to describe Black Water.

“Did you notice anything strange, Daddy, did you *notice* anything?” Regina pleaded to receive some acknowledgement beyond the blanket of “nothing major” reasoning.

“Like what?” he asked.

“After the explosion, did you notice anything really *strange* about the people in Black Water?” Regina asked.

“Well...” he said rubbing his head gently, something he often did when he was thinking.

Her mother interjected. “Like he said before, maybe people were a little different, but that is to be expected after an accident like that. People lost their family members, their incomes; things were just not the same around here for a long time. Is this about me?” her mother wanted to know.

“Yes, it’s about you!” Regina lashed out with a scream as she slapped her palm against the table.

“It’s about you, it’s about Lola, and it’s about everything!” She finished, slapping the table three more times to give emphasis to the important points of her rant.

“Lola?” Her mother said as confusion traveled her face. “What do you mean?”

“Glen DeFrank, Mom, was he different? Was he, Mom, huh? Did you know? Did you know?” Regina asked.

“Know what? You think he murdered Lola?” Her mother asked before she hung her head a bit lower than before. “We knew that he was different, Regina. For God’s sake, he lost both of his parents in that explosion. He was sad, but we never ever thought that he would hurt any of you girls, which is why we didn’t stop the lessons. We could have never thought that he would hurt Lola.” Her mother reached out and placed her hand on top of Regina’s and her father grabbed her other hand. Regina pulled away from both of them and used her hands to cover her face and soak up all the tears that were streaming uncontrollably from her eyes.

There was no point in telling them the whole of the truth that was to be known, it would only serve them more pain and as far as Regina could tell, they had been victims of everything just as much as she had been. There was no good in telling them, the money takers, the secret keepers, that they had failed to protect their children and that they had suffered for the unknowing actions of their parents. Regina gathered all of the pieces of herself that were shattered there on the table, pieces that may not have seemed like much to anyone else, but were all that she had, like a sad bag lady. She backed away from the table.

“Regina, honey...” her father began. Regina held up one hand to keep him from speaking.

“I’m sorry. I don’t blame you, I just want to take a shower and lie down for a little while.” Regina turned and disappeared from the room.

After her shower, in some ways she felt new and refreshed, but in the ways that mattered she still felt damaged. She would sleep in her towel and not bother with pajamas; she wanted nothing to hinder her from sheer undisturbed rest. Regina crawled sleepily under the sheets and comforter of her bed. Her head came to a gentle rest on her pillow and she stared off into the darkness at the back of her closet. She imagined all of the things that could be waiting inside that place and she breathed in and out, her chest rising and falling as fear grew in her one moment and subsided in the next. She blew it out and then drew it back in again until this rhythm of fear and tranquility was overtaken by the soft fluttering of her eyelids. To no avail she struggled to keep her eyes trained on the darkness, watching it, guarding herself, but it crept closer and closer as the slits in her eyes grew thinner and thinner until finally sleep came to her rescue before the darkness could ravage her.

When she woke, the moonlight filtered in through her open window. The house was silent except for the sound of the washing machine thrashing clothes around just down the hall. She looked at the clock: 8:00 p.m. Only one hour and forty-five minutes had passed, but it seemed as if she had been sleep for days, her head was muddled with the

mess of what had become her life in the past three days. It took her several minutes to generate the strength to lift her body and plant her feet on the cold floor.

“Mom” Regina called out and waited, but was not availed with any response. She went into her bag and pulled out a pair of her most comfortable stretchy black pants and pulled them up over the layer of goose bumps that rose on her legs, then she put on a black tank top and a brown hooded sweater.

“Mom” Regina called again as she walked out into the hallway, but there was still no answer. Feeling her way along the hall she made it to the top of the stairs, went down and into the kitchen, which usually served as the hub of their home. Regina flipped the light switch and scanned the room to find what she had been looking for, a note on the refrigerator scribbled in purple ink.

Regina, we had to go to your aunt's house, but we will be back later this evening. Dinner is in the oven. We love you. Mom & Daddy.

Regina opened the oven with a grunt. Now was not a time when she wanted to be alone, but besides the fact that her aunt's health was failing and her parents went to Edgerton to check on her often she was sure that her mother needed to vent about the discussion that had taken place to her big sister, Charlene. In the oven, she found a plate wrapped in aluminum foil. Regina peeled the foil back to reveal yet another one of her favorites, Mom's famous spaghetti and meatballs with garlic toast. The delicious aroma overwhelmed her. Regina took the plate out, placed it in the microwave and it began to heat. She poured herself a tall glass of ice water and gulped down several swallows before the microwave cried out. Regina grabbed the hot plate and began shoveling forks of spaghetti into her mouth. As much as she tried to muster it she was empty of reason, but emotions she was full of. Loneliness filled her heart and she thought of Lola. Although everything about this trip had been about Lola, it somehow felt that she had gotten lost somewhere along the way. Regina remembered the times that she spent with her best friend, the sleepovers, the swimming, exploring in the woods and as she sat there in the dimly lit kitchen she longed for her childhood friend. Regina could almost hear her laugh echoing through the room and she was suddenly taken by shame. Lola deserved none of this and she was the one who had lost the most, she did not deserve what she got from Glen and she did not deserve what she got from Regina and she did not deserve the injustice that was being propelled by all of the secrets that camouflaged themselves shamelessly among truth. A lifeless Regina could no longer fill her stomach with food because it no longer mattered considering the emptiness of her stomach was no match for the emptiness of her heart. Regina put her plate in the sink, she pulled on a pair of her boots that were left by the front door, grabbed the keys to her father's car and left the house. The car steered itself and Regina relaxed and pushed all thoughts from her head.

A jack-o-lantern scowled at her from the porch of Lola Rusher's home when her car finally came to a stop on the curb. The windows of the home were warm with the glow of life inside and the porch light welcomed her. Before she had too much time to think about her visit she found herself on the porch.

Regina was at a loss for what she would say when the door flung open and she stood there emotionally naked at the threshold of the Rusher family home. A harsh breeze rushed passed her causing goose bumps to rise on her entire body; she looked to the sky and saw the dark storm clouds beginning to develop with methodical madness. Her index finger depressed the little, round cream-colored button and she heard the bell ripple through the house. At the sound of the leaves rustling playfully in the yard behind her she scanned the front yard for obscurities. A shadow appeared behind the glass in the door and she heard mumbling before she heard the locks began to clink to allow entry. Light poured over Regina.

"Regina! Are you OK?" Mrs. Rusher asked as she ushered her in from the dark night. The skin around Mrs. Rusher's eyes was puffy and swollen with the confirmation that she had not stopped crying yet.

"You look terrible," Mrs. Rusher said; her eyes trained on the dark circles that outlined Regina's eyes.

Some nerve, Regina thought to herself.

She tried hard to speak, but it was as if her mouth did not work; her jaws were tense.

"Regina, has something happened? Are you OK?" Mrs. Rusher asked again. Regina could see that Leo was coming into the foyer to check on his mother. Though there was no outward sign of it, on the inside Regina fought hard with her body in order to make it move, in order to generate sound from her throat, she pressed against the cavities of her own chest, a little voice inside of her screamed and shouted, but there in the Rushers' foyer all they saw was a silent, empty-eyed girl.

"I'm fine," she finally croaked. "I'm OK, I just had a dream about Lola and I had to come." The girl lied, which now seemed to be an action that was becoming a part of her normal life.

"Oh, honey." Mrs. Rusher sighed. "Do you want some tea?" Mrs. Rusher asked. "No. Can I go up to Lola's room for a minute?" Regina asked, skipping the common courtesies and racing to the point. Mrs. Rusher narrowed her eyes in concern.

"Are you sure that is such a good idea?" she asked as her head unconsciously cocked to one side.

"I just need to be close to her for a moment. That's all," Regina explained. Mrs. Rusher's better judgment advised against it, but her heart told her to allow the girl to go to the place that compelled her and she waved her hand up the stairs in a go-ahead to Regina. Unsteadily, Regina began up the stairs.

The phone rang and rang, but there was no answer. At the sound of the answering machine Mrs. Rusher hung up the phone and dialed again, but got the same result.

Ringling penetrated the Dean house, but there was no one there to answer the phone, there was nothing but darkness with the occasional flashes of searing white light that illuminated the house with schizophrenic timing as the storm brooded toward them.

"No answer," Mrs. Rusher said to her family as they sat in the living room watching her, they looked toward the ceiling where they heard Regina creeping softly into the

room of the dead girl.

Regina wrapped her hand around the doorknob and pushed the door open. The room was dark, except for the closet light that gave a dull orange hue. Regina went to the window where she got on her knees and peered out at the same view that Lola had marveled for sixteen years. Regina watched the naked trees sway in a seductive dance that welcomed the rain. She laid across the bed and felt the thick cotton mold to the curves of her back. The closet light drew her eye and seemed to spotlight on the clothes hamper. Her mind rewound rapidly to the last time that she was in this room and she scrambled over the bed and knocked the hamper to the side, she pulled up the carpet and removed the loose floorboard. Regina pushed through all of the miscellaneous photos, papers, and trinkets until she found what she had been looking for, the journal. She opened the journal and rediscovered the same letters in white envelopes with the crimson hearts decorating them. She opened one of the letters and her eyes moved across the words on the paper in critical analyzes. The words on the paper stabbed her and the blade turned violently every time she came to the end of the letter and read the signature that was anteceded with the same closing each time, *All my love...forever*. She read the next letter and the next and they were all the same; testaments of obsession and worship to the point of idolatry. He had been on the verge of stalking Lola and her best friends had never even known it. In the letters he spoke of how he watched her, followed her, how much he loved her, how much he wanted nothing more than to be with her. This was more than a high school crush, dangerously more. Regina knew no one anymore, everyone was a stranger. She was guilty of so many things and this was another. Lola *had* been trying to tell her something before she died; something that Regina had simply brushed off with a laugh. Regina continued reading through letter after letter of the same adulation. She shoved the letters into her bag and ran out of the room, not bothering to conceal the hiding place. The woman yelled a quick good-bye to the family as she scrambled down the stairs and darted out of the house. Within seconds the only thing in the night air was the echo of Regina's squealing tires as she shot off into the night to the home of her newest suspect.

Chapter 24

The land around Barron's home was murky and haunted by the imaginary shadows that bordering a cemetery usually causes onlookers to see. The rain was just beginning to shower as Regina pulled her father's car into the cement drive in front of the house. Regina felt her heart beating furiously, her stomach began to cramp with anxiety. In the car she took several deep breaths before opening the door, the girl closed her eyes and sucked as much air as possible into her lungs, pushing the air down through her entire body, and then allowing it to come up out of her mouth again. There were several breaths before she felt the beat of her heart returning to a normal pace. Regina pulled her hood over her head, stepped out of the car and started fast toward the door. As she approached the small cement porch steps in a rapid jog, the door flew open and Barron emerged from the darkness and charged her. She screamed and her body stiffened to a halt. Barron purposely stumbled himself so as not to cause a head on collision.

"Regina?" he called as he squinted his eyes, trying to see clearly in the night. "Barron, I need to talk to you." she yelled to be heard over the gentle shower that was quickly mutating into a roaring storm. Behind him, a girl came tumbling out of the door in a yellow rain coat. Regina realized that it was not a girl, but a woman.

"Regina," Barron's mother smiled at her.

"Mrs. Forte," Regina offered a weak smile.

"I have wanted to see you, but I can't talk now or I'll be late for work." Mrs. Forte gave her a quick squeeze and scampered off toward her truck.

"Open the door, Barron, and hurry up." Mrs. Forte yelled back to him. Barron pointed a handheld black device toward the truck and then Regina heard a clicking sound.

"Just go inside and wait for me. I have to drop my mother off at the hospital and I'll be right back." Barron told her. She wanted to yell, "No! Stop!" but everything happened so quickly that Regina barely found the time to nod her head. She ran up unto the porch and into the lightless house.

Regina fingered the walls looking for the light switch in the living room. She ran her palms against both sides of the entryway to the living room, but still the switch escaped her. In the flashes of lightning, she was able to make out a lamp, she went over and turned the little black knob, which washed the room in depressing amber light. Regina couldn't help but smile remembering all of the fond memories that had been created in this house with Barron. Endless nights of being sprawled out across this floor, claiming to do homework, but really just flirting for hours on end. Regina noticed that Mrs. Forte had gotten new carpet and furniture, but the wood paneled walls remained. Regina peeled off

the wet sweater that stuck to her skin. She sat on the couch and thought of turning on the television, but decided that the incessant, brainless chatter of that idiot box would only make her more nervous about the confrontation that lay ahead of her. How could she tell Barron that she thought his little brother might be a murderer?

A persistent rain pounded the tired earth now and she worried about Barron and hoped that he would be OK and even more importantly, that he would return quickly. She was cold and beginning to get frightened by the strange familiar surroundings. As the shadows began to play hide and seek among the knick knacks and books that covered the shelves, she realized that she had never been alone in this house. Creaking floorboards whined in the hallway, her breath froze dead away inside of her throat and she held it so as not to make a sound. She saw movement in the dark hallway; something was bobbing up and down, a long object, brown; a bat. Her breath expanded inside of her throat choking her as she tried to scream. In the next moment, Carter's face came into the light and he drove straight toward Regina holding the weapon high above his head. Regina jumped upon the back of the couch and threw up her arms to protect her from the tremendous blow that was about to land on her head.

"CARTER NO!" she screamed as she lost her balance, falling off the back of the couch and into the window frame that was just behind the sofa.

"Regina?" she heard him call out. Her eyes popped open and she saw Carter standing only inches from her, the bat lowered.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he asked, his features tightened in irritation, his eyes tired with sleep. "Barron is not here, he took my mother to work." Carter informed her.

"I know," she said, finally able to regain her breath. "I saw him as he was leaving. He told me to come inside and wait for him."

"Well I'm glad someone told me." Carter added sarcastically. "I was about to kick your ass." Carter held out his hand and pulled her back onto the couch.

"Sorry," Regina responded meekly. "I didn't know you were here," she told him. He sat down and let the bat fall to the floor, it rolled around aimlessly and seemed harmless compared to the lethal weapon it had been just moments before.

"What are you doing here?"

"I needed to talk to Barron."

"About what?" Carter inquired. Regina could feel the heat rising up in her face and she felt uncomfortable with Carter being so close to her. Regina clutched the bag that held Carter's idolatrous letters a little more tightly to her body, trying her best to keep him from noticing that she was treasuring the bag.

"I just need to talk to him." Regina restated.

"Is it about Lola?" Carter asked, intrigue filling the lines of his young face.

Regina studied him, but he was blank and it worried her.

"Lola? Hmm...well..." Regina was stalling for time to think, but it was useless, her throat was dry and her eyes felt as if they had been rubbed with beach sand.

“What have you found out? You know something, don’t you?” Carter asked. “Nothing,” Regina lied. “Nothing.” She lied again.

“Hmmm,” Carter reflected upon his own mysterious thoughts before he rose from the couch and bent to pick up the bat. He turned to face Regina eyeing her meticulously as he tightened and loosened his grip on the handle of the wooden stick.

“Well, I’m going back to bed. I have not been feeling good since the wake,” he said as he lumbered out of the room. Regina let out a deep sigh, instinctively she put her hand to her chest and she could feel her heart pounding relentlessly. She sat silent and still for several seconds anticipating Carter’s climactic and violent return. When she heard nothing, she grabbed her bag and sweater and shot out for the door when it burst open and the wind of the vespertine storm howled into the house.

“It is crazy out there,” Barron announced as he struggled to shut the door behind him with a pizza box in one hand.

“What took you so long?” Regina asked impatiently.

“The roads were a mess and I stopped to get food. What’s wrong?” Barron asked. Regina looked up the stairs into the complete black of the second floor to see if Carter was there glaring down on her angrily, but he was not.

“I’m fine.” She sighed, forcing herself to calm down. With Barron there, she felt safe. He followed her into the living room where they sat on the couch, he flipped the pizza box open and grabbed a slice of the thin crust pepperoni pizza and drove it into his mouth. He finished his first slice before he spoke again. Barron grabbed a napkin and began wiping his hands.

“So what is so important? Did you find out anything new?” Barron asked. Regina sighed and pressed her fingertips into her eyes lightly.

“Barron, I don’t even know where to begin. I have heard Nikki’s explanation about the picture with Glen DeFrank, but it still freaks me out. I have never fully retired all of my suspicions about Natalie and today we went to the site on the DeFrank estate where Lola’s body was found.” She told him. Barron nearly spit the garble of chewed pizza that he had in his mouth unto the coffee table. He swallowed hard to finish what remained.

“What?” He spat. “You went there alone? I can’t leave you alone for a minute!” He sounded upset.

“No.” Regina moaned as she sank unto the couch next to him. “I went with Natalie and Nikki and guess who we saw?”

“Lola,” He responded mischievously.

“Barron!” Regina shouted. “This is not funny!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Barron said, but unable to wipe the grin away from his face fully.

“Eden,” Regina told him.

“Eden? Who?” he questioned.

“Eden DeFrank,” Regina confirmed.

“She was DeFrank’s sister, right?” He said.

"She *is* DeFrank's sister and she told us that she knew about what her brother had done to us, but she defended him against the accusations about Lola's murder. She said that he was a lot of things, but not a murderer," Regina explained.

"Well what do you think she is going to say, Regina? Hi, my name is Eden and my brother is a child molester and a murderer? That's only a good icebreaker if you're attending an AA meeting. She is going to say whatever she has to say to defend that monster of a brother of hers," Barron explained to Regina.

"But why? He's dead. Why would she come back to confront us now if she didn't feel so strongly about it?" Regina wanted to know.

"And I think she is the person that has been following me and the person that attacked me yesterday," she added.

"What? You think it was her? We need to go to Sheriff Handow." He stood up.

"No, no, please. I can't prove anything, she didn't actually say that it was her, I just feel that it was and besides I am still not ready to get the sheriff involved."

"But if she is dangerous..."

"No, please, Barron." Regina cut him off. Defeated he retook his seat on the couch.

"Why did she come back now just to tell us that?" Regina persisted.

"Regina, who knows? She's probably a psycho like her brother; psychosis is genetic, you know," he told her. Regina wanted to tell Barron about the things that she had discovered about the Waterford explosion, but she thought better of opening up an entirely new topic of events that would just make the situation more complicated. Already, Barron must have thought that she had become odd over the years and since it did not lead to helping directly solve any of the immediate problems, she decided that it was probably best to keep the story of the voodoo gas, as Natalie called it, to herself for now.

"I suppose," Regina stated.

Regina's palms were dampening as she tried to muster the courage to confront Barron with the true reason for her visit. She cleared her throat as she reached into the bag that rested in her lap and pulled out the handful of letters that she had stolen from Lola's secret stash and tossed them on the table next to Barron's pizza.

"What's this?" he asked as he picked up one of the envelopes, pulled out the letter and began reading.

"I don't know, you tell me. Did you know about this?" Regina asked.

"Know about what?" He said as his eyes continued sliding over the words on the page. He put down one letter after he finished reading and picked up another. She could see the expression of curiosity on his face slowly disintegrating into one of realization and disappointment.

"So now my brother murdered Lola? Is that what you are saying?" He tilted his head slightly after asking the question as if trying to figure out the meaning of this display of high school love letters.

"He wrote her some letters, Regina. We all knew that he had a little crush on her. So

what?” Barron defended his brother, his jaw tightening.

“Exactly, Barron, we all knew that he had a little crush on her, but none of us knew this. This is sick,” she said, pointing accusingly to the letters that were sprawled across the table. “He was stalking her. This was no high school crush. I think she was afraid of him.” Regina said, her voice growing into a roar. Barron jumped from the couch his anger plainly written across his face, he looked out into the entryway to the living room to make sure that Carter was not in earshot of this accusatory conversation.

“You also think that you killed Lola yourself, dropped her in a park and the dead body fairy just picked her up and took her away. You also think that a Halloween monk attacked you in the middle of a festival. You think a lot of things, Regina.” Barron’s fists were balled up at his sides by the time he finished his monologue through clenched teeth. He could see that Regina was now trembling and he forced himself to take a couple of deep breaths, turn and walk a few steps away. Barron turned to face Regina again with a new calm.

“You are losing it, Regina,” he said in a lowered voice.

“Am I, Barron? Am I?”

“Yes! As a matter of fact, you are. Glen DeFrank was a crazy psycho, he killed Lola and that is it!”

“So you don’t even believe my story. You don’t believe me when I said that Natalie hit her?” Regina asked.

Barron rolled his eyes slightly and lovingly grabbed Regina’s hand. “I think that you are under a tremendous amount of stress and with what your mother went through...” Regina groaned into the air in exasperation at Barron’s words. Immediately, Barron regretted bringing up the emotional struggles that her mother had faced in the past; he was the only one that she had ever told about the incident with the mirrors and he feared making her regret that.

Regina shrieked un-interpretably.

“You think that because my mother had a breakdown that I am the same? You think I’m like my mother? You think I’m crazy?” Regina was barely able to get the words out before they broke into unrecognizable sobs disintegrating like wet tissue paper. Ignoring Barron’s apologies, she gathered the letters and shoved them into her bag.

“I am not crazy and I am going to prove it!” she threatened as she threw on her sweater and raced out the door into the chaotic storm.

“REGINA!” Barron chased her out to the edge of the porch.

“REGINA!” he yelled again, but she was already in her car and moving head on into the dismal whirlwind. Barron closed the door with a curse and somewhere upstairs in the Forte home a door moved silently to a close.

Regina gripped the steering wheel tightly in hopes that it would help her control the vehicle against the storm. The clock on the dashboard told her that it was getting late, 9:45 p.m. To whom could she turn now that Barron thought that she was a lunatic? The farouche storm banged wildly against the car pleading to come inside. She found herself

on Main Street with the illuminated police station just up ahead; a lighthouse beckoning anyone lost in the storm. As the stoplight turned green she pulled cautiously through the intersection and settled her car on the curb, less than a block from the police station. She cut the headlights and tried to determine whether she should go to the police with all of the garbled information that she had gathered over the last several days. Buckets of water splashed her windows and she was startled by them despite the fact that they were anticipated. At this time of night, she was sure that Sheriff Handow was comfortable and warm in his bed and the person guarding the light was one of his puerile sons. Every detail of information filtered through her mind and she wondered if any of it made sense or if she had attached too much personal meaning to each object and event. Would the objective listener think that she was just paranoid or worse, crazy? Fifteen minutes later her story made no less sense to her because she knew the truth, but no one would understand the connection of all of the individual events that she had experienced and they would think that her rattling was just that of an over-imaginative girl who wanted to give reason to a senseless death.

Maybe it was not that they could not see, but that they turned away. Everything was right in front of Handow's eyes, but he failed to see, maybe he didn't want to see, no one did.

Maybe she was actually losing it.

Regina was grateful to be jolted out of the labyrinth of thought by the loud demonic howl that soared through the night air. She plucked on the headlights and pulled back onto the street. Visibility was nil and she was forced to find her way home based on memory as much as actual sight. She maneuvered through the streets and stoplights until she pulled up in the driveway of her pitch-black home. Regina bristled at the realization that her parents were still not home. For the first time ever her house seemed uninviting. Her stomach shifted with anxiety. She gathered her things and pulled her hood down tight in preparation to race through the storm. Her boot sunk into the flooded grass; the water was coming down in falls, covering everything in sight. She sprinted through the lawn, threw off the hood and shook her hair out as she found herself safe under the shelter of the porch. Fumbling the keys, Regina felt something creeping up her spine; she was not alone. Compelled by instinct she spun around and scanned every corner of the wooden porch. Her eyes darted around and she scampered to the end of the porch and peered out around the house into the never-ending blackness. Her keys clattered to the floor, but the sound was barely audible against the soundtrack of the wind and the rain. Regina saw someone slip into the trees toward the alley and the wind was sucked out of her at the sight. She continued to peer into the thunderous night, and then blinked her eyes rapidly. Lightning flashed again and there was nothing. Her mind was playing tricks on her, but that didn't stop her from dropping to the ground and frantically grappling along the edge of the porch, racing to find the keys.

"Shit," she shouted as she felt them slip out of her grip and plop into the flower bed at the side of the house. Her heart began pounding and she could feel a wretched strain in

her eyes as they began to fill up with tears. Hyperventilation was next. Regina could not think, see or feel, her senses had departed completely. She could hear only her quick hard breaths inside of her head and she closed her eyes tightly and focused on regaining control of them, slowly her breathing began to stream longer and steadier until the process was once again a rhythmic and involuntary flow in and out. The sounds of the squall and the mist of rain washed violently back into her reality along with a bright streak of lightning, followed by a thunderous crash that felt so powerful she thought the earth shook. Instantly, the sound propelled her back to her feet and she ran down the steps of the porch into the tsunami-like weather, as she approached the corner of the porch she dropped to her knees and began scuffling around the flower bed in a frenzied manner waiting and praying for the sensation of cool metal between her fingers.

“C’mon, c’mon, c’mon, c’mon.” she raved. Regina dug her hands deeper into the soft dirt. She gasped a sigh of relief when she felt the jagged edge of one of her keys, she plunged farther and wrapped her hands around the cluster of key chains and rings and began to pull them out of the dirt. Regina wrenched the set of keys from the dirt and she had never been happier to see them. Her relief lasted for only a moment when the fingers shot out of the dirt, she screamed and moved clumsily to dodge the grasp, but it was too late, the hand had anchored itself firmly at the root of her hair and she raged and tugged at the hand in a losing battle to release her. She cried deliriously, but only half of her miserable wails were due to the pain that was being unleashed on her scalp. The attack happened quickly, but Regina had caught a glimpse of the bright tangerine nail polish on the chipped and jagged finger nails. The stench of rotting roses was all around her.

“Please Lola! Please stop, please.” Regina screeched, but the storm roared over her and she fought ferociously against being pulled down under the dirt. She struggled to breathe when the strong hand pulled her face so far into the wet flower bed that mud clogged her mouth and nose.

“No, please, Lola!” Regina screamed again after spitting out a mound of moist dirt that plugged her mouth.

Regina searched the ground desperately with her hand for something, anything, when she felt the cool metal once more. Like a knife, she maneuvered one of the keys between her fingers with the point jutting out and began stabbing at the dead hand in unsystematic jabs until it finally released her in one quick movement. Regina stumbled onto her back, hitting her bottom hard on the ground with a yelp. She peered into the flower bed where no trace of a hand remained. Her mother’s flowers sat disturbed only by the storm. Quickly realizing that the keys were still in her hand, she bolted from the ground. As she tried to run, she could feel that the series of blows to her body were beginning to take their toll and the most that she could force was a wounded jog up the porch stairs. She fought to sweep her wet and matted hair from her face. Regina wrestled with the storm door and it was difficult for her to steady the key with the waves of anxiety sweeping through her body. Regina was at war with the keys and the door when her body froze as if the temperature in Black Water suddenly dropped twenty degrees. Still, she was not

alone. She turned slowly to face the next obstacle and as soon as she laid her eyes on the sight, she was unable to hold it together any longer. Regina squeezed her eyes shut and could no longer hold back the cries and the tears.

“Please no more, PLEASE.”

Desperation leaked from every pore in her body.

Lola’s rotting corpse made Kafkaesque steps toward her through the heinous night. Her body was stiff with death, but wobbly with the movement of a body that had been cut to pieces barely holding together like a limp puppet being yanked and jerked for every movement.

“Regina, Regina, Regina, Regina, Regina...” The corpse was babbling through its toothless mouth. Regina rolled her head back and forth reiterating the words that she wanted it all to go away. Again, she screamed but the corpse was undisturbed and continued on its path straight toward her. The skin on Lola’s neck was stretched thin; her head cocked fully to one side causing it to lie on her shoulder almost completely, the strands of what was left of her once beautiful black hair hung like slick wires over her arm. The rotting corpse was making failed attempts to lift its uncooperative foot upon the first step. With no end in sight, Regina turned back to the door fumbling with the keys until finally the correct silver key emerged in her fingers, she thrust it into the lock. The door sprang open and she threw herself in, slamming the door behind her and flipping the locks to entomb herself in the house. She leaned against the door and took only two breaths before she felt the load of vomit curdling in her throat and coasting up into her mouth, she dashed through the dining room into the hall bathroom and barely got the lid up before vomit was spewing into the porcelain bowl. Her stomach retched with vile liquid and dirt, her throat burned, and her eyes felt as if they would bulge out of their sockets. Regina could hardly breathe as her body ridded itself of what little food she had consumed that day. Once everything was gone from her stomach, she took in a deep gasping breath as her body worked desperately to get oxygen to all of its parts. Even after there was nothing left to vomit, she stayed bent over with her hands on the sides of the toilet, not trusting her body and wanting to be sure that the purging was complete. Regina flushed away the sewage that had come from inside. At the linen closet she pulled out a towel, wiped her mouth and blotted her entire face. Next, she soaked the rainwater out of her hair. She wiped the clumps of mud from her eyes and mouth. As she stepped into the hallway she stared at the front door, but there was no longer any terror within her. She knew that there would be no banging on the door. Regina stood only feet from the door that was bordered with two draped windows. No part of her felt compelled to look out of either of them because she knew that no one was out there.

Lola was dead and Barron was right...she *was* crazy. No longer would her nightmares be contained by sleep.

Regina was the only person here tonight and she herself had brought Lola along. The only place that Lola was alive was inside her mind.

The house was freezing and Regina’s teeth began to chatter. She turned to go up the

staircase, but her attention was summoned to the living room by the night light plugged into the wall. Her mother was accustomed to having at least one or two in the house at all times. Next to the light she saw the small space heater. Every part of her body was so cold that the only thing that was more inviting than her bed at this time was the heat of the little machine that would buzz a bright shining orb of heat unto her shivering body. Regina looked back toward the stairs that seemed so steep now and her body was tired. She drug into the living room and pressed the button on the top of the heater that sprung to red light and instantly there was warmth on her ankles melting away the cold world. She shed the dripping clothes and pulled the blanket off the back of the couch, into which, she swaddled herself. Regina reached over to the end table where her shaking hand held the telephone receiver to her ear and there was silence, she pressed her lips together tightly and exhaled through her nose with great disappointment. Surely, the storm had stranded her parents at her aunt's house in Edgerton. Regina took a quick look around the room as if this time would be her last, she then, lay her head on one of the throw pillows. Her only bedtime wish was for the daylight to come because the light would make it all go away. Before she became too frightened by the thoughts of the day, she was asleep under the weight of them.

Regina was startled into awakening by a thud. She swiped away the last clouds of sleep in her eyes and cased the living room. Her gaze went to the ceiling where she thought she heard the noise, but she was immediately jolted again by a crackling of thunder and was not sure whether what she had heard was the shifting of the old house, the roaring of thunder, or just a spontaneous noise that had originated deep in her REM. To her disappointment, the morning had still not come and judging by the look of the deep sea night sky out of the living room window it was not even close. Again, she lifted the phone in the unfounded hope that she would hear a dial tone, a lifeline to someone else in the world, but again she heard nothing and replaced the phone on the hook. Regina turned off the heater, gathered her clothes, and made her way toward the darkened stairs. She inhaled sharply as she exited the living room, realizing that the heater had, in fact, only warmed that one room of the house and the rest of the home felt like a meat locker on the coldest day of winter. Regina entered her room without bothering to turn on the light and threw her clothes into the hamper that her mother had placed in the closet for her. She stripped off her underwear and showered before returning to her bedroom, where she flipped on the bedside lamp and began to dig into her messy black suitcase for something comfortable. A pair of cotton tights was the winner along with an oversized sweatshirt that boasted the name of the college she attended. The bed was soft and warm as she went through the ritual of stretching and retracting her legs all over the sheets to feel the coolness of their surface on her bare feet. Regina nuzzled her head into the pillow and spied a splash of color in the form of an envelope that sat, propped against the mirror on her vanity and she could see her name was scribbled across the front of the canary yellow envelope.

Chapter 25

Regina threw back the comforter and stepped out of bed, she found it difficult to keep her legs from giving out under her as she made her way across the room. She held the envelope up and read and re-read her name several times putting off opening the letter for as long as she could. When she could not justify reading her name one more time she turned the envelope over and pulled out a thin piece of matching yellow paper, unfolded it and began to read.

Dear Regina:

I have Nikki. I have to see you tonight at the DeFrank estate, midnight. No police, if you call them, I will know and another one of your friends will die because of your lack of courage and heart.

The words hit Regina like a diesel truck and the raging ocean of emotions overflowed the sea walls in a destruction that was silent, like a disaster watched through the lens of a soundless camera. Lola died because of Regina's inaction and this person knew that. Regina sank into the chair that was parked in front of her vanity, crumbling the piece of paper into her chest and through the despairing tears, a crafty smile etched itself into her face. Tonight would be the night that it would all end, when she would walk out of the destroyed gates a free woman.

Her eyes traveled to the clock on her nightstand and she took off down the hall when she saw that it was already 11:30 p.m. She thundered down the stairs and began pulling on her black boots. Outside she could hear that the storm was still tearing through the town of Black Water. Every move she decided to make, she second-guessed, her mind was racing, but no one was winning. She was confused, anxious, and almost delirious. One of her first thoughts was to leave a note on the refrigerator, but in the next moment, she changed her mind and headed toward the phone in the living room. Regina thought it would be worth it to give it one more try; she pressed the receiver to her ear and her hope melted in the silence that hung heavy at the other end of the phone. She banged the phone into the end table in a rage before dropping it to the floor and sprinting into the kitchen. The contents of the drawers rattled as she wrenched them open and closed until she found the marker. Regina licked the sleeve of her sweatshirt and used the moisture to erase the note from her parents that was scribbled on the little white board; she then wrote a message to them praying that they would come home soon.

Please Help. Call the police. DeFrank estate. I love you, Regina.

Taking a moment to stand back, she marveled at the message and the power of those three words in light of the fact that she may never say them again. Regina went back to the drawer and pulled out a sharp blade, she shoved it into her bag and thrashed out of the house barely securing the door behind her. At full speed, she charged through the storm that raged all around her. Regina jumped in the car, started the engine, and snapped the door closed. She shifted the gear into reverse, floored the gas and the car shot out of the driveway like an ill-aimed rocket. The car hydroplaned into the street and she jammed her foot into the brake, causing the tires to squeal. Regina screamed as the reckless car spun more times than she could count before coming to an abrupt stop without hitting anything around her. Dumbfounded, Regina sat in the car with her eyes focused straight ahead.

I'm OK. I'm OK. She found herself chanting almost silently when she realized that she had not been broken to pieces in a potentially cataclysmic collision. She reminded herself that it didn't matter how fast she got to the DeFrank estate if she arrived in several pieces. The irony of the thought became immediately apparent and she cringed before proceeding to straighten the car on the road. The clock on the dashboard read 11:38 p.m.

The letter instructed her to come alone, but she reasoned that may not be exactly the case; besides, the letter identified cops specifically and Natalie was no cop. Surely, whoever did this knows that Natalie was the direct cause of Lola's death and she should have been invited to this creepy rendezvous as well. Regina would be coming up on Natalie's house momentarily and would give her no choice, but to attend.

Natalie's house stood tall and forbidding, but Regina had precious little time to be in awe at the overall creepiness of it. She ran up the walkway and banged on the door; the fact that it was the middle of the night or that someone may be disturbed from their restful sleep did nothing to deter her. The time had come for them to reap what they had sown and Natalie had every right to be present at the harvest. Regina released another series of wild bangs on the door.

"Natalie," she screamed with her mouth at the door. She ran to the window where she peered in, but saw nothing move. Regina instinctively held her hands to her ears as thunder rang out and a flash of lightning brightened the sky and her mind illuminated with a single thought; the rose trellis. Regina lit off the porch and ran toward the side of the house and there it was.

"Natalie!" Regina howled.

The trellis that was attached to the side of Natalie's house had once been overgrown with luscious blooming red roses, but was now swallowed in a tangle of thorny vines. Regina hesitated, she had not climbed the trellis since she was a child and though she was far from obese she shuddered at the thought that the fence may not be able to hold her grown-up weight or that the wood had become weak or rotted and she was especially frightened at the thought that she may not figure it out until she was halfway up.

Natalie was awake; the light in her room was on.

"Natalie," Regina yelled once more before she decided that everything was a risk at

this point and leapt unto the wooden structure. Regina placed her hand up as far as she could grasp and began to climb. Drops of water pelted her face as she continued a climb that was much harder than she remembered. She was doing well until one of her feet slipped as a piece of rotted wood broke from the trellis. Regina screamed out, but regained her composure and navigated her foot blindly until she secured a solid position for it. Blood began to run from the wounds that splinters and thorns were digging in her palms. When she made it to the top she swelled with the pride of one who had conquered Mt. Everest. She peered into the glowing room, but was unable to make out much more than basic shapes and colors. Excessive sheets of rain blurred the view, but every time she swept water away, there was more to fall effortlessly into its place. When Regina saw that the room was empty she banged her fist against the pane, but nothing inside of the home stirred. Natalie was not there. Her eyes widened with disbelief when she was able to make out the distinct yellow color on Natalie's desk. It was the same yellow paper that Regina had found in her room not an hour before.

The clock on the dashboard read 11:55 p.m. She rushed through town, passed the police station and onto I-48. The windshield wipers whipped back and forth like the finger of a parent forbidding a "no-no."

Regina leaned into the windshield for a better visual of the road. Her thoughts never veered far from Natalie. Soon she turned off onto Culliver Parkway and began down the stretch that would take her to the DeFrank house.

Headlights burned in her rearview mirror as someone came around the curve behind her. Regina drove faster performing routine checks in her rearview mirror. The headlights were much further behind her now, but she was no less terrified.

Despite the weather she knew that the turnoff for the DeFrank house was coming up and though the DeFrank Estate was the last place on earth that she wanted to be she was relieved to be getting off the abandoned road and away from the car that was somewhere far behind her.

The gates to the DeFrank property were open and she drove in smoothly. The many trees on the property filtered the torrential rain causing it to come down in a soothing spray. Before Regina was halfway down the drive she could see that the windows of the house were illuminated, offering a perverse welcoming.

Regina stepped out of the car and prepared for the rest of her life, which depending on who was inside and why, may not be a very long time at all.

As she stood in front of the house she rested her hand on the butcher knife that was hidden in her bag, but the act was of little comfort. The porch stairs threatened to crumble under her heavy boots. One of the front double doors was open a crack and Regina grasped the crystal handle and walked into the foyer of the home of decaying magnificence. Each room was lit with candles and offered more a feeling of romantic rendezvous than impending doom. Several candles sat atop the old piano.

"Hello?" Regina's voice echoed endlessly throughout the rooms and she immediately scolded herself for sounding so ridiculous, but nothing more logical to say

had come to mind. Regina stepped into the piano room, it was warm with candle fire and the scents from the different candles produced a gruesome floral aroma. Regina gagged and escaped the room before it became impossible for her to hold her insides.

"I'm here," she shouted, her voice repeating itself as it bounced off of the walls. Regina waited, but still no one answered her. She gripped the handle of the knife through the bag like a security blanket. With one hand against the wall and the other parked on top of the knife in her bag, Regina crept along the hall toward the study. When she reached the door, she poked her head in cautiously to ensure that the room was empty before she stepped inside. On the far wall next to the bookshelf was a collage of newspaper articles, some about the explosion at Waterford and the rest documented strange occurrences, disappearances, and murders in Black Water. Regina saw a newspaper article that referenced the same girl whose posters she had seen at the police station, Nikki's mother and the death of Glen DeFrank, she pulled off several and studied them carefully. Regina crumbled them and threw them to the floor. Only Eden would have dug up all of these old clippings to try and prove her theory. Bangs on piano keys made her heart jump as the noise trumpeted through the house; she spun around quickly pressing her back up against the wall. Unmethodical strikes on the piano keys made the instrument give ugly howls and Regina's heart jumped with every harsh note. She blew out the candles in the study and pulled the knife from her bag. The gleam swam from handle to tip as she admired it under the moonlight. She made sure the hall was clear before she stepped out of the darkened room and she tiptoed through the oversized dining room taking precautions with every step to be unnoticed and unheard. The house had been silent for several seconds when Regina made it back to the piano room where the piano sat innocently. The room of music was devoid of life despite the fact that the lit candles bathed the room in parading shadows.

"Eden" Regina yelled. "I'm here. Tell me what you want." She took a chance on the identity of her stalker. On the second floor, there was a tumbling and Regina raced up the long flight of stairs before Eden had a chance to disappear again, but she was too late. Up there nothing was lit by anything but the faint moonlight coming from the window at the end of the stretching hall. Rain still sprayed the house, but the storm had begun to die down.

"Natalie," Regina tried another suspect, but still received no response. Sensing something behind her, she ducked swiftly into a room and waited for her anxiety to pass. It felt as if several people slipped in and out of the numerous rooms of the enormous house. Her heart pounded so hard that it could have cracked open her chest, she could have dropped to the floor right then, died, and it would not have come as a surprise.

Regina sprinted through the hallway to the room that was just on the other side of the hall and she closed the door behind her.

"Nikki," she whispered into the dark room. All she wanted to do was find her friend and get out of this house. The room was empty and she snuck back into the hallway with the knife still gripped tightly inside of her palm.

After a fruitless search, Regina came to the entrance of the last room on the second floor, the very last door at the end of the hall. Just as she pressed the wooden door open with one hand lightening flashed through the house and she gasped, startled to see so many eyes on her. Hundreds of inhuman eyes burned deep into her as if they were trying to steal her soul straight from her chest. Dolls, there were dolls everywhere, on the shelves, the dresser, even on the floor crowded around the majestic canopy bed. This was Eden's room, the room was black between the flashes of light, but she recognized the gray dress of the girl that lay sleeping on the bed.

"Eden," she called the girl who was sleeping on her back with her legs crossed at the ankles.

The eyes of each doll moved with Regina, watching her closely. Eden's body seemed lifted from the mattress and a barrage of dolls encircled her on the bed, guarding her. Still Eden had not stirred and as Regina got closer lightening flashed brilliantly, snapping a morbid photo that allowed Regina to see the girl in her entirety and she immediately understood why the girl had not responded to any of her calls. Regina was unable to get her hand to her mouth before the shrill scream filled the room. She collapsed against one of the shelves, which broke allowing a platoon of dolls to dive on her. She dropped the knife in her struggle to keep the little demons from overwhelming her completely. The rest of the soulless figures watched her and laughed at her weak sensitivity to the concept of life as she found her breath being taken away again at the sight of Eden's body. Eden's wrists were settled upon her belly with one hand slightly gripping the wrist of the other; she had not been sleeping at all. Regina could now see the dark droplets of blood that were spattered against the regal headboard. Her eyes followed the blood splatter up the wall and she was disgusted to see that some of it had traveled far enough to make its mark high up on the canopy.

"Oh, Eden," Regina whispered.

Regina had never seen someone wounded by a shotgun before, but she was sure that this is what it looked like. Eden's body was undisturbed by the blast, but it was the bloody and flesh covered stump at the top of the torso that revealed her fate. Again, Regina noticed how high Eden's body sat and against her repulsion she crept closer to see what appeared to be hair flowing from underneath the corpse. Under Eden's body were more dolls. Regina reached out her hand to pull away one of the many uncaring toys and she winced as her hand accidentally touched the headless corpse disturbing the body that suddenly came to life grabbing her around her neck in a choke hold.

Regina screamed as she tried to pull away from the monster that was pulling at her, grabbing and yanking her body. Regina reeled with terror as she heard screams besides her own; it was impossible. In the midst of the struggle, Regina opened her eyes and was face-to-face with live, wild eyes. Regina's face was inches away from the blood-soaked, almost unidentifiable face of Nikki Valentine.

"Nikki?" Regina screamed as she finally jerked free from the bloody grasp of her friend. Regina stumbled back to see that Eden's headless body had fallen to the side and

Nikki Valentine had been buried under the massacred body. Nikki was still screaming as she raised from the bed with hands outstretched toward her friend, covered in the blood of Eden DeFrank. Regina had to fight to shake off the shocking paralysis. Nikki's words were garbles of nothingness and Regina reached out and pulled her friend from the dolls' deathbed and laid her limp body on the floor.

"Nikki," Regina spoke, but received only incoherent gurgling in response. "Nikki? What is wrong with you?" Regina asked and she used the sleeve of her sweatshirt to wipe blood from her face. Her eyes were glassy as they stared vacantly up into the darkness of the ceiling.

"Nikki? Nikki, can you hear me?" Regina asked. She held up two fingers and waved them in front of Nikki. "How many fingers am I holding up?" she asked, but the eyes of the barely conscious girl just rolled lazily up into her head. Regina slapped the girl with a light hand. She moved Nikki's body away from her so that she could ensure that none of the blood that covered Nikki was her own. The dazed girl was not wounded. Regina moved her face close to Nikki's again and her eyes focused momentarily, but soon began rolling again. Regina slapped the girl as hard as she could, causing Nikki to begin blinking rapidly and soon her eyes were trained on Regina. She pulled down the soft skin under Nikki's eyes to see that her pupils were dilated.

"Nikki, can you hear me?" Regina asked almost in a scream, trying to revive the drugged Nikki.

"Re...Reg..." Nikki struggled to put the syllables together to make her friend's name, but was unsuccessful.

"OK. We're going to get out of here, but you gotta help me, Nikki, you gotta help me." Regina assured her as she searched the floor for the butcher knife, launching dolls left and right until she found it and returned it to her bag. Regina got to her feet and gathered Nikki's limp body and lifted.

"C'mon, Nikki, I need your help. You have to stand up, I can't carry you; you have to stand up." She continued to tell her friend. The clumsy pair limped unsteadily out into the hall. Out of any corner or dark bedroom, Regina was sure that the same culprit who had fired the fatal shot blowing Eden's head away would emerge and shoot both of them. Regina could feel the beads of sweat forming on her forehead. She was forced to stop several times before Nikki was finally able to coordinate her feet enough to keep from tumbling to the ground. Regina held one arm around Nikki's waist and used the other to keep Nikki's arm securely around her own neck. On the journey down the stairs, the pathetic pair collapsed twice. At the bottom of the staircase Regina rested, her arm ached, and Nikki was of absolutely no help carrying her body weight. Regina shook out her arms and prepared to lift Nikki again. Before boosting Nikki, she tried again to speak to her. Regina grasped Nikki's chin in her fingers, she could tell that Nikki recognized her more now, but was still having trouble forming words.

"Nikki, who brought you here?" Nikki's eyes flickered with horror before glazing with a thick film of tears. She tried hard to speak but could not get anything coherent to

come from her mouth and her communication consisted of a series of spits and groans. There was no more time to waste and Regina hoisted her friend from the stairs again. The grand double doors were only a few precious feet in front of them when Regina noticed that the tall fireplace was roaring with robust flames that had not been there when she entered the house. Regina pushed her body harder in her attempt to get herself and Nikki to the front door knowing that the person who knew their secret would show him or herself soon, but a glimmer of fantastic green light distracted her. Above the fireplace hung an object that reflected light off the walls in every direction. Immediately, she knew the piece and whoever placed it there had known that she would not resist it and as she stood there between the exit, only feet in front of her, and the sparkling crystal that hung deep in the belly of the room she knew that she should flee, but she knew that if she left the house without it, she would never see it again and that would be unbearable. With Nikki attached to her side she limped away from the front door and into the wide open living room where she let Nikki's flimsy body collapse unto the tattered couch that had been left in the abandoned room. Regina got close to the fireplace and reached up, stretching her fingers as far as they would go but still not able to fully grasp the sparkling thing. Closer, she pressed to the fireplace so that she could reach farther up the wall. Tireless groans escaped her as she stretched her body to its limit. The fire burned fiercely close to her stomach and perspiration dripped from her, but abandoning the feat was not an option. Regina made a mental note of the exact position of the object that teased the tips of her fingers, she bent down and jumped grasping the air in the exact spot that she had plotted in her memory and she reveled in joy when she realized that she was back on the ground and not empty-handed. She opened her eyes to see the green crystal that hung innocently at the end of the thin silver chain and she grasped the amulet close to her.

"Regina," a voice that she recognized, called to her and she turned to face the person that she suspected was guilty all along.

Chapter 26

Natalie sauntered into the room and their eyes locked.

"Regina," Natalie spoke softly.

"Natalie, why?" she asked as the tears began streaming down her face.

"Why what?" Natalie responded as her eyes fell to the figure slumped over on the couch. "Oh my God, Nikki," she gasped, hastily making her way to the incoherent girl. Regina wrenched the clean blade from her bag and held the weapon out in front of her as she stepped in front of Nikki who was still trying to mentally claw her way out of a distant existence. Natalie withdrew at the sight of the blade.

"Regina, what the hell are you doing?" She began shouting.

Both girls were startled by unexpected movement when Barron entered the room and took another corner.

"Barron?" Regina was awed at the sight of him here.

"What are you doing here?" Natalie asked him.

Barron held up a sheet of paper familiar in color. "I found this letter from *you*, Regina, after you left asking me to meet you here." Barron spoke as his eyes darted from one girl to the next. "What is going on?" He asked.

Regina opened her mouth to speak and her lips quivered as she spoke. "I didn't write you a letter," Regina told him, timidly switching the direction of her weapon to face Barron directly. "Yes, you did," he countered.

"You wrote me one too, Regina." Natalie finally spoke.

"What?" Regina raged, her weapon-wielding hand shaking thunderously. "I didn't. I got a letter saying that someone had Nikki here."

"From who?" Natalie asked. Regina jumped to speak, but was unsuccessful. Every time she positioned her lips to voice the thought that she had formed she could not speak because the thoughts changed continuously.

"I...I don't know." Regina suddenly felt very confused; her mind was quickly becoming as weak as her trembling body. The look of pathetic sympathy from Barron served for more frustration. Her mind reeled and she tried to think back. Had she left a letter for both of them and somehow not known what she was doing, which led to the even more frightening question that she was forced to ask herself.

Am I crazy? The room was spinning.

Regina was gripping the handle of the blade so tightly that her fingernails began to break the skin of her palm. Natalie could see her friend falling apart.

"Regina, just give me the knife," Natalie demanded in an airy whisper. Barron's eyes

flashed at Natalie's request. "No, Regina. Give the knife to me." Barron eyed Natalie closely to make sure that she made no sudden moves, he trusted none of them. Natalie sneered at him nastily.

"Regina, I don't know what's going on here. I really don't, but I just want us all to leave here safe tonight, OK? Please give me the knife. I promise I won't hurt you." Natalie focused her attention on Regina while still casting watchful glances at Barron.

Regina eyed them both.

"Regina, Nikki needs help, damn it! We have to get her help; we can't let this happen again, Regina. I won't let it happen again!" Natalie spoke. Regina had forgotten that Nikki lay barely conscious on the couch; begging for clarity in guttural moans.

"Don't give her the knife, Regina. She has done this before. She killed Lola. Just give me the knife and we can call Sheriff Handow like I said from the beginning and this will all be over." He guided.

Regina lowered the weapon slightly as she contemplated his words.

Surprise sparked Natalie's features. "I...I..." Natalie wanted to deny it; to deny everything, but she could not deny the truth, she had hurt Lola and probably killed her and she could no longer hold her tears either.

"I don't want to hurt you, Regina. Please just give me the knife." Natalie begged.

"Don't do it, Regina. Don't let her fool you, not again. I love you." Barron told her. Natalie looked at Barron with, first, a strange disgust on her face, then revelation. Regina could feel her knees buckling and she wanted nothing more than to hand over the knife and be done with this entire event.

"It was you, wasn't it?" Natalie accused the man.

Regina strengthened and her eyes darted back and forth between the two equally viable suspects. Regina mentally tried to review several days of happenings in seconds, searching for something, any detail or conversation that could help her determine the guilty one. Growing more nervous by the moment, Regina had to make a decision because out of the three someone would make a move soon and it needed to be her if she was going to survive.

"Barron" Nikki's tiny whisper crawled out of her wracked body. Nikki's weak finger pointed at the man accusingly before she dipped back into her partially anesthetized state. Before the look of sheer disappointment had fully shown itself upon Regina's face, Barron roared and was upon her with the rage of a rabid dog. He punched her hard across the face, but before she could fall to the floor he grabbed her under her arms, grappled the knife from her hand and held the point at her neck.

"Let her go, Barron." Natalie spoke to him calmly.

"No, I don't think so." He fumed, spitting and hissing; his transformation from man to monster seamless. "Not this time."

Regina's face ached and she rotated her jaw, praying that it was still in place.

"What do you want?" Regina barely managed to whisper.

"Nothing has changed, Regina. I want the same thing I always wanted, you. When

you poured your heart out to me about how Lola really died, I thought we were building something again. Of course I already knew most everything you told me, but it was the fact that you opened up to me.” Barron explained.

“How did you know?” Natalie asked.

The blazing fire crackled and spit, rising and falling at Barron’s back as he held tightly to an unsteady Regina.

“I was there when it happened.” He chirped casually.

“What?” Natalie asked breathlessly.

“I guess stalking runs in the family.” He laughed to himself. “When you left the party early that night, I followed you, like I liked to do sometimes. I didn’t know what was happening inside at Nikki’s house, but I waited. Then the three of you came out carrying the blanket and, call me stupid, but I never thought in a million years that your precious Lola was wrapped in that thing, but when I went into the park to see what you all had thrown away I was relieved quite honestly,” Barron explained lightheartedly.

“Relieved?” Regina cried, her face still locked stiffly in Barron’s grip.

“She was always around, your best friend. We hardly ever had any time away from her for just us,” Barron explained tenderly. “You went to the movies together; she stayed over at your house EVERY weekend and, quite frankly, I was tired of always being second. You gave her *my* necklace!” He spat.

“But why did you do it? Why did you have to go back.” Natalie asked.

“I knew you girls; well, I thought I knew you. You were soft. I figured one of you would be leading the police to the body before sunlight. So I got rid of her once and for all; that way, you couldn’t find her even if you *wanted* to. The police and everyone else would just think you guys were nuts. I mean, with no body and all how much could really be proven? Besides, that hiding place was amateur at best, someone would have found her before the week was up and, sooner or later, Sheriff Handow and his band of idiots would have put it together and Regina, they would have taken you away from me. I wouldn’t let her keep coming between us even in death. I buried her on the DeFrank estate because I knew that no one would search for her there and even if they did find her there, well even better, everyone already knew that DeFrank was weird so he would take the fall. But I must admit it was sheer luck considering I had no idea that he had been banging you girls only a couple of years before. When Regina, here, told me that...it all made sense. For years, I wondered how you girls were able to keep such an awful secret for so long, but now I realize that it was because you all have been keeping dark secrets together for a long time, haven’t you?” Barron asked accusingly.

“The secret keepers,” he whispered seductively in Regina’s ear. Regina struggled to get away from him, but he jerked her body hard and she fell back into submission.

“Why did you have to cut her up?” Natalie asked.

“Logistics” Barron responded casually. “I had to move her and I had to keep her in my car until I decided what to do with her and I couldn’t just haul a dead body wrapped in a blanket, which is where the garbage bags came in. It was just easier that way.”

Fighting the tears was impossible now and her cries began exploding in short powerful sobs. This was a man that she thought that she could love, but he had been betraying her from the very beginning.

Surges of adrenaline began pulsing through Regina's body and her tolerance for listening to Barron's psychotic babbling was thinning. In a wave of adrenaline-fueled power, she used all of her weight to heave her body backward into Barron. He lost his balance and almost stumbled into the mouth of the fireplace whose gaping jaws were only too ready to consume him. He yelled in surprise feeling the heat singe his back. The knife clattered to the floor and sailed across the room when Barron decided to use the knife-wielding hand to grip the fireplace and keep him from toppling into the hungry flames. His other hand was forced to release Regina's neck, but not before violently driving her head into the hard stones on the side of the fireplace. Regina crumbled to the floor clutching her forehead in a useless effort to control the pain that splintered her head. Her senses blurred, blood ran into her eye, and hearing and seeing became a chore.

Natalie hopped upon Barron, clawing, scratching, and screaming in a reflexive attack, causing them both to go sailing to the damaged marble floor. Regina rolled around doing her best to string together bits of consciousness in a way that made sense. Barron gripped Natalie by her hair tightly and attempted to position his other hand around her throat, but the struggle was too fierce for him to gain any type of advantage. Again he tried to get his hand around her neck, which placed the web of his hand directly in front of Natalie's mouth and she bit into him like a venomous reptile. Barron wailed in agony. He released the hand that he had entangled in her hair and began punching her in the side of her head until she could no longer withstand the blows. Natalie released his hand from her blood soaked mouth and pulled away from the crazed lunatic.

Regina began to pull herself from the floor, but before either of the girls could make another move he slid across the floor, reached under the couch and yanked out a long black shotgun and before anyone could react a ferocious blast convulsed the room. Regina fell helplessly back to the floor, her body was beginning to numb.

Once the room felt still again Regina took her hands from her ears and patted her entire body searching for the wound, the blood, the soft hanging flesh that would have been exposed by the gunshot. Regina soon found the wound, the blood, the soft hanging flesh, but it was not on her body, it was Natalie who had been wounded. Natalie sat up against the wall, taking sharp and ragged breaths. Regina scrambled across the floor and took Natalie's hand.

"Natalie," she cried as she wiped Natalie's blood splattered bangs from her lifeless face with the gentility of a mother. Natalie wheezed and her eyes stared blankly into open space. Regina looked down, but promptly looked away when she realized that she could see the wall through the enormous hole in Natalie's torso. There was no hope of saving her. Regina knew that it was impossible, but she would not leave Natalie until she was sure that her friend was gone, she would not let her die alone.

"Natalie, everything will be OK, I promise." Regina was not sure if Natalie could

hear her in these last few seconds that she still managed to take in air somehow. Regina looked into her eyes and she knew what Natalie was thinking as she sat there, her body dying, her soul preparing for the next place. Both girls thought of Lola. The guilt that Natalie felt over Lola riddled her and she was relieved that it was over and that she would get, with the ceasing of her own life, to face the girl whose life she had taken years ago. Regina was terrified. Regina doubted herself and wondered if Natalie was not thinking any of those things, if she had no brain capacity anymore to think of anything and Regina was just speaking of what she saw of herself in the reflection of Natalie's blank eyes.

Regina hadn't noticed that Barron was standing over them once again as Natalie took in her last labored breath. The shotgun rang out again and Natalie's face came apart before Regina's eyes and her vision was all but taken away with a wash of Natalie's blood as it sprayed her face. Incessant ringing penetrated Regina's ears as she grabbed them again and threw herself to the floor and as far away from the blast as possible.

Regina knew it was over now and she was happy that this miserable life was finally going to end. Barron knelt over Regina and began speaking. His voice was far away and there was a delay from the time that he spoke until she could actually hear the words that were coming through the wind tunnel of the time and space that was between them.

"You always did care more for them than me when I was the one who tried to give you everything. I tried everything. I was always good to you. I took care of Lola's body for you. And I thought this would be our opportunity to start something again, but you couldn't just come back and go the funeral, right? You just had to *figure* everything out, didn't you? This is all your fault, Regina. None of this had to happen. But you came here and the only thing you were focused on was Lola, then you blame my brother!" He spit. "You have got to be the most selfish person I've ever known. Well, where are your friends now, Regina? Where are they now?" he asked with a smirk.

Barron's face twisted in a devilish grin that she had never seen before.

"It's just you and me." Barron's demonic grin deformed as his jaw twisted furiously and he released a strained sob. He released his tight grip on the shotgun, which began to hang from his hand. He groaned again and Regina could see the blood began to bubble out of his mouth.

"...and me." The sound of Nikki's voice felt warm and blanketed Regina. Barron slumped helplessly onto Regina and his weight was tremendous on her small chest.

Nikki rose behind him, she was lifted on her knees but delivering the two stab wounds to Barron's body robbed her of what little strength she had gathered and she let her body sink back into the floor. Regina heaved Barron's massive body off her. She got to her knees and rolled him onto his back to see if he was still alive. His dark brown eyes peered into hers.

"Barron," Regina spoke his name sweetly. "Please...I need to know if she was alive." Regina said. In his barely lucid state, Barron did not immediately understand her question, but once he did his eyes danced in delight. There was something that she desperately needed from him and he knew that this was the way that he would hold on to

her forever. Regina cradled his head between her palms and he smiled cunningly.

“That’s my secret.” He spoke his last words through blood painted teeth.

Regina cried as she laid her head on his stomach. Choking on his own blood, Barron gargled, blew bubbles and then he was dead with the sadistic smirk still lathered on his face.

It was the same lock that kept the truth in that wouldn’t let the demons out.

When there was nothing more to be done, Regina lifted herself from the floor, found the necklace and clasped it around her neck. Nikki was more lucid, but still weak when Regina lifted her off the floor. Neither of them looked at what was left of Natalie’s body as they dragged out of the living room. Regina leaned Nikki against the wall as she labored to unlock the front door. She gathered her friend up once again and they stepped out into the starry tranquil night. The atmosphere was misty from the storm and the fresh air made them feel clean and new. The hood of her father’s car was open and frayed wires hung pathetically out the sides. She made no attempt at the dead car and instead continued to walk along the drive toward the highway with the moon lighting the path. Before that day, Regina would have been frightened on a foreboding night like this, but now there was no reason. All of the ghosts were dead.

“Would you have really killed Natalie?” Nikki inquired sleepily.

“I don’t know.” Regina responded listlessly.

“Did you really think that she had done it?”

“I didn’t know. I didn’t know anything at the time.” Regina answered.

“Do you think that Lola was dead?” Nikki asked. Regina stopped walking for a brief second to ponder the question and then began moving again just as quickly.

“I don’t know.”

There were no more questions until they were out of the gates and limping along the edge of the highway.

“What’s gonna to happen to us?” Nikki asked.

Regina became still when a chilling wind swept over her. She turned back and there flashed a glimpse of Lola, not a dead rotting corpse, but the funny sixteen-year-old girl that they had all loved and Regina prayed that the Rushers’ porch light was burning bright tonight. Warmth filled Regina’s chest as she said a silent good-bye to the girl before turning on the place that she would never lay eyes on again.

Regina turned to Nikki. “All we know right now is that Barron brought us to this house, he killed Eden...”

“He killed Eden too?” Nikki interrupted her. Regina sighed, feeling bad for Nikki who had still not yet realized that she had been hidden under Eden’s corpse.

“Yes, he killed Eden. He killed Natalie and tried to kill us and that is what we will tell the police for now. I just want to go to Lola’s funeral. After that we will go to Sheriff Handow and tell him everything, OK?” Regina explained.

“OK,” Nikki said as her frightened eyes filled with tears.

Regina got a new and better grip around her friend’s waist and they continued

silently down the highway. Soon, they heard the wail of sirens approaching and the sight of the flashing red lights were next. Regina smiled; she was sure that her parents had come home and found her note. She deposited Nikki along the side of the highway and stepped into the road waiving her hands over her head in a calm signaling for help. The first police car sped by her causing her to venture farther into the highway so that she would be seen by the next one. The second patrol vehicle flew by her but this time the driver spotted the wandering figure and the tires squealed as the car came to a screeching halt and whipped around.

At the police station, Regina and Nikki told Sheriff Handow how they had been brought to the DeFrank estate that night, how Eden and Natalie had been murdered and how Barron had confessed to killing Lola. In secret Regina and Nikki agreed to go back to Sheriff Handow after the funeral and reveal the story of Lola's murder in its entirety, which ensured that they could attend the final burial of Lola Rusher without fear of being arrested for it.

The day was bright with the earth colored leaves dressing the branches of the endless landscape of trees that stood protectively over the countless tombstones littered across the cemetery. A night of rain had refreshed the grass and it thrived despite the chill. Wind whipped the faces of each mournfully dressed funeral attendee, but the sun counteracted the minor flaw of the day with its exuberant shine. Nikki and Regina had hardly slept at all after their long night explaining at the police department, not to mention their forced visit to the hospital to be checked despite the objections of both girls. During the hours of questioning, Sheriff Handow appeared to have been genuinely confused by the complicated story that Nikki and Regina recounted at the police station, but when the search of Barron's home turned up not only the ruby ring that Lola had been wearing the night of her death, but also an axe in his shed that did not appear to have been used recently, but could have easily been the weapon used to dismember the young girl, his suspicions immediately refocused on the dead man.

Regina touched the green amulet that the Rushers had allowed her to keep. Loving words were spoken over the gleaming casket, but Regina could hardly focus on the eulogy with the dank fragrance of the thick dirt into which Lola was about to descend invading her nose. Regina said her own prayer for her friend. She took Nikki's hand, which instantly crumbled the tough exterior and Nikki began to sob silently as Regina looked on at the casket without a tear.

By the time of the funeral Regina assumed that she would have been at a point of some resolve, but there was no relief to be had by anyone associated with this tragedy. Sheriff had not released any of the details of the previous evening to the public, but this place was not so large that everyone did not have at least one bit or piece of the entire story by now and their questioning eyes burned into Regina and Nikki from every direction, their true motivations cloaked cleverly under the guise of sympathy.

Lola's story had come to an end, but in the process lay a plethora of new questions at the feet of Black Water as a whole and Regina stared suspiciously back at the people who

surrounded the casket and wondered who they were and what they were hiding.

What was in Mrs. Landcaster's house that was so horrible that not only did she have to hide it, but she herself did not want to be anywhere near it? Was it only the blood of animals that covered Mr. Flowers' apron? And what really happened to Ann Ivey? Regina accepted that she *was* a secret keeper, but how could she not be when she came from a whole town of them she thought as she watched the people that watched her.

After the funeral the girls stood outside of the police station. The night before, Nikki and Regina had been ready to tell the police everything, including their integral part in the death of Lola Rusher, but things looked different in the light of day and the motivation to reveal one of the many secrets that held Black Water together was ebbing.

Sheriff Handow was startled to find the two women on the step of his police station when he swung open the door to leave.

"Ladies," he greeted the similarly startled women. "Something else you want to tell me?" He asked as he looked at them sympathetically, they looked back at him, but no one spoke.

Regina smiled innocently.

Some people say that Black Water is hell, but that is not true. Hell is the place that the devil goes to escape the evil of this place and all of the people who call it home.

The End

About the Author

JeanNicole Rivers is a great lover of reading and writing. Though she loves reading and writing varied genres, horror/thriller is her favorite. JeanNicole has been writing poetry and short stories since she was a child, but has always aspired to compose a novel. The Secret Keepers, the first story in what will be a series of Black Water Tales, is her first novel.

JeanNicole Rivers graduated from Florida International University with a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy and lives in Houston, Texas.

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It's midnight when Regina Dean she receives a harrowing phone call. On the other end of the line a scratchy voice whispers, "They found her, Regina...they found her." Over the phone Regina learns that the corpse of her best friend, Lola Rusher, has been found and she must return to her, Godforsaken, hometown of Black Water for the funeral of the beloved girl who disappeared when they were both only sixteen years old.

Regina returns to Black Water and is reunited with a cast of old friends. Soon Regina realizes that the details revealed with the discovery of Lola's corpse do not make sense, especially the fact that Lola's body was dug up on the land of their childhood piano teacher.

Determined to lay Lola to rest, Regina launches her own investigation, but someone in Black Water warns Regina to STOP DIGGING. She is thrown into a race to solve the mystery before she loses her mind or meets Lola's fate.

Though Regina's hometown is a fun house of disturbing characters and distorted images, the truth about what happened to Lola Rusher will be revealed along with a most unexpected and perverse secret that threatens to expose everyone in Black Water.

Everyone knows something, but no one knows everything...