

NORAH McCLINTOCK

TAKEN



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ONE

My stomach clenched as the bus rumbled across the county line. In less than ten minutes it would pull into the parking lot at Ralph's, and I would have to get off. I wished it would never get there. Allison wished exactly the opposite.

"I can't wait to get home," she said. "I can't wait to show my mom what I bought."

Allison was my best friend. We'd met in fourth grade after my dad had been hired as a manager at a nuclear power plant and we had moved from the city, where I had been born, to a small town about twenty miles from the plant. Allison had lived in the town her whole life. Her dad was a pharmacist. He owned a drugstore on the main street. Her mom

was a hairdresser. She had her own salon. Allison and I hit it off right away. She made me forget how much I missed my friends back home. It wasn't long before we were doing everything together. Today we had taken the bus into the city and spent the whole day shopping.

"Steph?" Allison touched my arm. "Steph, what's the matter? I thought we had a great time, but you haven't said a word for the past half hour."

Reluctantly I pulled my eyes away from the bus window.

"Is it Gregg?" Allison said.

I nodded. "He's such a dick."

"Maybe they'll break up."

"I wish."

Boy, did I wish! I didn't even know what my mom saw in him. He was nothing at all like my dad. My dad had a couple of university degrees and traveled all over the world before he met my mom and got married. He read all the time. He was smarter than almost anyone else I'd ever met, but he never showed off. He also cared about important things—things besides making money. He liked to spend his time helping people and volunteering in the community. He was involved in a couple of

service clubs and some local charities. Everyone liked him. Everyone said what a nice guy he was.

Gregg, on the other hand, had barely made it through high school. He worked at a car-parts factory that had gone down to half-shifts months ago. He was trying to make up for his reduced wages by working for a buddy of his who had a vending-machine operation. A couple of days every two weeks, Gregg drove all over the area, filling machines and collecting money. His idea of a good time was playing poker or going snowmobiling with a bunch of his loser friends he'd known since high school. His big dream was being his own boss in his own business (I never was clear on just what kind of business he had in mind or was even qualified to run) and making a pile of money that he could spend on a new boat, a new car every year and—this was the one he made the biggest deal about—an outdoor hot tub so that he and my mom could sit outside under the stars, drinking champagne and fooling around. Yuck!

Unlike my dad, Gregg had never been anywhere. Worse, he was actually proud that he'd been born and raised, and had spent his whole life so far, in the same stifling little town. I'd lost count of the number of times I'd heard him say that he would never live

within a hundred miles of a city. He said cities were filled with concrete and smog and people living on top of each other, like ants in an anthill. He said if you looked at the crime rates, you'd see that most of the people who got murdered were city people. What an idiot. First of all, didn't he know that something like eighty percent of the people in the whole country lived in cities, so of course it stood to reason that most of the people who got murdered got murdered in cities? And second, it wasn't like there was no crime at all out in the country. For the past two months, everyone in every small town up here had been freaking out because of the two girls who had disappeared. One day they were there, the next they were gone.

When the first girl vanished, the police said they believed she had either run away or got lost. They thought this because she was a city girl who had moved out to the country less than a year ago and her parents said that she hadn't settled in yet. Her mom was afraid she might have tried to hitchhike back to the city. Her father had another idea. He said she'd started taking walks in the woods behind the subdivision where they lived. The woods were thicker than they looked from the subdivision,

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and they went on for a long way. He thought she was in there, either hiding because she was mad at her parents or lost because she had no sense of direction. The police mounted an all-out search for her. Dozens of volunteers helped them, combing the woods, the fields around the woods and the countryside beyond that. They looked for six days before they called it off. They said they had exhausted all the possibilities.

Two weeks after they stopped looking, a man out walking with his dog found her—*not alive*, as my mom put it. It turned out she had been murdered and then buried out in the scrub behind an abandoned sugar shack. Whoever had buried her hadn't dug a deep grave. Because of that, an animal got at her, which is how the man and his dog found her. The dog started barking, and when the man went over to see what was wrong, he saw a hand lying on the ground. That's it, just a hand. The man called the police and they brought in their own dog, and that dog led the cops to the rest of her. It was on the news for days. Everybody talked about it—especially because two days before that, the second girl had disappeared.

At first the police said that there was no evidence to suggest that the second girl's disappearance had

anything to do with what had happened to the first girl. At least, that's what they said publicly. Nobody believed that was what they really thought.

“Two girls, both the same age, both with long dark hair—of course they're related,” Derek Fowler, who was in three of my classes, said. “And look at the circumstances—they were both supposedly on their way home, both just after dark, but neither one ever got there. Trust me, there's a serial killer out there.” Derek claimed to know everything there was to know about serial killers. He considered himself an expert. “If the first girl turned up dead, you can bet your life the same thing will happen to the second girl. Serial killers are all about patterns and rituals. If they ever get caught, that's how the police get them—by studying their patterns and rituals. The FBI has a whole training program on serial killers.” Derek talked a lot about joining the FBI one day and learning to track serial killers. Most of the time, he sounded like he might turn out to be a serial killer himself. But not this time. Almost everyone in town was thinking the same thing Derek was.

Derek claimed that the police were thinking it too, even if they never came right out and said so. “Either that or they're totally incompetent,” Derek said.

There were just too many coincidences for the two disappearances to be completely unrelated.

The thought that there was a serial killer out there put people on edge. Parents warned their daughters never to go anywhere alone. They told them never to talk to strangers. They wagged their fingers and said they should never get into anyone's car, not even someone they might have seen around and who looked friendly, because, they said, you never know. We had a special assembly at school where a cop told us more or less the same thing. The school sent a special newsletter out to parents with a checklist to go over with their kids—what to do and what not to do. My mom made me read it out loud to her so that she knew that I knew what was in it. When I finished, she said, "Do what they say, Stephanie." She also said, "Don't even think about running away again. What happened to those two girls could happen to you." Just to make sure I didn't forget, she stuck an article from the local newspaper to the fridge door. It outlined the details of both disappearances and had pictures of both the girls on it.

"Hey, those girls look just like you," Gregg said one morning when I went downstairs for breakfast. He was standing in front of the fridge with a carton

of orange juice in his hand, and I could tell by the dribble of juice on his chin that he'd been drinking straight from it.

"Mom told you not to do that," I said.

"Mom told you not to do that," he repeated in a high-pitched voice, doing an imitation of me that made me sound like a bitchy little princess, which I'm not.

"Well, she did," I said. God, he was so annoying. "It's disgusting."

"It's how I do things."

"Yeah? Well, if you want to do disgusting things like that, you should buy your own juice instead of always mooching off us." I never touched any container of juice or milk that was open in the fridge. I didn't want his germs.

Gregg gave me a sharp look. I thought he was going to say something else, but my mom came into the kitchen and all of a sudden he was all smiles. He was always all smiles around her.

"What's going on?" my mom said after she kissed him on the lips, which was even more revolting than watching Gregg drinking orange juice straight from the carton.

"I was just telling Steph to be careful," Gregg said. "You know, because there's a killer on the loose."

He made spooky ghost noises, like that was going to scare me.

“It’s not funny, Gregg,” my mom said. “I wish the police would catch the guy. Then we could all stop worrying.”

I hadn’t even started worrying, mainly because neither of the two girls who had disappeared lived in our town. The first one lived just outside a hamlet that consisted of four corners (gas station, motel and a few small stores) surrounded by mile after mile of farmland. It was lonely out there, which not only made it a perfect place to grab a girl unnoticed but also explained why the girl hadn’t settled in. Living there had probably driven her crazy. The second girl lived down the highway in a beach town that was filled with tourists all summer and was pretty much dead for the rest of the year—another perfect place for someone to grab a girl. But it was different for me. I lived in the biggest town in the county. There were always people on the streets. There were always people watching. Too many people, if you ask me, paying too much attention to everyone else’s business. I told my mom she was overreacting.



All too soon, the bus pulled into the parking lot at Ralph's, a combination restaurant and grocery store on Elgin Street that doubled as the intercity bus station. I checked my watch. We had arrived right on schedule. Allison was the second to last person to get off the bus. I was the last person. A big part of me wanted to hide in the back, a stowaway on the return trip to the city. I wished I still had some friends back there that I could stay with, but I had been up here too long.

"I'd get one of my parents to drive you, except they aren't home," Allison said. "But I can call Judd. He won't mind giving you a lift."

Judd was Allison's older brother. Judd and Allison lived three doors down from Ralph's. I lived on the other side of town.

"I'll be fine," I said. "Besides, after sitting on that bus for the last three hours, I need to stretch my legs. I'll walk."

"Are you sure?" Allison said. I nodded. But she wouldn't let it go. "Maybe you should at least phone home first so your mom can look out for you," she said.

“She’s not home. She’s at her book-club meeting. And Gregg’s out on a run.” Thank God. I would have the house to myself, which was exactly how I liked it. “I’m going to go home and have a bubble bath.” Taking a nice long soak in the tub was one of my favorite things to do.

Allison still didn’t look happy. “I’ll walk with you,” she said. “When we get to your house, I’ll call Judd and he can come and get me.”

See what I mean about Allison? She was willing to walk all the way across town with me just to make sure that I’d be safe. She was the best friend ever.

“You sound like my mom,” I said. “You worry too much. I’ll be fine. I’ll call you tomorrow. I promise.”



I walked down to the end of Elgin Street, turned up Elm Street and made a left on Poplar. I followed Poplar until I came to an open field. It was large and dark and mostly hidden from the view of the houses near it by a border of hedges and mature trees. Before we moved to town, the field had been part of a farm. Then the farmer sold his land to a developer, who built the subdivision where we lived and

another subdivision after that. Nothing had been built on this field yet. It had stood empty for as long as I could remember—except for a couple of big For Sale signs. At this time of year, the field consisted mostly of weeds and tall grass. The town mowed it in the summer so it didn't look that bad and so kids could play softball or football. There was a row of trees at one end and some big clumpy bushes dotting it that flowered in spring. There were also a couple of paths cut through the weeds and the grass by all the people who took shortcuts through the field.

For the first time ever, I thought about taking the long way around. But my house was just on the other side. If I cut across the field like I always did, like all the kids on my street did when they went to school or into town, I would be home in less than half the time it would take to go the long way. Besides, I was tired and hungry, and my mom had said she was going to leave supper for me. It seemed like a no-brainer.

Still, I stood for a moment at the edge of the field, scanning it—just to be sure. I didn't see anyone. But one part of my brain said, *Maybe someone is hiding behind a tree or a For Sale sign or in the bushes.* The other part of my brain said, *Get real, Steph, and get home.*

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I thought about the first girl who had been taken and who was the only one they had found so far. I wondered exactly what had happened to her. Had a car pulled up alongside her, the driver maybe asking her for directions and then, when she got close enough, grabbing her and dragging her inside with him? Had she been dumb enough to hitchhike and get into a car with just a guy in it or maybe a couple of guys? Or had she been jumped? Had she been walking home, like I was, thinking about school or her friends or what she was going to do on the weekend, when all of a sudden someone had attacked her or knocked her out or...?

I told myself I was being ridiculous. Just because my mom thought there was some kind of boogeyman out there didn't mean it was true. I mean, seriously, what were the chances?

I started across the field. I admit it, I walked a little faster than usual. I also admit that I couldn't stop glancing back over my shoulder, which was something I didn't ordinarily do. As I walked, I felt a tingle at the back of my neck, like someone was staring at me, but when I turned around, there was no one there. Mom is definitely overreacting, I thought. Worse, her overreacting is contagious.

I was halfway across the field when someone grabbed me from behind.

My instinct was to spin around to see who it was, but an iron-like arm closed around my throat and a steely hand clamped itself over my mouth and nose. I felt cold all over, like the temperature around me had dropped to subarctic levels. I thought, This can't be happening to me. I struggled. I kicked.

I couldn't breathe. The hand over my mouth and nose was cutting off my air supply. My head started to spin. I had to get free before I passed out.

Suddenly the hand let go. I opened my mouth to scream, but the arm around my throat squeezed tighter. I reached behind me to claw at my assailant, desperate to get his arm off me. I tried to scratch his face or his neck or anything else I could reach. Then I felt a jab in my arm. The pain was short and sharp, like a bee sting. I felt numb all over.