

Prologue

"Can't anyone hear me?" Claudia cried.

She struggled to lift her arms and legs from the weight of the sand. It was no use.

Claudia closed her eyes. Her throat ached. Her face was burning.

Water rolled over the sand, making it suddenly heavier on her chest.

The waves are getting closer.

I'm going to drown, Claudia realized.

She opened her eyes to find herself in shadow.

The shadow of death.

It's getting darker. Darker.

Death is closing in.

As Claudia made one last frantic struggle to free herself, the shadow rolled silently over her.

chapter

1

BURIED ALIVE

Claudia Walker surfaced slowly from a deep sleep. She felt something cool and damp covering her chest and legs. She could smell the salt air of the sea.

In the distance she heard waves breaking on the shore. She wanted to drift back into sleep but couldn't. Her face was burning.

She tried to open her eyes, but they seemed to be swollen shut. She struggled to sit up. But something—a thick, heavy weight—pressed down on her.

Her eyes opened a crack and she saw flies buzzing around a mound of dried seaweed near her head. A sand fly skittered across the sand. The fly buzzed toward her, its green eyes twitching. A thin, hairy leg touched her chin.

Moving steadily, the fly walked across her lips. Claudia tried to brush it away, but couldn't raise her hands. She struggled to move as the fly made its way across her cheek toward her swollen eye.

The harsh afternoon sun beat down. Claudia licked her lips. They were blistered and cracking. Her throat was parched, and it hurt to swallow.

Why can't I move?

What is holding me down?

Finally Claudia forced her eyes open all the way. A mountain of sand was piled over her. Her entire body lay buried beneath it.

I've been buried—buried alive! she realized, a tremor of panic rising in her chest.

With great effort she raised her head high enough to see ocean waves lapping closer. The tide was coming in, Claudia realized.

I've got to get up. Got to get out.

Or I'll drown!

She tilted her head back against the hot sand and uttered a cry for help. Her voice cracked. Her dry throat ached.

There was no reply.

"Is anyone here?" Claudia screamed. "Can anyone help me?"

A gull winged high overhead, its cries mocking her.

The cruel sun blazed down on her.

Claudia struggled to pull even one arm free. But the heat had drained her strength.

How long have I been sleeping here?

How long have I been buried?

Where are my friends?

Her temples began to throb. Raising her eyes to the bright, cloudless sky, she felt dizzy.

She struggled to lift her arms and legs from under the weight of the sand. But it was no use.

Her heart thudded heavily in her chest. Sweat poured down her forehead. She called out again.

No answer. Only the crash of the waves and the shrill cries of the gulls overhead.

"Can't *anybody* hear me?"

She knew that if her friends had returned to the house, they'd never hear her. Craning her neck, she could see the steep wooden stairway leading up to the house, up the face of the sixty-foot cliff.

The house itself had thick stone walls, like those of a castle. No one would hear her from up there. No one would come.

She screamed anyway.

chapter

2

THE SHADOW OF DEATH

Dear Claudia,

How the heck are you?

I know this is short notice, but I'm inviting you to the first annual reunion of Bunk from Camp Full Moon.

The four of us had such a short time together last summer that I got to thinking it would be great to see one another and catch up. (None of us has been too terrific in the letter-writing department, especially me.)

My parents will be away the first week in August. They told me to invite some friends to stay at our summer house on the beach so I won't get lonely.

So how about it, Claud? Can you come? It'll be just the four of us from Bunk 12—you, me, Sophie, and Joy.

I hope you're having a really boring summer in Shadyside, so you'll say yes. I promise it won't be boring here!

Please come!

Marla

That letter was how Claudia came to be on this lonely beach. Although surprised by Marla's invitation, Claudia had accepted at once.

She'd been having a dreadful summer. She had broken up with Steve, her boyfriend of two years, after a silly argument on the Fourth of July. A week later she lost her summer waitressing job when the restaurant had closed.

It will be great to see the girls again, Claudia thought as she stood on her porch on Fear Street, reading and rereading Marla's invitation.

They had spent three weeks together the previous summer and had become such good friends. They'd shared so many good times, so many laughs—until the accident. . . .

Still gripping the invitation tightly in her hand, Claudia rushed into the house, told her mother about it, and hurried up to her room to call Marla. "I'm dying to see you!" she exclaimed. "And your summer house. I remember you describing it as a real mansion!"

"It's a quaint little shack," Marla joked. "I think you'll find it comfortable."

Two weeks later Claudia was on the train to Summerhaven. She had brought a book to read on the long trip. But instead she just stared out the window, thinking about Marla and the other girls and their brief time together at camp.

Four and a half hours later Claudia stepped onto the wooden platform at Summerhaven, squinted into the bright sunlight, and saw Joy and Sophie parked next to a small pile of suitcases.

Joy carried one sleek, designer bag. Sophie had four mismatched pieces, each one bulging. Claudia had to laugh. It was so much like camp, when Sophie had arrived with two trunks full of clothes and an entire duffel bag of cosmetics. She had explained that she could never decide what *not* to pack.

As Claudia waved and started toward them, a sleek silver Mercedes glided up to the station. Marla leapt out from the driver's side, leaving the door open, and ran to hug Joy and Sophie.

From across the long platform, Claudia admired Marla's new look. She seemed taller and even more slender. Her strawberry-blond hair had grown long, and she looked very preppy in a turquoise designer top over white tennis shorts.

Joy was as exotic-looking as ever. She had slightly slanted green eyes, olive skin, dark, full lips, and straight black hair, which fell loosely down her back nearly to her waist.

Sophie hadn't changed either, Claudia saw. She was still the shortest of the four, with frizzy, light brown hair, bobbing on top of her round face. She wore wire-rimmed glasses to make her look older and more sophisticated, but Sophie still came across as about twelve.

Joy was the first to see Claudia. "Claud!" she shrieked, loudly enough to make everyone at the station turn to stare at her.

Before Claudia could reply, Joy had run up and thrown her arms around her. She was hugging her as if they were long-lost sisters.

Sophie approached and gave Claudia a short hug. Her greeting was polite and cool, and somehow more honest.

Marla gave Claudia a quick hug and said, "Let's go. I'm not allowed to park here."

A few seconds later they were rolling through the small beach town of Summerhaven, leaning back against buttery-soft leather seats and staring out from the air-conditioned coolness of the Mercedes.

Marla drove past the boardwalk and tiny beach shops selling surfing and fishing gear, then past blocks of summer bungalows. The bungalows gave way to larger houses and then to no houses at all.

"Marla," Sophie said, "I thought your family lived in Summerhaven."

"No," Marla replied, her eyes on the narrow road. "The house is out on the Point, about fifteen miles from town. We just use the Summerhaven post office."

The road curved through high, grass-covered sand dunes. Beyond the dunes, Claudia could hear the steady, soft roar of the ocean.

"This part of the beach is all protected land," Marla explained. "It's a bird sanctuary."

They drove through miles of sanctuary. Once out of it, the road narrowed even more, becoming a gravel path wide enough for only one car.

Claudia gasped out loud as the Drexell mansion suddenly rose up in front of them. Marla had shown her snapshots of it at camp, but they didn't come close to portraying the size or beauty of the enormous house.

Marla opened a metal gate and pulled the car through a space in the tall, perfectly trimmed hedge that

bordered the property. It had been planted to disguise the metal fencing. The gray stone house was completely visible now, set back on a wide, manicured lawn like a fairy-tale castle.

The driveway led around to the side of the house.

Claudia could see a conservatory with a stained-glass dome. In back, a wide terrace led to tennis courts, a colorful gazebo, gardens, an enormous swimming pool, and several smaller buildings.

Marla ticked them off carelessly, "Oh, that's the boat house, and that's the equipment shed, a cabana, in case you don't want to change in the house, the gardener's shed, woodshed . . . That larger building behind the house is the guest house."

"Hey, Marla, do you have a map?" Joy joked. "It'll take me all week to figure out how not to get lost!"

"Don't worry," Marla replied, pulling the car into the four-car garage. "We'll stick together. I'm so glad you all came. I won't let you out of my sight."

"Well stick together . . ."

Now, buried in the sand, with the waves slipping closer to her, Claudia remembered Marla's words.

"We'll stick together. . ."

But where was Marla now? Where was Joy? Where was Sophie?

How could they have left her buried under the burning sun?

Claudia closed her eyes. Her throat ached. Her face was burning. The back of her neck itched, but she couldn't scratch it.

Water rolled over the sand, making it suddenly heavier on her chest.

The waves are getting closer.

I'm going to drown, Claudia realized.

She opened her eyes to find herself in shadow.

The shadow of death.

It's getting darker. Darker.

Death is closing in.

As Claudia made one last frantic struggle to free herself, the shadow rolled silently over her.

chapter

3

FIRST "ACCIDENT"

*I*t took Claudia a long while to realize that the shadow was that of a guy standing over her. She saw his bare legs first, dripping with water, sand clinging to his ankles.

Gazing up into his face, she uttered a soft cry of surprise.

His dark eyes stared down at her. His short black hair was wet, matted to his forehead. He had muscular arms, crossed in front of his chest. He wore long, baggy, orange swim trunks.

"Do you need help?" he asked softly.

"Yes," Claudia replied quickly, struggling to nod her head. "I-I'm stuck."

A wave crashed against the shore. Frothy, white water washed up nearly to Claudia's face.

The boy started shoveling away the heavy, wet sand with both hands. "Can you move? Are you hurt?" he asked. "I was walking back from a swim. I heard you scream. Are you all alone?" He gazed up and down the beach.

Claudia struggled to answer him, but her parched throat closed up. She nodded.

He scooped away most of the sand, working quickly, his dark, handsome face set with concentration. He took her hand and tugged it. "Can you stand up?"

"I—I think so," Claudia stammered. "I am a little dizzy, though."

"You've got a bad burn," the boy told her, frowning.

"I fell asleep, I guess," Claudia said shakily, allowing him to pull her to her feet. "My friends left me. I don't know where they went. I—"

She stood unsteadily, holding on to his hands, and squinted against the sun. The sand was a dazzling white in the bright daylight, nearly as white as the Drexells' newly painted dock down the beach.

"If you hadn't come by . . ." Her voice trailed off. She shook her head, trying to shake some of the wet sand from her straight, auburn hair. "Even my hair hurts!" she exclaimed.

The damp, sticky sand clung to her skin. Her entire body was covered. She itched all over.. She tried brushing it off her legs.

"I've got to take a shower," she groaned.

"Are you staying up there? At the Drexells'?" He pointed up the side of the cliff.

"Yeah." Claudia nodded.

"I'll help you," he said quietly. "Put your arm around my shoulders."

She obediently followed his instructions. His skin felt surprisingly cold; from the ocean, she realized. She

leaned heavily against him. He was so cool against her burning skin.

He's really great-looking, Claudia couldn't help but think. And really strong. She loved his dark eyes. "I'm Claudia," she told him. "Claudia Walker. I'm visiting Marla Drexell."

Her arm around his shoulders, she allowed him to lead her to the steep steps that led up the cliff to the Drexells' estate. She waited for him to tell her his name.

"You'd better get something on that sunburn right away," he said. He held on to her waist, helping her up the narrow, wooden steps.

"What's *your* name?" she asked.

He hesitated. "Daniel," he answered finally.

"Do you live nearby?" Claudia asked.

"Not really," he told her, a strange smile on his face.

Is he laughing at me? she wondered, feeling some regret. She realized she wanted Daniel to like her.

But he just thinks I'm ridiculous, buried up to my head, my face burned red as a lobster!

At the top of the stairway stood a chain-metal gate. Claudia grabbed the gate and pulled. It clanked but didn't move.

"It's always locked," Daniel told her. "The Drexells keep their property very well secured. They also have a guard dog." He bent over and searched the low shrubs until he found a black metal box. He pulled the lid up to reveal an electronic keypad. Claudia watched him tap out a number code on the keypad. The gate clicked, then swung open.

"How do you know the code?" she asked, stepping unsteadily onto the grass.

He flashed her a mysterious grin. "I know a lot of things."

Feeling stronger, Claudia made her way quickly across the grounds, past the tennis courts and pool, toward the back terrace of the house. As she neared the terrace, she saw Marla behind a sliding glass door, a startled expression on her face.

The door slid open and Marla came running out, dressed in her tennis whites, followed by Joy and Sophie. "Claudia—what are you doing out here?" Marla cried. "We thought you were upstairs."

"Huh?" Claudia managed to gasp. "You—you left me down there to fry!"

"No!" Joy cried. "After we buried you, we went for a walk. When we came out, Marla said you'd gone back to the house. So we came in too!"

"I can't believe you left me buried in the sand, asleep!" Claudia cried angrily.

"We honestly didn't see you!" Sophie protested.

"Ow. Look at her face," Joy said, tsk-tsking.

"We didn't know you were still there. How did you get back in here on your own?" Marla asked.

"Daniel helped me," Claudia told her.

"Who?"

"If it hadn't been for Daniel—" Claudia started and turned to introduce him.

There was no one behind her.

He had vanished.

• • •

Claudia's being left in the sun was the first "accident" of the week. The next "accident" wouldn't occur

until the following morning.

It would take the girls even longer than that to realize that something strange was going on at the Drexell mansion.

Now, all Claudia could think of was treating her badly burned face. She showered and changed into a loose-fitting blue and yellow sundress. Marla appeared in Claudia's room with a bottle of aloe lotion and a jar of soothing skin cream. She made Claudia drink an entire bottle of water.

"I'm so sorry. Really," Marla kept repeating. "I'll never forgive myself. When we got back from our walk, we took the other path up from the dunes. I just assumed—"

"I don't even remember falling asleep," Claudia said, frowning unhappily as she studied her scarlet face in the dresser mirror. "It must have been that new antihistamine my allergy doctor gave me." She groaned. "This is going to blister. Then it's going to peel like crazy. I'm going to look like a monster!"

"I think you look great," Marla said unconvincingly. "I like your hair. You're letting it grow?"

"Yeah." Claudia pulled her auburn hair back. Then she rubbed more cream onto her face. "I'm never going in the sun again," she muttered.

Dinner was served in the large, formal dining room with the four girls huddled at one end of the long, marble-topped table. An enormous crystal chandelier hovered low over a centerpiece of white and yellow flowers.

"This is a little fancy for me," Sophie confessed, gazing uneasily about the room. "You're going to have to tell me which fork to use."

"I don't think so," Marla replied dryly. "We're having cheeseburgers and french fries for dinner."

They all laughed. It seemed funny to eat cheeseburgers and french fries in the midst of all that splendor.

"Alfred is barbecuing the hamburgers out on the terrace," Marla told us. "At least, I hope they're hamburgers. Alfred is very nearsighted. He could be barbecuing the dog and wouldn't know it!"

Sophie and Claudia laughed, but Joy groaned and pretended to gag.

The three girls had met Alfred when they arrived. He was a jolly, plump, middle-aged man with a pink bald head and a tiny gray mustache perched under a bulbous nose. He was the only servant on duty for the whole week, Marla had explained. The others had been given the time off by her parents.

He entered the room now, carrying a large silver salad bowl in both hands.

"I'll serve the salad, Alfred," Marla told him.

"The hamburgers are almost done," he informed her, setting the bowl down beside her on the table. His shoes squeaked as he left the room.

Marla stood up and began filling the china salad plates with salad. "We've got so much catching up to do," she said enthusiastically. "I've missed you guys, I really have. I apologize for not writing more."

After passing out the plates, Marla sank back into her chair.

All four girls lifted their salad forks and began to eat.

"Well, who wants to go first?" Marla asked, smiling. "Who wants to tell what's new and exciting in her life?"

There was a brief silence.

"Don't everybody answer at once," Marla joked, rolling her eyes.

Claudia chewed on a cucumber slice, thinking hard. What was there to tell? It hadn't been a very exciting year for her.

She glanced around at the other girls.

To her surprise, she saw that Joy's expression was contorted; by what, she didn't know.

"Joy—" Claudia started to say.

But her voice was drowned out by Joy's highpitched scream of horror.

chapter

4

THE GHOST BOY

Still shrieking, both her hands tugging at her hair, Joy leapt up from the table. Her chair toppled over backward, clattering noisily against the bare wooden floor.

"Joy, what is it?" Marla screamed. "What?"

Trembling all over, Joy removed one hand from her hair and pointed a trembling finger at her salad plate.

Claudia leaned over and peered at the plate. She made a disgusted face when she saw the fat brown worm crawling on a lettuce leaf.

Sophie had jumped up and wrapped her arms around Joy's shoulders. "What's wrong? What's the matter?"

"It's a worm," Claudia said quietly. "A big brown one."

Joy covered her face with her hands. "I-I'm sorry," she stammered. "I didn't mean to frighten you. But you know how I get. I mean, you know I have a thing about bugs and worms."

Sophie hugged Joy tighter. Marla was calling loudly for Alfred.

"I've had a thing about bugs," Joy repeated, "ever since—ever since camp."

None of us has been the same since camp, Claudia thought sadly.

Not since the accident last summer.

But she didn't want to think about that now. She wanted to enjoy this week, to have fun with her friends—and not think about what had happened last summer.

Alfred came bouncing into the room, concern on his pink face. "Is there a problem, miss?"

"Joy found a worm in her salad," Marla replied, pointing.

Alfred's mouth dropped open for a second. Then he quickly regained his composure. "I am so sorry," he said, scurrying to gather up the plate. He held it close to his face, searching for the worm. "The lettuce is locally grown," he said, and quickly disappeared with the plate.

When he was gone, Sophie laughed. "Was that an explanation? That it was locally grown?"

Claudia and Marla laughed too.

"I guess the worm was locally grown too!" Claudia joked.

"Sometimes Alfred is weird," Marla said, shaking her head. "I wish he'd get glasses. He'd serve up fewer worms if he did."

Joy bent to pick up her chair. She seemed to be recovered as she pushed her black hair back and sat down, her green eyes flashing to life.

Joy was always the most emotional, the most dramatic of the group, Claudia remembered, watching her friend. She guessed that's why she'd always liked her so much. Joy was so completely different from her. Claudia was so calm, so in control all the time. I never show my true feelings, she thought.

Lost in her thoughts, Claudia realized with a start that Marla had asked her a question. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"I asked you about that boy," Marla repeated. "You said something about a boy digging you out of the sand."

"Yeah, tell us about him," Sophie said eagerly, pushing her glasses up on her nose. "Are there boys around here?"

Alfred returned, carrying an enormous silver tray stacked high with hot cheeseburgers. He returned in a moment with a bowl of french fries and a tray of condiments for the cheeseburgers.

The girls helped themselves before Claudia answered Marla's question. "He said his name was Daniel. He had been for a swim, and then he saw me buried there."

"Been for a swim? On our beach?" Marla cried, narrowing her eyes. "What did he look like?"

"Not bad," Claudia replied. "Tall, very good-looking actually, black hair. A great bod, like he worked out."

"And he said his name was Daniel?" Marla demanded.

Claudia nodded.

"Strange. I've never seen him around," Marla said thoughtfully. "In fact, I never see any boys on our beach."

"You *must* know him," Claudia insisted. "He knew the code to open the back gate."

Marla dropped her cheeseburger onto her plate. "Huh?"

"He let me in," Claudia told her.

"No way. That's impossible," Marla insisted. Her blue eyes revealed some fear. "A strange boy knows the code to our gate? Come on, Claud. How long were you out in the sun?"

"A long time, thanks to you," Claudia replied, surprised by her own anger.

"You hallucinated this Daniel," Marla told her.

"Hallucinate one for *me*!" Sophie joked.

Everyone laughed.

"He was real," Claudia insisted. "He saved my life." She took a bite of cheeseburger. The tomato slid out from the bun and dropped into her lap. "Not my day," she muttered, struggling to pick it up.

"But there *are* no boys around here," Marla said heatedly. "There couldn't be a boy who knows the code. There couldn't be a boy who— "

She stopped in midsentence and uttered a silent gasp, raising a hand to her mouth at the same time. Her blue eyes grew wide, and her forehead became lined in a fretful frown.

"Marla, what's the matter? Did you find a worm too?" Joy demanded anxiously, holding her cheeseburger in front of her with both hands.

"Oh, wow," Marla muttered, ignoring Joy and her question. Marla shook her head. "Wow." She raised her eyes to Claudia's and stared intently at her across the table.

"What? What is it?" Claudia asked, reaching for Marla's hand.

"It wasn't a boy," Marla told her in a hushed whisper. "I know who it was, Claud, and it wasn't a boy."

"Marla, what do you mean?"

"It was a ghost," Marla said, her hand trembling under Claudia's. "It was the Ghost Boy."

chapter

5

SHADOWS

Claudia laughed. "Get serious, Marla. That boy was real. He told me his name was Daniel."

"I thought he was real too," Marla replied softly, her expression solemn. "I thought he was real the times I saw him. But he isn't. He's a ghost."

Joy's green eyes sparkled to life. "You mean—your house is haunted?" she asked.

Marla nodded and pointed to the tall window that faced out the back. "He lives in the guest house, I think," she told Joy. "That's where I've seen him the most."

"You've seen him a lot?" Joy asked. Sophie shoved her plate away and stared intently across the table at Marla. Claudia's mouth was twisted in a skeptical smile.

"Once I saw him on the tennis court," Marla said, her blue eyes darting from girl to girl. "He was dressed in white, in old-fashioned clothes, very starched. He was holding a weird tennis racket, made of wood, I guess. He had the saddest look on his face. I waved to him."

"Did you play tennis with him?" Claudia asked sarcastically.

Marla shook her head, ignoring Claudia's tone. "He turned toward me and realized I could see him. He stared at me for a second, that sad expression on his face—then he disappeared." She snapped her fingers. "Poof. Into thin air."

Claudia narrowed her eyes and studied Marla. "You're serious—aren't you?" she said.

"Yes. It's all true," Marla told her.

"But this boy had to be real!" Claudia protested. "He shoveled away the sand with his hands. He pulled me to my feet. I *touched* him, Marla. I had my arm around his shoulders. Solid shoulders. Real shoulders."

"And he didn't feel strange to you?" Marla asked.

"Well . . ." Claudia hesitated. "His skin *was* very cold. But—"

"See?" Marla slapped her hand triumphantly on the table. "His skin was cold because he's dead, Claud."

Claudia's mouth dropped open. "He told me he had just been swimming," she said, thinking hard. "His

skin was cold from the ocean."

"No." Marla shook her head. "That was his excuse. He's dead, Claud. He's been dead for a hundred years."

"How do you know that?" Joy asked excitedly, twirling a strand of black hair into a corkscrew and tugging it over her forehead. "Have you talked with him?"

"No," Marla replied, turning to Joy. "The real estate agent told us about him when he sold us this place. He said a boy had been murdered in the guest house a hundred years ago. The murderer was never found. The agent said that since then, the boy had been seen haunting the grounds, going for solitary swims, walking in the gardens."

Marla took a long drink of tea, then continued in a hushed voice. "I've seen him three times. The last time, he came very near. I think he wanted to tell me something, but he acted very shy. I said hello to him, and he disappeared."

"Wow," Joy muttered, shaking her head.

"He's very handsome," Marla said, "in an old-fashioned way."

"Weird," Sophie muttered, obviously a little frightened.

"I want to see him," Joy declared. "I really do believe in ghosts. I've always wanted to see one."

"His skin was so cold," Claudia admitted thoughtfully. "Even in the hot sun, his skin was cold. Cold as death." She shuddered. "I can't believe a ghost saved my life this afternoon."

To her surprise, Marla laughed. "Then *don't* believe it!" she cried.

"Huh?" Claudia was bewildered by Marla. "What do you mean?"

"I made it all up!" Marla confessed, and uttered a gleeful laugh, her blue eyes glittering.

"You *what*?" Claudia and Joy cried in unison.

Sophie pushed her glasses up on her nose, stunned.

"I made it all up!" Marla told them, unable to hide how pleased she was. "The whole story. There *is* no ghost boy. No murder in the guest house. No boy on the tennis court with a sad expression."

"Marla!" Claudia screamed angrily. She stood up, grabbed Marla by the neck and pretended to strangle her. Marla collapsed in gales of laughter.

"I believed her! I really did!" Joy confessed.

"Me too," Sophie said, shaking her head.

"Wish I had my camcorder," Marla cried gleefully.

"The expressions on your faces! So serious!" She turned to Claudia. "I'm really surprised at you, Claud. At camp, you were always the one who could scare us with your crazy ghost stories. You were always the one with the wild imagination. How could you fall for my stupid little story?"

Claudia could feel her face grow red. She couldn't decide if she was more angry or embarrassed. "A boy really did help me!" she insisted shrilly. "Daniel. He really did rescue me. And he really did vanish into thin air!"

"Yeah. Really!" Marla cried, and began laughing again.

Well, Daniel, Claudia thought, frowning, if you aren't a ghost, then who are you?

Claudia pushed back the white lacy curtains and peered at the night through the French doors of her room. Even with the doors closed, she could hear the steady wash of ocean waves against the shore.

Spotlights sent out yellow cones of light over the back lawn. The tennis court and rectangular swimming pool were nearly as well-lit as they would be during the day.

After dinner the girls had watched a tape of *Bye Bye, Birdie* that Marla had rented. The old musical was a riot, Claudia thought. The girls had hooted with laughter at the funny way the fifties-style teenagers were dressed and at the hilariously sexist attitudes.

"Those girls were so *dumb*!" Sophie had exclaimed. "They only cared about pleasing boys!"

"Yeah. Not at all like today," Claudia replied, rolling her eyes.

After the movie they said good night and made their way upstairs to their rooms. Feeling sleepy, her face burning from her sunburn and chills running down her back, Claudia had taken a hot bath. Then she changed into a long nightshirt and carefully applied more cream to her face.

Now, yawning, she found herself leaning against the glass door, taking one last peek at the back lawn before tucking herself in. It was all so beautiful, so luxurious. Listening to the faint roar of the ocean beyond the cliff, she felt as if in a fantasy world.

She uttered a little gasp when she saw the light flicker on in the guest house window.

Raising her hands to the sides of her face, she narrowed her gaze and squinted hard.

Yes.

A shadow was moving in the guest house window.

A pale light flickered there.

Someone is in there, Claudia thought, staring hard, her nose pressed against the glass.

For a brief second she thought she recognized the shadow figure.

Is it Daniel? she wondered.

Is it the Ghost Boy?

Then an icy hand, cold as death, gripped Claudia's shoulder.

chapter

6

A SHOCK

Claudia cried out in fright.

She spun around, gasping for breath to scream again.

"Oh. Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you," Marla said, lowering her hand.

"Marla! I—I—" Claudia stammered, breathing hard. She could still feel the chill of Marla's cold hand.

"You were concentrating so hard on what's outside that you didn't hear me call you," Marla said, her blue eyes locked on Claudia's.

Claudia stepped back to pull the curtains over the glass door. "I saw the shadow of someone," she told Marla. "In the guest house."

"Huh?" Marla appeared surprised. She moved toward the glass door and pulled the curtain back.

"A light. In the guest house," Claudia repeated.

"No way," Marla said, shaking her head. "There's no one staying there, Claud. The guest house has been empty all summer."

"But I saw someone—" Claudia began.

"Probably a reflection," Marla said, moving back. "Those spotlights are so bright. Daddy had them installed to discourage prowlers. But they throw so much light. You must have seen a reflection in the guest house window. That's all."

"I guess," Claudia replied doubtfully.

"I just came in to see if you needed anything," Marla said.

"No thanks. I'm fine," Claudia replied. She yawned. "The sun really knocked me out."

"Such a bad burn," Marla said.

Something about the way she said it struck Claudia as odd. Marla hadn't sounded sympathetic. She sounded *pleased*.

No. I'm just overtired, Claudia scolded herself. I'm starting to get really paranoid.

She said good night to Marla, turned off the light, and climbed between the satiny sheets of the enormous, four-poster bed.

A few seconds later she drifted off to sleep, the dark, handsome face of Daniel, the Ghost Boy, floating in her mind.

When Claudia awoke the next morning, she stretched luxuriously in her bed.

Morning sunlight filtered in through the lacy curtains covering the French doors. One door had been left ajar a few inches, and she could smell tangy salt air and hear waves falling onto the shore. Any place in this house, I can always hear the ocean, she thought, smiling.

She pushed back the sheet and light summer comforter and sat up, enjoying the elegantly furnished room.

A cherrywood dressing table and mirror stood directly across from the bed. Beside them was a matching chest of drawers. On the adjoining wall a small, ornate desk, complete with writing paper and a fountain pen. A cut crystal vase filled with fresh flowers was on the corner of the desk, and the dressing table held tiny vials of perfume.

A door beside the desk led to a private bathroom. Claudia thought she liked the bathroom best of all. The night before, lying back in the deep bathtub, she had raised her eyes and realized that the entire ceiling was painted with pictures of mermaids.

This guest bedroom was a long way from the cramped room on Fear Street that she shared with her younger sister, Cass. I could get used to this luxury, Claudia decided.

What was it like for Marla to live like this all the time? Did she even notice how beautiful it all was?

Claudia didn't know very much about Marla's family, but she knew that her father, Anthony Drexell, was a financial wizard. He made his money buying up companies around the globe, and it seemed Marla usually communicated with him by phoning Vienna or Stockholm or Barcelona.

Mrs. Drexell was, in Marla's words, a socialite. She accompanied her husband everywhere, and spent most of her time making the rounds of international benefits.

It must get lonely for Marla, Claudia thought. No wonder she wanted company for a whole week, rather than be alone in this big house. Alfred seemed like a nice guy, but he wouldn't be much company.

Claudia got out of bed and sat down at the dressing table to examine her sunburn. Her skin was still an alarming shade of red, and it hurt to raise her eyebrows or wrinkle her nose, or even smile.

"What's wrong with you, Claudia?" she asked her reflection. It was the first time in years she'd gotten burned. She'd been crazy to agree to let the others bury her in sand, and crazier still to fall asleep in the sun—though the antihistamine had had something to do with that.

Why hadn't one of the girls awakened her? She couldn't believe they'd forgotten. They knew how easily she burned. How could they have left her to fall asleep like that?

Claudia smoothed some aloe gel onto her face and then hurried to get dressed. She put on a yellow T-shirt, black spandex shorts, and white sneakers, and headed downstairs past Joy's and Sophie's rooms. Their doors were still shut.

Claudia checked her watch. It was nine in the morning. They'd all turned in fairly early the night before. How could they sleep late with all that bright sunlight streaming in? she wondered.

Downstairs, she found Marla in the kitchen, wearing crisp white shorts and a pale pink top. "Alfred fixed us a fruit salad, biscuits, and some sausage," Marla said, motioning to a row of blue and white china serving dishes on the counter. "Help yourself."

"I guess Joy and Sophie are still asleep," Claudia said.

"Joy hates getting up before noon," Marla reminded her.

"And Sophie loves doing whatever Joy does," Claudia added with a smile.

It was true. At Camp Full Moon, Sophie had practically worshiped Joy, copying her every move.

"How about a game of tennis before they wake up?" Claudia suggested, spooning fruit salad into a bowl.

Tennis was Claudia's sport. At camp, she remembered, she and Marla had been fairly evenly matched. But Marla said that her father was going to get her a private coach, so she was probably terrific now.

"Well, okay," Marla replied reluctantly. "A short match. You don't want to get too much sun, Claud."

"I'll be careful," Claudia replied. Once again she had the uneasy feeling that Marla was gloating about her sunburn. She dished up the fruit salad and tried to ignore it.

The tennis match was not what Claudia had expected.

Marla couldn't do anything right. She had never had a problem with Claudia's serve at camp, but today she failed to return ball after ball.

"The sun is in my eyes," she explained, shaking her head, kicking at the red-clay court.

They traded sides.

To Claudia's surprise, Marla misjudged balls, swung wildly, and hit the ball high in the air as if she were a beginner.

Those private lessons have wrecked her game! Claudia thought. She was winning in straight sets and hadn't even worked up a sweat.

"It's just not my day. My muscles are tired or something," Marla cried unhappily. Angrily, she threw her racket down.

"You'll probably beat me easily next time," Claudia said, jogging over to her.

Marla scowled and studied her toes, avoiding Claudia's eyes. "I'm out of practice," she muttered. "I haven't had time to play this year."

Claudia stepped up beside her as they headed slowly back to the house. She placed a hand lightly on Marla's shoulder. "Maybe you're upset seeing us again," she said softly.

Marla turned to her, her blue eyes wide. "Upset?"

"You know," Claudia insisted. "You haven't seen us since the accident. Since your sister died."

Marla's face turned bright red. She tugged the hairband out of her hair and shook her blond hair free. "I don't want to talk about Alison," she replied, still avoiding Claudia's eyes.

"It's on all of our minds," Claudia said. "We know how you must feel, Marla. We—"

"I *told* you," Marla shouted shrilly, "I don't want to talk about that." She turned abruptly, her eyes narrowed into slits, her cheeks bright scarlet, and stormed angrily toward the house.

When Claudia finally returned to the house, she was pleased to see that Marla had calmed down. Joy, Sophie, and Marla were seated at a white umbrella table on the terrace, chatting as they ate their breakfast. Behind them Alfred was humming pleasantly as he pruned a row of rhododendrons near the guest house.

"How was your tennis game?" Joy asked Claudia as Claudia pulled a canvas chair into the shade of the umbrella.

"She let me win," Claudia joked, glancing at Marla. "She wants me to get overconfident, then she's going to *slaughter* me."

Marla forced a smile. "Claudia's game has really improved," she said, and poured herself a glass of orange juice from a tall glass pitcher.

"Looks like a great beach day," Joy exclaimed, raising her eyes to the cloudless, blue sky.

"I can't wait!" Sophie declared.

"Alfred packed us a picnic lunch," Marla told them. "We can carry it down and have lunch on the beach."

"I hope there are good waves," Joy said to Marla. "I want to try out one of your boogie boards."

"The waves are always pretty strong," Marla told her. "There aren't any sand bars or anything to break them up." She took a long drink of orange juice, then turned to Claudia. "Do you want to stay up here and avoid the sun?"

Claudia hesitated. "No. I thought I could take a beach umbrella down to the sand and just stay in the shade."

"Good idea," Marla replied. She shouted to Alfred to fetch a beach umbrella from the equipment shed.

A short while later the four girls were making their way across the back lawn toward the steps leading down to the ocean. Claudia carried a yellow- and white-striped beach umbrella over her shoulder. Ahead of her, Marla and Joy each gripped one handle of the large Styrofoam cooler that held their lunch. Sophie led the way.

As they neared the cliff edge, the roar of the ocean grew louder. Shielding her eyes from the bright sun, Claudia could see the dark *V* of a sea gull soaring high above them against the bright blue sky.

Not yet eleven, and it was already hot. The air hung wet and heavy, without a breeze.

I'm going to take a short swim, Claudia thought, shifting the weight of the beach umbrella on her shoulder. If I slather my face with sunscreen, my burn won't get worse.

They hesitated at the metal gate.

"Just turn the handle," Marla instructed Sophie. "It'll open."

Balancing the beach umbrella, Claudia watched Sophie grab the oval handle on the gate.

Then she watched Sophie appear to freeze as a loud crackling burst from the gate.

Claudia uttered a horrified gasp as Sophie's body shot backward and she slumped to the ground.

chapter

7

SURPRISE VISITORS

Marla was the first to move.

She dove toward a control panel hidden behind some low shrubs and tugged down a switch.

Claudia tossed down the beach umbrella and lowered herself to the ground beside her fallen friend.

Sophie stared up at her with unfocused eyes. Her glasses had flown off, and Claudia picked them up from the ground.

"Sophie? Are you okay?" Claudia demanded, holding the glasses.

"Yeah, I guess." Sophie blinked once, twice. The color began to return to her ghostly white face.

Marla knelt beside Claudia and leaned over Sophie. "You had a nasty shock," she said, shaking her head.

Sophie seemed confused as she started to sit up. "My whole body is buzzing."

Marla gently helped her up. She turned toward the house and yelled for Alfred, cupping her hands into a megaphone.

The servant must have gone into the house because there was no sign of him.

"I don't get this," Marla declared, raising her eyes to Claudia. "I just don't get this. The electrical system is supposed to turn itself off during the day."

Sophie groaned. "Ow," she muttered, and began to rub the back of her neck. "It hurts back here. The muscles are all tight."

"Are you sure you're okay?" Joy demanded, still lingering several feet away. "Do you feel dizzy or anything?"

"I'm okay," Sophie answered, still rubbing the back of her neck. "Ow. That really did hurt, though."

"You could've been killed!" Joy shrieked, her shoulders beginning to tremble under the loose top she wore over her bathing suit.

"Joy, please," Marla muttered impatiently. "Sophie is all right. Don't carry on and make it worse."

Joy muttered an apology.

"How do you feel, Sophie?" Claudia asked softly. "Better?"

"Yeah." Sophie nodded. "I'm just afraid the shock made my hair even more frizzy!"

Everyone laughed except for Marla.

She rose to her feet and began pacing in front of them, her hands balled into tight fists at her sides. "I don't understand this," she kept muttering. "That system is not on during the day. It goes off automatically."

"Maybe the timer is broken," Claudia suggested, helping Sophie to her feet. Sophie took her glasses from Claudia and slipped them on with a shaky hand.

"She could have been killed!" Joy repeated.

Marla flashed Joy an impatient look. Then her expression softened as she turned back to Sophie. "I'm so sorry. Really. I'm so sorry. Do you want to go back to the house?"

"No. No way!" Sophie declared, motioning for Marla to stop. "I'm okay. Really. My heart is racing a little, but I feel fine. Let's get down to the beach. Let's not spoil this beautiful day."

"But the shock—" Joy began.

"It just woke me up, that's all," Sophie said, forcing a smile. "Really. We have only one week together. I don't want to spoil it."

"If you're sure . . ." Marla said, studying Sophie's face.

"Tell you what," Sophie said. "I'll stay in the shade with Claudia. Okay? I'll rest for a bit in the shade. My body's just tingling a bit. I'm a little shaky, that's all."

Marla stared at Sophie thoughtfully, then shrugged. "Well, okay. But if you start to feel weird, let us know?"

Sophie agreed.

Joy had finally calmed down and hoisted the heavy cooler up by herself.

"We're all getting *cooked* here!" Claudia joked. "First I get barbecued by the sun. Now Sophie nearly gets fried by the gate."

Claudia meant it as a light remark, but Marla took it to heart. "They were accidents—right?" Marla snapped angrily as if challenging Claudia.

"Yeah, of course," Claudia replied quickly, her voice rising. "Of course they were just accidents, Marla."

"Don't worry. When we get back, I'm going to speak to Alfred," Marla proclaimed in a low voice filled with menace.

They made their way down the wooden stairs slowly, with Marla leading the way. Far below, Claudia could see the sparkling, blue-green ocean ending as white froth on the sandy shore.

The air grew cooler, saltier, but the hot sun still burned down on Claudia's shoulders.

By the time Claudia had descended the stairs and stepped onto the beach, Marla was spreading the blanket. Joy had set the heavy cooler down. She spread out a brightly colored beach towel of her own.

Then she pulled off her top, revealing a shiny green bikini underneath, and immediately began to brush out her long, black hair.

Well, that was one thing that hadn't changed from camp, Claudia thought dryly. Joy is still brushing her hair at every opportunity.

Marla had spread the blanket out a good distance from the stairs. As Claudia trudged toward it with Sophie at her side, she felt burning grains of sand slide through her thongs and onto her feet.

What a scorcher! Claudia thought, gazing up at the sun, which seemed to fill the entire sky.

At Marla's direction she stood the beach umbrella up at the edge of the blanket, then buried it deep in the sand, bearing down with all her weight.

As soon as the umbrella was spread, Sophie lowered herself into its shade and stretched out on her stomach.

Claudia reached for the beach bag and began covering her sunburned face with a thick layer of pink

sunscreen.

"You look gorgeous, dahling!" Joy trilled.

"Oh, shut up," Claudia muttered, laughing. Adjusting the straps of her purple, one-piece swimsuit, she began to apply the pink sunscreen to the rest of her body.

Joy, meanwhile, had put down her hairbrush and was rubbing a light tanning oil over her already tanned body.

Claudia turned her eyes to Marla, who was still working at getting the blanket perfectly smooth. How strange, Claudia thought, her eyes on Marla's slender back. Marla isn't tan at all. In fact, she's very pale.

It struck Claudia as strange because Marla had told them she'd spent most of the summer here at the beach.

How has she managed to avoid the sun for the entire summer? Claudia wondered.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a low cry from Joy. Claudia saw Joy sitting up on the blanket, shading her eyes with one hand and staring out at the water.

"I think we've got company," Joy declared.

Sure enough, two boys were stepping out of the water. They were wearing blue, sleeveless wet suits and carrying pink and black surfboards under their arms.

Claudia raised her hand to her mouth to cover a startled gasp.

One of the boys, she saw, was Daniel. Daniel, the Ghost Boy.

chapter

8

"LET'S PARTY"

The two boys stepped onto the sand, water dripping off their wet suits.

Shielding her eyes from the sun with her arm, Claudia realized the boy wasn't Daniel at all. It was another tall, dark-haired boy.

What's happening to me? Am I getting really messed up? She asked herself, watching the boys approach.

She studied them as they tossed down their surfboards. They were about seventeen, both with strong, muscular builds.

The one Claudia had thought was Daniel was slim with dark, razor-cut hair and gray eyes. He grinned at the girls, his eyes lingering on Claudia. She had a sinking feeling that what was making him grin was the sight of her face covered in pink sun block.

"We've got to get rid of them," Marla whispered, adjusting the top of her red bikini.

"How come?" Claudia heard Joy whisper back. "They're cute."

"Hey, how's it going?" the second boy called out. He had longish blond hair and a more compact build, almost like that of a wrestler.

His friend gazed down the shoreline toward Summerhaven. "I have a feeling we're way past the bird sanctuary."

"You girls see any birds around here?" the blond guy asked. His grin, Claudia saw, revealed about four hundred teeth.

"Just a couple of Dodos," Marla said nastily.

Claudia was surprised by Marla's meanness. Why was she on their case?

Joy had climbed to her feet and was brushing back her hair and smiling at the two boys. Sophie remained under the shade of the umbrella, but she too seemed pleased by the surprise visitors.

The boys' grins faded. The blond-haired boy sauntered toward the blanket. "We were just taking out our boards and got caught in a really strong riptide." He pointed out to the water. "It runs along the shore. It was amazing. Pulled us out here to the Point before we even knew it."

"How fascinating," Marla replied sarcastically.

Claudia watched Joy roll her eyes. "Marla, will you please chill?" she whispered, her dark eyes on the boys.

The dark-haired one followed his friend toward the blanket. "Watch out if you go swimming," he said very seriously. "If you get caught in that riptide, you could get pulled out beyond the Point."

Marla stood with her hands on the hips of her red swimsuit. "Thanks for the safety tip," she said coldly. "It was very nice of you to come warn us, but this is a private beach." She pointed toward the sanctuary and Summerhaven. "If you want to surf, the public beach is down there."

The dark-haired boy grinned at Marla. "I thought all beaches were public," he said, studying her. He raised his eyes to the stairway that led up to her family's estate. "Has your family bought the ocean too?"

The other boy sat down on the beach blanket and smiled at Sophie. "Hi. Are you always this quiet?"

Sophie giggled. She pulled off her glasses and smiled at him. "Not always."

"Don't you think you should go now?" Marla asked, frowning unpleasantly.

"Depends on what you have for lunch," the blond boy told her. He slid the cooler over and lifted the lid.

His friend held a hand out to Claudia. "I'm Carl, this is Dean, and thanks for inviting us to lunch."

"Well . . ." Claudia found herself speechless. She glanced at Marla, who was fuming.

Why is Marla so unfriendly? Claudia wondered.

Does she know something about these boys? Is she really scared of them?

"Wow, you must really hate the sun!" Carl exclaimed, staring at Claudia's lotion-covered face. He laughed, shaking his head.

Claudia could feel herself blushing underneath the thick layer of goo. "I—I got a bad burn yesterday," she stammered.

Kneeling on the blanket, Dean had begun emptying the cooler. "There's plenty here," he said. "Fried chicken. Potato salad. Lots of little sandwiches. Picnic time!" He raised his eyes from the cooler and smiled at Marla, a shark's smile.

Carl joined his friend, dropping down on the other side of the cooler. "Is there enough for the girls too?"

"Yeah. We can share," Dean replied, grinning his many-toothed grin.

Marla, her hands in tight little fists, a furious expression on her face, started to say something. But Joy cut in. "There's plenty of food," she told Marla. "Why not share with them?"

Carl grinned at her appreciatively and offered her the plate of sandwiches. "What's your name?"

"Joy. Joy Birkin." She took the plate and sat down next to Carl.

"I'm Sophie Moore," Sophie offered brightly, moving out from under the umbrella to join them. "Mmmm. The chicken does look good. I'm starving even though we just ate breakfast."

Marla stormed off to the water's edge, where she angrily ignored them all.

"Don't mind Marla. She's just a little shy," Joy said.

"How about you?" Carl asked Claudia, his voice mocking. "Are you shy too?"

"That's why she's hiding behind that pink stuff," Dean teased, chewing on a chicken leg.

Claudia knew she shouldn't care, but she was dying of embarrassment and knew she looked like a total dork.

"You should try that pink stuff," Dean told Carl. "It would be an improvement on *you*!" He tossed his chicken bone on the sand and grabbed for a sandwich.

"Hey, don't litter," Carl scolded his friend. Then he added, "This is a private beach, remember?"

The two boys laughed heartily, slapping each other high-fives.

Joy asked them questions about surfboarding. It was obvious to Claudia that she was flirting with them.

Obvious to the boys too.

After a while Sophie and Carl moved under the umbrella, where they chatted quietly, sipping on cans of soda.

The sun had moved higher in the sky. The ocean waves were lined with gold.

"This isn't a bad picnic," Claudia said, feeling a little strange about the situation.

"Too bad the princess over there won't join us," Dean said.

Claudia saw Marla heading back toward them, taking long strides over the fine sand, her features set in anger. "Did you save me a sandwich or something at least?" she demanded.

"There are some left," Dean replied. "But you'll have to ask nicely."

Marla uttered an angry groan and crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm going to ask you nicely one more time to *leave!*" she said through gritted teeth.

Dean jumped up and stepped in front of her. "Hey, give us a break," he pleaded, a mocking grin spreading over his face. He pushed a lock of blond hair off his tanned forehead. "Carl and I are great guys. Why the attitude?"

"I'm warning you," Marla fumed. "Just go—okay?"

Dean took a defiant step closer to her. "Don't spoil the party, Marla. Is that your name? Marla?" He glanced quickly back at his friend, who had come out from under the umbrella. Carl was staring at Dean warily, as if expecting trouble.

"Carl and I were hoping that after lunch, we'd all go up to your house and—you know—party." Dean took another step toward Marla, who stepped back.

Uh-oh, thought Claudia, climbing slowly to her feet. This was getting tense.

"Get back. Go away!" Marla cried, contempt in her eyes.

"No. Really," Dean insisted. "Carl and I are great guys. Let's go up to the house. It's too hot down here, don't you think?"

Carl was standing there, his smile fading, his features hardening.

Are these guys just playing at being tough? Claudia wondered, drawing back. Or are they really looking for trouble?

"I—I have an attack dog," Marla warned, glancing up at her house. "An Irish wolfhound. Have you ever seen an Irish wolfhound? They're huge."

"Oooh, I'm shaking all over!" Dean cried, shaking his arms and legs. "How about you, Carl?"

"Chill," Carl said edgily. "Let's just go, Dean."

"All I have to do is call the dog," Marla warned.

"Dogs like me," Dean boasted. "I'm not scared." He turned to Claudia and the other girls. "You want Carl and me to come up to the house, right?"

"I—I think you'd better go," Claudia stammered, moving over to stand beside Marla.

Dean moved closer, his expression menacing. "You're not going to invite us up?" he asked Marla, his eyes cold, his tone challenging.

"No way," Marla insisted.

Then, before Claudia realized what was happening, she saw a blur of motion.

And heard a loud *smack*.

Marla staggered back with an angry cry.

It took Claudia a long moment to realize that Dean had slapped Marla.

Oh no, Claudia moaned, suddenly afraid. These boys are going to be trouble.

chapter

9

RETURN OF THE GHOST

Marla quickly regained her balance and glared at Dean, her face bright red.

"It was a horsefly," Dean told her. "On your shoulder."

"Huh?" Marla cried, a little stunned.

"A really big horsefly," Dean repeated. "Those things can bite."

"But—" Marla's expression softened.

"I didn't mean to slap it that hard," Dean said softly. "Sorry if I scared you."

Claudia breathed a sigh of relief. Behind her, she could hear Joy and Sophie giggling nervously.

"We'd better get going," Carl said, picking up his pink and black surfboard.

"Yeah. Okay," Dean agreed. He cast another apologetic look at Marla. "I really didn't mean to scare you or anything," he said. Then he blurted out, "My dad used to work for your dad."

"He *what*?" Marla demanded.

But the boys had hefted their surfboards, tucked them under their arms, and started off down the beach in the direction of town. "Thanks for lunch!" Carl called back.

"It was great!" Dean added.

Claudia watched them walk along the shoreline, kicking up wet clumps of sand as they made their way.

"Let's pack up and go back to the house," Marla said, frowning. "It's too hot down here anyway."

"Marla, why'd you give those guys such a hard time?" Claudia demanded.

Marla was shaking out the beach blanket. She stopped and turned to Claudia. "My parents made me promise," she told her.

"Promise what? No boys?" Joy asked.

"My parents made me promise it would be just the four of us this week," Marla replied. "If they found out there were guys with us, they'd ground me forever."

"It's not like they were sleeping over!" Joy protested. "I mean, they just happened to wash up on the beach."

"I don't need any trouble," Marla replied, and began folding the blanket.

That's an odd thing to say, Claudia thought, helping Sophie and Joy load up the cooler. But then she realized that what had happened with the two boys really wasn't that much different from the way Marla had treated guys at camp the previous summer.

Marla had been very standoffish around guys then. As far as Claudia knew, Marla had had only one boyfriend, a guy named Michael, and they had gone together for only a few months.

Joy, on the other hand, flirted as easily as she breathed. And Sophie worked hard to copy Joy, although she was less outgoing.

As for herself—Claudia had gone out with a few guys, but she'd only had one real boyfriend. The problem, she'd decided, was that she didn't make much of an impression on guys. She met them and they forgot her.

She smiled, realizing that wasn't true with Dean and Carl. She knew she'd made an impression this time. They'd probably remember her forever—as the Girl with the Really Gross Pink Goo on Her Face.

Later that day the three girls were up in Claudia's room. Joy and Sophie, in shorts and sleeveless T-shirts, were sprawled on top of the quilted coverlet on the four-poster bed. Claudia stood at the open French doors, staring down as the long, late afternoon shadows spread out across the back lawn.

"Does anyone here think Marla is acting a little weird?" Joy asked. "Raise your hands."

Both Claudia and Sophie obediently raised their hands.

"She's so tense," Sophie remarked, lying on her back, hands behind her frizzy brown hair.

"She's always been a little tense around boys," Claudia said.

"But she wasn't just tense. She was angry," Joy declared. "Angry that the boys were there."

"She never gave them a chance," Sophie agreed.

"I thought Carl was kind of cute," Joy said, grinning.

"Kind of," Claudia said from the window. "But they were kind of tough too. I think Marla was frightened. I know I was a little bit."

"Marla was a lot more relaxed at camp," Sophie offered.

"A lot has happened since then," Claudia said wistfully. She walked over and sat down on the edge of the bed at Sophie's feet. "Are you feeling better?"

Sophie shrugged. "I'm still a little weird. Kind of light-headed."

"What did it feel like?" Joy asked. "Did it hurt?"

"Yeah, it hurt," Sophie told her. "It was sort of like being punched in the stomach. I couldn't breathe, and—oh, I don't know."

"What a weird two days," Claudia commented. "We're supposed to be having fun, enjoying the beach and this incredible house. So far, it hasn't exactly been fun in the sun! You nearly got electrocuted. I got buried—"

"And don't forget that disgusting brown worm in my salad," Joy interrupted. "That was so gross!"

Claudia and Sophie laughed.

"I have to tell you something, Claud," Sophie said, abruptly sitting up and cutting her laugh short. "I meant to tell you before, but I didn't have a chance."

"What?" Claudia demanded, rubbing her hand over the smooth bedspread. "Why so serious all of a sudden?"

"Well . . ." Sophie seemed hesitant to talk, then all at once the words burst out of her. "Joy and I wanted to go back for you yesterday afternoon, but Marla wouldn't let us."

Claudia stared at Sophie, not quite understanding what Sophie was telling her.

"When we got back from our walk, Marla insisted you had gone up to the house," Sophie continued, lowering her voice to a whisper, her eyes on the bedroom door. "We took the other path, the one up from the

dunes. But Joy and I wanted to go back down to make sure you weren't still buried in the sand."

"Yeah. We were worried about you," Joy added.

"But Marla said she was sure you had left the beach. She insisted we go up to the house with her," Sophie whispered.

"Weird," Claudia muttered.

"Then she acted so surprised when you came staggering up from the beach, burned to a crisp," Joy said.

Claudia automatically touched her face. Her cheeks and forehead were hot and still a little swollen. She walked over to the makeup table to get more aloe lotion.

"I guess Marla was confused," Claudia said thoughtfully. "If you went up on the other path, there was no way you could have seen me."

"I think she's messed up," Joy said, lowering her feet to the floor and turning to face Claudia. "I think the accident last summer—"

"That's the other thing," Sophie interrupted. "She never mentions her sister. She hasn't mentioned Alison once. Don't you think that's strange? I mean, we were all there last summer. We all shared it. I mean, Alison *was* Marla's sister. But we all—"

"Poor Alison," Joy said in a low whisper. "That poor kid."

"Well, it's on my mind all the time," Sophie admitted heatedly. "I'm sure it's on *all* of our minds, but Marla acts as if it never happened. I mean—"

"She told me she doesn't want to talk about it," Claudia interrupted. The fresh lotion felt cool and soothing on her forehead.

"You *asked* her?" Joy demanded. "You mentioned Alison?"

"We were playing tennis this morning before you guys woke up. I mentioned the accident—and Marla snapped at me. She told me she didn't want to talk about it."

"But it's so— *unnatural* not to!" Sophie protested. "I feel like I'm bottled up. I mean . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"I guess Marla just wants us all to have a great time this week, and forget about what happened," Claudia said thoughtfully. She stared at her burned face in the mirror. "And if we could all stop being so accident prone, I'm sure we *would* have a great time. . ."

That evening the four girls had dinner in the big, formal dining room again. Sitting crunched together at one end of the long table made the huge room seem even bigger than it was.

But everyone was in a good mood. Joy told hilarious stories about her attempts to break up with a thick-headed boyfriend who refused to get what she was saying to him. The story had the girls roaring with laughter.

Then Marla told a funny story about her father showing up in the wrong country for a business meeting and being totally confused as to why everyone was speaking Italian!

Then, as Alfred began to clear the dishes from the table, Joy turned to Marla. "So," she asked, "what's there to do in Summerhaven at night?"

"Not much," Marla admitted. "We can see a movie, maybe. There's one old movie theater in town. It smells like cats, but sometimes they show good films. Or we could hang out on the boardwalk."

"Boardwalk? You mean like an amusement park?" Joy asked excitedly.

"Yeah." Marla nodded.

"Let's go!" Joy cried. "I love rides!"

"Me too," Sophie added enthusiastically. "We've got to do bumper cars—and the house of mirrors. I love seeing myself skinny!"

"How about you, Claud?" Marla asked.

"Sounds good," Claudia replied. The idea of getting out of the Drexell mansion for a while and seeing other people appealed to her. She thought of the things she liked best about amusement parks. "I want to ride the Ferris wheel."

"No way! Not me!" Joy blurted out. "Ever since last summer, I'm afraid of heights!"

"Oh!" Sophie cried out, her mouth dropping open.

Joy immediately realized what she'd said. She turned bright red. "Oh, I'm sorry, Marla. I—I wasn't thinking." She lowered her eyes to the table.

"No problem," Marla said in a flat, dry voice, her eyes blank, her face completely without expression.

• • •

A short while later the four girls were in the Mercedes, with Marla at the wheel, driving toward Summerhaven. Again Claudia was struck by how isolated the mansion was on its remote point of land. The house was miles from any humans.

About twenty minutes later Marla pulled into a parking space at the edge of town, and the four girls stepped onto the boardwalk.

What a change! Claudia thought. She felt as if she were a thousand miles from the Drexell estate. The beach in town was a much narrower strip of sand. It was flat with no dunes, and even the waves seemed tamer. There were no cliffs. The sound of human voices, laughing and screaming on the rides, drowned out the sounds of the ocean and the gulls.

The girls joined the crowds on the boardwalk. Neon lights flashed everywhere, and the mixed aromas of popcorn, hot dogs, and cotton candy floated through the air.

It's crowded and noisy—and friendly, Claudia found herself thinking. She realized she felt an unexpected sense of relief at being in the middle of it.

They went to the House of Laffs first and spent about fifteen minutes trying to find the mirror that would make Sophie look skinny. Claudia laughed at her reflection. She and Marla both appeared at least eight feet tall. But somehow, even in the distorting mirrors, Joy managed to look perfectly proportioned and sexy.

Next they rode the Sizzler, and, after standing in line for nearly twenty minutes, the bumper cars. Joy, in her usual cool way, slid her car right through all traffic jams, her long, black hair flying loosely behind her.

To Claudia's surprise, Sophie turned into a demon driver, intent on ramming everything in sight!

After the bumper cars, they made their way along the food stands that lined the boardwalk. Claudia stopped to buy a giant cone of pink cotton candy.

She had just taken her first careful bite when she heard a familiar voice behind her. "You have a thing for pink, don't you?"

She turned to see Carl smiling at her. Dean stood beside him, his blond hair catching the light from a street lamp. The boys had changed into faded jeans, torn at the knees, and sleeveless muscle shirts. Claudia was again aware of how good-looking both boys were, in a rough sort of way.

She raised the cone of pink cotton candy. "Yeah. I'm going to rub it all over my face," she told Carl.

The boys laughed.

"What are you two doing here?" Marla demanded, sounding more surprised than hostile.

"We live here," Carl said, grinning.

"Yeah. Right here on the boardwalk," Dean jumped in. "That's my bedroom over there." He pointed to a bench between two food stands.

"Very cozy," Joy said, moving close to Carl.

Sophie immediately imitated Joy, moving in on Dean.

"You guys want to do the bumper cars?" Joy asked. "We just did them a few minutes ago. They're fun!"

"Yeah. Sure," Carl agreed quickly.

Marla started to protest, but she found herself swept along as everyone hurried to get in line.

"I'll meet up with you in a bit!" Claudia called to her. Claudia decided she'd had enough bumper cars for the night. She wanted to explore the boardwalk, and she needed a little time to herself.

Besides, she thought, Joy and Sophie were obviously going to monopolize the boys. And she was sure Marla would go with them just to make sure they didn't invite Carl and Dean back to the house.

So why should she tag along?

Taking a bite of her cotton candy, Claudia made her way past a row of games and a small video-game arcade. The noise on the boardwalk was so loud, it drowned out the roar of the ocean, even though the beach was right beneath them.

Beyond the arcade the crowd thinned out. The lights grew dimmer. Claudia took a last lick of the empty paper cone, then tossed it into a trash basket.

She licked her sticky fingers and gazed up at the sky. Slender wisps of gray cloud swam over a pale full moon high in the sky. Away from the game booths and food stands and crowds, the air felt cool and wet.

I'd better turn around and go find my friends, she thought.

As she turned, she saw that someone was standing nearby, staring intently at her.

Startled, Claudia stopped and focused on him.

She recognized his straight, dark hair and his intense dark eyes at once.

Daniel.

"The Ghost Boy!" she cried aloud.

chapter

10

DEATH ON THE BOARDWALK

"**W**hat did you call me?" He moved quickly toward her, a smile forming on his handsome face.

"I—uh—nothing," Claudia stammered, embarrassed.

"Did you say I was a ghost?" he demanded, his black eyes burning into hers as if looking for the answer to his question.

"No. I—" Claudia didn't know *what* to say.

Impulsively, she grabbed his hand and squeezed.

The hand was cold.

As cold as yesterday on the beach, she thought, surprised.

As cold as death. The thought crept into her mind.

"No. You're real," she told him, letting go quickly, smiling at him, her heart thudding. "At least, you feel real. I mean—"

"I guess that's a compliment," he said with a shrug.

"It's just that when you helped me, you vanished before I could thank you," Claudia said awkwardly. "You vanished like a ghost, and—well . . ."

"Your name is Claudia, right?" he asked, shoving his hands into the pockets of his denim shorts. He wore a white Gap T-shirt with a gray sweatshirt tied around his waist.

Real clothing, Claudia thought, feeling a little guilty.

So what made me believe he was a ghost?

What could I have been thinking of?

"Yes," she said. "Claudia Walker."

"Your burn doesn't look too bad," he said, his eyes examining her forehead. "Do your friends do that to you a lot? Bury you in the sand and leave you there to roast?"

"Not a lot," Claudia told him. "They thought I had gone up to the house."

"Great friends," Daniel said, shaking his head.

"They're okay," Claudia replied, feeling defensive. What right did he have to put down her friends? He hadn't even met them. "It was an accident, a mistake," she said.

They had been ambling back toward the amusement area. Claudia found herself doing most of the talking. She told him how the girls had been in the same bunk at camp the summer before, and how surprised she was to receive Marla's invitation to come visit for a week.

Daniel listened attentively, making quiet comments. He seemed shy to Claudia. Not uncomfortably shy, just shy. As they walked, his arm bumped hers softly. His dark eyes studied her.

They stopped at the Ferris wheel. As it twirled, the bright yellow lights on its frame rose up against the black night sky like shooting stars.

A cool breeze floated in off the ocean, fluttering Claudia's hair. "Beautiful night," she murmured, smiling at Daniel.

He held up his hand. "Look. I have two tickets," he said, his eyes on the Ferris wheel. "The line isn't very long. Let's go."

"Okay. I love Ferris wheels!" she declared.

"I know," he said mysteriously, taking her hand and leading her to the line.

Why is his hand so cold? Claudia wondered.

"What do you mean? How could you know?" she demanded playfully.

"I'm a ghost, remember? I know all things." He grinned at her, a mischievous grin.

A few moments later Daniel handed the tickets to the young man running the ride. An empty seat rolled around. The wheel stopped. They stepped along a short ramp and climbed into the seat.

As soon as the safety bar was pushed down in front of them, the seat lurched backward and, with a jolt, they rose up off the ground.

Claudia leaned back against the plastic seat. She was a little surprised to find Daniel's arm around the seat back. She rested her head against it, the breeze off the ocean cool against her face, and stared up at the sky.

"It's such a clear night," she said. "We'll be able to see everything. The ocean. The entire boardwalk . . ."

He smiled. "It's a full moon," he said softly, pointing with his free hand.

"Do you turn into a werewolf in a few minutes?" Claudia teased.

He growled at her. "Make up your mind," he said.

"Am I a ghost or a werewolf?"

"Do you live in town?" she asked.

"No." He shook his head. A wave of black hair fell over his forehead.

"Well, where do you live? What are you doing here?" Claudia asked.

"I live everywhere. I float through the night sky," he replied, grinning. He leaned very close to her, lowering his arm from the seat back to her shoulders. "I haunt people," he whispered with mock menace, bringing his face close to hers.

"Have you ever been all alone in the dark with a ghost before?" he asked, lowering his voice to a whisper. "Have you ever been this close to a ghost, Claudia?"

Is he going to kiss me? Claudia wondered.

Do I want him to?

Yes.

She felt disappointed when he pulled back against the seat. "Wow. Look at the ocean," he said. "It's unreal."

As they rose higher, the ocean coming into view on their right. The full moon cast a wash of pale light over it, making the tossing waters sparkle like silver.

Beneath them stretched the crowded, noisy boardwalk. Turning to her left, Claudia could see the lights of Summerhaven, tiny and twinkling, as if the town were some kind of toy.

"You've been here longer than I have," she told Daniel, enjoying the weight of his arm around her shoulders. "Point out the sights to me."

"Well—okay," he agreed reluctantly, leaning across her to see out the left side. He pointed. "That's a building of some kind over there. And that's a red light. And that's a street. And there's a yellow light." He grinned at her, his face inches from hers.

"You're a great tour guide," she teased.

"I told you, I don't live here," he said, staring hard into her eyes.

He's so good-looking, Claudia thought. And funny. And nice.

Impulsively, she leaned forward and kissed him.

He seemed startled at first, then returned her kiss.

He's real, she found herself thinking. He's not a ghost. His lips are warm.

The car suddenly rocked and came to an abrupt start.

"Oh!" Claudia cried out, pulling away from him. She gazed down. They were at the very top.

"Why'd we stop?" Daniel demanded, leaning over the safety bar to stare straight down, rocking the car gently.

"They're letting on more people," Claudia replied, the taste of his lips still on hers. She smiled at him. "I like it up here. Look how big the moon is."

"I'll bet I could touch it," he said, following her gaze. He stood up, rocking the car violently. "Here. I'll grab it," he said, reaching up with both hands.

"Daniel—sit down!" Claudia cried.

Leaning over the safety bar, he pretended to grab the moon.

And as he reached, the seat jolted hard—and tilted all the way forward.

Claudia stared in horror as Daniel, his arms still outstretched, went sailing over the safety bar and fell head first to his death.

chapter

11

ALISON'S TRAGIC ACCIDENT

*B*efore she could cry out, before she could even *breathe*, Claudia realized she wasn't watching Daniel fall.

She was watching Alison.

Alison. Poor Alison had been on Claudia's mind since arriving in Summerhaven.

Now, once again, she was reliving the tragic accident that had taken Alison Drexel's life.

Like a life flashing before a person's eyes, the tragedy of the previous summer appeared to Claudia, the stark horror of it washing over her as Daniel rocked the Ferris wheel car.

Once again it was the previous July and she was back at Camp Full Moon. . . .

Claudia stretched out on her bunk, feeling limp from the damp afternoon heat. She swatted listlessly at a fly. She was convinced the insects liked Bunk 12's peculiar combination of scents—a mix of bug repellent, deodorant, and Marla's rosewater perfume.

It was just after lunch, "free time" when everyone was supposed to be in her bunk writing letters home. Luckily, Caroline, Claudia's counselor, was in love with the waterfront counselor, so Caroline was never around and none of them ever had to write letters.

That afternoon Claudia, Marla, Joy, and Sophie were playing a lazy game of Truth or Dare. It was Joy's turn. She gave Claudia a sly look. "Truth," she said. "Tell us how many zits you have today."

Claudia blushed as she realized Joy must have seen her in the latrine that morning examining her face.

"Would you rather have a dare?" Joy asked idly as she applied pale pink polish to her toenails.

"Three," Claudia confessed, staring at the wooden floorboards. "Big deal. So I don't have your flawless skin."

The girls all laughed.

Suddenly the screen door banged open and Alison, Marla's younger sister, bopped in. Alison was a year younger than her sister. Like Marla, she was long and slender, with blond hair. But to Claudia she was much less sophisticated. Alison didn't have her sister's easy grace or natural athletic skills, and she wasn't the least bit likable.

"What are you guys doing?" Alison asked.

"Nothing you'd be interested in," Joy assured her.

Marla didn't even look up. "Go away, fish face."

Even Claudia, who had tried hard to like Alison, had to admit she was a world-class brat. She never hung out with the kids in her own bunk. She acted desperate to be accepted by Marla's friends and become part of Marla's group.

Which might have been okay if she weren't a snitch and a spy. Alison was always reporting their minor sins to the head counselor, always doing her best to get them in trouble.

"I want to play," Alison announced, dropping down on Marla's bunk. "Can I play? I'm bored."

"You don't know what we're playing," Joy pointed out, frowning.

"Truth or Dare," Alison said smugly.

"You're too young for it," Claudia told her.

"Go out and play in the traffic," Marla said coldly. "You don't belong in here, Alison."

"I'll report you all," Alison threatened. "You're supposed to be writing letters home."

"Fine," Marla said. "You want to play? Then tell us about the time Mother caught you kissing Michael Jennings up in your bedroom."

"Huh? I never did," Alison insisted. "That's a filthy lie!"

"Wasn't he *your* boyfriend?" Claudia asked Marla, unable to conceal the surprise in her voice.

"He was my boyfriend till Alison saw him," Marla said, scowling.

"You're lying!" Alison insisted shrilly. "You're a filthy liar!"

"Oh, yeah. Right," Marla replied sarcastically, rolling her eyes. "Come on, Ali. You want to play the game? Tell my friends what you did to me. Come on. Details."

"This is fascinating and all," Joy said in a weary tone, "but couldn't Alison maybe leave so we can enjoy our game?"

"Yeah. Take a hike, Alison," Sophie said.

"Come on, Alison. Truth," Marla insisted. "Either tell the truth or take the dare. Truth, Ali. What happened between you and Michael?"

Alison stared at the floor, then raised her eyes defiantly to her sister. "I'll take the dare."

"You don't have to. You could just leave," Claudia pointed out. She suddenly didn't like the atmosphere in the small cabin. She had a bad feeling creeping up from her stomach, one of dread.

"I said I'll take the dare!" Alison insisted, standing up angrily.

"Then I dare you to go back to your own bunk and stay there," Claudia suggested, grinning at Joy and Sophie.

"No," Marla objected, her blue eyes lighting up. "I have a better dare. Either tell us the truth, or tonight you cross Grizzly Gorge under the full moon."

Alison glared angrily at her sister, her face drained of color. They all knew she was terrified of heights. And she wasn't exactly the most coordinated girl in the world. There was no way Alison could cross the log over the gorge—especially at night.

Finally Marla had come up with a way to make Alison leave them alone.

"All right," Alison said softly, her blue eyes locked on her sister's. "I'll do it."

"What are you saying?" Sophie cried. "You will not, Alison!"

"What time do you want to meet there?" Alison asked, ignoring Sophie.

Marla shrugged nonchalantly. "How about after lights out. At ten."

"No problem. See you there," Alison said, and stalked out of the bunk.

That night, just before ten, when they were sure Caroline was down by the mess hall with her boyfriend, the four girls crept out of the bunk one by one. It was a cool night, with the full moon yellow and low in a purple sky. Crickets chirped loudly. The trees whispered as they swayed in the soft breeze.

They were halfway down the dirt path that led to the deep gorge—when a bright light bobbed through the woods, catching Marla in its beam. They heard Caroline's stern voice. "All right, Drexell. You're busted. Where are your pals?"

Marla, muttering under her breath, stepped fully into the circle of light from the counselor's flashlight. The others remained silent. Not moving. Trying not to make a sound.

Claudia crouched behind a tree, sure that her breathing would give her away. Caroline searched for them, moving the light along the trees that lined the path. But she quickly gave up and contented herself with marching Marla back to the bunk.

"Should we go back?" Sophie whispered when Caroline and Marla were out of sight.

"Yes. This is dumb," Claudia said, lingering by the big oak tree that had hidden her.

"No," Joy insisted. "Caroline will only be waiting for us at the bunk. Besides, what if Alison is already at the gorge? We'd better go get her."

They found Alison standing on the lip of the gorge, staring down at the Grizzly River below. It was at least a twenty-foot drop, Claudia knew.

A single log had been set across the gorge, its rough surface gleaming under the bright moonlight.

"Alison, go back to your bunk. This is crazy," Claudia told her, stepping up behind her. One look at her face and Claudia could see how frightened Alison was.

"Yeah. It's okay if you wimp out," Joy said, her hands shoved into the back pockets of her jeans. "It's too far down. If you fall . . ."

"Don't do it, Alison," Sophie added, standing at the edge, peering down at the white foam of the rushing river.

Alison ignored them. "Where's my sister?" she demanded, eyeing them tensely.

"Caroline caught her and made her go back," Claudia replied. "We should go back too."

"You'll have to tell Marla I did the dare," Alison said in a tight, choked voice.

"No, please!" Joy cried.

"*You've* done it, haven't you?" Alison snapped. "You've all crossed the log. What makes you think I can't do it?"

"We did it in the daytime," Sophie told her. "And we're all very athletic—"

"And we're not afraid of heights," Claudia added.

"Come on, Alison," Joy begged.

Alison didn't say another word. Biting her lower lip, her eyes narrow with determination, she stepped out onto the log.

"No!" Claudia gasped.

The gorge was narrow—no more than thirty feet across. But if she fell, Alison would land on huge rocks in the shallow river, with current strong enough to carry her away.

"Alison—whoa!" Joy called, her hands pressed against her cheeks.

"I can't look," Sophie declared, turning away from the gorge.

Slowly, her legs trembling, Alison inched her way out onto the log.

"Alison—enough!" Claudia called. "You proved your point. You did it. Come back."

"Yeah. Come back!" Joy pleaded.

Alison ignored their frightened words.

Then, about two-thirds of the way out, she stopped, her knees buckling. She struggled to regain her balance.

"Oh, help," she said softly. "I'm going to fall."

"No, you're not," Claudia told her, moving to the edge of the log. "You're fine. Just sit down, turn around, and scoot back."

Just then Claudia saw darting, weaving circles of light play against the trees. It took her a moment to realize the light was coming from flashlights. Then she heard footsteps. Voices.

"It's Caroline!" Joy cried. "And some of the other counselors!"

"Run!" Sophie shouted. "Come on! We'll be caught!"

"Come on, Alison—hurry!" Claudia urged.

"I'm coming," Alison answered. Then the girls were running breathlessly, running back through the woods, away from the darting lights, away from the counselors.

Claudia thought that Alison was right behind her. Claudia thought that Alison was running too.

She didn't see Alison fall.

She didn't hear the hard *crack* as Alison dropped into the boulder-strewn river, the splash as she was tossed into the rushing water.

She honestly believed Alison was right behind her. And so she ran from the counselors' lights, ran through the dark woods.

Ran through the cold black shadows . . .

Ran . . .

Now Claudia felt a hand on her shoulder.

She swallowed hard and gazed into Daniel's eyes. "You okay?" he asked softly.

She blinked, startled to discover that she wasn't in Camp Full Moon. She was sitting next to Daniel in the Ferris wheel car. And the wheel was moving smoothly again, carrying them down to the brightly lit park.

"You didn't fall?" she blurted out.

He shook his head, his eyes narrowing in confusion. "Fall? You mean out of the seat?" He laughed.

"I thought—" Claudia felt dizzy. The ground was rushing up to meet her. It took her a while to realize it was the movement of the Ferris wheel.

"I'm a ghost, remember," Daniel teased. "I fell out, but I floated back in."

She forced a smile.

Alison. You've been in the back of my mind all this time, Alison, Claudia thought with a shiver.

That's why I saw you just now. You fell. Not Daniel. You fell, Alison. Such a terrible accident . . .

A short while later the chair stopped on the platform, swaying gently. Daniel helped Claudia out. "That was cool," he said, his dark eyes sparkling.

"Yeah. It was great," Claudia agreed, still a little shaky. "Thanks, Daniel."

They started walking along the boardwalk, nearly colliding with two boys whining rapidly toward them on rollerblades.

"I've got to find Marla and the others," Claudia told him. "Do you want to come along? I want to prove to them that— Hey!"

He was gone.

Vanished again.

What is going on here? Claudia wondered.

"Claudia! Claudia! Over here!" familiar voices called.

Claudia spun around to see her friends waving to her from in front of a brightly lit dart-game booth. Joy was carrying a hideous pink teddy bear. Dean and Carl gave Claudia a wave and took off. Her three friends came hurrying over to Claudia.

"Where did you run off to?" Marla demanded.

"Yeah. We all had a great time," Joy gushed. "The boys are nice, when you get to know them."

"Have you just been wandering around by yourself?" Marla asked, her eyes studying Claudia.

"Uh—yeah," Claudia told them. "I enjoyed it. Really. I just like watching people at places like this, you know?"

"Look what Carl won," Joy cried, holding up the ugly pink bear. "He gave him to me. I'm going to name him Carl."

"Looks just like him," Marla said dryly.

Chattering excitedly, the four girls headed to the car to go home.

Later, Claudia lay in bed, thinking about Daniel, about their kiss, about how handsome and mysterious he was. A soft breeze floated in from the open glass doors and gently cooled her skin.

She realized she hadn't learned a thing about Daniel. She didn't know where he lived or what he was doing at the beach this summer. She didn't even know his last name.

She had just drifted into a light sleep when the shrill screams awoke her.

Claudia jerked straight up, breathing hard.

The screams, she realized, were coming from Joy's room.

chapter

12

TORTURE

*J*oy's room was across the hall from Claudia's.

Claudia pushed open her door and fumbled for the light switch.

"Help me! Help me!" Joy was shrieking at the top of her lungs.

The ceiling light clicked on, revealing Joy sitting up in bed, her skin bright red under a sleeveless nightgown. Her black hair fell in wild tangles around her face. Her features were twisted in horror. Her arms thrashed wildly above her.

"Help me! Claudia—help me!"

Sophie and Marla burst into the room behind Claudia.

"Yuck! Joy! What are those things on your arm?" Sophie screamed.

"Help me! Please—help me!"

The three girls ran to her bed.

"Leeches!" Claudia declared.

Three enormous black leeches were stuck to Joy's right arm just below the shoulder.

"Get them off! Get them off!" Joy shrieked hysterically.

"Joy, calm down!" Marla shouted.

"How did they get on you?" Sophie demanded, nearly as hysterical as Joy.

"Stop moving around and we'll pull them off!" Claudia said, grabbing Joy's shoulder.

"Help me! Help!"

"Joy—stop thrashing about!" Claudia shouted.

"How did leeches get in her bed?" Sophie demanded of Marla.

"How should I know?" Marla cried impatiently.

Marla grabbed Joy's wrist and held it down on the bed.

With a trembling hand, Claudia struggled with the leeches. As Joy cried and shook, Claudia pulled the leeches off one by one and tossed them in a wastebasket.

"Ow! I'm bleeding! I'm bleeding!" Joy cried.

"The bleeding will stop in a minute," Claudia said, trying to reassure her.

Joy's entire body convulsed in a shudder of horror, and then was racked by another. She pulled the sheet up

to her chin, shaking violently, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Remember last summer at camp?" Sophie asked Claudia. She squinted at her. She had run into Joy's room without putting on her glasses. "Remember that day Joy was swimming in the lake and got the leech on her leg?"

"Stop!" Joy pleaded. "Don't remind me!"

It took all day to calm her down, Claudia thought unhappily.

"How did they get in here?" Marla asked angrily. She stared into the wastebasket. "How?" she demanded of no one in particular. "How could leeches get into an upstairs bedroom?"

"Someone was in here!" Joy cried, wiping away tears with her sheet.

"Huh?" Marla reacted with surprise.

"Someone put them on my arm!" Joy cried. "They weren't there when I went to bed. They weren't in the bed. Someone had to bring them in."

"How do you know that?" Claudia asked, laying a soothing hand on Joy's heaving shoulder.

"Because I checked the bed!" Joy told her. "You know how I am about bugs and worms. I pull back the covers and check the bed every night before I get into it!"

Marla strode to the window and peered out. She became very pale and worried-looking. "Who would come in here? Who would put leeches on your arm, Joy? It—it doesn't make any sense."

Joy uttered a low moan. "They're so disgusting. I felt something pinching my arm. They—they sucked my blood. They—"

"Please, Joy, try to calm down," Claudia said softly, her hand still on Joy's shoulder. "You're okay now. You're okay."

"Did someone know Joy has a thing about bugs?" Sophie asked.

"No one was in here," Marla said firmly, turning away from the window. "No one can get in. You know that, Sophie."

"Then how did leeches get on her arm?" Sophie demanded in a high-pitched voice.

Marla shook her head and closed her eyes. Her blond hair fell loosely over the shoulders of her white nightshirt. She tugged at a strand of hair, pulling it to her mouth and chewing on it as she thought.

"There are always lots of bugs in the summer," she said finally, brushing the strand of hair back, talking to herself. "Mice too. But there's no way leeches could get up here. Leeches don't live in the ocean, so . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"Someone had to stick them on me!" Joy declared, only a little calmer.

"I'm going to speak to Alfred about this right now!" Marla declared. Shaking her head, she strode from the room.

Claudia listened to her footsteps pound down the stairs. "This certainly is a mystery," she said to Joy. "Are you feeling a little better?"

"Know what I think?" Joy asked, ignoring the question. She pulled herself up straighter against the quilted headboard. "Know what I think? I think Marla invited us here to torture us!"

"Huh?" Both Claudia and Sophie reacted with surprise.

Sophie dropped down onto the edge of the bed and squinted hard at Joy. Sophie was wearing silky striped pajamas. Claudia remained standing next to Joy.

"What on earth do you mean?" Sophie demanded.

"You heard me," Joy snapped. "These things that are happening here—they can't all be accidents."

"Joy—what are you saying?" Claudia demanded.

Joy wiped her runny nose with the sheet. "I'm saying that Marla invited us here to torture us," she replied darkly. "Because of Alison."

"I'm sure Marla doesn't blame us for what happened to Alison," Sophie said, her voice revealing uncertainty.

"Let's not get totally paranoid," Claudia said softly.

"Paranoid? I'm not paranoid!" Joy replied angrily. "Do you really think it was an accident that Marla left you buried in the sand to fry?"

"Yes, I do," Claudia told her.

"And what about Sophie?" Joy asked with a shudder.

"It was Marla who asked Sophie to touch the electrified gate. Sophie could've been electrocuted. And now me! Leeches stuck to my arm. I'm telling you, Claudia—I'm not paranoid. I—"

"Sshhhh!" Sophie whispered, raising a finger to her lips.

They all heard Marla's footsteps in the hall. Marla entered the room, a concerned expression on her face. She swept her hair back over the shoulders of her nightshirt. "Alfred is just as baffled as we are," she announced in a low voice.

The room fell silent. No one knew what to say next. The high-pitched whistle of crickets drifted in from the open window.

Sounds like camp, Claudia thought with a shiver.

Sophie yawned loudly.

Joy had stopped crying and had pulled the bedspread up to her chin.

"Let's go back to bed," Marla suggested, frowning. "Maybe we'll be able to figure it out in the morning."

After saying good night to Joy and making sure she was calm enough to be left alone, Claudia made her way across the hall to her room. Feeling chilled, she pushed the French doors shut. She had started to climb into bed, picturing again the three big leeches on Joy's arm, when she realized her mouth was dry.

"Water, water," she groaned aloud.

A glass of cold water from the refrigerator would help a lot, Claudia thought.

Walking as silently as possible, so she wouldn't disturb the others, she made her way down the long hall. Then crept down the stairs to the kitchen.

She stopped in the doorway, surprised to find a dim light on over the long counter. The tile was cool under her bare feet.

A shadow moved.

Someone else is down here, Claudia realized.

"Marla? Is that you?" she whispered.

No.

She could just make out a tall figure half hidden in the shadows near the back pantry.

"Daniel!" she cried. "What are *you* doing here?"

chapter

13

RIPTIDE!

“**D**aniel—how did you get in here?” Claudia demanded, her voice a whisper.

His dark shadow moved against the wall.

Frozen in the doorway, Claudia squinted against the dim light, struggling to see his face.

The shadows darkened.

No one replied.

For a brief moment the dim light from the counter played over his face. Claudia could see his expression. Troubled. Frightened.

"Daniel—?" she called, taking a few steps toward him and shivering from the cold tile. "Hey, wait—"

But he had vanished silently into the shadows.

"Daniel . . . ?"

Silence. No footsteps.

A door creaked somewhere. A gust of wind set a tree branch tapping at the kitchen window.

Claudia could hear her heart pounding as she continued to search for him in the shadowy kitchen.

But he was gone.

Why didn't he answer me? she wondered.

Why didn't he say anything?

Why did he look so frightened?

"He isn't a ghost," she said aloud. "He *can't* be. I touched him. I kissed him."

But then how had he gotten into the house? How had he gotten past the electrified fence?

"Oh!" Claudia cried out as the bright ceiling lights clicked on.

"Hello?" a voice said.

Claudia spun around to see Alfred. Dressed in dark trousers and an undershirt, his suspenders drooping down at his sides, Alfred seemed as startled to see her as Claudia was to see him.

"Oh, hi," Claudia managed to choke out. "I came down for a glass of water."

Alfred nodded. "Me too. I'll get some for both of us." He pulled open the big refrigerator and squinted for a long time at the top shelf. Finally he reached for a bottle of water.

"I—I saw someone," Claudia stammered.

"What did you say?" He turned to her, the refrigerator door still open.

"I saw someone in here. In the kitchen. A boy."

He narrowed his eyes at her suspiciously. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," she insisted, leaning against the counter on one elbow, her hands clasped at her waist. "Yes. It was dark, but I saw him. I mean, I recognized him. He—"

"But that's impossible," Alfred said, scratching his bald head. He set down the bottle of water and pushed the refrigerator door shut, keeping his eyes on Claudia. "No one could get in here."

"Is someone else staying here maybe?" Claudia asked.

Alfred shook his head. "No one else."

"There's no one in the guest house? I thought I saw a light in there last night," Claudia said.

"A light?" He tilted his head, staring intently at her.

"That's impossible, miss. I cleaned the guest house today. Dusted and vacuumed it. I clean it every week. It's empty. Completely empty. No sign of anyone being in there."

"But I saw this boy's face," Claudia insisted heatedly. "His name is Daniel. I saw him at the boardwalk tonight. He—"

"How would some strange boy get in here?" Alfred interrupted. Still scratching his head, he crossed the room and peered out the window, squinting hard. "The electrified fence is on. The guard dog has been let out of his pen. Miss Drexell changed the alarm system code herself this evening."

"Marla changed the alarm system?" Claudia asked.

Alfred nodded. "Yes, she did. There's no way. No way a boy could get through all that without our knowing."

"Oh," Claudia replied flatly and let out a long breath.

Alfred poured out two glasses of water and handed her one. He seemed to be uncomfortable, and his eyes avoided hers.

Is he hiding something? Claudia wondered.

Does he know more than he's saying?

And then, as she sipped the cold water, a frightening thought flashed into her mind:

Was Daniel upstairs? Had he put the leeches on Joy's arm?

Why? Why? Why?

The next morning, after a restless sleep, Claudia hurried down to breakfast. She couldn't wait to tell the others about seeing Daniel in the kitchen.

Sophie teased her. "The Ghost Boy!" she cried. "Come on, Claud. Now you're seeing ghosts in the house?" Sophie started to laugh, but stopped when she saw the serious expressions on everyone's face.

"Someone came up to my room with those leeches," Joy said with a shudder. "That was no *accident*. Maybe it was this boy Claudia saw."

"He seemed like a nice guy," Claudia told them. "But—"

Marla interrupted by jumping up from the table. "I don't believe in ghosts. If there is some boy hiding in this house, I want to find him," she declared, frowning.

She started toward the kitchen. At the doorway, she turned back to her guests. "I'm going to have Alfred

call the police," she said. "I want them to search the estate from top to bottom. They can do it while we're out waterskiing this afternoon."

Shouting for Alfred, she disappeared from the room.

Claudia had looked forward to waterskiing. But with her face still scarlet and starting to peel, she decided she'd better protect her skin more than she normally would.

First, she covered herself in number 30 sun block.

Then she changed into an iridescent blue one-piece bathing suit. Over her suit she pulled on a pair of flight drawstring pants and a long-sleeve T-shirt. She topped the outfit off with one of her brother's baseball caps that her mother had insisted she take.

There, she thought with satisfaction. I look like a total jerk, but the sun won't get near me!

By the time she reached the Drexell's dock, the other three girls were already in the boat, wearing bright orange flotation belts. Marla was perched up front at the wheel, Joy in the back in the spotter's position, and Sophie hanging over the side, running her hand through the water.

"Whoa! Claudia, you're going to melt," Marla predicted as Claudia stepped onto the dock.

"Probably," Claudia agreed as she strapped a life belt on over her T-shirt. A cool wind played over the water, but the sun beamed down hot and strong from a cloudless sky. Waves lapped quietly at the dock. The boat rocked gently, pulling against its line.

"Who wants to ski first?" Marla asked.

"I'll go," Sophie volunteered, raising her hand as if she were in school.

Marla and Joy both showed their surprise. "You're the one who never liked to water ski," Joy said.

"Weren't you the one who didn't believe in getting in water that was colder than your body temperature?" Marla teased.

"I've changed," Sophie assured them. "I'm a much stronger swimmer than I used to be. Ever since I found out I was a Pisces and water was my sign, I've had a much better relationship with swimming. You'll see. I've become a great swimmer. I'm a fish! Really!"

It was a typical Sophie explanation, Claudia thought with a smile. Next, Sophie would probably discover she'd been an eagle in a past life and she was, like, meant for hang-gliding.

"Do you want a dock start or a water start?" Marla asked Sophie.

"Water," Sophie said. "I'm a little out of practice."

"Okay," Marla said. "Just one thing. If you go down, hold up your right arm to let us know you're okay."

"No problem," Sophie said. She climbed out of the boat and sat on the edge of the dock to put on the long skis. Claudia helped her tighten them, checking that they were on properly.

Sophie swung her legs around so that the skis were out over the side. Then she pushed herself off the dock, squealing as her body hit the cold water.

Claudia untied the boat from the dock and jumped in. The motor started with a pleasant roar. Marla pulled the boat out a short distance from the dock, and Joy threw Sophie the tow line.

Slowly, Marla took the boat out until the line was drawn taut. Claudia saw that Sophie had her knees drawn up in perfect position, the tips of the skis above the water, the wooden handle of the tow rope between her legs.

"Ready?" Marla called back.

Sophie nodded to Joy at the back of the boat, who called to Marla, "Ready!"

After a moment's hesitation the boat shot forward, its bottom slapping against the dark green swells.

Claudia's eyes were riveted on the back of the boat, where Sophie stood up smoothly, then bounced across the glassy waves, perfectly balanced on her skis.

"She *has* improved," Joy cried out over the roar of the motor.

"For sure!" Claudia agreed, watching Sophie confidently release one hand from the rope and wave at them.

Marla swung the boat in a wide arc, and Sophie leaned into the curve, laughing and happy. Her short, fuzzy hair bobbed freely.

Watching her friend, Claudia could feel herself getting impatient for her own turn.

As if reading her thoughts, Joy called, "Do you want to go next?"

Claudia nodded. She hurriedly took off the baseball cap and then the flotation belt, so that she could remove her pants and T-shirt.

I can't wait to get into the water! she thought. I'm sweating to death under all these clothes!

She peeled off her T-shirt and pants and was reaching for the flotation belt again when she heard Joy's cry over the noise of the motor: "Marla—stop. Sophie's gone down!"

Claudia turned her eyes quickly to the water.

Sophie was definitely down.

She watched for Sophie's right arm to shoot up, the signal that she was okay.

No signal.

Squinting hard and shielding her eyes from the sun, Claudia saw something bob to the top of the waves.

Sophie?

Claudia felt her throat tighten as she realized it was a ski. One lone ski.

"Where *is* she?" Joy shouted.

"There!" Claudia cried, pointing as she spotted Sophie's head float to the surface.

As Claudia was pointing, Sophie sank again and then resurfaced, flailing her arms and legs frantically.

"Marla—turn the boat around!" Claudia screamed. "Sophie's in trouble! She must be caught in the riptide!"

"It—it's taking her out to sea!" Joy cried, her eyes wide with horror.

Claudia gasped at the sudden silence.

The boat slowed, then drifted with the waves.

She could see Sophie kicking and thrashing, struggling desperately to free herself from the powerful current.

"Marla—go after her!" Claudia screamed in a shrill voice choked with fear.

"I—I can't!" Marla shouted back, her hands frantically working over the controls. "The boat—it stalled out! It won't move!"

chapter

14

SWEPT AWAY

“**S**ophie's drowning!” Joy shrieked, leaning over the side of the boat, shielding her eyes with one hand from the glare of the sun. “Marla—do something!”

“It won't start!” Marla shouted, both hands stabbing wildly at the controls. “What can I do? What can I do?”

The boat bobbed helplessly on the rocking waves.

Claudia saw Sophie struggling frantically as the powerful current swept her farther and farther away.

“What can I do? What can I do?”

The panic in Marla's voice spurred Claudia to action. Without realizing what she was doing, Claudia dove over the side of the boat.

The shock of the cold water made her gasp. Choking, she rose to the surface.

My flotation belt! she thought. It's still in the boat!

The sun made the rolling waves sparkle all around her. Spinning around, she searched for Sophie.

Where are you? Where are you?

Her heart pounding, she finally spotted Sophie in the near distance and saw her arms still flailing wildly.

Taking a deep breath, Claudia began swimming toward her with a strong, steady crawl, moving against the pull of the waves. She knew she had to stay parallel to the rip tide—without getting caught in it.

Sophie's head went under. Then, a few seconds later, it appeared on the diamondlike surface again.

“Sophie! I'm coming!” Claudia shouted. But the wind and the waves blew her voice back behind her. “Sophie!”

She tried to swim faster, but the current was pulling her the opposite way.

“Marla— Where are you? Marla, please hurry!” she said frantically to herself.

She listened for the roar of the boat motor as it caught. But the only sounds she could hear were the steady wash of the waves and her labored breathing as she pulled herself through the water.

Glancing back over her shoulder, Claudia could see the boat, bobbing silently far behind her.

“Marla—*please!*”

How could a boat just stall out like that?

Claudia's shoulders began to ache. She cried out as a cramp shot up her right leg.

Her eyes burning from the saltwater, she squinted hard, searching for Sophie.

Where are you? Where are you, Sophie?

Keep swimming. Keep struggling.

Yes. Claudia could see her up ahead.

I'm coming. I'm coming, Sophie.

Claudia suddenly realized that she was swimming much faster, gliding easily now over the tossing waves.

The leg cramp eased. She seemed to be moving with the current now instead of against it.

With the current.

The current.

To her horror, Claudia realized she had swum into the riptide.

"No! No—please!"

She was caught.

Caught in the powerful rush of current.

Helpless.

Being swept away, out to sea.

chapter

15

SHE'S TRYING TO KILL US!"

I'm going to drown, Claudia realized.

The thought made her spin around to search frantically for the boat.

Marla, where are you?

She couldn't see the boat anywhere.

A tall wave rose over her, tossing her forward. She gasped and started to choke again. She could feel herself being pulled under the surface.

I'm sorry, Sophie. I tried.

I'm so sorry. . . .

Her arms throbbed as she struggled to pull herself free from the current. Her leg cramp returned, shooting paralyzing pain up the length of her right side.

I'm going to drown now, she thought, gasping out a sob.

I'm going to die.

The wash of the water became a loud hum.

The hum became a roar.

I'm sinking, Claudia thought. Sinking into the roar.

Her arms were too heavy to stroke now.

Her legs ached with shooting pains.

She could feel herself sinking into the deafening roar.

And then, unexpectedly, hands were circling her arms.

She felt strong hands grasp onto her and pull.

That roar wasn't inside her head.

The roar was the sound of a motor. A boat's motor.

And she was being lifted out of the water. Two people were working to lift her, to pull her onto the boat.

Beside Sophie.

Sophie smiled at her. Trembling all over, her entire body shivering and dripping wet and covered with goose bumps, Sophie had her arms crossed in front of her—and was smiling at her.

"Are you okay? Claudia, are you okay?" another voice, not Sophie's, asked.

Claudia stared up into the worried face. Tried to focus on the dark hair tossed in the strong ocean wind. Tried to focus on the dark eyes.

"Carl!" she cried.

"Carl and Dean to the rescue," he said quietly, a smile forming on his tanned face.

Claudia turned to see Dean at the wheel. She rolled onto her knees on the deck of the boat, her wet, auburn hair falling over her face. She pushed the hair back with a trembling hand. "Sophie, are you okay?"

Sophie nodded. "Yeah. I just can't stop shaking."

"Close one," Claudia managed to mutter.

"We'll take you to the Drexell's dock," Carl said, his hand warm on her shoulder.

Claudia nearly toppled backward as the small boat roared forward. She struggled to keep her balance. Wiping water from her eyes, she saw that they were in a small fiberglass powerboat.

She searched the horizon for Marla's boat but didn't see it. The tiny boat roared loudly, bouncing over the waves.

Claudia scooted close to Sophie. "What happened?" she shouted. "Did you let go of the rope?"

"I don't know," Sophie told her, still shivering despite the hot sun that burned down directly above them. "One minute I was up. The next, I was down. I was still holding onto the bar. But—but the tow rope—I don't know! I wasn't connected to the boat anymore. I don't know what happened, Claudia. I got caught in the riptide and—and—"

Claudia wrapped a comforting arm around Sophie's trembling shoulders. She could see the white dock up ahead.

We're okay, she thought.

We're okay.

Claudia's legs were shaking as Carl and Dean helped her onto the dock a few moments later. Sophie offered both boys a relieved smile as they pulled her from the boat. "You guys are heroes," she told them.

"Hey, we do this all the time," Dean told her, grinning.

The roar of another boat's engine made them all turn toward the water. Marla and Joy were both waving wildly as Marla's boat bounced up to the dock.

A few seconds later Joy leapt off the boat and, shrieking happily, came running over to throw her arms around Sophie and Claudia.

Marla tethered her boat, then jumped ashore, a broad smile on her face. "I'm so happy!" she cried. "My stupid boat. I've got to get a new motor. Joy and I saw that you were safe. Then I finally got my motor to turn over. I think I'd flooded it or something!"

There were more hugs and cries of thanks to the two boys. Carl and Dean tried to act casual, but Claudia could see how pleased they were with themselves. Even Marla thanked them again and again, which seemed to be a special triumph for them.

"We've got to get the boat back," Carl said finally. "We, uh, sort of borrowed it."

Everyone laughed.

"Maybe we'll catch you later," Dean said, smiling at Sophie.

"Yeah. Catch you later," Carl repeated.

The four girls watched the boys roar off in the tiny boat.

"Let's get up to the house," Sophie cried, smiling at Marla. "I'm starving!"

"Close calls always make me hungry too!" Joy declared, her arm around Sophie's shoulders.

"What on earth happened, Sophie?" Marla asked, her smile fading. "Did you lose your grip on the bar, or what?"

"I don't know—" Sophie started.

But Claudia interrupted. She had reached into the water and pulled up the end of the nylon tow rope. "Look at this!" she called to the others.

She held up the end of the rope for them to see. Her hand began to tremble as she realized what she had discovered.

"What are you showing us?" Marla asked as the three girls huddled around Claudia.

"Look at this tow rope," Claudia said softly. "It isn't frayed. It didn't tear."

"Huh? What do you mean, Claud?" Joy demanded, bewildered.

"The rope had to be cut. Look how smooth the end is. It had to be cut so that it would snap under pressure."

"You mean—" Sophie started, raising a hand to her mouth.

"I mean someone did this deliberately," Claudia said, turning to Marla.

Marla tossed back her blond hair, her blue eyes staring hard at the end of the rope. "That's impossible," she said shrilly. "My father and I took this boat out waterskiing last week. The rope was fine. I really don't think—"

Marla's mouth dropped open. She turned her gaze to the boat. "Whoa!" she cried. "Hold on a minute . . ."

"What?" Sophie demanded. "What are you thinking, Marla?"

"The boy you saw in the kitchen, Claud. I wonder—"

"Daniel?" Claudia cried. "Why would he cut the tow rope?"

"I have another idea," Marla replied thoughtfully, pointing in the direction the boys' had headed. "Carl and Dean. They were on the beach yesterday. I wouldn't be at all surprised if *they* cut the rope."

"Huh?" Joy cried out. "How can you accuse them, Marla?"

"Yeah! They *saved* us!" Sophie declared heatedly.

"We would've drowned!" Claudia agreed. "Those boys—"

"How did they know to be here?" Marla interrupted. "Don't you think it was a little too convenient? How did they know just when to come riding in to the rescue?"

"Marla—" Sophie started.

Marla cut her off. "They cut the rope after we left the beach yesterday. Then they probably watched from the Point, waiting for someone to start skiing and go down. I'm telling you, Sophie, they did it so they could be heroes. Their showing up like that is just too big a coincidence."

"No, it isn't," Joy said loudly, her green eyes lighting up.

"Huh? What do you mean?" Marla asked.

"It wasn't a coincidence," Joy confessed. "I told them to come around today."

"You *what*?" Marla cried, hands on her hips.

"Can we please get up to the house?" Sophie cried. "I've got to get changed. And I'm *starving*!"

"Yeah. Let's go," Joy eagerly agreed, starting toward the stairs that led up to the back lawn. Frowning thoughtfully, Marla followed.

Only Claudia lingered behind, holding the cut tow rope out of the water, staring at the smooth end.

"Now I know I'm right!" Joy declared, whispering.

"Right? Right about what?" Claudia demanded.

It was right after lunch. They were in a dark wood-paneled den, huddled together on an enormous red leather couch. Marla had disappeared to make some phone calls. Across the room, a mounted moose head hung over a redbrick fireplace stared at them with mournful brown eyes.

"Joy, what are you talking about?" Sophie asked, whispering too, her eyes on the den doorway.

Joy pushed herself off the couch, crossed the room, and closed the door before replying. She wore a white sleeveless top over white tennis shorts, which emphasized her tanned skin.

"Just what I said before," she whispered, her expression troubled, "about the reason for this little Camp Full Moon reunion. Marla brought us here to torture us." She swallowed hard. "Maybe even to— kill us."

"Joy—really! You need a reality check," Sophie said, rolling her eyes. She turned to Claudia for support, but Claudia didn't say a thing. "Anyone can have a waterskiing accident," Sophie insisted. "You can't blame Marla—"

"Yes, I can. Claudia was right about the tow rope," Joy continued, tugging at her ponytail. "You saw it, Sophie. That rope was cut."

"But, Joy—"

"And do you really believe that Marla's boat cut out just at the moment it was needed to rescue you?" Joy continued, her nostrils flaring. "Do you really believe it stalled out just when you were about to drown?"

"I—I don't know," Sophie replied, shaking her head. She pushed her wire-framed glasses up on her nose, frowning.

"I'm right. I *know* I'm right. The leeches on my arm weren't an accident. None of the accidents here have been accidents. Marla has to be responsible. Alfred reported that the police searched and didn't find any trace of Claudia's Ghost Boy. It *has* to be Marla. Marla brought us here to torture us."

Claudia raised her eyes to Joy's. "But why?" she demanded. "What's her reason, Joy? Why would she want to do that to us?"

Joy leaned forward, all the light fading from her green eyes. "Because," she whispered, "Marla must know that Alison's death wasn't an accident."

chapter

16

THE TRUTH ABOUT ALISON

Claudia uttered a silent gasp as Joy's words burned into her mind. She sank back against the soft red leather of the sofa and closed her eyes.

Alison's death—it had to be an accident, she thought.

A horrible accident.

But Joy's words had cleared a path in Claudia's mind, a path that had been closed off since the previous summer.

Joy's words brought the frightening memories rushing out from their dark hiding place in a corner of Claudia's mind.

And for the first time in nearly a year, Claudia allowed herself to remember what had really happened that night at Grizzly Gorge. . . .

• • •

Claudia, Joy, and Sophie watched fearfully as Alison balanced on the log, halfway across the gorge, her slim body illuminated by the full moon. The sound of the river rushing beneath her echoed up to them. Her arms straight out at her sides, Alison slowly inched across the thick log.

Claudia, Sophie, and Joy huddled together back near the thick bushes. "I can't believe she's really doing it," Sophie whispered.

"I tried to stop her," Claudia whispered back. "But she's so stubborn."

"I'm glad Marla isn't here," Joy said, her arms crossed in front of her chest. "She'd have a heart attack."

"Are you kidding?" Sophie exclaimed, her eyes riveted on Alison. "Marla would shake the log! She can't *stand* her sister!"

"That's not true," Claudia insisted. "Marla cares about Alison. But you know Marla. She doesn't like to show that she cares about anyone."

Just then Alison cried out. She appeared to have stumbled. Her arms flew up as she struggled to regain her balance. "I'm going to fall!" she cried.

"Keep going," Sophie urged. "You're almost there."

"Don't turn back," Joy told her. "Keep going!"

"I mean it." Alison's voice became panicky. "I—I can't do it. I'm going to fall!"

"Alison—stop messing around. Hurry up before someone comes," Joy told her impatiently.

And then all three girls saw the darting lights, flashlights in the woods. Footsteps approaching. Counselors' voices.

"Come on, Alison!" Sophie called. "We're going to be caught!"

"Hurry!" Claudia shouted. "Let's go!"

And then the three girls were running into the darkness of the woods, running away from the approaching lights.

Was Alison running too? Was she following them back to the bunks?

Claudia didn't bother to check.

As she ran, her sneakers crunched loudly over twigs and dry leaves. So loudly that she could barely hear Alison's high-pitched squeal; "Help me!" And she didn't hear the *thud* of Alison's body hitting the rocks, or the splash of the water swallowing her up.

When Alison's counselor discovered Alison was missing, they searched for her. Her blood-soaked T-shirt was found the next morning, clinging to a jutting rock near the riverbank.

Her body was never found.

Claudia, Joy, and Sophie never told anyone they had been there when Alison fell. They never told anyone that Alison had asked for help, that they had run away instead, that they had never checked to make sure Alison was safely back on solid ground.

Maybe we could've saved her, Claudia thought, overcome with guilt.

Maybe we could've walked out and helped her off the log.

Maybe she didn't have to die.

"She was fine when we ran off," they told Marla later. "We thought she was right behind us. We really did."

Marla believed her friends' story.

It didn't take the three girls long to believe their story too.

It was easy to believe.

Easier than the truth.

It was a nicer version of a horrifying death.

And, Claudia realized, they had all clung to the story because it offered a much nicer version of themselves.

We probably could have saved Alison, Claudia knew.

Instead we let her fall to her death.

The memories of that dreadful night roared through Claudia's mind faster than the rushing river at the bottom of Grizzly Gorge.

It seemed so long ago.

And so long since she had faced the truth.

Claudia opened her eyes and leaned forward on the soft leather couch. She raised her eyes to her two friends. "We have to get out of here," she said in a low, steady voice. "I think Joy is right. I think Marla has decided that we could have saved Alison but didn't that night at Camp Full Moon. I—I think she brought us here to torture us. Maybe worse."

Sophie gasped, her eyes open wide. "But how? What do we do? How do we get away from here?"

"Marla won't let us get away," Joy muttered, standing and pacing. "She won't, Claud. I know it!"

Claudia got to her feet and crossed to the desk. She lifted the phone receiver. "I'm going to call my mom and tell her to come pick us up," she told them. "When she shows up, Marla will have to let us go."

Claudia punched in her home number and turned toward the wall to talk to her mother.

When she turned back to her friends, her expression was troubled. "She can't come till the day after tomorrow," she told them.

"What do we do till then?" Joy demanded shrilly.

"Lay low, I guess," Claudia replied, replacing the receiver.

"We can make it for one more day," Sophie said. "We'll just have to be careful. No dangerous water sports. And we'll act as if everything's okay."

"Sophie's right," Claudia quickly agreed. "We'll just be careful until my mom arrives. We'll pack and be ready to go. And—"

She turned toward the figure in the den doorway.

Marla!

Claudia was startled to see Marla silently standing there, one hand raised against the door frame, staring intently at her. A frown hardened Marla's features.

How much did Marla hear? Claudia wondered.

Did she hear their whole conversation?

Did she know they were planning to leave?

Marla's expression softened as she stepped into the den. She held up a flat gold box in one hand and made her way toward the three girls.

"Would anyone like a chocolate?" she asked, lowering the box. "They're very good."

chapter

17

DOWN, BOY!

Staring up at the white glare of the afternoon sky, Claudia adjusted her purple swimsuit, brushed sand off her back, and gazed down the butterscotch beach.

I'll go for a long run, she decided.

Despite the tension the three girls felt, the day had gone pretty well. Joy and Sophie had played tennis most of the morning. Marla had slept late, then said she had chores to do.

After lunch Joy had gone into town with Carl. Sophie announced she was taking a long nap. Marla had letters to write. Claudia had ventured down to the beach.

Splitting up is a good idea, Claudia thought. We'll get through this day. Then my mom will be here bright and early tomorrow, and we'll be out of here.

Barefoot, Claudia started to run south, in the direction of town. She stayed close to the shoreline, where the sand was wet and compact. The waves splashed up against her bare legs, cold and salty.

Watching the sea gulls make their soaring V's against the gray-white sky, she lost track of time. The waves splashed against her. Her feet kicked up chunks of wet sand as she jogged.

Before long, Claudia found herself running on the beach that cut past the bird sanctuary. She also realized that once again she'd misjudged the intensity of the summer sun.

Even though it barely poked through the high cloud cover, she could feel her skin burning. She wished she'd taken a water bottle and worn something more protective than the one-piece bathing suit. She wished she was the type of person who tanned instead of fried.

Should I turn around and go back? she asked herself.

No. It feels so good to run. I'll just go a little bit farther.

A jetty of dark boulders broke the water a short distance ahead. She decided to jog as far as the jetty and then go back.

Her eyes on the preserve, Claudia sensed that something was wrong. She could hear her own footsteps, her breath coming in hard pants, and the sound of breakers hitting the shore.

But the air had suddenly gone very still.

Claudia stopped.

What's wrong here?

What feels so weird?

It took her a while to realize that the quiet was what was wrong.

What had happened to the sounds of gulls and sandpipers and the other sea birds?

She listened.

Silence.

This was a bird sanctuary, right?

So where were the birds?

She squinted into the distance and, to her surprise, saw another person running near the edge of the beach. It looked like Marla—no one else had that strawberry-blond hair and perfect, slender figure.

"Marla!" Claudia called, cupping her hands around her mouth.

The girl in the distance didn't stop or even look back.

It must be someone else, Claudia thought.

Forgetting the girl, Claudia searched the trees for birds.

None in sight.

And no chirps or whistles.

Why would all the birds have suddenly vanished?

Why?

She could think of only one answer.

And the answer made a cold chill run down her back despite the heat of the sun.

Something had frightened the birds away.

A predator.

There must be a predator—a large one—nearby.

Seconds later Claudia's guess was confirmed by a low growl directly behind her.

She turned to see an enormous white Irish wolf-hound. It stood eyeing her. Its narrow snout was lowered, and its matted, wiry fur appeared to be standing up on its back.

The dog stared menacingly, its teeth bared, revealing long, pointed fangs. It snarled out a warning.

"Down, boy," Claudia muttered in a low, trembling voice. "Easy now. Go home. Go home, boy, okay?"

The rumble in the dog's chest deepened in reply.

"Nice dog," Claudia tried, desperate, her heart thudding in her chest. "Nice doggie. Go home, boy."

Saliva dripped from the wolfhound's mouth. Its snarl changed to a loud, frightening growl.

Slowly, her eyes trained on the dog, Claudia began to back away.

In response, the wolfhound loped toward her with alarming speed.

Claudia wheeled around and started to run, her feet kicking up large clods of wet sand.

She turned to see the dog running after her, its teeth bared, its eyes eager for the chase.

What little she knew about Irish wolfhounds flashed through her mind as her feet pounded the sand. Even bigger than Great Danes, they were bred for speed and aggressiveness, bred as the ultimate hunters.

They were bred to tear apart wolves.

The dog was gaining on her, Claudia saw.

Closer.

Closer.

Until she could hear the snap of its teeth and feel its hot breath on her legs.

What can I do?

What can I do?

She had no other choice.

With a desperate cry, she lunged into the water. Taking a deep breath, she dove under the waves.

She came up, swimming hard, stroking out from the shoreline.

Got to get away.

Got to swim away.

She screamed as the surge of pain shot up her leg.

Thrashing hard, she stared down—and saw the dog's teeth clamped around her ankle.

chapter

18

NO ESCAPE

Claudia screamed as the dog bit deeper into her ankle.

"Let go! Let go!"

She tried to kick at it with her free leg, but only succeeded in forcing her head under the water, her arms thrashing desperately.

The dog let go, but the throbbing pain remained, shooting up Claudia's side.

The huge dog lunged at her, snarling, its teeth snapping ferociously.

Sputtering, Claudia tried to stand, to kick the animal away.

"Help!"

With a desperate, shrill cry, she fell again.

Choking, struggling to breathe, she kicked at the growling creature.

Blood stained the water. Her blood. Claudia's ankle throbbed with pain.

I'm going to pass out.

I can't bear the pain.

"Help me! Somebody—help!"

Her screams rang out across the beach. The empty beach.

The dog's teeth snapped near her leg again. She struggled to pull back, but each attempt sent pain stabbing up through her entire body.

Claudia's head sank under the water. She fought her way to the surface, gasping for air.

"Help me! Can't somebody help me?"

With a desperate lunge, she heaved herself into the tossing waves.

Snarling furiously, the dog snapped at her hand. Missed. Snapped again.

Got to get away. Got to get away from him.

Her heart pounding, and sobbing with each breath, Claudia dove under the surface and began to swim. Dragging her injured leg, she pulled herself away, using all of her remaining strength, pulled herself away from the shore, away from the snapping dog.

She stayed under the surface until it felt as if her lungs would burst. Then, lifting her head, she took in deep,

hungry breaths.

The saltwater stung her open wound, and her leg burned as if it were on fire.

Gasping for breath, she looked back and saw the dog paddling toward her, its dark eyes locked on hers.

I have to get away.

I have to wear him out.

She turned toward the open sea and dove under once again.

Dragging her leg still, she swam hard.

I can outswim it. I know I can.

If I go out far enough, the dog will have to turn back.

Pulling herself through the dark waters, Claudia urged herself on.

But then, a few moments later, she surfaced again, sucking in deep breaths of air. As the water rolled off her eyes, she stared into the near distance—and lost all hope.

A single, blue-gray fin was cutting smoothly through the water. Not wavering to the left or right, it was moving toward her with unnerving speed.

A shark!

chapter

19

DEAD IN THE WATER

“Nooooooooo!”

Claudia's wail rose over the tossing waves.

Watching the dark fin skim so smoothly through the water, she panicked.

She tried to swim, but her arms failed her. Salt water rushed into her nose and mouth, choking her.

Coughing, struggling to breathe, she felt herself being pulled below the surface by the undertow.

No!

Got to get control!

Get control!

Sputtering and sobbing, Claudia fought her way back up to the surface again. Her throat and nose burned from the water she'd taken in. Her leg sent fiery pain straight up through the top of her skull.

Got to think.

Think clearly.

Taking a deep breath and holding it, Claudia forced herself to fight down the panic that rolled through her body.

Think. Think!

She'd read that sharks were drawn to struggle and violent movement. Which meant she had to stop moving around.

The shark might get her anyway—she knew it would be drawn to her blood—but she could try to slow her movements and not guarantee a quick death.

Exhausted and terrified, Claudia forced herself to do a slow, even breaststroke. She remembered Steve, the waterfront counselor at Camp Full Moon, telling them, "Your legs and arms should move so smoothly in the breaststroke that they barely make the water ripple."

So smooth.

So smooth . . .

Swimming without making a ripple was all Claudia had to hold on to.

Smooth.

Smooother.

Ignoring her pounding heart, the blood pulsing at her temples, the throbbing pain in her ankle, she swam as smoothly and calmly as she could, counting silently to a measured rhythm.

One, two, three, four . . . Two, two, three, four . . .

Three, two, three . . .

I'm too tired.

I can't swim another stroke.

Exhaustion swept over her. Her arms suddenly weighed a thousand pounds each.

I can't make it.

I can't swim anymore.

The shark wins. . . .

Now she was fighting for every breath. Fighting to stay afloat.

And then suddenly, miraculously, the swimming became easier.

What's happening?

I'm moving again!

It took her a long time to realize what had happened. And when she realized, an ironic laugh escaped her lips.

I've swum straight into the riptide.

It's carrying me away from the shark.

But would it carry her fast enough?

Sucking in deep breaths, Claudia didn't allow herself to look back. With renewed energy, she kept swimming, grateful for the pull of the tide that carried her along.

The anguished squeal of pain made her stop.

"What was *that*?" she muttered aloud.

She turned in time to see the wolfhound's long white snout thrashing furiously above the water, its front legs shooting straight up.

A wave of pure horror swept over Claudia.

The dog squealed again.

The shark was attacking it from below, Claudia realized.

As Claudia gaped in horror, a geyser of blood boiled up from beneath the water. The foamy crest of a wave turned pink. The metallic smell of blood floated out over the tossing waves.

Even from where she swam, Claudia could see the water darken with the wolfhound's blood.

A surge of nausea made her stomach heave.

The dog uttered a final weak yelp.

Claudia shut her eyes.

But she opened them wide when something coarse bumped against her.

Treading water, Claudia goggled at the disgusting object.

She opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came out.

What is it?

What *is* it?

She didn't want to look at it—but she couldn't pull her eyes away.

She soon realized that it was a hair-covered chunk of meat.

Part of the dog.

The water all around her was black with blood.

Glancing around, she could see no other sign of the dog or shark.

Claudia couldn't stop the horrified scream that unexpectedly burst out of her. All of the terror of the last twenty minutes racked her body.

Again she slipped beneath the surface. She was never going to get back to shore, she realized. If the shark didn't take her, the riptide would.

I've got to swim, got to force myself to swim.

Was the shark gone? Was it really gone?

Had the dog satisfied the shark's appetite?

A biology lecture came absurdly to mind: "Sharks are among the most efficient predators ever designed."

It was a fact Claudia had memorized for a quiz. Now she understood its true meaning.

If the shark did come after her, she wouldn't have a chance.

Her eyes searching the bobbing, dark waters, Claudia took another deep breath.

Just swim, she told herself. Keep it smooth.

She was so tired now, it was an effort to move her arms. But she turned toward shore and forced herself to swim, stroke after painful stroke.

Stroke. Stroke.

I—can't.

Her entire body throbbed. Her foot was numb now. Her chest tightened, about to burst.

Water rushed over her.

The beach. Where is the beach?

Horror gripped her as she had the frightening feeling she'd been swimming in the wrong direction.

Why can't I see the beach?

She whirled around in the water, panic sweeping over her.

Where is the beach?

Her arms gave out. She couldn't move.

The tide carried her now.

Everything went bright red. Red as blood.

And then black.

chapter

20

THE TRUTH ABOUT MARLA

“Claudia? Claudia?”

Strong hands pushed at Claudia's shoulders.

"Claudia? Can you hear me?"

Claudia groggily realized that she was sprawled on her stomach. She tried to raise her head, to see through her soaked and matted hair, which covered her eyes.

"Claudia, are you okay?" the voice demanded.

Claudia groaned and made another attempt to push herself up.

"Claudia?"

"Am I alive?" Claudia asked weakly, rolling onto her back.

She pushed the hair off her forehead and squinted at the blurred figure in front of her. "Marla?"

Marla knelt beside her, her face twisted in fear. "You—you're okay?"

"Marla, what are you doing here?" Claudia blurted. She adjusted the top of her purple bathing suit. The sun had disappeared behind thick storm clouds, she saw. The late afternoon sky had darkened to charcoal gray. Cool winds swirled over the beach.

She shivered, pain stabbing at her foot.

"I—I saw you," Marla stammered, placing a warm hand on Claudia's cold, wet shoulder. "I ran as fast as I could. The water had carried you onto the sand. You—you were just lying there. I thought . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"My foot," Claudia said. She pulled herself to a sitting position to examine it. The cut was deep, but not as wide as she'd imagined while struggling with the dog. The saltwater had stopped the bleeding.

"It's lucky I came along," Marla gushed. "I was going for a swim and—and I saw you wash ashore. And—"

With a loud groan, Claudia pulled herself to her feet.

"Can you walk?" Marla asked, holding on to her.

Claudia gingerly put some weight down on her injured foot. "I think so," she told Marla uncertainly. The sand tilted up to meet her. Long blue shadows stretched toward her. "I-I'm a little dizzy," she confessed.

"What *happened*?" Marla demanded. "How did you cut your foot?"

"It—it was so horrible!" Claudia cried. "A dog chased me. And then a shark—" Her breath caught in her throat. "My ankle—"

"Easy. Just take it easy. I'll get Alfred to treat it immediately," Marla said. And then frowned. "Oh. I forgot. It's Alfred's day off. Well, we'll take care of it ourselves."

She started to help Claudia toward the stairs.

Leaning against Marla, Claudia gazed up at the gathering black storm clouds, and all sorts of dark thoughts began running through her mind.

Marla didn't just happen to be on the beach, Claudia thought, as they started up the stairs toward the back lawn. Marla was the girl on the beach. The stranger I saw running away.

The Irish wolfhound was Marla's guard dog.

Marla brought the dog to the beach, then ran away.

The dog was kept locked up in a wire-mesh dog run. It was never allowed out except to guard the property at night. Never!

Claudia shuddered as she pulled herself up the wooden stairs. "Almost there," Marla said. Claudia heard a rumble of thunder behind her over the ocean. "It's really going to storm," Marla remarked softly.

She brought the dog down to the beach to attack me, Claudia thought.

She wanted the dog to kill me.

She wanted me to die.

Marla bent down to the low shrubs, pushed the keypad inside the metal box, and the gate swung open.

Claudia leaned on Marla as they made their way past the swimming pool and tennis court and toward the house.

Claudia stopped a short distance from the guest house. "I—I need to catch my breath," she told Marla.

Marla's eyes examined Claudia intently. "Poor thing. I just don't believe this happened," she said in a low voice. "You have to tell me the whole story when we get inside."

Another rumble of thunder over the ocean. Closer this time.

"I'll run into the house and try to find some antiseptic cream and bandages," Marla offered sympathetically. "Can you make it on your own?"

"Yeah. No problem," Claudia told her, wincing from the pain in her ankle. "Let me catch my breath. I'll be there in a second."

She watched Marla run across the terrace and enter the French doors at the back of the house. When she was certain Marla was out of sight, Claudia turned and, limping, made her way across the lawn with long, determined strides.

The dog run where the Irish wolfhound was kept came into view at the side of the wide, four-car garage. Hobbling badly, Claudia hurried toward it.

She had to see for herself.

I have to know that I'm right, she thought warily.

She stopped a few feet from the wire-mesh gate.

The gate was open a few inches. The padlock, unlatched, was hanging beside the gate.

Yes, she was right, Claudia realized, shaking her head grimly.

The dog didn't break out. The dog was let out.

The lock was removed. The gate was opened.

Marla had deliberately set that attack dog on her.

"This proves it once and for all. We really are in danger here," Claudia muttered out loud.

Turning to the house, she hurried toward the sliding French doors. Another low rumble of thunder crossed the sky. Claudia felt a few cold raindrops on her bare shoulders.

I know what we have to do, she thought unhappily. We can't wait any longer. We have to get out of here—now!

Joy, Sophie, and she had to get away—as fast as they could.

Breathing hard, Claudia hobbled into the house. She pulled the door shut, glancing around for Marla. No sign of her.

Claudia quickly made her way through the back hall, toward the stairs. Then, leaning heavily against the polished wooden banister, she pulled herself up the stairs.

Where are Joy and Sophie? she wondered.

We've got to get packed. Got to get out. *Now!*

Sophie's room was the first on her right. She knocked softly on the door. "Sophie—are you in there?"

Sophie pulled open the door before Claudia could knock again. "What happened to *you?*“ Sophie demanded, eyeing Claudia's matted, sandy hair.

"Never mind," Claudia whispered urgently, pushing past Sophie into the room. "Pack up, Sophie. Hurry. We've got to go!"

"Huh?" Sophie's mouth dropped open.

"We have to hurry! Really!" Claudia insisted. "Pack up."

"But, Claudia—your mom. I thought—tomorrow—"

Where's Joy?" Claudia demanded breathlessly. "We have to tell Joy."

"But—but—" Sophie stammered. "But, Claudia," she said in a low, trembling voice. "Joy is gone."

chapter

21

A DEAD GIRL

"Joy's gone? Where is she?" Claudia demanded shrilly.

Sophie gaped at her, her eyes wide behind her glasses.

Rain pattered against the window. Lightning streaked through the nearly black sky.

"She's still in town," Sophie said. "With Carl."

"Still? When's she coming back?" Claudia asked frantically.

Sophie shrugged. "Before dinner, I think."

"Well, start packing," Claudia instructed.

Sophie frowned. "I don't get it. What happened?"

Before Claudia could reply, the door swung open and Marla hurried in, loaded down with bandages and ointments. "So there *you* are," Marla said to Claudia. "I've been looking all over for you. Sit down." She motioned to Sophie's bed. "You've got to keep the weight off it."

Claudia obediently moved to the bed. She could feel Sophie's questioning eyes on her. But she knew there was no time to explain.

No time for anything.

The three of them had to get away.

As soon as Joy returned, Claudia would ask Marla to drive them to the train or bus station. And if Marla refused . . .

If Marla refused, they'd *walk* to town—storm or no storm. Or they'd call the police.

Thinking about all the "accidents" that weren't really accidents during the past few days, Claudia allowed Marla to cleanse and bandage her ankle.

Marla tsk-tsked as she worked—but she didn't ask what had caused the wound.

That's because she knows, Claudia thought angrily. She knows.

Gusts of wind flattened the rain into sheets against the window.

Marla must have been so disappointed when she saw me wash up on shore, still alive, Claudia thought bitterly.

A bright flash of lightning made the shadows leap in the room.

Please get back soon, Joy, Claudia thought anxiously. Please hurry back. She stared out at the storm, wondering if the hard rain would keep Joy from getting back. She jumped when the thunder boomed.

"There. All better," Marla said, smiling at Claudia. "How does that feel?"

"Good," Claudia replied distractedly.

Marla glanced at her watch. "Almost dinnertime. It's Alfred's day off, but he left us a picnic basket. I thought it'd be fun to have dinner out in the gazebo."

"But it's pouring!" Sophie protested.

"It doesn't matter," Marla replied, heading to the door. "The gazebo is closed in. It'll be fun to sit inside it and have a candlelight dinner and watch the storm over the ocean." She stopped at the doorway and turned around. "Hope Joy gets back in time. See you out there around six, okay?"

Joy burst into Sophie's room a few minutes before six, her black hair plastered to her head, her yellow sundress drenched from the storm.

"How's it going? Is everyone okay?" she asked nervously.

"I had a close call," Claudia told her, lowering her eyes to her bandaged ankle.

Joy gasped. "Did Marla—"

"Pack up, Joy. Quick. You were right about Marla," Claudia said, climbing to her feet. "This afternoon, she set her guard dog on me."

"No!" Joy cried, raising her hands to her face.

"I saw her on the beach. Marla doesn't know I saw her. You were right, Joy. She's trying to kill us."

Joy shivered. "Let me change. Then we can go."

"Change, then pack up," Claudia instructed. "Then we'll tell Marla we want a ride to town."

"What if she refuses? What if she tries to stop us?"

Sophie demanded in a shrill voice. "What if she—"

"It's three against one," Joy said, hurrying to the door as a blaze of light lit the sky outside.

"If she won't drive us, we'll walk," Claudia said firmly.

A deafening thunderclap provided an exclamation point for her declaration.

The three girls dropped their suitcases in the front hall. Claudia slid open the coat closet door and pulled out three umbrellas.

As they made their way through the hallway toward the back of the house, the lights flickered.

"Uh-oh," Sophie cried softly. "Hope the lights don't go out."

"Are you sure Marla's in the gazebo? Isn't it kind of crazy to be there now?" Joy demanded in a whisper.

The lights flickered again, but didn't go out.

"She said it would be fun to eat out there and watch the storm," Claudia told her.

"She probably had some plan for us to be struck by lightning," Joy muttered dryly.

"I still don't think she's going to let us go," Sophie said.

They opened one of the French doors that led to the back terrace. The lawn was illuminated by spotlights that automatically came on at dark. The sheets of rain shimmered in the bright light.

The three girls stepped quickly out onto the terrace and opened their umbrellas. The terrace was puddled with rainwater. Claudia's umbrella nearly blew out of her hands.

A long streak of lightning was followed by an immediate roar of thunder. The spotlights flickered, then shone steadily.

"Is she there? At the gazebo?" Sophie asked anxiously, lingering behind the other two girls.

"I can't see very well through the rain," Claudia replied.

"I think I see a light at the gazebo," Joy reported, holding the umbrella handle steady with both hands.

"The wind is so swirly, I'm getting soaked!" Sophie complained.

Their sneakers squishing in the grass and soft ground, they made their way past the guest house and the tennis court, the red-clay court nearly as bright as day under bright white spotlights on tall poles.

A light flickered in the gazebo near the fence at the back of the lawn. The roar of the heavy rain drowned out the rush of the ocean just beyond the fence.

Claudia hesitated near a small, white shed at the edge of the lawn. "What's that awful smell?" she asked.

Despite the falling rain, a heavy, sour smell, like decaying meat or rotten eggs, floated into her nostrils.

"Ugh. I smell it too," Joy cried with disgust.

"Gross!" Sophie agreed.

The woodshed door was slightly ajar.

"That's strange," Claudia commented. "I thought Alfred was always so careful about locking everything up."

"Whatever it is, it sure stinks!" Joy declared. "Let's get to the gazebo and then *out* of here."

"No, wait." Claudia held Joy back with one hand. On an impulse, she moved toward the open shed door. The other two girls followed close behind.

The sour odor grew heavier as they approached the shed.

Gripping the umbrella in one hand, struggling to keep it steady in the swirling rain, Claudia pulled open the shed door.

All three girls screamed as Marla's lifeless body toppled out.

chapter

22

WHO KILLED MARLA?

Marla's body had tumbled stiffly into the harsh glare of a spotlight.

Before Claudia could turn away and cover her face, she saw that Marla's skin was purple. Her eyes had sunk deep into her skull. Her jaws were frozen open in a permanent scream of terror.

"Noooooooo!" Sophie uttered a low howl of horror and disbelief.

Joy spun away from the gruesome sight and buried her head in Claudia's shoulder. "It can't, be. It can't be," she repeated.

"We just saw her a couple hours ago," Claudia said, thinking out loud. "How can she be dead?"

"She was m-murdered!" Sophie stammered. She had let her umbrella drop to the ground and stood with her hands covering her face, the rain drenching her short hair and her sweatshirt.

"Alfred!" Joy cried, pulling away from Claudia. "We have to tell Alfred!"

"He isn't here. It's his day off, remember?" Sophie said.

"Who killed Marla?" Claudia asked, feeling dazed and shaky. She stared into the yellow cone of light from one of the spotlights and watched the steady downpour. The sound of the rain pushed by the wind drowned out the ocean behind them.

Was it Daniel? Claudia wondered, dread sweeping through her body. Was he still around?

"There's no one here but us!" Sophie cried.

"So who killed Marla?" Claudia repeated, trying to force away the fluttery feeling of panic, trying to slow her racing heart.

"We've got to call the police—now!" Joy declared.

She glanced down at Marla's stiff, unmoving body for a second, then turned away.

"Yes! Come on!" Sophie agreed.

Limping on her bad ankle, Claudia followed the two girls around the deep puddles in the lawn, back to the house. She tossed her umbrella down at the doorway. Once inside, she shook her head hard, as if trying to shake away the hideous picture of Marla's purple face.

Shuddering, with rainwater soaking through her clothes, Claudia hurried to catch up to the others in the kitchen.

She stopped at the doorway. The lights flickered once again, but didn't go out.

Joy was standing by the counter, the phone receiver in her hand. She uttered a short cry of dismay.

"What's wrong?" Sophie asked, wiping the rainwater off her glasses with a paper towel.

"The line. It's dead," Joy replied softly.

Sophie gasped. "We can't call the police?"

Joy shook her head and replaced the receiver on the wall.

"We've got to get out of here," Claudia said, her eyes darting from Joy to Sophie. "Whoever killed Marla—maybe they're coming after us next!"

"No!" Sophie screamed, her face bloodless in the overhead fluorescent light.

"We've got to get to town. We've got to tell the police," Claudia said. She could feel panic tighten her throat.

"How can Marla be dead?" Joy wailed, gripping the back of a tall kitchen stool. "We just saw her. How did it happen?"

A loud crack of thunder made all three of them jump.

"We'll take some rain gear from the front closet," Claudia said. "We'll get out on the road and start walking, unless one of you knows where the car keys are kept." Neither girl answered. "Maybe someone will come by and give us a lift to town."

"Her face—it was so gross!" Joy exclaimed. "And her mouth—it was frozen open as if she'd died screaming."

"Joy—stop!" Sophie pleaded, even more pale.

"Yes. Stop," Claudia agreed. "Try to get Marla out of your mind. We've got to get out of this house. We've got to get the police."

Lightning crackled outside the kitchen window. As the thunder roared, the three girls made their way to the front and searched the coat closet for rain gear.

Claudia found a yellow slicker, two sizes too small, but she pulled it on anyway. Joy pulled a long silk scarf from a shelf and wrapped it around her head. Sophie pulled a light blue jacket on over her drenched sweatshirt.

"Ready?" Claudia asked.

"I guess," Joy replied quietly.

"Let's go," Sophie muttered, her eyes revealing her fear.

Claudia pulled open the front door and peered out over the wide front lawn. Bright spotlights illuminated the front lawn too. The rain had slowed a little, she saw, although the lightning and thunder continued.

"Let's go!" Claudia called. "Once we get on the road, someone may come by."

"I just want to get *out* of here!" Joy cried.

They ran out into the rain, bending low as they ran, their sneakers splashing up water and sinking into the soft grass as they made their way down the lawn.

At the end of the grass a tall metal fence rose up, hidden from the other side by a high, perfectly manicured hedge.

Claudia started to reach for the gate handle.

"Stop!" Joy screamed, pulling Claudia's arm back. Joy pulled off the scarf she had taken from the coat closet and tossed it at the gate.

Sparks flew as electricity plastered the scarf against the fence.

"Oh, wow! I forgot!" Claudia cried. She turned to Joy. "Thanks!"

"Now what?" Sophie cried miserably. "Now what do we do? We don't know where the controls to the fence are!"

"We're trapped," Joy muttered.

"We can't get out," Claudia agreed, staring hard at the electrified fence. "We're trapped here until it shuts off in the morning."

"But—what about the killer?" Sophie stammered.

chapter

23

A GHOST

The rain shimmered down like silver coins in the bright spotlights. Lightning streaked high over their heads.

"We have to find the controls," Joy said breathlessly. "There's got to be a way to shut off the fence."

"But it's all automatic, remember?" Sophie said in a tight voice. Drops of rainwater shone on her glasses. "It's on a timer."

"Then we've got to find the timer," Joy replied.

"It's probably in the basement," Claudia said with a shiver.

"I'm not going in the basement!" Sophie shrieked. "No way!"

Claudia had an idea. "I bet we can shut off the fence in back," she told them. "There's some kind of switch near the gate that leads down to the beach. I remember seeing Marla pull it. Near the control pad you have to push to open the gate."

"You mean we should go down to the ocean?" Sophie demanded shrilly. "In this storm?"

"No," Claudia told her, holding the yellow slicker over her head. "We just get out. Go through the gate. Once we're on the other side of the fence, we can follow it around the side of the house and head back to the front."

"Yes," Joy said. "That sounds good."

"You're sure we can shut off the gate in back?" Sophie demanded skeptically.

"I'm not sure, but we can try," Claudia said.

Bending low against the driving rain, they made their way around the side of the house, their sneakers sinking deeply into the soft mud as they walked. Joy slipped and fell against the house, but quickly pushed herself up and regained her balance.

The back of the house came into view. Rain splattered noisily against the flagstone terrace. Water poured out like a waterfall from the gutter.

"Do we have to go by the shed?" Sophie asked in a tiny voice.

"No. We can go on the other side of the guest house," Claudia told her. Her leg was burning with pain again, and she felt an agonizing jolt every time she stepped down on her foot.

Joy said something, but her words were muffled by the roar of the rain.

They were nearly to the guest house when a figure stepped out into the glare of a spotlight.

"Oh!" Claudia cried out in surprise.

All three girls froze.

The figure wore a trench coat pulled tight at the waist. A wide-brimmed straw hat covered her head, throwing her face into shadow.

What was that gleaming object she was raising in her hand? Claudia wondered.

Was it a pistol?

She pulled the brim of the hat back and revealed her face. Her cold blue eyes reflected the spotlight as she glared angrily at the three girls.

"Marla!" Joy managed to choke out. "But Marla— you're dead!"

chapter

24

"WHO WANTS TO DIE FIRST?"

They backed out of the rain and under an overhang of the sloping guest-house roof. The pistol continued to gleam in the bright light. Marla raised it to her waist. "Surprised, huh?" she asked bitterly.

"We saw your body in the shed," Claudia managed to choke out. "We thought—"

A bitter smile formed on Marla's lips. "Well, Claudia, you're the one who believes in ghosts. I guess I'm a ghost too."

Claudia took a step toward Marla. "The gun—" she began, staring hard at it, feeling cold fear sweep over her.

Thunder roared over the ocean. Wind pushed the rain against their backs.

"You all look so confused," Marla observed, the bitter smile still playing over her lips. Her blue eyes sparkled in the rain-filled light.

"We're so glad you're alive!" Joy cried.

"But Marla isn't alive," came the startling, even toned reply. "Marla is dead. I killed her a week ago. Before you even arrived."

"Huh?" Claudia cried out.

Joy uttered a cry of surprise. Sophie remained frozen, her eyes on the gleaming silver pistol.

"Marla's been dead for a week! Couldn't you tell by the smell?"

"Then—then—" Claudia started. Her legs suddenly felt weak, and she could feel the blood pulsing at her temples.

"That's right. I'm not Marla. I'm Alison." She tossed the straw hat into the rain. Her blond hair fell wildly about her face. Her eyes burned into Claudia's. "I'm Alison, back from the dead. And now Marla's the one who's dead. Surprise, surprise."

Claudia and the other two girls stared at Alison in silent shock. No one moved.

The spotlights flickered.

Alison gripped the pistol tightly, aiming it at Joy.

"You all look so confused," Alison said, shouting over the rain. "Not like at camp, where you thought you knew it all." She uttered the words slowly, bitterly.

"But, Alison—" Claudia started.

"Perhaps you'd like me to clear up your confusion," Alison continued, ignoring her. "Marla didn't know I

was alive, you see. Marla thought her poor sister had died in the gorge. She didn't know I was alive until I showed up here last week and killed her."

"But why?" Joy interrupted in a high-pitched voice. "Why did you kill Marla?"

"Because she watched me fall into the gorge. After you three ran away. Marla's face was the last face I saw, staring at me from the edge of the woods, staring at me *with a smile!*"

"No!" Claudia cried. "She couldn't—"

"Marla was smiling," Alison shouted, brandishing the pistol. "She didn't care about me. No one in my family cared if I lived or died. No one cared about me. So when a family pulled me out of the river, all broken and beat up and half drowned, and they were so nice, so caring, I decided to stay with them. I pretended to have amnesia—"

"You *what?*" Joy interrupted, gaping at Alison in disbelief.

"I pretended that I'd lost my memory," Alison cried, "so I wouldn't have to go back to my disgusting family. I decided this was my chance. To start a new life. To be with a happy family. So I pretended I didn't know who I was, and I stayed with them."

"But wh-what do you want with us? Why are you doing this?" Claudia stammered.

"Because the hatred built up," Alison shouted bitterly. "My anger didn't go away. Over the past year, it grew. I couldn't get Marla's smile out of my mind, that horrible smile as I fell off the log. I knew I had to come back to kill her."

"I made my way back here, not knowing what I'd find," Alison continued. "Mom and Dad were away, of course. They always are. I hid in the pantry. I heard Marla talking with Alfred, telling him she had invited you three for a camp reunion."

Alison grinned. "Perfect timing on my part. I killed Marla, hid her body in the shed, and took her place. Poor nearsighted Alfred didn't have a clue. And now, here we are, girls, having our gala camp reunion. Are you enjoying it so far?"

"Alison—put down the gun. Please!" Claudia pleaded.

"Uh-uh. No way." Alison's grin faded. The hand holding the pistol trembled.

"Alison, listen—" Claudia began.

"You shouldn't have let me fall," Alison cried with a surge of emotion. "You shouldn't have run away. You should've helped me. One of you should have helped me. One of you should've *cared* about me just a little."

With a loud sob, she pointed the gun from girl to girl. "Okay. I guess the party's over. It's been great. Really."

"Alison—stop! We'll help you! We care about you!" Joy cried, her eyes on the pistol.

"This time it's *my* turn," Alison said, ignoring Joy's plea. "This time I get to stand and watch while you die." She narrowed her eyes, her jaw set hard. "Who wants to die first? How about you, Claudia?"

Claudia gasped as Alison pointed the pistol at her chest.

chapter

25

A SECOND DEATH

*L*ightning flashed close by. A white streak just beyond the tennis court.

Claudia heard a pop as the lightning struck the ground.

She cried out, thinking she'd been shot.

Thunder shook the ground.

Claudia brushed her wet hair off her forehead and stared at the raised pistol quivering in Alison's hand.

And as she stared, the door to the guest house swung open.

"Oh!"

Claudia's cry made everyone turn.

A dark, hooded figure stepped out of the guest house and into the light.

Squinting through the rain, Claudia saw that the hood was part of a dark blue plastic windbreaker worn over dark jeans.

A gust of wind tossed the hood off his head.

Claudia saw his dark eyes, his thick black hair.

She recognized him at once. The Ghost Boy!

"Daniel!" she cried.

Alison's mouth dropped open. She turned the pistol on the new arrival. "Hey—who are you?"

He didn't reply. His dark eyes locked on Alison, he stepped toward her.

"Who *are* you?" Alison demanded, shaking the gun in his direction.

He took another step toward her.

"It's the Ghost Boy!" Claudia cried. "The ghost from the guest house!"

"Huh?" Alison reacted scornfully. "I made that story up. Are you *crazy*?"

Daniel took another step, rain sliding down the front of his windbreaker, his eyes on Alison.

"Hey—stay away! Stay away!" Alison cried, her anger suddenly giving way to panic. "Don't come any closer! I'm warning you!"

But the Ghost Boy continued his slow, steady walk toward her.

"I'm warning you!" Alison cried shrilly. "Stay away!"

Her eyes grew wide with terror.

With a loud cry, the Ghost Boy dove at Alison, tackling her around the waist.

Claudia froze for a second. Then seeing Alison start to fall, she darted forward, her hand outstretched, and grabbed the pistol from Alison's hand.

A streak of lightning hit with a pop near the swimming pool.

This time the lights went out.

The girls shrieked, startled by the sudden total darkness.

Claudia turned her gaze to the house. "The lights are out everywhere!" she cried.

She heard a struggle below her on the ground.

"Let go!" she heard Alison cry.

Then, as her eyes adjusted to the darkness, Claudia could see Alison running across the back lawn, past the tennis court and pool, running through the pouring rain at full speed toward the gate.

"No—Alison! No!" Claudia screamed, starting after her.

"It's electrified!" Joy screamed. "Stop! The gate is electrified!"

"The power is off, idiot!" Alison screamed back.

All three girls were running now, running after Alison.

Too late.

Claudia heard a generator hum on—just as Alison grabbed for the gate.

She heard the crackle. Saw Alison's arm catch in the wire mesh. Saw Alison struggle to free herself as a white streak of electricity encircled her body.

Alison screamed once. Then her body jerked and tossed inside the bright white electrical flame that appeared to dance around her.

I'm watching her die again, Claudia thought, horrified.

I'm watching Alison die a second time.

A jolt of current shot Alison off the fence, her body sprawling facedown in the muddy ground.

Twitching.

Then still.

By the time the girls knelt beside her, Alison was dead.

The bright spotlights flickered on. The wet grass sparkled green again.

Claudia stared down at Alison. Alison who was so frail and tiny. Her blond hair, matted flat to her head, shone golden under the harsh light.

She was so pretty, Claudia thought. So pretty.

How horrible to hate your family, to want to forget them. What a horrible life Alison had.

Claudia glanced toward the house and gasped.

She had forgotten all about the Ghost Boy.

He was advancing toward the three girls, his dark eyes trained on them in an eerie stare.

chapter

26

NOT A GHOST

"*I*s she—is she dead?" The boy asked, staring down at Alison's body.

Claudia nodded, her eyes trained on him as he advanced. "Yeah."

Behind her, Joy and Sophie were hugging, trying to comfort each other from the horrors of this night.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" Claudia demanded, rising to her feet, pushing her soaked hair off her forehead.

"I'm not a ghost," he replied, a grim smile forming on his handsome face. "I told you, my name is Daniel."

"Daniel who?" Claudia asked suspiciously.

Joy and Sophie turned to listen.

"Daniel Ryan," he replied, standing beside Claudia. "I'm Alfred's son."

The three girls reacted with surprise.

Daniel pointed to the guest house. "I'm on summer break from college. Visiting my dad. Dad let me stay in the guest house, but we didn't want anyone to know. The Drexells aren't the most generous people in the world. They wouldn't approve. I didn't want my dad to lose his job." He turned to Claudia. "That's why I've been so mysterious. Sorry."

"That's okay," Claudia replied softly, feeling relieved.

"The rain is slowing. Maybe the phones are working again," Joy said.

"We'd better try to call the police," Sophie said.

Joy and Sophie began jogging toward the house, their sneakers splashing through the marshy lawn.

Claudia lingered behind. She raised her eyes to Daniel's.

"Now both sisters are dead," Claudia said sadly, shaking her head.

Daniel put a comforting arm around her shoulders. "It's a horrible night. A horrible night," he muttered.

Claudia nodded in silent agreement.

"Did you really believe I was a ghost?" he asked, pulling her nearer.

"Maybe," she replied softly.

He smiled. "How can I prove that I'm not a ghost?" he asked, his dark eyes lighting up.

Claudia raised her face to his and kissed him.

"You pass the test. You're not a ghost," she told him. "Now let's get out of this rain."

Walking side by side, they made their way to the house.

About the Author

“Where do you get your ideas?”

That's the question that R. L. Stine is asked most often. "I don't know where my ideas come from," he says. "But I do know that I have a lot more scary stories in my mind that I can't wait to write."

So far, he has written nearly three dozen mysteries and thrillers for young people, all of them bestsellers.

Bob grew up in Columbus, Ohio. Today he lives in an apartment near Central Park in New York City with his wife, Jane, and thirteen-year-old son, Matt.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

AN ARCHWAY PAPERBACK *Original*

An Archway Paperback published by POCKET BOOKS, a division of Simon & Schuster Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

Copyright © 1993 by Parachute Press, Inc.

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. For information address Pocket Books, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

ISBN: 0-671-73868-2 First Archway Paperback printing June 1993

10 9 8 7 6 5

FEAR STREET is a registered trademark of Parachute Press, Inc.

AN ARCHWAY PAPERBACK and colophon are registered trademarks of Simon & Schuster Inc.

Cover art by Bill Schmidt Printed in the U.S.A.

IL7+