

“Take my purse,” the woman in the woods said. “There’s three hundred dollars in there. I can get you more money, if that’s what you want.”

Darby grabbed Stacey by the arm and pulled her back behind the slope. Melanie huddled up against them.

“This is probably just a mugging, but he might have a knife, maybe even a gun,” Darby whispered. “She’ll hand over her purse, and then he’ll run away and it will be over. So let’s just keep quiet.”

Both Mel and Stacey nodded.

“You don’t have to do this,” the woman said.

As scary as it was, Darby knew she had to look over the slope again. When the police came with their questions, she wanted to be able to recall everything she saw – every word, every sound.

Heart beating faster, she poked her head back over the slope and looked around the dark woods. Blades of grass and dead leaves brushed against the tip of her nose.

The woman started crying. “Please. Please don’t.”

The mugger whispered something Darby couldn’t hear. *They’re so close*, she thought.

Stacey had decided to take a look, too. She moved closer to Darby.

“What’s going on?” Stacey whispered.

“I don’t know,” Darby said.

A car was heading up Route 86. The headlights formed a pair of eerie white circles which were now sliding and bouncing across the tree trunks and the sloping ground full of rocks, leaves, and downed tree limbs and branches. Darby heard music

– Van Halen’s “Jump,” David Lee Roth’s voice growing louder along with the worrisome voice in her head telling her to look away, look away *now*. God knows she wanted to, but some other part of her brain had taken control, and Darby didn’t look away as the headlights washed over her, David Lee Roth’s booming voice singing to go ahead and jump, and she saw a woman dressed in jeans and a gray T-shirt kneeling by a tree, her face a deep, dark red, eyes wide and fingers desperately clawing at the rope tied around her throat.

Stacey jumped to her feet and knocked Darby backwards against the dirt. A rock smacked the side of her head hard enough that she saw stars. Darby heard Stacey pushing her way past branches, and when she rolled onto her side, she saw Mel running away.

Next came the dry crack of branches and twigs snapping – the mugger was coming toward them. Darby scrambled to her feet and ran.

Darby caught up with Stacey and Mel at the corner of East Dunstable. The closest payphones were the ones around the corner from Buzzy’s, the town’s popular convenience store, pizzeria and sub shop. They ran the rest of the way without talking.

It seemed to take forever to get there. Sweating and out of breath, Darby picked up the phone to dial 911 when Stacy slammed down the receiver.

“We can’t call,” Stacey said.

“Have you lost your goddamn mind?” Darby shot back. Behind her fear was a severe and growing anger directed at Stacey. It shouldn’t have come as a shock that Stacy had pushed her aside and run off. Stacey always put herself first – like last month, when the three of them made plans to go to the movies only to have Stacey cancel at the last minute because Christina Patrick called and invited her to some party. Stacey was *always* doing stuff like that.

“We were drinking, Darby.”

“So we won’t tell them.”

“They’ll smell the beer on our breath – and you can forget about chewing mint gum or brushing your teeth or gargling with mouthwash, because none of that works.”

“I’ll risk it,” Darby said, and tried to yank Stacey’s hand away from the receiver.

Stacey wouldn’t let go. “The woman’s dead, Darby.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I saw the same thing you did –”

“No, you didn’t, Stacey, you couldn’t have seen the same thing I did because you ran away. You pushed me aside, remember?”

“It was an accident. I swear I didn’t mean –”

“Right. As usual, Stacey, the only person you care about is yourself.” Darby ripped Stacey’s hand away and dialed 911.

“All you’re going to get is punished, Darby. Maybe you won’t get to go down the Cape with Mel, but your father won’t –” Stacey stopped herself. She was crying now. “You don’t know what goes in my house. None of you do.”

The operator came on the line: “Nine-one-one, what is the nature of your emergency.”

Darby gave the operator her name and described what had happened. Stacey ran behind one of the dumpsters. Mel stared down at the hill where they used to go sledding as kids, her fingers touching each of the charms on her bracelet.

An hour later, Darby was walking back through the woods with a detective.

His name was Paul Riggers. She had met him at her father’s funeral. Riggers had big white teeth and reminded Darby of Larry, the slimy next-door neighbor from *Three’s Company*.

“There’s nothing here,” Riggers said. “You kids probably scared him off.”

He stopped walking and shined his flashlight on a blue LL Bean backpack. It was unzipped all the way and she could see the three Budweiser cans lying inside the bottom.

“I take it that’s yours.”

Darby nodded as her stomach flipped and squeezed and flipped again, as if it was trying to tear itself away to find a place to hide.

Her wallet had been removed from her backpack. It was now lying on the ground, along with her library card. The money was gone, and her learner’s permit, printed with her name and address, was missing.