



Strange forces are blocking Anna's memories of what really happened the night her parents died and her home burned. As she struggles to find the truth, she must reject the very thing that protected her throughout her entire life. Is she strong enough to face it alone?

RUTHIE

By Lynn M. Stout

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Ruthie



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Chapter One

1983

Anna found herself in the kitchen and couldn't remember why. It was very late, and she should have been in bed. She held a sandwich made with the ends of the loaf. She hated the ends. Wrinkling her nose, she pulled the bread apart to reveal an orange slice of cheese. She froze when she heard Ruthie's voice.

Get out of the house.

"Why?" Anna asked.

But Ruthie didn't answer questions like that, so Anna simply obeyed. That's what she always did when Ruthie spoke. She lifted her doll from the chair, cradled her in her arm and walked, in a trance, through her home. She paused at her parents' room and peeked through the open door.

Suddenly, Anna was cold. She quickly realized she was sitting crisscross applesauce in the dirt and gravel that made up her front yard. Despite the raging fire behind her, she shivered and hugged her doll closer. Something was poking her. She

reached under her leg and found the culprit. She tossed the small rock away from her.

She took a bite of her sandwich and chewed mindlessly. Rocking her doll gently back and forth, Anna watched her shadow sway and dance in front of her while behind her, her home burned to the ground, taking her parents with it.

Now, she itched. A scratchy blanket was tucked around her. A nice lady fussed over her and asked questions. Ruthie told her to be quiet, so she closed her eyes and pretended to sleep.

She didn't have to pretend for long. Anna was very tired and every muscle in her six-year-old body hurt and ached. She blocked out the sounds of firefighters and sirens and slept.

The sound of squealing brakes and crunching gravel woke her. Familiar arms lifted her, and she opened her eyes to see Aunt Lu. Lu pulled Anna onto her lap and hugged her tight. She murmured that it was all over now. She was okay. Aunt Lu was here.

Anna closed her eyes again and drifted in and out of sleep while hushed adult voices spoke.

"How old is she?"

"Six," Aunt Lu said.

"Any other children in the house?" a man's loud voice.

"No. Two adults though," Aunt Lu answered.

"We found 'em," he answered, grimly.

Another man's voice, "What's her name?"

"Anna."

"Do you know what happened?" the other voice asked.

"Anna? Can she talk?"

"Honey, what happened?" Aunt Lu asked.

Anna burrowed further into her aunt's neck and shook her head. She held her doll and her sandwich, and Aunt Lu held her.

"Not now," she said.

“It’s a miracle she got out,” the man mumbled.

Anna drifted to sleep again, waking when she felt movement. Aunt Lu lifted her easily and propped her on her hip. She felt Aunt Lu’s body move and heard the crunch of gravel beneath her boots. Anna dropped her sandwich somewhere, but she held tightly to her doll. A car door clicked open and the cinnamon scent in Aunt Lu’s car told her where she was. Another set of arms held her briefly, then she was buckled into her booster seat. Aunt Jody put her arm around Anna and adjusted herself until she was comfortable.

Anna heard two thuds as car doors closed. She opened her eyes and saw Aunt Lu looking at her and Jody in the rearview mirror.

“Let’s go. Now,” Jody said.

Lu nodded once, and Anna felt the car start.

“You okay?” Lu asked.

Anna looked up at Aunt Jody’s face. She was staring out of the window at the old tree in front of the house.

Anna felt a shiver run through Jody’s body and then she felt a warm tear land on her arm. She looked up at Aunt Jody’s pale face and wide eyes, still fixated on the tree.

“Jody?” Aunt Lu said as the car began to move.

Jody blinked quickly and looked down at Anna. She muttered something about being afraid of fire. Anna peeked through the window as the car pulled out. She saw heavy smoke where her home used to stand. As they drove away, she closed her eyes and once again heard Ruthie.

Safe now.

Chapter Two

1983

“Huh,” Lu grunted as she hung up the phone.

“What is it?” Jody asked.

“The police want to come by and ask us some questions. And they want to talk to Anna too, as if she hasn’t already been through enough,” she added.

It was the day after the fire. Anna was sound asleep despite it being 11 o’clock in the morning. They knew she was exhausted and planned to let her sleep as long as she wanted.

“What’s to ask? It was an accident. The idiots passed out in bed with lit cigarettes or something,” Jody said. A moment passed. “I’m sorry. That was insensitive.”

“I agree with you. They are, were, idiots. No, that’s not why they want to come by. Apparently, Lori is missing,” she said.

“What?” Jody asked. “Missing, how?”

Lu looked at her sideways.

“You know what I mean,” Jody rolled her eyes. “What are they thinking? Did she run off?”

“I don’t know. They didn’t say on the phone. Although that explains why she’s not returning our calls,” Lu said.

Lori Jamieson was Anna’s Child Protection Services contact. She became involved with the family when Amber and David, Anna’s parents, weren’t sending her to school. She began home visits when Anna showed up at school with bruises on her arms and legs. Anna adored her, but Jody and Lu knew how much her parents hated Lori.

“Why do they want to talk to us about it? What would we know?” Jody asked.

Lu sighed heavily.

“They said she called the police station and wanted an officer to go to the house with her. She said she had proof that David was there. They found a note on her work calendar that said she was going to the house alone. She hasn’t been seen since.”

“They don’t think she was in the fire?” Jody asked.

“No, I don’t think so,” Lu said, “This just keeps on getting better and better. They think Amber and David might have something to do with her missing.”

“Wow! Like they might have hurt her or something? Were they really capable of that?” Jody knew even as she asked the question that she was grasping at straws.

Lu looked at Jody.

“Are you seriously asking if they were capable of hurting someone?”

“I know, I knew it as I said it. Of course, they were capable of that,” Jody said.

“We don’t know everything that went on in that house. And I can’t help-,” Lu stopped abruptly and glanced down the hallway where Anna still slept. She held one finger up to Jody and tiptoed to Anna’s room. She peeked in. Anna was still sound asleep, curled into a tiny ball and clutching her doll. It

was unlikely she would hear what Lu was about to say, but Lu wasn't taking chances. She closed the door without a sound.

"Good idea," Jody said. "She doesn't need to hear any of this yet."

Lu nodded as she sat beside Jody.

"I can't help but wonder just how bad it really was," she continued. "She says she doesn't remember what happened before she went to the hospital. And she's always said those bruises were from being clumsy and falling down or running into something. No one believes that. Why is she protecting Amber and David?"

"I don't think she's protecting them. I think she just doesn't remember. It's like she blocks out the bad stuff," Jody said.

"If that's true, what will happen when she does start to remember? Will she be able to handle it all? Will she be hurt all over again?" Lu stared at her hands as she said the last part.

"We won't know for a while. Let's not get ahead of ourselves. For now, we need to see if Anna remembers anything about Lori so we can tell the police. Then we'll deal with the memories. Anna's memories," Jody added. She long suspected Lu had her own horror stories about growing up in the same house with David. She believed Lu and Anna's childhoods were more alike than Lu wanted to admit.

"I'll talk to her first. Maybe she doesn't know anything, and she won't have to talk to the police. She's had enough trauma," Lu said.

As she stood, Jody grabbed her hand and pulled her back. She turned so she could look fully into Lu's eyes.

"If this gets too hard for you, I am here. I'll do everything I can to help you through this," she said.

Lu swiped at a tear and hugged Jody. She dried her hand on her jeans as she stood. Jody watched her walk towards Anna's room. Everyone worried about Anna, as they should. But Jody

knew Lu carried her own burden. Lu knew better than anyone what David did to Anna.

*

Lu tapped on Anna's door and opened it slowly.

Anna was in bed under a comforter and a fluffy blanket. Her tiny body barely made a lump. She was very small for her age. Lu guessed she weighed about thirty pounds. The bones of her shoulders and back were too easy to see. They would fix that in no time.

Lu sat on the bed next to her and brushed Anna's brown hair out of her eyes. It was long and tangled across the pillow. Lu tried to comb it out with her fingers. She couldn't wait to wash it and maybe trim the ends a little. Anna had beautiful hair when someone helped her take care of it. She always left Lu and Jody's house clean and fed, only to return a few weeks later dirty and hungry. Anna's large brown eyes opened and focused on Lu. She smiled.

"Did I wake you?" Lu asked.

Anna shook her head and stretched.

"How are you feeling?"

"Happy," Anna said.

"Oh, honey," Lu murmured.

In one smooth motion, Anna threw her covers off and crawled into Lu's lap. She buried her head into Lu's shoulder. Anna still smelled like smoke from the night before, but Lu didn't care. She hugged her tight and wondered if Anna's reaction to the day before was normal. She didn't seem to realize what happened. She wasn't upset or scared. She hadn't cried and didn't even seem sad. Most kids, even abused ones, want their parents. Lu guessed she was in shock and it just hadn't hit yet. When it did, she would need all the support and love she could get.

“We need to talk,” she said.

“Okay.”

“Has Lori been around lately? Can you remember the last time you saw her?” Lu got straight to the point. She needed to find out if Anna knew anything before the police came.

Anna closed her eyes and shook her head once.

“I miss her,” she whispered.

Lu searched her mind for words. Anna didn’t answer the question, and she did that strange thing where she shook her head. It had become Anna’s tell. Something she did when she wasn’t being completely truthful. Anna would never admit to lying though and always promised she was telling the truth. But it looked to Lu as though she was fighting or arguing with herself.

It didn’t matter now though. This wasn’t the priority. Lu refused to add to Anna’s trauma, but she also knew the police were worried about Lori. In fact, so was she.

Anna spoke up again, “Lori will be so happy.”

“What makes you say that?” Lu asked.

“Because I’m here now. Sometimes she and Daddy would fight about it,” Anna said.

Lu sat Anna up so she could see her face.

“Do you remember the last time you heard them fight?” she asked carefully.

“I don’t know,” Anna mumbled. She shook her head again and closed her eyes. Then she crawled from Lu’s lap and scooted under her covers. As she pulled the soft blankets to her chin, Lu leaned over her and whispered.

“It’s important, Anna. Please try to think for just one second. When was the last time you heard them fighting?”

“Before everything happened,” Anna said through a yawn. “She didn’t say goodbye to me.” She closed her eyes and rolled over, pulling her doll with her.

Lu sat for another minute watching Anna drift off to sleep. Obviously, something bad had happened, and she had a strong feeling that Anna saw or heard something. And that thing she did with her head told Lu she was keeping something to herself. It might be nothing, or it might be serious. She was unlikely to figure it out though.

Lu left Anna sleeping soundly after kissing her cheek and tucking the blankets around her small frame. She needed much rest, both physically and emotionally, after the last few days.

*

When the police arrived, Jody let them in and led them to a seat in the den.

"Something to drink?" she asked after introductions were made.

"Yes, please," both answered as Officer Bright and Officer Paulsen made themselves comfortable.

Jody fixed tea. She was grateful to have a moment alone to collect her thoughts. Lu had told her about Anna's reaction to her questions. Jody had her own thoughts about Anna's lack of memory, but she kept them to herself.

When she entered the room, Lu was saying, "We knew they hurt Anna, so they were certainly capable of violence. Jody, let me help," Lu said as she stood to help Jody with the drinks.

Officer Bright filled Jody in on what they had been discussing, then he asked her if she could think of anything that could be helpful.

"Anything at all helps," he said, adding, "Even if you don't think it's useful, it might be."

"I know they hated Lori. She was someone in authority, and she had power. She was on to them. She knew what was going on," Jody said.

"The abuse?" Officer Paulsen asked.

“Yes. Anna always had bruises on her. Mostly her arms and thighs. Bruises that looked like fingers, like she was grabbed really hard,” Lu said, demonstrating what she meant using her own arm as an example.

“And last week, I guess you know this, she ended up in the hospital,” Lu paused. She couldn’t bring herself to say more. “Lori was there and knew about it all.”

“David did these things to her,” Jody added.

“You are convinced it was him?” Officer Paulsen confirmed as she made a note and nodded her head encouraging them to continue.

“Yes,” Lu said.

“If Lori knew about the abuse from her father, why did Anna go back there?” she asked.

“Amber, her mother, came swooping in and made a grand gesture of supposedly kicking David out and becoming the best mom ever,” Lu’s voice dripped of sarcasm.

“What has Anna said about it all?” Officer Paulsen asked.

Jody looked at Lu and raised her eyebrows.

“Go on,” she said. “Tell them.”

“Anna doesn’t remember anything. She doesn’t remember how she got the bruises. She doesn’t remember why she was in the hospital. She doesn’t remember anything at all. She explains the bruises by saying she’s clumsy and bumps into things. She won’t talk about the hospital or what happened leading up to it. She’s never said a word to us about it, and as far as we know, she never said anything to Lori either,” Lu said.

“We’ve wondered about brain damage. We’ve also wondered if she might have blocked it out, maybe an alternate personality that developed due to trauma? She also has this imaginary friend,” Jody added.

She felt Lu's gaze shift abruptly to her and sensed she was close to crossing the line. She stopped talking.

Officer Paulsen seemed to pick up on the tension.

"What about the imaginary friend?"

She waited for one of them to speak.

Finally, Lu broke the silence.

"She has an imaginary friend named Ruthie. According to Anna, Ruthie talks back to her. Like Jody said, maybe she's an alternate personality. It's more than just an average kid with an imaginary friend. Ruthie is very significant in her life and appears to direct her actions and words at times. Anyway, she will be going to therapy. There's a lot to process. And to answer your original question," Lu looked at Officer Bright and caught her breath. "That is all the information we have."

"And Lori Jamieson knew all of this," Officer Bright confirmed.

Lu and Jody nodded.

"I asked Anna if she remembered anything at all about Lori being at her house. She said sometimes she would hear Lori and David fighting. Anna knew Lori wanted her to live with us, and she also knew David didn't want that," Lu said.

"Did she say when she last heard them fighting?" Officer Paulsen asked.

"She said after the hospital and 'before everything happened.' That's exactly how she said it," Lu said making air quotes.

"Does she mean they fought right before the fire?" Officer Paulsen asked.

Lu nodded in agreement, and Jody shrugged. She didn't know exactly what Anna meant, but she wasn't going to disagree with the group.

"Well, that sounds like possible motive," she said to Officer Bright.

“Agreed,” he added.

“Motive? So, you really do think they did something to her?” Jody asked.

“It appears as though she decided to go to the house without waiting for an officer to escort her,” Officer Bright said. “If that’s the case, she was likely in danger from the Marshalls.”

Lu and Jody nodded solemnly, each remembering their own violent run-ins with Amber and David.

“We will keep you informed if we discover anything,” Officer Paulsen said, handing each of them a card. “And if you think of anything else, please let one of us know.”

“You don’t need to talk to Anna?” Lu asked, standing to walk them to the door.

“Not right now,” Officer Paulsen said. “She’s been through enough. What you told us confirms that Lori was at the house, and there was conflict. We really have all we need.”

“Now we just need to find Lori Jamieson,” Officer Bright added.

Chapter Three

1983

Lu and Anna entered the office. Anna held her doll with one hand and Lu's hand with the other. As she checked in with the receptionist, Lu noticed Anna staring at a bead maze sitting in the corner.

"Go play," she said. She was certain the child had never seen a toy like that before.

Lu sat close to where Anna played and settled in for a wait. There was always a wait at the therapist's office. She watched Anna. She had that pitiful doll in a chair, propped up with plastic toy blocks on either side.

Lu studied the doll. Her pale, porcelain face was covered with a spider's web of small cracks and her kewpie mouth was pursed into a soft pink kiss. Her hair was matted flat to her head in some areas and stuck straight out in others. It was tangled and messy. Lu laughed to herself remembering the one time they tried to clean it. They painstakingly pulled at the wig and almost had it completely off. Then Anna began crying hysterically at the sight of her precious doll rendered partially

bald. The wig went right back on. Anna added the small pink bow that was currently hanging on for dear life.

The doll's dress was made of an intricate lace, long, full and fitted at the bodice. Within the folds of the bodice lurked remnants of the dress's original color, a bright, sunflower yellow. The rest of it had faded to an off white, pale yellow that reminded Lu of the inside of a banana peel.

Her left leg was damaged at the joint, so the foot was twisted in, pigeon-toed and pitiful. Her dark brown eyes were painted wide open. Unable to blink, always watching and readily returning the gaze of whoever happened to look at her. Lu avoided eye contact.

She shivered slightly and willed herself back to reality. She made a mental note to find an antique dealer. They found markings under the wig during the brief time it was off. Jody found a book on antique dolls which led them to believe the doll was made in Germany, imported and distributed in the late 1800's. But it was idle curiosity because even if it was worth something, Anna would never part with it.

Anna loved that doll. She named her Ruthie, but it occurred to Lu that Anna hadn't called the doll by name since the fire. She searched her memory and tried to think of a time in the last few days when Anna referred to Ruthie by name rather than 'my doll.'

She didn't have long to ruminate before the door opened, and Dr. Jayhala appeared. Lu stood to shake her hand. Dr. Jayhala pulled Lu to the side where they could still see Anna and asked how she was doing since their last phone call.

"The same," Lu said.

"Is she eating?" Dr. Jayhala asked.

"Yes, she's eating everything we make, and she snacks throughout the day. I guess that's a positive," she contended.

“Yes,” Dr. Jayhala smiled. “How about the fire? Has she said anything about that?”

Lu didn’t want Anna to hear this conversation. She shook her head and darted her eyes toward Anna.

“We can talk here,” Dr. Jayhala noticed her discomfort. “There’s a white noise machine next to where she’s playing. She won’t be able to hear us.”

Lu nodded but scooted closer to the doctor anyway.

“I’m mostly concerned about her apparent lack of interest regarding the fire,” Dr. Jayhala said. “From what you told me on the phone, she doesn’t seem to remember it or even realize that it happened. Has that changed since we last talked?” she asked.

Lu shook her head and sighed.

“You also told me she was abused, and she doesn’t talk about that either. Or seem to remember it,” the therapist said.

“She’s always been like that, even when it was going on,” Lu replied. Then she added, “She explained it away by saying she’s clumsy.”

Dr. Jayhala took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

“I want to suggest something, but it’s only a theory to be explored,” she said.

“Okay,” Lu looked doubtful. She was fairly certain she wasn’t going to like what she was about to hear.

“Based only on our conversations, of course I haven’t worked directly with Anna yet, I don’t think she started the fire on purpose.”

Lu held up a hand.

“She didn’t start it at all. She’s six,” Lu’s voice went up a few notches.

“Most likely not,” Dr. Jayhala said quickly. “But please, let me finish. I only wonder if she did something on a

subconscious level, and she is blocking it out just as she blocks out the abuse,” the therapist said gently.

Lu felt tears spring into her eyes, and she brushed them away quickly. Dr. Jayhala went on.

“As I work with her, I want to see if we can get those memories back,” she said.

“Why?” Lu asked. “Why make her remember such horrible things? Isn’t she happier not remembering? If she doesn’t remember on her own, why force her?”

“As she grows up, those memories will likely start coming back. If she remembers bits and pieces and can’t make sense of it all, that could affect her significantly, as a teenager and even into adulthood. We want her to be healthy,” she added.

Lu nodded her head.

Dr. Jayhala smiled kindly.

“Please don’t worry. She will be okay. She has you and Jody now, and you both are doing a beautiful job. She will be okay,” Dr. Jayhala repeated.

When Lu saw Anna look at them, she waved her over. Anna stood and picked up Ruthie. She walked slowly towards the two women.

“Anna, this is Dr. Jayhala,” Lu said.

Anna smiled shyly.

“Who’s this?” Dr. Jayhala asked, pointing to Ruthie.

Anna hesitated.

“My doll,” she said quietly.

“She’s very pretty. Would you like to bring her in with you while we talk?” she asked.

Anna nodded.

Dr. Jayhala held out her hand.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

To answer, Anna took her hand and walked with her into the private office.

Lu watched them go, then she went to the play area. She busied herself tidying up where Anna was playing. She froze when she heard laughter from the next room. She shouldn't be able to hear anything from the doctor's inner office.

The white noise machine, she thought suddenly.

She looked frantically for the small box and found it, unplugged and on its side.

Anna may have heard everything.

*

Lu felt her body stiffen and her heart rate increase. Her stomach churned, and she stifled a burp. What exactly had they said? Anna was abused. Anna started the fire. Did she hear those things?

Lu always tended to overthink and was an expert at catastrophizing things she couldn't control. She desperately wanted to burst into the office and stop everything. She would demand to know what Anna overheard. She would take Anna home immediately and sue Dr. Jayhala.

Instead, she reflected on what she learned throughout her own years of therapy. She took deep breaths and reminded herself that it didn't help anyone when she panicked.

She tried to refocus her thoughts on the positive. Anna would be okay. She has Jody and herself to care for her. She is loved and has attention. She has her own room with a comfortable and clean bed. She has as many books and toys as she could possibly want. Overall, she was a happy little girl, and Jody and she would make sure that continued.

And she has Ruthie, Lu's inner voice added wryly.

The positive train of thought came to a screeching halt. Lu immediately thought about Ruthie again. She was certain Anna had stopped calling her by name. It used to be, "Ruthie this and Ruthie that" but now she called her "my doll." Why? Lu's

mind went to PTSD next. Of course she had PTSD. How could someone go through that and not? And from there, she jumped to Dissociative Identity Disorder, convinced Ruthie was an alternate personality.

Lu was sweating now and began pacing, aware that she was failing horribly at calming herself down. She tried once again to refocus her thoughts and forced herself to think about Jody.

Jody was always the calm in the storm. Even though her unique beliefs were ultimately what brought them together, it was a topic that had faded from their lives until recently. She didn't need to say it for Lu to know what she was thinking. Jody firmly believed the house Anna and she grew up in was evil. And she figured Jody worried something had followed Anna out of the house or the doll was haunted or something like that. A promise made years earlier made Jody respect her wishes not to bring it up, but she definitely dropped some hints.

Maybe it's time to talk about that again, Lu thought. *I'd do it for Anna.*

Certain this was the distraction she needed, she asked the receptionist if there was a pay phone nearby. Before she answered, Anna and Dr. Jayhala came out and Lu told her never mind. Anna was smiling, but the therapist wasn't.

Anna quickly hugged Lu and then ran back to the bead maze. Lu moved to where Dr. Jayhala was waiting.

"Still nothing," she said. "Let's schedule for next week, and I'll continue to work with her on those memories."

"Your white noise machine is off," Lu hissed. "She probably heard us earlier."

Dr. Jayhala looked to the corner where the machine usually sat. She shook her head slowly.

"No, I doubt it," she said, still shaking her head. She mindlessly rubbed her furrowed brow.

“Did she say anything about hearing what we said?” Lu asked again.

“No, but even if she did hear us, isn’t it a good thing? For her to know what happened to her?” she asked.

For the second time that day Lu felt her blood pressure increasing and her stomach knotting. No, this isn’t what she wanted after all. She wanted Anna to be healthy but not if it meant pulling horrible memories from her tiny mind.

“No,” Lu said through clenched teeth. “It’s not a good thing. Not now anyway. If she ever asks, I will tell her. In my way.”

Lu was surprised by the ferocity of her words. An overwhelming desire to protect Anna burned in her chest.

“Why not now?” the therapist asked softly. She was still looking at the corner where the white noise machine should have been humming.

“The truth is too hard. She’s better off never knowing. We’re leaving now,” she announced. “Anna, come on.”

“Are we coming back?” Anna asked. She straightened the toy area quickly and picked up her doll. She smoothed the dress and checked the bow.

“I hope so,” Dr. Jayhala affirmed.

At the same time, Lu said, “No.”

As she drove home, Lu thought about what she would tell Jody. Jody deserved to know what happened, but Lu was almost certain she would take it as an opportunity to drop hints about her own theories again. While talking to Jody about that had seemed like a good idea earlier, she was having second thoughts now.

She justified her change of mind by telling herself that she wasn’t thinking clearly. Her own memories, combined with her fears for Anna, were the only reasons she briefly entertained Jody’s theories. Now that she was thinking straight, Lu was

confident that she didn't want to explore all that nonsense again.



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