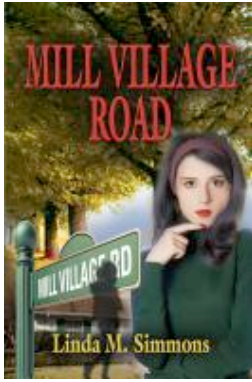


MILL VILLAGE ROAD



MILL VILLAGE RD

Linda M. Simmons



Nine-year old April Dawn Tyler's dream shatters when classmate Hilda Jean Norton disappears. The one suspect, Bryan O'Keith, terrorizes Dawn, and threatens her with death if she even hints that he is involved. Even with his threats, Dawn vows to Hilda Jena's spirit that she will never stop looking for her. Now grown and working in the mill office, the menaces she uncovers changes her and the mill village residents in ways she never dreams.

Mill Village Road

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MILL VILLAGE ROAD

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Factory (fak'ta-rē) n.,pl,-ries (mill, manufacturing, plant). A large industrial building where goods or products are manufactured. Most factories are large warehouse-like facilities that contain heavy equipment used or assembly line production.

CHAPTER

1

March 1955

Nine-year old Dawn Tyler fell back against the pillow and tugged the quilt over her head. *Please, God, don't let Hilda Jean be dead. I didn't mean to be late, honest!* She closed her eyes and an image of Mrs. Norton's tear-stained face glared back at her. "If you had been on time, my baby wouldn't be missing!" she screamed. Dawn clamped her hands over her ears. "This is all your fault, Dawn Tyler." Dawn pressed her head deeper into the pillow as Mrs. Norton's long fingers reached for her. She opened her eyes and gasped for air. She tossed back the quilt and stared at the ceiling. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" she sobbed. "I couldn't help it!" She pulled the quilt over her shoulders and winched. She pulled back the neckline of her gown and raised her head just enough to see the bruises on her left shoulder and then her right shoulder. Her shoulders ached from the brutal shaking Mrs. Norton had inflicted on her. She lowered her head back on the pillow. "Hilda Jean?" she whispered. "Where are you?" She turned on her side and drew her knees to her chest. "I need you. I need you so much."

She heard people moving in the hallway outside her room. Someone opened the door. "She's asleep." It was her ma. Was that a sob? Was her ma crying? "Three days now. Lord, please help her to get better." She heard the click of the latch as the door closed.

She pulled the quilt off her head and stared at the door. Had she been in bed for two or three days? She didn't know and didn't care. What she did know was that she missed Hilda Jean.

Dawn breathed deeply and made herself think of the good times she spent with Hilda Jean. She filled her mind with the memory of the first time she spent the night with Hilda Jean Norton, her best friend.

She sat at her school desk and watched the clock that hung on the wall above the chalkboard. Her head moved up and down as she kept time to the movement of the second hand as it jerked it ways around the clock. She counted softly the last thirty seconds. When the hand clicked onto the twelve, the bell clanged in the hall. She crammed books into her blue satchel, looked over at Hilda Jean Norton, and smiled. She was spending the night with her and she could barely sit still until the town children lined up. She was a bus student and all bus students lined up first. She watched as the bus students lined up and walked out the side door and down the concrete steps where each child ran to his or her bus line near the curb to wait for the buses.

"Dawn, ain't you coming?" Jerry Caldwell said as he started up the aisle. "Miss Thompson already called for bus students."

She snapped out of her daydreaming. "No," she answered without looking up. "I'm going home with Hilda Jean." She cocked her head to the side hoping she looked cool, like this was something she did every day. "I'm not riding the bus today."

"Oh, you're going home with a mill brat, are you?"

Dawn turned quickly and stared at Jerry. "Who you calling a mill brat, you clod knocker?" she snarled.

"Clod knocker? If I'm a clod knocker, so are you Dawn Tyler." He stuck his tongue out and wiggled it. "I rather be a clod knocker than mill trash any day."

Hilda Jean had walked up behind Jerry. She tapped him on the shoulder. He spun around and almost fell over his desk.

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"Who are you calling trash, you swamp stomper? At least my daddy owns his house. He doesn't live in no shack by the creek."

Jerry grabbed his books and his coat and backed away from Hilda Jean. "You stay away from me, you hear me? My ma said your kind won't nothing but trouble."

Hilda Jean put her hands on her hips and leaned toward Jerry. "Your ma sure knows what she is talking about. Now, get out of here before I squash that flat nose of yours even flatter."

Jerry turned and ran toward the door. He turned and looked at Dawn. "Butter tub!" he shouted. Hilda Jean started toward him and Jerry scrambled out the door. She looked at Dawn. They laughed.

"That's telling him, Hilda Jean."

This was the first year that Dawn and Hilda Jean were in the same class. Dawn had noticed Hilda Jean over the school years. Because she was a bus student and Hilda Jean was a town student they never were friends. This year, they sat next to each other in Miss Thompson's fourth grade class. On the second day of class during recess, several boys surrounded Dawn and Hilda Jean. They taunted and teased Dawn and she fought back the tears as she clinched her lips tight together. Name-calling was the boys' favorite pastime at recess. Dawn looked like her ma, short and chunky with short, dark hair and the boys called her Lard Bucket and other humiliating names. Hilda Jean was tall, skinny and had long blonde hair that she pulled back with barrettes. They called her Slim. Hilda Jean did not like to be skinny any more than Dawn liked being chunky. Hilda Jean usually just stuck her tongue at them and kept on walking. Dawn usually lowered her eyes. She barely could move. Her feet felt as if they froze to the ground.

"What did you have for breakfast, Lard Bucket? Fat fried in fat?" Dawn stared at the ground her face grew hot. Jerry patted her stomach. "Yeah, it jiggles just like we thought." They laughed. "Jell-O, Jell-O, bello, bello!"

Hilda Jean Grabbed Jerry's fingers and slowly bent them backwards. Within seconds, he was on his knees. He clawed at her hand. She did not let go. "Apologize to Dawn or I'll break them."

"No," he moaned. I won't." She pressed his fingers further backward. He glanced around at his friends. They stepped back into the crowd. He stared at the ground. "I'm sorry," he murmured.

Hilda Jean leaned towards him. "What? I didn't quite hear that."

"I'm sorry!" he shouted.

"Sorry. For what?" She looked around and shrugged her shoulders. "What are you sorry for and who are you talking to?"

Jerry pulled hard on Hilda Jean's arm. He tried to bite her but she pressed harder. The blood vessels on his hand look as if they would burst. Hilda Jean did not move.

"I'm sorry, Dawn, for calling you names."

Hilda Jean nodded. "Promise her that you'll never do it again or neither will any of these clod knockers and hill runners you call friends. If you ever tease her again, I'll hurt you where you live. Understand, stupid?"

"I promise!" he shouted.

Hilda Jean's eyes widen. "Say, I promise never to call you names again."

"I promise never to call you names again."

Hilda Jean released his fingers. He jumped up and rubbed his fingers. Dawn saw tears running down his cheek. She smiled. The boys took off.

That day Dawn latched on to Hilda Jean and made a promise to herself that she would be true to her forever.

"Town students, line up," Mrs. Thompson said. That brought Dawn back to the present. She snapped her bag closed, flipped her dark hair behind her left ear, and pretended she was bored. Inside, her heart raced and she was ready to spring out of her seat.

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Slowly, Dawn picked up her sweater and tied it around her waist. She pulled her satchel off the desk and then looked over at Hilda Jean. Hilda Jean was already in line. Now that the time was here, Dawn wanted this moment to last. She took a deep breath and made herself walk slowly. She savored each second as she moved toward the line. Miss Thompson opened the door and the line moved out on to the breezeway.

At the bottom of the step, Hilda Jean grabbed her hand. "I'm so glad you're coming home with me," she whispered. "Daddy's going to let us walk to the movie theater tomorrow and he's giving us fifty cents apiece."

"Fifty cents apiece?" That was a lot of money. "Hilda Jean Norton, you're my best friend."

The girls walked to the corner where Spencer Hawthorne stood in the middle of the road stopping traffic. He was an eighth-grader at Murdock High School. He was a foot taller than Dawn and he kept pushing a wisp of hair off his forehead. The eighth grade classes were placed at the high school because the middle school was too crowded. Spencer walked the five blocks to Murdock Elementary every afternoon at two-thirty and for five dollars a week, stood in the middle of the road with a red and white stop sign. The seventh grade girls flirted with him by crossing and re-crossing the street. He winked at them each time they strolled by him. Dawn and Hilda Jean giggled.

Dawn and Hilda Jean flowed across the street with the thirty or forty other mill village kids. Dawn stared up at the white cross-like sign painted with black blocked letters.



She gazed down the long, straight street and took in the gigantic oak trees towering over the homes. The trees stood a few feet back from the sidewalk; their colorful leaves and outstretched limbs arched over the street and formed a canopy that seemed to protect all who walked beneath them. She stared at the dogwood trees dwarfed by the oaks and their violet leaves seemed to say, "Welcome, you are safe here." She watched as kids ran in all directions toward their various homes. Each house looked the same: white clapboards with front porches supported by four posts. Each porch held a variety of metal porch swings, rocking chairs, or straight back chairs tilted back against the wall. She heard screen doors slam up and down the street as kids disappeared into the houses.

Hilda Jean lived at the corner of Mill Village Road and Seventh Street. "That's where Spencer Hawthorne lives," Hilda Jean said, pointing to the house across from hers. "You ought to see all the big girls parading by here, shaking their behinds and giggling. They're so pathetic and silly." Hilda Jean put her hands on her waist and swayed her hips from side to side. She threw kisses toward the house. They giggled and ran up the path to Hilda Jean's house.

Planted in front of her house were yellow and orange mums. Dawn stooped down and rubbed her fingers over the tiny petals.

"Hmmm, these feel so soft."

"Yeah, I helped Mama plant these flowers right before school started. It was so hot I thought I was going to melt. They sure are pretty now."

They ran up the steps and raced inside. Hilda Jean dropped her book satchel on the floor near the front door and motioned Dawn to do the same. "Let's get a snack then we'll go over to the park and climb on the monkey bars."

Hilda Jean's ma worked at the mill until four and it usually took her ten minutes to walk home. She had left a plate of cookies wrapped in wax paper on the round wooden table that

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sat in the middle of the kitchen. The kitchen was small, not like Dawn's huge kitchen at home. She touched a tie-backed cushion on one of the four ladder-back chairs pushed up against the table. It was smooth as nylon and matched the café curtains that hung over the window above the sink. The café curtains had flowerpot borders and hung from a metal rod suspended between the facing. The small window looked out on to the neighbor's house. Dawn wondered if they and their neighbor could reach out their windows and shake hands. Wall cabinets covered the walls on both sides of the sink and the back wall. White painted countertops seemed to flow around the kitchen on top of floor cabinets. A white stove was on the right wall with a wooden china cabinet on its left. Its enameled counter top held a bowl of fruit and a yellow and white milk pitcher. The refrigerator and a washing machine were to Dawn's left on the front wall.

Hilda Jean opened the refrigerator and took out two Pepsis. The girls took their snacks out on to the screen porch and sat on the steps. While they ate, they talked about school, teachers, homework, and the movie they were going to see the next day. Hilda Jean's neighbor came out of his back door and ran across the yard. An outhouse stood beneath a huge oak tree and he jerked on the door and went inside. "Mr. Burke's the only man here who won't put in a bathroom. He the most penny-pinching man alive," Hilda Jean declared. "Daddy's said that place smells worse than when the honey wagon came through."

"The what?" Dawn asked.

"Honey wagon. When Daddy was my age, this man came by every day in a truck with a tank on the back. He would drive to the back of the house and stick a hose in the septic tank in the ground. The poop and pee would then be sucked into the tank. Daddy said it smelled awful. Someone nicknamed it the 'honey wagon'."

"That sounds terrible!"

Hilda Jean laughed. "We all got regular septic tanks now but Burke won't spend a dime to put one in. He's so stingy!" A smile crept across her face and she giggled. "Let's go knock on the door and run." They tiptoed across the lawn keeping a lookout for anyone walking by or coming out of one of the houses. Slowly, they crept to the front side of the outhouse and Hilda Jean banged on the door with both fists. The girls took off and ran back to the house onto the screen porch. They ducked behind the half wall and waited. Sure enough, the man opened the door and peeked around the corner. They could hear him muttering under his breath. The door slammed and they stood and tiptoed back into the house.

"That was fun. I do that every once in a while. So do some of the other kids. We're gonna force him to tear down that stinky outhouse."

Ten minutes later, they ran down the street behind other kids who headed toward Murdock Mill Park or as the kids called it "MM Park". They passed a well in the center of the road.

Dawn stopped and stared at the well in the center of the road. "What's a well doing in the middle of the road?"

Hilda Jean ran over to it and lifted up the boards that covered the hole. She looked down inside. "This is where people used to get water from before Mr. Murdock put in the water treatment plant. There used to be one on several of the other streets but they caved in and they were filled with dirt. This is the only one left. Mama said it is to remind folks how nicer things are now than they used to be." The girls stared down into the dark hole and then dropped pebbles into it and giggled when they heard a splash. Finally, they left and headed toward the park.

The Murdock Mill Park was on the corner of Park Road and Tenth Street. It took up the entire block. Dawn paused under the black, wrought iron arch and stared up at the sign above the gate. She read the giant, red letters welded across the arch:

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MURDOCK MILL PARK
1946

"This was built the year I was born." Tall, green bushes, trimmed in the shape of teddy bears, stood on both sides of the gate. She felt like she was entering a fairy book land.

She ran to a swing and began to pump her legs. She wanted to swing high so she could see everything. There were two slides, a small one for the younger children and a spiral-shaped for the older children, a merry-go-round, three sets of monkey bars, a sand box, benches under oak trees, and a field where the boys were playing softball.

The girls ran from one playground equipment to another. At four o'clock, a whistle blasted through the air. "That's the shift-changing-whistle. Mama will come by here in a few minutes. We'll walk home with her and later we'll help her with supper," Hilda Jean said. "First, I want to show you a secret hiding place."

"What? A secret hiding place?"

She grabbed Dawn's hand and pulled her to the side of the community building. She placed her index finger against her lips and said, "Shhh." She looked around the corner and quickly pulled Dawn behind the azalea bushes that grew beside the wall. They were thick and reached up to the windowsill. There was just enough space between the bushes and the brick wall to walk if they bent over. Under the second window from the entrance to the building, Hilda Jean squatted down. She counted four bricks up from the ground, just to the right of a vent. She removed the brick and motioned for Dawn to look inside. Dawn squatted down and peered inside the dark hole. At first, she could not see anything. Then she began to make out a tiny little white box stuffed inside. Hilda Jean reached in and removed the box. She placed it on her lap. She opened the box and pulled out several coins totaling eighty-seven cents.

"I've been saving this money to buy something special for Mama's birthday. She wants a new pair of gloves to wear to church on Sunday. That's what I'm going to buy her with this money." She also took out a seashell and a ring. "Mama said I'm too young for rings. She said I might lose it. I found this one under the merry-go-round and hid it here." She slipped the ring finger of her left hand.

"It's so pretty," Dawn whispered. The stone was blue and the ring was gold. "Can I try it on?"

"Sure." She slipped it off her finger and gave it to Dawn. She placed it on her finger. "Wow!"

"Where is your friendship necklace?" Hilda Jean asked.

Dawn pulled back the neck of her dress, reached down inside, and pulled out the chain with the half of a heart attached to it. Hilda Jean reached into her dress and pulled out her half of a heart. They clicked them together forming one complete heart.

They bought the hearts during their school lunch break a few weeks ago, even though no one was supposed to leave the school ground during school hours without a written permission slip from home. Hilda Jean and Dawn had planned this for a month. They wanted something to show that they would be friends forever. Dawn had seen the hearts in the five and dime store several weeks ago when she went to town with her ma, Helen Sue. While her ma was looking at artificial flowers, Dawn wandered around the store. The second she saw the two hearts hanging from the metal rack above the jewelry counter she knew this was for her and Hilda Jean.

"How much is the heart necklace?" She asked the clerk.

"For one half or for a set?"

"A set."

"Two dollars."

Dawn smiled and slowly backed away. *Two Dollars! I will never be able to buy that!* she thought. She told Hilda Jean the next morning. They tried to come up with ways to get the money. Hilda Jean suggested they beg their folks. Dawn

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wanted it to be a secret. She wanted it to be a sacrifice on their part so these hearts would be special. That is when they, in the same instant, decided to save their lunch money for a week. Lunch was twenty-five cents a day. They would have the money in four days. They held hands, danced around, and shouted.

Each day Dawn swiped two apples from the box on the back porch and hid them in her book bag. Hilda Jean made two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches after her ma left for work. She shared them with Dawn at lunchtime. Dawn felt a little smug as she drank water to wash down the food.

The next problem was to get uptown without anyone knowing what they were doing. Hilda Jean suggested that they could just walk away from school at lunchtime.

On Friday, they had the two dollars plus twenty-five cents each for that days' lunch. When the lunch bell rang, they lined up with the other girls and marched into the bathroom to wash their hands. They went into a stall and stayed until the bathroom was quiet. They opened the stall door and tiptoed to the outer door. Hilda Jean slowly opened it and peeked around the corner. "It's empty." They walked quickly to the side door, down the steps and out to the sidewalk. They ran the six blocks to town.

The girls were out of breath when they entered the five and dime. They went straight to the counter and placed their money on the glass shelf. "We would like to buy the heart necklace," Dawn said. The clerk nodded her head, and took the necklace off the metal rack. It came with two chains.

"That will be two dollars plus tax."

"Tax?" the girls asked.

"Yes, Uncle Sam had to have his share, you know."

No, they did not know. "How much is the tax?" Dawn asked.

"Six cents."

Hilda Jean and Dawn smiled. They each took a nickel from their lunch money and placed it on the counter. The clerk gave them back four cents change.

They ran back to the school just as the bell rang signaling the end of lunch. The girls raced back to the bathroom and waited in one of the stalls until the other girls came in. They opened the stall doors, washed their hands, and got back in line and went back to class. Dawn slipped a note to Hilda Jean and told her to write her initials on the back along with the year 1955.

Sitting behind the bushes, Dawn turned her necklace over. Scratched on the back were the letters *HJN 1955*. They had swapped hearts the next day during recess.

Dawn remembered the comment her sister, Jinger made when she saw the necklace two nights ago. Dawn told her that Hilda Jean had given it to her. It was not a lie.

"A broken heart," Jinger said. She touched it and shook her head. "I hope not."

"That's not what it means," Dawn snapped, snatching the necklace from her hand. "It stands for undying friendship."

Now Dawn smiled at Hilda Jean. "We will always be friends."

"Forever," Hilda Jean said, nodding her head. "If you have something you want to place in this secret box, bring it when you come the next time to spend the night."

"This is great." She helped Hilda Jean placed the items back into the box and watched as she placed it back into the wall. She counted again the number of bricks to the location.

They slipped out from behind the bushes and walked slowly to the merry-go-round. A few minutes later Mrs. Norton waved at them from the sidewalk.

Carol Norton, with a navy blue sweater draped over her left arm and a matching purse with a long strap on her right shoulder, strolled through the arch toward the girls, her print dress swaying as she moved. Hilda Jean and Dawn ran to her and she bent down and kissed each of them on the cheek."

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Mrs. Norton had cotton lint in her hair and on her clothes. Dawn remembered that when her ma worked at mill she came home from the mill with lint in her hair and on her clothes.

"Dawn, honey, I'm glad you're spending the night. How are your Mama and Daddy? I don't get to see them much now that she doesn't work at the mill anymore."

"They're fine. Thank you for letting me spend the night. I think this place is so neat."

Mrs. Norton smiled. She looked around and nodded her head. "I think it's neat, too. Did you girls eat the snack I put out for you?"

"Yes, Mama," Hilda Jean answered. "Mama, may we go over to Mrs. O'Keith's for a little while?"

"I suppose. But, I want you home by five o'clock to help with supper."

"Come on Dawn. You'll like Mrs. O'Keith. She always has something sweet for us kids."

They ran down Park Road to Second Street. Mrs. O'Keith lived in the middle house on the block. This house was different from the other houses. It had two stories and painted light blue and Dawn noticed that the lot was bigger. They ran up the steps and Hilda Jean knocked on the door. Dawn looked around and wondered why there was only one rocking chair on the porch. It was painted white and decorated with blue and yellow flowers.

"Mrs. O'Keith is like another granny to all us kids. In fact, she is better to me than my own granny is. My granny makes me haul water from that well that sits in the middle of her street every time we visit. She lives over there on Fifth Street." Hilda Jean pointed off into the distance. "I'm scared of that old well and she knows it. That did not stop her from pushing that old bucket in my hand and shoving me out to that well. She says the water taste sweeter than from the faucet in her house. I fell in it when I was about three. I cannot remember too much about it, but I remember being scared of it ever since. Mama gets mad every time we go over there. What Granny doesn't

know is that Mama hauls that water out of the well for me and then she runs back into the house. Granny's old and can't see or hear much." Hilda Jean smiled. "I sure love my mama."

The door opened. "Good afternoon, Miss Hilda Jean. Who is your friend?"

"Good afternoon, Mrs. O'Keith. I like to introduce you to Miss Dawn Tyler. She's spending the night with me."

"Isn't that fine? Please, come in. I'm about to serve tea."

Mrs. O'Keith had on a green cotton dress with a gold braid around the sleeves. The hem of the dress brushed the top of the floor when she walked. A lacey white shawl hung from her shoulders although the temperature outside was seventy degrees. Her white hair was pulled up into a ball on the top of her head. "She has pretty clothes, don't you think?" Hilda Jean asked. "Green and gold are my favorite colors. Mama says those colors go with my hair." She stopped and looked at Dawn. "What do you think? Do you think I looked elegant like Mrs. O'Keith?"

Dawn stepped back and smiled. "I see you in every color of the rainbow and making each your own."

Hilda laughed and they hurried into the living room and into the kitchen. "Mrs. O'Keith treats us like we're grownups," Hilda Jean whispered. "I like it. It's like playing house only now with a grown up."

A strong odor filled Dawn's nostrils. She covered her nose and mouth and glanced at Hilda Jean.

"Mrs. O'Keith," Hilda Jean began, "Mama said I had to do something nice for you. May I empty your trashcan?"

"Now child, hospitality doesn't have to be reciprocated."

Reciprocated? Dawn glanced at Hilda Jean.

"She uses big words," Hilda Jean explained. "This one I know the meaning to."

"Yes ma'am, but Mama won't let me come over if I can't do something for you."

"Oh, we can't have that, now, can we? You may empty the waste can."

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"Dawn would you like to help?" she asked, motioning with her head for her to say "yes".

"Certainly, it would be my pleasure."

The girls giggled as Hilda Jean pressed down the pedal on the trashcan. Dawn saw remnants of chicken fat and intestines. She held her breath as they lifted out the double paper bag liner. Hilda Jean opened the back door and took the trash to the metal trash can that sat by the fence at the back of the property.

A puppy ran out from under the bushes next to the steps. Hilda Jean petted his head. The puppy jumped up on her leg. "This is the Hawthorne's" puppy. Her name's Molly."

Dawn reached down and petted her too. "Hello, Molly." She was a brown and white beagle. Her belly almost touched the grass. "She's so cute."

They went back inside; the puppy climbed the steps and bounced onto the porch.

"Mrs. O'Keith can't smell like she used to. She told me when a body gets older everything slows down: hearing, seeing, smelling, everything. That is why I try to do things for her. Mama never did say I had to do anything over here. That's okay, 'cause I like to help."

"It stinks in the kitchen. How are we going to get the smell out?"

"When we go back in, I'll leave the door open a bit. She won't notice, and I'll close it before we leave."

Dawn went in first and looked out of the corners of her eyes and watched as Hilda Jean closed the door with a soft click and then softly opened it again about two inches.

"Hilda Jean, will you please show Miss Dawn where to sit?"

Hilda Jean pulled out a chair and motioned for Dawn to sit down. Hilda Jean sat opposite her. Mrs. O'Keith opened the glass front of the china closet and took out another cup and saucer. She sat at the head of the table. Dawn watched Hilda Jean and did as she did. Hilda Jean picked up the cloth napkin, shook it, and placed it in her lap. Dawn picked her napkin up,

shook it, and placed it in her lap. Mrs. O'Keith poured hot tea into three cups.

"Miss Hilda Jean, do you care for sugar and cream in your tea?"

"Yes, ma'am, if you please." Mrs. O'Keith picked up the tongs and placed three lumps of sugar in the cup. She then picked up the matching creamer and poured cream into the cup. She handed the cup to Hilda Jean.

"Thank you ever so much."

"You're quite welcome, young lady. Miss Dawn, do you care for sugar and cream in your tea?"

Dawn did not know. She never drank hot tea before. "Yes, ma'am. That would be nice." She did not know what else to say. Mrs. O'Keith put in the sugars and the cream and placed the cup and saucer before her. "Thank you ever so much." Dawn giggled and then Hilda Jean giggled.

"Would either of you care for a cookie or maybe two? I baked them this morning."

"Yes, ma'am, two please," said Hilda Jean.

"Yes, ma'am, two please," said Dawn.

Mrs. O'Keith placed two cookies on a plate and handed it to Dawn. Then she did the same for Hilda Jean.

Dawn picked up the cup and sipped the tea. She was surprised. It tasted good. "This is fun. This is the first time I had hot tea."

"Now young ladies tell me about your day. I enjoy hearing what goes on at your school and in the neighborhood. I don't get out much anymore."

Dawn heard a whimpering sound coming from under the table. She lifted up the tablecloth and Molly stared up at her.

"It's Molly," Dawn exclaimed. She reached down and pulled her on to her lap.

"My goodness! Where did that little puppy come from?" Mrs. O'Keith asked. She touched her on the head. "I bet she's hungry." Mrs. O'Keith gave her a half a cookie. Molly gobbled it down.

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Dawn continued to hold Molly while she and Hilda Jean talked about their school, the kids, and Dawn answered questions about her parents and told Mrs. O'Keith where she lived and about her pa's farm, and that they had only been living there for two years.

The screen door slammed on the porch. Mrs. O'Keith jumped and stared at the kitchen door. The girls turned toward the door, too. Standing in the doorway was a man. His brown hair plastered to his head with hair oil, glistened, and his black eyes squinted back at them.

"Mama, damnit, you left the back door opened again! Someone's going to come in here and slit your throat one night while you sleep." He stared at Dawn and Hilda Jean. "I thought I told you to stop letting these damn kids into this house! And whose smelly mutt is that?" He stared down at Dawn. His light blue eyes glowed against the white and seemed to have no pupil at all. She pulled Molly closer to her as she turned away from him.

Mrs. O'Keith rose slowly from her chair. She stared up at him. "Bo, do not use that kind of language in front of these young ladies."

"Young ladies, my ass! Mama, they only come over here to eat you out of house and home. They don't care about you."

Mrs. O'Keith looked at Dawn and Hilda Jean. "Thank you both for coming to see me today. You make me happy with your presence."

Hilda Jean stood and pushed her chair under the table. "Thank you for having us, Mrs. O'Keith. I had a wonderful time."

Dawn cradled Molly in her arm as she stood. "I did too," Dawn murmured.

Bryan O'Keith moved toward the hall door blocking their exit. His tall, thin frame barely filled the entranceway. He tucked his thumbs underneath his belt buckle and the silver initial "BOK" sparkled. His glared stopped Dawn in her tracks. "You brats find somewhere else to spend your time, do you

understand? Mama's too frail to be entertaining the likes of you."

Hilda Jean smiled. "It's been my pleasure to visit with your mother. I think you would get tired of saying the same old line every time you walked through that door." She wrinkled her nose. "Hmm, there's still an odor in here."

"You certainly have a fresh mouth on you, Hilda Jean Norton. I've a good mind to tell your daddy just how much a pest you are."

Hilda Jean placed her hands on her hips. "You go right ahead and do that. My daddy said you ain't nothing but a worthless piece of garbage and he and others here don't like the way you treat your mama."

"Hilda Jean!" Mrs. O'Keith sat back down. "Young ladies do not repeat gossip."

Hilda Jean walked back over to her and whispered in her ear. Mrs. O'Keith hugged her.

Bryan moved away from the door and both girls walked through the living room and out on to the porch.

Bryan followed them and grabbed Hilda Jean by the back of the neck. "Girl, I'm warning you for the last time. Stay away." Hilda Jean glared up at him. "Little girls who stick their nose in where it doesn't belong have a habit of disappearing without a trace." Hilda Jean kicked him in the shin. He jerked his hand away from her neck and rubbed his leg. "Damn, you!"

Dawn tucked Molly under her left arm, grabbed Hilda Jean's arm with her right hand, and pulled her down the steps to the sidewalk.

Hilda Jean pulled back almost jerking Dawn down onto the sidewalk. "What are you doing? Are you crazy?" screamed Dawn.

Hilda Jean turned and chanted:

"Bo Bo O' Keith,
Has rotten teeth,
Bo Bo O'Keith,

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Has stinky feet,
And soon the Devil
He will meet."

She held her fist up in the air. "Bo Bo O'Keith!" she shouted. "I'm telling my daddy what you just did. He's going to come over here and beat you to a pulp."

Bryan hobbled down the steps just as Dawn grabbed Hilda Jean's arm again. They raced down the sidewalk and cut through Spencer Hawthorne's yard. They ducked behind a trashcan and waited, their chests going in and out, as they tried not to breathe too loud. Bryan never came their way.

"Do you think it's safe?" Dawn asked.

Hilda Jean peaked over the trashcan lid. "Yeah, he's too lazy to chase us." They stood and Dawn's eyes darted from bush to tree, to house. "Let's put Molly back on Spencer's porch and go home."

They ran to Spencer's yard and Dawn opened the porch door. She pushed Molly inside. Molly whimpered as they walked quickly away from the porch. They crossed Mill Village Road and headed to Hilda Jean's house.

"I was a little scared of him. Why did he act like that?" Dawn asked.

"He's mean, that's why. Usually he doesn't come here on Friday."

"Were you afraid?"

"No, way. He's all mouth. Nobody likes him."

"I don't like him either." They climbed the steps to the porch. "What did you say to her?" Dawn asked.

"To whom?"

"Mrs. O'Keith."

"Oh, I told her that everyone thought she was the nicest person in the village, and she is."

"Why is he so mean?"

"Mama said he only wants her to hurry up and die so he can sell the house. Everyone says she got thousands of dollars hidden in there."

Dawn looked back toward Mrs. O'Keith's house. *Thousands of dollars?* She tried to imagine what thousands of dollars looked like. The most she had ever seen was a twenty-dollar bill. Her pa showed it to her after he sold a hog.

At the supper table, Hilda Jean told her mama and daddy what Bryan

O'Keith said. She did not tell them what he had done to her. Dawn cocked her head at her but Hilda Jean shook her head.

"Honey, maybe you ought not to go over there so much."

"Mama, she likes us to come." She looked at Dawn as to say that is why I am not telling. "I'm not the only one who goes. All the kids go. Well, the girls do any way. She's fun to be around, and she talks about the old days and she treats us nice. We treat her nice, too."

The girls put their dishes in the sink and cleared the rest of the table. After all the dishes were washed and dried, they followed the Norton's out to the front porch. Mr. Norton leaned back in a chair resting it against the wall. Mrs. Norton sat in a rocker and Hilda Jean and Dawn sat on the top step. Dawn saw others sitting on their porches too. An occasional shout disturbed the quiet evening as a mama hollered for a child to get out of a tree. People strolled down the sidewalk stopping to chat with a neighbor working in a yard.

Dawn frowned. "Mr. Norton, why does her son treat her like that?" Everyone here seems so friendly."

"Most folks are friendly, here and everywhere else. They are all just trying to get along. Sometimes a greedy jerk like Bryan crawls out of the woodwork." He sighed. "I wondered if it's God's way to keep us on our toes."

"Mrs. O'Keith has lived here ever since the mill built these houses," Mrs. Norton explained. "Her husband was the foreman

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for thirty years in Plant Number One and the Murdocks considered them part of the family. They gave her that house after her husband died. They paid on it for years and Bryan, that no account son of a . . . he tried to put her in the old folks' home but the Murdocks put a stop to that. If they hadn't, the folks around here would have. Everyone says the walls are full of money."

"I don't believe that," Hilda Jean said. "Mrs. O'Keith wouldn't live here if she had money."

"Why not?" Dawn asked.

Mr. Norton snickered. "Everything ain't always this peaceful."

Dawn bit her bottom lip. The whole neighborhood reminded her of a storybook: children playing, people sitting on their porches greeting folks and stopping to chat, cats sitting on the porch rails. It was not anything like living way out in the country.

When she got off the school bus all she did was chores, lots of chores. In the morning before school, she and Wade gathered eggs. She hated that because some of the hens would peck her hand and worse than the pecking was the poop on the eggs. It seemed like she always got some under her fingernails. She hated milking the cow too, because the cow always stepped on her toes. She had more scars on her right foot than anywhere else on her body. She and Wade slopped the pigs and the pigsty always smelled. Biting flies buzzed around the hogs except in mid-winter and attack any one that came near.

She shuddered when she remembered what happened a year ago. Dawn had leaned over the low rail of the pigsty and was pouring a pail of kitchen slop into the trough. Squealing pigs and hogs ran toward the trough and buried their nose in the slime encrusted food and grease. Unbeknownst to Dawn, one hog had rooted under the fence. When she bent over the rail, this hog nudged her leg with his dirty, cold snout. She turned and jumped up on the rail. The pig raised its head and his snout brushed against her foot. She screamed again and

tumbled backwards into the foot deep trough. Slop filled her nose and ears, and covered her arms and face. Her dress was saturated. When she fell, the other hogs and pigs scattered. Now they edged their way back more hungry than frightened.

"Help! Help me!" she screamed. The hogs squealed when she screamed. No one heard her because the pigsty was located behind the barn next to the woods. The smell penetrated her nose and caused her to gag and her stomach to heave. She threw up several times. Shaking, she stood but slipped again in the slippery trough. She braced her hands on one side of the trough and threw one leg over side and literally fell out on to the ground. Her hands landed in hog poop. The hogs stared at her. She pushed herself up and the hogs sniffed her. She ran to the gate and reached over the side. The slide bolt was stuck. She looked down at her feet as several little pigs nudged her shoes with their snouts. "Scat!" She kicked at them just as the gate opened. She flung it back, stepped outside, and quickly snapped it back. The little pigs hurried back to the trough where the hogs were now snorting their way through the slop.

Dawn raked soggy cabbage leaves from her hair and slimy grease from her arms and face. Then she heard a snort. The hog that had caused all this chaos stood before her, his ears flopped back and his snout in the air. Dawn scrambled behind a tree and the hog chased after her. She took off for the barn, the hog right behind her. She darted around the barn and raced to the house just as the pig caught up to her. She screamed as she jerked open the screen door and dashed onto the porch. Her ma made her strip on the porch and hosed her off in the backyard while her pa and Jon Henri chased the hog back into the pigsty. If Dawn could have reached her pa's rifle that hung over the fireplace, she would have shot that hog right then and there. The week before Thanksgiving, she watched with glee while her pa put a bullet in his brain. Every time she ate a sausage patty or a slice of ham, she smirked. Jon Henri laughed at her. "Sunshine," he said, "That sausage must be

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good. You're grinning and smacking with every bite." She nodded her head. More than you will ever know. "This pig is gonna be . . ." She stopped.

"Gonna be what?" he asked.

"Nothing." She was going to say poop, but she knew her ma might smack her. She licked her lips and stuck a fork into another patty.

Her daily chores also included - with the help of Jinger - making the beds and washing the breakfast dishes before going to school. After school, Dawn, according to the season of the year, picked vegetables from the garden, apples and pears from the trees, or berries or grapes from the vines. They were always, freezing, canning, or preserving food. She did not complain about putting up food as she did the other chores. Dawn liked planting the tiny seeds and watching them grow. Hoeing weeds and pulling grass, she could do without, but even that chore meant she was tending the plants and watching over them. She loved the tangy odor of each fruit and vegetable. She liked holding the jars and seeing the tight-packed beans, peas, peaches, and berries in the thick liquid. She had known these plants during their growing life and had nurtured each of them to maturity. Now these filled jars were the result of her tender loving care.

Still there were always chores and they were always tired. The nearest neighbors were five miles away and all her friends worked on the farm just as she did. She very seldom saw anyone unless she was in school. Occasionally, she was allowed to have someone spend the night with her. She only went to town on Saturdays and sometimes not then if there was work that needed doing.

No, this place, this mill village, was the perfect place to live. She sniffed the air. It smelled like sunshine dried laundry. The paved streets and the cement sidewalks were inviting. Everyone smiled and were friendly, well, almost everyone. Bryan BO O'Keith was the only bad part. *Maybe he would die first*, she thought.

Linda M. Simmons

He did not die and Hilda Jean was missing. She pulled the quilt over her head.

Hilda Jean where are you?

CHAPTER 2

Dawn slipped out of bed and quietly opened the door to the hallway. She heard voices on the porch and someone – she thought it was her ma – say “Come on in, Sheriff Jordan.” She heard them go down the hall to the living room. The glow of the floor lamp spread out over the back of her pa’s chair and she could see the top of his dark hair. She crept toward the door staying close to the wall. She squatted down in the corner and peered around the door. She glanced at Helen Sue who sat in her chair by the fireplace and then at the deputy who stood to the far left, his arm resting on the mantle.

“We have search teams in the entire village and going through every department at the mill. So far we haven’t found a trace of her anywhere.”

“Why do you want to talk with my daughter?” Justin asked.

“We’re talking to everyone who saw Hilda Jean that day. Your daughter was supposed to have spent the night with her. We’re hoping she saw something that might help us locate the girl.”

Dawn tiptoed back to her room and pulled the quilt up to her chin. She did not want to talk to anyone.

Had two days really gone by since she had stood on the top step of the side entrance of the school building and stared at the sign across the schoolyard that faced Crabapple Road? She remembered narrowing her eyes and shielding them as she tried to focus her sight just beneath the sign. Hilda Jean was supposed to be there but she wasn’t. In fact, there were no kids racing down Mill Village Road and the schoolyard was empty. She bit her bottom lip, turned, and glared at the locked door to the auditorium. She knew it was locked because she

saw Mrs. Herndon insert the key in the lock just before she dismissed the Third and Fourth Grade Choir.

"Sing it one more time boys and girls," Dawn mocked. One more time and now instead of getting out at three-thirty it was four o'clock. No wonder the schoolyard and the street were empty. "Old maid!" Dawn whispered. It was just as Jinger said; Old Lady Herndon did not have anything else to do and no one to do it with, no husband, no children, and no nothing. "Well, Old Lady Herndon, some of us do have things to do and people to do it with." She looked back at the sign. *Hilda Jean, where are you? Don't be mad with me! It's not my fault.*

"I hate you, Old Lady Herndon!" she screamed. She looked around. No one heard her.

Dawn signed.

She picked up her book bag and suitcase, and walked down the cement steps and headed toward the street. This was her weekend to spend with Hilda Jean. Since Halloween, they had made a pact to stay at each other house every other weekend. Now she was late.

She did not take her eyes off the sign until she reached the school crossing. No one was at the school crossing either. "That's your fault, too, Old Lady Herndon." Dawn was angry because she should have gotten out early. Everyone knew she was the best singer. Didn't Mrs. Herndon tell her over and over again that she sang like an angel? Why didn't Mrs. Herndon listen to Jerry Caldwell?

"My pa's going to be mad if I don't leave now," Jerry said. "He's waiting for me out there in his truck. I've got to go home and do my chores."

"One more time," Mrs. Herndon said. Now Dawn was late and Hilda Jean was not waiting for her beneath the sign.

She almost missed out being in the choir. Hilda Jean and Dawn tried out together and until they sung the first note, Dawn had not realized that Hilda Jean's voice was awful. She could not carry a note. She screeched and sometimes her voice disappeared completely on the high notes. Mrs. Herndon

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thanked them for trying and told them maybe next year. Dawn waited until Hilda Jean went to the bathroom and ran back to the auditorium and begged Mrs. Herndon to let her try again. This time she made it.

She loved to sing. She sang in the children's choir at Calvary Baptist Church. At the Tyler family reunion, her pa stood her on a picnic table and she sang for everyone. She sang at the Murdock Mill Fourth of July Picnic. She knew she could sing and even if she had not believed it, everyone told her how pretty her voice was.

Hilda Jean yelled at Dawn for going back saying that she betrayed their friendship, and that they were supposed to do things together. Dawn cried for two days because she wanted to sing and she needed to be friends with Hilda Jean.

Her ma, felt sorry for her and baked oatmeal and raisin cookies for Dawn. Eating sweets soothed her hurt feelings. That was why she sneaked six cookies to Hilda Jean. It worked because they were friends again, and she did not have to give up the choir. After that, Hilda Jean would sneak into the back of the auditorium and smiled at Dawn. Sometimes she would forget she was not supposed to be there and began clapping and stomping her feet.

Now she wished she had never heard of Mrs. Herndon's Third and Fourth Grade Choir.

Dawn waited until the road was clear before she crossed Crabapple Road. She walked straight to the sign and stared up at it. She cocked her head to one side and looked down the street. Hilda Jean was not anywhere in sight. She was supposed to be waiting by the sign.

Where is she? Is she hiding from me?

"Hilda Jean?" she shouted. "Are you hiding? Mrs. Herndon made us practice 'till our throats hurt!" The wind shook the branches of the maple tree on the corner and dried leaves twirled and floated passed her and settled in the gutter. Dawn wrapped her coat tighter around her chest. She wondered if she should wait there or head for Hilda Jean's house. She

could see her house but the holly tree blocked the view of the porch. She looked back toward the school. "Hilda Jean?" She shouted again, but not as loud as before. She wondered if Hilda Jean got cold and went home to wait. Dawn smiled. *That's it*, she thought. *She's cold*. Dawn smiled as she ran down the street, her school bag bumping against her left thigh and her suitcase bumping against her right thigh.

At Hilda Jean's house, Dawn started up the steps. A jack-o-lantern sat by the door. Its crooked teeth seemed to snarl at her and its triangle-shaped eyes glared up at her. She glanced at the living room window hoping that Hilda Jean was watching for her and would come bouncing out and lead her pass this orange menace.

She didn't.

Dawn swallowed and made herself climb the steps. She placed her suitcase and book bag on the opposite side of door away from the jack-o-lantern. She knocked on the door three times. "Hilda Jean? It's me, Dawn. Let me in, please." She pressed her ear to the door and listened. She could not hear a thing. She banged on the door. "Hilda Jean Norton? It's cold out here. Open up!" Dawn tried the knob and the door opened. She stuck her head inside. "Hilda Jean? Are you home?" She turned her head and listened. The only noise was a bird chirping overhead. She looked around. Mrs. Norton turned into the walkway, her coat pulled tight around her shoulder, her head bent against the wind.

Dawn closed the door. She stood on the top step and waited. When Mrs. Norton stepped onto the walkway, Dawn smiled. "Mrs. Norton. How are you?"

Mrs. Norton stopped and stared at Dawn then she smiled. "Child, what are you doing out here? You'll catch your death of cold!"

"I just got here. Mrs. Herndon, my choir director, kept us late. Hilda Jean was supposed to wait for me by the street sign but I guess she got cold and left."

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"You come on in. I'll make you girls some hot chocolate and that'll warm both of you up."

Mrs. Norton opened the door and held it for Dawn. "Hilda Jean? Dawn's here." She closed the door. "Put your bags in her room, honey, and come on out to the kitchen."

Dawn hurried to Hilda Jean's room and placed her school bag and suitcase on the bed next to Hilda Jean's school bag. She smiled. Hilda Jean was here and she was hiding.

Dawn ran to the kitchen. She expected to see Hilda Jean sitting at the table, giggling. "Where's Hilda Jean?"

"Isn't she in her room?" Mrs. Norton asked, placing her coat on the back of a chair.

"No, ma'am."

"Maybe she's in the bathroom. Go knock on the door."

Dawn went back down the hall. The bathroom door stood opened. Dawn walked in, looked around, stepped over to the tub, and pulled back the shower curtain. No one was there. "She's not in there," she shouted down the hall.

Mrs. Norton came out of the kitchen wiping her hands on a dishtowel. She looked in the bathroom and then headed for Hilda Jean's room. "Her book bag is here." She opened the closet door. "Her coat's gone. You sure you didn't see her outside."

"No, ma'am."

"I can't imagine where she is. She was looking forward to you spending the night with her again." She stood still for a moment. Then she looked down at Dawn. "Let's go to the park. I might have missed seeing her. I bet she is waiting for you there. Get your coat, honey." She hurried down the hall into the kitchen. She grabbed her coat off the chair and stopped. "I just came by the park. There were not many kids out playing it is so cold. If Hilda Jean had been there I know she would have yelled at me." Mrs. Norton's eyes opened wide. "Let's hurry." She grabbed Dawn's hand and pulled her through the living room, out on to the porch. She did not even bother to close the door. They ran all the way to Murdock Mill Park.

They stood at the entrance of the park.
It was empty.

The swings twisted and turned in the wind and the merry-go-round slowly revolved as if an invisible force moved it. Dawn shivered. She looked up at Mrs. Norton. "Where is she?"

Mrs. Norton shook her head. "I don't know." Her eyes opened wide and Dawn thought they might pop out of her head. "Hilda Jean Norton," she shouted, "if you're hiding you better come on out right now. Do you hear me?" A pinecone fell to the ground with a thud beside Mrs. Norton's foot. She bent down and picked it up. The tightly closed pinecone's sharp points pricked her hand. She dropped it. "Hilda Jean? I am not kidding! You're going to be in a ton of trouble if you don't answer me."

Dawn closed her eyes and prayed in her mind. "Hilda Jean, please come out. Your ma's getting mad."

Mrs. Norton ran toward the swings, stopped, and headed for the slide. "Hilda Jean, where are you?" She turned and stared at Dawn. "Where is she?" She bent down and stared in to Dawn's eyes. "This has gone on long enough. You two stop playing this silly game and tell me where she is!" Dawn swallowed and shook her head. "Now! Tell me now!"

Dawn stared up into her eyes. They glared back at her. "I . . . I don't know," she whimpered. "She slipped me a note during math and said she and I were going to Mrs. O'Keith today."

"What?" A long breath came out of Mrs. Norton's mouth. "Oh, my gosh! I bet that's where she's is." She grabbed Dawn's hand and walked quickly across the street. They turned down Park Road and headed to Second Street. "Come on, hurry. It's cold out here."

Mrs. O'Keith answered the door after Mrs. Norton knocked several times. The last knock rattled the screen.

"Mrs. Norton, Dawn. Come on in. I've been waiting for you."
They stepped inside

"Is Hilda Jean already here?" Dawn asked.

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"Hilda Jean? Why, no child, I have not seen her since yesterday. Isn't she with you?"

Mrs. Norton moaned. "Have you seen her at all today?"

"No, I haven't."

Mrs. Norton ran back out the door. "Hilda Jean!" she screamed as she ran down the steps and out to the sidewalk. "Hilda Jean! You answer me! Do you hear me? Answer, now!"

Dawn and Mrs. O'Keith stood on the porch and stared at her. "Dawn? What's wrong? Where is Hilda Jean?"

"I don't know. She was to wait for me by the road sign across from school. I had to practice music and was late. Do you think something happened to her?"

Mrs. O'Keith looked at her and back at Mrs. Norton. She placed a hand on her shoulder. "No, my child, no. She probably just went off with some other friend and lost track of the time."

Dawn heard a noise coming from under the porch. She looked down at her feet and narrowed her eyes to look between the cracks. It was too dark. "Mrs. O'Keith, is Molly under your house?"

"Molly?"

"You know, the puppy that follows us around."

"Oh, yes. She's locked on the Hawthorne's porch."

Dawn walked down the steps and squatted down. She peered between the bushes and stared through the holes in the lattice that surrounded the porch. A dark form, a shadow, seemed to be leaning against the cinderblock wall. She stared but could not tell what it was.

A shoe appeared between the bushes. Dawn fell backward.

"What are you staring at, brat?"

Bryan Keith stepped from between the bushes.

Dawn jumped up. "Noth . . . nothing," she stammered.

Bryan Keith stretched his leg out and in one giant leap was standing before her. "That's right. You don't see nothing," he whispered.

Mrs. Norton shouted from the corner. "Dawn, come with me. I've got to call my husband."

Mrs. O'Keith came down the steps and placed her hand on Dawn's shoulder. "Please, let me know when she comes home. I'm such a worrier," she said.

"I will," Dawn reply. She stared at Bryan as she stepped around him. She ran after Mrs. Norton who was already turning the corner.

Dawn sat on the couch and listened as Mrs. Norton explained to Mr. Norton that Hilda Jean was missing. Mr. Norton questioned Dawn and she told them the same thing she had told earlier. He called several neighbors and they took off down the street.

Mrs. Norton called one neighbor after another. No one had seen Hilda Jean at all and when each parent questioned their kids, the kids said they had not seen her since she walked into her house after school. One girl said that Hilda Jean was going to eat a snack and walk back to the main street to wait for a friend.

Mrs. Norton went to the phone several times, picked it up, held it for a few seconds, and then placed it back in its holder. "I don't know whether to call the Sheriff or not. What do you think, Dawn?"

Dawn shrugged her shoulder. She sat on the couch with her hands folded in her lap watching everyone run in and out. "My pa would call them. He said it's better to be safe than sorry."

Mrs. Norton picked up the phone and dialed a number. "This is Katie Norton. I live at 134 Mill Village Road. My daughter hasn't been seen since school let out at three o'clock over two hours ago." She turned her head and stared at Dawn. "No, absolutely not! My little girl would not run away. Something has happened to her." She licked her lips. "What? . . . You have to wait how long? . . . No! You send someone over here now! I do not care if it is procedure. You send someone now!"

Mrs. Norton slammed down the phone. She sank to the couch and buried her face in her hands.

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The door opened and Mr. Norton and several neighbors came in. He sat beside her and took her hands in his. "We searched the whole village. We did not find her. I think we better call the Sheriff."

Mrs. Norton shook her head. "I just talked to someone. They said she had to be missing twenty-four hours before they could start an investigation."

"What? Who in hell made up that damned rule?" He grabbed the phone. "What's the Sheriff station's number?" Mrs. Norton told him. He stabbed his finger in each hole and jerked the dial around as if he were poking someone. "This is Ted Norton over here on Mill Village Road. Send someone over here now or I'll call the newspaper and tell them that Sheriff Warren Jordan didn't want to bother with poor working class people whose child is missing." He slammed down the phone.

Mr. and Mrs. Norton held hands for what seem like hours to Dawn. She was thirsty and hungry, but was too scared to say anything. She wanted to go home; she wanted her ma and pa.

They heard the sirens long before the Sheriff car pulled up to the curve. Mr. Norton stood at the door. An officer in a blue uniform and a man in a dark brown suit strolled in.

"Are you Mr. Norton?"

"Yes, I am. Our daughter has not been seen since school let out this afternoon. The neighbors and I searched the whole village and the schoolyard. She ain't nowhere to be found."

"Has she ever run away before?"

"Run away?" screamed Mr. Norton. "She didn't run away! Something has happened to her."

"I'm sorry. What I'm asking is has she ever run away?"

"No!"

"You check her friends' houses . . ."

"Yes, everywhere. She's gone, something happened, someone . . ." Mr. Norton stopped. He closed his eyes. "Help us find her."

"We're not supposed to start for twenty-four hours . . . Mr. Norton opened his mouth. The detective held up his hand . . .

"I'll call this in and tell them to send some more deputies and we'll conduct a search and I'll get Bobby Smith and his bloodhounds. I'll need a piece of clothing that she worn recently."

"Bloodhounds?"

"Yeah, it could be she's hurt out there somewhere and can't talk for whatever reason, you know," he lean down and whispered, "unconscious. I don't want to bother the Mrs. with this because it might not be anything."

Dawn realized that they had forgotten that she was there. She heard every word they said and worse she understood what they were saying. She closed her eyes and prayed silently. "God, please, bring Hilda Jean home."

For almost an hour, maybe longer -- she did not really know -- she sat watching and listening, her hands in her lap, her ankles crossed. Mrs. Norton moved from window to door and back again. She pulled back the curtain and stared into the dark. She moved to the door and looked out the tiny square window cut into the wood. A minute later, she would be back at the window.

She stopped in front of Dawn and stared down at her. Dawn smiled at her. She wanted Mrs. Norton to bend down and hug her, and tell her everything would be just fine. She didn't. Her eyes seemed to bore into Dawn's eyes. Finally, she leaned over resting her hand on the arm of the couch. "If you had been on time," she hissed, "my baby wouldn't be missing." This is your fault." She grabbed Dawn by the shoulders, lifting her off the couch, and shook her. Dawn's head bounced from side to side and up and down. Her neck felt like it was going to crack. She clawed at Mrs. Norton's arms but she shook her harder.

"Damn, woman! What are you doing?" Mr. Norton grabbed his wife's hand and pried them off Dawn's shoulders. "You are going to hurt her!" Mrs. Norton laid her head on her husband's chest and sobbed. He looked down at Dawn. Dawn began to cry. "Don't cry, Dawn. She didn't mean it. Maybe you better go into the kitchen."

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Dawn stared at them both as she walked backward into the hallway. She watched as Mr. Norton led her to the couch. They sat down and he began to cry, too.

Dawn backed into the telephone table. She grabbed it before it fell to the floor. She picked up the receiver and dialed her home.

"Hello?"

"Jon Henri?" She swallowed hard. "This is Dawn."

"Hi, Sunshine. Are you and Hilda Jean having a good time?"

"Jon Henri, I want Ma and Pa."

"They aren't here. They are in Charlotte."

A shudder went through her entire body. Her fingers tightened around the phone. "I want to come home," she whispered. A sob escaped from her throat.

"Sunshine, what's wrong?"

"Will you come get me? I need you to hurry."

"I can be there in fifteen minutes. Sunshine, what's the matter? Did you and Hilda Jean have a fight?"

"No, we didn't fight. She's gone. She's missing." Tears overflowed her eyes and streamed down her cheeks. "The Sheriff is here," she sobbed. "Jon Henri, I'm so scared. I want Ma and Pa."

"Dawn, stay inside until I come to the door. Do you understand? Don't go outside."

"I won't. Just hurry."

Shaking and sobbing, Dawn clutched the phone long after Jon Henri hung up. If she held on to it, she would be safe. A man stepped into the hall. Dawn turned toward the wall.

"Are you using the phone, little lady?"

Dawn tried to speak but no words came out. She nodded her head.

"When you are through on the phone let me know. I need to make a call."

Dawn nodded her head again. He turned and went back down the hall. She took a deep breath and tried to stop

shaking. She did not want anyone to know she was crying. She was afraid they would ask her questions. She could not talk, not now. Carefully, she placed the phone back on the hook.

She walked slowly back to the living room and stood in the doorway. Mrs. Norton sat hunched on the couch staring at the floor. She twisted a handkerchief in her hands. Mr. Norton paced back and forth. Dawn stepped back into the hallway. She was scared they would see her. She turned and hurried into the kitchen.

People had brought food over and the table was crammed with plates and bowls. She stared at the refrigerator. Her throat was dried and she wanted a Pepsi but was afraid to ask anyone if it was all right. Two women stood at the sink: one washed the dishes while another dried them.

"I've got this friend who lives in South Carolina," the woman said as she placed a pot in the dish drainer. "Her little girl was kidnapped and it was a week before they found her tiny body." She leaned toward the woman drying the dishes. "She was naked," she whispered. Dawn moved nearer so she could hear. "The guy broke her neck and raped the poor little thing. They said she was covered with leaves and branches and mud."

The woman drying the dishes bumped into Dawn. "Oh, honey, I didn't see you." She looked at her friend. "Little pitchers have big ears." She smiled at Dawn. "Why don't you go out on the porch and sit down where you'll be out of the way?"

Dawn moved toward the screen door that opened onto the porch. She gazed out into the night. The porch light cast a halo onto the steps and onto the path near the clothesline. The shadowy outhouse in the neighbor's yard looked like a guardhouse. She stepped out onto the porch. Windows of nearby homes glowed and their lights made rectangle shapes on the lawns. To Dawn they looked like steppingstones, stones that could lead her away from all the accusing eyes. If *only she had been on time*. It was her fault and she wanted to run and hide. Jon Henri told her to stay inside and wait. She felt as if she was going to explode.

MILL VILLAGE ROAD

She placed her palm on the screen door and gently pushed it. The hinges squeaked and she quickly glanced over her shoulder. No one heard or if they did, ignored the sound. She stepped outside and gently closed the screen door.

She stared passed the outhouse into the darkness. She wanted to go home. There, she knew every clump of weeds and where they grew and ever clod of dirt that made ridges in the earth. Here, she knew nothing. She needed Hilda Jean.

She sat down on the steps. Tears filled her eyes and she sobbed. She covered her mouth with her hands so no one would hear.

Finally, the tears stopped falling although every few seconds a whimper escaped from between her lips. She trembled and rubbed her arms with her hands.

She stared up at the star-filled sky. "Please, twinkle, twinkle little star, let Hilda Jean be all right." She whimpered again. Something cold touched her leg. She gasped and scrambled up the steps, her back against the door. She stared down at two big, brown eyes.

"Molly!"

She reached down and gathered the little beagle into her arms. "Oh, Molly, it's so good to see you." She kissed Molly's nose. "Have you seen Hilda Jean? I wish you could lead me to her. If you were bigger, I bet you could." Molly wiggled out of Dawn's arms and headed down the path moving from patch of light to patch of light. She squatted near the outhouse and peed. Suddenly, Molly barked, a yip. Something in the way she yipped and in the way she backed up startled Dawn. Dawn heard her grunt and then squealed. She ran back toward the house and then darted around the house. Dawn stared after her.

"Molly? Come here, girl. What's wrong?"

Then she heard someone clear his throat. She looked back at the outhouse. "Who's there?" she whispered. "Hilda Jean?" A tall silhouette moved around the outhouse and became an

extension of the building as it leaned against the wall blending in with the building's dark outline.

The silhouette straightened up and moved toward her. Hairs on her neck bristled. She tried to move her legs and feet. They were numb. She stared at the figure as it moved from patch of light to patch of light. She watched as the porch light climbed up the figure's pant leg, to his shirt, and finally to his face.

Bryan O' Keith!

A tiny squeal slipped from between her lips. He slapped his hand over her mouth. She scratched at his hand and he jerked her up by the neck and tucked her under his arm like a sack of fertilizer.

"Damn, you're heavy!"

She kicked and punched his stomach as he moved back down the path. He circled around to the front of the outhouse. He twisted the wooden lock but it did not open. "Damn, stupid lock!" He jerked the door several times until it popped open. He hurried inside and dropped her down.

"If you scream, I'll throw you down that hole. Do you hear me?" Dawn did not move. He grabbed her shoulders and shook her. Her head snapped backward. "Do you hear me?"

She nodded, "Hmm," she moaned. Tears filled her eyes. He reached down, grabbed her legs, and flipped her upside down. Her arms flail out and she tried to grab hold of him. He held her over the hole and her dress fell over her head covering her face. The chain she wore around her neck with the half heart dangled in front of her eyes. She tried to grab it but he kept bouncing her up and down. Her throat seemed to close and she could not breathe. Her lungs felt like they were on fire.

"I might just kill you. I don't need no brat telling about what took place between me and Hilda Jean." He squeezed her ankles and lowered her into the hole. It was black and the stink smothered her. She grabbed the sides of the hole and pushed up with all her might. "I've good mind to put you down there

MILL VILLAGE ROAD

with all the worms and crap.” He snickered. “You’ll sink to the bottom and no one will ever see you again.”

“No! Don’t!” she cried. “Please, don’t!”

“This is what should have happened to Hilda Jean. Damn, aggravating brat. All you girls are damn brats.”

He pulled Dawn up and tugged her legs until she let go of the sides of the hole. He dropped her left foot and her leg bent backward. Pain shot through her back. She felt his hand slide down her left thigh to her panties. His fingers slid under the elastic at the leg.

“Stop! Leave me alone!” She twisted trying to pull away from his fingers. “Stop!” She sobbed. He laughed and she felt his hand circle her buttock.

She screamed.

He jerked his hand back and slapped her on the back. She arched her back as the pain spread. “I told you not to scream!” He shook her again. Her head bounced up and down. She stretched her fingers trying to grab the boards on the wall. He jerked her back. The chain fell forward and she grabbed the heart suspended in front of her face.

“What’s this?” He twisted it from her grasp and stared at it. “You think little metal hearts makes you buddies. Ya’ll don’t know nothing. Y’all ain’t nothing but little women who flirt and tease. That’s all you brats are.”

He spat and a glob of spit splattered on her cheek. He jerked on the chain and the metal links cut into the nape of her neck. “You didn’t see nothing today, you understand?”

“Yes, I understand!” she yelled.

He let go of the chain and loosened his grip. She flared her fingers as her body fell toward the floor. Just before her head hit the floor, he grasped her ankles and jerked her up high again. Her teeth slammed against each other, her neck popped. He cackled. She twisted and turned reaching for anything to on hold to. The silver initials, “BO” on his belt buckle, reflect the porch light that shone through the cracks in the door. She grabbed for it but he slapped at her hand before

she could latch on to it. He laughed and his grip loosened. She felt his fingers sliding over her ankles and then her shoes.

"No!" she screamed. Her head struck the floor. Streaks of white light filled her eyes as her body crumpled to the floor. Blood gush from her nose and poured down her throat. She coughed and gagged. He grabbed her arm and jerked her off the floor.

"Let me go, please!" she sobbed. "I ain't going to say nothing."

"I don't know what I'm going to do with you. I ought to break your neck and throw you in that hole. Hell, it stinks so bad no one will ever think there's a rotten body down there."

"Please, let me go! I won't tell anyone. I promise."

"Don't say nothing about what you saw or heard today. If you even think about blabbing, I'll kill your ma and your pa and that no good brother of yours." He pushed her out the door, his fingers clamped around her upper arm.

She shivered in the cold air. Huge white spots danced before her eyes. She rubbed them and shook her head. In the distance, she saw a yellow haze and realized it was the porch. *If only I could get to that porch*, she thought. He dropped her arm and through the white spots that danced before her eyes, she saw him trying to close the outhouse door. He tugged on the wooden block that held it shut. "Damn, lock. It's screwed too tight."

Dawn stepped away from him, turned, and skirted around the outhouse toward the porch. "Come back here, you little shit head." His voice was harsh and raspy. She heard him running across the yards. Her fingers curled around the door handle and she snatched it opened. Before she could scramble inside his fingers circled her throat and he dragged her down the step into the thick shrubbery that grew against the porch. "If you tell anyone, brat, remember, I'll kill your family and then I'll come after you." His hand tightened around her neck. She clawed at his hands and kicked his legs. She couldn't breathe. Suddenly,

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he let go of her throat. "Do you understand? Answer me!" Dawn nodded her head. He slammed her back to the ground.

She laid there, her eyes closed. She felt nothing. Am I dead? she wondered. Her body began to twitch and shake. Cold settled around her like the icy water of the creek. Was she in the water? She opened her eyes and slowly sat up. She turned her head and looked behind her. He was gone. She stood and the ground began to spin. She fell backward into the shrubs. Branches scratched her face and arms. She tried to push herself up but she could not get a grip on the tiny branches, her hands and arms sliding deeper into the bush. She turned over onto her stomach scraping her face as she pushed against the main branch of the shrub. Finally she stood. Her stomach heaved and she vomited. Blood and mucus poured down her dress and dripped onto her socks and shoes. She took a deep breath and the dizziness slowed. She turned toward the steps. Something moved behind her.

"No!" She screamed. She grabbed the handle of the door as something brushed her leg. She jerked it open and dashed across the porch into the kitchen. She ran into the hallway and smashed against the phone table. It wobbled and tipped over, the phone crashed to the floor. She dodged legs and furniture as she ran through the living room. She flung open the front door, and ran down the front steps and leaped onto someone's chest and wrapped her arms around his necks. It was Spencer Hawthorne. He held her tight.

"What's wrong, little girl?" She buried her head in his shoulder and sobbed.

"What wrong with her?" Dawn glanced around and saw a deputy on the top step. "She came barreling through the house and I think she's bleeding."

"Look at me," Spencer said. He lifted her head. "Her nose is bleeding and her dress is wet. I think she vomited. Baby, what happened?" She shook her head and gulped down air. Her sobs choked her. "It's gonna be okay." He took out his handkerchief and wiped her nose and face. She stared at the

crimson spots. It was her blood. She shuddered. "I'll look after you. Nothing is going to hurt you now."

"Get a towel and some ice," someone shouted.

She put her lips to Spencer's ear. "I want my brother," she whispered. "Where's my brother?"

"Who is your brother?"

Dawn blurted his name out between sobs. "Jon Henri Tyler."

"I know Jon Henri. Where is he?"

Dawn shook her head. "I don't know," she sobbed.

A car door slammed.

"What are y'all doing to my little sister?"

Dawn stared into the eyes of Jon Henri. She wiggled out of Spencer's grasp and ran toward Jon Henri. She jumped into his arms. Jon Henri turned her face around and gasped. "Sunshine, what happened?"

"Nobody knows. She came running out of the house and jumped into my arms," Spencer said. "She's looks like she seen a ghost."

Jon Henri squatted on the ground and stood her on her feet. "Tell me, who hurt you?" He touched her face and neck. "You're covered in blood and bruises."

Through tears and white spots, she tried to focus on his eyes. The white spots moved around his face and head. She stared up at the faces standing over her. She turned her head and between the spots, she saw Bryan O'Keith standing at the edge of the house behind the porch railing. He held up his fist and shook it. She screamed. She buried her head in Jon Henri's shoulder. "I want to go home!" she sobbed. "Please, take me home!"

"I am, Sunshine." He picked her up and she buried her head in his shoulder. "What's going on around here? When Dawn called she told me Hilda Jean was missing."

"Jon Henri, we have searched this entire village, from the mill, the park, even the well and we can't find Hilda Jean

MILL VILLAGE ROAD

anywhere,” the Sheriff said. “We got bloodhounds out. They picked up her trail but it disappeared near the park.”

“What’s my sister got to do with any of this? Why is her nose bleeding? Why weren’t any of you looking after her?”

“Man, we’re sorry. We just forgot she was here. Why don’t you take her on home? If we need her, we’ll call you.”

“Dawn, honey, we’re going home.” Jon Henri carried her to the car. Dawn lifted her head and stared at the corner of the house. Bryan was gone. She collapsed on the front seat.

At home, he carried Dawn to her room and laid her on the bed. She curled into a ball. She shook so hard the bed quivered. Jon Henri washed the blood off her face and hands, removed her vomit and blood soak clothes. He wrapped two quilts around her and crawled in beside her. He cradled her in his arms. “Everything is going to be alright, Sunshine. I’m here. Nothing’s going to bother you now.” His voice soothed her. The shakes eased and finally stopped and she closed her eyes.

She dreamt she was standing on the porch of Mrs. O’Keith’s house. A sound, a whimper, came through the slits between the boards of the porch. Dawn stares down between the slits and gazes into two round eyes.

A door opens and Bryan O’Keith’s hand stretches out, his fingers reaches for her throat.

She screamed!

Hands shook her. She sat up and saw a shadow above her.

“Dawn, wake up!

“No!” she screamed. “Stay away from me! Stay away!” Tears filled her eyes as she backed up against the headboard. She jerked the quilts over her body.”

“Dawn, sister, it’s okay. It’s me, Jinger.” Dawn stared at the shadow until the face came into view. It was Jinger. Dawn shook and the bed shook with her. She tried to speak but there was no sound. “I’m getting Ma.”

Jinger opened the door and ran from the room

Voices echoed down the hall. Dawn heard her pa shouting.

"She's got bruises on her neck, arms, ankles, and a huge lump on her head. The doctor said the bruises were in the shape of fingerprints. That means someone grabbed her." She realized he was on the phone. "Why didn't you all watch after her? Damn, a child is missing and the deputy and everybody ignored the one sitting in the house? You ain't heard the last of this!" She jumped when he slammed down the phone.

She clamped her hands over her ears and slid further under the quilts. Her body shook as chills enveloped her. If she had not stayed after school, if she had not been in the choir, she and Hilda Jean would be giggling in bed right now telling ghost stories. She imagined Hilda Jean in a ditch somewhere, cut and bleeding, desperately waiting for someone, Dawn, to find her. What will happen if everyone stops looking for her? Would she die?

Helen Sue came into the room and sat down on the bed beside her. "Mama's here, baby. Nothing's going to bother my baby girl again." She rocked her back and forth.

After several minutes, Dawn stopped shivering. She inhaled deeply and slowly let out her breath. A picture of Hilda Jean filled her mind. Dawn needed to find her. *Monday, Dawn thought, I am going to go back down Mill Village Road and search in every ditch and under every house until I find you. You are there, waiting for me. I just know it. I will tell you what Bryan O'Keith did to me. You will think of something awful to do to him.*

Dawn closed her eyes and slept.

In the dream, she stood beside a mound of dirt. She stared at the leaves, sticks, and mud until her vision pierced through the mucky mixture. There in the shallow grave in Murdock Park laid the lifeless body of Hilda Jean Norton. Dawn dropped to her knees and dug fiercely at the muddy soil. A howling laugh echoed from the trees. She sprang to her feet and stared at Bryan O'Keith.

"You will join her soon."

Dawn screamed.

CHAPTER

3

During the following week, a member of the family stayed within sight of Dawn. When she lay on the couch, either Jinger or Jon Henri sat in the chair by the fireplace. If she stood on the porch and leaned against the railing, she would catch a glance of someone watching from the living room window. Several times a day, according to who was watching her, they would ask what happened and who hurt her. She would stare at them until tears filled her eyes. She said nothing. Finally, they stopped asking.

Sunday morning at church, she felt the eyes of the congregation on her and her family as they walked down the aisle. She saw them turn and whisper to one another. Her ma and pa ushered her into the pew and she sat between them and stared up at the wooden cross hanging from the ceiling behind the pulpit. A light from above illuminated the plaque at the top of the cross. She read the words "*Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*". Throughout the service, she never took her eyes off the cross. She laced her fingers together and prayed, begged God to let Hilda Jean be all right. *It is my fault, God, and if you bring her home safely, I will do all my chores. I will obey Ma and Pa, and on my birthday and at Christmas I will not ask for presents.* She promised to love Him forever if Monday morning when she walked into her classroom, Hilda Jean would be sitting at her desk, smiling and waving for her to come over so she could tell her what happened since the last time they saw each other.

At home, she laid out her clothes to go back to school. She helped with the dishes and swept the kitchen. She took a hot bath and scrubbed her body until it hurt. Before crawling into

bed, she knelt by the window and stared up at the stars. Again, she made promises to God.

Monday morning Dawn stood in the doorway of her class and all the kids turned toward her and waited for her to step inside. Dawn stared at Hilda Jean's desk. It was empty. She looked around the classroom and searched each face. Slowly, she lowered her head as tears filled her eyes. *Oh, God, where is she? Don't you know how much I need Hilda Jean? I'm sorry I was late. Please, bring her back.*

Head bowed, she moved toward her desk. She heard the kids turning in their chairs as she walked by. She sat down at her desk and wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her blouse. *Maybe, she thought, Hilda Jean is waiting underneath the sign in the mill village.* Dawn smiled. She had a plan.

During lunch period, she told her teacher, Mrs. Thompson, she had to go to the bathroom. She ran down the hall and out the side door to the road. She paused at the sign where she was supposed to meet Hilda Jean last week. She stared down Mill Village Road.

Gray clouds hung low in the sky. Bare tree branches hovered over the houses. Dawn breathed deeply. *I am not going to be scared,* she said to herself.

"Find Hilda Jean. Find Hilda Jean," she chanted as she started down the road. Her eyes darted from house to house, searching not only for Hilda Jean but for Bryan O'Keith too. She was afraid he would dart out from behind a house or a tree. She kept moving. "Find Hilda Jean."

Dawn saw two deputies sitting in a sheriff's car parked near the curb at the Norton home, and another deputy standing on the front porch. Dawn turned right on Seventh Street and cut across the lawns to the back door of the Norton house. Mrs. Norton sat on the top step, her head pressed against the screen door, and her legs stretched out in front of her. Dawn walked up to her and stood right in front of her.

"Hello," she whispered.

MILL VILLAGE ROAD

Mrs. Norton jumped. "What?" She sat up and stared at Dawn. She slowly raised her arm and ran her fingers down Dawn's face. Dawn turned her cheek into her palm. "Oh, Dawn, where's my little girl? Have you seen her?"

Dawn looked at her. "No ma'am. I'm going to look for her now."

Mrs. Norton nodded her head and folded her hands in her lap. "Everyone's looked for her. They searched everywhere, at least that what they told me." She signed. "I've called and called her but she doesn't answer me."

"Don't you worry," Dawn said. "I'm going to find her right now."

Dawn ran back around the house and across the street through the Hawthorne's yard. Molly, the puppy, barked when she saw Dawn. She ran up to her and jumped into Dawn's arms. Dawn cuddled her as Molly licked her face. "Do you know where Hilda Jean is?" Molly stared up at her with her dark brown eyes. "Let's you and me go find her. Okay?"

Dawn carried her to Second Street to Mrs. O'Keith's house. She stood behind a sycamore tree across the street and peeked around it. Her eyes darted back and forth from the front door to the windows, to the bushes, and back to the door. She waited several minutes and breathed deeply three times, felt the half - heart necklace through blouse and walked quickly across the road and up the steps of Mrs. O'Keith's house. "Hilda Jean," she whispered, "I'm coming." She rapped hard several times on the door. She ran back out to the sidewalk and waited. If Bryan O'Keith were in there, she would run back to Mrs. Norton house where the deputy was waiting.

Mrs. O'Keith opened the wooden door. She looked around and pushed open the screen door. "Hello? Is someone there?"

Dawn rushed back up the steps onto the porch. "Mrs. O'Keith, do you remember me? I'm Dawn Tyler."

She smiled. "Of course I do, child. Come on in." She held the screen door opened.

Dawn shook her head. "Is your son in there?"

"Bryan? Oh, no, child, he only comes on Fridays'." Dawn stepped into her living room. "Is that Molly, you're carrying?"

"Yes ma'am."

Mrs. O'Keith closed the door. She bent down and petted Molly's head. "Sometimes I wished I had a pet. If it wasn't for Hilda . . ." She stopped. She placed her hand over mouth and shook her head. "I'm sorry. I miss her so much."

"Me too."

Mrs. O'Keith sat down on the couch and patted the cushion next to her. "Bring Molly over here and sit beside me, dear."

Dawn sat down and took another deep breath. "Mrs. O'Keith, what do you think happened to Hilda Jean?"

She shook her head. "I don't know child. There is so much talk. I just do not know what to believe. Some say she ran away."

"No, she didn't!" Dawn snapped. Molly looked up at Dawn and licked her face. Dawn shook her head. "She wouldn't do that."

Mrs. O'Keith patted Dawn's knee. "It's okay, child. I don't believe that either."

"I think she's hurt somewhere and she's waiting for me to find her."

"Oh, child, the Sheriff has looked everywhere."

"I'm going to find her even if it takes me all week. I know she's here, nearby. I feel it in my heart." She touched her chest and the metal heart felt cold on her skin.

"If I was younger, I would help you look for her. If you could come by on Friday, Bryan can help you look."

Dawn jumped up clutching Molly to her chest. "No! Not him! Don't even tell him I'm looking for Hilda Jean." Her stomach lurched. It felt as if it caved in. "Please," she begged.

"Why child, you're so pale." She touched Dawn's arm. "Why don't you want him to help? Did he scare you or something?"

"Please," she gasped. "Promise me you won't tell him!" Her stomach churned and she began to gasp.

MILL VILLAGE ROAD

Mrs. O'Keith took her arm and gently pulled her back down on the couch. "Calm down, child, I won't tell him."

Dawn bit her bottom lip to stop them from trembling. Finally, she was able to talk. "I came by to ask you a favor."

"What favor?"

"I want to look under your porch."

Mrs. O'Keith placed her hand on her chest. "Whatever for? My porch? Why?"

"I had a nightmare about Hilda Jean. I haven't even told my folks about it."

"What about Hilda Jean?"

"She was crying and she wanted me to look for her here, under your porch."

"Under my porch?"

"Yes, ma'am. Please, let me. If I could just look, I know I . . . I . . ."

She closed her eyes. "I'm scared of what I'll see. I've got to do this."

Mrs. O'Keith nodded her head. "I understand. Let's go together."

Outside, Mrs. O'Keith pointed to a piece of lattice that was not nailed to the porch. Dawn pulled it back and squatted down. Light filtered through the adjoining lattice and Dawn's eyes adjusted to the shadows on the underside of the porch.

Molly jumped out of her arms and dashed under the porch. "Molly, no! Come back here!" She yelled. Dawn crawled through the hole and edged her way to the middle of the porch. She ran her hand over the dirt searching for anything that might help her remember what she heard that day. Her fingers brushed against a metal object. Dawn picked it up and brushed it off. It was a blue barrette. The slightly rusty metal clash looked worn. Dawn searched through her mind trying to remember if Hilda Jean had a blue barrette. *What was she wearing in her hair the day she disappeared?* Molly scampered back and forth and ran back to her bumping her head on

Dawn's arm. She whimpered. Dawn sat down hard on the ground. She gathered Molly up in her arm.

"You whimpered last week too, didn't you? How did you get under here then? Did someone open the lattice?" Molly licked her face and then dashed from under the porch.

Dawn crawled back out from underneath the porch. She stood up and dusted off her knees and dress. She clashed the barrette in her hand and held it behind her back. She had to find out if it belonged to Hilda Jean before she said anything.

"Mrs. O'Keith, do you remember me saying when Hilda Jean's Ma and I were looking for her last week that Molly was under your porch.

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, no. I was too upset that day."

"Well, I did. Do you remember seeing Molly that day?"

"No, child, I don't. Molly came over here several times but Bryan did not want her here so I asked the Hawthornes to keep her locked up. I was afraid Bryan would take her off somewhere."

Molly jumped up on Dawn's legs. "He probably would." She rubbed Molly's head. *Did he take Hilda Jean off somewhere*, she wondered. "Molly was outside today."

"It's hard keeping a puppy locked up all the time."

"I suppose." She glanced down the street toward the park. "I guess I've better take Molly back home. Thanks for letting me look under the porch."

"Come back and see me soon."

"Thank you, I will."

Dawn picked up Molly and walked slowly back down Second Street, her spirit was drained. This had not turned out as she had hoped. She cut across several lawns and at the Hawthorne's house; she opened the screen door and put Molly inside. She stared at Molly for several seconds. She wanted Hilda Jean to be hiding under Mrs. O'Keith's porch. Now she had to look somewhere else. But, where? Where could she be?

M & M Park.

MILL VILLAGE ROAD

Dawn ran across the lawn and headed down Seventh Street to Murdock Road. She ran all the way to the park and by the time she entered the park, she was out of breath. She sat down heavily on a swing huffing, and puffing trying to fill her lungs with air. Her stomach ached because she had skipped breakfast. She wished she had not done that. She closed her eyes and flared her nose. She could almost smell the hot-peppered sausages and taste the buttered scrambled eggs that filled the bowl and platter on the table just that morning. She opened her eyes and wondered if it was too late for lunch at school. She rubbed her stomach and stood up. She did not know what to do now.

She looked at the bushes behind the merry-go-round and over by the slide. Then she remembered the wall. Slowly, she moved toward the brick building. Her shoes felt like they were made of lead. Her hands shook as she parted the bushes and squeezed her way through to the back. She squatted and stared down the long rows of bushes, first to her left and then to her right. Hilda Jean was not there. She did not expect to see her but the idea had popped into her mind.

Dawn crawled to the vent and sat down beneath the window. "One, two, three, four," she counted. She tugged on the fourth brick and it came out in her hand. She reached inside and pulled out the white box.

Tears filled her eyes, a whimper escaped from between her lips. She looked down the long row of bushes to the steps and then to her right to the end of the wall. She needed Hilda Jean. It was her box. She should not open it without her permission. She frowned. Hilda Jean was not here. She had to see if she had removed anything.

Dawn opened the box. Inside were all the items that she had seen before. She touched the seashell and the blue stone ring. The money for her ma's birthday present was still in the box. Where was Hilda Jean? She wanted to call out to her but she was scared. What if Bryan O'Keith was standing close by, listening, and waiting for her? *What if Hilda Jean was hurt and*

lying down and I cannot see her, Dawn thought. She made herself whisper her name. "Hilda Jean?" The words were barely audible even to her. Leaves rustled on the bush behind her. Her heart pounded and she trembled. Slowly, she turned and let out a long breath. A bird fluttered from branch to branch just above her head. She swallowed. "Hilda Jean!" She yelled. The bird flew away.

Someone banged on the window above her head. Dawn clamped her lips together and pressed herself up against the building. She held her breath and stared up at the window. Was it Bryan? She heard the window being open. She moved her head just enough to see the ledge above her. She glanced up and saw a deputy leaning halfway out the window.

"What're you doing down there, little girl?" Dawn stared at him. "Hey, can't you hear me?" he shouted. "I asked you what're you doing down there?"

"Noth . . . Nothing," she stuttered.

"Why aren't you in school?"

"I . . . I . . . stayed home because I was sick."

"You don't look sick to me." He cocked his head to one side. "I heard you calling Hilda Jean. Is that Hilda Jean Norton you're calling? Do you know where she is?"

"No, sir. If I did, I wouldn't be calling for her."

"You know she's been missing for over a week."

"Yes, sir."

"What's your name?"

"Dawn Tyler."

He nodded his head. "Yeah, I know you. You're that little girl, the one who ran out of the Norton house, aren't you?" Dawn stared up at him. "What happened to you that night? Did someone scare you?"

Bryan O'Keith's face popped into her mind. She remembered his threat to kill her ma and pa. "No," she mumbled.

"I'm coming out there. You stay right there." He disappeared and then she heard the window slam shut.

MILL VILLAGE ROAD

Dawn hurriedly put the barrette inside the box. She closed it and crammed it back into the hole. She shoved the brick back in place. She clawed her way through the bushes. Branches scratched her face and arms as she scurried to the side of the building and flattened herself against the wall. She took a deep breath and ran around the corner across the park.

"Hey, you! Come back here!" Dawn glanced over her shoulder. The deputy stood on the porch. Dawn ran through the park and down Mill Village Road and she did not stop running until she was back in the lunchroom.

It was empty.

She walked slowly to her classroom. Mrs. Caldwell and the principal were standing out in the hallway.

"Dawn! My gosh, child! What happened to you?" Mrs. Caldwell stared down at her. "Your face is scratched and your clothes are dirty."

"I want to go home."

The principal squatted down and took her hand. "I've already called your pa, Dawn. Where have you been?"

Tears filled her eyes. "I have to find Hilda Jean," she cried. "She needs me. Don't you understand? It's my fault that she is missing. I wasn't on time! I was late." Tears flowed down her face as sobs escaped from her mouth.

The principal stood. "I'll take her to my office. Get the nurse," he said.

Justin and Helen Sue came. The deputy came, too. He told them about finding her behind the building. She heard snatches of words as they discussed her behavior.

"She believes it's her fault."

"Scratches on her arms, legs, and face."

"She needs to tell what happened."

In the truck, Helen Sue wrapped her arms around Dawn and rocked her back and forth until the sobbing ceased. At home, Dawn lay on her bed, her knees pulled up to her chest. Neither one had asked her any questions. She was glad. She did not want to talk.

Justin kissed her on the head and placed a quilt over her. "Come on Helen Sue. Let her sleep and later maybe we can talk to her."

When they left the room, Dawn opened her palm. Her chain with the half heart had scratched her hand. Her blood had settled into the initials and the date.

"Oh, Hilda Jean Norton, where are you?" she whispered. "I'm so sorry I was late." Dawn cried softly. "I promise I will never stop looking for you. I promise I will find out where you are." She closed her eyes and slept.

Dawn stayed home from school until the end of the month. For a while, everyone asked her questions: Jon Henri, Ma, Pa, Wade, and Jinger. Wade never asked her what she knew. He stayed by her side, rubbing her hands or her back, his eyes filled with tears. He was two years older than she was and although he was quiet, his compassion surrounded her. He held her hand when she cried at the mere mention of Hilda Jean's name. He checked on her before he went to bed and before he went to school. She welcomed his presence because he did not ask questions. He was just there. The others, especially Jon Henri, wanted to act, to seek vengeance on someone or something. She could never reveal what had taken place.

Later, she tried to act cheerful and pretend everything was okay. She hoped this cheery attitude would get her back in school. Going back to school was the only way she could sneak off to the mill village and search for Hilda Jean.

Finally, she was allowed to go back to school. This time she did not wait for lunch to leave the school grounds. As soon as she got off the bus, she walked straight across the street and headed down Mill Village Road. She waited behind the guardhouse until the guard turned his back. She ran through the parking lot and hid behind a high bush. No one saw her. This time she searched around the five buildings that made up the mill. It was easy to sneak around the buildings because of the high bushes. She searched behind every bush and tree and

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behind every building including the maintenance building that sat between two of the large buildings. "Hilda Jean? Where are you? Your mama is waiting for you. So am I." As she stepped from behind a bush, she saw a man standing next to a tree with his back to her. She tiptoe passed him, glanced back, and saw that he was peeing on the tree. He turned and zipped his pants just as she was about to turn the corner of the building.

"Hey you! What're you doing on the grounds?"

Dawn turned and faced him. He was tall and his gray jacket bulged at the zipper. The brim of his cap shaded his eyes. "I'm searching for a lost friend."

"What lost friend?"

"Hilda Jean Norton."

He stared at her for a few seconds. His eyes were the color of watered down Pepsi and they penetrated hers. "Who are you?"

"Dawn Tyler."

He nodded his head. "I've heard about you. Everyone's treating you like a China doll." He took a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and thumped it against his hand. A cigarette popped half way out and he stuck it in his mouth and pulled it out the rest of the way. He took out a Zippo lighter and held it up to the cigarette. He flipped the tiny wheel and a flame shot up. He sucked on the cigarette until the end glowed. He exhaled. The smoke hovered in front of his face for a few seconds and then thinned out and disappeared. During the lighting of the cigarette, he never took his eyes off her. "I don't believe in molly coddling kids. You might as well know the truth. Your friend is dead. The deputies gave up the hunt because they know she's dead."

Dawn's eyes narrowed and she shook her head. "No!" she screamed. "You're lying! She's not!"

He stepped toward her. "That little brat caused nothing but trouble. She's dead and if you don't mind your own business you'll be down there with her." He reached for her. Images of Bryan O'Keith flashed into Dawn's mind.

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She back away, his fingers grazed her arm, and she jerked away from him. He stepped closer and she skirted around him. "You're lying!" she shouted over her shoulder. "You don't know!" She ran across the manicured lawn passed the parking lot and through Murdock Mill Park.

She ran until she was standing in the hall outside her classroom. She collapsed on the floor and sobbed.

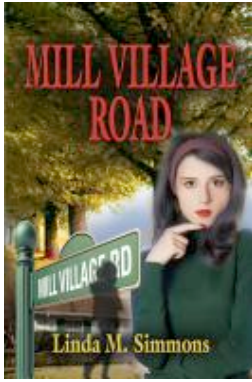
Her pa came and took her home. He carried her to bed and gently pulled the quilt around her shoulders.

"Pa," she whispered. "The man said Hilda Jean was dead. She ain't dead, Pa." She looked up at Helen Sue. "Ma, she ain't. If she were dead I'd know it." She grabs Justin's shirt and pulls herself up to look him in the eye. "She ain't dead!" she shouted. "She ain't dead!"

They looked at one another and he kissed her on the forehead and gathered her up in his arms. "Baby, my sweet baby. It's true. She's gone. She's dead."

Dawn shook her head. "No, no, no! She's not dead!"

The room went black.



Nine-year old April Dawn Tyler's dream shatters when classmate Hilda Jean Norton disappears. The one suspect, Bryan O'Keith, terrorizes Dawn, and threatens her with death if she even hints that he is involved. Even with his threats, Dawn vows to Hilda Jena's spirit that she will never stop looking for her. Now grown and working in the mill office, the menaces she uncovers changes her and the mill village residents in ways she never dreams.

Mill Village Road

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