

Chapter One

She could barely get the words out. And when she did, she didn't recognize her own voice.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Who do you think I am?" he answered, with a grin.



It was Saturday afternoon, late August, and hot — blazing hot. The last few days had been too hot for me to do my usual hour-long run, even first thing in the morning. I lay on a recliner in my backyard wearing a tank top and shorts, baking in the sun.

Except for the extreme heat, it was like any other normal summer day. But I guess every weird, bizarre, extraordinary event has to begin somewhere, and if you follow the trail back far enough, maybe you'd find the seeds of it starting to sprout on a normal day like this in a relatively normal neighborhood like mine.

I lifted my legs one at a time and eyed them. The heat gave everything an unnatural brilliance. I'd forgotten my sunglasses inside, and it was too bright to tell if my skin was burning under the sunscreen I'd slathered on. It was too bright to read. I flipped shut one of the fashion magazines that my older sister, Katie, had left behind when she moved out and let it slip from my fingers onto the grass.

My mind drifted to thoughts of high school, and instantly butterflies fluttered in my stomach. The week after next, I would start grade nine. I was excited that the teachers would be treating me more like an adult and less like a kid, but I wasn't looking forward to being at the bottom of a

school hierarchy again, down in the lowest grade. Plus, I didn't know many people. I didn't have a lot of friends. And now I'd be surrounded by new kids in my classes, kids whose names I'd have to learn, whose cliques I'd have to navigate through.

Our next-door neighbor Mrs. Carlton turned her sprinkler on. The water made a pleasant swishing sound, and I imagined it falling on me, cooling me. A crow called from the tall pine tree that leaned over our back fence.

At least in high school my marks would finally start to matter more. I wasn't the smartest student in the class, but my grades were good. I pushed myself, did all my homework and studied hard. I was disciplined, especially with my running. After track had ended in the spring, I'd continued training all through the summer because I knew it would help me make it onto the high school cross-country team this fall. Also, running kept me feeling in control, helped me get my mind off the things that I couldn't do anything about. And when I sank into that place where I felt like I was drowning, running helped me float back up and find my way to the surface again.

Staying in control. It's important. And maybe that's why people try to look for signs of what lies ahead, or believe in God. Maybe that's why some people read their horoscope or try to interpret lines on palms. So they can stay in control. So they can use these signs to make sense of the world, to make the right choices, to stay safe or even stay ahead of the game. I guess others decide they just don't want to know what might happen, especially if it's something bad coming their way. They stick their heads in the sand, turn away from any indications that things aren't quite right, ignore the butterflies that unsettle their stomachs when certain ideas, implausible, impossible, are spoken, are set in motion.

A lawnmower started up somewhere in the neighborhood, ran for a few moments, then stopped abruptly.

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I was melting in the heat. Five more minutes, I decided. And then I'd go inside.

My mother had been gardening. Now she stood in the shade at the edge of the flowerbed. "Ivy," she said.

I opened my eyes and looked at her.

"Ivy, it's too hot to be out here."

She wiped her forehead under the wide brim of her straw hat, shaking her head at me, a trowel dangling from one hand.

I didn't move, didn't respond. She flapped her hand dismissively and headed for the house, focused on getting her drink.

Sunlight seared through my eyelids as if it could burn a hole through them. A drop of sweat rolled from my forehead to my cheekbone and then slid slowly down my cheek. Other drops were pooling in my belly button. I shifted my legs again, unsticking them from the recliner's nylon covering.

The crow called again. When I first came outside, I had counted nine black birds, four in the pine tree and five in the maple tree in our neighbor's yard. Were they all still there? I couldn't open my eyes to check. My eyelids were leaden and my limbs without feeling.

The heat lay on me and purred.

I may have fallen asleep. When my father leaned out the porch door, calling, "Ivy, phone for you!" I had to reconstruct myself, drag myself up, up and out from wherever I'd gone.

"I'm going grocery shopping. See you later," he added.

Lightheaded, I sat on the edge of the recliner. Then I launched myself forward, somehow remembering how to put one foot ahead of the other.

The grass was hot; the kitchen floor tiles were cool on my bare feet. I placed one hand on the lemonade pitcher, and the chill of the ice entered my palm. My other hand, sweaty, held the telephone receiver.

"Hello?" I said.

“Hello. Ivy?”

“Yeah?”

“Hi, Ivy.” There was a pause. “It’s Virginia.”

“Hi, Gin,” I answered. I couldn’t keep the surprise out of my voice. “How are you?”

I had known my neighbor Virginia Donato since she and I were seven. We used to play together a lot when we were kids. But I was stunned to hear her voice. We hadn’t really talked in ages. We’d gone to different elementary schools, but we had been at the same middle school together for two years, and although we’d said hi to each other in the school hallways once in a while, she hadn’t called me in a long time, not for a few years at least.

“Fine,” Virginia replied. “I’m fine.” But she didn’t sound fine. She sounded distracted, as if I’d just interrupted her. As if she’d been in the middle of a conversation with someone else.

I waited, uncertainly, slightly uneasy to be hearing from her. There was a silence.

I felt a drop of sweat starting to trickle down my back.

Still Virginia didn’t speak. “Virginia? So, what’s up?” I asked lightly.

“Um, Ivy, I wonder if you could come over and talk to me.” Her voice sounded odd, thin and breathy. I didn’t remember it being that way. “It’s important,” she added.

I hesitated. This was even more strange, that she’d choose to talk to me about something important. We’d been ... well, friends, I guess ... but never really the best of friends. But I felt I owed her that much, and anyway, I was sort of curious about what had become of her. I hardly ever saw her on the street anymore. Her older brothers and sisters seemed to drive her everywhere she had to go. She kept to herself at school. And she seemed to have few friends, fewer even than me, maybe none.

“Well, okay. When?”

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“Could you come now?”

“Now?”

“Yes, now would be good,” she said.

It was weird. Hearing her ask for something so directly, it struck me that Virginia had never asked me for anything before. When Virginia and I used to play together, she had always wanted to do whatever I wanted. She had sort of flitted around the edges of my ideas, my little bits of organizing, my imagination. It wasn't like her to be demanding. This must be pretty serious after all.

“Okay,” I agreed. “I'll come over in a few minutes, Gin.”

“Thanks,” she said.

And so it began.



“What are you doing here?” she asked. She knew she should be afraid, and she was, a little. He was a stranger, after all. A stranger here, in her own bedroom.

Part of her knew she should scream and run, that she should call for help.

She was alone, and he had come in somehow.

He was here, in her bedroom.