

Darby's mother was waiting for her at the police station. After Darby finished giving her statement to the police, Sheila had a private talk with Detective Riggers for about half an hour and then drove Darby home.

Her mother didn't talk. Darby didn't get the sense Sheila was mad, though. When her mother got this quiet, generally she was just deep in thought. Or maybe she was just tired, having to pull double-shifts at the hospital since Big Red died last year.

"Detective Riggers told me what happened," Sheila said, her voice dry and raspy. "Calling nine-one-one – that was the right thing to do."

"I'm sorry they had to call you at work," Darby said. "And I'm sorry for the drinking."

Sheila put her hand on Darby's leg and gave it a squeeze – her mother's signal to let Darby know everything was okay between them.

"Can I give you a piece of advice about Stacey?"

"Sure," Darby said. She had an idea what her mother was going to say.

"People like Stacey don't make good friends. And if you hang out with them long enough, at some point they'll end up dragging you down with them."

Her mother was right. Stacey wasn't a friend; she was dead weight. Darby had learned the lesson the hard way, but the lesson was learned. As far as Stacey was concerned, good riddance.

"Mom, the woman I saw . . . Do you think she got up and ran away?"

"That's what Detective Riggers thinks."

Please God, please let him be right, Darby said to herself.

“I’m glad you’re okay.” Sheila squeezed Darby’s leg again, only this time it felt harder, the way you grip something to keep from falling.

Two days later, on a Monday afternoon, Darby came home from school and found a black sedan with tinted windows parked in her driveway.

The door opened and out stepped a tall man wearing a black suit and a stylish red tie. Darby spotted the slight bulge of a sidearm under his suit jacket.

“You must be Darby. My name is Evan Manning. I’m a special agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation.” He showed his badge. He looked like a TV cop – one of those tanned, handsome actors who could easily double as a Calvin Klein underwear model. “Detective Riggers told me about what you and your friends saw in the woods.”

Darby could barely get the words out. “You found the woman?”

“No, not yet. We still don’t know who she is. That’s part of the reason why I’m here. I’m hoping you can help me identify her. Would you mind taking a look at some pictures?”

She took the folder and, with a sense of falling, opened it to the first page.

The word MISSING ran across the top sheet. Darby looked at a color-copied picture of a woman with bright blue eyes wearing a nice string of pearls over a pink cardigan sweater. Her name was Tara Hardy. She lived in Peabody. According to the information printed under her picture, she was last seen leaving a Boston nightclub on the night of February 25th.

The woman in the second picture, Samantha Kent, was from Chelsea. She had failed to report to her shift at the Route 1 I-Hop on March 15th. Samantha Kent had a painfully toothy smile and was the same age as Tara Hardy. Only Samantha was heavily into tattoos. She had six of them, and while Darby couldn't see any of them in the picture, the descriptions and locations of each of the tattoos were listed.

Both women, Darby sensed, carried the same desperate quality as Stacey. You could see it in their eyes, that bottomless need for attention and love. Both women had blond hair – just like the woman from the woods.

“It might be Samantha Kent,” Darby said. “No, wait, it can't be her.”

“Why not?”

“Because it says here she's been missing for over a month.”

“Look at her face.”

Darby studied the picture for a moment. “The woman I saw, her face was thin and her hair was real long,” she said. “Samantha Kent's face is round and she has short hair.”

“But it looks like her.”

“Kind of.” Darby handed the folder back and rubbed her hands on her jeans.

“What happened to her?”

“We don't know.” Manning gave her a business card. “If you remember anything else, even the smallest detail, you can call me at this number,” he said. “It was nice meeting you, Darby.”

* * *

Her nightmares didn't stop until about a month later. During the day, Darby rarely thought about what happened in the woods unless she happened to bump into Stacey. Avoiding her was easy enough – too easy, really. It just went to prove how they'd never really been true friends.

“Stacey said she was sorry,” Mel said. “Why can't we go back to being friends?”

Darby shut her locker. “You want to be friends with her, that's your business. But I'm done with her.”

One thing Darby had in common with her mother was a love of reading. Sometimes on Saturday mornings she'd join Sheila on her yard sale trips, and while her mother was busy haggling over the price of another stupid knickknack, Darby would be on the prowl for cheapo paperbacks.

Her latest find was a book called *Carrie*. It was the cover that had grabbed her attention: a girl's head floating above a town in flames. How cool was that? Darby lay on her bed, deep in the part where Carrie was going to the prom (only the popular kids were going to play a sick, cruel joke on her) when the living room stereo kicked-on and Frank Sinatra's booming voice started singing “Come Fly With Me.” Sheila was home.

Darby glanced over at the clock on her nightstand. It was almost eight-thirty. Her mother wasn't supposed to be home until eleven or so. Sheila must have knocked off work early.

What if it isn't your mother? Darby thought. *What if the man from the woods is downstairs?*

No. This was the writer's fault, that stupid Stephen King had gotten her imagination all worked up. Her mother was downstairs, not the man from the woods, and Darby could prove it by simply taking a walk down the hallway to her mother's bedroom and look out the windows at the driveway where Sheila's car would be parked.

Darby dog-eared her page and walked into the hallway. She leaned over the banister and looked into the foyer.

One dim light was on, and it was coming from the living room – probably the banker's lamp on the table next to the stereo. The kitchen lights were off. Had she turned them off on her return trip upstairs? Darby couldn't remember. Sheila had this thing about leaving lights on in empty rooms, always made it a point to say she wasn't working all these extra hours to put Lester Light Bulb through college –

A black-gloved hand gripped the downstairs banister.