

Chapter One

This is how life as I know it ends. One minute I'm sitting on the couch, watching my favorite TV show, carefully avoiding the burned crater in the center cushion, a constant reminder of The Incident. The next minute...I hear tires crunch over gravel.

My head jerks toward the window as a tingling sensation crawls down my arms. I mute the TV and hold my breath, listening. Best-case scenario, it's Ronny—the unemployed, soul-sucking boyfriend—dropping Momma off early. Or Mr. Bilmer, our next-door neighbor, arriving home from his weekly bowling night. Worst case? Best not to think about that. I reach under the cushion and retrieve my knife. My heart leaps into my throat when whoever it is tears off, sending rocks ricocheting off the side of our trailer.

I jump up from the couch, knife in hand and fling the door open. Glowing taillights retreat as I step onto the rickety wooden stoop. Once my eyes adjust to the darkness, I see her.

Not again.

Sure enough, I spot Momma dumped in a heap in the front yard. Ronny...soul-sucking scumbag.

It's the thirtieth of May and Momma just got her monthly disability check. So what did she do? Buy groceries? Take me out to dinner to celebrate the end of freshman year? No. She couldn't resist a party, especially one starring heroin.

The Girl and The Raven (excerpt) by Pauline Gruber

“Come on, Momma.” I grab her by the shoulders and try to hoist her up, eager to get her inside. Mrs. Albright and Ms. Bigsby, the nosey bodies across the way are probably watching.

Momma’s stiff and heavy. And why does she feel so cool? I yelp as she slips from my hands and hits the ground with a solid thud.

What the...?

I stand frozen to the spot. I close my eyes against the sudden nausea. Goose bumps break out over my body. I swallow hard. Twice.

“Momma!” I force myself to grab her again, to shake her, ignoring what I already know to be true. “Wake up!”

Her body doesn’t move right. Doesn’t feel right. Bile fills my mouth and I lean over and spit onto the crunchy, dead grass. I run my hand along Momma’s throat to that spot where her pulse should be. Nothing. My breaths are jerky, out of control.

“Come on, Momma! Please!”

I grab her thin wrist with my trembling fingers and press hard, desperate to feel something.

No...no...no!

I lay her arm across her belly and race to the trailer next door, my heartbeat thudding in my ears.

“Mrs. Bilmer!” I pound my fist on the flimsy door. “Mrs. Bilmer, it’s Lucy!”

A light comes on and I hear the shuffle of slippers on linoleum.

“Mrs. Bilmer, please! I need your phone!”

“Don’t you go beating down my door, Lucy Walker!” she says, opening the door a crack.
“What’s the matter? Problems with your momma again?”

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“Call 911!” I choke. “Call them right now!”