

The EVIL WITHIN
A POSSESSIONS NOVEL

THE RETURN

*Battle not with monsters
lest ye become a monster
and if you gaze into the abyss
the abyss gazes into you.*

—Friedrich Nietzsche

*True love is like ghosts, which everybody talks about and few
have seen.*

— Francois De La
Rochefoucauld

ONE

December 24

possessions: me

as if objects, things, mattered. but they're proof that i'm a
real person, in the real world:

a suitcase of the clothes i humiliated myself with at
Marlwood, including:

black top from Julie

army jacket from cousin Jason

left the too-cute parka from CJ there.

threw out my ruined clothes. *except* Converse high-tops
(caked with mud and ash, but i will never throw them
out: *proof*).

was going to leave all the textbooks, but CJ saw my home-
work list so i packed:

American lit

Spanish II

trig book

six half-filled regulation Marlwood Academy notebooks
 embossed with crest
 ditto logo pencils
 ditto logo coffee cup for CJ (present, she saw it in the book-
 store before we left).
 ditto logo highlighters—these guys are into serious logo
 usage.
 Tibetan prayer beads, which i am wearing down w/ prayers,
 not in Tibetan
 Jason's St. Christopher medal (maybe it worked!)
 Dad's socks. the ones i knitted. still too big. but still his.
 the digital camera Jason gave me
 the memory of seeing Kiyoko Yamato dead

haunted by: what happened
listening to: myself whimpering
mood: terrified

possessions: them

everything they want, whenever they want it. proof that
 their version of the real world is a different planet:
 designer clothes, made just for them, with fittings in Paris,
 New York, and Tokyo
 family jewels: pearls from the French Revolution; Daddy's
 Skull and Bones fraternity ring
 techie gear like the CIA
 free passes no matter what they do, including killing Kiyoko
 and trying to kill me

amnesia

God, i wish i could forget just as easily. maybe they buy drugs for that.

haunted by: are they still possessed?

listening to: Christmas carols and Hanukah songs and the roar of their private jets as they fly as far away from Marlwood as they can, as fast as they can, *because* they can.

mood: if you buy it, is it still a “mood”?

I HAD ESCAPED. I was alive.

So why was I still shaking so hard?

Shadows stretched across the setting sun as my stepmom, CJ, drove me to Fashion Valley Mall to meet up with Heather Sanchez, my former best friend. The radio of our old Subaru was playing “Here Comes Santa Claus,” and trim, freckly, strawberry blonde CJ was humming along. My heart pounded; and I couldn’t stop staring at the bone-colored clouds that stretched across the December sky like the heavy fog far away at Marlwood Academy. That fog, so thick I couldn’t see my own hands, much less anyone stalking me and trying to kill me.

Four days ago, I almost died, I thought, and it seemed so unbelievable. But then, my life had become unbelievable. All of it.

Last October, I had ditched my entire messed-up life in San Diego to escape to Marlwood Academy, located in the isolated

mountains of Northern California. I had gotten a late acceptance on full scholarship into the super-posh private boarding school to the rich and famous, opened again this year after being closed for over a hundred years. It should have stayed closed, forever, but of course I didn't know that, then. I doubt anyone knew, not even Mandy. Especially not Mandy.

They almost killed me, I thought. Mandy Winters and her psycho-packmates.

With no idea of the thoughts barreling through my head, CJ pulled off the freeway, wound around the perimeter of busy Fashion Valley Mall, and rolled to an idling stop beside the escalator that trundled up three stories to the multiplex and the food court. The elaborate Christmas lights cast colored bubbles on our windshield. Inside, I was screaming; outside, I tried to smile.

“You’ll have fun, Linz,” she said, wrinkling her slightly turned-up nose. She was cute, in an athletic gymnast kind of way. She knew Heather and I were making up. I thanked her and got out, and she waved and drove away.

I stepped onto the escalator, feeling dizzy, digging my fingers into the rubber rails. It was a warm night. Christmas Eve in San Diego wasn't about snow-covered meadows and hushed forests; it was about surf reports and guys in Santa hats and board shorts. Silver bells, seashells. The mall was bustling with last-minute shoppers and kids like me, who'd managed to get permission for a few hours out of the house.

At the top, Heather paced on the other side of the patterned cement breezeway. The mall-bouquet of cinnamon buns, scented candles, lattes, and popcorn wafted between us. Heather had

cut her hair about two inches short and gelled it; she used to be all long curls and pastels, but now she was more urban grunge, like me. Heather 2.0. She had on black pencil-leg jeans, nicer than my raggedy, dark-blue flares, and a black baby-doll top with silver polka dots and cap sleeves—more polished than my charcoal-gray T-shirt over a black long-underwear shirt with the sleeves rolled halfway up my forearms. I had forsaken my high-tops for flip-flops. Heather was wearing eye makeup and lip gloss, while I was bare from my madwoman hair to unpolished toes.

“Hey,” Heather said, seeing me as I approached. She didn’t hug me, but she did hold up two tickets. “*Feliz Navidad, Fea.*” It felt good to hear her say it. “*Fea*” meant “ugly” in Spanish. That was her nickname for me. Not Linz, like everyone else. And not because I was actually ugly or anything; I just wasn’t obsessed with looks . . . or hadn’t been, back in the day. Everything had changed when I’d befriended Jane.

I wasn’t sure if Heather really had forgiven me for treating her like slime last year. She was definitely on her guard. If we could just get past the weirdness, maybe we’d be us again. But how did you just forget and move on? I was hoping to learn.

“How you been?” I asked her.

She semi-smiled. “Well, you know.”

I didn’t know. She changed the subject by opening her backpack and showing me two cans of Diet Coke. She waggled her brows. I unfastened my little boho bag and displayed my Jolly Rancher yuletide stash, stolen from the brass sled-shaped candy dish on the coffee table in our foyer.

“Sweet,” she said.

We still didn't hug, which was not us, if you skipped over my season of insanity and remembered us back when. I had been so mean to her. I desperately needed to get past that.

"I like your hair," I told her, still trying to connect. She had gone through some major changes since I had left. The Heather I knew had been more bouncy and out there. This Heather kept things in close.

"Remember when you said I looked like Miley Cyrus?" she asked. There was a hint of bitterness in her voice, and I knew why, because I did remember. I had said it to dis her, to make Jane laugh, back when I'd first started hanging out with Jane. Now I swallowed, and Heather snorted in response.

"I so totally *did*. I looked like such a dork."

"No," I protested, but she smacked my shoulder, the way she used to.

"If you hadn't said it, I would still look like Miley Cyrus. So I'm actually grateful."

"You never actually—"

"They wouldn't have laughed if it wasn't true," she said, clearly remembering, as I did, when Jane and everyone else had cracked up after my comment in the cafeteria, so long ago now it seemed. I couldn't look at her. "Anyway," she went on, "it happened a long time ago. Before boarding school." She blinked at me. "What is *that* like?"

Oh, God, I want to tell you, I thought; but instead I said, "Wackier than you can imagine."

"I can't wait to hear about it," she said. "After the movie."

"Okay." I felt a little more hopeful, even though I knew the movie was a barrier as well as an icebreaker. In the old days,

nothing would have stopped us from talking for hours. A movie saved us from all that. And we still didn't hug as we sailed inside and handed over our tickets. Then we half-ran into our auditorium and I finally smiled because that was how we used to be when we were best friends—rushing and running.

Four days ago, I ran for my life, I thought. I ran even faster than this.

As the screen loomed before us, our eyes adjusted to the light, and we turned and studied the banked rows of chairs. There were maybe twenty people in the theater.

Then I spotted Riley, and I froze.

"Oh . . . kay," Heather whispered, and she half-turned to leave, casting me a look that said, *We're gone, if you want*. By then, Riley had seen us, and he half-rose from his seat. Grossmont blue-and-gold letter jacket, black T-shirt, ripped jeans. My favorite combination on him.

Riley. Riley, my cliché ex-crush—captain of the football team, homecoming king, super-nice, tender, lying, creepy jerk. My ribs squeezed hard as he got up and started loping down the stairs toward us, as if he couldn't wait to grind me into dust all over again. He reached us in less than ten seconds.

"Hey," he said, blinking his long, chick-magnet lashes at me. "Lindsay. You look good."

In all my post-breakup crying sessions, I had made a million silent bargains with the universe, if only I could see regret on the sharply sculpted face of the guy who had broken my heart. And in the darkness of the theater, I saw that it was *there*.

I nodded at him. My throat was tight and my lips were

prickling. He smelled like shampoo and Gummi Bears. I remembered that mixture very well.

“Do you . . . want to sit together?” he asked. I wondered how he had the courage to ask, and I wished I was like that. Brave. A bit audacious.

You are, I reminded myself. *You are so far past that it’s not even funny.*

Heather looked at me, and I didn’t look at anyone. Riley took silence for agreement, turned, and led the way back to his otherwise empty row. Dead center. I don’t know how it happened but Heather sat down between us, and I was so grateful my toes curled against the rubbery edges of my flip-flops.

“This movie is supposed to really suck.” Heather pulled our DC’s from her bag and I got out the Jolly Rancher assortment from mine, wrapped baubles of sugary mania. We moved in rapid unison, like soldiers on a special mission unpacking our weapons.

“God, I hope so,” Riley said, and I smiled, faintly. I didn’t ask him why he wasn’t with Jane or any of his jock friends. Why he was alone. He was one of the most popular boys in school. I suddenly got the suspicion that Heather had set up this whole running-into-my-ex-boyfriend-accidentally thing. Maybe Riley wanted to get back together. Maybe Heather figured I would want that under my Christmas tree.

I felt some butterflies, and my cheeks warmed up—plus a few other things—at the exact same time that Troy Minear’s face blossomed in my mind. Troy was not just a crush. Troy was something more, far more. And he was still missing in the

woods around Marlwood. And so far, there was nothing I could do to help find him.

My heartbeat picked up and I started to fuzz out. Oh no, was this a panic attack? Dr. Yaeger, my therapist, had explained about the symptoms of my post-traumatic stress disorder, which he believed had been caused by the death of my mother, and triggered by “the stresses of adolescence.” He had *no* idea. There was stress, there was massive betrayal followed by heartbreaking loss, oh yeah, and then there was nearly getting *killed*.

You are safe, you are safe, you are safe. You will NEVER go back to Marlwood. It will all seem like a bad dream, I told myself. And the searchers will find Troy. He will be okay, too.

Zombielike, I sat through the commercials and the previews, just trying to breathe calmly while Heather texted a bit before she put away her phone. Riley offered us some popcorn and Heather paid him back with sour apple, his favorite. I didn’t move, didn’t talk to them. I thought about asking Heather if we could leave. But our friendship was already on shaky ground, and so I kept taking slow, deep breaths to ease myself through my freak-out. *Be normal*, I silently commanded myself.

The movie started. We settled in. On the screen, lowering himself down a chimney with a winch, the jolly old psychopath in the Santa suit was filling the Christmas stockings as the little girl’s disbelieving father crept up on him. Without warning, Santa grabbed a fireplace poker, shrieked like a ninja, and stabbed the man through the heart. Blood gushed everywhere; as the man died in agony, Santa showed him the letter his daughter had written: *Dear Santa, please make Daddy stop hurting me.*

“Yeah, that’s the kind of Christmas cheer we’re talkin’ about,” Heather said, and Riley snickered. Then he snaked his arm around her shoulders and tousled my hair. I tossed my head to show him that I was not about to be won back easily, if at all. I started to laugh along with them . . . when all of a sudden, an intense rush of grief and horror gushed through the center of my being like icy mud. Troy was *missing*.

I stared at the fire poker on the screen; something about it was familiar. A strange buzzing vibrated against my ears and I blinked hard and bit my lower lip between my teeth, tasting copper, or was it something citrusy, acidic . . . and then clouds spilled across the screen, moving from right to left, superimposing themselves over the movie. I gripped the armrests as I glanced at Heather and Riley, who were joking about Santa’s sack, now filled with Daddy’s corpse. But what I saw was Searle Lake, back at Marlwood, with its shoreline of rushes and large boulders, and the stretch of loamy earth where fellow sophomore Kiyoko Yamato’s body had washed up.

Where I had discovered her. Less than three weeks ago. Her hair had been so frozen that it broke off when they moved her.

Above the movie-lake loomed a huge, heavy moon, and grainy, gray clouds. The clouds riveted my attention; I couldn’t stop staring at them, and my heart pounded. Heather dug into Riley’s popcorn. Riley slurped his theater fountain drink.

The clouds blossomed in strange, muted colors—sepia, shades of gray, and amber, growing and spreading across the screen; and in the next second, they flooded over the surface, completely blotting out the movie.

“Attaboy, Rudolph,” Heather said, and Riley groaned.
It’s all right, I told myself. The clouds are not really there.

The buzzing in my ears got louder. Chills like fingertips skittered across my shoulder blades and ran down my spine. I tried to look away, or close my eyes, as I began to realize that the clouds weren’t clouds at all. What I was seeing were billows of smoke.

“You put too much butter on this stuff,” Heather grumbled at Riley.

“No such thing,” Riley shot back.

“Guys?” I murmured. Now I smelled the smoke, and something else I couldn’t place, like oil, something for camping. It was so strong my eyes watered.

“Guys?” I said again. I heard the shrillness in my voice.

“What?” Heather asked.

Heat rose around me, like a bad sunburn—then hotter, too hot. Flames shot to the ceiling of the theater; I saw through them, yellow, red, and orange, crackling around me, and the black smoke, pouring into my lungs. I started choking. My hands began to blister; my face—

“Oh my God, the door is locked!” the scream tore through my parched throat as I dizzily tried to stand, waving smoke from my face. Oh God. I was suffocating. “We’re going to die!”