



For Leslie, and for everybody else who has been so devastated by tardive dyskinesia that they ended their lives because of it.

"Magical Thinking: The conviction of the individual that his or her thoughts, words, and actions, may in some manner cause or prevent outcomes in a way that defies the normal laws of cause and effect."

American Psychiatric Glossary, 7th Edition.
American Psychiatric Press

"There are sorcerers among us." Larry Dossey, MD, from:
Be Careful of What You Pray for,
you just might get it
Harper Collins Publishers

Prologue

Beth McDonald was an imaginative child. And willful, too. Tell her she couldn't do something and she would, just to test her own mettle.

Like the time one hot summer day when she was ten and her uncle Jason took her to the warehouse in the Flats along the Cuyahoga River that he kept for his natural foods business. A complete little tomboy- all skinned knees, grubby sneakers and muddy soccer shorts, her pigtails braided so tight they seemed to pull her face back with them- she'd leapt into the back of his pickup truck where he'd let her ride in spite of that being against the law in Ohio and wedged herself tight into the corner munching on a big bag of Doritos so she could grin and wave up at startled truckers howling by in massive semis and feel the air funnels of their passage flap her tee shirt and pig tails, then sail along the east shoreway hoping they'd catch the fleeting shadow of a plane taking off from Burke Lakefront airport and follow it down the highway like the moon eclipsed by the earth, then lean way, way back and just listen to the steady hum of uncle Jason's Diesel Toyota tires on the asphalt and pretend she'd hitched a ride on a freight train the way her teacher said the homeless did during the Depression and she knew she had to keep her head loooooooow, as low as it would go to be sure it wasn't lopped off by a passing bridge, but she knew she had to keep a wary eye out as well, for the company police who were more likely than not to simply throw any hobo they caught riding the rails right off of the moving train and be ready to fight for her life if one came clamoring up the box car she was riding atop, and when uncle Jason made that sharp turn at dead man's curve and it rattled her bony little body around in the back of that truck with the greasy old milk crate full of engine valves and the catamaran off his boat like a wild ride on a centrifuge, well that was just what any new NASA recruit would have to endure training for that world-saving trip to rein in the comet hurling towards our planet and send it on off on a new trajectory, and she knew she'd better just get used to it if she was ever going to make it as space jockey in the Astronaut Corps, so she relished every bone-jarring lurch and thump until the crunch of gravel and a hard right turn told her they were there and she could come out from under cover 'cause she'd made it through the training exercise without hitting her PANIC button.

"You all right back there?!"

Grimy and grinning, with styrofoam packing crate peanuts stuck behind her ears, Beth

McDonald sat up and squinted underneath the faded Gore/Leiberman 2000 bumper sticker to uncle Jason in the cab. "Good to go back here!" She straddled the side panel and dropped to the ground with a "plunk!" before he could even get out and grab her to ease the fall.

"Ugh! You're a mess!" He chuckled and brushed the packing crate peanuts from her hair. Then a horrible sudden noise had them both jerking back reflexively and uncle Jason shielded her with his body. "What the hell!?" It was like a clap of thunder! Again! WWWOOOOFFF!

A huge black dog had lunged out from behind a plywood barrier on the other side of a chain link fence separating her uncle's portion of the lot from a used motorcycle parts business. A horror movie apparition, it stood on its hind legs and the force of its presence sent waves rippling up and down the twenty meters of cold steel. It barked like a cannon and Beth went slack-jawed in awe.

"Wow!"

"Damn, they should have WARNED us they were getting that thing!" Uncle Jason muttered something about those guys next door that she wasn't meant to hear and roughly moved her away from the fence. "Stay away from him! Get back in the truck," he told her. "Up front, in the cab! And keep the door locked! I'll be out in a minute." He stomped over to the door, fiddled with the alarm and went inside while the hound raged on.

Immediately, Beth turned and gaped back at it. A big black, tailless Doberman with stiletto sharp ear stumps and the jaw of a T-Rex, it caught her eye and lunged again.

But Beth's adrenaline jolt had already subsided and a prickly hot flush came over her. She was safe where she sat. But she knew she'd be safe back outside, too. That fence was solid and that dog wasn't going anywhere. She just HAD to get a good look at him. And she had a plan for dealing with him.

Bag in hand, she popped open the door to the cab, closed it softly and stood about ten meters away from him munching Doritos and staring him down. He roared, but she stood her ground. He ran in circles and threw himself against the fence again, getting catapulted off of it when it sprang back on him. He whirled like a dervish and his rage seemed about to reach critical mass with his next fruitless lunge at the fence.

Beth flipped him a Dorito, right up over the fence. He took that as a provocation and leapt again, but then sniffed and gobbled it down. Beth flipped him another. And another. He smacked his tongue and wagged the little stub of his tail, but he started his war dance right back up.

Then uncle Jason reappeared. "Beth, cut it OUT!" He grabbed her by the elbow and hauled her back into the cab of his truck. She sat mute, suppressing a grin while he balled her out. "Don't DO that! Did you see the TEETH on that brute!? If he'd gotten out of there, he would have torn you in two!" He gestured back at the beast. "Dogs like that aren't PETS! You CAN'T just PLAY with them!" He took the Dorito bag from her lap, crumbled it and stuffed it in the trash bag between the seats. "Jeeze, that was dumb!"

Beth did her best to look contrite.

"Promise me you won't do that again!"

"I promise," she murmured, with her fingers crossed.

"All right then," her uncle sighed, starting the engine and pulling out of the lot. He had to get three crates of soy mix to the co-op in University Circle before it closed, and he was in a hurry.

Uncle Jason wasn't mad for long, and when they started talking again Beth told him how she thought she was ready for a 10K run, but her coach at St. Ann's wanted girls under twelve to stick to the 5K instead and she thought that was SO lame, and that got him chuckling. He and his wife were watching Beth for six weeks while her Mom, a psychologist, was off at conferences in Europe and her Dad, an attorney, was defending tax evaders who were on trial in Washington. Back on the shoreway, Beth started in on when was he going to teach her to drive the truck? Well, if he wasn't going to risk letting her drive yet, could she at least ride along with him again when he came down here to the warehouse? Like, the ride along the lake was... well AWESOME, but all she was really doing was making up excuses to come visit that junk yard dog again. Beth McDonald had made up her mind that she was going to make that dog her friend by summer's end.

One time a week later he took her along and asked her to help him carry some crates inside. That dog did his war dance again and uncle Jason hustled her in, slamming the door hard behind him. But then he was distracted by a call and she snuck out with a Kit Kat bar she'd brought for the occasion. She tossed in two pieces of it before she had to scoot back in, and when they left he was raging again, but his howl wasn't so quite so bloodcurdling.

The very next day she begged to go along with uncle Jason when he made a run down there to get a crate of vitamins for a store in Lakewood. That time, she got to face off with her dog friend just a few feet from the fence till he howled himself hoarse. Then she tossed him bits of a hot dog she'd filched from aunt Gloria's fridge, and he'd just scarfed down the last morsel when a fat, ugly man with a beard and tattoos came out and hollered at them both.

The fat man menaced him with a two-by-four and that big dog cringed and slinked out of sight. Beth felt bad for him and glared at the fat man. Her lip quivered, she locked her jaw and stared at him until he cringed like the dog and turned away in shame.

Something about that encounter gave Beth McDonald the spookiest feeling that she possessed some secret weapon that made up for her small size and her young age, but she forced it out of her conscious mind because even thinking about it might cause her to lose it.

One more time, just before school was to start, she accompanied uncle Jason to the warehouse. The dog again made a stand. Beth projected all her willpower to make him settle down, but he was still howling when her uncle ushered her in the door. She slipped out a few minutes later with a fish cake she'd been nibbling on during the ride. He only pawed the fence and growled this time. Beth stepped closer, so close she could have touched his nose through the fence if she dared. She was frightened, but only of being caught there by her uncle or the fat man. She stepped closer and deftly flicked a morsel of fish cake through the fence without touching it. He snapped it out of the air without moving his paws. "Hey, good catch!" Another, and another, and with the last bit of it, Beth dared to put her little fingers right up to the fence and she had that vicious dog eating right out of her hand...

"You SON OF A BITCH!!" It was the fat man. He'd appeared without warning. "What the HELL kind of guard dog ARE you!?" SMACK! He hit her dog friend upside the head with that

two-by-four! It tumbled and cried out in pain. "You worthless bag of garbage!" THUD!! A kick to his side and he squealed and tried to hobble out of the way... "Don't you EVER let anyone touch that fence, you son of a BITCH!!!" The dog howled, Beth shrieked and her uncle burst out of the door.

"Beth!"

"Mister, get your little BRAT away from my fence, or I'll..."

"Hey! Don't you call my niece names!" He grabbed Beth, but she held tight to the fence.

"Stop it, you! Stop!" Beth kicked the fence. All she could hear was the echo of her own screams. "Stop it! STOP IT!!!"

But her cries only provoked the fat man to kick the dog harder. "Lousy mutt! I paid four hundred dollars for NOTHING!!!" Cringing and whimpering under the blows, the big black Doberman curled up and tried to shield its head with his paws...

"...I hate you! I HATE you!!!" For an instant she locked the man in her gaze and something went SNAP! in her head... "I hope you DIE!!!" Other men from the fat man's side of the warehouse shouted coarsely, but made no attempt to stop him from punishing his dog.

"For God's sake Beth! Come ON!!!" Her uncle dislodged her and dragged her screaming back into the warehouse. "Mister," he hollered over Beth's cries, "if you don't stop abusing that dog, I'm calling the cops!"

"Fuck you!" A cough, then more kicks, more squeals...

"Die, you, die, die!!!" Beth screamed and cursed till her uncle slammed the door between her and the horror.

"Calm DOWN! He WON'T get away with that!" He snapped the lock and yanked out the key to keep her in, then went to his office to call the police. Beth raged and cried and pounded on the door and wished that man dead.

Then it was quiet out there. Beth cried and a thunderstorm rumbled their way. Rain plinked on the windows. In another minute there were sirens, and shouting again. Uncle Jason stayed on the phone to the cops while Beth pouted, then went out to see and he didn't lock her in. She followed him out into the storm. But it wasn't the police. It was an emergency medical vehicle, with yellow and blue lights flashing in the rain. Those men who watched the beating emerged from their side of the warehouse, followed by two EMS men bearing a stretcher. On it was the fat man, with an oxygen mask stuck over his face. "He's not going to make it," said one of his associates following them to their van. The dog was nowhere in sight. Beth gaped, speechless, as they drove the dying man away.

"Beth, honey, it's got nothing to do with what you said," her uncle assured her. His voice was shaky and his grip on her arm was clammy and trembling. "He just had... had an unhealthy lifestyle and it finally got to him, that's all... You can't wish a person dead and really make it happen. You simply CAN'T do that!"

Chapter One

Haphazardly dropping her blouse and skirt on her bed, 17 year old Beth McDonald hurried to change into her running gear. The rest of team would be off in five minutes, with or without her. The early October day bore the heat of one in midsummer and the shade of three old oaks around her dorm building did little to dispel it. Her head swam with caffeine, hormones and the unsettling electricity of a gathering storm. She stuffed her feet into her running shoes and cursed when she realized she couldn't find a rubber band to put the mess that was her hair that afternoon into a ponytail. Lean, statuesque, with ivory skin and jet black hair, Beth was a beautiful young woman. Muscular legs and square shoulders spoke of years of athletic training, but you'd have to be blind to mistake her for a man. Beth got a lot of attention from men and more than a little from women, as well. So far as she was concerned, she could do without the former. An adequate, if somewhat lackadaisical student at an exclusive Catholic girls' school that was only a mile and half from the house in Cleveland Heights where she grew up, Beth had opted in her freshman year to board rather than walk or bike to and from school and her parents hadn't objected, though it was costing them an extra six thousand dollars a year and Beth's entire work history to date wouldn't take more than a line or two on an index card. She lived to run, and was damned good at it- she'd held girls' state record for the 10K for more than a year. Indeed, she was so good that three universities had already offered her athletic scholarships.

Her cell phone jangled with the opening of Paramore's *Let the Flames Begin*. Beth yanked the lace tight on her right shoe, leaving the other untied and flipped the phone open. "Hello?" She could guess who it was.

"Beth, are you coming?" Haleah's voice was faint, and high-pitched with worry.

"Yes sweetheart, I'm coming! You worry so much!" Beth cradled the phone on her shoulder while a she tied the other shoe. "I gotta' run the whole course with the team, but I'll lose them and loop down to our place at the end. Gimme' an hour, OK?"

"I'll meet you on the way there. With the kind of juice you like."

"You're too sweet."

"I miss you."

"I miss you, too." Beth blew a quiet kiss into the phone and snapped it shut, but not before whispering to Haleah "I love you." It'd been a whole week since they'd been together and Beth ached for the girl's touch. She and Haleah had found a tiny, forgotten brick maintenance shed off the path in a densely wooded park near her school where they could climb up on the roof and be out of view of all, even to people running or rollerblading just a few meters away. Haleah would bring a quilt in the basket on her bike and they'd spread that out on the rough tar paper and wooden roof and be intimate there. After a run, Beth'd be charged with a passion that astonished and amused Haleah and more than once her cries of ecstasy had nearly given them away to passersby.

Beth heard her teammates' feet pounding softly down the driveway to the school's Fairmount Boulevard gate. No time to stretch or warm up. She loped out after them and caught up easily. Always the pace setter, Beth took the lead with fourteen girls following her up the shady

suburban boulevard. Their chatter was mostly of boys who were cute, of teachers who gave too much homework, of vapid films they wanted to see that weekend and all of that was just more reason for Beth to stay out ahead.

She heard steps closing in behind her. It was Colleen, a quiet redhaired girl who was serious like herself. She held a small flask of energy drink. "I'm going to toss this, unless you want the rest of it," she told Beth.

"Sure. Thanks!" Before she could weigh the consequences, Beth chugged it, coughed and pitched it in a curbside trash can. The caffeine worked its way to her heart and she broke out in a cold sweat. "Hey," she told Colleen, "I'm gonna' do some wind sprints. See you up ahead!" Beth charged out ahead of the pack with seemingly boundless energy.

"Take it EASY, McDonald,!" somebody yelled, but Beth wouldn't hear it. The breeze fluttering her little white running shorts against her thighs was like foreplay for her date with Haleah and Beth McDonald felt more naked than she'd ever felt before wearing them. With one part of her brain obsessed with moving her legs at full throttle, another part of it generated random word chatter, as it often did at times such as this. It locked onto the Hare Krishna chant she'd heard in a video that her comparative religion teacher had played for them the previous week. "Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare..."

A small boy of three or so sat on a tricycle in a driveway up ahead, staring gape-jawed at the apparition charging his way...

"...Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna..." Beth's chanting was silent- in her head only- she was positive of that. She'd always been embarrassed by public professions of religion...

"...Hare Rama..." She glanced down to smile at the boy and say hi...

"Rama Rama," he declared, with a big grin. "Rama Rama!"

Damn!! It happened AGAIN! Beth broke stride and fought not to gape back, horrified at the boy. Somebody had read her mind and spoken the very words she'd been thinking! It had occurred too many times, in too many peculiar circumstances for it to be coincidence! And it was happening more and more all the time. Was this how a person went insane? Now she was barely walking, trembling and saying the rare prayer that she not turn and frighten the innocent boy with a horrified face.

Colleen ran up behind her and slapped her on the back. "OK, Beth?"

Beth managed a lie: "Sure, just a cramp." The rest of the team flew by on either side of them.

"Be careful, OK?" Colleen ran off ahead.

"Thanks, Col," Beth grunted. "I'll catch up." She watched her teammates flow gracefully up the street, ponytails bouncing.

Beth first became aware that she could broadcast her thoughts around age 11 or twelve. Every time it happened she'd tell herself it was just some fluke of electro magnetics that some day Science would explain. A few times she was even able to chuckle at the bewilderment of

strangers who found themselves mouthing words that meant nothing to them, but it had been occurring at an ever greater frequency and this was the second time that year it had involved a young child. The previous incident had been nothing short of nightmarish. Beth was on the #32 bus in Beachwood, listening to a mother scolding her son for no good reason, and was quietly imagining what she'd like to say to the lady when suddenly the boy blurted out the precise, exotic vulgarity Beth had been thinking. The woman flew into a rage and struck him repeatedly, creating a melee on the bus when witnesses intervened to stop her. Beth had fled the scene in horror and did herculean mental gymnastics to shove the whole incident out of her conscious mind. That worked, till the boy on the tricycle brought it all to the surface again. One common thread behind these incidents was they they always seemed to happen when she was in particularly high spirits. Now would she have to go through life trying to be depressed just so she didn't hurt anybody with her thoughts? That struck her as so ridiculous she once again shoved the whole affair deep into a black box in her brain, squeezed her eyes shut so hard it hurt and slammed her fist into her hand to lock it all in. Then charging up the street, she rejoined the team.

"You gotta' go easy on that caffeine, Beth!" Colleen looked over and winked.

"Hell, you GAVE IT to me!" Beth slapped her playfully on the butt.

"Look at the lezzies," quipped a sophomore girl behind them.

Beth turned and gave her the finger, but with a wry smile.

Up the low incline that was Fairmount Boulevard, with its vast perfect lawns and seven figure homes the girls of the Glenmont cross country team ran. Again, Beth ran out ahead, setting the pace, her snarled hair whipping in the humid breeze, the sweat on her brow scarcely cooling her. Behind them, ten miles away over downtown Cleveland, thunder rumbled. A pack of earnest cyclists in black spandex shorts and dayglow jerseys on expensive racing bikes whooshed by quietly, a few of them grinning at the pretty young runners two meters away. Some of the girls waved to their comrades in sweat. Across the street, a goateed young man in a VW bug honked and waved, but nobody seemed to know him. No matter. There was strength and safety in numbers. A few girls started singing Janis Joplin's Mercedes Benz. *"Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mer-ceedes Benz, my friends all drive Porches, I must make amends!"*

At South Belvoir Road, Beth turned and the pack followed. Now the incline of the road was downhill and Beth felt the impact of each step acutely in her knees. But the pain of that was minor and the excitement in her chest, the sheer exhilaration of charging down that road nearly as fast as any human being could possibly run was more than enough to compensate. Jaws dropped at the sight of them as they charged through the heart of John Carroll University. Frat boys whistled and cheered. "You GO, girls!" hollered a woman, choking on her cigarette.

Haleah wasn't a runner, or much of an athlete at all, although Beth was happy that she was riding her bike a lot and seemingly growing fitter. Beth's girlfriend would be loathe to be seen wearing anything like Beth's skimpy running gear. Nice Iranian girls didn't dress like that if they wanted to live long.

She roomed with her older sister Mari in a tiny attic apartment on the poorer end of Cleveland Heights, north of the strip of bars, coffeeshops and overpriced boutiques along Coventry road that some still considered chic'. Both were students at Case Western Reserve University, Mari an engineering major and Haleah a freshman who planned to major in Languages. She was

already fluent in English and semi fluent in Russian and French. Their family had spent a small fortune sending them to America for their education and though they were not devout Muslims, a male cousin who was an intern at Cleveland Clinic was always nosing around and no doubt reporting back to their father in Tehran on any real or imagined transgressions of propriety. Haleah always wore baggy slacks and sweaters- even in the summer heat- as well as a scarf covering her hair, which had to be torture, but she did not cover her face. Undressing with Beth on that splintery roof in the woods had to be a terrifying thing to do, but there was simply no other place they could go to be intimate. Beth dreaded the approach of winter and was planning to come out to her mother in the hope she could start bringing Haleah around the old house where she grew up as her girlfriend, not just "a good friend," as was the charade the few times Beth had brought her over for dinner. They'd been together since April, when Beth discovered the MySpace page that Haleah had taken out in an Anglo-sounding name, with a phony blond picture she'd downloaded from God knows where, references to the poet Sappho and a clip by the folk duet The Murmurs. Beth had almost laughed out loud when the nervous, overdressed, dark-eyed girl sitting in the coffeeshop where they'd arranged to meet leaned over to poke her and say hi. Needless to say she was expecting something completely different, but her surprise was a pleasant one and in those six months they'd gone from awkward adolescent groping to experienced lovemaking that had not yet begun to lose its thrill.

Belvoir ended in a short, steep incline up to Cedar Road, but Beth surged ahead, up over the crest of it and slowed for a second to turn and look back, She was a good fifty meters ahead of anybody else. Her heart thundered and chest heaved. The air now was near 100 percent humidity and to the west lightning flashed. In seconds the dull rumble reached them. Beth's only hope was that the storm would be brief and she could wait it out with Haleah in a bus shelter. There was little shade on Cedar road and the heat from earlier in the day rose in visible waves. Beth was soaked, and left a trail of perspiration on the hot pavement behind her.

Ahead a massive red Mac truck loaded with concrete debris seemed to be stalled in the street. Beth caught the driver's leering eye and felt the sting of pure evil. Crossing the street would have been impossible in the heavy traffic, so she ran on. As soon as she got within ten meters of the huge truck, it rumbled to life and spat out a cloud of noxious exhaust. The smoke rolled over Beth and toward the remaining members of the team, who were just then coming over the crest of the hill. She cursed. "Bastard, you did that on purpose!" To runners and cyclists, that sort of assault was all too familiar. Drivers who hate do it just because they can. The truck rumbled away and Beth started imagining him getting in a crash...

...until she remembered that her thoughts could have unpredictable consequences. Innocent people could get hurt. She forced the notion out of her mind and slapped Colleen on the back to help her clear her lungs. Girls stood hunched over, gagging on the sidewalk, those diesel fumes were so bad on their overworked lungs. It forced the whole team to break stride. Half of them fell to the grassy lawn of the funeral home on the corner so they could get beneath the poison. Spitting, wheezing and rubbing their eyes, girls looked to Beth for strength. She forced a determined smile. "C'mon, let's get moving! We can't let that stink bomb ruin our run!"

In a tight pack they proceeded west on Cedar Road, up another short, steep incline and past an elementary school that was letting out for the day. Dozens of kids cheered them and a few took off in hot pursuit, much to the consternation of their crossing guards. The truck driver's foul offering faded already in Beth's mind and in her mind's eye was only Haleah laying naked beneath her on the quilt, smiling shyly and thrusting her soft unshaved lap against hers, her long black hair free and spread out like the rays of the sun, her olive skin glistening in the faint afternoon sun filtering through the lush greenery all around them...

“Beth, look out!”

She opened her eyes just in time to dodge a temporary traffic sign that work crews had planted on the sidewalk. It would have taken her cheek off. “Thanks!,” she called back to the girl who warned her. Adrenaline from the near miss hit her a second later. Her heart hammered nearly out of control. She turned for a second and saw her teammates tortured expressions. She had to slow down for their sake, if not for her heart's. She dropped back, letting them to overtake her. Most of them slowed but not one of them stopped.

The sun broke through momentarily as the storm moved closer. A hot blast of wind whipped them, stirring up dust and debris from the street. Beth thought much more of this and they'd have to revert to running boring laps around Glenmont's outdoor track. The pungent smell of hot oil and overcooked fast food burned her nostrils as they neared the corner of Taylor Road. A bus rumbled by and somebody hurled a hamburger wrapper at her from the back window. Was that a calculated insult from somebody who took her to be a vegetarian? Anything seemed possible after that Mac truck.

Ahead was the massive Cleveland Heights High School and mobs of kids milling around outside, talking trash, checking out each others' cars, putting on tough airs to maintain the rigid adolescent hierarchy of that institution. “Hey, let's get in a tight group now!” Beth herded her teammates together for safety's sake. Across a high fence was the school's own running track, where the girls track team was working out. One of them eyed Beth's team.

“Glenmont, we're gonna' whip your white asses!” That brought a huge chorus of cheers and cat calls from the mob hanging out on the corner.

“We're cross country,” shouted a girl running ahead of Beth, “not track!” The point was lost on the mob. More shouting and insults.

“Just keep going,” Beth told the girl. “Don't let them pull you into their bullshit.” Suddenly she felt the toll that the heat, the exertion and the foul air had taken on her. Haleah said she was bringing Beth's favorite juice- pomegranate/apple- and she felt she could down a gallon of it.

They turned onto Lee Road for the last leg of the run, back towards the safety of Glenmont's shady, walled-in campus. Haleah would be riding this way on her bike from Coventry Rd- probably on the sidewalk across the street- and if Beth saw her she'd be able to run over for a word with her, but she wanted to finish her run with the team, then rendezvous with her at their secret love nest. She scanned the street, but Haleah was nowhere to be seen.

The street rose again ahead of them in the steepest incline of the whole course. Gasping for air now, the Glenmont team made an all out effort to take that last incline without slowing. Beth fell behind the sweaty pack of girls, turning, looking back and straining her eyes for any sign of Haleah. There was a hot orange flash followed almost instantaneously by a deafening clap of thunder. Girls laughed and screamed. The ozone of it tickled Beth's sinuses. Now it was a mad rush to make it back to school before the storm hit. The first hot raindrops plunked down around her. Beth sprinted up ahead to catch up with Colleen. “I'm gonna' take a little wind sprint up to the park. Cover for me, willya”?

Colleen grinned and made a lewd gesture with her tongue and two fingers of her right hand, but all the other girls were up ahead and didn't see it. She knew Beth had a girlfriend. “Be careful!”

Beth gave her shoulder a playful little punch and ran straight up Lee Road when everybody else turned onto Fairmount. She felt light, energized again. Every nook and cranny on Glenmont's rough hewn stone wall shimmered and vibrated as she flew past it. She knew Haleah was close even if she couldn't yet see her through the haze. A white van squealed close to the curb, startling her. She charged on, not noticing that it had stopped, then lurched into reverse, careening madly, backwards up the street. It came alongside her just as she caught sight of Haleah on her bike a hundred meters or so ahead. The driver, a heavysset young man with a shaved head and shades rolled down the passenger side window and leaned toward it as he backed up the street alongside her.

"Lil' lady, you are just about the CUTEST thing I ever seen in hotpants!"

Beth ignored him.

"I could get you a job modeling! I KNOW people in New York and L.A.!"

Beth tried to force a yawn. She wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of her paying him any attention. She knew not to talk to creeps like him...

"Hey LOOK Sweetie, I'm talking BIG BUCKS! Three thousand a week, just for starters! Lemme' just take your picture in them little short shorts and we can start makin' plans. You and me, sweetie, jus' you and ME..."

Now Haleah saw Beth and was waving! Another flash of lightning...

"C'mon Peaches, don't be so stuck-up! Just lemme' get your picture.."

...the clap of thunder was simultaneous with Beth thinking: "Fuck you, asshole!"

"WHAT DID YOU SAY?!?" He barked that so loud Beth had to look. In the hand that wasn't on the steering wheel he had a small, dark object. Was he going to try and take her picture with his cell phone?! He extended that arm her way...

BBBAAamppppPHH!!!!

Beth's first impression was that her head had struck a glancing blow on another one of those portable street signs, struck it so hard that she was momentarily blinded. Funny, she hadn't seen one in her path. She ran on, feeling oddly disconnected from her body. Twenty, thirty more steps she took, staggering, feeling a sudden downpour of moisture on her arms and shoulders, then collapsed face-first onto the sidewalk with blood gushing from holes on either side of her temple. There was the squealing of tires and Haleah's screaming, and the last thing Beth McDonald was aware of was the sensation of a succession of heavy oak doors slamming shut around her till there was nothing but darkness and pain.

End of Chapter One.