

"Are you busy tonight?"

"I'm preparing for a cat."

Darren blinks at her. "I didn't know you were expecting. Have dinner with me."

"That's kind of a demanding way to put it," Melissa responds, arching an eyebrow at him. "And I really am expecting a cat. I pick her up next week." Although this is the night that she is supposed to get her cat—and it seems as if it's taken the week so long to pass, as it is—the breeder had called last night to tell her that the pick-up of the kitten had to be delayed another week.

"Well then, that's a week away. Come on, Melissa, it's just dinner."

"Okay," she agrees, "see you at eight?"

"Seven-thirty," Darren says. "You shouldn't stay here too long. Do what you have to do and go home."

Melissa grins and waves goodbye. As Darren leaves the room, she looks down at Christy's open file on her desk. Picking up the phone, she dials the emergency contact for Christy, a Becky O'Neil. The phone rings and rings; there's no answering machine. Melissa sighs. She sits, staring at her classroom, considering what to do. Everything in the school policy says that she has to inform Christy's parents. *I'm probably jumping to conclusions, making comparisons because I recognized myself in her*, she reasons. *It might not have been an anxiety attack. Darren's right; I'm not a doctor. Even if it was, I don't know what caused it...* She dials Christy's home number, the logical side of her brain taking over and following school policy.

Beth hooks her arm in Christy's. "No big deal. That's what friends do."

"You should be at home. It's after five," Darren says, walking into Melissa's classroom.

Looking up from the computer, Melissa grins. "So should you. How was your day?"

"Not as interesting as yours, from the chatter that's been flying around. What's up with the early dismissal?"

Melissa explains to him about Christy.

"Oh, that's no good," he says.

"No. I think she fainted and maybe had an anxiety attack."

"Are you a doctor as well?"

"No, but I've had them for years, so I think I know what I'm talking about," Melissa snaps. Immediately, she realizes how harsh she just sounded. "Sorry. I usually don't divulge that piece of information and when I do, apparently I'm rude about it."

"It's okay. I'm flippant; I deserve to be snapped at. What are you going to do?"

"I'm not sure. She doesn't want me to call her father because he's away on business. But if it's a medical condition, it needs to be reported to the school. If it's something else, it needs to be reported...."

"Abuse allegations are severe," Darren says, guessing where she is headed. "You don't want to report anything until you're sure. Then again, what if you're right and you *don't* report it now?" he pauses for thought and suggests, "You could talk to Fletcher."

"Yes. Then again, she might go to the extreme end. I have no reason to think it's abuse, other than the anxiety attack. She's quiet, but that isn't necessarily an indication of anything. Christy is a pretty bright girl, her homework has been handed in, she participates in class... Anxiety attacks could happen for a variety of reasons, like stress."

"She's thirteen. Thirteen-year-olds aren't supposed to have stress," Darren says, propping himself on her desk.

"You must have had a very different life than I did at thirteen," she replies. Melissa puts her head in her hands. "But I guess there's good reason to consider investigating further."

"Call her emergency contact. See what you can find out and go from there. That's all you can do at this point."

"I know," Melissa says, "unfortunately."

"Yeah, just a little weak."

"Does this happen often?" Miss Bates asks, concern in her voice.

Now, Christy thinks, I could tell her now and have it all end.

"No, just sometimes. It's hard to explain," Christy says, twirling her pencil in her fingers.

"I need to call your parents and let them know. You should go to a doctor," Miss Bates says, cringing a little as she's saying this. Christy wonders if she scared her teacher.

"Please don't do that... There's no need... They know."

"If this is something that happens on a regular basis, the school needs to know. I need to know, so that I can help you."

"Oh," Christy says, softly.

"Has something like this happened before?" Miss Bates asks, pointedly.

"No," Christy says, "not exactly. This was the first time it's happened like this... My Dad is away a lot on business. He won't be home right now if you call."

"Okay, well, I need to call someone and let them know. If I call your emergency contact, is that all right?"

Christy nods. "Yeah. I'm sorry I interrupted the class."

"It's all right. I don't like math that much myself."

Christy laughs, grateful that Miss Bates has broken the tension.

"Are you okay to go home by yourself?"

"Yeah, it's a short walk."

"All right. Have a good weekend."

Miss Bates walks to the front of the classroom and starts to tidy up. Christy gathers her stuff up and walks out, waving goodbye. She hurriedly makes her way through the busy hallway. She doesn't even notice Beth waiting outside the classroom door.

"Hey, are you okay?" Beth says, running to keep up with Christy.

"Yeah, feeling a little weird."

"I bet. You gave everyone an early dismissal."

Christy smiles meekly. "Yeah, they all probably think I'm more of a freak now."

"Who cares what they think? You weren't feeling well, no big deal. Besides, if anyone says anything, I'll tell them to shut up."

"Thanks," Christy says.

No Shadows Left Behind

Tina-Sue DuCross

Chapter Five

Christy gazes out the window of the classroom, looking at the sunshine hitting the windshields of the cars in the parking lot. She's hoping that the day will end and hoping that it won't. Her father is returning home tonight.

She glances at the front of the classroom, where Miss Bates is continuing with a lesson on geometry. She takes a pencil and starts to doodle in her math book. Suddenly, she startles, seeing an illustration of a teacup in her textbook.

In a moment of rationality, she thinks, *That's a stupid drawing*. And then the memory overtakes her, everything in her mind going blank except the memory of her Daddy storming into her bedroom and being mad at Christy for something she had done—she wasn't sure what. He then started knocking everything down from her shelves. As if in slow motion, his arm swept across her dresser and smashed Christy's rose-covered teacups and saucers. Even more slowly, his hand came across Christy's face. Christy had sat there on her bed, staring at him, crying, "Daddy no!" but he just slammed her door behind him, no longer acknowledging her. She starts to shake, remembering the pain. Terror seizes her and she gasps for breath. The room spins dizzily.

"Christy, hey! What's wrong?" a voice asks her from somewhere far away. Remotely, she hears it, but she doesn't come out of the hold of fear. She is terrified to stay within it, but it is more terrifying to emerge from it. Voices murmur around her, and she feels vaguely crowded.

"Everyone dismissed," a voice calls, cutting through, and suddenly she feels the crowd departing.

"Christy, can you open your eyes? It's okay."

Slowly, Christy opens her eyes. She stares at Miss Bates.

"Hi," Miss Bates says. "Are you okay?"

Christy nods. "Sorry," she says in a quiet voice.

"It's all right. Here, drink this," Miss Bates says, handing her a glass of water. "Are you all right?" she asks again.