Prologue

He stood on the wall of the lighthouse looking down upon the roaring sea. Rain lashed at his face like knives as lightning crashed overhead. The roaring wind should have been deafening to his ears, but he heard nothing. He stared at the spot, some twenty feet below, where the rocks met the water to hide the treasure dwelling among them. His most beautiful treasure.

She’d lived among the stones for three years now, growing to be one with the elements around her. He remembered standing in this spot with the heavy weight over his shoulder, the dawn sun speaking out to him as he pondered her fate. It was as if Nature had called to him that day, coaxing him to relinquish his divine flower. After all, there had been none finer to ever have been sown by Her before.

She lived with the water now. She saw every roll of the clouds as the winter storms came and went. She witnessed every gleam of beauty on the warm, sunny days as the students from the local college flung themselves off the ledge into her lake’s cold, slick arms. They laughed and they smiled while she watched and felt everything.

Three years had passed since he’d given her up, and now her place was marked by a miraculous patch of flowers that even the iciest of temperatures could not whither. She had been his Lucy and now her course was run. She’d left him, and although she was long gone he could still see her pale, young face floating in the water below him. Despite the apocalyptic conditions he stood in, Lucy was always the perfect picture of calm. Her quietness and reserve was a reminder to him of all the things he had wanted, and now of all the things that would never be.

Chapter 1:

He hunched over the counter, wiping away the night’s grease. The red, neon letters of the OPEN sign glared back in his face as he scowled at the couple still sitting in the corner. Ten minutes till closing and there they were still canoodling and staring into each other’s eyes. He wondered what they’d think if he brandished his dicing knife at them, threatening as he chased them out the door. He chuckled low in his chest at the thought. Scaring people was too easy, and way too fun.

“Hey Will!” the raspy manager’s voice called. He appeared from the back with two heaping bags of trash. Flies buzzed around the openings and juices oozed as they were held out for Will to take. “Take these out back. Then get outta here, okay?”

William nodded curtly and snatched them up, dropping his rag. He adjusted his cap and took another long look at the disgusting lovebirds in the corner, sneering as he stepped out into the cold Oswego air. He threw the bags in the dumpster with a loud *CLANG!* and drew his coat tighter around his body as he turned toward the sidewalk. He had taken the ten minute trek down Bridge Street every night for the past ten years.

William dug his hands into his pocket to fish out his tattered, grimy wallet as he reached the bottom of the hill, at the intersection with the McDonald’s. Passing the restaurant, he headed toward the Fastrac next door. Once inside he traipsed right up to the counter where a dull college boy manned the cigarettes.

“Pack ‘a Marlboros,” he grumbled. The boy didn’t seem to hear him and kept on reading his porno mag.

“I said I want my Marlboros,” William said again. His tone was gruff and urgent, with and underlying current that sent the boy running to fetch him his cigs with the hair standing up on the back of his neck. The boy handed him the box and William threw a ten dollar bill at him.

“Keep the change,” he mumbled before taking his leave. Once outside William reached for his zippo, flipping back the top as he brought a newly bought cigarette to his lips. He inhaled deeply, feeling the black smoke curl around his lungs, and headed across the street toward his shabby house that stood next to the candy shop. Fumbling with his keys, he was just about to put them in the lock when he heard her laugh.

William’s keys dropped to the concrete of the stoop he stood on. He’d never heard a laugh like that before. He turned around to find the source of his fascination. She was across the street, her long blonde hair gleaming under the fluorescent of the street lights. It peaked out of the black hood hiding her head, trailing down her chest. She tried to cover up her lusciousness beneath the black clothing, but her body was lithe and lean beneath her black sweatshirt and skinny jeans, not a single curve left to his imagination. Her face was as beautiful as the brightest star in the sky, almost as if she were the only one.

She was young, he noticed, like a dove among a sea of old crows. He supposed she was likely from the University down the road. At first he thought her youth would serve as an obstacle. After all, she looked like she could be his daughter; but maybe what he needed was a little spark from a young lass like her.

The beauty of the night seemed to emanate straight from her soul, radiating purity and light down upon this dreary, drab city as if she was the embodiment of natural beauty itself. It was such a shame that she had to waste such a voluptuous kindliness on these desolate, lost sticks and stones, like the two Lotharios beside her who dared stand in her presence.

The two boys with her paid her none of the attention her beauty deserved, choosing instead to ogle at a couple of tramps strutting down the sidewalk in their night outfits. The girl laughed at their misogyny, calling them pigs, but good-naturedly so. These bastards didn’t deserve the friendship of a maiden like her. They should be focusing solely on the angel standing in front of them.

William licked his thin, dry lips as he found his hands knotting into tight fists. His pulse sped up and he felt his jeans straining against his crotch. He wanted her. He wanted to know what she would look like writhing beneath his weight as he ravished her mercilessly. He wanted her clawing at his back as she struggled, her face blood red from exertion and her throat raw from screaming out her passion. He wanted to be the person to bring out her inner demons, to corrupt the virgin-like temperament that seemed to cloak her, but not tonight. Tonight was just for study. First, he needed to know more about her. He needed to know how to capture her.

There had been others before her that he’d sought like this; other conquests he’d had to abandon for fear of condemnation, but all those past feelings didn’t matter now. All that mattered was that he’d found his latest quarry. She wouldn’t be able to resist him, he thought. He wanted to call out to her and tell her to move along and abandon the shades beside her. He’d offer her a gentle hand, and let her think of him as her savior.

As William turned back to his door he saw her notice his stare. She glanced at him, both uneasily and curiously at the same time. He smiled. The hook was in. All he had to do now was reel her in and catch her for good.

Chapter 2

From that moment forward all of William’s thoughts were filled with the images of the girl. There were no more sightings of her for a week, but William’s fantasies satisfied him enough until he could find her again.

The pizza shop was dull with dingy light and the wind whistled as an early November snowstorm raged outside. No orders had been made in two hours, and no customers had stepped inside all night. William grumbled as he worked at mundane tasks: wiping down perfectly clean tables, sweeping the floors every twenty minutes, getting every trace of grease off the counters – if it was up to him the shop would be closed by now.

His co-worker, a 20-something college nobody named Robert, stood to the side playing Angry Birds. He’d just started yesterday and already he was proving to be worthless.

“Can’t you do something productive?” William barked. The boy shrugged and readjusted his cap on his shaggy brown hair.

“I mean you’ve pretty much cleaned everything man, what else is there to do?” he asked.

“Oh forget it,” William huffed, turning away. He was about to go out the backdoor for a smoke break, muttering “useless bastard” under his breath, when he heard the bell over the shop door jingle.

“Hey, Lucy!” he heard the boy cry. That’s when he heard the laugh – the same laugh that had plagued his dreams for the last week. It couldn’t be. Sure enough, when William peaked around the doorframe there she was. Her blonde hair was laced with snow and her cheeks were deliciously rosy from the cold. Her white scarf and red pea coat were wrapped tightly around her body for warmth, and William immediately found himself wanting to rip them off. He could make her warm, after all.

The girl – Lucy, the boy had called her – stood amiably at the counter as she chatted. The childish attempts at flirting made my Robert made William wince in disgust. What was this girl doing trying to get a foolish boy like that when she could have a man like him? She could do so much better. William listened to them converse for a few minutes before decided to make an appearance. He ambled back out to the front, trying to plaster a friendly smile on his face. If he wanted to get this girl, he’d have to play nice first.

Robert jumped as William appeared by his side, apparently worried that this flirtation would cost him.

“Sorry!” he yelped. “I was just – she just stopped by for a sec.”

Lucy smiled meekly, casting her eyes to the floor.

“Whatever,” William said. “Not like we’re busy anyway.”

“I’ll get going anyway,” she said. Her voice was like honey. Robert looked disappointed at her decision. William fought the urge to laugh at the boy’s incompetence. He needed to be forceful if he wanted a woman like Lucy.

“Whatever,” William repeated. “You can handle the rest of the night, right?”

Robert looked perplexed.

“I guess so,” he said. William nodded. He’d come up with an idea, and he needed to leave early in order to make it work.

“Just lock everything up and I’ll deal with counting the drawers in the morning, I’m heading out,” he said. Without waiting for a response, William left out the back door. He waited in the shadows once he was outside, lighting a cigarette to help keep warm. After a few minutes she emerged from the shop and he smiled.

“Let the games begin,” he said to himself. He waited until she was far up the street, her red coat barely visible in the snow. William started walking. The quickly falling snow was a God-send, because it quieted his footsteps as he tracked Lucy’s movements. All he wanted to know was where he could find her, and then he would strike in the morning. He walked until they reached the top of the hill before turning right onto a dark side street. There was no sign visible, but it was right next to the new Hibatchi restaurant, so it would be easy for William to remember.

William found a place to nestle himself behind a copse of bushes. The streetlights illuminated Lucy’s figure, allowing him to watch her from his vantage point without having to get closer. She walked a third of the way down the street before stopping and turning right in front of a shabby ranch house. She walked up the old, cracked driveway and fumbled for her keys. Lucy glanced around her, as if she was making sure she was safe. Little did she know that William was watching a mere 100 yards away. Seeming to be satisfied she went inside. William smiled.

The next morning he parked down the street and waited. At about 7:30 his prey emerged. He made sure to stay very still as Lucy traipsed across the icy ground. She could only see him when he was ready. She was heading toward the college campus, assumingly to class. William laughed to himself, because today she’d be playing hooky.

William waited until she passed, and then slipped out of the driver’s seat, leaving the door open for a quick getaway if need be. It was time.

“Excuse me, miss?” he called to her, throwing his voice up a few notches to seem friendlier. Lucy turned toward him warily. Her eyes narrowed as she tried to place him. After a moment she seemed to gain some clarity, and she smiled nervously.

“You were at the pizza shop last night, right?” she asked, clutching her bag tight across her chest. “You work with Robert?”

“Sure do,” William replied. “Great kid, great kid. Anyway, I’m having a little car trouble, and I left my phone at home. Could I trouble you to borrow yours? It will only take a minute.”

“Oh. Um, sure,” Lucy said. She dug around in her bag and then walked forward slowly as she held out her iPhone. William smiled as he took it. He pretended to concentrate as he dialed his own home phone number and proceeded to talk to his answering machine. He smiled periodically at Lucy as he spoke, and then hung up after a few minutes.

“Thank you,” he said. “My friend is coming to pick me up.”

“Oh, that’s good,” Lucy said. “Glad I could help.”

She put her phone back in her purse.

“I better get going,” she said, glancing down the street. “Have a nice day, sir.”

“You too,” William said. As soon as she turned around the smile vanished from his face and turned into a sneer. He struck out with his fist, making contact with the side of her head. Lucy cried out and crumpled onto the pavement as her head struck the ground. William glanced around to make sure no one had heard, and once he made sure he was alone, he reached for her. She was light in his arms as he scooped her up. Placing her in the backseat of his car, he made sure she was comfortable situated, smiling down at her unconscious figure with a cool fondness. He slipped back behind the wheel and smiled as he drove away.

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Two days later Lucy Gray was officially declared missing by her boyfriend Robert, who had been told by Lucy’s housemates that she’d left for class Wednesday morning and never returned. After contacting Lucy’s professor to find out she’d never made it to her 8:00AM English seminar, the authorities had been notified. Posters were mounted on light posts and on the sides of buildings throughout the city of Oswego, and the college campus was on red alert, warning students to travel in groups and stay indoors as much as possible.

Her friends searched the streets, looking for any traces of Lucy they could find. Her parents drove up from Syracuse to do a press conference and hold a vigil for their daughter, who they knew God was protecting and would return soon. But the snow had covered up her footsteps and washed away the little spot of blood where her head had struck the cement.

Weeks went by and Lucy was still but a ghost in the wind. She’d left behind no clues and she wasn’t giving anyone any new hints as to where she could be. Many started to believe the worst for Lucy now, giving up on searching for the poor girl and starting to grieve and honor her short, wonderful life.

William watched the stories unfold on the morning news with little worry. No one had seen him approach Lucy that morning. No one had seen him tuck her in his car. He was the only one who knew she was there in his house, in the basement which he had fixed up for her as nice as possible. He made sure she had a bed, and bought her some clothes, and gave her whatever meal she wanted. Soon enough she would warm up to him, and then she wouldn’t want to leave. She wouldn’t be scared of him. They could be together like it was meant to be, and then she could do as she pleased. Until then, though, he had to be careful.

It had been ruled out that Lucy had simply run away, as she had nothing but her purse on her when she disappeared. They knew that someone had taken her, but William wouldn’t let them find her. She was his now.

The child next door played in the snow, oblivious that somewhere out there a man had taken a young woman. She rolled the soft white powder into big round balls, the perfect size for a snowman. She heard a whistle coming from her left and looked around. No one was outside with her, her mother watching from the kitchen window.

The child stood and listened again, and without fail the whistle came forth. It was a light eerie tune, full of wonder and mystery. The young boy turned back to his project, abandoning his search as the whistle kept coming. It blended with the lower whimper of the wind as it blew gently around him. Then, the child bent to form another snowball, and he saw a flash of gold. There, in the barred up window of his neighbor’s basement, he could have sworn he saw a face. It was there for a nanosecond and then it was gone again. The boy stood and raced inside.

“Mommy!” he cried as he ran through the door.

“What’s the matter, Nicky?” his mother asked as she knelt down to his level.

“I saw a ghost in the basement!” he pointed in the direction of the neighbor’s house.

“Oh, Nicholas, don’t be silly! Ghosts aren’t real!” his mother said, smiling brightly to appease her frightened child. “It was just your imagination!”

“But – ”

“How about some hot cocoa for my cold boy?” his mother cut him off before he could say more. The ghost was forgotten and Nicky smiled.

Chapter 3

William stood at the foot of the wrought iron bed frame looking down upon his Lucy as she slept. In sleep she was even more beautiful than when she was awake and fixing him with those icy blue eyes. She was still pretending that she didn’t like him – that she was scared of him, but he knew deep down that she wanted him just as much as he wanted her.

Her golden hair was strewn across the white pillow, shining in the pale light of the moon streaming through the tiny barred window at the top of the wall. Her face was relaxed and looked like pure porcelain. She was like his little doll that he could play with whenever he wanted. She was at his beck and call. While she dreamed she looked even more like she was still a child and William felt a strong urge to protect her and keep her from the world so that no one could ever take her away from him.

Lucy stirred in her sleep. The sheets were already strewn at the foot of the mattress, and the little white nightgown William had provided her rode up along her thighs, giving him a delicious view of her creamy white skin. He wanted to touch it and lick it. He wanted to be one with that skin.

William moved to sit at the foot of the bed. Careful not to wake her, he sank onto the thin white mattress and reached out a hand. He needed to feel her. His fingers needed her softness. His hand ran up and down the perfect ivory skin of her leg and Lucy woke with a start, bringing her knees to her chest as she scrambled to the opposite end of the bed. A slow, cold smile crept along William’s face.

“Don’t be scared, baby-girl,” he whispered, crawling toward her. “Daddy will always protect you.”

Lucy whimpered as he fell on top of her. Her screams and protests fueled his fire as he progressed, ripping the fabric from her thin frame and taking pleasure in what was his.

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Although most people believed by now that Lucy Gray was gone, there were those select few who were still searching for clues. Robert had spent the last few days trekking through the slush to every house and business in the city of Oswego. He’d even convinced a young deputy to come along with him – just in case. Robert was sure that Lucy was out there somewhere. He could feel her. If she were truly gone, wouldn’t he know it?

They’d started on the east side of the city, and now they were finally working their way back toward the campus. Today was their last shot. When they knocked on the door to little Nicky’s house he watched tentatively from the top of the stairs as she spoke with the handsome young man and the police officer standing beside him.

He heard them ask about a girl who had gone missing. He didn’t understand any of the technical terms they spoke of, but when the young man brandished a photo the boy recognized his ghost. He galloped down the stairs.

“That’s the ghost I saw!” he cried as he pointed at the picture. His mother gasped at her child’s rude outburst in front of the strange men, quickly going to apologize for his behavior.

“I’m so sorry, gentlemen,” she said, pushing Nicky behind her. “You know how boys can be, I’m sure.”

Robert smiled, but moved to kneel in front of Nicky.

“Yes, I do,” he said. Still, he showed the picture to the boy again. “Have you seen her, little man?”

Nicky smiled and nodded.

“Yeah!” he cried. “I was playing and I saw her in the window!”

Nicky pointed in the direction of the neighbor’s house.

“So she lives next door?” Robert asked.

“I think so,” Nicky said. “I only saw her once, but she was there alright!”

Robert smiled and reached out to shake Nicky’s hand. The boy grasped it firmly, feeling proud to be treated like such a grown up. Then, Robert stood and glanced back at his mother.

“Thank you so much for your help,” he said. He glanced at Nicky one last time. “This little guy definitely deserves a treat.”

He and the deputy exited the house. Lucy had been found.

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William watched as the young man and the police officer stepped into the house next door. He recognized Robert – his dimwitted co-worker. He was coming to take Lucy away from him.

William moved quickly as he unlocked the basement door and stomped down the stairs. He snatched Lucy up from where she’d been curled in a ball on the bed and pushed at her until she reluctantly climbed along the dirt floor under the bed frame.

“Don’t you dare make a sound,” he hissed. William scrambled to make up the bed and make it look like no one had lived in the dank room for years. Then, he stomped back up the stairs just as he saw the two men mount his porch steps. He let them knock twice before swinging the door open and plastering on a fake, friendly smile.

“Hello, gentleman,” he said. “What can I do for you today?”

Robert started as he recognized William. There was no way. William didn’t even know Lucy, why would he kidnap her? He forced himself to seem calm.

“Oh, hey man,” he said. “I didn’t know you lived here. Anyway, I’m sure you’ve heard about Lucy Gray? The girl that went missing from the college? Well, she’s my girlfriend, and I’m trying really hard to see if anyone knows anything so I can find her.”

Robert flashed him the picture of Lucy. It was gorgeous. Her eyes sparkled as she smiled this absolutely radiant, open mouthed smile. William could practically hear her laughing just by looking at it. Instead of showing his true feelings, though, he grunted in acknowledgement.

“Sorry,” he said. “Haven’t seen her. Now, sorry, but I have some work to do.”

William made a move to shut the door, but the deputy stopped it with his hand, the other hovering over his gun.

“You see, sir,” he said. “We really don’t want to bother you, but we’ve had a report of someone seeing the girl in question in the basement of the house. We’re not accusing you of anything, but we’re searching out every possible lead, so please, would you mind if I had a quick look around?”

William could have refused, seeing as the officer had no warrant, but he didn’t want to look suspicious. Who could have possibly seen Lucy in this house? The bars on the windows hadn’t been enough. He should have just boarded that damned thing up and not taken any chances. He sighed in frustration.

“Yeah, whatever, come on,” William stepped aside. The officer took his time walking through the house, looking in every room. Finally, he opened the basement door and descended the old wooden steps. Once downstairs he took in the dirt floor, the cinder block walls, and the barred up windows. He pointed toward the stark, white, perfectly made bed and the empty wooden end table beside it.

“Someone been sleeping down here?” he said. “Pretty dark place to be living.”

William shrugged.

“Used to live with another guy,” he said. “He liked it. Moved out a few years back and I just haven’t been down here much since. No need to be.”

The deputy nodded. The duvet on the bed was made for a king size mattress, so it hung heavily over the sides. This meant that it blocked the deputy from being able to see Lucy, who was hiding right there in front of him. She was being such a good girl. William would give her something for it later. After a few more tense moments of silence the deputy sighed.

“Alright,” he said. “Sorry about this. Thank you for your time.”

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William listened as Robert and the deputy spoke outside the house.

“I’m sorry, Robert,” the officer said. Robert bristled.

“She has to be here man,” he said. “That boy over there is the only person in this city who’s even seen a glimpse of her.”

“I know,” the officer said. “But he’s a little kid. It was most likely his imagination. He’s probably seen her picture on tv or around town and just made her up accidentally.”

“No,” Robert said. “I can feel it. She’s here.”

The officer sighed.

“Well, there’s nothing more we can do know,” he said. “We’ll see what happens the next few days and then if we hear anything else, I’ll come back with a warrant. Otherwise I can’t really search the place thoroughly enough to do anything.”

Robert kicked at the stones beneath his shoes, nodding reluctantly.

“Fine,” he said. “Thanks for your help.”