

SHATTERED SOULS

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

—François, duc de La Rochefoucauld, 1613–1680



The voice of a small child called out from somewhere behind me. *“Please. I need your help.”*

I twisted around, heart pounding in my ears, and stared at the empty row of bathroom stalls.

I couldn’t be like him. I refused.

Flipping on the sink faucet, I splashed water on my face and took some deep breaths to calm down. This was my imagination, nothing more.

The water dripping down my neck made me shiver. I yanked out a few paper towels and dabbed myself dry, then tossed them in the trash bin. Shaking, I rubbed my arms.

Why was it so cold in here? The bathroom had become a freezer—I could see my breath. Puffing little clouds, I turned around to check the long bank of stalls again.

Nothing.

“It’s your imagination, Lenzi,” I whispered, trying to calm my heart.

“*Help me,*” the voice of the child begged between sobs.

“This is not real,” I chanted. “I’m not hearing anything.”

“*Please, please,*” the voice cried.

Maybe there *was* someone there?

I walked slowly down the length of the bathroom toward the crying, which was coming from the handicap-accessible stall at the end. It was like I was in one of those slasher films where the characters can’t resist finding the source of the scary sounds. Only, in the movies, this kind of thing always happens in the dark with no one around. The girls’ bathroom was flooded with light, and I could hear students outside in the hallway.

I gently pushed the stall door open, but no one was there. I stepped inside. Maybe someone was crouching behind the door.

The second I let go, the door slammed shut behind me with a metallic bang.

“*I need your help,*” the same small voice cried, now from right next to me.

I flinched so hard I smacked my head on the steel stall divider. Fear masked the pain from the lump rising on the back of my skull. There was no one there. I was hearing things, just like he did.

I had to get out. Now!

I yanked the door handle to escape. It wouldn’t budge. My

fingers fumbled with the lock, but it was stuck. Gripping the handle, I tugged hard.

“Oh, my God!” I yelled. “Let me out!”

The main door to the bathroom rattled like someone was pulling on it, and I heard shouting out in the hallway. It was Ms. Mueller, who taught eleventh-grade history. Her voice cut through my terror.

“Miss Anderson! How did the door to this restroom get locked?”

Too freaked out to even answer, I slapped the stall door with my hands. “Get me out of here!” The temperature dropped again, and my teeth chattered.

“Help me, please,” the child whispered in my ear.

I screamed.

“Miss Anderson! Open this door!” Ms. Mueller shouted from the hallway.

“Let me out of here! Please help me.” I dropped to my hands and knees and wiggled under the stall door, clambering to get away from the voice. I jumped to my feet and bolted toward the exit. I jerked the handle of the door to the hallway, but it didn’t open. I yanked again. Nothing. I twisted with all my strength on the knob—still nothing.

“I need your help.”

“Please,” I whispered. “Please go away and leave me alone.” I slid down the door and curled into a ball, shivering. Clamping my eyes shut, I prayed it was a waking dream that would end any

second. That I wasn't crazy. That I wasn't hallucinating like he did.

A faint sniffing came from the far end of the bathroom, as if the child were weeping. I could barely hear it over the chattering of my teeth. For a moment, I wanted to reach out, offer some comfort. Instead, I unfurled and sat up. "Go away!"

"Help me."

"I can't help you. I *won't* help you." I shook my head, hands over my ears to block out the sound. "You're not real."

The weeping stopped.

I sat in the frozen silence. Listening. Praying.

"Not real," I whispered.

The temperature returned to normal.

Bang, bang.

Ms. Mueller was whacking on the door again. "Unlock the door this minute," she demanded.

I pushed myself up and wrapped my fingers around the door handle, almost afraid to try it. If it didn't open this time, I was going to start screaming again, and I didn't think I'd be able to stop.

After a deep, shaky breath, I turned the knob. It released, and the door swung open easily. Trembling, I took several steps back. I closed my eyes against Ms. Mueller's glare and the curious looks from my classmates. The kind of looks I'd seen so many times as a child. The looks people gave my dad when he had episodes. The looks reserved for crazy people. People like me.

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“You’re lucky you didn’t get detention, Lenzi,” Mom said on the way out of the counselor’s office. “Running out of class without permission and locking yourself in the bathroom. That’s not like you. Has something happened?”

All the way to the car I wanted to tell her—I really did, but I couldn’t do it; it would break her heart, just like it was breaking mine. My chest ached when I thought of what she’d been through and what she might have to go through again.

Sliding into the car, I rolled a hair band off my wrist and pulled my hair back in a ponytail. “I didn’t lock the door. It just got stuck or something.”

Mom pulled her sunglasses case out of her purse. “The counselor said you were screaming.”

Tightening the hair band one more twist, I grimaced when my fingers brushed the lump on the back of my head. “Yeah, it scared me when the door wouldn’t open.”

She shoved the glasses case back in her purse and turned in her seat to face me. “Do you want to talk to somebody, Lenzi? Dr. Alexander said you could see her anytime.”

Not this again. I leaned over, pretending to search for something in the outside pocket of my backpack. Right now I wasn’t up to an argument. Imagined or not, the episode in the bathroom with the invisible bogeyman—no, bogey*baby*—had taken all the fight out of me. I was going crazy.

I snapped the seat belt, leaned my seat back, and closed my eyes.

Like flickering snapshots, images of the cemetery in Galveston where Dad was buried flashed through my head. I opened my eyes, and they stopped.

Mom stared at me, her hand on the keys in the ignition. “Are you okay, Lenzi?”

“Yeah, I’m fine, Mom. I just want to get home and shower before Zak takes me out for my birthday.”

She started the car. “I’m sorry I have to work tonight, Lenzi. I’ll make it up to you next weekend.”

“It’s fine, Mom. Really.” And it was. This was my first birthday without Dad, and hanging out with Zak would make it easier.

I closed my eyes again, and the images flickered. *The gate to the cemetery; the marker on Dad’s grave; a tall Celtic cross; a marble angel with a cracked face; a tall, thin guy. The guy was smiling. I liked him. I missed him.* With a gasp, I opened my eyes.

Mom was staring straight ahead, concentrating on the road.

I was losing my mind—no doubt about it. First the voices, and now I was having some kind of hallucinations. My dad had given me a gift this year after all: his schizophrenia.

“Happy birthday, Lenzi,” I whispered under my breath.