

KILLER PIZZA: VAMPIRE STAKES!

PROLOGUE: The Girl in White

"What's with this girl, anyway? I mean, seriously, could she have picked a creepier place?"

"She loves scary movies."

"She loves scary movies? That's it? That's why she told you to meet her at a cemetery?"

"Yeah. You got a problem with that?"

Josh and Logan had just emerged from dark, dense woods that bordered two sides of a church cemetery, a hilly area dotted with hundreds of gravestones. The two wore winter jackets and combat-style boots, which left deep treads in the snow that glowed white in the clear moonlight.

"What's her favorite?" Josh asked.

"What?"

"Movie. What's her favorite scary movie?"

"Don't know. You can ask her when you meet her."

Trudging past century old grave markers, their breath visible in the cold night air, the two sixteen year olds turned when they heard a sound coming from the woods behind them.

"That her?"

Logan shrugged. He and Josh waited to see if anything emerged from the woods. Nothing did, so they continued walking in an aimless direction across the cemetery.

"Sure she's bringing her friend with her?"

"I'm beginning to wish I hadn't brought you with me."

"Sorry, man, it's just... what are the odds this girl actually sent you her real picture? Or her friend's real picture?"

"I have one question for you."

"Yeah?"

"Did you have anything better planned for tonight?"

Josh stopped and screwed up his face, as though he were giving the question some real thought.

"Didn't think so," Logan replied.

Josh grinned. "You're right. I mean, look at this place! It's like something out of Night of the Living Dead. Seriously, I feel like I've stepped into a black and white movie."

Logan smiled. The cemetery's nocturnal palette of black, white and shades of grey did give it the look of a landscape captured on black and white film.

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"Hey, check it out." Josh indicated a large marble headstone, slightly askew and smoothed at the edges from decades of exposure to the elements. "This dude died all the way back in 1897," Josh said after moving closer to read the inscription.

"That's a long time to be dead, isn't it."

Josh and Logan whirled when they heard the feminine voice. A girl dressed in a white dress stood a few feet away, staring at the two with a smile. She was startlingly pretty, with porcelain skin whiter than her dress. "Good evening, Logan. You must be Josh."

"Who are you?" Josh asked.

"Traci. Logan's online friend."

"No you're not."

Traci shifted her gaze from Josh to Logan. "I hope you don't mind I didn't send you my real picture."

Hearing this, Josh laughed. "Let me explain something to you, Traci. You're not supposed to send a dude a picture of a girl who isn't..."

"As pretty as I am? Guys are usually intimidated by a pretty girl. Which is why I sent Logan a picture of a girl who was... less pretty than me."

Logan's expression was deadpan, not giving away how he felt about the deception.

"By the way, I'm sorry, Josh, but my friend couldn't make it."

Josh took a quick glance around the cemetery. "Well, I guess I'll be leaving you two alone then."

"Oh, no. You're not going anywhere."

Josh exchanged a perplexed glance with Logan as Traci clasped her hands demurely in front of her and gave the two a raised eyebrow look, an invitation to speak.

"Aren't you just a tad on the freezing side?" Logan asked.

Traci studied her light summer dress and bare feet. "No, I'm not."

"You're kidding me."

Traci shrugged apologetically. "I'm hot blooded. Does that bother you?"

"That you're barefoot and wearing a flimsy dress on a butt-cold April night? Yeah, it bothers me. It's weird."

"I'd have to second that," Josh said.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to make you two uncomfortable. I want you to like me, after all."

Josh leaned in and whispered something to Logan, who responded with a concerned nod. "Can't say as I'm liking any of this so far. Which means Josh and I will be heading home."

"Didn't you hear what I told Josh? He's not going anywhere. And neither are

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you. By the way, Josh, it's impolite to whisper about someone when they're standing right in front of you. But you're correct in what you just told Logan. You cannot see my breath when I breathe, the way I can see yours."

Josh backed slowly away from Traci, his expression morphing into one of fear and disbelief. How could Traci have heard what he just whispered to Logan? It wasn't possible. Logan held his ground, returned Traci's stare, then said, "C'mon, Josh. We're out of here."

Logan hadn't taken more than a step when he felt a crushing blow to his chest that sent him sprawling backwards into the snow. Writhing in pain and gasping for air, he slowly rolled to one side. His eyes opened wide when he saw Josh's legs protruding from behind the nearby grave stone, twitching spastically and kicking snow into the air in high arcs.

"Josh," Logan whispered, his depleted lungs not allowing him to speak properly. He painfully rose to his knees, then watched in horror as his friend's legs suddenly straightened out, went rigid for a moment, then fell limply to the ground. A moment passed before Traci appeared from behind the tombstone. Several things hit Logan simultaneously, images absorbed like quite snapshots. Traci's white dress, now dotted with red splashes. Her breath, now visible in the cold night air. And...

Logan couldn't believe what he was seeing. It wasn't possible. It simply wasn't. But there they were. Two long incisor teeth were now prominently curled out and over Traci's full and very red lower lip! Logan cried out in alarm as he lurched to his feet and staggered away from the vampire. Unable to keep his balance for more than a few steps, he fell backwards and landed right in front of a gravestone.

"Perfect position," Traci said with a terrifying smile.

"No," Logan whispered. "No way. You can't be!"

"Hush, Logan. I know it's difficult for you to speak." Traci stopped a few feet away from Logan and looked down at him with a strangely sympathetic frown. "Didn't your parents ever tell you not to meet people online? Fortunately, for me, there are plenty who do just that, every day. I feel for them. I really do. They're mostly just lonely kids, trying to make contact with someone who understands them. Who gets who they are, right?"

Traci had a faraway expression on her face as she thought about all of the lonely kids out there. Desperately hoping that the horrifying creature in the splattered-red dress might have forgotten all about him, Logan began to crawl toward the woods. Traci smiled at the sight of her retreating prey.

"NNNNOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!"

Logan's verbal epitaph of white-hot terror echoed back from the trees when Traci pounced on him, her attack so swift that it defied earthly logic. The

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scream - quickly snuffed out - was replaced by an eerie silence. The only sound, if you were close enough to hear it, came from the vampire as she fed her insatiable hunger.

From behind the nearby tombstone, Josh's hand suddenly twitched. The deceased teen's journey from living, breathing human to the land of the undead had taken only a couple of minutes. When his eyelids slowly opened, like that of a newborn, Josh found himself staring uncomprehendingly up at the starless sky overhead.

The gnawing hunger had already begun.

PART 1: Scary Stories

1

"How long till I plate?"

"Four minutes."

"Yikes!"

"Stay cool. We're doin' fine."

Toby Magill resumed preparing his smoked pork tenderloin with sun-dried tomato sausage after giving Marissa, his appetizer chef, the plate countdown. Toby and his Hidden Hills High cooking team were in the heated midst of their first high school cooking competition, the Southern Ohio Hillsboro Regionals. They'd been preparing their meal all day and it was crunch tourney time. Everything had to go like clockwork or they'd lose precious points. And points was how a cooking team won competitions.

"Damn!"

Alarmed by the forceful exclamation of his team's salad chef, Toby looked down the counter and winced when he saw Ami clutching a bleeding hand. *Good one, Ami, Toby thought in dismay. Just what we need right now!*

Toby grabbed a napkin and draped it over Ami's hand, at the same time chastising himself for being more concerned about the competition than Ami's injury. "Press hard for a minute, then I'll take a look at it."

"I don't have time to press hard for minute. I need to get this done!" Ami's citrus drenched watermelon salad was the second course of the four course dinner and the next one up.

"Just do what I tell you. I'll be right back."

Toby went down the counter to check out Marissa's Arctic char with sweet

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corn sauce appetizer. "How's it look, boss?" Marissa's forehead was glistening with sweat, as much from the pressure of the competition as the hot kitchen.

"Looks great. More importantly..." Toby dipped a finger into the garlic mayonnaise appetizer sauce and tasted it. "The sauce is terrific."

Marissa smiled, pleased with the compliment. "Is it time?"

Toby nodded. "Plate 'em!"

As the appetizer plates were taken out to the judges' tables, Toby hurried across the kitchen, removed the napkin from Ami's hand and studied the salad chef's self-inflicted cut.

Whoa! That's a bad one! Trying to keep his boiling emotions under control, Toby addressed an adult who was standing at the edge of the kitchen and observing the proceedings. "Mr. Dansbury? I think Ami needs this looked at. It's pretty deep."

"But my salad!" Ami complained.

"Don't worry about the salad. You did a great job so far. It's just a matter of finishing it off. Marissa!"

Having just sent out her last plate of Arctic char, Marissa ran over to join Toby, Ami and Mr. Dansbury, the cooking team's faculty advisor.

"Take over here, will you? If you need any help, yell. Ami, you're outta here. Get that finger bandaged."

As Mr. Dansbury led a still-complaining Ami out of the kitchen, Toby took a moment to focus (and acknowledge that this competition was culinary pressure unlike anything he had ever experienced before, including the busy time at Killer Pizza, where he worked on the weekends), then hauled a tray of macaroni and cheese covered with a crust of panko - a Japanese bread crumb - to the deep fryer. Toby froze when he got to the fryer and looked down at the oil. "Oh... *crap*."

"What, *oh crap*?" Justine, the fourth member of the cooking team and Toby's dessert chef, had a stray strand of hair hanging down over one eye as she gave Toby a wild-eyed look. A ball of nerves even during the group's weekly cooking class sessions at Triple H, when nothing was at stake, Justine looked positively frantic now that she was in the midst of her first competition.

Toby leaned over the fryer for a look behind the appliance. "It's not plugged in."

"What?!"

"The plug came loose somehow."

"You're *kidding* me!" Justine practically leapt across the kitchen to see for herself.

Marissa glanced up from her watermelon salad. "Is there enough time to heat up the oil?"

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"No," Toby replied with a devastated shake of his head. "Which means our signature dish will not be done in time. Which means we'll have to go without it."

"Sabotage!" Justine said vehemently, the spit flying from her mouth as she spoke. "One of the other teams sabotaged us!"

"Calm down, Justine. I doubt any of the other teams sabotaged us." *Although I wouldn't put it past them,* Toby thought as he gave the deep fryer a frustrated kick.

Marissa and Justine waited for Toby to do more than kick the fryer. He'd been holding it together remarkably well, especially considering this was his first competition, but surely the fryer mishap would break him, send him into a screaming, utensil-throwing fit.

That's exactly what Toby felt like doing. Instead, he took a long, deep breath, let it out slowly, and said, "Stay focused people. We still need to beat the clock. Points off if we don't." With that, Toby went back to the counter to put the finishing touches on his main dish, which - besides the smoked pork tenderloin - included apricot compote, glazed carrots and "haricots verts", or French string beans. Pretending to be immersed in their work, Marissa and Justine watched their head chef to see if he might still succumb to an hysterical breakdown. When a few moments had passed, and he hadn't, they gave each other surprised looks, then resumed preparing their salad and dessert dishes.

"Dessert's up!" Toby proclaimed a half hour later, after the salad and main courses had been taken out to be judged. Justine furiously applied the final touches to her chocolate pate and swatted the loose strand of hair away from her flushed face as she stood back for Toby to give it a once-over.

"It looks beautiful, Justine." Justine looked like she might collapse onto the counter as the final plates were whisked out of the kitchen. Toby smiled and turned to look at the clock on the nearby wall. "Congrats, everyone. We did it!"

And with a few seconds to spare, Toby noted happily.

"We would have totally won if that fryer had been working!"

His finger stitched and wrapped in a cocoon of gauze, Ami was at the wheel of a Dodge van, driving the team back to Hidden Hills from the Hillsboro Marriott, where the cooking competition had been held. Mr. Dansbury had stayed behind in Hillsboro, where his parents lived, for the weekend.

"Second place isn't bad for our first competition, though," Marissa said with a satisfied grin.

"No, it isn't!" Justine agreed. Her mood, inexorably governed by her hyper personality, had switched from super-frantic to super-cheerful. "But I still think we were sabotaged."

Sitting in the back seat with Marissa, Toby merely smiled. No, second place

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wasn't bad at all. His team did well. Everyone had held up admirably under the pressure. Even Justine hadn't totally lost it. Looking around at his trio of cooking partners, Toby felt a twinge of guilt at how much affection he had developed for them over the past three months, which is how long it had been since Toby had taken over the moribund Hidden Hills High Cooking Club. He knew it was silly, this guilty feeling, but he still couldn't shrug off the notion that he was somehow cheating on his other cooking team, with whom he worked at Killer Pizza.

Annabel Oshiro and Strobe (aka Gordon Tibbles) were more than just Killer Pizza cooking partners, however. Often, while laying in bed at night and unable to sleep, Toby would think of the first time he had met the two of them, on his first day of employment at Killer Pizza. It had been shortly after that fateful morning when Harvey P. Major III - the owner of the Killer Pizza chain - had revealed to his three new employees that Killer Pizza was actually a front for an underground monster hunting organization.

Combined with Harvey's offer to try out for his elite, secret group of Monster Combat Officers, that astonishing revelation - monsters actually existed! - had been the turning point in Toby's life, the moment that had changed things forever. After two wild adventures of the monster-fighting variety, Toby still found it difficult sometimes believing that he had become a full-fledged veteran of Harvey's MCO force.

"Hey, let's tell scary stories!" Justine suddenly suggested. Toby tried, but failed, to stifle a grin at her suggestion. "What, it's a perfect night for it," Justine said, frowning at Toby's response to her idea. "How many hours do we have till we're home?"

"A couple, give or take a few minutes," Ami said.

"There you go. A couple of hours. Just think how many scary stories we can tell in that time."

Toby had to admit it was a perfect night for scary stories. The trees that lined both sides of the two-lane road were in a branch tossing and clicking frenzy, thanks to a strong April wind that had developed since they left Hillsboro. Leaves scuttled in and out of the van's headlights. Clouds were boiling in the dark sky overhead, threatening rain - or maybe even snow, you never knew with the unpredictable Ohio April weather - in the not-too-distant future.

"OK, you first, Justine," Toby said, sliding further down in his seat in an attempt to get more comfortable for the scary-story session.

"Not too scary, OK?" Marissa said. She was a quiet and sensitive girl, the perfect counterpart to the always effusive Justine.

"Right, let's see..." Justine closed her eyes. When she hadn't opened them after a few seconds...

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"C'mon, girl, we only have two hours here," Ami said, swerving suddenly when a possum darted into the headlights.

"What was that?" Justine said in alarm.

"Just a possum."

"Never swerve to avoid an animal. That's what my dad told me when I started to learn how to drive. He said it's better the animal dies than me or one of my passengers."

"I couldn't help it. It was a reflex."

"Well, think about it next time."

The dark silhouette of a sign at the side of the road was briefly illuminated by the van's headlights - *Raven's Run, population 1,319* - before being left behind.

"Hey, did you hear about the two kids who disappeared here a few weeks ago?" Marissa asked.

"Is this a scary story?" Ami asked.

"It is, actually. A real one."

"Line-jumper!" Justine blurted out.

"OK, OK," Toby intervened. "Justine, you go first." Actually, Toby was more interested in Marissa's news about the disappearing kids. It was the sort of thing he, Annabel and Strobe kept an eye out for. Most disappearances were unfortunate mishaps of the human variety, but one never knew. Sometimes they fell under the domain of Killer Pizza.

"This one's called Ax Murder Hollow," Justine said, her eyes flashing with delight at the prospect of scaring her fellow passengers. "I read it online. Ready?"

"Yeah, we're ready already," Ami said impatiently.

"OK. A girl and a guy are driving along a road at night. Just like this road, actually. It's probably why I thought of this one. It's raining really hard. *Suddenly...* the car goes into a spin when the guy drives around a corner. The car goes off the road, down a hill and comes crashing to a stop at the bottom of the hill, right next to a stream. The girl and the guy are OK, but when the guy gets out of the car to check things out he sees there's no way they're getting the car back up to the road. So he tells the girl to stay in the car and *absolutely keep the doors locked* while he goes for help."

"Why do they always do that?" Ami said, exasperated. "People never stick together in these kinds of stories. It's always, 'Wait here while I go for help.' That's just so lame."

"Well, that's how the story goes," Justine said, shooting Ami an annoyed look. Ami waved off Justine and shook his head in disgust.

"OK, so the guy goes off for help, right? What he didn't tell the girl is that they've landed right in the middle of Ax Murder Hollow! Why's it called that?"

"I'm sure you're gonna tell us," Ami replied.

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Justine shifted in her seat with a wait-till-you-hear-this grin. "Many years ago, we're talkin' decades here, this weird old guy lived in the hollow. And you know what he did? Hacked his wife to death with an ax!"

"That's so gross," Marissa said.

"Isn't it? OK, so the girl is waiting in the car for her boyfriend to return. The rain's pouring down, lightning's flashing. Suddenly she hears something. *Thump... thump... thump*. Something's above the car, hitting the roof! The girl's really freaked out by the sound, so she slides over to the driver's seat to get as far away from it as she can. *Then*, a bright light comes shining through the back window! The girl practically jumps out of her skin, she's so scared. But then she's relieved, 'cause she figures her boyfriend has come back with a cop and it's the cop car's headlights shining in her face. So the girl gets out of the car and immediately stops dead. 'Cause the first thing she sees..."

Justine hesitated with a theatrical, wide-eyed look to build the suspense.

"If you don't tell us, quick," Ami warned. "I will, because I know where this is going,".

"The first thing she sees is her boyfriend, hanging from a tree by his *feet* and bumping against the car in the wind. His throat's been slashed and his head is barely hanging on his head. That's what was causing the thump, thump, thump. His flopping *head*."

"OK, I think I've heard enough," Marissa said.

"Just plug up your ears for the rest of it," Ami suggested with an appreciative nod. "This actually just took a nice little unexpected turn."

"I told you it was good," Justine said.

Toby smiled at the exchange. Looking out the window, he saw that it had started to rain, the weather outside now reflecting the weather in Justine's story. Which was about to reach its exciting climax.

"The girl goes totally mental when she sees her boyfriend and starts screaming her head off as she runs toward the bright light that was shining into the car. But when she gets closer to the light, she sees the light isn't coming from any headlights of any cop car. It's coming from the glowing ghost of the ax murderer! He's standing there in the pouring rain with a crazy grin on his face, holding his ax. And he says to the girl, 'Who is this guy you're seeing behind my back?' The girl just stands there, she's so petrified by the sight of this crazy, toothless phantom. And the last thing she sees before everything goes black is the glint of the bloody ax as it comes swishing toward her!"

"Ha! That's a good one, Justine," Toby said.

"I give it two out of four stars," Ami said.

"It's better than a two!" Justine countered hotly.

"A definite improvement over the classic boyfriend girlfriend parking in the

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woods version," Ami added to placate Justine.

"Wait a second. I don't get it," Marissa said. "Why did the ghost say that to the girl?"

"He thought the girl was his wife," Justine replied, as though it was perfectly obvious.

"But why would he think that? She didn't look like his wife, did she?"

"Maybe she did," Ami said.

"Or *maybe* he was just totally insane!" Justine said.

"Can we move on to the next one?" Toby suggested. He was interested to hear about the disappearing kids.

"None of you heard about this?" Marissa asked.

Negative nods from the rest of the passengers.

"It happened just a few weeks ago, right here in Raven's Run. One of my cousins lives near here. She's the one who told me."

"So, two kids disappeared," Ami said to bring everyone back up to speed on the story

"Yeah, these two high school kids. They went to the local cemetery to meet a girl one of the guys met online."

"That's scary, right there," Ami said.

"What, meeting someone in a cemetery or meeting someone online?" Justine asked.

"Both, actually."

"Anyway," Marissa continued. "The cops found out about the meeting when they were investigating the disappearance. They took the kid's computer. A week later, still no sign of the kids. But then, just last week, someone in the area said they saw one of them late at night, running around in the woods. It was freezing out, but this kid was only wearing a T-shirt and jeans. No shoes. And get this. He was totally hairy! His arms, his face. All over!"

"OK, that's where you just off-roaded from true story to urban legend," Ami said with a laugh.

"Maybe, but that's the story goin' round at my cousin's school."

"Ami! Watch out!" Justine screamed.

Ami had looked over his shoulder when he addressed Marissa. Just after shifting his eyes from windshield to back seat, a fallen tree blocking the road ahead had appeared in the headlights. Ami frantically braked and swerved at the same time, but was unable to avoid crashing into the tree. The van resembled a metallic bucking bronco as it bounced over the thick trunk and went into a spin. Screeching tires burned a semi-circle track across the road as the vehicle left the road and plunged down the hillside that fell away from the two-laner.

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When the van came to a sudden halt, its momentum stopped by the dense underbrush that covered the hillside, everyone sat in stunned silence. The airbags had deployed in the front two seats, their white marshmallow mass enveloping Ami and Justine. The engine and headlights were still on. Ami turned both off, then slumped back into his seat.

"Whew!" Marissa exclaimed, gingerly touching the side of her head.

"You OK?" Toby asked.

"I hit my head on the window. I'll be alright."

"How about you two up there?"

"We had airbags," Ami replied. "We're good."

"Speak for yourself," Justine said. "I'm pretty freaked out. I've never had a bag blow up in my face like that!"

Toby already had his phone out and was dialing 911. Holding the phone to his ear, he frowned.

"There's no reception here?" Justine asked. Toby shook his head. Determined to prove Toby wrong, Justine swatted the airbag away from her face, got out her phone and dialed. She exhaled in frustration after a few seconds.

"Maybe there's no reception because we're in... *the hollow*," Ami said, his eyes wide with horror.

"What is wrong with you?" Justine said. "How can you make a joke like that after what just happened?"

"Well, I'm not gonna cry. Although I would like to apologize for not keeping my eyes on the road."

"Yeah, this is all your fault!"

"Actually, it's yours, Justine, for suggesting that we tell scary stories. If you hadn't done that, Marissa wouldn't have..."

"Maybe she still would have."

"OK, enough," Toby said. "The sooner we find help, the sooner we're out of here. Marissa, do you know the way to Raven's Run?"

Marissa thought for a moment, then said, "I think it's up the side road we passed a little while back."

"Ever been there? Is there much of a town?"

"Yeah. There's a main street. Stores. A gas station. The usual small town stuff."

"OK, let's go. Maybe we'll get reception on the way there."

"Justine, you stay here," Ami said. "Be sure to keep *all the doors locked* while we're gone."

"Ha, ha, ha. Very funny."

One by one the group unbuckled themselves and got out of the van, Ami and Justine shoving aside their airbags in order to get out of the front seats. The rain was coming down heavier now, interspersed with flakes of snow. The

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temperature was dropping rapidly, which caused shakes and shudders from the foursome as they zipped up their jackets and pulled their hoods - those that had them - over their heads.

After slipping and clawing their way back up to the road, everyone stared at the mangled remains of the tree. Ami walked over to it and delivered a swift kick. "Take that!"

"Hey," Justine said, an angry scowl suddenly clouding her face. "Check it out. Someone put this tree across the road on purpose!"

"Uh oh," Ami said. "Justine's moved on from scary stories to conspiracy theories."

"Seriously. Show me where this tree came from. Where's the other part of the trunk?"

Everyone stared into the dark woods. The main trunk of the tree - the part still in the ground the rest had separated from - was nowhere in sight.

"You know what? It doesn't matter how this tree got here," Toby said. "All we need to be concerned about right now is getting help."

"What idiot would do something like this, though? I'm reporting this to the police!"

"You do that, Justine," Toby replied. "In the meantime, let's get this tree off the road before anyone else has an accident."

After the group had dragged the tree clear of the road, they started off down the two-laner. By now the rain had mostly turned to snow. It was gathering in the trees and turning the branches a ghostly white.

"Maybe someone will come along, give us a lift," Marissa said after the still-stunned group had walked in silence for a while.

"No way am I getting into a strange car," Justine proclaimed.

"She has a point," Ami said. "Which reminds me of this story I once heard. This guy was hitchhiking on a deserted country road..."

"Don't start," Justine insisted.

"Why not? It's my turn. I should get a chance to tell my scary story."

"Why not? I'll tell you why not. Because we're right in the middle of living a scary story!"

"Don't be so melodramatic, Justine. We had an accident, we're going to get help. What's scary about that? And let me say this about that tree being put across the road on purpose. If it had been, don't you think we'd have been attacked by now?"

"Attacked? Who said anything about being attacked?"

Toby groaned inwardly. He had had exactly the same thought, but hadn't wanted to say anything for fear of upsetting the group. Fact was, Toby had an uneasy feeling about their situation. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but he

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was pretty sure there was something dangerous out there in the woods. Something they did not want to deal with.

"*What was that?!*" Justine suddenly cried out, whirling and scanning the woods behind her. Everyone else had heard it, too. A loud rustling sound among the trees.

"A deer, probably," Ami said, indicating a sign at the side of the road that featured the silhouette of one.

"Keep walking, people," Toby said, trying his phone once again. Mimicking Toby, everyone pulled out their phones and dialed numbers. Nothing. Everyone's phone, dead.

"This is unbelievable," Justine said, the panic starting to rise in her voice. "Someone set a trap for us and now they're stalking us!"

"Did you take your medication today, Justine?" Ami asked.

"Hey, there's no need for that kind of crack," Toby scolded.

"What? She really does take medication."

"You do?"

Justine nodded.

"Oh... OK. Well, did you take it?"

"In all the excitement? Our first competition and all? I might have forgot. *Did you hear that?*"

Everyone had. The rustling sound, closer now. The group instinctively moved in unison to the other side of the road and stared into the darkness, trying to catch a glimpse of whatever had crashed through the underbrush.

"Maybe we should go back to the van," Marissa said. She had been one of the coolest under fire during their competition, but Toby could tell that she wasn't composed now. She was scared. "At least we'd be inside," Marissa pointed out. "With the doors locked."

"Good idea," Justine said.

"You two are totally overreacting," Ami said. He was trying to keep his voice light, but even the group's funny man seemed to be concerned at this point.

"Don't you think, Toby?"

Toby didn't want to say what he was really thinking. "How far is it to the town, Marissa? Any idea?"

"A mile, maybe, no more than two. That's my best guess."

The road that led to Raven's Run had become visible in the darkness ahead. Toby weighed the two options available to them. Continue on to town. Or go back to the van.

"OK," Toby said. "Let's head back to the van."

"AAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!"

Justine's scream was absolutely ear-piercing. Everyone saw the filthy T-shirted

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and barefoot teen at the same time. He had leapt from the woods and was dashing across the road, his rail-thin arms and legs churning at lightning speed. Within seconds he had disappeared down the incline on the other side.

"*Did-you-see-that?*" Justine said in a horrified whisper. Her eyes opened even wider as something occurred to her. "Marissa, that was the guy from your story. The one who disappeared last week. It was absolutely him!"

The foursome stood at the side of the road, staring in silence at the woods. The sound of the man crashing through the underbrush had suddenly stopped.

"At least he wasn't all hairy," Ami said.

"Who cares!" Justine replied hotly.

"He went across the road to cut us off from the van, didn't he," Marissa said.

Her statement caused Justine to bring her hand up to her mouth, as though to stop herself from screaming. "Ohmygod, you're *right*. He must have been the one who put that tree across the road. What does that psycho want from us?!"

Toby was pretty sure he knew the answer to that question. Fine-tuned to the existence of monsters over the past nine months, he had definitely zeroed in on a not-entirely-human vibe from the man who had streaked across the road.

"Let's take it easy, people. We don't know who this guy is or what he wants.

"That's right," Ami said. "For all we know he might be as scared of us as we are of him."

"I'm *sure!*" Justine replied sarcastically.

"To be safe, though," Toby said. "I'm making an executive decision here. We're going to town instead of back to the van." Just then the sound of a glass window shattering echoed through the woods.

"Good idea," Ami said. "Seeing as that sounded like the window in our van being smashed to smithereens."

"I *told* you the guy was crazy!" Justine hissed.

Toby was already rummaging around at the side of the road. After coming up with a couple of thick branches and two rocks, he distributed the crude weapons to the group. "We're still don't know who that guy is or what he wants, but we stick close together, hear? We do that and we'll be fine. Now let's go. Keep an eye out."

Impressed with how quickly Toby had taken charge of the situation, Justine and Marissa fell in next to him without argument as he began jogging down the road. Ami looked back in the direction where the T-shirted figure had disappeared down the hill, then followed his chef-mates. Just after the foursome had taken the turn-off toward Raven's Run, a deer startled everyone when it jumped from the woods and dashed across the road. Toby noted that the deer was heading in the same direction they were. No surprise there. The buck was just as anxious as the Hidden Hills High Cooking Team to get away

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from the mysterious emaciated man lurking in the shadows behind them. Animals always knew when something wasn't right in their world.

2

"Where is he? Anyone hear him?"

Running closely together, four abreast, Toby and Ami flanked Marissa and Justine as they jogged down the middle of the road. There was only a slight upward incline to the road, but it was enough to make the group's journey an increasingly difficult aerobic workout.

"Maybe he's gonna let us go," Justine said when no one answered her question. "Think?"

No, I don't, Toby thought. The forboding feeling that had gripped him when he saw the predatory figure leap from the woods was still very much with him. Toby's best guess was their mysterious stalker had allowed them to get this far so they would wear themselves out and be easier pickings. It was a tactic that was working, at least as far as Toby was concerned. He'd fallen out of shape over the past few weeks while preparing for the cooking competition, not only letting his thrice weekly Killer Pizza workouts with Strobe and Annabel slide, but also eating way too much, courtesy of all the taste-testing he'd done with the various dishes the club had been preparing for their contest.

This'll teach you to play hooky with your exercise routine, Toby thought with a wince as a stitch in his side gave him a painful jab.

"Hey, there's a break up ahead in the trees," Marissa announced.

"Yes!" Justine replied between deep intakes of breath. "What is it? A strip mall or something?"

Toby had seen the break at the same time as Marissa. Darkness still shrouded the open area, but Toby was hopeful they might find some sort of shelter. If he was correct about their stalker - that he was something other than human, something monstrous - they needed shelter, and fast.

"Actually... it's a cemetery," Ami said.

"A cemetery?" Justine replied. "You've gotta be kidding me."

The cemetery slowly revealed itself the closer the group got to it, the tombstones undulating across several hills and stretching to the woods that bordered it.

"That's where those two guys met that girl," Justine said. "You said they met her at a cemetery, right, Marissa?"

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Toby detected an audible tremble in his volatile dessert chef's voice and knew he needed to say something to try to calm her down. "I'm sure there are other cemeteries in Raven's Run, Justine. It wasn't necessarily this one."

"I'll bet it was. This is insane. We're heading right for ground zero!"

Just then a sharp whooshing sound sliced through the heavy silence.

"UUUNNGHHH!"

Everyone stopped in the middle of the road when they heard Ami cry out in pain, then froze at what they saw. He had collapsed onto the asphalt! Toby's eyes went to a thick, several-foot long branch that still spun on the road a few feet from Ami's head.

"WHOOO-HOO-HOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!"

Toby's heart kicked into overdrive when he heard the weird, high-pitched taunt explode from the woods. It was the last thing he expected to hear, which made it all the more frightening.

"Did-you-hear-that?" Justine said, her voice hushed with disbelief.

Game on, Toby thought as he kneeled next to Ami.

"Is he OK?" Marissa asked.

"He's out cold," Toby replied.

"He's coming!" Justine yelled frantically.

Toby was instantly up and heading toward the woods to meet their stalker head-on, the branch clutched in his right hand his only weapon.

"Toby!" Justine cried out. "What are you doing?!"

Toby stopped at the edge of the woods, ready to do battle, then saw a flash of white among the trees, heading away from him.

"WHOOO-HOO-HOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!"

Whatever kind of monster this guy is, he's totally psycho besides, Toby thought as he slowly backed away from the woods.

A crazy monster. Something new for Toby. The ones he had faced before were cold and calculating. Turning back to the group, Toby was dismayed to see that his hand was trembling as he handed his branch to Marissa. "If you see that guy, throw the branch at him as hard as you can. Then your stone."

"Will do."

Toby bent down, picked up Ami and slung his limp body over his shoulder.

"Throw a branch?" Justine said as she followed Toby and Marissa. "That's it? Throw a branch? That's not gonna make this nut-case go away!"

"Well, it's something," Toby replied. "Try the phone again, will you, Justine?"

"Still dead," Justine said after holding the phone up to her ear. "Which is what we're gonna be before long!"

"That's an optimistic attitude," Marissa shot back.

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Barely managing to hold back from yelling in frustration at Justine, Toby instead said in a measured voice, "Hold yourself together, Justine. There's a caretaker's building just inside the cemetery entrance. We're gonna get in there and we're gonna be fine." Toby wasn't completely sure about that - the monster in the woods was clearly deranged and unpredictable and could come at them any second - but he knew he needed to keep up a confident front. Already laboring under Ami's weight as he carried him up the road, Toby had to pause to catch his breath when the group reached the main gate of the cemetery.

"WHOOO-HOOOOOO! WELCOME TO MY WORLD!!!"

The stalker's shrill greeting - expanding his vocabulary beyond the unnerving "WHOO-HOOO's" - had a high, strained quality, as though it were difficult for him to speak, making it all the more weird and off-center.

"I told you this was the cemetery," Justine whispered. "That dude is *gone*, man." Justine looked like a coiled spring, ready to burst. Which she suddenly did. Whirling toward the woods, she yelled, at the top of her lungs, "YOU'RE INSANE, NUTSO!"

"For god's sake, Justine, stifle it, will you?!" Toby commanded angrily.

The stalker responded to Justine's verbal volley with an hysterical laugh.

"Let's get to that caretaker's building," Toby said. "Now!" Adjusting Ami's still unconscious body on his shoulder, Toby headed toward the building. The trio hadn't gone more than a few yards when Marissa suddenly cried out in pain. Toby wheeled around to see her wincing and clutching her thigh. The sickening thud Toby had heard a split second before Marissa's exclamation had been caused by a large stone, another deadly accurate strike from their pursuer.

"YOU'RE A LUCKY ONE, GIRL! I WAS AIMING FOR YOUR HEAD!!!"

The high-pitched retort from their stalker, along with the sight of Marissa grimacing in pain, caused a a primitive, powerful anger to pulse through Toby. "Help her, Justine!" Justine looked blankly at Toby, then seemed to snap out of her daze. Helping Marissa to her feet, she followed Toby. The foursome was a pitiful looking group as they arrived at the caretaker's building. After leading Justine and Marissa around to the back to get out of their assailant's throwing range, Toby gave out under Ami's weight and collapsed to both knees. He placed Ami on the ground, asked Marissa for her branch, then smashed a hole through a window of the building and opened it. "You first," he told Justine.

"We'll be trapped in there!"

"Then stay out here if you want."

Justine looked wildly around the deserted cemetery. The snow had stopped and a willowy mist hovered a few feet above the ground. The creepy, uninviting scene caused Justine to reluctantly enter the caretaker's building.

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Marissa was the next to go inside, then there was an awkward exchange as Toby lifted Ami to the window and Justine and Marissa took him from there, arms under each of his armpits as they dragged him into the dark interior of the building.

Toby took a quick glance around the building toward the cemetery entrance - no sign of their stalker - then joined the group inside the building and closed and latched the broken window. He immediately felt better when he saw what was arranged on the walls. Shovels, a pickax, gardening shears, a long handled tree trimmer, a couple of different sized crowbars. Plenty of possible weapons.

"Hey! I finally have a connection!" Justine said, her voice practically breaking into grateful sobs as she held up her phone in triumph.

Toby went to Ami when he heard him groan. "Marissa, can you see if there's flashlight in here somewhere?"

"Hello? Hello!" Justine put one hand over her exposed ear and frowned. "Yes! We need help! What?"

"Ami?" Toby said, leaning in close to the inert figure. "Give me a nod if you can hear me."

"I don't have an address! We're at a cemetery and this guy... what?"

Toby was relieved when Ami give him a slow nod. "OK. Alright. Excellent. You're gonna be OK, man. We're in a safe place now."

"I said we're at a cemetery!"

"It's the Harmony Hill Cemetery on Briar Road," Toby said, mentally thanking Harvey and Steve for their insistence that he notice details in the course of his monster-hunting training. "Marissa, why don't you take over this call." Marissa handed Toby a high-powered flashlight she had found, then went to get Justine's phone.

"It's the Harmony Hill Cemetery on Briar Road! Hurry! This guy..." Justine jerked away from Marissa when she approached and held out her hand for the phone. "What's my emergency? I'll tell you what my emergency is. A total nut-case is stalking us! He knocked one of us out with a branch and he's throwing stones at us and he has this weird laugh and... What?"

Toby shook his head in dismay. Justine was the one who sounded like a total nut-case! Getting up, Toby grabbed the phone from Justine and said, "Hello, operator? This is Toby Magill."

"There he is!" Justine yelled as she pointed frantically out the front window. "I just saw him!" Toby had seen him, too, the moonlit gravestones a fitting background to the flash of a white T-shirt as their demented stalker streaked in and out of sight.

"That's correct," Toby replied. "One of our party was knocked unconscious." Toby went to the side window to try to catch another glimpse of their assailant.

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"We had an accident down on Route 21 and were walking to Raven's Run to get help when we were attacked."

Studying the hundreds of gravestones arranged in neat rows on the hillside that rose up behind the caretaker's building, Toby had a sudden sick feeling that their stalker was not alone. Which meant they might have been allowed to get as far as the cemetery not to wear themselves down, as Toby had thought, but because this is where the psychotic teen had arranged to bring his monster accomplices their next meal!

"Yes, we're currently at the Harmony Hill Cemetery, in the caretaker's building."

"I can't believe how *calm* you are," Justine shouted from the other side of the room. "She's gonna think this isn't serious. You need to raise your voice a little. You need to yell!"

"Thank you. I'd appreciate it."

"Get someone out here as soon as possible!" Justine bellowed as Toby pressed the OFF button.

"You really are a piece of work, Justine."

"Me? What about you? You're acting like this is just a little inconvenience or something!"

"Well, it's better than totally falling apart, which is what you've been doing," Marissa said, obviously fed up with Justine's hysterics.

"Oh, that's right. Gang up on me!"

"I just don't see how getting all crazy helps matters," Marissa countered.

"Don't call me crazy!"

"Where are we?"

Everyone turned when they heard Ami's question. Illuminated by the flashlight Toby had left on the floor, he was up on his elbows, looking around the room with a frown.

"We're in a caretaker's building in a cemetery, that's where." Justine's reply prompted a frown from Ami. "The cemetery where those guys met that girl? The cemetery where they disappeared?"

"Are you serious?" Ami asked.

Taking off his jacket, Toby bunched it up and placed it behind Ami's head to use as a pillow. "Lay back, OK? Rest. The cops are on their way."

"What happened to me?" Ami asked.

"You were hit by a branch." Marissa looked pained at having to relay that to Ami.

"Get out. By that guy?"

"Yeah, he's a total nut-case, just like I said!" Justine was at a back window, staring outside. "Toby, did that woman say how long before someone gets out here?"

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"No."

"Great."

"I'd keep away from that window if I were you."

Justine glared at Toby, but backed away from the window. She paced back and forth for a moment, then sat down on the cold floor cement. "So we're just gonna sit here? Wait for the cops?"

"Have any other ideas?" Toby asked.

"I'm freezing," Justine said with a shudder.

Toby got up from Ami's side and walked around the room to study the caretaker's equipment, glancing out the windows as he went.

"Is that a chainsaw I see?" Ami asked, a sudden dreamy tone slowing down his words as he spoke.

"It is," Toby replied.

"That could do some damage." Ami managed a weak smile. "Texas Chainsaw Massacre, baby. The first one was great. The second one sucked."

Toby checked out the chainsaw at closer range, then selected one of the crowbars, the largest one. He liked the feel of it in his hands.

"Ohhhh, man," Ami groaned. "I think I might be sick."

"Just lay still," Toby urged. "It's best not to move right now. You might have a concussion."

"What a night, huh?" Ami said, his words slurred. "Second place in our cooking competition, a car accident, a branch to the head..." Ami's eyes closed as he spoke and he appeared to drift off to sleep.

"AAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!"

Toby whirled when he heard another ear-piercing scream from Justine, just in time to see a bare arm reaching through the broken window and feeling for the latch! In an instant he was across the room and at the window, bringing the crowbar down in a sweeping arc as he arrived. The crowbar thudded against the assailant's hand, causing an immediate withdrawal.

"WHOOO-HOO-HOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!"

Toby, Justine and Marissa crowded at the window to watch the man's retreat, his injured hand dangling limply at his side as he ran crazily among the tombstones.

"That dude must have escaped from an insane asylum," Justine said, looking awed at just how off-the-rails their stalker really was. "Seriously." Just then another figure appeared from the woods at the top of the hill. "Oh, no. *Who's that?*"

Toby felt an icy tremor snake down his spine at the sight of the female figure. She was wearing a short white dress. Standing just outside the line of trees that bordered the cemetery, Toby felt as though she was staring right into his skull.

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"That one's really creepy," Justine said, echoing Toby's thoughts as she moved slowly away from the window. "I can't believe this. It's getting worse every second. *Where are those cops?!*"

Toby continued to look at the girl at the top of the hill. He couldn't help himself. Even though she was several hundred yards away, Toby had the unsettling feeling that she was overpowering him with some kind of otherworldly strength. "Let's not panic," Toby urged, feeling panicky himself at girl's strangely hypnotic pull. "We're gonna stay right here until the police show up." Toby managed to break eye contact with the girl and quickly turned away from the window.

"Yeah, good idea," Justine shot back. "Just like in all those horror movies, when everyone's trapped inside a cabin the woods. You know how they turn out, don't you? Everyone dies!"

Toby, Justine and Marissa all whirled toward the front door when they heard the unmistakable sound of a car, coming in their direction.

"It's the cops!" Justine yelled.

The trio ran to a window that faced the front of the cemetery. Toby found himself holding his breath as he waited for the car to appear, its tires squealing on the curves as it approached. Then... there it was.

"NO!" Justine cried out in despair as the civilian car rushed past the entrance to the cemetery and disappeared around a bend in the road. Collapsing melodramatically on the floor, Justine wailed, "We're never getting out of here. This is it. This is where it all ends!"

Justine's sobbing hiccups and shaking shoulders were so over-the-top that Toby almost laughed. But he didn't, instead turning away from Justine's pathetic figure and returning to the rear window. The girl in the white dress was no longer standing at the top of the hill. Appearing at his side, Marissa said in a whisper, "Think maybe we should call 911 again?"

"Not a bad idea." Toby was getting his phone out when he heard the sound of another car. Once again everyone was at the front window, straining to see if this car was the police.

It was.

"WHOO-HOOOO!" Justine yelled, strangely echoing their stalker's crazed battle cry as her despair instantly flitted to elation.

Hearing his cellphone ring, Toby fished it out of his pocket. "Hello?" Toby frowned as another cellphone continued to ring. Realizing he still had Justine's phone, he exchanged his for hers. The call was from the sheriff, who had just turned into the cemetery and was now driving slowly up the road toward them.

"Justine!" Toby yelled when she ran to the front door and started to unlock it. "The sheriff said to stay right here until he checks out the surrounding area."

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"Why?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Marissa replied, shooting Justine an irritated look. "He wants to make sure everything's safe out there."

"That guy is probably haulin' butt through the woods right now," Justine replied happily. "The girl, too, whoever she was. You think they want to tangle with the cops?"

Looking out the window, Toby felt as though his blood had suddenly drained from his body, leaving nothing but a freezing coldness in its wake.

"NO!!!"

Toby's yell of warning came too late. Their stalker had just leaped from behind a nearby gravestone, a large stone clutched in his hand. The sheriff turned as he reached for his gun, but the crazed teen already had the jump on him. Staggered by a blow to the head, the sheriff stayed propped up for a moment by the open car door, then disappeared from sight as he fell to the ground.

There you have it, KP fans!

The rest of "Killer Pizza: Vampire Stakes" will be available on May 7, 2013. Don't miss out on Toby, Annabel and Strobe's exciting third Killer Pizza adventure!

THANKS FOR YOUR SUPPORT.