

Fiction: WHAT THE MONSTER SAW by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

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She might have vanished forever if it weren't for a haphazard glance by Kyle Worthington. He was walking past the alley on 63rd, his cell phone in his left hand as he showed his friends Mason and Devin the one-touch video feature his dad had forbidden him to use.

It was eighty-six degrees in October and the streets reeked of piss and garbage. Kyle had tied his woolen school jacket around his waist, rolled up the sleeves of his white shirt, and loosened his tie. He didn't dare pull it off because he'd never get it tied again; somehow he couldn't learn the over-and-under pattern, and his dad had forbidden his mom from tying it for him. No way he was going to ask his buddies to do it. With them, he wasn't Kyle Worthington, the good-for-nothing only son of Jackson Worthington, he was the Big K, the kid who'd seen the inside of half a dozen impossible-to-get-into private schools and lived to tell about it.

The Big K knew stuff that hardly anyone else knew. He had the latest, coolest gadget before anyone else, and he could chat up the prettiest girls because he was indifferent to dating any of them. Rumor had it that he didn't date in high school because he had his pick of the college girls that filled the city.

He liked the rumor. It kept the attention off him, and allowed his shyness to manifest itself as an intense need for privacy instead of the nearly pathological aversion to close companionship that had him going to counselors since he was six.

He'd learned, thanks to one very driven therapist and all those private schools, how to make casual conversation with almost anyone. He'd also learned how attract hangers-on and the occasional groupie just by letting the rumors swirl. Kids cared as long as he didn't seem to, an attitude he blew big time as he swung his cell toward the alley on that hot October afternoon.

"Christ!" he said, and took a step back.

There was a girl in the garbage. Her eyes were closed, her long black hair flowing around her. Her features were delicate, and her mouth small.

But her face wasn't what caught him. What caught him were her hands, curved into fists and flopped beside that sea of hair, and her bare arms, bruised and covered with blood.

It took him a second to realize that what he'd initially taken for a black garbage bag tossed over her torso was a mat of drying blood. And weirdly, horribly, he couldn't see her legs at all.

"Dude, what the hell?" Mason stopped beside him, looking up at him, as Mason always did.

Kyle couldn't say anything. He was frozen, one arm up, clutching his cell. He wasn't looking at her anymore—he couldn't—but he was searching through the piles of black bags for a sign that he was staring at more than the upper half of what had once been a living, breathing human being.

"Crap, man," Devin said, and promptly vomited all over the sidewalk.

Mason stepped back, but Kyle didn't move. He was staring at the image on the cell now, the one he'd inadvertently captured. The girl's face in closeup—those delicate features oddly familiar.

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"Crap, man," Devin said, and

promptly vomited all over the sidewalk. Mason stepped back, but Kyle didn't move. He was staring at the image on the cell now, the one he'd inadvertently captured. The girl's face in closeup—those delicate features oddly familiar. He knew her. Well, he didn't really know her, but he recognized her. She was the Breck Girl. That wasn't her real name. That was the nickname one of the male teachers gave her after he'd caught some of the boys looking at her online.

Kyle had downloaded her YouTube video six months before, and had bookmarked her Web site, www.tallystipsforhair.com. It was a video blog all about hairstyling because, she'd said with a twinkle in her eye, no

matter what they claimed, guys looked at a girl's hair first. He'd always meant to e-mail her and tell her she was wrong. Guys looked at tits first or a really fine ass. But he had never been able to bring himself to write the letter. It was just a little too crass, and he'd always had hope of meeting her, even though he hadn't known, until now, that she lived anywhere near New York City.

"What do we do, man?" Mason asked.

The question snapped Kyle back to the alley, which now reeked of vomit as well as garbage and blood. He pressed Save with his thumb. Then he dialed 911, and braced himself for the long, lost afternoon ahead.

* * * *

It was midnight before he was alone with his computer. He sat in the dim glow from the monitor, his heart pounding.

Months ago, he had put blackout fabric over his door and pulled the shades down on his windows, but he still felt watched. He had finally gone to the spy shop near Ground Zero and bought a bug zapper. He had brought it home and found half a dozen bugs all over his room, as well as two hidden cameras. He had pulled the bugs out of his phone and off the lamp bases. Then he had brought them to his mother.

"I think Dad forgot these," he had said, and she had flushed. He had no idea what she had done with them, but he

knew she hadn't confronted his father about them. She never confronted his father, not even this evening when his dad ripped him a new one for bringing the Worthington name into such a sordid affair as a murder, as if Kyle had killed the girl himself. It had started out okay. When his mother had found out that Kyle was late coming home because he had called the police, she had wrapped him in her arms and pulled him close.

"I'm so proud of you, Kyle," she had said—whispered, really, as if expressing her opinion in that apartment was against the law.

That was when his dad had come home. And his dad wanted to know what Kyle had done that was so praiseworthy.

Kyle had defaulted to his usual “Nothing, sir,” but his mother had to go and explain it all. His father glared at him, then walked into the at-home office, turned on the wall screen with its twenty-four available channels to see the damage.

Kyle followed him to the door.

The damage wasn't national, not yet, but NY1 already had the story: The mutilated body of a young girl was found this afternoon by Kyle Worthington, only son of billionaire Jackson Worthington. Young Worthington was walking through the neighborhood with friends when he caught sight of what he called

“a girl in the trash,” and called 911. The girl, who has not been identified,

had been beaten, stabbed, and mutilated, in what police call one of the most graphic crimes the city has seen in a decade....

"You realize what this is going to do, don't you?" his father had said. "The entire press corps will descend. This story is about you, Kyle, and because of you, it'll be about me." His father pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and hit a button with one finger. Kyle had used that moment to retreat.

But he hadn't been able to go to his room—not yet. He'd had to eat with both parents, because they insisted. Families eat together, his mother always said in that whispery tone, as if even that firmly held belief might have to change under

his father's dictates.

Kyle wished it would. Dinner consisted of more beratings from his father. Kyle had to stay through the coffee and more recriminations. Then his mother wanted more time with him, and because his father was so furious, Kyle had complied, even though it meant watching reruns of Desperate Housewives on the big screen in the den.

By the time he had gotten to his room, he was tired and shaking. He put one of the continuous loops he'd taped into the cameras' programming so his dad couldn't spy on him, careful to chose the one that went with this shirt, and then he logged onto the computer. He was desperate to prove to his father that the

Breck Girl wasn't famous because Kyle had found her. She was famous in her own right, first for her YouTube video and then for tallystipsforhair.com.

No one knew it was her in that alley. No one except him. He hadn't even told the cops, figuring they would find it on their own. Besides, he didn't want to seem like he knew too much about her. He'd watched enough crime shows to know that the guy who found the body was often under as much suspicion as the friends and relatives of the deceased.

Kyle went to that website now. She had a studio portrait on one of the pages, and he wanted to see that. He was going to compare it to the video he'd taken that afternoon, just to make sure his own

memory wasn't faulty.

He logged onto the site and there she was, a living, breathing human being, brushing her long black hair. It was the video opener she had put up earlier in the week. He'd already watched it half a dozen times with the sound off. Much as he liked her slightly husky voice, he'd grown tired of the instruction: Forget that myth about a hundred strokes. A hundred strokes won't give you shiny hair. Only the proper care will do that. The proper care and thirty minutes of slow brushing with a soft-bristled brush every single day...

He stared at that face, with its slight color in the cheeks, the knowing black eyes, the small dimple on the left side of

her mouth, a dimple that only appeared when she smiled. He clicked on the link that led to her studio portrait and looked at the shot. Her eyes stared into the distance, her delicate mouth was partly open, and her hair flowed around her as if caught in a gentle breeze.

He grabbed his cell phone, opened the video file, and froze it on the closeup he'd taken of the dead girl. Except for the open eyes, the staging was exactly the same. Particularly the hair. It was identical, down to the positioning of the strands.

The killer had been to the site. He had used this photograph as his template. He had been sending a message.

A message that only Kyle had

received.

* * * *

Kyle paced around his bedroom for an hour. His bedroom was big. He had his own bathroom, and a sitting area that had been a second room until his father's on-staff designer had gotten ahold of it. Everything was open and airy, or so she said, as if in creating the illusion of openness, she could force the family into being open.

Of course, it hadn't worked.

Nothing was working, not even Kyle's brain. If he hadn't been Kyle Worthington, only son of billionaire Jackson Worthington, he would have resolved to call the police first thing in the morning, no matter how much

suspicion it would have cast on him.

But he'd already received a new asshole for doing the responsible thing and calling 911. He couldn't imagine how his father would react if Kyle actually cast suspicion on himself by showing that the dead girl wasn't some random victim.

And he couldn't ask one of his friends to do it. He knew how that would work. The police would ask them how they knew the Breck Girl wasn't a random victim, and they would say that Kyle Worthington told them. That would be even worse than telling the police himself. Kyle sat on the edge of his king-sized bed, the satin spread bunching against his legs. He picked up his phone

and played the video again, heard his startled voice sounding digitized and small as it said, Christ!

Next came Mason, his voice even clearer as he said, Dude, what the hell? Then there was Devin's Crap, man, accompanied by the sound of vomit spattering all over the concrete. Recognizable, clear. The sounds of the boys who had found a dead body on their walk home. What the paparazzi wouldn't give for a bit of that tape. What his dad would do if it were made public. But it had a couple of things, things that the police needed to solve the crime, things that the police didn't know they needed.

Like the way her hair mimicked the

hair on her pro shot. The way her fists were clenched as if she'd been fighting. Or maybe as if she'd been holding something, something someone had taken away. He was shaking. He lacked the skill to send an encrypted e-mail message—the kind that would truly be anonymous. The NYPD had a dedicated computer crimes unit now, one that had been able to track pedophile rings all over the world, which meant that they knew how to go through layers and layers of masking technology.

And he couldn't go to a cyber cafe because those things used monitoring now too, just like his dad did. They recorded whoever sat at the screen from the screen's internal camera, as well as

on the external security system.

He could try a call from a pay phone if he could find one, and if the one he found wasn't near an ATM or any other private security camera. He could even use a prepaid cell, but he'd have to buy one, and most small stores now had sophisticated security as well.

He was being watched everywhere, just like everyone else.

Finally, a glance at the clock convinced him he wasn't going to find the answers here. It was nearly two a.m. If his father got up for his middle-of-the-night pee, then he'd check the cameras and see that his number-one son—his only son—hadn't gone to bed yet.

There'd be another round of

recriminations. It wouldn't matter if Kyle said it was normal for a guy who discovered a dead body to have trouble sleeping. His dad would start in on him again for calling 911, and the entire nightmare scenario would replay.

Best side of valor was to shut down the continuous loop, turn on the live cam, and go to bed. Then his dad would think he was asleep, and Kyle could think with a reasonable expectation of privacy—or at least, an expectation of not being interrupted.

He reset the cameras, went through his bedtime routine, and crawled between the silk sheets, shutting out the light. He'd been afraid that the Breck Girl's face would peer at him in the darkness,

but it didn't. Nothing did.

* * * *

Lunch was the most painless part of the school day. Kids sat at white linen-covered tables. Waiters actually took orders and served food, food that was better than the crap served at his dad's private men's club.

Kyle always sat at the same table, with Mason and Devin and a revolving group of casual friends—whoever showed up before the table got filled. They were all coming to sit with him, the mysterious Kyle Worthington, but he'd long ago given up on trying to figure out if they were sitting with him because they liked him or because they wanted to get to know someone whose dad was

one of the richest people on the planet.

Kyle stared at his usual lunch table, already filled except for the chair he usually sat in, then veered away from it. He went to the table in the back where the Geek Squad hung out.

"You mind?" he asked as he pulled out the chair closest to the window. The Geek Squad—a group of four of the most brilliant guys in class and the only two girls who weren't afraid to show that they could keep up—stared at him in shock.

"You can have the chair," Loiree said. She was pudgy with chapped lips that she always kept biting. Her glasses didn't fit right. They slid down her nose, and she kept pushing them up with the

knuckle of her left forefinger.

She'd been his chem partner for all of a day before the teacher separated them, saying that the pairing would allow Worthington to coast. A valid assumption based on his past history, but nowhere near the truth.

If Kyle applied himself, he could be a member of the Geek Squad. He just never saw the point. All it would do was force his father to push him even harder, something Kyle didn't ever want to suffer through.

"I don't care about the chair," Kyle said. "I'd like to sit here." They stared at him as if flames had shot out of his nose. He straddled the chair and sat, resting his elbows on the table.

"Mr. Worthington," said one of the waiters. "May I assume you're eating here?"

"You may assume that," Kyle said. "And give me the usual." The waiter nodded and vanished toward the back without taking orders from the rest of the Geek Squad. No one else seemed to notice. Everyone in the entire lunchroom was staring at him. He decided to ignore them, and only concentrate on the six people at this particular table. "I got some questions," he said, "and you guys are the brilliant ones, so I thought you might have some answers."

"We don't let anyone crib homework," said Nellie Evans, the other girl at the table. She'd actually be pretty if she

didn't hunch and if she had taken the Breck Girl's advice and paid attention to her hair. "And we don't send answers to cells, even for a fee."

"Bully for you," he said drily. "I can do my own homework, thanks." He tried to bury his annoyance. Why did everyone think he was stupid anyway?

He knew how to do the work. He just chose not to, mostly to piss off his old man. But he didn't say any of that. Instead, he said, "I just want to know some technical stuff." The Geek Squad boys still hadn't moved. They were watching him with more than a little fear. People usually weren't afraid of him.

It took him a moment to realize they

thought this was some kind of prank—that they'd be made the butt of a particularly ugly joke—and they weren't participating in any part of the conversation for that very reason.

"Look," he said as calmly as he could. "This is on the level. You guys know more about everything than anyone else. And I have some questions. I'm not going to embarrass you. I promise." They were saved from answering him by a different waiter, one Kyle had never noticed before. He didn't realize until that moment that the lunchroom waiters had their own sections and, presumably, their own customers, just like the waiters at his dad's club did.

He shivered. He hadn't even noticed

the de facto segregation until he'd broken protocol. He wondered how many other things he had missed.

"I just want to know," he said after the Geek Squad ordered, "if it's possible to send an e-mail that no one—and I mean no one—can trace."

"Just go to an anonymous e-mail site," said Loiree. She rolled her eyes at one of the male Geeks, a scrawny kid named Najib.

"If I send an e-mail from one of those sites, it can be traced to my computer, right?" Kyle asked. Loiree tilted her head, her glasses catching the light and hiding her eyes. Still, Kyle could sense her surprise.

"That's right," Najib said in his high-

pitched voice. He was two years younger than the rest of them, a scholarship student whose family couldn't even afford to buy him the school uniform. He'd had to borrow old ones that the principal's office kept for just such emergencies. "There's no way to send an untraceable e-mail. I mean, even if you go to some cyber cafe or use a friend's computer, someone would eventually find you. If they were that motivated."

The Squad had leaned forward as a unit, all except Nellie, who was still hunched in her chair, chewing on a strand of her black hair. Kyle was beginning to realize that he freaked her out.

"What about a text message?" he asked. "What if I used a prepaid cell?"

"Those can be traced too," said Najib. The other boys were nodding. "Especially if you bought it recently."

"But if you have an unlocked prepaid cell," said the other scrawny kid at the table, Taéo Domingus, "you could put in a foreign SIM card like a Turkish one or something, and then send the text."

"Yeah," said Najib. "If you send it to a few other unlocked cells with swapped-out SIMs, the tracker would have to go through not just the cell but the supposed country of origin. A lot of those countries, if you chose the right one, keep their cell records confidential."

"And they're hard to hack." Nellie had stopped chewing her hair. "It's not untraceable, but it would take a long time."

"You worried about a hacker?" Loiree asked.

"Worried about my dad." Kyle had meant that as a lie, but in essence it was true. If his dad wasn't such a grade-A control freak, then Kyle could do the responsible thing without resorting to trickery. "Worried about his security people and any authorities they might contact." The girls and Najib nodded. But Taeo was frowning. "Money can buy a lot of information. Your dad would find it."

"But," Najib said, "it would take a lot

of time, finding the right official to bribe in the right place."

"And you'd have to know the text was sent too, right?" Kyle asked. "I mean before you start looking for it."

"Yeah," Najib said. "You'd have to want to find the source of that particular text."

"Pretty badly, as a matter of fact," Nellie said with a sideways glance at Taeo.

"Is your dad the kinda guy who'd go through the trouble to find all of that?" Taeo asked.

"He wouldn't go through the trouble," Kyle said. "He'd pay someone else to." But first, his dad would have to know the police had received a text. And then

his dad would have to suspect him of sending that text.

Kyle felt pretty safe that neither would happen.

"I know where to get an unlocked cell," he said. The spy shop where he had gotten a lot of his other gear had unlocked cells. "Tell me how they work."

"Pretty simple," Najib said. "American cell phones are locked. In most countries, the cells aren't. If you take the battery out of your cell, you'll see a flat surface. Beneath that surface is your SIM card. It's the brains of your phone. Remove that and the phone doesn't work. You lose everything from your phone numbers to your saved texts.

Put it back in and those things return."

"Like the memory card for a camera," Kyle said.

"Exactly." Najib stopped as their waiter brought the rest of the food. Kyle didn't recognize any of the items. He wondered if they had a different menu than he had too—one that wasn't as expensive. When the waiter left, Najib continued. "The SIM card is proprietary to your cell-phone provider. If you had an unlocked cell with service from, say, Verizon, you could remove the SIM and put in an AT&T

SIM. You'd lose all your Verizon memory and your Verizon number and you'd replace it with an AT&T

number. If you put in a British SIM

card, you'll get a British phone number from a British provider."

"But don't you need a credit card for that?" Kyle asked.

Najib and Taeo both laughed.

"Don't you live in Manhattan, dude?" asked the third boy, whose name Kyle didn't know.

"Yeah," Kyle said, not understanding.

"Have you seen how many guys sell electronics on the sidewalk?" the kid asked.

"Yeah," Kyle said. "But they're illegal, often stolen merchandise."

"Or at least untraceable," Taeo said. "I doubt any of those guys has a machine for your credit card, even though they'd want your card number."

"Hell," Najib said. "I want your card number, at least for a day."

"Stop it," Nellie said.

She'd been picking at her food, and Kyle thought she had stopped paying attention. Obviously, she hadn't.

"The key is," she said, "that you need a lot of SIMs and you need to send that text from phone to phone to phone. Then you have to toss everything."

"Phones and SIM cards," Najib said. "Get rid of all of it."

"And not garbage cans, either," Taeko said. "Smash the cards, toss them in the river." Kyle bit the inside of his lower lip. He wasn't stupid. But he wasn't going to let these kids see him as defensive either.

"No one'll trace that text, man," Taeko said.

"Except..." Loiree let her voice trail off dramatically.

"Except?" Kyle asked.

"You already screwed up by asking us. We know your plan now. If your dad wants to know about some text, we can tell him how you sent it. We won't have the phone numbers, but we'll have the plan. That's good enough."

In spite of himself, Kyle felt another shiver run through him.

"For all you know," he said as nonchalantly as he could, "I'm researching a paper."

"For all we know," Najib agreed.

"Since you're not letting us do your

homework,” Tao said with a smile. Kyle smiled back. “Thanks.”

They watched him as if they expected him to leave. But he wasn't going to leave until he was done, no matter how uncomfortable it made everyone at the table. He wasn't the kind of guy who would sit down for one question and leave when the Geek Squad answered it. He didn't want to treat them like that. The Geek Squad didn't talk much while he was there. Nellie kept sending him sideways glances. Finally, she said, “Why do you need to send a secret text?” He debated telling her the truth, and then decided against it. “I don't,” he said, flashing his most charming smile. “Maybe I truly am going to write a

paper."

She flushed as if he'd embarrassed her. He probably had. He'd done what he'd just vowed not to. He'd belittled her by making her answers to his questions into a joke.

"Or maybe," he said in a gentler tone, "I'm finally doing the stuff my dad doesn't want me to. It's about time I get a spine anyway. At least, that's what he says." They watched him, mouths open. He started shaking. He piled his dishes on the side of the table, then pushed his chair back.

Why did he have to tell her the truth? Because he'd embarrassed her? He embarrassed a lot of people. No. It was because he'd hurt her feelings, and all

she'd done was ask a simple question after he demanded that she help him.

He wasn't used to demanding anything from anyone, and he certainly wasn't used to someone taking a genuine interest in what he was doing, which was what she had displayed. He felt a flush warm his own cheeks. He'd embarrassed himself and he had a hunch it was only going to get worse.

* * * *

He cut classes that afternoon. Since it was hot again—stifling, really—he decided not to take the subway. Instead he stopped at one of the neighborhood touristy shops and bought a white FDNY T-shirt, carefully putting his jacket, his shirt, and his still-tied tie in the bag. He

didn't want to be memorable when he bought the SIM cards on the street. He was halfway to the spy shop when he realized he needed something to drink. He stopped in a nearby coffee shop and bought an iced cappuccino. As he sipped it inside the air-conditioned shop, he frowned at himself.

What had he said to Nellie? Maybe I'm finally doing the stuff my dad doesn't want me to. But he'd always done the stuff his dad didn't want him to do. He'd just worked very hard at not getting caught. When he did get caught, he took his punishment and silently vowed not to get caught again. The important sentence had been the next one: It's about time I get a spine anyway. Because if he had a

spine, he would defy his dad in public, when getting caught was guaranteed. Kyle had done that a few times before, but those defiant moments had been accidental. Even though he'd made a study of his dad's temper his entire life, he wasn't always sure what would set the man off. Who knew that a simple thing like reporting a murder victim would piss off his father so badly?

His father didn't want him to call attention to himself. But attention had already been called. The media knew that Kyle Worthington, only son of billionaire Jackson Worthington, had discovered a body in an alley. They'd used that moment to explore the history of his family and to recycle all that file

footage of Kyle from his very first departure from the hospital wrapped in the arms of his smiling mother to a picture of him and Mason and Devin talking on the steps of school.

The story had been a story not because of the girl, but because of Kyle. And nothing he could do would change that.

Kyle tossed the iced cappuccino into a nearby garbage can and left the coffee shop. Instead of heading down to the spy shop, he walked half a dozen blocks to the precinct listed on the card the chief detective had given him.

Kyle didn't stop as he walked inside. He used all his skills to keep his face neutral as he wended his way up a flight

of stairs to the main desk.

No one needed to know how terrified Kyle Worthington, only son of billionaire Jackson Worthington, was of doing the right thing.

* * * *

The detective, one Louis Gollier, stood beside an ancient office desk, flipping through manila folders. He was a small man wearing a brown suit jacket that had frayed cuffs. He didn't seem too thrilled to see Kyle.

"Your dad know you're here?" Gollier asked. And that was when Kyle knew that in addition to chewing his son a new asshole, his father had chewed Gollier one too.

"No." Kyle's voice didn't shake, and

he considered that a step forward. Gollier sighed. He looked exhausted. He waved over another detective, who took one look at Kyle and shook his head in weary resignation.

"What do you want?" Gollier asked.

"I got something to show you," Kyle said. "You got a computer?" Gollier looked at the other detective, who shrugged. Kyle couldn't tell if the other man was Gollier's boss or just someone who was present to cover Gollier's ass.

"Over here," Gollier said, leading him to a desk toward the back.

"Can we go online from here?" Kyle asked.

Gollier nodded. He punched the machine's space bar so that the screen

saver disappeared, then clicked on the Internet icon. A program Kyle didn't recognize booted up, slower than anything he'd seen in years.

"Gimme the site," Gollier said.

Given how slowly the computer worked, Kyle would rather type in the site himself. But he told Gollier to go to www.tallystipsforhair.com/contact. That took them directly to the photograph.

"Jeez, kid." Gollier looked over his shoulder at Kyle. "You knew about this when?" Kyle swallowed. He knew this part was coming. "I thought she looked familiar when I found her, but I wasn't sure. So I logged on last night. The guy who killed her, he knew the site."

"So did you," said the other detective.

Kyle nodded. "That's why I debated coming in."

"Your dad would want you to bring your lawyer," said Gollier. Kyle had to resist giving him a pitying look. His dad had inserted himself into the investigation so forcefully that an NYPD detective was worried about lawsuits.

"He would," Kyle said. "But that's my problem."

"Kid, it's mine too," Gollier said. "How'm I supposed to look at this? You found her, for God's sake. You could've dummied this up for us."

Kyle reached over him, deleted the word "contact" from the web address, and hit Refresh. It took a minute, but the website's home page finally appeared,

with fifteen different videos of the Breck Girl cued up and waiting to be played.

"Your computer people can look at all of this," Kyle said. "I didn't dummy any of it up. She's been around for about six months."

"You know this because ... ?" Gollier let the word hang, as if the implication was that Kyle knew her.

"Because he's a red-blooded teenage boy," the other detective said. "This is the underwear section of the Sears catalogue for a new generation."

Kyle didn't exactly get the reference, but he understood enough to flush. Gollier shook his head. "Why not just go to a porn site? Or is this one?"

"No," Kyle said. "She was just..."

He didn't know how to finish that sentence. It sounded lame to say she was just into hair. But she was. And that was all he knew about her.

"I didn't even know she lived near New York until yesterday. And I wasn't sure she was the same person until last night. You can have your techs check the site. I'm sure it'll show when I logged on yesterday."

"This changes things," the other detective said.

"At least you know who she is now," Kyle said.

"Oh," Gollier said, "we knew that yesterday. We found a purse not too far away. Money was gone, but her I.D. was intact. Family's been notified, no one

knows what happened."

"So you got suspects, then," Kyle said.

"Kid, until just now, we had a possible runaway with no local ties. Except you."

"And all the guys at my school," Kyle said.

"Including the boys you were with?"

Kyle shrugged. His stomach had clenched. Maybe he should have sent that text after all. Or brought a lawyer. He thought the police would get through the suspicion stuff pretty damn quick. But that wasn't happening.

"I don't know who she was," Kyle said. "I don't know where she lived. I can tell you everything I did for the past

week. And most of it is on tape."

"What?" Gollier said.

Kyle swallowed. "My dad—he hid some cameras in my room. He doesn't think I know about them. So if I wasn't in school, I was at home, being filmed."

Gollier glanced at the other detective, who mimed a visible shudder.

"You don't got friends?" the other detective asked.

"I do," Kyle said, unsure whether or not that was a lie. "I didn't spend much time with them this week." Gollier sighed. "We're going to look into this Web site crap. If we need to talk to you, we're going to call. Both you and your dad. Got it?"

Kyle's stomach clenched so hard that

it actually hurt. "I do."

"Then we're done," Gollier said.

Kyle nodded. He turned, feeling slightly dizzy, and realized he wasn't breathing. He made himself suck in some of the precinct's stale air.

"Hey, kid," the other detective said. "How come you came in?" Kyle swallowed. He wanted to say, because it was the right thing, but he knew that would sound both lame and suspicious. So he took another deep breath before turning around.

"Right now," he said, his voice shaking, "on the news, it's all about me. I found her. I did this, I did that. No one talks about her. And she's the one who died. Pretty horribly, right?"

"Yeah," the other detective said.

"It should be about her," Kyle said.

The other detective nodded, but it was Gollier's expression that softened.

"Ah, kid," he said softly, "out there, it's never about the victim, no matter how much we want it to be."

* * * *

By the time Kyle got home, the Breck Girl's real identity (Ioni Locke from Schenectady) and her original YouTube video were on NY1. From that moment on, reporters stopped mentioning Kyle's name, except as the one who discovered the body. The story grew from a grisly murder case to the dangers of the Internet to the way that society (and its youngest members) voluntarily give up their

privacy. Kyle followed it all, even after they caught the alleged killer, a middle-aged mechanic named Harold Talbert who spent his evenings trolling the Internet and picking up underage girls. Most were runaways, but he'd become obsessed with the Breck Girl, visiting her site and e-mailing her constantly. No one knew (or maybe the police weren't releasing) how he managed to kidnap her, but Kyle did remember that the detective said they'd initially thought she was a runaway, so she had probably left the house voluntarily.

All the news did release was that Talbert's garage was filled with her blood. The mutilation, the press speculated, had happened there.

Once all that came down, Kyle thought he was in the clear. Even though he had deliberately defied his father, he hadn't been caught. The police never called and asked for the recordings Kyle's father made (good thing too, because any good analyst would find the loop) and the detectives had kept Kyle's involvement secret.

Or at least, he thought they had until six months later when a junior prosecutor stopped by the house just before dinner to talk with Kyle.

The butler answered and announced the prosecutor at the dinner table. Kyle's father had been eating with the concentration of a man facing his last meal, but he looked up at the

announcement.

"Gareth Jennings from the district attorney's office for Mr. Kyle."

"Mr. Kyle?" Kyle's father said.

Kyle stiffened. His mother looked at him as if he had done something wrong. His father wasn't that subtle. "You in trouble?"

"No," Kyle said.

"Show him in, then." Kyle's father said to the butler.

Gareth Jennings was maybe thirty. He clutched a briefcase that looked so cheap it might fall apart if he bumped it against something. But his dark eyes were avid, and the set of his jaw made it pretty clear that he was going somewhere and no billionaire's family

was going to slow him down.

"What do you want with my son?"
Kyle's father asked.

"We want to make sure he'll testify in the Locke case."

"The what?" Kyle's father asked.

His mother leaned over and said in her hesitant, whispery voice, "You know, that poor girl from the alley..."

"Oh," Kyle's father said. "You don't need my son to establish that her body was found. Use one of his little friends."

Kyle winced. He watched Jennings from the corner of his eye, but otherwise kept his head down. His heart was pounding.

"We don't need him to establish that the body was found, sir," Jennings said.

“We will probably need him to testify on his meeting the day after with detectives.”

“He didn't meet with detectives,” his father said. “He would have no reason to.” Kyle was getting dizzy. That clenched feeling in his stomach had returned, threatening the little bit of his dinner that he had eaten.

Now was the moment to stand up to his father. Since so much time had gone by, he actually thought it wasn't going to happen.

But now it was. And he wasn't ready.

“I told them about the Web site, Dad,” Kyle said, hoping his voice sounded normal. Of course, it didn't. It sounded even more strained and terrified than he

felt.

"What?" His father raised his head. "You were told to stay out of this. It's not our concern." Kyle's cheeks flushed. Kyle's mother picked up her plate and carried it into the kitchen.

"Yeah," Kyle said to Jennings. "I'll testify if you need me." Kyle's father said, "You can't. I won't allow it."

Kyle's hand clenched. His whole body ached from the strain of sitting at attention. "It's the right thing, Dad."

"The right thing." His father rolled his eyes. "Please."

"It is." Kyle didn't look at his father. Instead, he watched Jennings, who was shifting his briefcase from hand to hand. "I'll testify."

"I forbid it," his father said.

Kyle finally looked at him directly.
"Try and stop me."

"It's not hard, Kyle. My attorneys will make sure you never step into a courtroom."

"Then I'll go to the press." Kyle's voice squeaked. Even his throat was tight.

"The press?" His father's tone had become dangerous. His eyes were flat. Two spots of color had appeared on his otherwise pale cheeks.

If the prosecutor hadn't been there as a witness, Kyle's father would probably have hit him.

"Yes, sir," Kyle said. "I helped the police because I knew something they

needed to know. It was the right thing to do."

His father snorted. "The right thing was to keep our family out of this. The right thing was to shut the hell up and do what you're told."

Kyle nodded, then he stood. He was shaking, but he wasn't going to stop. He rounded the table and approached the prosecutor.

"Let me walk you to the door," Kyle said as if nothing had gone wrong, as if his father wasn't watching them. "I do mean it. I'll testify. I'll come with you now and put everything on record if you want, before my father's lawyers get involved."

The prosecutor looked terrified. "It's

just a precaution. I'm sure we won't need you. The detectives can establish how they found the site. It's just that I'm supposed to make sure the witnesses are prepared in case this does go to trial."

"You think the case won't go to trial?" Kyle asked.

"There's too much evidence," Jennings said. "The defense knows that we have him, not just on this case, but half a dozen others."

Kyle shuddered. He didn't care what his father said. Because of Kyle, this creep had been caught. The police would have ignored the case otherwise. They admitted as much.

"How did this guy find her?" Kyle asked.

"Standard stuff." Jennings looked over Kyle's shoulder. Kyle looked too. His father sat at the table, finishing his dinner alone.

"What do you mean?" Kyle asked.

"Modeling," the prosecutor said. "He offered her a contract with a major agency. It looked legit. We saw the snail-mail letters. As I said, we have a lot."

Then he thanked Kyle, reassured him again that he probably wouldn't have to testify, and fled the apartment as if it were a crime scene.

Kyle closed the door and leaned on it.

Ioni Locke, the Breck Girl, had done everything she could to get noticed, and it had gotten her killed. Kyle had done

everything he could so that no one would notice him, and now he had to face his father. Kyle walked back to the dining room. He stiffened his shoulders, bracing himself. "You said I needed a spine."

"I did not mean that you should subject this family to some tawdry police investigation. You'll be in the news for months—"

"At least I'll be in it for doing something I believe in," Kyle said. "You were always afraid I'd be in it for doing something wrong."

His father tilted his head ever so slightly.

"I'm going to do what I do from now on," Kyle said. "You shouldn't mind. I

don't do drugs. I've only gotten drunk a few times. I don't date because I don't want to end up in the tabloids. It's bad enough that my own father films me every single moment of every single day. I don't need strangers doing the same thing."

His father leaned back. He didn't seem shocked that Kyle knew about the cameras. He looked like a man prepared for this argument.

"You need to be protected," his father said. "You see what a dangerous world it is out there. You see what happens to people who trust too easily."

"You don't have to worry," Kyle said. "You made sure I don't trust anyone." His father raised a finger, clearly about

to say something.

But Kyle didn't want to listen. He was tired of being afraid of his father, tired of not having a spine. He walked down the open corridor to his bedroom. Once inside, he disabled the cameras and set them outside the bedroom door.

He would have privacy whether his father wanted it or not.

And he would do what was right—what was normal—for most other kids. Starting the next day. Kyle was actually going to talk to his friends instead of talk around them. And he was going to invite the Geek Squad to lunch. Then he'd smile at a pretty girl—a real one, not one he fantasized about on the Internet.

Because he was beginning to think

fantasizing about someone he didn't know wasn't healthy. It was wrong to know the intimate details of some nameless girl from Schenectady without ever meeting her. It didn't matter that she had put those details on the Web, seeking attention. He didn't have to give it.

Any more than he had to indulge his father by creating endless loops of meaningless activities. He had to stop thinking about being Kyle Worthington, only son of billionaire Jackson Worthington. He had to stop thinking about being the Big K, the guy everyone envied. He had to start being just plain Kyle, the guy who secretly wanted to know about things like SIM cards and

theoretical physics and Shakespearean sonnets. The guy who wanted to be asked to join the Geek Squad not because it would make them cool, but because he had earned it.

It wouldn't take much to get the kind of grades that sent him to the college of his choosing, not a college his dad bribed to let him in.

Maybe at that college, wherever it was, he could blend into the crowd, move unnoticed through the hallways, disappear along the quad. No one filming him, no one measuring his every move, no one trying to figure out who he really was without knowing him at all.

He would like that. True privacy. The kind that had always eluded him. The

kind the Breck Girl had until she posted a video of herself on YouTube. She hadn't understood the downside of being watched all the time. Kyle didn't know if there was a downside to extreme privacy.

But he was going to find out.

No matter what the cost.