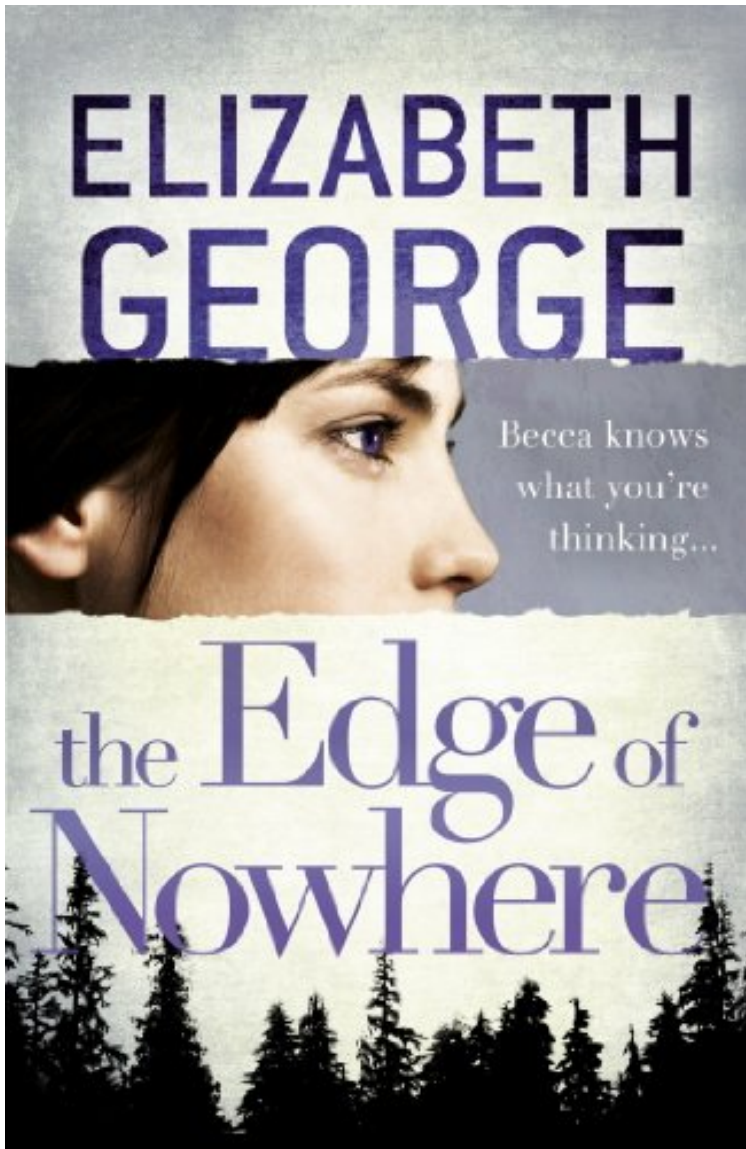


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The Edge of Nowhere: Book 1 of The Edge of Nowhere Series



Par Elizabeth George
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurBecca King and her mother are on the run from her stepfather who has used Becca's talent for hearing 'whispers' to make a large and illegal sum of money. Now their options for safety are running out. In the town of Langley on Whidbey Island, Becca finds refuge in the home of her mother's childhood friend while her mother continues on to Canada in search of safety.But on her first day in town Becca meets sixteen years old Derric Nyombe Matheson a Ugandan orphan who was adopted as a ten-year-old by the town's Deputy Sheriff. Derric has a secret that no one on Whidbey Island knows. Derric and

Becca form an un-severable bond. Becca is convinced that she's the only person who can truly help him, and just maybe Derric can convince Becca that life is too short to live on the run. Extrait How Things Began

On the last day of Hannah Armstrongs existence, things were normal for a while. She made a 94 percent on a math test, and she accepted a movie date for later in the week. She walked home, as usual. She didnt use her hearing device since she didnt really need it outside of school. This gadget had the appearance of an iPod, but it didnt play music. Instead it played a form of static that removed from Hannahs hearing the disjointed thoughts of other people. Since babyhood, shed heard these broken thoughts of others, which shed learned to call whispers. But they came into her head like a badly tuned radio; she could never tell exactly who the whisperer was if more than one person was present; and they made school a nightmare for her. So a mechanism that her mom called an AUD box had been manufactured for Hannah. Shed worn it since she was seven years old. When she arrived home, she went to the stairs. She headed up to her room, only to see her stepfather come stealthily out of it. They locked eyes. Damn... whats she doing... why didnt... came into Hannahs head from Jeff Corrie as whispers always did, disconnected and seemingly random. She frowned as she heard them, and she wondered what her stepfather had been doing in her room besides trying once again to gather reassurance that she wasnt going to tell her mother how shed been helping him with his latest scheme. It wasnt as if shed wanted to help him, either. But Jeff Corrie had Hannahs mom in some sort of thrall that had more to do with his looks than his character, and caught up in their dizzying relationship, shed told him what went on inside Hannahs head when she wasnt wearing the AUD box. It hadnt taken him long to figure out a way to use Hannahs talent. He decided to employ her as the cake and coffee girl at his investment house, just the person to bring in the refreshments and listen to the whispers of his clients in order to read their weaknesses. He and his pal Connor separated old folks from their money in this way. It was a grand scheme and it was making them millions. Hannah had never wanted to help him. She knew it was wrong. But she feared this man and she feared the fact that his whispers, his words, and the expressions on his face never matched up. She didnt know what this meant. But she knew it wasnt good. So she said nothing to anyone. She just did what she was told and waited for whatever was going to happen next. She had no idea it would happen that very afternoon. Jeff Corrie said, Whatre you doing home? His gaze went to her right ear where the earphone to the AUD box usually was. Hannah dug the box out of her pocket and clipped it on the waistband of her jeans, screwing the earphone into her ear as well. His eyes narrowed till he saw her turn up the volume. Then he seemed to relax. Its three thirty, she told him. Start your homework, he said. He went past her and down the stairs. She heard him yelling, Laurel? Where the hell are you? Hannahs home, as if his wife was supposed to do something about that. Hannah put her backpack in her room. Everything seemed to be the way shed left it that morning. Still, she went to the bedside table to check the drawer. The tiny piece of clear tape was ripped off. Someone had opened the drawer. Someone had read her journal. It wasnt enough, she thought, that she helped him and his friend. He had to possess her thoughts on the matter, too. Well, good luck to figuring out how I feel, Daddy Jeff, Hannah scoffed. Like Id write something honest and actually leave it in my bedroom for you? She left her room and descended the stairs. She heard her mom and Jeff Corrie talking in the kitchen. She joined them there and turned away from the sight of Jeff Corrie nuzzling her mothers neck. He was murmuring, What about n-o-w? and Laurel was laughing and playing at pushing him away. But Hannah knew her mom liked what was going on between her and her husband. She loved the guy, and her love was as deaf and as dumb as it was blind. Hannah said, Hi, Mom, and opened the refrigerator, reaching for a carton of milk. Laurel said, Hey. No hi to Jeff? Already saw him upstairs, Hannah told her. She added, Gosh. He didnt tell you, Mom? just to see how she would react. Dont trust him, dont trust him, she wanted to say. But she could only plant seeds. She couldnt paint pictures. There was a silence between Laurel and Jeff. With the refrigerator door still open, hiding her from them, Hannah turned off the volume of the AUD box. Hes not... he cant be... had to be from her mother, she thought. She tried to hear Jeff, but there was nothing. Then everything changed, and life as Hannah had known it ended. Little bitch always thinks... a break-in... surprise... Connor... if she hears that a gun... because dead isnt always dead these days... The carton of milk slipped from Hannahs fingers and slosed onto the floor. She swung around from the refrigerator and her eyes met Jeffs. Clumsy, he said, but inside his head was something different. His gaze went from Hannahs face to her ear to the AUD box on her waist. She heard was the last thing Hannah heard before she ran from the room. The Cliff-----Becca Kings mother, Laurel, had traded the Lexus SUV at the first opportunity after theyd descended interstate five on the serpentine stretch of highway known as the Grapevine in California. Shed lost money on the car, but money wasnt the issue. Getting away from San Diego along with getting rid of the Lexus was. Shed traded it

for a 1998 Jeep Wrangler, and the moment theyd crossed the California state line into Oregon, she began looking for a place to unload the Jeep as well. A 1992 Toyota RAV4 came next. But that only took them up through Oregon to the border with Washington. As quickly as possible and making sure it was all legal, Laurel then dumped the Toyota for a 1988 Ford Explorer, which was what mother and daughter had driven ever since. Becca hadnt questioned any of this. Shed known the desperate reason it had to be done, just as she knew the reason there could be no more Hannah Armstrong. For she and her mother were traveling as fast as they could, leaving house, school, and names behind them. Now they sat in the Explorer in Mukilteo, Washington. The car was backed into a parking space in front of an old wooden-floored store called Woodys Market, across the water from Whidbey Island. It was early evening, and a heavy mist that was not quite fog hung between the mainland and the island. From where they were parked, Whidbey was nothing more than an enormous hulk surmounted by tall conifers and having a band of lights at the bottom where a few houses were strung along the shore. To Becca, with an entire life lived in San Diego, the place looked forbidding and foreign. She couldnt imagine herself there, trying to establish a new life far away from her stepfathers reach. To Laurel, the island looked like a safety net where she could leave her daughter in the care of a childhood friend for the time it would take her to establish a place of refuge in British Columbia. There, she figured that she and Becca would be safe from discovery by Jeff Corrie. Laurel had felt overwhelming relief when her longtime Bohemian lifestyle had been enough to quash any questions from her friend. Carol Quinn had not even acted surprised that Laurel would ask her to care for her daughter for a length of time she couldnt begin to name. Instead of questioning this, Carol said no problem, bring her on up, she can help me out. Havent been feeling so great lately, Carol had said, so I could use an assistant in the house. But will you keep this a secret? Laurel had asked her over and over again. To my grave, Carol Quinn had promised. No worries, Laurel. Bring her on up. Now Laurel lowered her window two inches, to keep the windshield from fogging up. The middle of September, and she hadnt had a clue the weather would have changed so much. In southern California, September was the hottest month of the year, a time of forest fires driven by winds off the desert. Here, it already felt like winter. Laurel shivered and grabbed a sweatshirt from the back of the car, where it lay against the wheel of Beccas old ten-speed. She said, Cold? Becca shook her head. She was breathing deeply, and while she usually did this to calm herself, she was doing it now because on the air was the scent of waffle cones meant for ice cream, and it was coming from Woodys Market behind them. Theyd already been inside. Becca had already asked for a cone. Laurel had already made the automatic reply of In through the lips and onto the hips. She was a woman who, on the run from a criminal, could still count her daughters intake of calories. But Becca was hungry. They hadnt had anything to eat since lunch. A snack certainly wasnt going to blow up her thighs like balloons. She said, Mom... Laurel turned to her. Tell me your name. Theyd been through this exercise five times daily since leaving their home, so Becca wasnt happy to go through it another time. She understood the importance of it, but she wasnt an idiot. Shed memorized it all. She sighed and looked in the other direction. Becca King, she said. And what are you to remember as Job Number One? Help Carol Quinn around the house. Aunt Carol, Laurel said. Youre to call her Aunt Carol. Aunt Carol, Aunt Carol, Aunt Carol, Becca said. She knows you have a little money until I can start sending you more, Laurel said. But the more you can help her... Its like earning your keep. Yes, Becca said. I will become someones slave because you married a maniac, Mom. Oh God what did he do to you when youre my only? Sorry, Becca said, hearing her moms pain. Sorry. Sorry. Get out of my head, Laurel told her. And tell me your name. Full name this time. There was a parking lot to Beccas right, across the main road that ended with the ferry dock. People had been sauntering from cars in that lot to a food stand just to one side of the dock. A sign declaring the place to be Ivars was shining through the mist, and a line of people making purchases had formed. Beccas stomach growled. Tell me your name, Laurel repeated. This is important. Her voice was calm enough, but beneath the gentle tone was come on come on theres so little time please do this for me its the last thing Ill ask, and Becca could feel those words coming at her, invading her brain, perfectly clear because that was how her mothers thoughts always were, unlike the whispers that came from others. She wanted to tell her mom not to worry. She wanted to tell her that Jeff Corrie might forget about them. But she knew the first statement was useless, and she knew the second was an outright lie. Becca turned back to her mother and their eyes met and listen my children and you shall hear of the midnight ride of Paul Revere came from Laurel. Very funny, Becca said to her. It wouldve been nice if youd memorized something else in sixth grade besides that, you know. Tell me your name, Laurel said again. All right. All right. Rebecca Dolores King. Becca grimaced. God. Does it have to be Dolores? I mean, who has a name like Dolores these days? Laurel ignored the question. Where are you from? Becca said patiently because

there was no point to anything other than patience at the moment, San Luis Obispo. Sun Valley, Idaho, before that. I was born in Sun Valley, but I left when I was seven and that's when my family moved to San Luis Obispo. Why are you here? I'm staying with my aunt. Where are your parents? My mom's on a dig in... Becca frowned. For the first time since they'd fled California, she couldn't remember. She assumed it was the fact that she was so hungry because she was never at her best when there were physical needs that had to be taken care of. She said, Damn. I can't remember. Laurel's head clunked back against the headrest of her seat.

You have to remember. This is crucial. Its life and death. Where are your parents? Becca looked at her mother, hoping for a clue but all she picked up was on the eighteenth of April in seventy-five hardly a man is now alive, which wasn't going to get her anywhere. She looked back at Ivars. A woman bent over with osteoporosis was turning from the counter with a carton in her hand and she looked so old... and then it came to Becca. Old. Olduvai Gorge, she said. My mom's on a dig in Olduvai Gorge. Nothing could have been further from the truth, but shortly before they'd made their run from Jeff Corrie, Becca had read an old book about the discovery of Lucy, aka *Australopithecus afarensis*, in Olduvai Gorge by an ambitious postgraduate fresh out of the University of Chicago. She'd been the one to suggest that her mother be a paleontologist. It sounded romantic to her. Laurel nodded, satisfied. What about your father? Where's your father? Don't you have a father? Becca rolled her eyes. It was clear that this was going to go on till the ferry arrived because her mother wanted no time to think of anything else. Least of all did she want to think of how she'd endangered her daughter. So Becca said deliberately, Which father would that be, Mom? and then she reached in her pocket and pulled out the single earphone of the AUD box. She shoved it into her ear. She turned up the volume and her head filled with static, soothing to her as always, the way satin is soothing against someone's skin. Laurel reached over and yanked the earphone out of Becca's ear. She said, I'm sorry this happened. I'm sorry I'm not who you want me to be. But here's the thing: no one ever is. At this, Becca got out of the car. She had money enough in her jeans to buy herself something to eat, and more money in the pockets of her jacket. She fully intended to use it. There was even more money in her backpack if she wanted to buy everything on the menu, but the backpack was with her bike in the back of the Explorer and if she tried to get at it, she knew her mother would stop her. Becca crossed the road. To her left, she could see the ferry coming, and she paused for a moment and watched its approach. When Laurel had first told her that she would get to Whidbey Island on a ferry, Becca had thought of the only ferry she'd ever been on, an open-air raft that held four cars and sailed about two hundred yards across the harbor in Newport Beach, California. This thing approaching was nothing like that. It was huge, with a gaping mouth for cars to slide into. It was all lit up like a riverboat and seagulls were flying around it. The line at Ivars had diminished by the time Becca got there. She ordered clam chowder and made sure it was the New England kind, made with milk and potatoes and therefore possessing a dizzying number of calories. She asked for an extra bag of oyster crackers to float in the container, and when she had to pay, she did it in coins. She placed them carefully one at a time on the counter, and oh damn... what the... stupid chick told her that the cashier wasn't pleased. Becca saw why when the cashier had to pick up the coins with fingers minus their nails. She'd bitten them down to the quick. They were ugly, and Becca saw the cashier hated them to be on display. Becca thought about saying sorry but instead she said thanks and took her chowder over to a newspaper stand. She balanced the soup container on top and dipped her spoon into it as she watched the ferry come nearer to the mainland. The chowder wasn't what she expected. She'd been thinking it would be like the chowder her stepfather two stepfathers ago had made. He was called Pete and he used corn in his, and Becca was a corn girl. Popcorn, corn on the cob, frozen corn. It didn't matter. Laurel claimed corn was what was fed to cows and pigs to make them fat, but since Laurel said that about nearly everything Becca wanted to eat, Becca didn't give much thought to the matter. Still, this particular chowder wasn't worth fighting over with Laurel. So Becca ate only half of it. Then she jammed her container into a trash can and sprinted back toward the Explorer. Laurel was on her cell phone. Her face, now without its spray tan, looked gray and weathered. For the first time, Becca thought of her mother as old, but then Laurel smiled and nodded and started talking in that way where no one could squeeze in a word. Carol Quinn was probably getting an earful, Becca thought. Her mom had been calling her twice a day to make sure every detail of the plan was hammered into position irreversibly. Their eyes met, and when they did, what Becca heard was no one's ever going to hurt, but that was cut off the way a radio gets cut off when someone changes stations and what came over the airwaves next was one if by land and two if by sea and I on the opposite shore will be. It was just like static from the AUD box and it worked as well. Laurel said something into the cell phone and ended the call. Becca got into the Explorer. Her mother said sharply, Was that New England clam chowder you were eating? Becca said, I

didn't eat it all. Ready to ride and spread the alarm through every Middlesex village and farm took the place of what Laurel wanted to say but it didn't matter and Becca told her so. Stop it, she said. I know what you're thinking anyway. Laurel said, Let's not fight. She reached over and touched her daughter's hair. Carol will be waiting for you when the ferry docks, she said quietly. She has a truck for the bike, so there's nothing to worry about. She knows what you look like and if she isn't there when you arrive, just wait because she'll be on her way. Okay, sweetheart? Hey. Are you hearing me? Becca was. She was hearing the words. She was also feeling the emotion behind them. She said, It's not all your fault, Mom. There's more than one kind of fault, her mother replied. If you don't know that yet, believe me, you will. Becca reached for her backpack in the back of the Ford. Laurel said, Where are the glasses? You'll need to put them on now. No one's looking at me. You need to put them on. You need to get in the habit. Where's the extra hair dye? How many batteries do you have for the AUD box? What's your name? Where's your mother? Becca looked at her then. Listen my children listen my children, but there was no need for Laurel to recite that poem over and over, even if she couldn't recall the rest of the words at that moment. For Becca read her expression as anyone could have done. Her mother was terrified. She was going on instinct alone just as she always had, but because her last instinct had been the one telling her to marry Jeff Corrie, she no longer trusted what her gut was telling her. Becca said, Mom. I'll be okay, and she was surprised when Laurel's eyes filled with tears. Her mother hadn't cried once since they'd left San Diego. She hadn't cried at all since she'd spent herself crying when she'd learned who Jeff Corrie really was and what Jeff Corrie had done. We can't go to the police, her mother had told her through her tears. God in heaven, sweetheart, who will believe you? No one's reported a body yet and if we do... we have no evidence Jeff was involved. So she'd laid her plans and they'd made a run for it and here they were on the brink of something from which there was no return. Becca reached out and took her mother's hand. Listen to what I know, she said. What do you know? Rebecca Dolores King, Mom. San Luis Obispo. My aunt Carol on Whidbey Island. Carol Quinn. Olduvai Gorge. Laurel looked beyond Becca, over her shoulder. The sound of traffic said that the ferry had arrived and was offloading its vehicles. Oh God, Laurel whispered. Mom, Becca said, it's okay. Really. She shoved open the door and walked to the back of the Explorer. Her mother got out and joined her there. Together they lifted her bike from the back and arranged its saddlebags on either side. Becca struggled into the heavy backpack, but before she did so, she dug inside for the glasses with their clear and decidedly useless lenses. She put them on. Map of the island? her mother asked her. I've got it in the backpack. You're sure? I'm sure. What about Carol's address? Just in case. Got that too. Where's the cell phone? Remember, it's limited minutes. Yours is programmed with the number of mine. So emergencies only. Nothing else. It's important. You've got to remember. I'll remember. And I've got it in the backpack, Mom. And yes to the rest. The AUD box. Extra batteries. More hair color. Everything. Where's your ticket? Here. Mom, it's all here. It is. Oh God oh God oh God. I better get going, Becca said, gazing at the stream of cars heading into the town beyond the ferry line. Look at me, sweetheart, Laurel said. Becca didn't want to. She was afraid, and she didn't need to hear more fear. But she knew the importance of giving her mother this reassurance, so she met her gaze as Laurel said to her, Look right into my eyes. Tell me what you see. Tell me what you know. And there was no midnight ride of Paul Revere now. There was only a single message to read. You'll come back, Becca said. I will, Laurel promised. As soon as I can.-----The walk-ons and the bikes went first. There was a crowd of them, and Becca followed their lead. Those with bikes moved toward the front of the ferry, wheeling them along a three-lane tunnel toward an opening at the far end. The walk-ons went for a stairway. Among them were people fishing in their pockets and their purses, and Becca concluded that there was something to buy up above. She guessed it was food or hot drinks. Either would be welcome to her, because a cool breeze was coming off the water, she was shivering, and she was still hungry. At the front of the ferry, people parked their bikes. Becca did likewise. She had intended to go back to the stairs to find the food, but the sudden roar of motorcycles stopped her. The noise was intensified because the motorcycles were coming through the ferry's tunnel. There were only four of them, but it sounded like twenty, and what followed them was a line of eighteen wheelers. The cars followed, arranging themselves in four lanes, two to each side of the main tunnel. None of this would have been a problem, since Becca had the AUD box with her. She plugged in the earphone and turned up the volume and concentrated on the static the AUD box produced. But as she did this, she saw that the first car coming into the side tunnel and parking just behind the spot where she was standing next to her ten-speed was a police car. If it can be said that blood can run cold, Becca did at that moment. All she could think of was the logical first move Jeff Corrie would have made when he found his wife and his stepdaughter gone: phone the cops and report them both as missing persons, sending out the

general alarm to find them as quickly as possible, so that Becca and what Becca had gleaned from his whispers could be wiped from the face of the earth. Jeffs favorite motto had been about the best defense being an offense, and what better offense could there be? Becca could even picture the flyer hed come up with and circulated far and wide. It would be fastened to a clipboard within the police car, she imagined, her face and her mothers face upon it. She turned away from the police car slowly, determined to look straight ahead. Anything else like a sudden turn would have given her away, and the thought of giving herself away not ten minutes after shed left her mother was so frightening that she felt as if neon arrows were pointing down from the ceiling of the ferry right at her skull so that the cop inside that police car would get out and question her. But the suspense of not knowing if shed been noticed was too much for Becca to bear. She knew it meant exposing herself to even more of an assault pounding like hammers inside her head, but she did it anyway because she had to do it: she turned down the AUD box to try to catch some useful information. It was nearly impossible to distinguish anything. There was Nancy damn it and dinner wont be and nail polish all over and talked to my boss and William for a haircut... then suddenly with all of this came a warmth that should have been impossible to feel in this cool, damp place. With the warmth came scent, equally out of place. Where she should have been smelling diesel fumes from the big rigs or exhaust from the cars and the motorcycles, instead what she smelled was the sweetness of fruit being cooked. It was so intense that before she realized what she was doing, Becca actually swung around, exposing her face to the police car behind her. But she didnt think of what might happen. Nothing seemed as important as finding the source of the warmth and the scent. That was how she first saw him, the boy who would ultimately change everything for her. He was a teenager like her, and he was sitting in the police car. He was in the front seat, not the back, and he and the policeman were talking. They both looked serious, and the contrast between them could not have been greater. The boy was black, deeply black, and the pure midnight of his skin made the policeman with him look white beyond white. He was also completely bald, not the bald of illness but the bald of choice. This suited him and, in contrast again, the policeman had lots of hair that mixed gray and brown. Becca realized as she looked at the boy that he was the first person of any color other than white that shed seen in the vicinity of the ferry. She didnt intend to stare and she wasnt actually staring when the boy looked at her. As their eyes met, the warmth Becca was feeling increased along with the scent of cooking fruit, but something else floated on that warmth and it was the unexpected hollowness of the boys despair.

Along with the ache of it floated the whisper of a single word repeated three time: rejoice, rejoice, rejoice. Becca half-smiled at the boy the way one does. But in return the hollowness grew, and when it began to feel as if it might take her over, she dropped her gaze. As she did so, the policeman got out of the car. He shut the door neatly and walked toward the stairs, punching in numbers on a cell phone. While this was the moment that Becca could have approached the boy, she knew far better than to do so. She decided that now she could go for the food shed been thinking about when the police car had stopped behind her. She shrugged out of her backpack. She left it next to her bike and walked in the direction of the stairs. She couldnt risk another look at the boy but she saw as she passed the police car that on the side it said ISLAND COUNTY SHERIFF. As luck would have it, she found herself climbing upward just behind the policeman, who she assumed was a deputy of some kind, or perhaps the sheriff himself. He seemed to be well-known, because people passing on the stairs called him Dave and asked how Rhonda was and inquired about his daughters new baby. Becca huddled into herself to stay unnoticed to him, but it didnt matter as things turned out, because his call went through and he started talking about a cliff to someone. Becca caught snatches of conversation but not any whispers. The conversation that came to her said that next week was going to be too difficult for Dave because of his schedule and maybe the week after might work if it works for you too. Also, was the cliff completely safe because it was pretty exposed, wasnt it, and you-know-who was starting to hang around there with his little brother. This made Becca wonder more about the island. She was used to southern California, which had suffered from every possible kind of natural problem: earthquakes, fires, floods, drought, windstorms, and landslides. But now she saw that disasters were, perhaps, common here as well, and she wondered what sort of disasters they would be if they had to do with the safety of cliffs. Upstairs, the policeman paused to continue his conversation near the windows, while Becca followed the crowd to a cafeteria where a line had formed to purchase food. Aware of money and how she was going to have to make it last till her mom started sending her more, Becca chose cookies. There was a package of three, sugar cookies that were frosted in orange, and she concluded this was something special when she heard a little girls voice behind her say, Look, Gram! Theyre not pink this time, and Gram say in reply, Maybe its for Halloween. Halloween. Becca felt a tug. It had always been her favorite holiday. Laurel usually

said this was because of the free candy she could collect and it was important that they take a look at your addiction to sugar, sweetheart, because Type Two diabetes is becoming an epidemic these days among kids your age. On the other hand, Beccas grandmother noted that it was all about the fun Becca had in knowing who each child was behind the mask since their whispers almost always gave them away. Beccas grandmother always advised her to stay near the whispers of children anyway. They dont know how to lie to themselves, she said. Becca missed her badly. She missed hearing, Laurel, just let her be, okay? Shes going to adjust, and although Laurels answer was always the same, I want her to be normal, Mother, her grandmothers reply of Pooh. Nothings more boring than normal, generally made Becca feel special, not odd. It was in the cause of seeming normal, though, that Laurel had come up with the AUD box. Shed claimed it was entirely for Beccas benefit, so that she could concentrate when she was in school. But the truth was that while the AUD box worked perfectly to help Becca focus, it also served to keep other peoples thoughts away. Laurels in particular, of course. BECCA DIDNT TAKE any note of the girl in front of her in the cafeterias line till they reached the cash register. Then she saw her holding a foil-wrapped hamburger and talking to two boys who were waiting for her by the condiments, a short distance away. One of the boys was long-haired and spotty-faced, wearing a rolled-up ski cap on his head like a beanie; the other was neatly dressed and neatly combed, looking worried and swallowing compulsively. As for the girl, she was very small and very trim, not an ounce of fat on her, virtually all muscle. She had a pixie haircut and a voice whose tone was one of snarky irritation. All three of them together made the suggestion that something was going on. It came to Becca as she watched them that, no matter what, high school kids were probably the same pretty much everywhere. The long-hair boy muttered, She doesnt have the guts to try it, as the girl reached the cash register. Probably shouldnt, Jenn, the worried boy said. Becca thought idly, Shouldnt what? as Jenn handed over a ten to pay for her food. The cashier took the money, and Becca watched the exchange and admired the womans nicely buffed nails, so different from those on the cashier at Ivars. They were smooth with a pretty sheen to them and Becca wondered as she handed change back to Jenn. Hey, Jenn said to the cashier, I just gave you a twenty. Becca spoke without thinking. No, it was a ten. I saw it. Jenn swung on her. What the... Are you calling me a liar or something? And what came with this was who the hell... oh great, Dylan... more cool ideas? Oh, sorry! No, Becca said. I just noticed because I was looking at her nails. She added, Theyre really nice, to the cashier, who blushed prettily. Jenn said, What are you, some kind of perv? and to the cashier, It was a twenty, and I want my change. It really wasnt, Becca said as, behind the counter, a man came out of an inner room. He asked what the problem was, and the girl Jenn spoke right up. Ill tell you what the problem is, she said, as the younger of the two boys with her murmured, Jenn... in a voice that sounded like a warning. I gave her a twenty, Jenn declared. This chicks seeing things. Lets take a look, shall we? the man then asked. He swung a small screen around to face the line of customers. It displayed the cash drawer, and it filmed each time the drawer opened. He pushed a button and there it was. The ten-dollar bill went from Jenns hands to the cashiers hands. Move along, the man said in a steely voice. Next customer please. Becca stepped to the register and paid for her cookies. But not before Jenn said into her ear, You little bitch, and then vanished with her two companions. AN ANNOUNCEMENT TOLD everyone when to head back to their vehicles. Becca followed the crowd. She was careful when she passed the sheriffs car not to look at it or the boy within it, although she caught a glimpse of his shoulder because he was leaning against the window. Everything was as shed left it at her bike. The saddlebags still bulged on either side of it, and her backpack leaned against its rear wheel. She worked her way into this again and gazed forward as the ferry dock loomed up ahead. She saw that here the mist was more like fog, a billowing gray veil that hung between her and whatever there was that defined this place. Mostly, what defined it appeared to be trees. There were more trees here than shed ever seen in an area where people also actually lived. Becca was used to hillsides sketched with the bony definition of chaparral and a landscape that developers scraped clean to the desiccated dirt before they filled it with thousands of identical houses. Here, though, if there were houses at all, they were somewhere in the trees, because what Becca was looking at was a vast forest: Douglas firs, hemlocks, and cedars that would remain untouched by winter weather, along with alders, birches, maples, and cottonwoods that would lose their leaves and thus bring light to the forest floor. This landscape rose steeply from a beach along which a few houses were strung, brightly lit against the growing gloom. The ferry workers waited till a ramp was lowered from the dock. Then they took down the barrier chain and waved at the bicyclists and the foot passengers to disembark. The foot passengers headed to the left, and the bicycle riders headed to the right. Becca went along and found herself on a dock far vaster than shed expected. Here, she realized, everything was larger than life. Ferries, trees, docks,

everything. As soon as she had walked her bike to the end of the dock, she began to look for Carol Quinn.

She didn't know a thing about what her mom's friend looked like, but she assumed that there would be someone waiting with a pickup truck into which she could dump her bike. But there was no one, just a local bus that pulled away and headed in the direction of a highway, just a few cars in a distant parking lot to which ferry passengers walked and then climbed inside. Becca looked around, but she felt no panic. Her mom had phoned Carol Quinn. Becca had seen her do it. Carol Quinn was on her way. Becca waited ten minutes. Slowly, she ate one of her cookies as those ten minutes stretched to twenty. Another ferry came and went with no Carol Quinn turning up to get her. After the departure of yet another ferry, Becca rustled through her backpack and found the cell phone that was programmed with Laurel's number. The call to her mom didn't go through. Out of range was the reply she received. She would wait awhile and phone again, Becca decided, but in the meantime she would start on her way to Carol Quinn's house because, obviously, something had come up to detain her and she would no doubt meet her on the way. Becca pulled out the map of Whidbey Island, along with Carol Quinn's home address. She plotted the most direct route she could find to Blue Lady Lane. Right off the highway, she saw, a street called Bob Galbreath Road would take her there. She wasn't in the best shape in the world for a bike ride, she knew, but this appeared to be only six miles. A piece of cake, she decided. She had a ten-speed. And anyone with a ten-speed could ride six miles. Wrong, she discovered. When she pedaled to the highway that led away from the ferry, Becca's first thought was, Oh my God, and her second was, I'll never make it. For where the road began, it climbed at once. It curved up and away from the dock, and it disappeared into the fog. Along its right side a few businesses were lined up, hopeful buildings that seemed to cling to the ground with the expectation of otherwise sliding into the water. Becca actually made it about one hundred and fifty yards before her breath was shrieking through her chest and her heart was slamming so hard that no A&D box was going to be necessary to drown out every other sound around her. Then she turned into a small parking lot. A sign reading CLINTON NAIL AND SPA identified the business, and a red neon sign indicated it was open. There was also a light above its door that cast a pyramid glow down to a welcome mat, and it was this light that Becca approached. She took out the map again. She tried to find another way to get to Carol Quinn's house. There wasn't one. So she watched the highway for a good ten minutes, hoping to see a pickup truck slowly going by, with someone inside it searching for her. That didn't happen. She had no choice. She set off again. The pedaling was so difficult that she was practically standing still. She managed to inch past a low-slung Wells Fargo bank and an ancient restaurant with Pizza! Pizza! Pizza! advertised and that same sheriff's car parked in its lot and, no doubt, the sheriff and that boy inside, scarfing down a king-size pepperoni and cheese. When she crawled past a used-car lot, she thought about how she and her mom could have driven onto it and traded the Ford Explorer for whatever came next. Thinking this made her eyes sting, though, so she looked away from the car lot and what it promised and instead looked ahead with the hope of seeing the road she was looking for somewhere in the shrouded distance. Instead she saw a Dairy Queen. Her heart sang. She'd make for this, she decided. She'd buy herself a hamburger there. French fries and a strawberry shake. Eating her way through her fear was the only answer. She certainly could make it as far as the Dairy Queen, she told herself, especially since there was a meal waiting for her at the end. As it happened, however, what was also waiting was Bob Galbreath Road. It lay a short distance before the Dairy Queen, giving Becca another option. Since the shadows were lengthening and darkness was approaching, she went for virtue instead of calories. She set off along Bob Galbreath Road.-----Becca discovered quickly enough that Bob Galbreath Road was worse than the highway she'd ridden to get to it. It began with a descent that allowed her to coast, but within fifty yards it started to climb. Soon enough there were trees everywhere. On the right, the edge of the lane ended abruptly. It gave way to a hillside that fell steeply, with thin-trunk alders bursting out of it. This same kind of tree grew in profusion on the other side of the road as well, and in the fog the leaves on the branches above Becca made a tunnel from which drops of water plopped onto the glasses she wore. Becca shook her head to get the water from the lenses, but she knew better than to remove the glasses altogether. For they were now part of who she was, along with the dismal brown that Laurel had chosen in order to change her hair from strawberry blonde to completely ugly. The important thing was neither her glasses nor her hair, though. Getting to Carol Quinn was paramount. Yet Blue Lady Lane seemed as far away as the moon, and with every revolution of the pedals it became more difficult for Becca to breathe. The fifth time she came out of the forest to climb yet another hill, a sob leaped out of her chest. She couldn't tell if she was sobbing for breath or simply sobbing, but what she did know was that she had to rest. She made it to a point where the road wasn't so narrow, and she got off her bike. She leaned over the handlebars to catch

her breath. That was when she heard the siren approaching, followed in short order by flashing lights. She thought the worst at once. As the vehicle came closer, she could tell it was a police car. She steeled herself and waited for something to happen, but the car screamed by her as if she were invisible to its occupants. Becca saw them, though. In the brief instant it took for the car to shoot by, she saw the boy from the ferry again. Their eyes met. She felt the hollowness within him. And then it was gone. What had he done, she wondered, that his insides were so empty? Where was he being taken? The silence was profound once the police cars siren faded away. Becca had no idea how much farther she had to go, but she assumed she had little enough hope of reaching Blue Lady Lane before the gloom of the evening became utter darkness. She set off again. She'd gotten only a quarter mile when she heard a vehicle coming up behind her. She moved as far to the edge as she could, but the engine noise didn't get any louder. She realized that whoever was coming along in her wake had no intention of actually passing her, and she turned to see a pickup truck, a group of dogs moving restlessly in its bed. Hallelujah, Becca thought. Carol Quinn at last. The truck pulled to the side of the road. Someone got out. Becca could see a baseball cap, work boots, and a heavy jacket. A woman's voice spoke pleasantly. Looks like you're struggling. Do you need a ride? Obviously, Becca thought bleakly, this was not Carol Quinn at all. She listened for whispers. On the side of the road there was a woman. On the side of the road there was Becca. What there wasn't was a single whisper. Becca wasn't sure what this meant. The lack of whispers from this woman said she was completely different from anyone Becca had ever come into contact with. Although Laurel would have declared that this was the precise reason Becca should avoid her like poison oak, Becca's grandmother would have taken her aside and said, Special defines itself by absence as well as presence, hon. So Becca said, The chain keeps slipping, in reference to her bike. This was a lie, but a small one since the chain had been feeling like a chain with the clear intention of slipping every time she had shifted the bicycle's gears. I'm going to Blue Lady Lane, she added. The woman said, This is your lucky day. I'm going to Clyde, as if Becca would know exactly what that would mean. She strode over and said, Let's get this in the back, and she picked up the bike, its weight and the loaded saddlebags nothing at all to her. She carried it to the side of the truck and hoisted it into the bed, saying to the animals, All dogs move, before she said to Becca, Hop in the front. Oscar'll move over. Just let me get this settled. Oscar turned out to be a standard poodle, without what Becca thought of as a poodle's froufrou haircut. He was black, and he was secured into the seat with its regular belt. Since Becca wasn't sure if she was intended to unfasten the belt, she waited until the woman opened her door, climbed in, said What're you waiting for? and then laughed when she realized the seat belt was the problem. She said, Sorry. Let me get that. Come on over here, Oscar, and when she had the seat belt off the dog, she pulled the poodle over, and then said to Becca, Diana Kinsale. I don't know you, and I thought I knew everyone on the south end. Becca King, Becca said. She thought the rest: Rebecca Dolores King from San Luis Obispo, California, by way of Sun Valley, Idaho, where I was born. I do not ski. You'd think I would, considering, but I don't. Diana Kinsale said, Pretty name. She put the truck into gear. Becca glanced back through the window at the pickup's bed. There were two labs back there and two mixed breeds. She said to Diana, Doggie daycare? Diana laughed. She took off her baseball cap and Becca could see that her hair was gray. Becca found this quite strange. She couldn't remember if she'd ever actually seen gray hair on a woman before this because where she was from women dyed their hair the moment the first strand of gray came in. But Diana Kinsale was the definition of au naturel. She wore no makeup, and her hair wasn't even styled. They're all mine, Diana Kinsale said in reference to the dogs. I didn't intend to end up with five of them, but one thing always leads to another and here I am. What about you? I don't have a dog, Becca said. I like them a lot, but my mom's allergic. Ah. Who is she? Becca felt a pressure inside her head. Who is she? was, of course, the logical question. Who is your mom, this woman who is allergic to dogs, and does she know you're on your bike all alone in the growing dark with the fog coming in heavier each minute? But these questions weren't asked. They weren't even thought. Becca stole a look at Diana Kinsale. Diana Kinsale glanced at her and said nothing. She punched a button on the radio, and the Dixie Chicks began singing at a volume that precluded conversation. It didn't take long to get to Clyde Street. One and a half Dixie Chicks later, and Diana was pulling into the driveway of a gray clapboard house that overlooked water that Becca would come to know as Saratoga Passage. Below the house, a group of cottages sat directly on a spit of beach, and across from this another island rose up in a mass of trees, darkness, and a fistful of flung lights coming from the houses that stood at its south end. Diana got out of the truck and Oscar followed her. The other dogs began to pace. When Becca joined the woman at the pickup's tailgate, Diana had lowered it and the four dogs leaped out and began bounding around the front yard. No pooping, Diana shouted at them as

she heaved the bike out and set it on the ground. She rearranged the saddlebags upon it, and extended her hand to Becca. I hope to see you around, Becca King, she said. Becca reached out for the shake. When their hands met, a tingling shot up Beccas arm, something between an electric shock and her arm coming awake from sleep. Her eyes met Dianas and in that moment, Becca knew what her grandmother had said was true.

Sometimes the absence of something indicates the presence of something else. The only difficulty lay in discerning what that something else was. Diana said quietly, Things arent always your fault. Becca said, Huh? because she needed whispers now in order to understand this woman, and in the absence of whispers she was only too aware of how lost she could become on Whidbey Island. Diana said, The chain on your bike? It probably needs some work but its natural not to notice that kind of thing till its too late. Its not your fault that the ride was a tough one if your bikes not in good condition. The dogs returned. They began sniffing the ground around Beccas feet and theyd soon made it up her leg to the vicinity of her jacket pocket where the last two sugar cookies remained. Diana said, The dogs like you. Thats good, and then she said to the animals, Chow time, dogs! and the dogs set up a chorus of barking. Stop by anytime, Diana said with a wave, and she disappeared toward the back of the house. The dogs followed. BECCA REMEMBERED TO push her bike.

She figured that Diana Kinsale might have known she was lying about the chain slipping, but still she wanted to keep up the pretence. So she pushed it till she came to a streetlight some distance away from Dianas house and there she unfolded her map to see where Blue Lady Lane was from Clyde Street. A single glance told her why Diana had said this was her lucky day. Blue Lady Lane broke off from a street at the end of Clyde, and the end of Clyde was clearly visible by the stop sign on its corner. So, it turned out, was the sheriffs car that had passed Becca on Bob Galbreath Road. When she made the right turn that would take her to Blue Lady Lane, she saw the car sitting in front of a house midway along the street, where Blue Lady Lane began. Becca knew, then. She couldnt have put everything into words, but something had happened and it wasnt good. At first she thought the police were looking for her. But the presence of at least eight people on the upstairs deck outside of the house and the bright lights within the building seemed to suggest something else. She rolled her bike to a mound of vegetation, and from within its shelter she gazed at the house. A low sign in front of it said Horse Haven and lights shone on house numbers on this. She dug out Carol Quinns address, but she was sure of what she would find. The numbers matched. She crept forward. She crossed the street in the shadows from the trees, and shed reached the side of the sheriffs car before she realized the boy was still in it, although the sheriff was not. She began to back off, but the boy got out. He rubbed the back of his neck and gazed at the house on its little rise of land. She froze where she was. Then he turned to her. Their eyes locked on each others. People leave... someone... if death was easy... rejoice rejoice... caressed the air between them. Then voices broke into the darkness around them as two men approached, coming down the walk from the house. Im so damn sorry, Mr. Quinn. If theres anything... The boy glanced their way, then back at Becca. Go, he mouthed. Now. Go. He got back into the car. But Becca couldnt go until she heard and knew, and the knowledge came quickly with the other mans words. She could tell he was crying. Just a little under the weather, he said. She felt bad but she thought it was the flu and so did I. And now this. Shes not the first, the undersheriff said. With women, a heart attack... it doesnt feel like they think it would feel. She didnt know that. She was so strong, Dave. He started sobbing. Becca backed away. She returned to the vegetation and sat. She put her head in her hands and listened to the sound of the Island County sheriffs car as it drove off. She had no idea what she would do. WITHIN AN HOUR, everyone had gone as Becca sat and thought and tried and failed to contact Laurel. Out of range, out of range was the message each time, feeding into Beccas deepest fears. At the end, she had only a single hope. She would have to talk to Carol Quinns husband. Becca stepped out of the vegetation. She approached the house, and as she did so, Mr. Quinn came outside and stood on the deck. She hesitated, half-hidden behind a rhododendron. She could see him, but he could only see her if he knew where to look, and he wasnt looking. Instead, he stared out at the water across the street from his house in a way that told Becca he wasnt actually looking at anything. He lit a cigarette and smoked for a few moments in silence, and in equal silence Becca watched him. Then what now... she never thought... no plan came to her, a scattering of thoughts, like bread cast on the water for ducks. But the feelings that came with them made them heavy like boulders and they rolled toward Becca till she stepped into the light. Mr. Quinn? Yeah, he said heavily. Whore you? You lost? Im Becca King, she said. And then she waited, for the recognition, for the realization, for the remembrance, for anything. She hoped he would say, Oh yes. The girl Carol was going to take in till her mom comes back, but he said nothing. So Becca knew from this that Carol Quinn had taken Laurels request for absolute secrecy right to her death. Her lips felt stiff and sore as she murmured, I just wanted to say... Im

sorry for your loss. But he was already deep within his own thoughts, and none of them related to a girl from

San Diego on the run from a man who murdered his business partner in a phony break-in into the mans million-dollar condo. BECCA WENT BACK to her bike. She pulled the cell phone out and she tried again. She heard her mothers words. Its programmed, sweetheart. Press one on yours and itll connect you to mine. But only in an emergency. Everything related to Carol Quinn had turned into an emergency, Becca thought.

She pressed one and tried for Laurel again. She waited in agony for the connection to go through. But the message was the same as before. Out of range, out of range, out of range. Wait, she told herself. Just wait for a while. Cell phones got out of range all the time, and she expected that they got out of range frequently in this part of the world. There were mountains and bodies of water and islands, and surely all of these things indicated it would be very simple for someone to be out of range for a time. So wait, wait, wait, she told herself. Just wait, wait, wait. Because the last thing she could face at the moment was the possibility that the very same mother who planned their escape from Jeff Corrie so perfectly had ended up leaving her to fend for herself on an island she knew nothing about.-----In that moment, Becca was afraid

of a lot of things. Like other girls her age, she had never been on her own. She had her mother and, before her breast cancer death, she had her grandmother. Now what she had was a cell phone connecting her to exactly no one unless she wanted to call San Diego and exchange happy greetings with Jeff Corrie. The fact was that Laurel had laid very careful plans, and the big one had just blown up in Beccas face. She crossed the street in front of the house where Carol Quinn had lived. The man had gone back inside, and she could see him through the brightly lit windows. She couldnt hear his whispers from this distance and because of the glass between them but she could easily imagine them: Carol... Carol... what do I do... He was moving aimlessly around the living room. Becca was on a stretch of open grassy land, high above the water. A log lay here, bare like a piece of driftwood that had been brought up from the beach below to serve as a bench.

She sat and tried not to think about anything else but an answer to the question, What next? To keep herself

from going to a place of total panic, she dug in her jacket where the sugar cookies were, and she ate the second one slowly, in order to kill time. A soft rain began to fall, and she put up the hood of her jacket. Then she looked out at the lights across the passage and wondered how far Laurel had gone. She was heading for British Columbia and a mountain town called Nelson. She had said her reasoning had to do with Roxanne, that old film with Steve Martin and Daryl Hannah. Laurel liked it so much that she had her own DVD of it, and she played it whenever life got to her. It wasnt the romance of the film that seemed to interest Laurel,

though. It was the little town of Nelson where it had been filmed. She studied that town every time she watched Roxanne. She stopped the film and looked at the scenery. She did it so often that Becca had wondered if Laurel was actually looking for someone, like an extra hired from the town. But she never was able to figure this out. For when Laurel watched, she kept her mind going on listen my children and you shall hear of the midnight ride of Paul Revere, and when Becca asked her why she was doing that, her mother said, Discipline, sweetheart, as if she was afraid she would forget the poem because the film would sweep it from her mind. She added sharply, And why arent you using the AUD box? The AUD box is for your protection, hon, her grandmother would say. Its to give other people their privacy, sure. But its also because

you cant go through your life being bombarded with noise. You have, Becca would answer, for she had inherited hearing whispers from her grandmother instead of the womans flaming red hair. Sure. But your talents stronger than mine. Itll take you a while to learn to control it. So, I have to wear this dumb thing for the rest of my life? Just till you learn where the knobs are on the volume in your head, her grandmother said.

Your moms only trying to protect you, hon. Its for the best. But Becca couldnt see how her mom was protecting her now. So when she finished the cookie, which she had eaten as slowly as she could manage by letting each bite melt on her tongue, she took out the cell phone and called Laurel again. Out of range was the message another time. Becca gave a little cry, and she shoved the phone back into her pocket. She wanted to

be angry with her mother, but she knew there was no point to that. She also wanted to return to Diana Kinsales door and ask for help. But despite not having the AUD box plugged into her ear, the fact that she had gotten no reading off Diana Kinsale worried her. She wasnt sure what it meant. Still, she couldnt stay here on the driftwood log, so she roused herself and trudged back to her bike. Under a streetlight nearby Becca fished out her map of Whidbey Island and traced the route into Langley, which was the nearest town. It wasnt terribly far at this point: back to Clyde, a few miles to the end of a road called Sandy Point, and then a right turn would put her in the vicinity of downtown, whatever went for downtown in this place. But she didnt know what she would find there, and she was so tired that she didnt know what she would do when she got there. So she refolded the map and returned to her bike. She had to do something, and riding was better than

nothing. When she reached Diana Kinsales driveway, Becca paused. In the darkness just beyond the house, she could make out the silver outline of the dog run where the shapes of Dianas dogs were moving about, settling down for the night. Becca found there was comfort in thinking about those dogs. Theyd been friendly to her, sniffing around her feet and her pockets but not jumping on her or anything. She glanced around. As she did so, the porch light on Dianas house went off and somehow that seemed like an invitation. She saw that next to Dianas driveway, an enormous heap of shrubbery grew. In the darkness she couldnt tell what it was, just that it was thick and ungoverned and that it had copious thorns, which she discovered when she removed her saddlebags from her bike and slid them and the bike beneath its branches. The dogs began barking as she approached the dog run. The back door of the house opened and Becca shrank back into the shadows. Dianas voice called out, Enough, dogs. No bark, and they fell silent although they increased their restless pacing. The door closed once more. Becca waited. She wanted the dogs to settle down and she wanted to make sure that Diana Kinsale wasnt going to open the door again. She shivered and stuck her hands into the pockets of her jacket, and her right hand found the last of the sugar cookies. This told her there was an easy way to handle what had to come next. At the run she extended her fingers, sugary now from the cookie and its icing. The dogs jostled one another for a smell and a lick, and they were delighted when she climbed over the fence, joined them, and broke the sugar cookie into pieces, saving one for herself and giving them the rest. There was a doghouse at the far end of the run. It was the size of a chicken coop because of the number of dogs that slept there. It was also big enough for just one more creature to fit inside, and that was what Becca did. She crawled through the opening, out of the rain. The dogs crowded in after her. The smell was terrible, since theres very little that smells worse than wet dog except, perhaps, wet dog plus dog blankets in need of washing. But for Becca it was a beggars and choosers situation, and even if it hadnt been, she thought she probably would have chosen the dogs anyway as her sleeping companions that first night on Whidbey Island. For as they settled around her and she settled in with them, one of the dogs sought out her face and licked her lips. She knew at heart that the dog was after one more crumb of sugar cookie, but she decided to call it a good-night kiss. *Revue de presse* Action-packed, mysterious, and somewhat creepy . . . Raising the bar when it comes to today's YA fiction. (*Suspense Magazine*) In combining her skills in crime writing with an obvious flair for the supernatural this award-winning author creates a wonderful tale. (*My Weekly*) The author writes brilliantly and has an incredible ability to set a scene and create characters you want to know more about. (*Sun*) Presses all the buttons to make us Hoover her stuff up. (*Daily Telegraph*)