

# THE Shape Shifters



## CHAPTER 10

# The Girl in the Picture

The next day at school, kids from the birthday party talked all about what had happened. Thankfully, since they didn't notice the Hartsook kids, they didn't even mention that they had disappeared right after the shooting had taken place. The story took on many forms. There was a huge gun-down on the whole neighborhood, and all the kids feared for their lives. Or there was a blow up in someone's kitchen from an angry husband. The most creative was that madness had made Mrs. Herman go crazy. Colin ignored it all. All he cared about was that evil lingered heavily, wanting him to keep away from Jenna. No matter what happened, he couldn't be kept from his new found friendship – the only friendship he'd ever really had.

Jenna met Colin at lunch and sat at their usual table. She looked sad. "I have to talk with you."

"Um, ok. Why does this sound like it's gonna be bad?" Colin felt nervous.

Jenna put her lunch down and heaved a sigh. "My dad doesn't think we should hang out any more. Not at all," Jenna told him. She looked down into her lunch, like she was hiding tears. "After we told him about what happened at my party, he thought it might be a lot easier if we just stopped hanging out together. I told him that I think that's wrong, because now that you know about us, we can protect you when needed."

Colin whispered, in shock, "Okay, and...?"

"Well, he seems to think that if we create some distance between us, the evil shifters will notice and keep away from you...and those around you. Us being friends might cause things to happen that shouldn't. It's just too risky," Jenna explained. "I tried and tried, but he didn't budge. Mom agreed with him, too. They just don't want to create danger for anyone. Do you get that?" Colin's heart stopped for a full minute, it felt.

"Colin? Say something. Anything," Jenna nudged him.

"I can't," was all he could manage. He stood fast. He needed to get away.

Something fell from his pocket. Jenna noticed, but Colin didn't.

"What is this?" She picked it up and brought it to Colin's attention as he and his lunch tray started for the drop-off. His plan was to go to the library, bathroom, or just a dark space where he couldn't think of a way to get Mr. Hartsook to reconsider.

"Oh," Colin had forgotten he'd put it in his pocket. He wanted to show it to Jenna, but was shaken by her awful news. "Yeah, I found that in my G'ma's attic. The night I was getting ready for your party, the night everything happened. I was going to tell you, but..."

"This is the girl," Jenna interrupted. "She is the same as..." Jenna stopped and simply stared as

Colin sat down next to her. "Did you tell your G'ma about this?"

"No, I didn't. I didn't know if she would be mad at me for finding it." Colin looked down at the picture. The pretty young grayscale face looked back at him. No matter how many times Colin looked at her, he could almost feel her sadness.

Then, the same fear that overtook him in the attic came back. A chill came through his t-shirt and gave him goose bumps. Colin hugged himself and tried to warm. *You are part of the blood!* He heard again in his head. The image of the mist was back. Colin closed his eyes, put his throbbing head in his hand. All he could see in his mind was the mist, its bloody, fiery red eyes staring at him. Terror struck Colin for a moment as he remembered his first encounter with the evil being. Then, with his eyes closed, the mist turned into the girl from the picture, but this time she was in color. His imagination was running wild, he knew, but at the same time, he knew something was trying to draw him in. The girl with pretty bluish eyes and rosy cheeks looked at him while she sat in the same pose she had in the picture. Abruptly, her facial features started to change. Her mouth curved downward and her eyes began to droop, almost like she was melting. Her sad expression now looked tortured and scared. It was as if someone had just slashed water all over the delicate photo and was trying to destroy her.

Then her mouth opened. In a muted tone, her face now horribly distorted, Colin heard again, *You are part of the blood...* coming from her mouth.

"Colin? Are you ok?" Jenna shook his arms and dislodged his hands from their position. "What is wrong? Are you in pain?"

"No," Colin mustered when he realized Jenna was speaking to him. The image of the girl misted away and Colin was left with just a pounding headache. He opened his eyes. "I just... remembered." Colin shifted in his seat.

"Remembered what?"

The lunch bell rang.

"Remembered what, Colin?" Jenna shook Colin again.

"I can't talk about it now. And I need to see you later. Right now, I don't care what your dad wants." Colin was shocked at himself, insisting that they break the rules. But, this wasn't going away, and he knew breaking his friendship off with Jenna would only make life harder for him. He needed help, not separation.

"Meet me after school and we can talk about this picture, and what I've been...hearing," Colin offered.

Jenna nodded, "Ok."

Colin held onto his head for the rest of the day.

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Jenna and Colin walked side by side away from the school building. It was a pretty afternoon with a light breeze. The fresh spring smell helped lightened the pain on Colin's head.

"There's no way we can stop seeing each other. That picture, I have no idea what it means, but I have to find out," Colin began to Jenna.

"Ok, slow it down. What happened at lunch today?"

Colin bit into his sandwich. In all the passion in their cafeteria, Colin had forgotten to eat.

"Here, sit," Jenna commanded. Colin obeyed. After he finished most of his food, he started talking.

"Whenever I look at that picture, stuff happens. First, I feel cold. Then, I remember that evil shifter again, with his red eyes staring me down. Then, I hear him say *you are part of the blood!* Just like I heard on the day I came face to face with him."

"He spoke to you that day?" Jenna looked surprised. "I didn't know that."

"Yeah, he did. Now every time I look at the picture and remember the mist, I hear it, like it's in the room with me. Today, I got a headache after it. I feel better now, but man, it was bad."

Jenna looked perplexed. "I wonder why..." Her voice trailed off.

BEEP BEEP!

It was Lucas, coming to get Jenna.

"Please come home with me and tell my brothers."

"Jenna, there's more," Colin threw his lunch bag in his backpack. Jenna signaled to her brothers that it would be a few minutes. She could see Lucas approve, but he was watching her close.

"I saw the girl in my mind. The girl from the picture. She started to speak to me with the same *you are the blood talk*. Her face got droopy and her eyes sagged. She looked like one of those haunted house picture joke things, only she was actually really freaky," Colin explained.

Jenna was wide-eyed now. "You're coming with me. Let's go." She grabbed Colin's hand, and he had no choice but to follow.

Even though Lucas was on strict orders to make sure Jenna always came home solo from now on, he wasn't shocked that his little sister was making a plea to bring home her best friend. Lucas knew that their dad would have a tough time keeping these two apart.

"Fine, but if dad wants to get mad at me, you better stick up for me. And I mean it, sister," Lucas said.

"Oh, I will. I promise," Jenna said.

On the way home, Colin opened up to all three about the vision he'd been having and answered every question they'd had. It felt like only two minutes in the car before they pulled into the Hartsook's drive way. Colin could see that no one was home, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

Once inside, the kids all with their respective snacks around the kitchen table, began discussions. What did "You are part of the blood" mean? Who was that girl? Why did that mist seem to invade Colin's thoughts? Why was he so burdened?

"We're going back." Jenna was emphatic. "Lukie, I don't care what you say, we're going. You can stay or come, but we're going. We have to."

Lucas looked at Jude and Colin. He knew his approval as the oldest brother would confirm the need to go back.

"Jenna, if something happens to Colin, or worse to you, I won't be able to live with myself."

"You know I can take care of myself. And if Jude goes..." Jenna looked at her brother, "...we'll be more than fine. Please, don't tell dad, and please help us. Let us go!" Jenna almost yelled.

"Ok, go. You three, you go. I'm staying here, for mom and dad. Someone needs to ward them off," Lucas said after a moment of thinking about it. "And you better not come back mangled and worn," Lucas was stern. Colin frightened a little. Here this shifter was still in human form and could still scare.

"Thanks, Lucas. We'll be safe, I promise! Jude, you in?" Jenna asked the middle child.

"You know it, sissy. I'll get the backpacks!" Jude was always eager for an adventure. He hopped up and started gathering necessities.

"You want to, Colin?" Jenna asked. Her eyes were starting to yellow at the thought of someone hurting her friend.

Colin looked at her, knowing this might be the last time they have an adventure together. Something twinkled on her neck. The necklace he'd given her. He was able to give it to her before she left her party, and now she wore it all the time. Fire raged inside of him like it had at Jenna's birthday party.

"You better believe it. Let's get out of here."

**Next Week Chapter 11**

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**For more information, please call**

**Elaine Riner at 423-245-4954**

**or e-mail at [eriner@timesnews.net](mailto:eriner@timesnews.net)**