

AS SIMPLE AS IT SEEMS, by Sarah Weeks

(Verbena)

It was obvious I was far from perfect, but because my mother was able to overlook my shortcomings, for the most part so did I, until I hit fifth grade.

(Narrator)

That year, suddenly Verbena started losing her temper at the drop of a hat, especially with her mother, and sometimes she would just start crying, for no good reason at all.

(Narrator)

She felt mixed up and mean and, on top of everything else, she began to feel self-conscious about the way she looked.

(Verbena)

My glasses magnified my eyes and made me look like a bug, and my pale skin and white blond hair made it seem as if I didn't have any eyebrows or eyelashes.

(Narrator)

But what was bothering her the most was that she had accidentally uncovered a secret her parents had been keeping from her for years. That secret caused her whole world to shift, like a sheet of tracing paper that no longer matched up with the drawing underneath it.

(Verbena)

One afternoon I was feeling bored and grumpy, so I decided to go fishing down at Bonner's Lake. The only problem was, my mother didn't want me anywhere near the lake. Any time I brought it up, she always said the same thing –

(Mom)

You remember what happened to that little Allen girl.

(Narrator)

Tracy Allen was the youngest of the three Allen girls. The summer she turned nine, she and her family went on a picnic down at Bonner's Lake and she drowned.

(Verbena)

I was only a baby when Tracy Allen died, so I never knew her, but I'd heard the story a million times. When something like that happens in a small town, it never quite goes away.

(Narrator)

The Allens moved away soon after the accident, and it wasn't long before the rumors started up about their house being haunted.

(Narrator)

People claimed they'd seen Tracy's ghost sitting in the window.

(Narrator)

Some said they'd heard her crying and calling out for help in the middle of the night.

(Verbena)

But I didn't believe in ghosts. I was almost twelve. Old enough to go fishing by myself, whether my mother thought so or not.

(Narrator)

Verbena hadn't bothered to get dressed yet that day, she was still in her nightgown, and she hadn't combed her hair.

(Narrator)

She planned to change before heading down to the lake, but when she heard her mother's car coming up the road, she knew she'd better get out of there before her mother got wind of her plans.

(Narrator)

By the time the car started up the driveway, she was already in the woods following the path down to Bonner's Lake.

(Narrator)

Verbena was barefoot, her progress hampered by the long white nightgown, which billowed out around her ankles, snagging on the prickles and blackberry brambles that grew along the edges of the path.

(Narrator)

When she got tired of having to stop and work the tiny thorns out of the fabric she took to yanking herself free, which quickly reduced the hem to tatters.

(Narrator)

Ten minutes later, she stepped out of the cool woods. Bonner's Lake stretched out before her like a giant sheet of green glass.

(Verbena)

Something glistened in the sun near the edge of the water and caught my eye.

(Narrator)

At first she thought it was a shiny black rock, but then she realized it was a turtle sunning itself on a log, and curious to see what kind it was, she crept slowly toward it.

(Narrator)

As soon as her shadow fell across the water, the turtle slid quickly off the log, disappearing with a soft *plop*. That's when she saw the boat.

(Narrator)

It was an old wooden rowboat, stuck in the dark mud at the edge of the water and almost completely hidden by cattails and reeds. There were no oars in it, just a hunk of dirty gray rope tied to the bow.

(Verbena)

I pushed my glasses up with a knuckle, then I grabbed hold of the rope and pulled, but it broke almost immediately and my feet flew out from under me sending me tumbling backwards into the tall weeds.

(Narrator)

The fall knocked the wind out of her and she had to lie there for a few minutes, waiting to catch her breath.

(Narrator)

That's when she heard a soft tinkling, like the sound of the wind chimes that hung from the corner of her front porch.

(Narrator)

Wondering what it could be, she stood up and was shocked to discover a boy, standing a few feet away, his hands sunk deep in his pockets.

(Narrator)

Startled, she screamed. And to her surprise, so did he.

(Pooch and Verbena)

(scream) AH!

(Verbena)

What are *you* screaming about? You're the one who scared me.

(Pooch)

I'm, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. Honest.

(Narrator)

Despite the summer heat, he had on long pants and a long sleeved shirt. And for some reason he was wearing a necktie.

(Narrator)

He put his hands in his pockets and jiggled them nervously. Suddenly the air was filled with the tinkling sound Verbena had heard earlier.

(Verbena)

What have you got in there?

(Pooch)

Bottles.

(Verbena)

What kind of bottles?

(Pooch)

Little ones, for collecting stuff. See?

(Narrator)

The boy pulled a small, clear glass bottle out of his pocket, and showed it to Verbena. There was an iridescent gold bug lying dead in the bottom of it.

(Verbena)

That's nothing special. Just a dumb old Japanese beetle.

(Pooch)

Oh.

(Narrator)

The boy put the bottle back in his pocket and fiddled nervously with his necktie.

(Verbena)

Do you always dress like that?

(Pooch)

I don't usually wear a tie. I put it on for you ---out of respect. I wasn't sure what to wear. See, I've never done this before.

(Verbena)

Done what? Scared someone half to death?

(Narrator)

The boy broke into a goofy lopsided grin.

(Verbena)

You think that's funny? You could give someone a heart attack sneaking up on them like that.

(Pooch)

I'm sorry. But you have to admit, it *is* kind of funny, the idea of *me* scaring *you*.

(Verbena)

Uh huh. Hilarious.

(Narrator)

The boy extended his right hand, but Verbena crossed her arms over her chest, making it clear she had no intention of shaking hands.

(Pooch)

My name is Robert, but you can call me Pooch.

(Verbena)

Don't you know it's rude to spy on people, *Pooch*?

(Pooch)

I wasn't spying. Honest. I was waiting.

(Verbena)

Waiting for what?

(Pooch)

For you.

(Verbena)

How could you be waiting for me? Nobody even knows I'm here.

(Pooch)

The lady at the post office does. She told me people see you down here all the time.

(Verbena)

She must have been talking about somebody else.

(Pooch)

No. She was talking about you. I'm positive.

(Verbena)

How can you be *positive* she was talking about me? You don't even know who I am.

(Pooch)

Yes, I do. (*pause*) You're Tracy Allen. The girl who drowned in the lake.

(Narrator)

Verbena was so surprised, her mouth dropped open like the metal flap on the end of a mailbox.

(Verbena)

Tracy Allen? How could I be Tracy Allen? Don't you know what *drowned* means?"

(Pooch)

I know what it means.

(Verbena)

What do you think I am, a ghost or something?

(Narrator)

He tilted his head to one side and studied her for a moment, standing there in her long tattered white nightgown.

(Pooch)

Well, aren't you?

(Verbena)

(laughs) Do I look like a ghost?

(Pooch)

Yeah. Except for the glasses. I didn't know ghosts wore glasses. Plus I kind of thought you'd be more see-through.

(Narrator)

It's hard to say exactly why Verbena did what she did next. Maybe it was her way of getting back at Pooch for sneaking up on her. Or maybe she was just mad at the world and looking for somebody to take it out on.

(Narrator)

She knew it was wrong, but when Pooch handed her his trust on a platter Verbena reached out and took it anyway.

(Verbena)

You're right. I am the ghost of Tracy Allen.

(Pooch)

(to audience) And I believed her.