

## Prologue

### *Lost*

Lois Stevens struggled to reach the top row of the stadium stairs, where the soft grass of the surrounding field might ease her throbbing feet. She had chosen this spot because it was isolated – tucked away in the back corner of the small community college campus across the street from her home. The close proximity allowed her to easily sneak out of her bedroom when her parents were asleep, and make the short walk to the field where she was free to challenge her body without any nosy witnesses or annoying interruptions. She could handle the pain of it all much better when she was alone.

Her whole body throbbed with the constant, dull aching she had been living with for so long that she couldn't even remember when it had first come. The dark silence all around her was suffocating, and she longed for even a sliver of light. But it was just after midnight, and the sunrise was far away.

Lois kept running, oblivious to the sharp pain each breath created in her dry throat. Even if she had felt it she would not have stopped. She focused on the faded magazine clipping tucked inside her sports bra, close to her heart. She visualized every detail. That photo would always inspire her, even at these tough moments when her mind and body were strained to the breaking point. It was Lois' favorite image, and she never went anywhere without it.

She hadn't reached her ultimate goal yet, but she knew that when she did, her life would be painless and full of the perfection and beauty she now spent her days dreaming about. With that thought, she forced herself beyond the top step where dew on the grass cooled her legs. She commanded her body to run even faster, focusing her mind on the flawless curves of the model in the photo.

After only a few strides, she lost the feeling in her legs and they collapsed underneath her. A wave of terror momentarily pierced through the dull pain as she fell, but it quickly vanished,

and the cool dew on her cheek comforted her. She closed her eyes, and a brilliant light flooded her mind. The light transformed into flashing images, too fast to focus on at first. Then they slowed down a bit and came into sharp view.

Lois saw herself as a young girl of six, wearing a cowgirl outfit, blowing out candles on her birthday cake. Her cheeks were round and flushed with joy. The love from those surrounding her made her feel dizzy, and she couldn't stop smiling.

The image changed and she saw herself as she was now, at 16. She was wearing what looked like a prom dress, and twirling around an empty dance floor in a silent ballroom. She felt dizzy and groped the air around her for something to hold on to. She couldn't see straight, but she suddenly smelled her mother's perfume and stretched her arms out toward it. But the comforting smell disappeared, and Lois saw the flesh on her own young body melt away, until all that remained was a small skeleton. The skeleton collapsed into a formless heap. She could feel the skeleton mourning the loss of its flesh, and desperately longing to feel something other than the dull pain throbbing in its bones.