



The speech reversals throughout this book were found on actual audio recordings of the authorities interviewing the suspect in a missing person's case. The story itself, however, is a work of fiction; any resemblance to actual people—living or dead—is purely coincidental.

To hear examples of speech reversals go to [www.backwardmessages.com](http://www.backwardmessages.com) or [www.reversespeech.com](http://www.reversespeech.com) and click on “Examples”

The face in the mist on the cover is used with permission of the photographer, D. Sharon Pruitt, the original owner of the photo

## **Meet The Insiders**

As unlikely a group of teenagers as you could find ....

Luke Nelson, 17, a high school senior, comes from a wealthy family, is tall, handsome, blond, and popular at school; life has always been easy for him—until now

Arianna Ladanian (Ari), 16, immigrated from Iran with her parents to escape religious persecution, doesn't trust easily, is trying to forget terrifying memories of Iran where her safety depended on keeping her thoughts to herself only to face more danger in America

Elaina Ramon, 15, the youngest of the group, works on the family ranch, is bright, likable, and funny, but anxious, her favorite thing to say to calm her nerves is: “Deep breath, no pressure”

Jessica Algren, 17, the oldest of the group, is headed for college in the fall, is beautiful, tall, reclusive, a vegetarian

Jonathan Rabinowitz (Jon), 17, will be a high school senior in the fall, loves NASCAR races and astrophotography

Kim Song, 16, holds a Black Belt in Karate, is health conscious, vegetarian, and the most confident of the group until the accident

Todd Draper, 16, cautious, guarded, and keeping a secret, but the mind-reading machine reveals it

Shanika Sabair (Nika), 16, outspoken, feisty, a talented soloist in her church choir, wears colorful African clothes, tries to be the moral compass of the group, but finds her religious beliefs challenged

.... united in an extraordinary adventure, the discovery of a “mind-reading” machine. The voice-analysis procedure, which reveals people’s hidden thoughts in actual words leads them deep into the fascinating underworld of a killer’s psyche. They’ll be hunted for their discovery and soon running for their lives—and for their sanity.

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## Prologue

Night. The bright, full moon casts ghostly light across dark hills, a narrow river curves through pastures, a deserted two-lane road divides meadows and ranchlands; on the horizon train tracks stitch a long, silver scar.

A breeze ruffles the dark branches of scrub oaks and Whippoorwills call to each other followed by the brittle, metallic chirp of crickets. Bullfrogs, low voices reverberating in stock ponds, petition for mates and cattle doze under the trees. A coyote stirs the night with several high, short yips and then a long, drawn out howl—claiming its territory—and frightened goats press together for protection in a shadowy field.

The distinctive rumble of a Harley Davidson motorcycle interrupts the night as it pulls off the country road and up a long, winding driveway. Two teens get off the bike and remove their helmets. Luke—tall, blond, wearing tight jeans, t-shirt, leather jacket, and cowboy boots—turns off the engine, and walks the bike to the top of a rise overlooking a field behind an empty two-story house with raw, unfinished wood, sagging porch, and missing glass in the windows.

Ari follows closely. She's pretty with dark, shoulder-length hair, deep brown eyes, clear olive skin, and wearing jeans and a loose, long-sleeve shirt with buttons down the front.

Pickup trucks are parked throughout the field below, a couple four-wheelers do donuts in the dirt; the air is laden with dust. Men call to each other, carry folding chairs, coolers, and portable pens, which they assemble. Women visit in muted tones, children play tag. Dogs bark and whine. Bonfires are lit, lanterns hung in trees.

Luke eyes the scene suspiciously and rolls the bike off the driveway into the bushes. Headlights turn off the country road onto the driveway. He tells Ari urgently, "Get back!" and pulls her farther into the shadows. They crouch down, clutch hands. A pickup truck with two men in the front seat, a gun rack in the back window—and an animal crate holding a large, barking dog in the bed of the truck—

bounces past them as the driver navigates the ruts in the driveway and drives down the hill onto the large field behind the house.

“What’s going on?” Ari whispers.

“I’m not sure, but I think that was a pit bull in the crate. This might be a dogfight.”

“I’ve heard about those. They fight dogs to the death and bet on who’ll win. Why don’t the dogs just run away?”

“They’re trained to be vicious, given drugs to kill the pain, executed if they don’t fight. A guy with a good dog can win as much as \$5,000 a night.”

Ari grimaces. “There must be 150 people. Look at the travel trailers and children.”

“Yeah, ‘good’ family fun. Except dogfighting is a felony, and there might be additional charges for bringing kids. Those guys could go to jail for a long time.”

Ari muses, “There are stories about this place: baying hounds, flickering lights in the woods, tales told by vagrants and drunks, derelicts not to be believed. Hey, look, the men over by the corner of the house, are they buying something from someone, tickets?”

“No, I don’t think so; maybe drugs,” then sarcastically, “This just keeps getting better and better.”

“Let’s call the police.” She straightens up, visible in the moonlight; he grabs her arm, pulls her back down, “Stay down! These guys are real ugly. We’ll be in *big* trouble if they see us. We’re witnesses. They’d waste us in a second and not think twice about it; and no one knows we’re here, no one would know where to look for us.”

“That’s it, let’s go.”

“If I start the Harley, it’ll draw attention to us.”

“Then roll it back out to the road.”

Luke shakes his head no. “There could be more people coming. They’d see us leaving and wonder who we are.”

A snarl erupts from a pen as two pit bulls are set on each other.

Both animals are equal in size, muscle, and bone. Neither runs nor cowers. They slash at each other with glistening, foaming fangs.

Fur bristles, eyes glow with an unearthly light. Around and around they go, stand on hind legs, brace against each other, rip and tear. Men circle the pen and cheer their favorite.

“This is making me sick!” Ari hisses and twists out of Luke’s grasp, but he can’t take his eyes off the grisly scene.

A menacing, moist growl comes from out of the darkness near them. Ari’s stomach turns to ice and her ears buzz. She and Luke rise slowly, turn, squint to try to make out two figures in the dark—about 10 yards away—one holding a bullmastiff, a large, solidly built dog with powerful jaws and an under bite, straining against a thick leather strap.

“We saw you there in the shadows,” the man without the dog taunts, “and I don’t recall you being invited to the party.”

The dog drools and strains forward against the strap.

The first man gives a slight, curt nod to the man with the dog; had Luke not been looking right at him, he wouldn’t have noticed. He would have thought that the dog simply broke away from its handler rather than released. The man’s hand goes slack on the strap; the dog plunges forward in a blaze of slashing fangs, glowing eyes, spittle, and rage. Ari shrieks, Luke grabs her arm, yanks her nearly off her feet—no time to start the Harley—half drags her up the gravel driveway toward the deserted country road. One of the men takes out his cellphone, speaks urgently to someone, “Get up here *now!* We got a couple of kids.”

Blinding lights pierce the darkness ahead. Luke and Ari race toward the high beams. The light blinds the dog temporarily; it sniffs the air with its short muzzle and tracks them by scent. It hurls itself into Ari, knocks her off balance against Luke, her feet slip on the crunchy gravel, she screams and goes down on one knee, the dog’s teeth tear into the loose material of her shirt, flecks of slobber spray her. It lunges again, Luke kicks at it and it attacks his boot. Ari’s dark eyes glaze over, her breathing shallow, harsh and rough, too terrified now to even scream.

The back door of the car swings open; Luke shoves Ari into the dark back seat, the dog grips his boot. The car speeds away, the back

door bouncing, still open. The dog lets go, drops behind, and howls in protest as its prey escapes. Men from the yard below scramble for their trucks and guns, fire a couple shots into the air. The headlights of half-a-dozen vehicles blink on and come streaming up the hill after them.

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Ari gasps, lungs burning. Her vision clears and she sees Nika driving—wearing a colorful African-print shirt, her dark hair gathered into a bun at the nape of her neck—and next to her, Todd, pale and shaken, looking back, horrified to see the men in trucks gaining on them.

“Oh *nooo*, fire ants,” Ari wails, and rubs her arms vigorously, “they must have been in the weeds, they’re stinging me, *ow ow ow*, they’re everywhere, they’re all over me!”

Luke asks frantically, “Are you allergic?”

“I don’t know, *owww*.” She fumbles with her shirt, “They’re in my clothes, get them off me, *get them off!*” She’s crying miserably, her breath coming in gulps, he hesitates, and then tears open her shirt; buttons pop all over the backseat. He stares at her lacy bra, white against her olive skin, so beautiful.

“Would you two just get a room,” Todd quips.

“She could go into shock, she could stop breathing if she’s allergic!” He rubs her arms looking for ants, picks them off her quickly, one by one, pinches them between his thumb and forefinger, “I think I’m getting them, how’s that, any better?”

She nods, yes, a little; her breathing slowly returns to normal and, mortified—no one has *ever* seen her like this—twists away from him, pulls the front of her shirt together, and buttons the one remaining button.

“Did the dog get you?” he asks and touches her torn sleeve. She flinches; he frowns, puzzled by her over-the-top reaction. Maybe it was cultural. She was from Iran where women are known for their modesty. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

Nika growls, “Stop talking, we’re gonna freakin’ die!” She clutches the vibrating steering wheel as though to choke it, “I need to

concentrate.” The car flies down the deserted country roads—65 miles an hour, 70—a white car, a perfect target in the dark. How fast can she drive and still keep it on the narrow road, 75 miles an hour? Distant lights shine from the windows of ranch houses scattered throughout the hills—too far to reach—80 miles an hour? The high beams press into the night, tires hum; white lines on the sides of the road guide them tightly around curves, across a narrow bridge, and up and down dark, rolling hills.

There’s something at the side of the road, glowing eyes, an animal; a large coyote arcs into the headlights, they scream, Nika swerves, they brace for the thud—nothing.

“I thought for sure we’d hit it,” Todd gasps.

“Maybe it was a specter, a bad omen predicting we’re all going to die,” Ari states.

“Does anyone have their phone?” Luke asks, voice shaking, “Mine’s back with my bike.”

Todd fumbles for his, but the lurching car sends it flying out of his hands and under his seat.

### **POP, POP, KA-ZZZING!**

The back window shatters, Nika screams, “Son of a bitch!” the bullet whizzes by her ear and exits the front window, the car swerves again, she steadies it.

“Oh shit,” Todd exclaims, amazed, “they’re trying to kill us.” “Go to the police station in Dalton,” Luke shouts.

### **DING, DING, DING**

Red lights flash ahead. “Ah crap, a train,” Nika says.

The crossing gate begins to lower. “We’re dead,” Ari states, her voice dull, resigned. Todd curls up to make himself as small a target as possible.

“We’ve got to get to the other side of the tracks, or we’ll be trapped,” Nika yells above the deafening noise, and then to herself, “We’re almost out of gas.”

The train speeds closer, its bright, single eye piercing the darkness, seeking them out. It’s as huge as an ocean liner bearing

down on a rowboat. Death towers over them, Nika speeds toward it desperate to cross the tracks before the men with guns catch up.

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John Paul, senior engineer for the Union Pacific railroad, sits in the cab of the 60-ton engine and sees the car speed toward the crossing. Who the hell is that? Trying to beat a train? *STUPID!* Try to save two minutes and get killed.”

He calls 911 to report the pending disaster and then engages the dynamic braking system to reverse the electric motors on the wheels, applies metal-to-metal backup brakes, and activates the sander, which spews sand under the wheels to increase traction.

This isn’t the first time someone played chicken with his train. He saw it dozens of times and it happened to other engineers, too, who weren’t as lucky as he’s been so far. The worst that happened to him was the time a large dog—its coat bluish gray in the moonlight—tried to outrun the train. Get off the tracks, John Paul muttered through clenched teeth; just jump *off* the tracks and you’ll be okay. But it kept running down the tracks ahead of the train. John Paul felt nauseated but couldn’t stop and couldn’t go back.

Trains broadside pick-up trucks, clip school buses, waste families in cars, and kill drunk teens on prom night. My time was bound to come, when some jerk wad tries to cross before it’s safe and I waste him. I’ve got a family and a good life; I don’t want the deaths of stupid people on my conscience. I’m pulling 110 cars. It’ll take a mile to stop at this speed.

The shriek of the whistle seems to be his own voice screaming his anger and anguish into the night, the brakes squeal, but the train speeds forward with a mind of its own.

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“I can make it across, I know I can,” Nika says.

Ari sighs, “I didn’t leave Iran to die here in America.”

“I’m sorry, I’m *so* sorry,” Luke agonizes, “if I hadn’t asked you guys to join the group this wouldn’t be happening.”

They grow quiet and Nika muses, “I feel calm all of a sudden.



I'm not afraid to die, I know I'll see Jesus; I don't know where you all are going to end up."

"I feel like I'm floating," Ari says, feeling disconnected from her body.

The train's brakes shriek like a metallic banshee, the noise fills the car. Nika hunches over the steering wheel, "Oh Jesus, help us." The car lurches toward the now-lowered gate .... slides on the gravel .... crashes head on into the gate ... a blizzard of splinters explodes in every direction .... the car bounces and rattles across the tracks .... the train clips the back fender .... it feels like they've gone airborne .... floating now .... floating .... silently in slow motion .... above the confusion .... the noise .... the night .... the terror.

## 1. "My wolf howls in the surf"

**Six weeks earlier ...**

"I want to know why you're following me," Ari demanded as Luke crouched beside his Harley inspecting the front tire for road wear. She was furious with fear and so focused on getting answers from him that the voices of the kids coming out of the high school behind them seemed distant and muted.

He looked up. His compelling, blue-green eyes and good looks distracted her a moment from her anger, but she recovered and continued, "You've been stalking me for days, slinking around the corners of buildings, watching me."

"I might be a little secretive, but I don't stalk or slink," he smiled, amused. He stood up and raked a hand casually through his thick, dark blond hair.

He wore jeans, cowboy boots, and a white t-shirt; his leather jacket tossed across the seat of his bike. He was the quiet, confident type, which made him potentially dangerous. Ari didn't trust people who didn't say what they were thinking. It was too much like the government in Iran from which she and her family fled seven years ago. Soldiers watched innocent people—university students, businesspeople, teenagers, the elderly—"government opponents"—

and before you knew it, the people they were watching disappeared, never to be heard from again, or were found tortured to death. A memory flares into her mind.

“Welcome to the second grade,” the teacher says pleasantly. She wears a dark, loose fitting, ankle-length robe and a hijab, a headscarf that covers her hair, forehead, and neck. She smiles at the six girls in the small classroom, “Before we start, do we have any Bahá’í’s here?”

Ari raises her hand proudly.

“Girls, this student is a Bahá’í.” Her voice hardens, “The Bahá’ís are a disgrace to Allah.”

Ari’s face flushes, prickles. The children’s eyes bore into her; she can’t look at them, instead stares at her clenched hands on the desk in front of her and inwardly cries for her mother, *help me, māmān come and get me, I want to go home.*

The teacher continues, “The Bahá’í’s are morally corrupt; they let women worship in the same room as men, and—” She takes a deep breath for emphasis, and says on the exhale, “They don’t have any clergy, there’s no holy man in charge; individual members run their so called ‘spiritual’ gatherings. They’re heretics and their religion is false.”

Ari blinked in the bright parking lot, heart pounding. A gentle breeze swirled her dark hair about her face; she smoothed it back behind her ears. Luke stood puzzled before her. She cleared her throat and explained “In Iran kids followed me and bullied me for being a Bahá’í and the teacher encouraged it. I was scared all the time, but I won’t be intimidated here. I refuse to be afraid.”

He studied her sleeveless, lemon-color tank top tucked into low-waist brown shorts, her long, bare legs, sandals, toenails painted a delicate pink. He knew that Iran had a mandatory dress code for women; they had to cover their hair, necks, legs and arms in public, often wearing overcoats of sorts with long sleeves that come below the knees and under the overcoat, slacks or dark stockings. He smiled a little, pleased that it wasn’t that way in America.

“Don’t laugh at me.”

“Oh, I wasn’t. I was thinking how beautiful you are.” She glanced away, shyly, tugged at the small, black onyx heart—with raised golden symbols of her faith—on the chain around her neck; touching it gave her courage. She took a deep breath to steady herself and said evenly, “In Iran Bahá’ís are imprisoned, tortured, and killed.”

“Bahá’í is your race?”

“No, I’m Persian. My religion is Bahá’í. We believe in the equality of men and women and respecting people of all races and religions.”

“That sounds like a good idea.”

“The Iranian government doesn’t think so. Islam is the official religion. It’s not safe for us there. My best friend—also a Bahá’í—disappeared with her family. They might have been murdered.” She trembled.

“Or maybe they moved.”

“Yes,” she said doubtfully, “maybe they moved or came to America.” She paused, drained by the memories and then bolstered by them. “Now I’m asking you, why are you following me?”

His eyes softened, just now understanding the intensity and seriousness of her reaction to him watching her.

And she saw something in his eyes she’d seen in boys’ eyes before: interest. She was tall, slim, and dark, many would say “pretty.” Boys were drawn to her, but guarded, maybe even intimidated. It made her feel powerful and in control and she liked it. But Luke was different. She was filled with fear and hope that he’d be brave enough to pursue her.

“I’m sorry if I scared you,” he said. “I’ve been trying to get up the courage to ask you to join my group.”

“Why would you want me to join you for anything?” she asked. “You have plenty of friends and you’re on the school paper and in the drama club. I don’t belong to anything.”

He smiled. “You’ve been following my ‘career’.”

“The only thing we have in common is we’re in the same English class.”

She considered their differences. He was easy going and popular, a Texan by birth who came from inherited wealth, the grandson of a man who made a fortune in the early days of the oil business. She went to every school play he was in and sat in the dark auditorium feeling warm and feverish as she watched him on stage, but when the plays were over, she didn’t go to the cast parties when the audience was invited; she went home. There’d be plenty of girls there competing for his attention and she wouldn’t know what to say. He was confident; she was alternately apprehensive and bold. She made friends cautiously and guarded her thoughts and feelings.

“Well, I don’t want to be in your group. In Iran our lives were in danger every day and coming to America cost us everything, our family business, our home, our friends. We left it all. I’m not taking any more risks.” She spun around on her toe and stomped off.

“Wait, it won’t be dangerous, I promise,” he called after her. “We need you; I need you.”

She turned back, “Why me?”

“I’m forming a research group. Nika’s in the group.”

“Nika from English class?”

“Yeah, and Kim Song.”

She noted the diversity: Anglo-American, Luke .... Persian, her .... African American, Nika .... and Kim, Asian-American. She was more curious now than suspicious. “Who else?”

“Todd Draper, Jon Rabinowitz, Jessica Algren.”

“Jessica? She eats veggie burgers and keeps to herself. All those kids are pretty much loners and we don’t even know each other. What do you want with us?”

“Just listen.”

“Okay, okay,” she relented and inched closer, cautious, yet curious.

“We need interpreters. A diverse group from different backgrounds might be to our advantage.” His eyes darkened. “I found something that could change everything as we know it—and I

mean everything.” He motioned for her to sit on the curb with him, and said softly, “I want you in the group because **your wolf howls in the surf.**”

She inhaled sharply and her hand flew to her throat. “I just got goose pimples.” She extended her arm for him to see.

He was pleased by her reaction and elaborated. “You’re tough and smart, a survivor; I like that. And you don’t like Mr. Jones, our English teacher, do you?”

She lowered her eyes; if he knew personal things about her, he had a big advantage. Feeling confused and vulnerable, she crossed her arms tightly against her waist and resigned herself to being pulled further into his “plot,” whatever it was. Her apprehensive eyes searched his for an explanation.

“How’d you know I don’t like Mr. Jones?”

“You told me.”

She shook her head. “I never said I didn’t like him. In fact, this is the first time you and I have ever talked to each other.”

“I recorded a conversation that you and Jones had in class about the meaning of a quote in the book we’re reading.”

She frowned. “So, you recorded it and from *that* you gathered that I don’t like him?”

His eyes swept the parking lot to make sure they weren’t being watched, and then opened his saddlebag and extracted an iPhone. “After I recorded the discussion, I played it in reverse using a special app.” He took a deep breath. “Now it’s a mind-reading machine.”

End of excerpt