

The Night the Lights Went Out by Karen White

Excerpt for Bloggers

A cluster of moms stood in the parking lot surrounded by high-end SUVs following first day drop-off at Windwood Academy. The women appeared to be listening with rapt attention to the tall blond woman in the center of their semi-circle, her hair arranged perfectly beneath her white tennis visor, her long and lean limbs brown and glowy. Merilee noticed this last part only because her ex-mother-in-law had given her a bottle of glowy lotion for her last birthday and Lily had told her it made her look sparkly like Katy Perry in one of her videos. Merilee had thrown out the remainder of the bottle, realizing she wasn't the type anymore to look glowy much less sparkly.

But the blonde definitely was. Her whole body glowed. Her face glowed. Even the hair visible beneath the visor appeared to be lit from within. The woman looked vaguely familiar, and Merilee realized she'd probably been one of the mothers she'd met at the open house the previous week. She'd only been to the one let's-get-acquainted event, her work schedule precluding any of the various parties that were held almost exclusively on weekdays when she worked.

Merilee was terrible with names, had been ever since she started dating Michael. He was so good at it, always reminding her who everyone was when they were at a party, that she'd simply stopped trying. She hoped she was only out of practice instead of permanently disabled. Her children's futures probably depended on it since Michael wouldn't be there to make sure Merilee remembered the names of Lily's friends who were or were not speaking to each other. And which of Colin's teachers appreciated his dreamy attitude and those who

didn't. It had always been a game with them—her recalling every detail about a friend or teacher, details always overlooked by Michael—and then he'd fill in the missing part—the name. But now she had to do it all on her own.

She smiled vaguely in the direction of the blond woman and her entourage and had almost made it to her van when she heard her name being called.

“Merilee? Merilee Dunlap?”

Great. The woman not only remembered her first name, but her last as well. Forcing a warm smile on her face, Merilee turned. “Oh, hello. It's good to see you again.”

The other women parted like the Red Sea as the tall blond walked toward Merilee and she remembered that the woman had been wearing a Lily Pulitzer sundress and two-carat diamond stud earrings when they'd met before. But she didn't remember her name. “I thought that was you. I looked for you in Mrs. Marshall's homeroom. I'm the room mother and wanted to welcome Lily myself.”

Merilee remembered the voice. It was very Southern, heavily laced with dropped consonants and elongated vowels. The most memorable part about it was that it sounded exactly like Merilee's mother.

“We were running a bit late this morning.” Feeling suddenly short and frumpy in her dark skirt and blazer, Merilee had the strong urge to explain. “My son couldn't find his new uniform shoes. They somehow managed to find their way back into the box they came in and then got shoved so far under his bed that it took nearly twenty minutes to locate them. And then

Lily spilled her bowl of cereal and milk down the front of her skirt, and I had to quickly iron one of her other ones so she could wear it.”

The woman gave her a warm smile from behind dark Chanel sunglasses as if she knew exactly what it was like to be a frazzled single mother. “Bless your heart. And on the first day at a new school. You’ll get used to the routine, I promise. It took me a whole month to realize that I should have a skirt and blouse for every school day plus one, and have Patricia have them cleaned and ironed as soon as my girls dropped them on the floor.”

Not exactly sure how to reslake, Merilee picked out the first confusing part of the sentence. “Patricia?”

“My house manager. I couldn’t live without her. You know how crazy busy it is with all of the kids’ schedules.” She reached into her large handbag that was more briefcase than purse, with a designer’s logo sprouting over its surface like kudzu. “I was going to stick this in the mail to you, but since you’re here I’ll give it to you now. It’s a sign-up sheet for parties and field trips—it lists everything for the year. Just let me know your availabilities and ask Lily to bring it in to school and give to Bailey as soon as you can. Bailey is very responsible and will make sure it gets to me.” The woman smiled, her teeth perfect. “Only sign up for four—every mother wants to be at every single event, but then it just gets crowded—plus there won’t be room on the bus for the kids.”

“Only four...” Merilee took the list and looked at it, almost letting out an audible sigh when she saw the woman’s name at the top of the page, *Heather Blackford, Class Mother,*

followed by three different phone numbers. Now she remembered. Heather had a daughter in Colin's class, too, both girls' names starting with 'B'.

“Yes. And if you could turn it back in tomorrow that would be terrific. I'll have Claire put it all in a spreadsheet and I'll email it to all the mothers. Please write neatly—Claire has a way of butchering your name if she can't read it.”

“Claire?”

“My personal assistant. She's only part time but I would simply *die* of exhaustion without her.”

The ladies behind her all nodded in understanding.

“Yes, well, I'll take a look at it and get it back to you tomorrow.” Merilee was already wondering how she was going to approach her boss to ask him for more time off. The divorce and move had already eaten up all of her vacation time, and although Max was kind and understanding, everyone had their limits.

“And don't forget the 'I survived my first week of fourth grade' party at my lake house this Saturday. I'll be handing out disposable cameras to all the moms and dads to take pictures throughout the year at our various events—I like to do little photo albums for all the kids and the teachers at the end of the year.” She beamed, like it was just a small thing. “Oh, and I took the liberty of signing you up for a dessert because we're overrun with vegetables and dip and pimiento cheese. I figured you'd know how to make something sweet.”

“Oh...” Merilee simply blinked her eyes for a moment, wondering if Heather had meant to be insulting.

“Because you’re from South Georgia. You mentioned that when we met. You said I had the same accent as your mother.”

Feeling oddly relieved, Merilee said, “Yes, of course. Where did you say you were from?”

“Here and there—but mostly Georgia. I can always tell a native Georgian. Hard to hide it, isn’t it? It’s almost like no matter how far you go in life, all you have to do is open your mouth and somebody knows exactly where you’re from.”

There was something in the way Heather said it that made Merilee pause. “Yes, well, I’ll call my mother today and ask her what she might recommend.”

“Wonderful.” Heather beamed. She pointed a key fob toward a black Porsche SUV with vanity plates that read YERSERV, and the rear door slowly raised. As the other mothers oohed and ahed appropriately, Merilee stared into the trunk where fourteen metallic gift bags with blue or pink tissue paper expertly pleated at the tops were arranged in neat rows.

Heather moved toward the car. “A little lagniappe—that’s Cajun for ‘a little extra’ to all of my Yankee friends—for the first day of school. My treat. I thought we could each give our children a bag at pickup today and then head over to Scoops for ice cream afterwards. I’ve already reserved the party room at the back of the store. Claire is picking up the helium balloons this morning and will have it all decorated in Windwood colors.”

“You are just too much,” one of the mothers said as the other women eagerly stepped toward the car and took a bag.