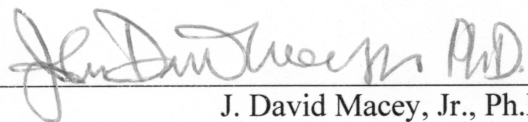


**The Deliverer**

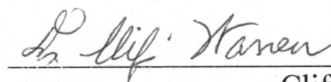
A THESIS

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## The Deliverer

## 1

The summer before my senior year was just like any other summer. All summers in small town suburbia went by in the same way. Highlights of a small town summer usually consisted of a few drunken nights spent parked out in a field where maybe someone loses their virginity. On a rare summer, there might even be a scandalous pregnancy about which to gossip. But other than that, the summers passed in a typical pattern, the same way every year, whether you were five or fifteen.

Only this summer in Yukon Falls, three different things happened. First, I spent my very last summer in this little town. The next summer, I might return from college, but it would be as a visitor. No longer would I be a resident who actually slept here full time. So, with every passing day, I felt a little more excitement. I was coming to the edge of a precipice—one where I might be able to eventually *breathe* and not be trapped here where every bit of air felt stagnant and old. It was like breathing in the same air over and over again. It always tasted the same.

Second, I had my very first, official boyfriend. Henry worked at Piggie's with me, not waiting tables like I did, but cooking in the back. We'd always been friends due to our houses' closeness in proximity, but working together brought us closer. Henry wasn't extremely handsome or funny, more of an average kind of Joe, but nice just the same. The most exciting thing about our relationship was the idea of not spending my last high school summer as an inexperienced seventeen year old. I knew Henry wasn't my first love, but we learned a lot from each other over the course of the summer.

Third, and most important, were the murders. It started as just one murder, but by the end of the summer had duplicated itself to two, one an exact replica of the first. They found Belinda Cummings first. Belinda was definitely not considered a pretty girl, nor was she very popular. So, her death, while shocking for our small town became easy to forget after the initial ripple it caused. But when the second murder occurred, everyone in town suddenly became aware someone capable of killing lived in our midst. I could not decide whether the repeat performance caught everyone's attention, or whether it was the victim chosen the second time around.

Zoe August, the second girl, could not have been more different from Belinda Cummings. Her parents were terribly rich, well known in the community, and she simply dazzled. Everyone knows at least one girl in high school who could only be described by that word. Belinda was barely considered a member of our town. Most folks might recognize her face, but I doubt many people knew her actual name. But Zoe? Zoe endured as the town's shining star. Everyone was sure she would grown up to be famous doing something. Her death suffocated everyone. Our whole town seemed to be holding its breath, waiting for someone to come and resuscitate it and bring it back to life.

By the end of the summer, most young people had early curfews, if they were let out of the house at all. And if they found themselves out after dark, they were apprehensive and paid close attention to their surroundings. The carefree days of summer vanished much earlier than summer's actual end. The Dairy Mart stayed in business, though I don't know how. No kids congregated outside drinking Cokes as they usually did. Where kids usually dreaded the start of another school year, they found themselves instead anxious to return. The thought of being able to eat lunch with their friends on the lush green lawn of the school sounded more appealing than sitting in their living rooms.

For me, the practice of counting down the days until summer's end was done with even more voracity than usual. I did not enjoy being trapped inside, under my mother's thumb twenty four hours a day. My Mom counted down, too, as I assumed most parents did. They feared the time school would start, and we would not be under their watchful eye. Instead, we would be in school, still supervised by a mass of adults. But this did not seem to allay anyone's fears.

I worked fewer hours at Piggie's. This meant less money for college and more of a chance I would have to work my first year there. For all purposes, our small town closed. It was like a diner, where someone simply flipped over the sign, turned out the lights, and all of the waitresses walked out the front door. All the crime in the world surrounded us, never reaching our front door. We'd built a wall around our town, and for the first time, something managed to scale that wall.

There is still an old theater on Main Street downtown. It's been closed for years. When I think back on this summer, I think of that old theater. As a child, it held a lot of



mystery for me. I could always imagine the life that used to be inside it. Teenage boys and girls waiting to buy their tickets through a glass box out front. The excitement in everyone's eyes and the hush that fell over the theater as the lights went down. The popcorn, candy, and every single seat packed. I could see it all in my mind's eye. I often wished someone would buy the old theater and refurbish it. But somehow I knew it could never return to its original grandeur.

That was how it felt in our town. Children no longer played hockey in the street. There was no sign of the shiny new summer tricycles that usually caused traffic jams on the sidewalks. Once welcoming homes with wide open front doors and wooden swings on their front porches could almost be mistaken for vacant, there was so little life inside. No parents had iced lemonade out on the front lawn, with brownie smell wafting from propped-open windows. All of the things that were good and right about summer simply vanished, as if they never existed in our small town at all.

And so it, my very last high school summer went.

## 2

Ever since I can remember, I've felt like I was waiting—waiting for another year to pass, waiting to be so close to where I was now, waiting to start my life. But this summer proved to be worse than I imagined. My Mom joined with the masses and allowed me out of her sight only during daylight hours. My frequently used bicycle sat locked in the garage, because she insisted on driving me everywhere. I stayed out of her sight only while I was at work and only then after she had made the manager promise to keep a very close eye on me.

I suppose in hindsight it was good. I spent exorbitant amounts of time studying to take the ACT and SAT one last time before sending off my college applications. I poured over college brochures and did research on any of the cities that had colleges that were interesting to me. I knew I would not get the chance to visit any out of state campuses to make my decisions, so I had to make do with what they offered via the internet. I had a big decision to make, and I took it very seriously. I was about to start a brand new life, after all.

I can't count the number of days I passed like this—staring at towering campus buildings and beautifully manicured lawns. I stared at the posed pictures of students to see if they looked like people with whom I might be able to form a lifelong bond.

I did this all the way up until my very last day of summer vacation, which happened to be a Wednesday. Our school always started back on a Thursday. We only had to make it through two days and it was time for the weekend. But with the current state of things, I knew the weekend did not hold much promise.

“There are new people moving in across the street.” Mom's voice drew me out of my bubble.

“Hmmm?” I asked her.

“Across the street. It looks like we have new neighbors.” She gave a nod in their direction.

I turned to take a look out the window, and it did look like we had new neighbors. I watched them move like ants, going into the truck, pulling out a box, and following the same route in and out, in and out. I liked to see what their furniture looked like, and imagine what kind of people they were. I stood at the window gaping. I didn't realize I had gone into a daze, just staring.

“Looks like the boy might be close to your age,” my mom said.

I focused on the neighbors to find there was a boy who appeared to be my age or at least close to it. It was easy to tell, because the boy had stopped moving the boxes and stared directly at me, waving his hand. How embarrassing. I smiled and waved back and

turned around and sat at the table. I pretended to be doing something, anything to make him think I wasn't staring. I did not turn back around, for fear I might be caught again.

As the day whittled away, and my very last day of summer vacation dwindled to just a few hours left on the clock, I walked outside. I forgot about the new neighbors across the street. Even with the sun starting to set, the day remained warm, so I soaked in the last bit of sunshine. It would be warm all the way into October.

The boy still moved boxes outside. He looked up from the box he carried, and he waved at me. I headed across the street to face the inevitable, since the point of pretending I didn't see him was moot. We were the only two people on the street. I didn't smile when I told him my name. There was no, "Hi! I'm Samantha, your neighbor. Welcome to the neighborhood!"

Instead, I simply said, "I'm Samantha." When I didn't stick out my hand, he stuck out his. "Hey, I'm Jack."

He gave a huge smile that made it feel warmer outside and balanced a box precariously on one knee. I shook his hand and soaked in his appearance. He stood taller than me, but not by much. I guessed 5'11". The shirt he wore was soaked in sweat, both from heat and manual labor, and I could make out he was neither skinny nor built. He weighed in as thin, but he definitely had muscle definition.

His hair gleamed a shiny, jet-black. It seemed to stand straight up, but I could tell he didn't fix it that way; it just did it on its own. I imagined, if I were to push my fingers through it, I would find it incredibly thick. His fair skin didn't show a trace of sunburn,

even on his prominent nose, since he'd been working the sun all day. He reminded me of a fictional vampire, fair skinned and dark haired, but without the brooding.

“So, do you start school tomorrow?”

“I do,” I answered him.

“I’m starting tomorrow, too. I have to get this truck unpacked, because I put all of my boxes at the very back, and I have to have them or I’ll have to wear this tomorrow. I can’t imagine that would make me very popular. “ He took a big whiff of his underarm, and I can imagine he smelled like a man who had, well, been moving boxes under the hot sun all day. But even so, I couldn’t imagine that he would have any problems being popular. Being new always made for an initial popularity in our small town, but his being extremely handsome wouldn’t hurt either.

“Where are your parents?” I wondered why he moved all of the stuff himself, especially since he was playing beat the clock to try to get it cleaned out so he could go to school the next morning.

“Oh, they’re inside taking a break.” I followed his nod to the window to see them waving at us.

“Where did you move from?” I asked.

“We moved from upstate New York.”

“Oh.” He didn’t give the name of the town. Since I didn’t know any towns in New York, that was okay with me.

I'd run out of things to say, already.

“Well, I guess I better get back inside and start getting my stuff together for school tomorrow.” It was a lie on my part. I wouldn't put a single thing together until tomorrow morning, five minutes before I headed out the door. I wanted to go back inside. I didn't want to waste any more time with Jack. Come tomorrow, I knew he'd fall in with the popular crowd and forget all about me.

“Yeah, I guess I better get back to work. I still have a lot to do.” He still had about a quarter of the truck left to unpack—a daunting task considering maybe one to two hours of daylight were left.

Jack picked the box back up in both hands, and only then did I realize he'd had it balanced on his one knee for our whole conversation. He said, “Hey, maybe I'll see you at school tomorrow? It'll be great to already know somebody!” His smile seemed genuine.

“It's not that big of a school, so I'm sure you will,” I answered. With that, I gave a bit of a wave, and I headed back to my side of the street. Sure enough, there my Mom stood, framed in our kitchen window, staring. “Great,” I thought. Now I'll have to answer all of her questions, only I didn't ask that many questions, so I won't know any of the answers.

As suspected, the deluge hit me as soon as I closed the door. “What's his name? Is he going to your school? Where did he move from? Yes, but what city? You didn't get the name of the city? You didn't get their *last* name?” I couldn't get out of there fast

enough. I hate answering questions. It surprised me she didn't go over there and "introduce" herself to the new neighbors.

Before I fell asleep I took a peek outside, and Jack was no longer moving boxes. The back door of the truck was pulled down and the lock was securely in place. Seeing the lock made me wonder whether or not Jack got all of his boxes inside or if he just gave in to the exhaustion and called it a night. There didn't appear to be any lights on across the street, and I found myself trying to determine what window might be his.

My Mom startled me by walking into my room, unannounced as always.

"What time do you want to get up tomorrow?"

I quickly crawled into bed and let her know seven would be fine. I drifted off thinking about how long the year would be and how many things I would do after I graduated. I spent the last few minutes of my very last day of summer spinning dreams while awake of all of the things I would do once I got out of this town.

3

The alarm was, well, alarming. I drifted out of sleep a few minutes early. Still the loud sound felt extremely harsh, a slap in the face for an early morning. But I got up and dressed and consumed my usual bowl of cereal for breakfast.

Mom gave me a ride to school. Usually, I rode my bike. No chance of a breakdown. I didn't need to pay for insurance, and I never ran out of gas. The bike belonged to my Dad so it was not only rusted, it was *really old*. I sensed enough to know I should be embarrassed, but I wasn't. Riding the bike made me feel connected to my Dad in a way I did not when he was alive. And I actually enjoyed riding it, much to my best friend's dismay. The slower pace gave me time to get prepared for the day. The time alone allowed me a chance to sort out the thoughts jogging inside my head.



Only now that I was trapped in her car, it was me and my thoughts, and my Mom desperately trying to intrude. I could see the great joy she experienced having me sequestered in such a small, inescapable space. Thank God the school was not too far from our house.

Miller High wasn't a large school, but it wasn't a small school either. All of the grades, K-12, went to Miller, but each one was separated in its own building and section. The high school had its own spacious green lawn spread outside its front doors, and the students would gather there both before and after classes, generally trading gossip they'd heard the night before or throughout the day. In good weather, it was not rare to find an empty lunchroom with everyone parked outside, sitting Indian style on the lush emerald grass, eating their lunch.

Today was no different. In fact, true to form, everyone huddled on the lawn waiting and watching everyone else arrive. Our school was no different from any other school, even though it sat nestled in a small town. We had jocks, girls who looked like models, science nerds, and people who were just average--in the middle—on the high school food chain. They weren't the lion, but they weren't the lamb either. With everyone huddled on the lawn, it was easy to pick out the groups and all of their members, most of them filled with hope that this year would be different than the last.

Me? I felt fine with where I ranked. Since the beginning of the first organized school, I imagined a social system existed. Popular kids, nobodies, and those folks in between. I fell into the in-between, and I was just thrilled to not be on the lowest rung. The lowest rung always looked like a rough place to be. Besides, being popular seemed like it took a lot of work. You always had to look good, be skinny, and say the

right thing. I felt certain the shiny and gleaming smiles of those ever-so-popular girls were fake. It must be tough to smile so much when you knew people watched and analyzed your every move.

Olivia, my best friend since grade school, immediately noticed my Mom's car pull up and looked relieved.

“So, you had to ride with your Mom, huh?”

“I tried, but I couldn't even come close to convincing her it was a good idea to ride Thunder.” I didn't need to explain that Thunder was the bike. I named it when my Dad used to ride it. I have no idea why I picked “Thunder,” but when you are five, you don't always have good reasons for the names you choose for things.

“My Mom made me ride with my Dad. I spent the morning listening to his patented ‘be careful’ lecture,” Olivia said. Her Dad was the police chief, so it was a speech we'd both heard often.

Olivia started to ask me about my college applications. We'd been best friends since kindergarten. We formed an instant bond when Jason Hummus tried to kiss us both mid-way through the school year. While now, either one of us would be more than pleased to even hold his hand, back then, we were utterly traumatized. In his teenage years, he had become quite attractive and coincidentally very popular. But how were we to know that we passed up a chance to kiss the future high school star quarterback in kindergarten?

Since Olivia and I did everything together during the last eleven years, it only made sense to her both of us would go to the same college and be roommates. I tried to find a good way (read easy way) to tell Olivia I really wanted to go to a college where I didn't

know anyone. Some people wanted the comfort of friendly faces surrounding them during changes. I wanted the absence of the familiar during my college transition. It would be so much more difficult to be whoever I wanted when I was attached to someone who knew exactly who I was. But as of yet, I still lead her to believe we were applying to all of the same places. I hadn't figured out how to break her heart.

Mr. Porter's voice interrupted my feeble attempt at yet another lie, instructing us to all find our way into the auditorium rather than attend our first period class.

The auditorium was one of the best things about our high school. We had one famous student who graduated and had gone on to star in some blockbuster movies. Not serious acting by a long shot, but enough to be famous, and have extra money in his pocket. He donated money with the stipulation that it be used to refurbish our theater into that of a performing arts school's caliber. With all the high school classes in attendance, we barely filled a quarter of the seats.

“Samantha!”

Someone shouted my name. And then again, “Samantha!”

I heard a male voice yelling from down the aisle. I swiveled in my seat to find Jack shouting across the theater in my direction. He waved enthusiastically, so much so he almost looked goofy. Well, an incredibly handsome sort of goofy. Most of the folks were already seated and turned to have a look.

“Sam?” Olivia asked. I could tell she was as confused as I looked. I hadn't had a chance to talk to her last night to tell her about Jack, and I forgot to mention him this morning. I forgot him period, and to see him in the auditorium surprised me.

“Can I sit here?” He gestured to the seat next to mine.

“Sure.” I am sure my face looked both surprised and confused. What I actually felt was delight. He remembered my name and wanted to occupy a seat next to me in public.

He sat comfortably and with ease, as if he fit right in. Some people can do that. They are able to look as if they belong, no matter where they are. Jack was one of those people. He dressed so simply, and yet I couldn't imagine he could look any better. He had on loose jeans with a basic black T-shirt and Converse tennis shoes.

Before Olivia could ask who he was, I heard Chloe calling Jack's name from a few rows back.

Chloe Short was good friends with Zoe, or as good of friends as two popular and competitive girls could be. She had shiny blonde hair, long and envied by every girl, and wore only lip-gloss to accentuate her full lips. She wasn't a skinny girl, but she had the right kind of curves—the ones that made high school boys take a second long look. Not friendly or snotty, she ignored most of the people who weren't in her group. I never got the impression it was intentional; she simply didn't notice anyone else. Her face was plain, in the girl next-door sort of way, but the lack of glamour or any exotic features made her even more beautiful. Of course she would know Jack. He was also beautiful, and beautiful people connected most easily with other beautiful people.

She moved from her seat and stood next to our row. “Hey Sam, Olivia. How was your summer?” She did not wait for an answer, asking more in a rhetorical way, and looked next at Jack. “Want to come sit with us Jack? I'd love to introduce you to some of the other girls.” She made sure her voice sounded as welcoming and alluring as

possible.

“Thanks, Chloe, but I've already sat next to Samantha, and she's promised to show me around the school this morning.” He glanced my way to make sure I would not dispute his claim. “Can I catch you at lunch instead?” His smile beamed up at her.

She looked confused. Apparently, that was common when Jack smiled. “Sure. I'll just look for you at lunch.” I don't imagine she'd experienced rejection before, especially not from someone of the opposite sex.

I felt unsure as to what to say. Olivia looked more aghast than she had when Jack was calling my name. Why had he chosen to sit here with us when he could have moved up and sat with Chloe? He looked at me, waiting on me to say something. Expecting was the right word—looking at me expecting me to say something.

“My name is Sam. Not Samantha. Well, at least, I go by Sam.” That is what came out. What was wrong with me?

He shrugged. “Okay, Sam then. I hope you aren't going to make me look like a liar to Chloe and her friends and not show me around the school.” Again with the big smile.

I had no answer. Instead I questioned him, with a tone similar to the one my Mom used just this morning. “How did you meet Chloe? You just got into the neighborhood yesterday.”

“Her family showed up yesterday saying something about being the town welcoming committee and brought us over a fresh baked apple pie. We've moved a lot, and I haven't had that happen once. This sure is a strange town. Nice, but strange. I feel like I'm sitting in an episode of *Leave It to Beaver*.”

The lights dimmed, and Mr. Porter began to explain to us how our school year would reflect our summer. There would be no football games, no dances, no after school activities. Nothing until our town was again made safe through an arrest. He scheduled a self-defense instructor for the morning to give us a demonstration on how to protect ourselves in the case of a surprise attack by the town villain and gave us the high points we'd been hearing all summer—most of which consisted of not being out alone or after dark, especially if you happened to be female.

By the time the whole thing was over, it was almost time for lunch. Chloe made sure to catch up to Jack as he promised his lunchtime to her, and he gave me a rain check. I felt like I was back on planet earth once again.

I told Olivia over lunch all of the things she wanted to know, the main ones being, “who was he,” and “when can I come and stay the night at your house so I can stalk him from across the street?”

“He's just a guy, Olivia. Just like any other guy. He just happens to have better-looking hair and shocking green eyes. I don't know a thing about him. He could be a total jerk.”

“Yes, but he lives across the street from you. *Across the street*. You can look from your bedroom window into his. You can see him mow the lawn, *with his shirt off*.”

“I don't even know which window is his.” But I had to admit to myself that seeing him mow the lawn with his shirt off would make my life seem much better. I could not deny it. It was a shame he had not lived across the street the whole summer. Maybe, with the town curfews, we could have become best friends, drinking lemonade on my

front porch. He could have told me all about New York and I could have told him all about...nothing. I would have had nothing to tell all about. But in my fantasy, he would not have cared. He would have thought my mundane stories were entertaining. He would have thought my sheltered small town life was curious.

“Let it go, Liv. One lunch with Chloe, and he'll be sucked in. The only chance I'll get to see him will be if I AM peering through his bedroom window. It's best not to think about what might happen if things were different.”

I glanced over to see a table full of Chloe and her friends listening, all ears, to Jack tell a story. I couldn't hear the story, but I imagined it to be funny and him engaging. After a few minutes, he stopped talking as if he'd just delivered a fabulously funny punch line, and everyone laughed. Instant friends. Slide right in with no work at all. That was Jack. I didn't need to know a thing about him to see he was able to do that.

It didn't take long before the days began to weave together. Before I realized it, the first week passed, and we were in our second week of school, and then our third. I

focused on my studies and worked hard to prepare for my last chances at the standardized tests. I failed to notice most of the things going on around me, except for Jack.

The leaves started to fall before they had even turned their autumn shades. I continued to see Jack in the hall, his locker being just a few down from mine. He and Chloe were rarely apart, having become quick friends, maybe more. Once Jack attached himself to Chloe, we rarely spoke. Sometimes, I saw him glance in my direction. Just as I was about to wave or smile, Chloe would pop in between our lines of sight. He'd begin talking to her, as if our eyes never locked. I could not and would not blame him. Chloe had so much more to offer a heterosexual teenage boy.

When I looked in the mirror, I saw the very definition of plain. What I considered to be medium length, curly hair hung down past my shoulders in that crappy brown color that everyone dyes to be blonder or darker—anything but its original mousey hue. My mother never allowed me to color mine, so I was obliged to wear it with faux pride. What choice did I have? Her voice bounced between my ears saying, “when you turn eighteen you can do whatever you want, but not a moment before.” Since I didn't turn eighteen until the summer after my senior year, I figured I should pick a different battle, a more important one.

My eyes did not sparkle a pretty green or blue. Instead a bland hazel color peeped out from behind my eyelids. My height and weight were proportionate, but more on a “national average” scale than that of a supermodel or anorexic teen. I tended to lean toward nondescript clothing, most often wearing comfortable things versus flattering things. I suppose if I used more make up or worked harder with my hair, I might appear



less average, but the thought rarely occurred to me. When it did, I usually pushed it to the back of my mind. If I suffered rejection, it was because I did not put forth the effort, not because the effort I put forth was not good enough.

I did not chastise myself for these things. There were a few pluses to add in when I thought about the areas where I had been fortunate. My skin hinted at a distant ethnic relative, with its olive-tinted hue. I tanned easily in the summer without ever suffering a burn. The Creator blessed me with a chest that was proportionate to my body size. I spent zero hours contemplating breast enhancement or reduction. I rarely woke up with zits, which seemed to be a particularly obnoxious blight on most of my classmates, especially the boys.

I suppose average remained better than ugly. The only truly bad thing about average is there is always going to be a chance that something is going to come along that you want and someone better than average is going to take it.

Only looking down the row of lockers at Chloe and Jack, it didn't appear that Jack had put up much of a fight. He and Chloe laughed—beaming at each other with eager smiles.

“Well, that didn't take long.” Why did Olivia say the most obvious things? It was very annoying.

“No, Olivia, I guess it didn't. Is that really a surprise, though? I mean, look at her.” I fished through my locker for my calculus book and gestured in Chloe's direction.

We both turned to look to see Chloe in her designer jeans with a tailored-to-fit T-shirt that showed off the fade of her summer tan. Her hair glowed, literally, as she tilted her head perfectly left and right to create a sway that looked like an accident, catching the light's reflection on her silky strands. As if her looks weren't enough, she exuded a confidence that radiated off her every inch. Not one part of her even whispered at an insecurity.

“She's smart, too.” Olivia made sure to point out. Again with the annoying.

“I know, Liv. I've had her in a few of my classes.” I rolled my eyes. Of course, I had her in a few of my classes. Miller's size didn't allow it any other way. At some point, everyone would attend classes with someone else, everyone's paths crossing at least once.

I closed my locker and walked away. I didn't want to see any more. I was surprised every time I saw Jack and Chloe. He and I barely knew one another, and no expectations had been set, no promises given. I acted like he was my boyfriend, as if Chloe stole him from me. It was ludicrous, and still I felt a misgiving every time I saw them together.

The disappointment wounded me, if only slightly. And I had no experience with treating this type of wound. It nagged at my thoughts whenever I wasn't busy with school or work, always there, waiting for a quiet time to slip in.

“Has he talked to you at all?”

“Nope.” I shook my head while I threw my backpack over my shoulder.

Olivia didn't say anything else. She just walked beside me for a few minutes.

“Maybe you should go and visit him, since he's just across the street. That would make it easy to be very casual about it.” She did an imitation of my voice, “I was just in the neighborhood kind of thing.”

“I think it's best if I just let it go. If he wants to talk to me, he'll talk to me. Besides, I have loads of studying to do if I want to be ready to take these tests, and there are still a few college applications I need to fill out. And anyway, I can't compete with Chloe. No sense in setting myself up for disappointment.”

She shrugged. I knew her well enough to know she wanted to push more. She knew me well enough to let it go.

We walked to Olivia's Dad's car. My Mom did not allow me to walk home. Thunder remained a hostage, tightly locked in the garage, with no opportunity for escape. With the time between murders quickly increasing from days to weeks, most parents became more lax in the supervision of their children. The faculty at Miller High was even considering hosting a fall dance, giving the students a chance to let off some pent up steam. Unfortunately, my mother was not most parents. Her hold would not relinquish until an arrest was made.

Once in the car, Olivia changed the subject to talk about all of her plans for college, especially the ones that included the two of us. I sat silently next to her, listening to her chatter away, and tried to push Jack and Chloe out of my mind.

## 5

Autumn showed its face earlier than in past years. The time for pulling out sweaters and boots came easily two weeks earlier than the year before. It did not, however, *feel* like autumn, not because of a lack of the usual fall crispness to the air, but due more to the absence of those events that shaped the high school experience—football games and school dances.

Like any other small town, Yukon Falls rallied around football season. Whether our team won or lost, the town supported its hometown heroes. On a Friday night, not a single place opened between six and ten PM, later if the game went into overtime. Our football games gave a chance for every member of Miller High to be on equal playing field. For that one night a week, regardless of social class, we were all one team. Had I grown up in a different place, I might never have gone to a football game. I guessed I would have been a drama nerd, one of those artsy pretentious types who wears all black. Or maybe I would have been on the debate team, ready to talk politics and injustice at the drop of a hat. But in those kinds of places, those kinds of towns, football games were

reserved mostly for the cheerleaders and jocks, and I doubted my attendance would have been regular.

In small towns, due to a lack of other options, everyone supported football, including my mom and me. Without the games, the sense of community that was typically so prevalent here abated, hiding itself in the shadows, waiting for its chance to rally again. Until its absence, I did not realize how much I missed huddling under a blanket with a thermos of hot cocoa; all of my hopes pinned on one high school quarterback's ability to throw a ball.

When the announcement came, close to a month into school, that a dance was to be held, I became more excited than usual, as did most of the school. Dances did not tend to be my favorite activity, due to my natural inability to dance and aversion to finding a good rhythm. But at that point, eagerness to do anything other than sit at home won out, and I found myself listening to Mr. Porter's detailed message over the intercom.

The dance would be nothing fancy. But since things died down, with no recent murders, the school wanted to give us a chance to do something normal. I started to think that I might go my entire senior year with no dancing involved. Decorations would be sparse, according to Mr. Porter. He did not want to celebrate too much in the wake of recent events. "We have still lost students, and there are some who are still grieving every day," his voice boomed over the intercom. No formal attire necessary, the dance would be a casual one. A DJ would be provided instead of a band.

The buzz surrounding the dance echoed around every corner and hallway in the school. Dates were not necessary on these informal occasions, but it was easy to tell everyone's minds depended on around the final decision of whom they might ask.

I saw Chloe talking to Jack excitedly about something. I couldn't remember seeing her ever look sad. She was alive and vibrant, and even more so when excitement showed up on her face. I could only assume he had already asked her to be his date. I caught him again glancing my way over Chloe's shoulder. I gave him a smile and he gave a small wave. Chloe turned to look at me and walked over. Jack followed slowly behind her.

“Sam! Isn't this the most exciting news? Who's going to be your date for the dance?” Hard to tell if her intention was to remind me I would be unlikely to have a date or if more intended as a genuine question. Either way, I was mortified for Jack to hear I did not have a date.

“I'm sure I'll go with Olivia.”

She looked confused, not realizing, I am sure, that girls did go to dances together, often in large groups, often without dates. Chloe always had a date, so she'd never relied on the sisterhood bond a lot of females shared.

“Oh. Well, since we haven't had any school activities this entire year, I bet everyone will be going. Surely there is someone you could go with?” It sounded as if she almost felt sorry for me.

“I’m sure I *could* find someone Chloe, but that doesn’t necessarily mean I want to. Olivia and I have a good time together, and I don’t want to go with someone just to be going with someone. I want to go with someone I’m going to have a good time with.”

I saw Jack shrug behind her, as if to say both “what can you do?” and “she doesn’t get it, so you might as well stop trying.” It made me smile.

I suspected Chloe was waiting for me to ask her whom she was going with. But I did not. I did not want to hear her say Jack’s name. Hearing it come out of her mouth would sound like a large booming drum that would hum in my ears. Besides, I learned a long time ago not to ask questions I didn’t really want the answer to. So, instead, I turned and walked away.

My Mom waited outside to drive me home. Lucky for me, she seemed to be available round the clock to chauffeur me back and forth from home to school and school to home.

I checked my e-mail, but I hadn’t received anything. Practically everyone I knew attended school, so they were unlikely to send me messages during the day. Mom asked me to help rake some of the new fallen leaves, so I changed my clothes into sweats and a long sleeve T-shirt. Just as I pulled the shirt over my head, the doorbell rang.

I ran downstairs to find Jack peeking in one of the side windows that stood vertically on each side of the door. Maybe he needed to borrow a cup of sugar.

I answered with a confused look on my face. As soon as he started to speak, I stepped outside and shut the door behind me. Partially, I didn’t want Mom to hear our

conversation, but I also didn't want Jack in my house. I didn't feel like I knew him well enough to let him in.

“It's strange we don't have any classes together, huh?” He asked.

I can't imagine this is what he rang my doorbell to say. “I guess it is.” In truth, it *was* strange. With our school being so small, it was odd Jack and I hadn't wound up with at least one class together. I'd counted on it when I saw him on the first day, but by the sixth period realized my hope must be futile, because Jack hadn't appeared in any of my classes.

“I had hoped we'd be in at least one class together,” he said, sounding genuine.

“How are you liking your senior year so far?”

“I'm just glad it's my last year. How are you liking going to a new school?”

He thought about it before he answered. “It's different. My last school was close to a big city, so I was used to there being so many more people. It's strange to see the same people every day. It's strange for everyone to know everyone! But I think the thing that is the most strange is that people stare at me like I'm a celebrity or I'm disfigured, I'm not sure which. There were so many people at my old school that went in and out from year to year that nobody noticed a new face. Apparently, it's not like that here. I wish you would have warned me.”

I felt admonished and I turned red. “I guess I didn't think about it.”

He sat down on our front porch step. I felt unsure what to do, so I sat next to him.

“So, what's this big dance about?”



“I’m not sure I understand the question. I’m sure it’s the same as the dances you had in New York.” I countered.

“We didn’t have dances. There were some fights and the school board vetoed having them right before I started. So, I’ve never been to a dance. Are they fun?”

Really, they weren’t fun. School dances were another high school rite of passage that I would have rather avoided, but went to anyway. I didn’t want to confess such a thing to Jack, because he seemed oddly excited at the prospect of attending a dance. Plus, I didn’t want to look like Debbie Downer.

I shrugged. “It’s mostly a bunch of kids standing around, eating homemade sandwiches and drinking punch, sneaking outside to drink beer in the parking lot whenever the teachers aren’t looking.”

“Do people actually dance?” he wanted to know.

“Some, I guess. But most people only dance to the slow songs, that is if someone asks them.” What was with the third degree about the dance?

“Do you dance?”

I laughed out loud. It felt good to hear such a deep, honest laugh come from inside me. My nerves faded, and Jack the beautiful, untouchable neighbor, had turned into the guy across the street.

“Why are you laughing, Sam?”

“I wouldn't call my flailing movements dancing.” I felt like I should be ashamed to say this, like I should have said yes. Then I could have secretly practiced at home, just so I wouldn't be forced to tell Jack there was something I couldn't do.

“What about slow dancing? Are you one of the girls who slow dances when they're asked?”

I was embarrassed to say, “I can't remember the last time I was asked.” I looked down at the step, not wanting to meet his eyes. I wanted to pretend I belonged to a different class, a more popular one, but I didn't see the point. Even if I pretended that our fellow male students were lined up to dance with me, Jack would know it wasn't true. Telling him out loud didn't make a difference.

“I find that hard to believe.” He waited a few more moments before he asked, “What about your Dad? Didn't he teach you?”

I thought about my Dad. I knew Jack didn't know he passed away last year. How could he? New gossip long since replaced the story of the sad widow and her daughter who were left alone. My Dad, in fact, had not taught me how to dance. He had not taught me a lot of things, and now he never would. He worked all the time, claiming he worked hard to make life better for his family, when his absence actually made it worse.

I knew he loved us. I never doubted it, but his mood usually swayed toward withdrawal and annoyance when having to deal with his wife and teenage daughter. He'd spent so much time at work, he'd forgotten how to be at home, how to be a dad and a husband. His death hardened me. I felt cheated and shortchanged, to have a Dad for so much of my life, but not have him there.

Then he disappeared and I was left with no hope of ever getting to know what it was like to have a father.

Instead of saying all of this, I simply said, "No. He didn't."

"Maybe I could teach you."

Such a strange offer for two people who barely knew one another. It wouldn't surprise me if Jack danced like Fred Astaire, tails, top hat, and all. His talents were undoubtedly many and unusual, different from the other high school boys in our sheltered town.

Lost in thought, I heard but did not register his next question until he said it a second time.

"Sam? Did you hear me? I said, 'Maybe I could teach you, so you won't be so nervous when we go to the dance.'"

My face formed a question, which saved me having to ask one.

"I heard you tell Chloe you didn't have a date. Would you like to go with me? I know you were planning on going with Olivia and some of your other girlfriends, but I would really like to go, and I'm kind of traditional in that I'd rather go with a date than by myself."

In a wave, all of my nervousness began to drown me. I felt like I was being smothered, whether it be with confusion or excitement, I could not be sure.

"What about Chloe?" I choked out.

“What *about* Chloe?”

“I just assumed you'd be going with her. You're not going with her?” I wondered how many ways I could ask the same question.

Now Jack took his turn at looking confused. “Why would you assume I was going to with Chloe?”

“Really?” I think I said it a little more loudly than I had intended.

“Really.”

“I see you guys together constantly. She's always at your locker. You're always at her lunch table. She looks like she's being charming and you look like you're being charmed. Sometimes, it's vice versa. When I look at the two of you, *I see fireworks.*” It all came out in a rush, and I realized it must have been bottled up and as soon as I had the opportunity, I wanted to let it out as fast as I could.

Jack gave a low rumbled laughter. “Chloe already has a date.”

“I especially like how you didn't answer my question.”

“There was a question? None of that sounded like a question.”

I rolled my eyes. Of course, it was a question. I fished for the answer, but I could tell I wasn't going to catch anything. Jack said all he had to say about Chloe. I could read it on his face.

“So? Do you want to go with me? I'll make it worth your while, take you out to dinner, buy you a corsage and everything.”

“The dance isn't formal.”

“I especially like how you didn't answer my question,” he said with a wink.

“I was just saying the dance isn't formal. I don't need a corsage.”

“So, that's a yes, then?” he asked again.

I looked up at his bright green eyes, framed by the darkest lashes I'd ever seen. I hadn't noticed before, but he had a light freckled pattern across his nose. He leaned in, waited for my answer, and for the first time, I imagined what it would be like to feel his breath on my lips. He looked intently at my face, trying to gauge my reaction to his question. His eyes locked on mine, and I knew he must realize my eyes were scanning his features. How could I say no?

I couldn't. “Sure. I would love to be your date.” I had just said aloud, the understatement of the year.

Jack said some other things, talked about the weather, raking the leaves in his own yard, how much he like Ms. Samuels, the Spanish teacher, but I didn't hear a single one of them. I only half listened, my mind shooting off its own fireworks in a thousand different directions.

“I have to go,” he finally said. Probably because I failed to speak, sitting like a deaf mute on the porch, pretending to listen to his banter.

“Well, thanks for coming by and..... asking me to the dance.” Was a thank you appropriate in the situation?

“I have to meet Chloe for studying at her house.” I tried to let that last comment slide off my back, not wanting to let the thought of Chloe and Jack ruin my newfound excitement.

“Tell her I said hi.”

“Sure. See you in school tomorrow.”

He walked back across the street, a casual stroll, and went inside. I pretended to rake leaves until I saw him climb on his motorcycle and ride off, presumably on his way to study. Shaking the thought of Chloe and Jack shoulder to shoulder working on math equations out of my mind, I ran upstairs to call Olivia.

“*Shut up!*” was all Olivia had to say. Neither one of us could believe it.

## 6

Chloe died. Just like that, quick as a finger snap. She was still alive when Jack rode off on his bike to study with her, still alive when I went to sleep. But somewhere between my drifting off and waking up, something horrible happened. Mother woke me with the news before the sun rose.

It took me a minute to realize I wasn't dreaming.

“What happened?” I asked, not sure I wanted to know.

“The janitor found her,” mother emphasized. “He arrived at school first this morning. You know how he always gets there early to make sure everything is okay for the students before the day starts? When he first got there he checked the grounds, just like always—went through all three buildings and walked around outside. He noticed something lying out on the field, wet from the sprinklers. Thinking it was just a coat someone had dropped or left behind, he turned the water off, and realized it was a body. Of course, he called the police immediately. The chief recognized Chloe as soon as he arrived.”

“How?” was the only word I could get out, my brain blocked with an overload of unpleasant information.

“You know how popular Chloe was,” my Mom answered.

“No,” I said shaking my head. “Not how did the police recognize her. How did she die?”

“I don't know.” She looked sad, paused for a time, looking out my window. “Sam, what if it had been you? That's all I've been able to think of since I heard.” She walked over and hugged me tightly.

*What if it had been me?* I thought about it. I think every person who heard the news about Chloe would ask that. At least all of the women.

I felt guilty. I had spent most of the rest of last night wondering why girls like Chloe had everything. I never understood how one person could have looks, smarts, and personality, and some people not have any. It never seemed fair. Hating Chloe came naturally to me.

Now, I couldn't hate Chloe any more. Her fate, whatever it was, had not been fair.

Olivia called. Her Dad, being the chief of police and on the school board, retrieved and provided much more information than my mom. Olivia regurgitated it to me, no emotion in her voice. She gave a “just the facts ma'am” rendition.

Apparently, Chloe suffered immensely. Her death had not come quickly. Bruises covered her arms, legs, face, back, everywhere. The police suspected she might have broken free and run, because the bottoms of her feet were bloody and swollen. They found her covered and on the football field when they arrived, but the janitor confessed he'd found her naked. A father himself, he told the police he couldn't imagine his own daughter lying naked, bent and broken, on the football field. He covered her with a tarp he found in the supply shed.



Olivia's dad said it would take a while to determine the actual cause of death, because of the vast damage. In addition to the bruises, she had rope burns on her wrists and ankles. Although she had clearly been bound and strangled at some point, until the medical examiner performed an autopsy, no one would even attempt to guess cause of death. Her body showed no visible knife or gunshot wounds with the exception of one. Chloe's ring finger had been removed from her left hand, grotesquely cut off and kept as a souvenir. Since the murderer kept the same trophy from both previous victims, this created no surprise. Olivia's dad always gave her the details, so it no longer seemed bizarre to me when she knew even the most grotesque things.

“Why was she killed on the football field? Both of the other girls were found in the woods.” I knew I sounded like I was a person who watched too many crime shows, but I asked Olivia anyway.

“He didn't kill her on the field. He just left her there. The police say she died somewhere else. My dad says the police can't make any connection with the places where the bodies were dumped.”

Olivia and I talked about Chloe, not reminiscing, but discussing how terrified she must have been. We repeated, “I just can't believe it,” too many times to count before hanging up.

Did I wish this on her? Deep inside, I did not. But it was easy to return to last night's thoughts of Chloe and Jack, ruining my recent joy at Jack's dance invitation. Instead of trying to figure out what I wanted to wear to the dance, I spent last night thinking of Chloe and Jack nuzzled together, her learning all of Jack's secrets, all of the

ones I hadn't had a chance to learn yet. I thought I would never stand a chance. Now, the dance seemed so stupid. Petty jealousies, even more so.

Wait.

Jack!

How could I forget about Jack? Jack spent the last night with Chloe, and whether or not they were a couple or just friends, they were close. He must be upset.

I pulled on some sweat pants and a sweatshirt, pulled my hair in a ponytail, and slid into my flip-flops. In a hurry, I ran downstairs and outside, headed across the street. I stopped short when I saw two policemen on Jack's front porch. Jack stood framed inside his doorway. The police car had pulled up in the driveway. While the red and blue lights weren't flashing, the scene still held an air of authority.

I knew both of the officers. In small towns, it's like that. So, I walked into the yard. Jack noticed me as I made it half way across the lawn, but he did not let on to the cops that I was there.

“Morning Officer Cooper. Officer James.” I nodded my head at each of them.

“Good morning, Sam,” Officer Cooper greeted me. He seemed only slightly annoyed I interrupted his interrogation.

Before I could speak to Jack, Officer Cooper made sure Jack understood his intentions. “We will likely need to speak with you again, so if you could just make sure you don't leave town or anything.”

“Where would he go?” I asked. “He's in high school. He lives here with his parents.”

Officer Cooper started to look more annoyed. “Sam, this really doesn't involve you.”

Jack took over. “I understand, officer. I promise you, it will be easy to find me when you need to. I gave you my cell number. If you don't get me, I will call you back as soon as I can. I want to catch whoever killed Chloe as much as you do. I'll help any way I'm able.”

Jack sounded fine, like the cops showed up at his door all the time. He didn't look like someone devastated over the loss of a loved one. Only then did I feel silly. I suddenly realized I had no idea what to say.

We stood on Jack's front porch and watched the officers leave.

“What was that about?” I asked.

“As far as we can tell, I was the person who last saw Chloe. We studied together at the coffee shop on Hartland. I can't remember the name, “Joe's”, I think. We went our separate ways at about ten thirty. She never got home.”

A feeling of horror filled me. Chloe's house wasn't far from the coffee shop. If she'd left, even on foot, it wouldn't have taken her more than thirty minutes to get home. Had she been kidnapped during that window of time? If so, it was more likely she had been tortured for hours, prior to her death. I shuddered.

“Are you cold?” Jack asked. “We can go inside.”

“I just came over to see how you were. I thought you might be upset. I know you and Chloe were close.”

“Oh.” I waited for more, but nothing came. Jack walked inside. I had no choice but to follow.

“You didn't notice anyone lurking around after you left?”

“Of course not.” He seemed mad at himself. I didn't need to ask why. He let out a long sigh. “I don't know if I even would have noticed. I didn't look around. I made sure she got in the car, and that it started. Then I drove away. I still can't believe this actually happened.”

I wouldn't know what to do if he cried. I hadn't prepared myself for that. The experience I had with boys ranked low. The experience I had with crying boys was nil.

Thankfully, Jack didn't cry. I saw no signs he would. He kept saying, “I keep seeing her, over and over in my mind, crumpled and torn up like that. It's not that she was beautiful. I know that's what people will think—that she had a bright future, that she could have been anything. Sure, those things are true. But when you really got to know her, you realized staring at her was like staring into a noonday sun, extremely bright, so bright it blinds you. You could tell she loved every minute of living. It's a sad day every time the world loses a soul like hers.” I knew that's not how I would describe Chloe. But Jack knew her far differently than I did. For me, she was more like the noonday sun that burned too bright. So bright it burned you. She made me feel uncomfortable. But that wasn't what bothered me about what Jack said.

“You shouldn't think ill of the dead,” he interrupted my thoughts.

Startled by his accusation, I blushed and started to stammer, embarrassed, because that was exactly what he'd caught me doing. “I wasn't.”

“What were you thinking, then?”

I told him a half-truth, focusing on my question, rather than confessing how I felt about Chloe. “Why did you say you keep seeing Chloe crumpled and torn?” Of course, I knew what happened to Chloe, because Olivia had told me. But the story had yet to appear in the paper or on the news. So how did Jack know Chloe's state when the police found her?

Jack hesitated for only a split second. To someone else, it may have seemed like he did not miss a beat in answering my question. Had I not spent so much time admiring him from afar, I may not have noticed. Of course, Chloe had just died, and the police grilling him with questions could easily have caused his distraction.

“The police told me. They were here for about an hour, asking me all kinds of questions. Where we went. What time we left. How long I'd known Chloe. What kind of relationship we had. They kept asking me the same things over and over, kept asking when I'd moved to town, and where I came from. I think they were trying to trip me up on something--catch me in a lie.”

“I hope you're not considered a suspect,” I said.

He thought about it. Surely that must have crossed his mind from the questions the police asked. Maybe not. I didn't know enough about how Jack's brain worked to make that determination.

For the first time, he sounded frightened and replied, "Honestly, Sam, I think I am."

7

"Where have you been?" My mom glowered at me. She looked at my flip-flops.

"I went across the street." After Jack's revelation that the police suspected him in Chloe's murder, there wasn't much else to say. I'd only been gone fifteen minutes.

"To do what?" She didn't wait for an answer. "I don't want you hanging out with that boy, Sam."

“Who?” She couldn't be talking about Jack. She didn't know Jack. She hadn't even *met* him.

“That new neighbor. I don't want you over there. We don't know anything about him.”

“I go to school with him. What do you want to know?”

“I have been on the phone all morning, talking to the other parents. Some of them said they heard from Chloe's mom that Jack was the last person to see her.” She looked suspicious.

“So what?” I couldn't think of anything smarter to say.

“So, Sam, we don't really know anything about that boy. I *know* he goes to school with you, and I can see he's handsome. I understand how you could be smitten with him, but that's not really enough. As women, we have to be aware all the time. You can't just let someone get you alone, in a compromising position because he's handsome. Look at Ted Bundy. He was handsome, and women trusted him, and you know how that wound up.”

Not the Ted Bundy speech again. I couldn't count the number of times she forced the Ted Bundy speech on me.

I rolled my eyes, but she ignored me and plowed on. “Even handsome and charming people can be dangerous. As ladies, we have to keep that in mind. And if you don't know someone...well, who do you really ever *know* anyway? My point is, you don't know anything about Jack.” I could tell she was about to start rambling, so I cut her off.

“Sure I do. I know his age and where he's from. I've met his parents, and I know he's never been to a school dance. I know he's smart, because he's in the honors program.” I didn't throw in that I knew he had startling green eyes and an ever-so-charming smile.

“I think you should just be careful, Sam. He showed up here about the same time all of this chaos started.”

What was she implying anyway?

“Actually, Belinda died two months before Jack moved in across the street. And his parents moved here. Jack didn't have any control over that.”

“That brings up another interesting thing. Where are his parents? I've never seen them at any of the town meetings or parent meetings at the school. As a matter of fact, I don't think I've even seen them across the street since that first day when they moved in. Don't they care to know what goes on with their son?”

She had a point. Now that I thought about it, I hadn't seen them either.

“His dad works out of town,” I blurted out a lie. I had to come up with something. “Sometimes his mom goes along, too. They must be on a trip.”

“For three months? That's an awfully long trip.” Again with the suspicious look. “I'm tired of arguing about this Sam. Sometimes I know things because I'm older and I'm the mom. You need to stay away from Jack.”

“But, he's invited me to the school dance. I can't cancel on him. He won't be able to get a date on this short of notice.”



My mother looked skeptical. Almost as if she didn't believe Jack would ask me to the dance. I couldn't blame her. I'd had a hard time with that one myself.

“Sam, I hate to disappoint you, but they're going to cancel that dance. There's no way they are going to let a bunch of teenage girls out late, drinking, and running around the town with everything that's going on. The parents are already putting a formal complaint together for the school board, just in case they don't do it on their own.”

I hated my Mother. Not always, but at that moment, I became overwhelmed with it. The temporary thrill of Jack asking me to the dance started to fade, because I realized what she said was true. The school board wouldn't take that risk. Tears filled my eyes. My one chance to finally get something I wanted disappeared before my eyes.

“Sam, there'll be other dances. Quit being so dramatic.” And I knew that was true, but there may not be other dances where I had a date with someone as perfect as Jack.

I turned on my heel and went back upstairs to pout.

The school board canceled the dance. Not a great surprise, as mom predicted. What was a great surprise was Jack still wanted to take me somewhere. He approached me after first period, the same day the announcement spilled out from the intercom

“What time do I pick you up on Friday?” he asked.

Horrified, thinking he'd not heard the morning announcements, I asked, “Huh?”

“What time do you want me to pick you up on Friday?”

“The dance got canceled,” I said, trying to hide my disappointment.

“So?”

“So?” I repeated back.

“So, you don't want to go out with me anymore? I thought we had a date.”

“We had a date for the dance, but now the dance is canceled.” It hadn't occurred to me that he still might be interested in doing something.

Jack sighed. “You're canceling on me, then?”

“No! I'm not canceling. I just assumed you would be canceling. What were you planning we'd do?”

His one thousand kilowatt smile sucked me in. “It's a surprise.”

“A surprise?”

“Yep. A surprise. I'll have someone pick you up at seven.” I melted.

Once I realized what he said, I know I looked confused. “What do you mean you'll have *someone* pick me up at seven? Why aren't you picking me up?” A slight apprehension began to gnaw at me. Why would Jack not pick me up? I had to admit that some of what my mother mentioned rang inside my ears, even though I tried to silence it. I thought a lot about the questions she'd posed. What did I know about Jack? Where were Jack's parents? Did I trust him enough, *know* him enough to get into a car with him, never mind someone else and go somewhere that was a “surprise,” read undisclosed location? I didn't. I could pretend like those things didn't matter, but they did. At least a little bit. What I was forced to decide in that moment was whether or not it mattered enough to tell him I didn't want to go.

He sensed my apprehension. “What's wrong?”

“I would just feel better if I knew where we were going.” So, if you wound up beating or stabbing me to death, my friends and family would know where to find me.

“But that would ruin the surprise.” Instead of understanding, he seemed to be annoyed.

“It just feels weird, with everything going on, to go somewhere I don't know with someone I don't know that well. What if something happened? Nobody would know where I was.”

“Fair enough. I'll tell you who's picking you up if you promise you'll still come with me.”

I shrugged. That *did* seem fair. And I *did* want to go more than just about anything in the world.

Jack could tell I was thinking it over. “Don't you trust me?”

I wanted to trust him. I wanted to look right into his eyes and tell him a one hundred percent truth—that I *did* trust him. I couldn't do it. But what I could do was give him a chance to show me I could trust him.

“So, who's picking me up?”

“My dad.” His smile looked even more mischievous.

“Your dad? I don't want to go somewhere with your Dad!”

“He's just picking you up, Sam. He'll bring you to where I am. It's not like you're going to hang out with him all night.”

“I swear, this is getting weirder and weirder.”

“Hey,” Jack said, “you promised.” He raised his eyebrows at me in a daring way.

“Okay, okay.” I shook my head, accepting the defeat. I was letting Jack's dad, whom I had never met, pick me up and take me to some place only Jack and his dad knew about. I bet this situation was going to go over like a lead balloon when I asked my mom for permission to go.

“All of your questions will be answered in time. Have patience.” Jack bowed.

“My dad will be there at seven. Be ready. He doesn't like to wait.”



Friday took forever to come. I'd fought more than one battle with my Mom over Jack's invitation.

My first task? Convince my mom going somewhere with Jack on a date was not the end of the world. I could tell she knew how much it meant to me, and she wanted to say yes, but her maternal instinct kept her from it. Once I convinced her (mostly by wearing her down), I had to explain why Jack's dad would be picking me up instead of Jack. For a moment, I toyed with the idea of lying and making it sound as if Jack's dad would be our chaperone. What mother could pass on a date with a parental chaperone? But mothers always know the truth. If I got caught lying, I wouldn't be going out of the house, much less with Jack on a mystery date.

Of course, I didn't know the answer to the big question. "What is it you two are going to do that he can't pick you up?" I decided to tell her Jack didn't want to take me out on his motorcycle, and since he didn't have a car, he'd volunteered his dad to pick me up.

"Isn't that nice of Jack's dad?" I asked her.

She squinted skeptically at me. "I guess. Where is it he's taking you again?"

I couldn't tell her that either. After much plotting with Olivia, I decided on a half-truth. "We're going for dinner. But where we're going is a surprise, so I don't know. I

tried to get him to tell me, but he wouldn't. He made it out to be a big deal, like he'd gone to a lot of trouble to make it special. I didn't want to ruin all of his planning.”

“Do you think he might tell me? You know, just so I'd know where you were in case something happened?” she asked. I could hear the desperation in her voice.

“Do you really want me to suffer that humiliation? Everything is going to be fine. The guy is having his dad pick me up for Christ's sake. I think if he were planning on murdering me, he probably wouldn't have invited his dad along.”

Once we went through the same line of questioning enough times to satisfy her, and I got a final yes, a different kind of battle began. What to wear. How to do my hair. What to talk about. Olivia and I worked round the clock, or at least in our free time, to make me look perfect. We even made a list of subjects, just in case awkward moments of silence developed. Did every girl go through this before a date?

As promised, Jack's dad rang the doorbell right on time. I'd never really seen him up close, but he didn't look much like Jack. In fact, they looked nothing alike. Jack's Dad had light hair, brown eyes, and was shorter than Jack. I would never think the two of them were related, much less father and son.

“Sam.” He smiled and held out his hand for a shake. “How are you? I'm Mr. Price. Is your mother around? I just thought I'd say hello and let her know a little bit of what is going on tonight. I can imagine she's very worried.” He had a warm smile.

“Sure.” I motioned for him to come in and walked him to the kitchen. “I'm just going to go and grab my stuff.”

I could hear murmurs between the two of them as I ran back upstairs. By the time I came down, they were laughing as if they'd been neighbors for years. My mom hugged and kissed me and said, "Have a great time. Mr. Price promised you'd be home by midnight, so please don't give him any trouble."

Jack's dad opened the door for me, and I settled in. "I know this is going to sound weird, Sam, but Jack is very excited about his surprise. We are going to drive for a little while, but as we get closer to where we're going, I'm going to ask you to put on this blindfold." He held up a blue bandana.

I felt my heart beat faster, and not for the reasons I'd imagined when I'd thought of our date. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. A wave of fear and nausea consumed me. I began to sweat.

"Jack wants you to get to the destination, but he doesn't want you to be able to guess the location before you get there. He said you might freak out, so he asked me to give you this note."

He handed me a cream piece of folded paper. Inside it read, "Sam, please put on the blindfold. Nothing is going to happen. Don't you trust me?" in all capital letters. I admitted to myself, I didn't know if I trusted him. His dad looked at me expectantly.

Why was I doing this again? I pictured Jack's face and warm smile, and I started to put on the blindfold.

"You don't have to put it on yet."



“That's okay. If I have to put it on, I might as well do it now. A few extra minutes aren't going to make a difference.” I knew if I didn't put it on right away, I might chicken out. I tried to be aware of our turns and make a mental map in my head just in case. Just in case what? Another overwhelming cloud of fear surrounded me. I could feel my heart beating inside my ears.

After about ten minutes, the SUV drove on what sounded like gravel, and came to a stop. I breathed a sigh of relief as soon as the movement stopped. “Can I take off my blindfold?”

“Not yet, but almost. I'm going to come around to the car and help you get out, and then I'm going to escort you somewhere.” So much for the brief moment of relaxation. Panic struck again. Why can't I take off my blindfold? What does he not want me to see? What if this is a trick? What if they're going to tie me up? What if they're going to kill me? Questions fired like bullets inside my brain.

The car door slammed, and I knew he was outside, walking around to open my door. I sat frozen. My door opened, and Jack's dad helped me out of the car. We were definitely on gravel. It crunched under my feet as he led me with his hand around my waist. A few steps later, the gravel stopped, and I was walking on something hollow. Each step made an echo.

After several moments, less time than I imagined in my head, he stopped me. I felt his hands at the knot tied on the cloth bandana. If something bad was on the agenda, it was about to happen. The sound of my heartbeat in my ears was deafening, and I was trying not to hyperventilate.

The blindfold came off, and nothing happened. I could see, and I saw nothing suspicious. I stood on a dock. Apparently, Jack's Dad had driven me to the lake. I didn't see Jack.

“Sam!” I heard his voice and a lapping noise. Both came from below me.

I looked down and there he was, dressed in a black suit that made him look like he belonged in another decade. He stood in a small wooden rowboat complete with two oars, smiling, as always.

“Want to go for a ride?” he asked.

“To where?” Once I saw Jack, I was no longer afraid.

“You'll see. Don't you trust me?”

“What is it with this trust thing, anyway? You keep asking me.”

“Well,” he said, “you keep acting like you don't, so I'm just checking.”

I shrugged and asked, “How am I supposed to get down there?”

Jack looked at his dad. I'd forgotten how I'd gotten here, already. “Dad, can you help Sam get down?”

Jack's dad pointed to a ladder and as I walked over, he helped me get down. Once Jack and I were in the boat, his dad walked to the car.

“Where's he going? How will we get home?”

“I drove here, too. I had to get here somehow.”

“Oh.” I felt stupid. Why couldn’t I just relax? Who would go to all this trouble just to kill someone?

Once we were both seated, Jack began to paddle.

“Where are we going?”

“I told you, *you’ll see*. Where’s your sense of adventure?”

I didn’t want to tell him I’d never had much of a sense of adventure. There were lots of inlets and pieces of land that jutted out into the water. We paddled close to shore, and as we rounded one of the corners, a flat dock anchored in the middle of the lake appeared. I knew the dock well. Olivia and I spent many a summer day swimming and sunbathing there. With everything that had been going on, we hadn’t gotten the chance to spend much time out there this past summer.

What struck me first were the lights. What seemed like a million lit candles were everywhere. Jack had placed small waist high tables on all four corners of the square and he filled each table with as many votives as it would hold. Just the glow of those candles would have been beautiful. But Jack also placed candles around the perimeter of the dock as well. The glow was breathtaking. I heard soft music playing, but I did not recognize the song. Not right in the middle, but pushed to the side, Jack set a table with two seats. Soft, yellow roses sat in the middle, nice and low so they didn’t block our view of each other.

The closer we got, the more I could see. A small piece of vinyl-looking material covered the dock. “What’s the vinyl for?”

“I promised to take you to a dance.” He looked at me for a few moments, not speaking. I felt pressured to say something, but I didn't know what. The dock happened to be the most unbelievable thing I'd ever seen. It must have taken him hours to set it all up, unless he brought a different girl here every weekend and just left it like this throughout the week.

Jack hopped on the dock, tied the boat, and helped me out. We sat at the table while Jack began pulling food out of some type of heat preserving container. “I like your dress.”

I looked down at what I'd chosen. A black sundress, layered with a beaded sweater, it was a perfect choice for a fall evening. I was pleased I'd chosen casual flats over heels since we might be dancing on a dock.

“Thank you.”

“You aren't saying much.” Jack prompted.

“I feel overwhelmed. Everything is so beautiful. I can't believe you went to all of this trouble.”

“You're not worth the trouble?” He always looked so mischievous when he spoke to me.

I blushed and changed the subject. “What is this music? I've never heard it before.”

“Do you like it? It's some old jazz from the 1940's. I tried to find music that was more recent, but nothing else seemed to fit the mood I was trying to set.” What mood was he trying to set?

We ate. Jack had brought salad, pasta, and a dessert. We talked while we ate, mostly about things that didn't matter. When we finished, Jack kicked off his shoes, rolled up his pant legs, and slung his feet over the side of the dock. I followed suit, dipping my feet in, making small ripples. The sun had completely set, so the only light was from the glow of the candles.

“So, where are you going to college?” Jack asked.

“I don't know. Olivia wants us to go to the same place, and I mostly . . . well, don't.”

“But I thought you and Olivia were best friends?”

I sighed. He sounded like Olivia. “I'm ready to do something new. I'm ready to meet new people. I'm ready for new experiences. Having Olivia with me almost makes it less of an adventure. She'd be like a safety net. Plus, she knows me. I won't be able to lie about who I am.” Now it was my turn to smile mischievously.

“I can understand that. Every time I've moved, I've got to decide if I want to be the same person I was before or change into someone else. It's a great opportunity.”

A few minutes passed, and neither of us spoke, kicking our feet and feeling the water swirl around our toes.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“I haven't decided yet. Maybe I'll wait and see where you're going.”

Again, my cheeks burned, and I felt glad we were surrounded by only a soft glow so he could not see my embarrassment.

“No, really.” I said.

“Really, I don't know. I guess I'll go wherever life takes me.” I had to admit I felt a little disappointed he wasn't being serious.

“That doesn't sound very responsible.”

Jack twisted his mouth up funny and looked out at the barely visible water. “I've always moved a lot. I don't usually get a chance to make long-term plans. I was only in New York for a year before I moved here. And before that it was Michigan. Before that it was Oregon. I never stay long enough to make any friends or even have a girlfriend. I guess it makes me kind of a loner.”

“What happened with your last girlfriend when you moved away?”

“I didn't have a girlfriend.”

“You didn't want to try out the long distance thing? It might have worked.”

Please, Lord, let him think it might work, so our winding up at different colleges won't pose a threat to a possible budding relationship.

“No, I didn't have a girlfriend the whole time I was there. I don't really see the point. I'm in and out of somewhere so quick, I don't want to get attached to anyone. And I don't want anyone to get attached to me. It wouldn't be fair to her.”

“But now you're eighteen, so you can make your own decisions. You don't have to move every time your parents want to.”

“I guess not. But I will anyway. I always have. I've done it so long; I can't imagine life any other way. I get ants in my pants if I stay somewhere too long.” He sounded almost wistful.

In an end to the conversation, he pulled me to my feet. “We're supposed to be at a dance,” he said. The glow of the candles made his eyes appear to twinkle.

“What did you have in mind?” Any guard I'd erected had fallen at dinner. I felt more like myself the more we talked.

He spun me in a circle. We began to dance slowly to the music. Nothing fancy, just a soft sway back and forth. Jack studied my face as we moved.

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” he asked.

“A writer. Ever since I was little.”

“A writer . . .” he thought about it.

“I figure the world always needs more good stories.” The moment started to suck me in. It all reminded me too much of what I might see on television or a teenage movie. I looked up to find Jack still staring at my face.

“Why didn't your dad teach you to dance?”

“He died.” It rolled off my tongue, almost too easy to say. I thought Jack might stop dancing, but he did not. I felt safe, so I continued. “Before that, he stayed pretty

busy with work. I spent my whole life cheated out of a dad. First by his choice, then by fate's choice. I don't know which one hurts more. I suppose the dead part. At least when he was still alive, there was hope that things might change. Once you're dead, there's no hope. There's nothing left.”

“You think?” Jack asked.

“I do. I don't want to, but I do.”

“I don't.” That was all he said.

Then he began to twirl me and twirl me. I laughed as hard as I might if someone tickled me. When I couldn't catch my breath, both from twirling and laughing, Jack stopped me.

First he looked at my eyes, and then he looked at my lips. Or maybe the other way around. It all got fuzzy then. He bent down, and I ever so lightly felt the brush of his lips against mine. That one tiny second when our lips touched felt unlike anything I'd experienced before. Mostly, it reminded me of a roller coaster ride—that lurch your stomach makes as it drops fifty feet at forty miles an hour on the very first dip. Everything stopped. I didn't hear bullfrogs or the water or even the music. I just heard Jack's breathing, in perfect rhythm with mine. We stood there still, our arms wrapped up in each other, but he did not kiss me again.

“Jack!” A voice carried across the water.

“Jack!” The voice intruded into the moment, and in a few short seconds, it seemed like it hadn't happened at all.



“Dad?” Jack yelled back as he stiffened. He moved me to his side. “What's going on?”

“We have to go right now!” his dad yelled. “Get Sam in the boat and come on!”

“What's going on?” Jack yelled back. But even as he did so, he was gathering up some of our stuff and getting it into the boat.

“It's an emergency. Leave the stuff and you and I can come back and get it later. You need to hurry!”

As soon as Jack seated us both securely, he untied the boat, and paddled us back to shore. The change of plans also included a return trip with Jack's dad. Apparently, Jack's presence at “the emergency” was a life or death situation, while his dad's was not. He and his dad talked to each other in low whispers for a few minutes while I got in the car. He walked around to my side of the car and gave me a kiss on my forehead, but no explanation. Then he drove off. Jack's dad got in the car, and even though I had a million questions, I rode back in silence.

“So, he just left?” Olivia sounded as confused as I felt.

“Pretty much.”

Olivia sat silent. We had been on the phone for the last thirty minutes rehashing last night. I wanted to have more details to share, but I didn't. Everything ended so abruptly. I'd peeked across the street when I woke up, but there wasn't any movement behind Jack's curtains. I didn't see his bike, either, but that didn't mean anything since he usually parked it in the garage.

“He didn't call or anything?” I felt like Olivia was rubbing it in.

“No, Olivia. I haven't heard a word.”

“Are you going to call?”

I'd thought about it last night. I could always feign concern. It would be partially true. I *felt* concerned. I had no idea what happened, but Jack's dad seemed to be in a full on panic, as did Jack when he sped out of the parking lot. There must have been some kind of emergency.

“I haven't decided yet. I'm thinking about it.”

“What's to think about?” she asked.

“I don't want to seem like a stalker. I figure if he wants to talk to me, he'll call me.”

Olivia countered, “Sure, but what if something REALLY BAD happened? What if he can't call?”

“Yeah, I don't know.”

The argument didn't last long. Olivia's dad called on her landline, so she let me go. I got up and looked out the window one more time. I hoped I'd see Jack outside. It seemed much easier than calling. Maybe I'd just walk over and knock on the door. Seemed simple enough. I don't know why I had such a hard time actually doing it.

"Sam!" My mom called from downstairs. "I need you to come down here...NOW!" Her voice sounded panicked, so I dropped everything to see what was going on.

"What?" I yelled back as I ran down the stairs.

"They just found Kelly Tracer's body in Werner field. They think she died last night. Mr. Parker found her body this morning while he was out on his morning walk."

From what my mom said, when he found her, her body looked just like the others—beaten and bruised with one finger missing. Kelly and I weren't good friends, but I was probably closer to her than any of the other dead girls. We'd had a lot of classes together in past years. She played in the high school band, which made her even lower on the social ladder than me. Dorky, sure, but she was a nice girl, and when we talked, she always made me laugh. She didn't care what other people thought about her.

I walked back upstairs dazed and did the only thing I could think to do to stop my brain from overload. I wrapped myself in my warm quilted blanket, lay my head on my down pillow, and took a nap.

I had a horrible dream. I found myself outside, running through the woods. The trees were so large, their branches were like a roof over the entire forest, and only small

slants of light from the full moon peeped through. I felt such a panic; I decided I must be running from something.

In the distance, I saw a man who looked like my dad. He stood near a tree trunk in its shadows. I ran faster, but as I got closer, he turned and walked away. I followed him. Each time, as I approached him and could almost see his face, he would turn and walk in another direction, always protected by the shadows. I could not figure out how he kept walking and I kept running, and I could not catch him. But often, that is how dreams work. We eventually reached a clearing, and the man stopped.

As I approached, I realized the man was not my dad, but instead Jack. I'd never been happier to see him. I ran toward him, overcome with relief. I trusted Jack to keep me safe.

Right as I came close enough to touch him, I realized he had blood on his face and hands. "Jack?" I asked him, confused. He just smiled at me, but not his usual, good humored smile. This smile seemed sinister. This smile stopped me, made me recoil back.

Right then, I noticed the smell. The clearing reeked of a horrible odor, unlike anything I'd ever smelled. I could barely breathe with that smell surrounding me. It smelled like rancid meat. I looked around to find the source, and for the first time realized Jack and I were not alone. We were surrounded by girls. Chloe was there, and Belinda, and Kelly. But there were other girls. Girls I did not recognize. At least a dozen or so.

“They’re already dead,” I thought. “There’s nothing I can do to help them. I need to run right now. Run from Jack. Run from this place.” But instead, I looked carefully at each of their faces, all contorted in pain, all smeared with dirt and blood. Whoever did this tied each girl to a tree, her hands behind her back. There was no way for me to tell whether they were dead before they were tied there or after they’d died. Some looked like they’d been there longer than others, their flesh starting to decay, their wounds covered in maggots.

When I couldn’t look anymore, I turned to Jack. No longer smiling, his usual face had been replaced by that of a monster. His front teeth began to grow into vampire-like fangs. I tried to run, but my legs refused to move. I tried to scream, but nothing came out. I had no choice. This fate was mine.

Jack turned on me in an instant. His fangs pierced tightly into my flesh, ripping through my skin. Again and again he bit me, on my neck, my shoulders, even on my face. I felt the will to fight for life ebb as his teeth sank into me again and again. Now I knew where the blood on Jack’s clothes had come from.

I woke up. I sat straight up in bed in a panicked sweat, gasping for breath. It took a few minutes for me to realize I’d been dreaming, and for the pace of my pulse to slow down.

I called Olivia.

“I guess you heard about Kelly.”

“That was why my Dad was calling. I’ve been trying to call you! Where have you been?”

“I fell asleep,” I said.

“You fell asleep? How do you fall asleep after you hear someone we’ve known since practically birth has been murdered?”

“It was a bad idea.” I felt ashamed. How did I fall asleep? “I had an horrible nightmare. I dreamed I found out Jack was the killer, and he’d massacred not only the girls here, but lots of other girls. He turned into a vampire and tried to kill me, too. I don’t know if I’ll ever get it out of my mind.”

Olivia was silent.

“What?” I asked her. Olivia rarely had nothing to say, and her silence made me suspicious.

“Olivia, WHAT?” I repeated.

“Sam, what if it is Jack?” She asked in a quiet voice.

“It can’t be Jack, Olivia. Kelly’s murder happened last night. Jack and I had a date last night. He was with me. He couldn’t have killed her.”

“Yeah, but not the *whole* night, Sam. He left early, remember? His dad came and he sped off without so much as an explanation. On top of that, you haven’t even heard from him today. He hasn’t called to tell you why he left or offered an apology. Nothing.

You said you haven't even seen him across the street after keeping an eye out all morning. Don't you think that's strange?"

Of course I thought it was strange. But the whole night was strange. Immediately, I rushed to defend Jack. "That's ridiculous, Olivia. What, you think his dad came to get him to tell him there was an emergency, and that the emergency was that he needed to kill Kelly?"

"Maybe his dad is a nut job, snapped, and killed Kelly, and he needed Jack to help him clean it up. That sounds like an emergency situation to me."

We both sat quiet and thought about it for a minute. I didn't have much to argue.

"I know you like Jack, Sam. But what do you really know about him? He could easily be the one who's doing all of this. And if not him, then his family. It fits, you know. None of this happened until they came into town. And he's been close with every girl who's been murdered. Never mind that he never seems to have an alibi."

"That's not true, Olivia. Jack didn't even know Kelly."

Olivia sighed. I could tell she didn't want to tell me something. "But he did, Sam. He'd been out with her a couple of times. I saw them at "Joe's Coffee Shop" twice. I didn't want to tell you. I knew you liked him, and I knew he'd asked you out for the dance. I didn't want to hurt your feelings."

I forced back tears. I felt more upset to think Olivia would hide something from me than I did that Jack was out with Kelly. "Why wouldn't you tell me? You're supposed to be my best friend!"

“I wanted to find out more information before I upset you. Maybe they were just friends. Guys and girls can be just friends. I didn’t want you to get worked up and then it turn out to be nothing. I promise I would have said something if I’d seen them kissing or holding hands or anything like that. The point is, he did know Kelly. And he obviously knew Chloe. Maybe he knew Belinda, and we just didn’t know it.”

I let everything Olivia told me sink in. Maybe I didn’t know anything about Jack. I didn’t even know he could put Kelly’s name with Kelly’s face, and Olivia had witnessed them having coffee together. Twice. This news, coupled with my earlier nightmare, made it impossible not to wonder whether Jack might be involved. I didn’t like it, but too many things pointed his direction. Everything led to Jack. Or at the very least, everything didn’t lead AWAY from Jack. But I hated to admit it to Olivia.

“Sam?” Olivia questioned.

“I have to go Olivia.”

“Are you upset? I don’t want you to be upset.” Too late.

“I just need to go. I’ll call you later, okay?”

Olivia said okay, but I’m not sure she meant it. Either way, we got off the phone, and I lay back down on my pillow with the covers up to my chin. I needed to figure out how I could learn more about Jack without directly asking him. I needed a plan.



I started my investigation the next morning. I still hadn't seen any movement across the street. Jack had not called *once* with any sort of explanation for his abrupt departure or with an apology, which I felt I deserved. It seemed like Jack simply disappeared. Of course, I'd just seen him two days ago, and that wasn't such a long time, was it?

I decided enough time had passed; it was only fair my curiosity peaked. Who runs out on the perfect date without an explanation and then never calls?

I felt the best place to start was to make a list of all the things I knew about Jack. The list turned out to be much shorter than anticipated. I knew several of the previous states where he lived, he hadn't told me the cities. I knew his last name, but I didn't know his middle. I knew his dad's name, but I didn't know his mom's. I could make an educated guess at his age, but if I knew his birthday, searching for him on the internet would be much easier.

The internet held a lot of valuable information. Supposedly, finding out history about someone in this day and age was easy. Didn't women research men they were dating and find out everything they ever wanted to know with a few clicks of the mouse?

Unfortunately, information about Jack didn't come so easily. With the limited time Jack spent talking about himself, I didn't have much to go on. Searching statewide, across a four-year span, for a Jack Price gave way too much information. I knew my lack of patience would prove to be my enemy. I would never get through everything. There was just too much.

I took a break, called Olivia, and shared my frustration. "There's too much information. I don't know enough about him to whittle it down to something manageable. How can I be so involved with someone I'm apparently not all that involved with? I think about this guy every waking minute, and when it comes down to it, I don't even know his full name or birthday."

Starting this project made me realize Jack really hadn't shared much. If he were really interested in me, wouldn't he have wanted to tell me a lot of the intimate details of his life? Forget that. Some basic facts might have been nice. His feelings must be completely different from mine. When we were together, I wanted to tell him everything. Even things I didn't tell anyone came spilling out when I was with Jack. I couldn't help myself.

"I'm going to Plan B."

I could tell Olivia didn't want to ask. "What's Plan B?"

"Plan B is where I go across the street and peep through the slit in his curtains. I know he's not home, because I haven't seen him. Maybe I'll spy something inside I can use to narrow down my search."

“There are two major problems with your plan, Sam. One, what if his parents are home? You haven’t seen Jack, but have you seen either of Jack’s parents? And two, what do you think you’re going to find that could be a clue to any of the questions you’ve been searching out? Maybe a map with all the cities they’ve lived in tacked with little pushpins, hanging on their living room wall? Or plaques with their social security numbers engraved? Can’t you just wait until tomorrow morning and see if he’s in school?”

“I don’t know what I think I’ll find. But I feel like I have to do something. I can’t just sit here anymore. The wondering is driving me nuts. And tomorrow is an eternity away.” I knew I was being dramatic, but tomorrow *really did* feel like an eternity away.

Olivia knew me well enough to know no matter what she said, I would be peeking in Jack’s curtains by the end of the day. Any convincing she would try to do would be a waste of breath.

“Be careful. Call and tell me what you find.” It was the best advice Olivia could come up with.

As soon as I hung up, I thought, “No time like the present.” I pulled on my black sweats, grabbed a flashlight, and quickly headed across the street.

The sun barely peeked over the horizon. It wasn’t completely dark yet, but it soon would be. The scent of an oncoming thunderstorm filled the air. A lot of people looked at me like I was crazy when I said that, but I could smell a thunderstorm from miles away.

I knew I couldn't look in the front windows. Mrs. Schwartz, Jack's next-door neighbor, was as nosy as they come, and she'd see me snooping around the windows in the front. So, I opened the side gate and walked into the backyard.

I had never been in the backyard, not even when the house was empty and up for sale. The grass was high; much more so than the front yard, which made it difficult to walk through. I could see two windows I could easily peep into, provided the curtains weren't completely closed. No lights were on inside, a clear indication no one was home. Unfortunately, the lack of daylight coupled with the lack of light from inside made it much more difficult to see what was behind the windows.

Before turning on my flashlight, I listened for footsteps or rustling in the grass. The quiet chirping of the cicadas died at the end of summer, and all I could hear was complete and deafening silence. I shone the light in Jack's kitchen, half expecting to see a face staring back at me. But all I saw was an empty kitchen.

Only it didn't look that much like a regular kitchen. This kitchen was spotless. Not spotless like when mom cleaned the kitchen, but spotless as in *spotless*. Not a loaf of bread, not a fruit bowl, not one single item on the counter. No magnets on the refrigerator or even a soap dispenser by the sink. The kitchen looked like a show house kitchen minus the homey- feeling details. Just looking at the über clean space gave me the creeps. But, other than its being freakishly tidy, there wasn't anything else suspicious.

The next window revealed the living room. It looked the same way it did the first time Jack invited me inside. I didn't notice anything out of place, or anything indicating what might have happened to Jack.

I studied the windows on the second floor of Jack's house. Both curtains appeared open. I felt sure if I could just get up on top of the porch deck I would be able to see inside. My "little voice" told me the idea was not only stupid but also dangerous. But like most teenage girls, I rarely listened to the little voice. Instead, I began looking around for things to pile on top of each other to get within hoisting distance of the roof.

Easy enough. I pulled the picnic table over and sat one of the porch chairs on top of it. Though the chair was a bit wobbly, it gave me just the height I needed to use my arm strength to get on top of the roof.

Still quiet, the only light now was that of the rising moon. Again, the little voice said to go home. "I will. I promise. I just need to look in these two windows, and then I'm climbing down and going home," I argued. I'd come this far. I wouldn't leave without making sure I'd given the house a fair inspection.

I decided the window to the left had to be Jack's. I flashed the beam of light through his room to find a neatly made bed, a little table, and a lamp. No TV. No desk. No clothes on the floor.

"Boy, I would hate to live here. These people must be total clean freaks. I'd never survive."

Disappointed at not finding Jack asleep on his bed, I moved to look in the window on the right. It appeared to be the master bedroom, but that was only a guess. My flashlight beam searched the room, but it landed on nothing. Another room completely empty. One door opened out into the hall, and one door opened into a connected bathroom, but the room itself had nothing in it. Even if nobody slept in this room, wouldn't they use it for an office or something? Rarely was a room in an occupied house completely empty. If things about Jack seemed a little off, the set up in his house seemed completely suspect.

Suddenly, I got a cold chill. It made me feel like I did in my dream. A rising sense of panic began to overcome me. Just then, I wished more than anything I'd stayed home. I lowered myself down from the first story roof as quickly as I could, intent on breaking into a run as soon as my feet were firmly on the ground.

My arm hairs still stood on end, and now that it was completely dark outside, I realized Jack's backyard didn't get any light from the street. I felt sure someone watched me. Everything in Jack's backyard stood eerily still, and if something hid in the shadows or the bushes, I didn't want to find it.

I dropped to the picnic table, skipping the more precariously perched chair. One less piece of furniture to navigate ensured a quicker departure. I jumped down and turned to sprint across the street. Only just as I started to run, I realized someone stood directly behind me. I'd already moved my body in preparation to run, and I ran right into them. I did the only thing I could think of to do. I screamed—as loud as I possibly could.

12

I was temporarily blinded by the beam of a flashlight.

“Samantha McCarty? Is that you?”

“Crap,” I thought. I immediately recognized the voice. Mrs. Schwartz. “You scared me,” I said, trying to catch my breath.

“What are you doing out here? You shouldn’t be out here after dark, you know. Does your mother know where you are?” She had such a nasal voice.

“I, um, I was looking for our cat.” At the time, it seemed like a perfectly reasonable explanation for being up on someone else’s roof with a flashlight in my hand.

“Mr. Bubbles? I could have sworn your mother told me Mr. Bubbles died last year.” I wanted to slap myself in the forehead. Of course my mother would have told the whole neighborhood about Mr. Bubbles. And since Mrs. Schwartz had nothing better to do, she would remember his death. Mrs. Schwartz was the unofficial record keeper of the East Gates addition.

“No, no,” I said, shaking my head to show Mrs. Schwartz how silly she was. “Of course I’m not talking about Mr. Bubbles. It’s our new cat.”

“I didn’t know you got a new cat. I haven’t seen any new cats around here.” She looked at me like I was lying, and I started to sweat. “I’m glad you told me, because I would have called animal control if I’d seen a cat I didn’t recognize. We don’t want a bunch of feral cats wandering around East Gates. What does she look like? Or is it a he? I wouldn’t want to call animal control on your cat. Your mother is always such a dear to me.”

“It’s a white cat, Mrs. Schwartz. Her name is Penelope. We call her Penny for short.” It was the first name that popped into my mind. “Please don’t call animal control if you see her! It would break my mom’s heart.”

“Oh, I won’t. Now that I know. I’m sorry you didn’t find her.”



“Me, too. My mom is going to be so upset! You haven’t seen the Prices around here, have you? I was going to ask them if they’d seen her. This backyard looks like a place a cat would love. With the tall grass, it’s just like a jungle.”

Mrs. Schwartz looked around and made a disgusted face. “It is a little overgrown, isn’t it? I’ll have to talk to Mr. Price. We wouldn’t want it to get out of control. East Gates has always been such a nice place to live.” She seemed to get lost in her thoughts. I had no idea how long Mrs. Schwartz had lived in East Gates, but guessed it was a long time, since she was older than the hills.

“It was good to see you, Mrs. Schwartz. But I have homework, and my mom has got to be wondering where I am. She doesn’t like me to be out after dark. I wouldn’t want her to get worried about me.”

“You’re a good girl, Samantha, not wanting to worry your mother. Tell her I said hello, and I promise to keep an eye out for Penelope.”

I felt a small tinge of guilt as I ran across the street. I knew I’d have a lot to explain once Mrs. Schwartz asked my mom about the new cat, and I knew she would. But right now, all I wanted to do was get home and lock all the doors and windows, securing myself safely inside.

Jack didn't show up Monday or Tuesday at school. This half worried me and half annoyed me. I couldn't focus on anything. I wanted to sleep as much as possible just so I could stop thinking. When I closed my eyes though, my mind churned with thoughts of

what happened between us and ultimately what happened to Jack. I finally understood what heartbreak felt like, and I didn't want to feel it ever again.

It sucked the life out of me, wondering what happened to Jack. I didn't want to go to school or work. I didn't want to talk to my mom or Olivia. I just wanted to build a wall around myself and hide inside. Especially if I could put a couch inside the wall and a lot of potato chips. They seemed to be the only thing I could eat lately. I'd lost five pounds, and just the smell of food made me feel sick.

I went on like this for what seemed like an eternity, but in reality was only about two weeks. Then I gave up. I started to believe Jack would never return to school. I watched his house at all hours, but I never saw him or his parents. It seemed he'd vanished into thin air. Between not eating and not sleeping, I finally made myself sick. Whatever happened, I decided the time had come to move forward.

I took baby steps. I started by taking off my sweat pants and brushing my hair. I told myself repeatedly I couldn't waste the rest of my senior year in a funk about Jack, and so far, my investigation hadn't gotten me anywhere. I needed to give up.

I forced myself to spend more time with Olivia. I focused on school and college essays. I looked forward to starting a new year. I worked extra hours at "Piggie's." I did whatever I could to keep my dance card full and my brain busy. It seemed to work, because after a while, I started to forget what Jack looked like. Sure, I still remembered those gorgeous green eyes, but the rest of his features were starting to fade away. And I couldn't remember what he smelled like anymore (like a hot summer day, just before it rained). I was making progress. Slow progress, but progress nonetheless.

Two days after a full month had passed since our date and the disappearance of Jack, I sat outside Rich Beans' Coffee Café, reading. The weather had turned cold. Not unbearable yet, but cool enough to necessitate being wrapped up from head to toe. The start of winter was my favorite time of year, and I sat outside enjoying my mocha. The freezing weather would come any day now, and I wanted to enjoy the crispness of the air and scent of just started fireplaces before the chance passed me by.

I sensed Jack before I saw him. I don't know how, but I knew he was behind me. He moved quickly around to the other side of the table, pulling out the metal chair. He sat down before I had a chance to say anything. It wouldn't have mattered, because I had no idea what to say. I couldn't believe, after all this time, all my heartbreak, and all the wondering, Jack sat in front of me.

He looked the same, if not better. He didn't appear to have suffered bodily harm. His eyes still twinkled mischievously, which made him look happy. I think he might have even had a tan. I looked for some sign, something to indicate where he might have disappeared to, but everything with Jack appeared status quo. What I did not see were any signs of remorse on his face. I wanted to see something, *anything*, other than him smiling at me. His smile made me angry. All this time I'd wasted tears, and he was somewhere getting a tan and *smiling*.

He sat silent, the smile plastered on his face, and I did the only thing I could think to do. I got up from the table and walked off. If I stayed I would have to listened to his excuses, and I simply had no interest in that.

“Sam! Please wait!” I heard his feet smack the pavement as he ran to catch up with me. “Give me a chance to say something.”

He grabbed my arm when he caught up to me. Even though I willed it not to, I couldn't control my stomach's whirling a little at his touch.

I was afraid to say anything. I feared that once I opened the floodgates, I wouldn't be able to hold back my tears. So, I raised my eyebrows at him, daring him to speak.

“I'm sorry. I don't know what else to say.”

“Where have you been?” There. I'd asked it. The million-dollar question.

“I can't tell you. All I can tell you is, I had to go. I could make something up to make you feel better, but it would be a lie. I don't want to lie to you, Sam.”

“You couldn't have called me? Or sent me a text? You just disappeared. I haven't even seen you at home. Who just leaves in the middle of a date and then disappears for an entire month?” Uh oh. I felt my eyes well up with tears. I wanted to get away from him before he could see how much his absence had affected me.

“I couldn't, Sam. I promise you, if I could have called, I would have.”

It was one of the only times I'd seen Jack without a smile, other than after Chloe's death. He seemed genuinely sorry.

“What kind of bullshit answer is that? Were you busy with one of the other girls you're dating? Because I found out about you and Kelly, Jack. Olivia saw the two of

you together several times, so don't bother telling me it's not true. I sure wish I could have asked you about it, but you weren't around." Once the words came out, I couldn't hold back the tears. They streamed down my face. I could taste their salty bitterness. I should have cared that I sounded ridiculous. Jack and I made no commitments to one another. We'd only gone on one date. He had every right to date whoever else he wanted. Jack hadn't lied to me about our relationship. I had lied to myself.

But with all of the anger and confusion I'd bottled up for the last month, I didn't really care anymore. I wanted Jack to say something to make me feel better. I wanted him to say something to make this whole last month make sense. Something that would make what he'd done okay, so I could go on liking him.

Instead, Jack said nothing. We both stood there. He looked sorry but stayed silent. I tried to stop sobbing. It seemed colder outside than it had been an hour ago. I'd spent the past month planning what I'd say if I ever saw him again. Now, here he stood in front of me, and all I could do was cry.

"I'm going home, Jack. You remember where I live, right? It's directly across the street from you. You'd think that would be pretty easy to remember. But I'm going to assume you forgot, because how hard would it be to talk to someone who lives *directly across the street from you?*"

I tried to turn around and walk away, but Jack grabbed my arm again. Only this time, he pulled me close into him. He grabbed my face in his hands and kissed me. The kiss, it was different from what I imagined. It was powerful, fueled by something other

than the sweetness I dreamed it would be. It felt desperate on Jack's part. A last ditch effort to try to keep us entangled. For what reason, I could only guess.

"I didn't get a chance to finish that when we were interrupted." He said it like our date had been only a few nights ago.

Stunned, I stood still. I don't know whether I was waiting for him to say something else, or whether I just couldn't move yet. As much as I wanted Jack to kiss me--as much as I wanted it to take the bitterness away, it did not. It surprised even me. I felt angry with myself for being so eager to see someone again who hurt my feelings so badly. Jack assumed his kiss would make everything between us better, but it only brought to the surface all of the things I'd pushed down in the last month.

"Now that you've finished apologizing, can I go home? You know what? Never mind. I'm not asking you if I can go home. I'm telling you. I'm going home. Whatever you have to say, it's not going to be good enough."

Before I could see a wounded look or hear him say anything else, I tightened my scarf around my neck and headed home. After a few minutes, I turned around to look, and Jack was gone.





Had someone told me I would be the one to eventually shun Jack, I would have thought they were crazy. Especially after the way things unfolded after our date. All I'd thought about, wondered about, wished for, was for Jack to show up and tell me he was sorry. Then, when he finally had, I'd walked away from him. I think it was the sheer audacity with which he assumed he could just show up whenever he wanted and pick up—right up, apparently—from where we'd left off.

After I stormed home, I felt a little panicked. I've never been a good decision-maker, because I'm always afraid of doing something that cannot be undone. I hoped I didn't later regret what happened. He might not accept my apology.

I voiced this same opinion to Olivia on the phone that night.

“What do you mean, he might not be willing to accept your apology? What do you have to apologize for? You didn't do anything! Does he think he's so good looking he can treat you like that, then show up with no explanation, and expect you to fawn all over him?”

Okay, she had a point. “Apparently, he does.”

Right before I drifted off to sleep, I heard Jack's bike pull up. I barely recognized the sound, it had been so long since I'd heard it. I heard his front door slam, and I got up to look outside. Jack only stayed inside a few minutes. He came back out and took off on foot. Where was he going this late on a school night?

Right then I decided to settle things once and for all. I would get my questions answered tonight. Every single one of them. I threw on my black sweats, sneaked down

the stairs, and out the back door. I stayed way behind Jack, hiding behind bushes, trees, wherever I could. I wanted to see where he was going before I confronted him.

At the time, it didn't seem odd to me that Jack opted not to take his bike. It seemed perfectly reasonable that someone would go on a two-mile walk in cold weather at eleven o'clock on a weeknight. I have to admit, I'm not always the brightest star in the sky.

Jack walked quickly and with a purpose. It didn't take long for me to realize following someone wasn't as easy as it looked, especially when they weren't simply meandering along. I had to keep up, and I had to stay hidden. Neither task would have been easy on its own, but together, they proved almost impossible. The only thing working in my favor was Jack's focus on his destination. He seemed to have tunnel vision as he walked.

He headed toward Hyacinth Park, named because when spring came, it would be filled with hyacinths. The largest park in town, it stayed packed in summer, full of families and children. The grounds were lush and the smells sweet. But as the cold seeped into the days, it became nearly deserted. Tonight, being a weeknight, and late at that, was no exception. The park seemed not just creepy, but downright sinister.

The many bushes and trees made it easy to hide, even though their branches were nearly barren. As Jack slowed down, I ducked into a small alcove formed by brown shrubs. I could see Jack looking intently at something. He crouched down and seemed to be waiting. For what, I couldn't tell. His body blocked whatever he stared at.

I waited, too. The stillness unnerved me. It was so quiet, I thought I could hear Jack breathing, even though he was easily thirty feet away. Every few minutes the wind blew, giving the swings the eerie creaking sound they make in creepy horror movies. I didn't know which was worse—the silence or the screech of the swings.

Jack stood up. He looked up at the sky. The night was clear, not cloudy, and every star popped against the black night. If I could scoot a little to the left, I would be able to see what he was here for. I moved as silently as I could, certain Jack would turn at any minute to find I'd been following him, but he did not.

I squinted. I couldn't tell what was there. It looked like a big blob—a mound of something. Maybe some clothes someone had left behind? I could make out something that looked like denim, and as I looked to the right, I saw a pair of tennis shoes. Jack still looked at the sky, so I moved in as far as I could while still being protected by the bushes.

It hit me all at once. It was as if my eyes all of the sudden came into focus. Ten seconds ago, I couldn't see a thing, and now I wished I hadn't. I knew I would never get the picture out of my mind. When I closed my eyes at night, when I had nightmares, this picture is what I would see.

The body lay flat. I couldn't tell who she was, but her long blonde hair fanned out around her. Her eyes were still open, gazing at the same stars as Jack. She looked like she might be sleeping, except for those eyes. Her lips were only slightly parted. Most of her was still covered with clothes, but her shirt was torn and ragged. She'd been beaten around her face. That much I could see. I looked at her hands, and just as with the others, her ring finger was missing.

I'd never felt terror before. I'd felt fear, sure, but never terror. Not until this moment. It hit me all at once. It smothered me so I couldn't breathe or move. It was Jack. Jack was the killer. It had been him all along. Olivia was right. He'd known those girls, dated those girls, and then he'd killed them. All of them. Every. Single. One.

I was next. Who knows where he'd disappeared to, but in the end, he'd come back. He'd come back for me. What if I'd kissed him back? Followed him home? Gone somewhere alone with him? Would my fate be the same as the girl who lay in front of me?

My fate could still be the same as the girl who lay in front of me. No one knew where I'd gone. I sat in a park, hidden in bushes. I had no idea what Jack was doing. We'd been in the park for over an hour. Maybe when he squatted down, he was cutting her finger off. The thought made me gag. Maybe he had come back to the park to admire his handiwork. That's what killers did, right? They returned to the scene of their crimes, collected trophies, that sort of thing.

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. All I could do was sit frozen behind the bushes and pray Jack didn't see or hear me. Over and over I kept telling myself it wasn't him. It couldn't be him. I kept waiting for him to move fully in the light and find my eyes had in fact played a trick on me. The person with the body only looked like Jack. It wasn't really Jack at all. But that didn't happen.

Instead, I stumbled, and a loud "crack" filled the air as I tried to catch myself. I'd stepped on a dried limb. Its sound rang out in the stillness of the night. I looked up to find Jack looking right at me.



“Run, run, run, run, RUN!” my little voice screamed. But my feet refused to move. I thought maybe he had just stared in the direction of the noise. Maybe he hadn’t actually *seen* me. But those hopes were short lived, as he stood up and began to walk in my direction.

That was all it took for my feet to break into a sprint. I shot out of my hiding place and started to run. I ran without knowing where I was going, but not without focus. My sole purpose was to get away from Jack, get away from the awful scene I’d witnessed in the park.

I’d never been a fast runner. I didn’t have stamina, either. But in that moment, I felt that I could run forever if I needed to. That was good, too, because Jack followed me for several miles, and my run turned out to be a long one.

I did not stop, not to hide and rest or catch my breath. I feared he might be right behind me. I heard my heart beat in my ears as my feet slapped against the pavement. I could swear I heard Jack’s panting so close behind me, I could feel his breath on my neck.

I did not realize where I was going until I arrived at home. I burst through the front door, slammed it shut, and turned both locks. I leaned against the door panting. My mother stood at the top of the stairs.

“Sam! What in the hell is going on? It’s after one in the morning. What were you doing outside?”

With everything that happened, I hadn’t even considered my mother might wake up and notice I was gone. I gasped for breath, and ran my hands through my hair, feeling bits of branches and dried leaves. I knew I looked a frazzled mess.

When she took in the entire situation, my mother’s tone eased to one of concern. “Sam? Are you okay?”

“I’m okay. I thought I heard something outside, in the bushes. Maybe just a cat or something. When I went outside to look, I didn’t see anything. I’m sorry I woke you. I heard a noise that scared me, and I came right back in. “

“I didn’t hear you go out.”

“I tried to be quiet.” Lucky for me, I’d never been caught lying, so my mother’s first instinct was to trust me.

“Okay. But next time, come get me if you hear a noise. I don’t want you out of the house this late, even if it is just in our front yard. Especially when we don’t know what’s outside. You’re not being smart. You never know when someone might be...” She trailed off, not wanting to put her thoughts into words.

“Sure Mom...I understand. It was stupid of me.” I shrugged and tried not to look in her eyes. If only she knew just how stupid I’d really been.

My mother walked back to her bedroom, and I headed to the kitchen to make tea. I could hear Olivia in my head, “What are you doing? You’re making TEA? Right now? After everything—all you can think to do is make yourself a cup of tea?”

And I answered her. “Yep. All I can think of to do is make myself a cup of tea.” The truth was, I needed somewhere to sit and think, to figure out what to do. I didn’t know why I hadn’t immediately called the police or why I failed to tell my mother the truth. Something gnawed at my insides, but I needed time to figure out what that something was. Until then, I refused to do anything or make any rash decisions.

I loved my bedroom. Under the covers, I always felt safe. Cocooned inside the soft, warm blankets, I knew my fear would ease, and I’d be able to think. Once I finished making my tea, I headed upstairs. I heard the television still on in my mother’s room.

“Goodnight, Mom!” I yelled down the hall.

“Goodnight, Sam! And no more going outside!”

As soon as I opened the door, I knew something was wrong. I knew it even before I turned the light on. Why didn’t I ever listen to my gut?

Too late, I spotted the silhouette inside my room. The shape moved toward me, and just like before, I stood frozen in place. I couldn’t see anything, except the soft shadow. I didn’t know how Jack could have made it into my room before me, but who else could it be? I dropped the mug of tea, and it landed with a soft thud on the rug. I



hoped my mother heard the cup hit the floor, but I knew the odds were slim, especially with her TV blaring.

I finally turned to try to get away. I didn't make it far. A soft hand cupped my mouth from behind to prevent me from screaming. The grip felt strong, and it prevented me from moving anywhere. I saw the monster's other hand reach toward the light switch and flip it on. I closed my eyes and waited, barely breathing. I felt movement from behind, and I knew the intruder had moved in front of me. "Here it comes," I thought. "These are my last breaths." I didn't cry. I just waited. But nothing happened.

"Sam, it's me."

His voices sounded soft, more concerned than scary or threatening. I opened my eyes cautiously and found Jack standing in front of me.

"Don't scream, okay? I only have a few minutes, and then I have to go back. I want to take my hand off your mouth, but I need to know you're not going to scream."

I nodded my head, and he removed his hand.

"How did you get here so fast? And up in my room?" Why was I not screaming? This might be my only chance to get away.

"There's an explanation for all of this, Sam. I don't know if you're going to believe me, but it's the truth. But I can't tell you what it is now, because it's a long story. You're going to have a lot of questions, and I'm going to have to do a lot of convincing. And I have to get back to—to—," he stuttered.

"To the dead body?" I asked him.

“Yes, to the park.” I could tell he didn’t want to say ‘dead body.’

I started to ask him why—ask him what was going on, but I could tell by the way he looked at me he wasn’t going to answer.

“Can you meet me tomorrow on top of flour mill?” he asked.

“No! I was just about to call the cops! I’m not going anywhere with you, and especially anywhere secluded. You’re crazy. You’re the killer. I *saw* you, Jack. I know it’s you.” I pulled away from him, shaking myself loose of his grip. He let me.

“Just meet me. Give me a chance. Don’t do anything until then. After you hear what I have to say, if you still want to call the police, you can. Six A.M. It’s not that long. On top of the flour mill. I’ll wait for fifteen minutes. If you don’t show, I’ll assume you’re not coming. If you didn’t have doubts about my guilt, you would have called the police by now. Think about it. Please, Sam.”

He turned and climbed out the window. I heard his feet land with a soft thud, and when I looked out the window, he had disappeared.

I changed my mind easily an hundred times before six AM came. I picked up the phone to call the police. I put the phone back down. I puked. I cried. I felt nervous. I couldn't decide what to do.

It seemed stupid to go. I knew that. But Jack had a way of making me act a fool. It was almost as if I couldn't *not* go. I had to know. I'd spent the entire school year waiting for Jack. Or better yet, *falling* for Jack. But I couldn't quite figure out if Jack had fallen for me. And now was my chance. What can I say? Love makes you stupid.

I wrote a note and left it on my desk, to let my mother know where I'd gone, just in case she woke up. Or worse yet, I didn't come home. I wanted to make sure someone knew I'd spent my last hours with Jack. I mimicked Jack's movement from the night before as I opened my window, shimmied down the roof, and dropped to the ground.

The sun hadn't risen yet. I pulled my coat up around my ears and tried to shut my brain off while I walked to the flour mill. The wind whistled and lapped at my face and hair. I was terrified, but my feet kept moving toward the mill.

The mill, closed for years, used to be one of the top producers of flour in the United States. But the mill unexpectedly closed anyway. Most of the townspeople

attributed it to the influx of accidents that occurred in the summer of 2004. A lot of folks claimed it was haunted. But kids climbed up the steep metal ladder to the top, got drunk, and hung out anyway. They said they heard strange noises, but I'd never heard anything myself. Then again, I didn't spend much time around the mill. The crowd who hung out there wasn't really my kind of crowd.

But there were people, especially those who had once worked there, who refused to go anywhere near the mill. They said they'd seen too many strange things. Maybe that's why Jack picked it. He knew it would be deserted. Especially so early in the morning.

I approached the mill with caution, but also with a sense of relief. Whatever was about to happen, I wouldn't waste any more days wondering about Jack. I would know. And at that moment, it felt like I would sacrifice anything to know what was really going on. A misty morning fog hung over the dewy grass. But all was silent and deserted. I walked across the field and carefully climbed the ladder to the top. The higher I got, the more the fog dissipated. By the time I reached the top, I could see the whole town clearly. Its lights twinkled in the distance. The sun just about kissed the horizon, a wake-up kiss of sorts. In less than an hour the sun would be up, and people's day would start.

I saw Jack's legs dangling over the side of the tower from where I stood on the ground. He must have heard me walk up, because he leaned over the railing.

"I knew you'd come!" He waved down at me. He sounded more relieved than sure of himself. "I brought some coffee and donuts. I thought you might be hungry." He held them up for me to see.

The truth? Food was the farthest thing from my mind. But donuts seemed like a good last meal. Besides, at the very least, the coffee could help warm me up.

I stepped on the first rung and hand over hand, headed up to the top.

I picked a donut out of the bag and sat down, making sure to keep a slight distance. As soon as I drank the coffee, it began to warm my insides.

“Who was it? In the field, Jack?” I paused to let him answer, but when he didn’t, I said, “I’ll know in a few hours anyway. You might as well just tell me now.”

“Let me talk first, Sam. And if you still have questions at the end, you can ask me whatever you want, I’ll answer the best I can. I promise to tell the truth. As much as I know, anyway.”

I only nodded. It seemed a fair deal.

“First, you have to give me a chance.” He paused. “I’m not crazy. What I’m going to tell you is going to be hard to believe. But I’m almost sure, if you can put aside what you *think* you know, you may be able to believe it.”

“What? That you’re the killer, Jack?” I half shouted at him. Hearing the words come out of my mouth made me want to cry. “As a matter of fact, it *is* hard for me to believe, and I don’t know why. That’s what I’m here to find out. Why can’t I move on from you? Can you answer that?” Only I didn’t have enough confidence to say those last two lines. I was afraid of the answer.

He continued, “I want you to think back to when your dad was in the hospital. Right at the end. You and your mom were there all the time.”

How could I forget? I tried to think about that time as little as possible. I still had a hole inside me from the loss of my dad, and it was a long way from healing. I kept it pushed as far back in my mind as possible. One day, I knew I wouldn't be able to ignore it anymore. But I'd keep it at bay as long as I could.

Jack took a deep breath. It seemed he could tell how much the thought hurt me. "You were devastated. I remember watching you. On the inside I knew you could barely breathe, it hurt so bad. But on the outside, you kept a brave face. For your mom, for your dad, I didn't know. I never could figure that out. You never gave a clue. But that kept me fascinated with you. Right from the beginning. I kept watching you every day, waiting for you to break down. Even when you sat in the room by yourself, holding your dad's hand, you never did. Even when there was not a single person watching you and you were all alone, you never broke. How did you do it? *Why* did you do it?"

*Because once I opened those floodgates, I might not have been able to close them.*

I started to say something, to ask Jack how he knew all of that truth. He held up his hand before I could get a sound out.

"Think back, Sam. Do you remember the hospital's clergyman? A man with blond hair, and a five o'clock shadow? He would have been my height and my build, and his eyes would have looked just like mine. But he wore glasses. Thick-rimmed ones. Look at my face, Sam. Doesn't it look familiar to you?"

And it did. It looked so familiar it knocked the breath out of me. The reason Jack seemed familiar to me from the start was because I *knew* someone who looked just like him.

As if he'd read my thoughts, Jack said, "Not *just* like me, Sam. Me."

I started to shake my head vehemently. "That's not possible." I wanted to get up and run, but once again fear froze me in place. Only this time, that fear was mixed with confusion. *Had his fascination with me caused those other girls to die? Had it kept him here long after he might have left? Had he been unable to control himself while he waited?* Clearly Jack had gone to great lengths to keep me on his radar.

If Jack noticed my fear, he didn't mention it. He plowed forward. "I used to try to make you laugh, remember? I think once you told your Dad while he was sleeping that I was the only good thing about the hospital. Other than the banana pudding, of course." He smiled at the memory. "For the record, I never thought the banana pudding tasted all that great."

"I wanted to take your pain away. Every day when you came in after school I wanted to make you feel better. Or at least feel something. You seemed so devoid of feeling. When your dad finally died, I wanted to comfort you. I wanted to make sure you knew his death didn't mean the end. I thought it might make you feel better if you knew there was something else, something *after*." I felt sure he was about to start preaching to me.

"But I couldn't. I had to go. I came there to take your dad to that something after, and it was time for us to go. For the past year, I've wondered what happened to you. I wondered whether you ever broke down--if your emotions came down in a landslide that took you down with them. Or if you kept that wall up for your mom."

“I kept that wall up for myself, Jack. I didn’t know what would happen if I let it down. So, I never have.” There. I’d said it. Something I’d never told anyone before.

“I could see that, Sam. From the first day, when you came across the street, I could tell the wall was still in tact.

He continued, “I begged to come here. I wanted to see you again. I had to know what had happened to you. No matter where I went, I felt like something pulled me back here. I have all the time in the world, so I waited. When an assignment came up, I took it. And here we are.”

His silence told me he’d finished what he had to say. I’m not sure how what he’d just told me answered anything. He looked at me as if everything should now be clear. Everything *was* clear. Clear as mud.

There were too many questions. I didn’t know which one to start with. I had no idea what he was trying to say.

“Did you kill my dad? Is that what you’re trying to tell me?” I asked, clearly confused.

“No,” Jack said as he shook his head. “But when he died, I helped him move on to the other side.”

I wouldn’t have believed it possible, but I became even more confused. “What does that mean?”

“That’s what I do, Sam. That’s why I’m here. When people die, I take them to the other side. When the soul leaves their body on the last breath, it has somewhere else



to go. 'Into the light,' I guess is the easiest way to say it. What you think of as death isn't really death. It's death to the living, because you can't see the person anymore. But they're still alive. Or at least their soul is. It's just moved on to somewhere else. I'm the person who helps that soul move from one place to another." He said it as if he was introducing himself to me for the first time.

"I was in the hospital to get to know your Dad. I needed to get him to trust me. Part of that was representing myself as a priest. Everyone trusts a priest. I wanted to make sure when he died, he would see a face he recognized. As you can imagine, death is very confusing. People don't know what to do or where to go. Some of them don't even know they've died." Jack made a face to inquire whether or not I understood, and then continued. "If they trust me in life, they often trust me in death. They follow me over with little resistance. So long as I've done a good job of building that trust while they're alive."

I felt angry. It was one thing for Jack to spin a ridiculous story. It was entirely something else to take my most devastating experience and use it *in* that ridiculous story. "What kind of bullshit is this, Jack? I don't know how you've gotten your information, or how you managed to be there when my dad died, but using his death to cover what you've done..." I trailed off. "Do you think if you weave some ridiculous ass story I'm going to think you didn't kill those girls? Do you think if you break my heart by bringing up my dad's death I'm going to break down and cling to you, forgetting what you've done?" Normally, I didn't use curse words, but I was so mad, I couldn't stop myself.

I didn't wait for his answer. I stood up to leave. Quick as a shot, Jack grabbed my hand. He sounded more desperate.

“Think about it, Sam. Did you ever see me actually *kill* any of those girls? You know I knew them. I know you saw me last night. But did you see me physically touch a single one of them? And how could I have been at the hospital a year ago when your dad died? Do you really think someone would be fascinated with you for so long they'd come back a year later just to kill or torment you? You really think you're *that* special?” It was the first time Jack had ever said anything ugly to me.

It felt like a slap to the face. But he had a point. A difficult to believe point. But a point, nonetheless. I didn't sit back down, but I stopped.

“How am I supposed to believe this? You're sitting here, telling me with a straight face, you're the Grim Reaper. Your excuse for being tied to all of these people, tied to this suspicious behavior, is *you're the Grim Reaper. Nobody* would believe you, Jack. Not even someone who believes in that sort of thing, which, for the record, I don't.”

“I didn't say I was the Grim Reaper. That's *your* term.” Jack almost sounded as if he found *me* ridiculous.

He shrugged—a ‘have it your way’ type of shrug. “I thought I'd try it the easy way first. Just tell you about it. See how you'd handle it. But I should have known better. You have zero imagination. So, we'll do it the hard way. Come on, I'll show you.” He held out his hand.

“Where are we going?” I asked him.

“Inside the mill.”

Was he crazy? “I’m not going anywhere with you.” I tried to sound indignant.

“Fine by me. But you’re always going to wonder whether or not I told you the truth.”

The guy had a point. He obviously knew how to motivate me. Unfortunately, my curiosity outweighed my fear. So, I grabbed his hand and let him pull me up, anxious to see what he had to show me.

17

We climbed down the ladder, Jack first. He grabbed me around the waist as I dropped off the last rung. I felt the heat from his fingers move through my body. I started to giggle. I couldn’t help myself.

“What?” Jack asked.

“You’re trying to tell me you’re *Jack the Reaper*?” Saying it out loud made me laugh even harder.

He looked mostly exasperated. “Yes, I suppose so.” I detected a frustrated tone and saw him roll his eyes.

The grass still felt wet. As we trudged through it, the dampness made the cuffs of my jeans and sneakers wet. The sun sat higher in the sky and made it a little warmer. I couldn’t see my breath anymore. But the early morning still held its chill.

We walked around to the backside of the mill. Jack pulled me along. His hand felt soft and warm. The solitude of the mill, coupled with the crisp fall morning, and knowing Jack and I were all alone...it could have been romantic. Under different circumstances, of course.

As we moved closer to the mill I asked Jack, “How are we going to get in?” The mill had been boarded up for years in hopes of keeping out trespassing kids.

Jack motioned to a place right in front of him. Someone long ago pulled the boards off a section of the window and made a small hole there. As long as someone wasn’t overweight, they could squeeze inside. Unfortunately, there was no such hole in the fence. Jack went over first, which gave me the perfect opportunity to run. Instead, I hoisted myself up and over. Again, Jack put his hands around my waist as I made the small jump from the fence to the ground. Even without gloves, his hands still felt warm. Electric, almost.

Together, we walked a few steps and looked up at the hole. There wasn't a ladder, and I didn't know if I had the arm strength to pull myself up.

Jack noticed my hesitation. "I'll lift you up and you can shimmy through. There's a conveyor belt right underneath, so you won't have to drop but a few feet. Just lower yourself down once you're inside the window."

"Huh-uh." I shook my head. "I'm not going in there. Not by myself."

"I can't help you get in from the inside. Someone has to be out here to hoist you up." I looked around to see if I could find something to stand on. "There's no other way, Sam. If you want to go in, you're going to have to go first." He raised his eyebrows in a question.

Jack pushed me up by my butt. I did just as he'd said and found him to be telling the truth. Once my feet hit the belt, I jumped onto the ground and looked around.

I hadn't been in the mill since it closed. It was dark, even with the sun up. All of the windows remained covered up. Only shards of light spilled through faint cracks where there were breaks in the wood. Shadows danced around the inside of the empty building. Their quick, darting movement gave me chills. The smell of musty dampness reminded me of my grandmother's basement. A thick layer of dust covered the left over equipment. I could see my own footprints in the dirt on the floor.

Jack could easily have boarded the window back up outside and left me trapped. I felt a great sense of relief when I heard him land on the conveyor belt behind me. He

moved in front of me and motioned for me to follow him. I heard him mumble something that sounded like, “this should be just about perfect.”

“What are we doing here, Jack?”

“You’ll see. It should only be a minute or two now.” I trailed cautiously behind him, not really sure what we were doing. We moved into the middle of the almost empty floor. “Stand close,” he said. He didn’t have to tell me twice.

Almost as soon as we got into the middle, the atmosphere started to change. I saw movement out of the corner of my eye. Movement I knew could not be caused by light and shadows. When I turned to look closer, nothing was there. “They know I’m here,” Jack whispered.

The tone and cadence of his voice terrified me. “Who knows you’re here?” I asked. “Who else is in here Jack?” I scanned the deserted mill and found it empty.

Suddenly, it got colder. Within a few seconds, the room became almost unbearably cold. I had to wrap my arms around myself to try to stay warm. I could *feel* something. An electric shock. A crackle in the air. My arm hairs stood on end.

I closed my eyes and took a breath, and when I opened them, Jack and I were surrounded by people. At least a dozen of them. Some of them were in old, torn clothes. Some elderly, some youthful. Men and women. They looked no different from Jack. Or me, for that matter. The only thing different about them was their eyes. They weren’t just hollow. They were milky, clouded entirely over, so no iris or pupil appeared.

These people looked confused at first. They stared quietly and both Jack and me, looking us over. I stood frozen next to Jack, staring back. After what seemed like an eternity, their faces began to contort into a rage.

“Remember, just hold on to me,” Jack said. “You’ll be okay as long as you hold onto me.”

They started to scream. Their voices mixed together sounded like a symphony played by painful sounding instruments. Instead of terrified screams, these screams were filled with hate and anger. If I focused, I could almost make out what they were saying, but I couldn’t fully understand it with all of them screaming at once.

All of them focused on Jack. Their eyes, their words. They didn’t even notice me standing there. They told him things. Things they wanted. Things they needed. The longer we stood there, the louder and more aggressive they became.

“Who are they?” I whispered.

Jack looked me straight in the eyes. “They’re souls who haven’t passed over.”

He turned to face all of them. “Stop!” His voice came out loud and stern. They all quieted. “I can’t do anything for you except deliver you to the other side. I will not and cannot help you do anything else. You have chosen to stay here, but you do not *have* to. Come with me now, and I can stop your suffering.”

At that, they began to fade one by one, their images melting away. It happened so fast; I began to second guess whether they were ever there in the first place. “I guess that’s a no,” I heard him whisper.

“We have to go,” Jack said. I still stood wide-eyed and in awe. After what I’d just seen, I could guarantee I would never be anywhere near the mill again.

I climbed onto the belt and hoisted myself back out the window, the same way I’d come in. Jack wasn’t on the other side to catch me, and instead of landing on my feet, I fell on my butt into the wet grass beneath me. I wanted to get away. Run from Jack, run from this place, but I didn’t.

“I’m surprised you’re still here.” Jack said as his feet landed next to me. “I thought I’d come out and you’d be gone.”

“What in the hell was *that?*” I asked him.

He didn’t hesitate. “Those people you saw were ghosts. They were people who should have been gone to the other side a long time ago, but either they didn’t want to go, or the people in charge of their delivery didn’t do their job. For one reason or another, they got stuck here.”

“Is that what happens when you die?” I had seen the torment and pain on all of their faces. I didn’t want to go through that.

“Not to everyone. Only to people who aren’t willing to let go of this world and move on to the next one. Those spirits, they’re waiting.”

“For what?” I asked him. I couldn’t imagine anything worth suffering what they were going through.

“All kinds of things. Some of them want to see family members again. Some want their deaths avenged. I’d bet some of them don’t even know they’re dead. Or they



don't want to face it. One of the two. They're trapped inside, because they died here. I think the worst thing that can happen is to die *inside* somewhere. If you choose to not move on, you're stuck. You can't ever leave. Its walls trap you inside."

"But none of them want to leave," I whispered. "Why? They seem miserable."

"There's a lot of truth to what you see on TV on those ghost hunter shows. They don't want to leave, because they have unfinished business. They don't realize when you die, all of your business is finished. Just like that. You have no more business. At least none that counts anymore. Either that, or they're just afraid of what comes after."

"What does come after?" I asked him. But Jack was so deep in his train of thought, he didn't answer me. He just continued on his same track.

"That's why I had to go back last night. That's why I knew every one of those girls so well. They have to trust me. They have to believe that I'm going to take them somewhere they'll want to go. Somewhere peaceful. Somewhere better than here. If they don't, they'll stay, and they'll wind up like those people in the mill. I wouldn't wish that on anyone."

"Is that why you left the night of our date?"

He nodded. "This part is going to sound crass, and it's going to be hard for you to understand. It would have been hard for me when I was human. But it's how it goes. There's a schedule for everyone. You only get a certain amount of time on Earth. For some people it's a long time, and for some it's very short.

“I know when that time is for everyone. It’s like a timeline is imprinted on their forehead. Yes, Sam, even you. I’ll answer before you even ask. But my job is not to stop it. My job is to make sure when people die, they move on to the other side. Occasionally, something goes wrong with that schedule. Someone, somewhere tweaked something in the timeline by not following the path, and it throws everything off. That’s what happened the night of our date. She wasn’t supposed to die until later in the week.

“I didn’t want to leave you. I was having the most amazing time. I don’t get the chance to connect with too many people. Not really connect. I move around so much, and I keep myself guarded. I’m sure you can understand why. But I can’t stop the connection I have with you. I’ve tried. All I wanted was to stay and kiss you. It’s been so long since I’ve kissed anyone. But I had to go. It wouldn’t have been right to be selfish and stay at someone else’s expense.”

“How did your dad know?” I asked.

Jack laughed for the first time. “Oh. I guess I should explain that. He’s not really my dad, Sam. And that’s not really my mom. I stay in the house, but it’s more for looks than for necessity. My “mom and dad,” he made the quote signs with his hands, “are just two other reapers, as you call them, who help me set up when I move into a new town. People have to believe I’m whoever or whatever I say I am. I have an image to protect.” He smiled so wide it touched the corners of his eyes.

I felt stupid. But now I understood why Jack’s house had no furniture in it, and why I never saw his parents around.

“You can’t tell anyone, Sam. You know that, right?”

I imagined how these words would sound falling out of my mouth. People would think I was a lunatic. Even Olivia would never believe it. It made sense why Jack had met me at the mill. He'd known what we'd see. He'd forced me to believe him by showing me what was inside. Otherwise, I never could have. Jack had trusted me with his secret so I would be sure he wasn't the killer. "I know," I said.

He let me think for a moment. Almost as though he knew that if he let me think long enough I'd come round to a question he knew I'd ask. It wasn't how he could let people die he'd gotten to know when he so easily could have stopped it. And it wasn't when I was going to die, though I must admit, I really wanted to know. After all, who wouldn't? This question felt like a slap to my forehead. And of all of the questions I needed to ask, *wanted* to ask, it seemed like the most important one. The one that could change everything. The one that could stop everything bad that happened in our town.

He'd shown me he wasn't the killer for a reason. If I could just get him to answer one question. Even give me a name or a clue. *Something*. Why else would he have divulged his secret? He must want me to know.

"Jack," I said. "Do you know who the murderer is?"

He looked me straight in the eyes, and without any twinkle in them, he said, "Yes, Sam, I do."

“I’m glad you believe me.” Jack looked relieved.

He grabbed my hand as we walked home. We walked directly into the wind, and as the chill swarmed around me, my hand was the only part that managed to stay warm.

“I don’t really have a choice. I have to accept that either what you showed me is real, or I’m crazy and had a full mental break down back there. Between the two, I’d just as soon go with your being the Grim Reaper.”

“But I’m not THE Grim Reaper, Sam. The Grim Reaper *is* death. He’s like the big boss who makes all of the decisions about when everyone dies. I’m just a peon in the chain of command. And there are lots of us, not just me. Can you imagine if I was the only person in the world who could help deliver people over to the other side? It wouldn’t be possible.”

“You could always ask Santa Claus,” I said. “He manages to do it.” I flashed a smart-ass smile. “So, you can’t fly, you can’t time travel. What can you do?”

“I’m not a super hero. I’m just here to make sure people leave here when it’s their time to go. I don’t really have any special skills. Well, other than that I know when

everyone is going to die. And I can run pretty fast. That's about it. Oh, I don't age. I guess that's something."

"Ever?"

"Not so far," he shrugged.

"How old are you?" I wanted to know.

"I think I'm around seventeen."

I rolled my eyes. "No, for real. How old would you be if you aged? When were you born?"

"Honestly, I don't know. I've been doing this job since January 25th, 1942. But I don't know how old I was when I took this position. They don't let us know."

I wanted to ask who "they" were, but I had so many other questions. I wanted to understand what Jack did, who or what he was. But I had a feeling I could ask him all the questions in the world, and I still might not know.

When I was silent, he continued. "I usually play someone between the ages of sixteen and twenty five. I guess they feel like I have good range. How old do *you* think I am?"

"I thought you were my age, I guess. I took you at your word."

"I *feel* like I'm your age." Jack said. "I've always had this feeling I imagine is similar to most seventeen year olds—like I'm waiting to be free or something. Free from my parents, free from rules. I'm waiting to be able to do whatever I want to do. I'm

almost there—not quite yet, but *almost*. Only, I don't have any parents and the rules I have are few and far between. So, I've always kind of figured it's something innate in me from before I died.”

I didn't know if it was insensitive or not, but I was dying to know (no pun intended), “How did you die?” I asked.

“I wish I knew that, too. But that's something else I'm not allowed to know. There are reapers in charge who erase all of our memories after they bring us back to life.”

“Do you know anything about your life before this--this delivering business?”

Jack shook his head. “They don't want us to know those things. They say it's for the best. They say it's easier to walk away from our old life if we don't know anything about it. I don't know where I'm from. I don't know who my parents were. I don't even know my real birthday.”

“Do you want to know?”

“I used to. When I first started, I tried to find out. But when your entire memory is erased, and you don't even know your full name or age, it makes it difficult. I did some research, tried searching for people in my age range who had died close to January 25<sup>th</sup>, but there were so many people. More than you would think. It was wartime, and young American men my age were dying every day.

“Then I heard some stories about other people like me who managed to find out information about their old life. It didn't end well, so I decided to stop looking.”

I hung on Jack's every word. "What happened?"

"Well, there was this one guy, new to the group like me. And he couldn't let it go. I don't know how he found out, but eventually he knew where he had lived when he was alive. Then he had to know if he had a wife or kids. Once he found out he had been married and had two sons, he couldn't walk away. He realized he'd left his wife alone, without any life insurance, to care for their two boys. She was in a bad situation, and he felt like it was his fault. He wanted to make things right for her and the boys."

"I'm not really sure what happened to him in the end, I know he'd actually gone to the house, and his wife had seen him. Which, as you can imagine, became a little difficult to explain. Shortly after, he disappeared. Rumor was, she and the kids did, too. Maybe she left on her own. I might go into hiding, too, if my dead husband had shown up on my doorstep. But some people think she and both of her kids died in a car wreck soon after. It sent a message to everyone involved in what we do—it was best not to go looking into your past. Someone you love might pay the price.

"I never wanted to risk I might hurt anyone I loved that way, so I just never looked too hard," Jack finished.

"So, you might have a wife and kids somewhere?" I asked.

"I might, but it's doubtful. I'm young. At least in human years."

"True, but people married a lot younger a long time ago," I tried to reason.

Jack only shrugged. "Whatever I was, *whoever* I was, it doesn't matter now. What's done is done. I couldn't go back if I wanted to. My only options now are to help

reapers deliver souls or cross to the other side myself. For now, I'm settled on the former. One day, that might change. But not today, and as long as I'm staying, I might as well do the job right."

"Do you ever feel bad when you have to take someone?" I couldn't imagine what that might be like, announcing to someone they were dead.

"I try to keep a distance as much as I can. I think it would be a lot easier to take old people. A lot of them have had nice, long lives, and they're ready to go anyway. I started out taking people more your dad's age, and that was hard, because most people his age have families. It always broke my heart to see the little ones first introduced to death by having one of their parents die.

"Then I got moved to these types of cases. They've been the worst. They're always girls, always your age. All of them have their whole lives ahead of them, and plans for college and careers. Then I come in and take all of it away. But I try to stay unattached. If I got attached, I'd get involved."

"You didn't seem so unattached with Chloe," I mentioned.

"I'm a good actor. It's what I do," Jack said and shrugged.

I rolled my eyes. "You sure seem to be lucky enough to have to keep your distance from quite a lot of pretty girls."

"Hey, I'm not complaining."

I hit him on his arm. When I looked around, I realized we were almost home.

"What are you going to do about the killing?"



Jack looked confused. “I’m not going to do anything about the killing,” he said matter of factly.

I started to ask some more questions, but Jack raised up his hand in an effort to stop me. “I’ve told you everything I can. You don’t have to understand it, but if you want us to spend time together, you will have to accept it. I can’t and I won’t tell you or anyone else about who is killing these girls. It’s not my place.”

I didn’t know how to deal with Jack’s serious voice. But the way he spoke to me, as if I were a child, made me feel angry. It wasn’t that I didn’t understand. It was more I thought his ideals, especially in this case, were ridiculous. Why would he tell *me* all of these things? He must have a reason, but I couldn’t imagine what that reason could be. I couldn’t decide whether I felt angry with Jack for keeping the information from me, or whether I felt flattered he considered me important enough to know what he’d told me.

“If you don’t want me to stop it, then why did you tell me all of this?” I asked.

“Don’t you know?” I shook my head.

“Because I’m in love with you, Sam. And I needed you to know who I really am.”

My jaw dropped before I could say anything. I realized we had made it all the way back home and stood outside my house. Jack kissed me on my temple and shoed me inside. I walked through my front door trying to deal with a dozen different emotions.

I heard my mom move inside the house. I tried to scramble inside before Mom opened my bedroom door, as she did every morning. I had barely climbed inside when I heard the creak of the footsteps outside her door. The doorknob turned before I had a chance to make it back to bed.

“Sam?” her Mom asked. I stood in front of her fully dressed trying to look nonchalant.

“Yeah?” I answered. I hoped to sound inconspicuous enough there would be no questions about why I was up and dressed so early.

“Why are you already dressed?” Clearly, that didn’t work.

“I noticed Jack out in his yard. I was going to go over and talk to him, see where he’s been.”

“Isn’t it a little early?” she questioned.

“I have to get him while he’s home. I’m afraid if I wait too long, he’ll disappear again.”

My mom knew how confused and disappointed I had been over Jack’s disappearance. Mom had tried to keep her distance, not asking too many questions, allowing me to deal with everything in private. She wanted to give motherly advice, but my sullen attitude must have sent out a strong signal that said, “leave me alone.” Because for the most part, she had. She’d watched me mope around and not tried to fix it.

“Can you just wait until it’s a little later? I don’t know what the neighbors would think if I let my daughter come knock on their door this early.”

I wanted to ask her the last time she’d seen the neighbors, but I held my tongue. I had to play things cool, because otherwise I might not get out of the house at all. And I had so many more questions to ask Jack.

I sighed, “Sure, Mom. I can wait a little while.” The thought of waiting killed me.

“Well, since you’re already up, do you want pancakes for breakfast? Sam?”

I looked intently across the street. Jack stood in his front yard and stared up at my window. It could have been just my imagination, but I swore when he saw me something

flickered across his face. He nodded at me, and gave me the thumbs up or thumbs down hand signal. I only shrugged. I didn't know if I was in the clear yet or not. Jack laughed and turned and walked in his house. I could only focus on what my mom asked after he was out of sight.

“Huh?”

“*I said, 'Do you want me to make you pancakes for breakfast?'*”

I smiled a genuine smile at her. My mom worked so hard since my Dad died, being a single mother and sole provider. I didn't know if I'd fully understood all that before. I didn't know what it felt like to be crushed on the inside because you'd lost your one true love. I had lost my dad, too. But losing your dad felt completely different from losing your soul mate. I knew that now. And at least for me, Jack had come back. My dad? He would never come back. My mom had to learn to live the rest of her life without him.

“How about if *I* make *you* pancakes for breakfast? You deserve it.”

“For what?”

“For being my mom.” Mom smiled when I said it. “I'll meet you downstairs in five minutes.”

I made the pancakes while mom talked to me. “So, are you going to try to work things out with Jack?”

I thought about it before I answered. *Did* I want that? “I don’t know yet. I have a lot of questions I need answered.” That was the truth. At least as much of the truth as I knew right then.

“Don’t settle, Sam.”

I rolled my eyes. The last thing I wanted this morning was to get advice from my mother about Jack. She’d married her high school sweetheart. What did she know?

“I know you think I don’t know anything. But just because your Dad was my high school sweetheart doesn’t mean I didn’t date other people before him. We got together our senior year. I had two other years of high school. I got dates.” I had always known my mom was a mind-reader. Now I had confirmation. I smiled at her sheepishly.

It was impossible to imagine my mom with anyone other than my dad. I had always pictured my mom’s life as starting when she and my dad found one another.

“I can tell he broke your heart. Believe it or not, I know what that feels like. I loved someone once, and he broke my heart. Bobby Randall. I really believed we’d get married, have kids—the whole package. I was a little younger than you are now, and I guess he decided he liked another girl better. I thought I would never get over it. I had to see them together at school, and every time, I felt like I couldn’t breathe. I just wanted to hide inside my house so I would never have to run into them together.

“I met your dad shortly after that. And you know what? That’s about the time Bobby decided he’d made a mistake. He showed up at my house with flowers and a heartfelt apology. But it was too late. Sure, I still had feelings for him, and a part of me

wondered if he really was my soul mate. Only I don't think I could have gotten over what he'd done to me. If he'd really loved me, he never could have hurt me like he did. Sometimes too much happens and you can't go back. You can only move forward."

I stared at her, open-mouthed. Mom seemed lost in thought as she spoke.

"All I'm saying is, when someone hurts you, sometimes it's best to walk away. Even if it hurts when you do it. It might save you a lot of hurt down the road. Jack is handsome, but he isn't the only boy out there. If it doesn't work out, you'll be okay."

"I know I will." And that was true. But right now I had questions I needed answered. Until I had those answers, I wasn't willing to let Jack go.

"Let's get this cleaned up, and then you can go across the street. I think it's late enough now."

Once we were finished, I went across the street. I started to knock on Jack's door, but he opened it before I could.

"Who's the killer?" I asked.

"Well, hello to you, too, Sam," he said.

"I need to know. You have to tell me."

"Sam, you know I can't."

"Why, Jack? You could stop all of this. If you don't want to tell me, tell the police. Tell *somebody*."

“I can’t.” He didn’t sound mad when he said it, but I could tell he wasn’t going to budge.

“I don’t understand! How can you keep letting people die when you could stop it? You know these people! How can you not care?” I knew my voice had risen, but I couldn’t stop it.

Jack remained calm. “I know you don’t understand, Sam. But I don’t get to decide who lives and who dies. That’s not my job. All I do is make sure the people who die pass over when it’s their time. “

“Well, then, who is in charge? I’ll talk to them!” I felt frantic.

“It doesn’t work like that.”

By this time I’d started full on screaming. “Then how *does* it work, Jack? Because these people you’ve known for a few months? I’ve grown up with most of them. I’ve known them my whole life. We may not be close friends now, but we’ve known each other forever, and I’m tired of seeing them die. And I’m tired of being locked up in my house and on watch everywhere I go, wondering if I’m going to be next!”

Jack just looked at me. “Are you done?”

“No!” I yelled back. “And don’t patronize me.”

“I can’t tell you, Sam. You can yell and get mad all you want. Hate me if you need to, but it’s not my place. I can’t change things. If it’s your time to go, it’s your time to go.”

“What if it was me? What if I was next? You wouldn’t stop it, even if you could?”

“I would want to, Sam. Believe me, I would. But I couldn’t. It’s not my job.”

I was furious and disgusted. I was tired of hearing his “job.” “What kind of person are you? People are DYING, and you’re telling me you could stop it, but IT’S NOT YOUR JOB?”

“I know it’s hard to understand. But it’s just the way it is.” He tried to grab my hand, but I pulled it away.

“I can’t do this, Jack. It’s one thing to accept that you ‘deliver’ souls into Heaven,” I made sure to use my fingers to make the quotations around deliver while I spoke, “but entirely something else to accept you will continue letting people die when you could stop it.”

I moved toward the front door, tears welling in my eyes. “I like you, Jack. Maybe even love you, even though I don’t know you very well. There’s definitely a connection between us. Something keeps me drawn to you. I know I’ve never felt this way about someone before. But I can’t say what you’re doing is okay. I can’t even look you in the eye right now.”

“If you change your mind, and you want to tell me, you know where I am,” he said in a completely rational voice. I walked out the door before he could say anything else. I half hoped he’d come after me as I walked across the street, but when I stopped to listen, I didn’t hear any footsteps behind me. In case he watched me out his window, I



tried to look as though I was sure of my decision, so I did not turn around. I hated how easily he's just let me go.

Tears streamed down my face as I opened my own front door. I heard my mom yell from the kitchen, "Well, that didn't take long!"

As soon as she came around the corner and saw my face, she reached out to hug me.

"I'm okay, Mom. Really." I pushed her away, not wanting to be touched.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Nothing. Nothing happened. And apparently nothing is going to happen. I just want to go up to my room."

Her face looked like she'd taken on my pain. "Let me know if there's anything I can do."

"Thanks, Mom." I kissed her on the cheek and walked upstairs.

I slept poorly, wavering between anger and heartbreak. Jack was one hundred percent right. I didn't understand where he was coming from. But not understanding didn't keep me from wanting him.

As soon as I got out of bed, I went straight to my window. I pulled back the curtains to see whether there was any sign of Jack. When I opened them, I saw a note, folded and neat, taped to my window. The outside, in a neat block penmanship, read "Samantha." I cracked open the window and pulled the note off. I'd only seen Jack's writing when he left the note with his dad on our first date, but I immediately recognized it as his.

I unfolded the note carefully, wondering what he could possibly have to say. At first glance, it looked short.

*"Samantha,*

*I know how upset you must be. I do. And I'm sorry for that. I would never want to hurt you on purpose. I wish there was a way I could make you understand, but I don't think there is one. Instead I'm hoping you can understand this.*

*I have been moving from place to place for three quarters of a century. In that time, I have gotten to know a lot of people. You know an important part of what I do is to get as close to others as possible. I've always felt incredibly lucky. Because in all of those times, I've never fallen for any of those people. I've always been able to keep that distance I spoke of tonight. I've seen it happen to others, and I always figured it must be gut wrenching. They were faced with a lose-lose situation. They could pass their soul mate over to the other side, or they could alter everything and face punishment by warning the love of their life about what was to come. Of course, if the person passed over, the deliverer would be left alone to grieve and find a way to move on. What if they never found love again? Of course, love at any time, for any one like me is impossible. So, we tend to stay lonely. But falling in love does happen.*

*As I said, I always felt so lucky I never had to deal with that. I guess I simply never found my soul mate. No one made my heart beat faster. Lucky for me, really. Until I saw you in the hospital a couple of years ago, I had no idea how gut wrenching the loss of love could be.*

*Now I know. I miss you when you are not next to me. I don't feel whole. I don't breathe right or think right. I need you with me.*

*It's true, eventually the killing will be over. The killer will be caught or will move on. One way or another, this thing you are so mad at me*

*for will end. I will have to move on. But until it happens, I don't want to waste any of the time I have. And any moment I'm not with you is a waste.*

*Please, forgive me.*

*Jack*

I saw Olivia as soon as I stepped on the school's front lawn. I wanted to tell her about everything that happened with Jack. It was hard to keep a secret from Olivia. We told each other everything. But I'd made a promise to Jack, in so many words, and I couldn't break that promise. The likelihood Olivia would believe anything I told her was also extremely slim.

"I haven't talked to you since Saturday morning. What happened to you?"

Rarely did Olivia and I not talk over the weekend. Usually we spoke every single day unless one of us was on vacation. Even then we at least sent e-mails and texts. "I spent the rest of the weekend with Jack." I hadn't told Olivia I was going to meet Jack at the mill. I knew she'd never let me go alone, if she let me go at all.

She grabbed me by the arm and turned me to where we were face to face. “You *what?*”

“I spent the rest of the weekend with Jack.” I shrugged.

“Doing what, exactly?”

I turned around and started to walk again. “We’re going to be late if we don’t start walking.”

“So, walk and talk. *Spill.*” Her tone demanded an answer.

“Nothing much. We just talked. He asked me to meet him at the mill. He brought breakfast. It wasn’t that big of a deal.”

Olivia didn’t look like she thought it wasn’t *that* big of a deal. I didn’t think she would. “Of course, it’s a big deal. Why would you go off to meet him somewhere like the mill? What is going on with you, Sam? You’re usually so much smarter than this.”

Her reprimand stung and automatically put me in defensive mode. “You’re not the boss of me, Olivia. I can do what I want. I make my own choices, and I don’t have to clear them with you.”

Olivia looked as though I’d slapped her across the face. It wasn’t often we spoke cross words to one another. She turned around to walk in the opposite direction. A curt “Fine,” was all I heard her say.

I should have grabbed her arm and apologized. I've found that it's much easier to say "I'm sorry" as soon as you are. The more time that passes, the harder the words seem to be to say. But the warning bell rang, and I risked being late if I ran to catch up to her.

As I headed to first period, I felt someone's breath on my neck. "Have you forgiven me yet?"

Jack's voice tickled my ear. I smiled even though I didn't want to. I wanted to be mad, especially since he seemed to be making light of our current situation.

True to my nature, I answered his question with a question. "So, when are you leaving?" I'd gotten a lot of information out of Jack's letter, but the realization that he would eventually be leaving is what most affected me. It had come as a shock.

"What?"

"When are you leaving? You said in your note you'd be leaving soon." I knew I sounded desperate for an answer.

"I said in my note I'd be leaving when this was all over, Sam. I didn't necessarily say it would be soon."

"I don't see what the point is, then. I mean if you're leaving anyway, what does it matter if I stay angry or not?"

Jack grabbed my free hand and held it in both of his. "We have this time. Today and the next day and the day after. I want to spend those days with you."

"Why make it harder on ourselves? Why get attached to each other?"

A look of hurt flickered across Jack's face. "You're not already attached to me?"

Of course I was already attached. But I had to make a decision. I already had to forget Jack. Would I want to make more memories with him I'd have to push to the back of my mind later? Ripping the band-aid off quickly and easily seemed like the smart idea. And as Olivia had said, I'm usually the one who makes the smart choices.

"Samantha?" I heard a lady's voice from down the hall. I had been so engrossed in my conversation with Jack, I didn't realize the final bell sounded and the hallway was empty. "Are you planning on coming to class today? Or do you want to stand out in the hall all morning?" My first period teacher stood half out the classroom door with her hands on her hips.

"I'm coming Mrs. Jackson. I was just talking to..." I turned to look at Jack, but he was gone.

Mrs. Jackson gave me a crazy look. "Talking to whom, Samantha?"

"Never mind," I said and headed toward English class. Apparently, Jack and I would have to finish our conversation later.



Jack never showed up at school anymore. The last time I'd seen him there had been when he disappeared in the hallway. At first, I thought the school wouldn't let him back in, because he'd missed so much. But when another body was found I knew why.

The most recent victim was Tabitha King. She'd dropped out of school midway through her junior year. To call her a burnout would be the understatement of the year. She'd been a mess. I'd always been surprised she'd made it as far as she had. Tabitha involved herself with an older boy at the beginning of our sophomore year. He had

graduated two years earlier. Since he didn't attend school, he didn't see why Tabitha needed to go either. She showed up for classes only sporadically. Even when she was there physically, she was not there mentally.

By junior year, word on the small town street was she'd become addicted to meth, courtesy of her boyfriend. Eventually, she just stopped showing up for classes altogether. For a while there was speculation she was pregnant, but a baby bump never came. I hadn't seen her around or thought about her. So, when I heard they found her body in the woods, I felt guilty. We were never friends, but in our small town, it was rare to completely forget someone unless that person was already dead. But that is just what I had done. I'd forgotten about Tabitha King.

I wished I knew more than what the paper reported. But my source for information on police matters dried up. Olivia and I hadn't spoken in three weeks. I refused to apologize, though I knew she was only looking out for my best interest. When I thought about it, she really had nothing to apologize for. She was only doing her duty as my best friend by trying to protect me. And so we wound up at a standstill. We avoided each other at school. I hadn't heard from her via text or e-mail either. As soon as I'd heard word about Tabitha, I wanted to call her.

Tabitha was the first girl who didn't fit the regular profile. Though the other girls were different in social standing and appearance, they were all the same age, and they all went to our school. I wanted to talk with Olivia to find out what the police thought about the change. Even more, I missed her. Tabitha's death made me think about Olivia, not because I feared she was on the list, but because we rehashed each killing in depth after it

happened. And I missed our talks. We used to pretend like we were Nancy Drew when we were in elementary school, and discussing the murders felt just like that. Two Nancy Drews on the hunt for the truth.

But I did not call her. I knew her first question would be about what I'd done over the past few weeks. I didn't want to lie to her, and if I told her I'd spent the time with Jack, I'd have to listen to a lecture.

A lecture is bad enough, but listening to a lecture that actually makes sense-- that's worse. I didn't want to hear all the reasons I knew were true. Problems between Jack and me would never work out. Heartbreak was sure to follow. He'd already hurt me once. And so forth and so on. But Olivia had never been in love, so she would never understand.

I'd gone to Jack's house the same day I'd seen him in school. Avoiding him was pointless. He lived across the street, and I wanted more than anything to be with him. I wish I could have been the girl who held fast to my morals. I wanted to know who the killer was. I wanted to save our town from suffering the loss of other victims. But more than that, I wanted to be with Jack. The fact he might soon leave made me want it all the more.

For three weeks, I lived in a fantasy world. I pretended we were a normal couple. I stopped asking questions about what Jack did during the time I wasn't with him. I didn't press him for information. Even when Tabitha's body was found, I only asked him if he knew her. To which he only replied, "Yes." *Things are easier this way*, I told

myself. And they were. As long as I could continue to push who Jack really was to the back of my mind, I could pretend everything was okay.

I came to his house every day right after school. We played chess and Scrabble, sometimes card games. We talked a lot. We were in the phase where we wanted to know everything about each other. I answered more questions than Jack did, and when he didn't want to answer, I didn't push.

Sometimes we lay on the couch, with me on top of him and my head on his chest. He'd wrap his arms around me, and I realized it was the safest I'd ever felt. He always smelled clean, like fresh soap.

He told me about all of the places he'd traveled. Places all over the world. I loved listening to his stories. Since I'd never traveled anywhere, I imagined what it might be like to visit some of those places. I could imagine us there together. I promised myself I'd visit every single one of them when I graduated college.

The one fact I couldn't manage to push to the back of my mind was the fact he would eventually have to leave, but Jack would never tell me exactly when that time would be. So, I just tried to enjoy the time we had together. And I tried to get to know as much as I could about him. I soaked in every detail, so when he left, I could relive all of our moments together, down to his clean soapy smell.

I felt giddy doing the simplest of things, as long as those things were with Jack. Sometimes, when I lay down at night, I would think about what might happen when Jack left. I couldn't imagine a day without him. But at the same time, I knew the time together now would be worth the hurt. Being in love was worth everything, right?

I wish I could say I found out a lot about Jack's responsibilities in those three weeks. Truth is, we rarely talked about it. As he'd told me before, Jack didn't know much about his life before he died, and pressing him with questions only seemed to make him more frustrated. When we did talk about anything related to his job, it usually revolved around my dad. Jack knew how his loss had damaged me.

"Death isn't bad for the people who die, Sam," Jack kept saying. "It's only bad for the people they leave behind. As long as they are willing to go over to the other side, to move on, it's very peaceful."

"And my dad?" I asked.

"He went over easily. He didn't fight me at all. Some people ask why, or they want to know special information. Some people cry. All your dad wanted to know was that you and your mom would be okay. Once I assured him I wasn't there to take either of you, he took one last look at you both and disappeared."

"How could he leave us? How could he look at us both and then just leave?" I pleaded.

"He knew you and your mom were strong, Sam. He knew you'd be okay. You have your whole future ahead of you. His staying here wouldn't have done anything for either of you. He'd still be dead. He only would have hurt himself. You wouldn't want him to be like those people in the mill."

I thought about it. "You're right. I would never wish that on anyone."

“You think of death as something horrible. It’s really just a gateway to another life. Something just like here, I imagine. Only your physical self has to die here in order to move there. I know you miss your dad, Sam. And I know you think it’s unfair. Take my word for it, everything happens for a reason. And you’ll see him again. Hopefully someday far in the future.” He smiled.

If nothing else ever came out of Jack and me, he helped lift a weight off me. For years since my dad died, I couldn’t move past his death. I shut down emotionally. I’d become a different person, never allowing joy back into my life. Sure I’d smile and keep up pretense that I was the same Sam I’d always been, but that’s all it was . . . pretense. Jack helped me find my old self. He helped me feel at peace with my dad’s death.

My mom noticed it, too. “Things seem to be going well with Jack,” she said with a knowing look and amused smile.

I beamed back at her. “They are,” I said.

She didn’t even tell me to be careful, which surprised me. I don’t know if she’d decided to trust Jack or if she just didn’t want to burst my bubble. Either way, it was nice to not argue with her about Jack.

Unfortunately, as all good things do, it had to come to an end. As the fourth week of my living in denial began, I found Jack on my front porch after school. I knew something must be wrong, because I always went to Jack’s house. He never came to mine.

“What are you doing here?” I asked suspiciously.

“Can we talk for a second?”

“Sure. Come on inside.”

My mom wasn't home, but I didn't think she'd care if Jack was in our house, so long as she didn't find him in my room. The main reason we went to Jack's house after school was that my mom thought his mom was always at home. Jack's fake mom had made sure to make a few appearances working in the garden or helping out the PTA, just to keep up the ruse. I'd told my mom she didn't work, so she chaperoned us in the afternoons. I was embarrassed to say it, but I'd become quite a good liar.

“What's up?” I asked as I wrapped my arms around his waist.

“I need to ask you a favor.” He grabbed my hands from around his waist and held them in his. “And I need you to do it without asking me a lot of questions.”

In the past few weeks I'd learned enough about Jack to know when he meant business. He wore his serious face as he spoke to me.

“I need you to stay glued to Olivia.”

“But—“ I interrupted him. He held up his hand to stop me.

“I know you guys are on the outs. But I need you to suck it up and apologize. Even if you think it's not your fault.”

“Why?” I felt if I had to apologize, which I still did not want to do, Jack at least owed me a little bit of an explanation.

“I can’t tell you. But I need you to trust me. I know you know I would never ask you to do something without having an extremely legitimate and important reason. Can you do it?”

“Is Olivia next on the list? Is the killer coming for her?” It was all I could think of.

“I can’t tell you, Sam. Really. But it’s imperative you stay with her. Before school, after school. Even spend the night on weekends. And if you can swing it, the weekdays too.”

“But what about us, Jack?” I knew I should be worried about Olivia, and I was. But I also knew my time with Jack was dwindling. And as selfish as it was, I didn’t want to give up that time.

Jack’s eyes softened. “I’ll miss you, too, Sam. I love our afternoons together. I look forward to you getting out of school all day. But I can’t be selfish here, and neither can you. Spending time with Olivia could save someone’s life.”

“How could I possibly say no to that?” I asked him. “But can we have one last afternoon together? I promise I’ll call Olivia tonight and apologize.”

Jack pulled me close to him and nuzzled his face into the crook of my neck. I stood still and felt him breathe against me, his chest warm against my breasts. “I think we can do that,” he said. “I’ll see you across the street in ten minutes.”

“I’ll be there,” I said. I longingly watched him walk home and go inside before I finally closed the door.





True to my word, I called Olivia that night.

I hated to say it. Really, I did. But I had to. I chewed my bottom lip while I made the call.

Olivia had caller ID, so she knew it was me before she answered the phone. “I’m sorry, Liv,” I said. As the words tumbled out, I realized I meant it. I missed her. I loved spending time with Jack, but it wasn’t the same.

“For which part, exactly?” Olivia sounded defensive.

“I snapped at you. And I know you were only looking out for me. You were being a good friend.”

She sighed, and I could hear the smile in her voice when she said, “You’re forgiven.”

“Good.” It turned out to be much easier than I had thought.

“I’ve missed you,” she said. “What’s been going on?”

“So much! Are you doing anything after school tomorrow? Maybe we can go get something to eat and see a movie.”

“Let’s see how much we have to talk about! We may skip the movie.”

Once that issue was settled, we chatted for a while about Tabitha, since we weren’t talking when she’d been killed. I was surprised, but Olivia didn’t say anything about Jack. She didn’t even ask what had been going on between us. I realized I wanted her to. I always thought whenever one of us fell in love, we’d share all the mushy details with one another. I guess things don’t always work out the way you think they will.

Finally, we hung up the phone, and I walked over to Jack’s.

He answered the door before I even knocked. “I called her,” I blurted out.

“Did you apologize?” he asked.

“I did.”

“And how was it?” He knew I didn’t want to, and I’d only done it for him.

“Better than I thought. I feel relieved. I didn’t realize it, but avoiding Olivia has taken a lot of work.” I smiled.

“I’d hoped it would turn out that way. A boyfriend should never be a replacement for a best friend. Do you want to come in?”

“I do,” and believe me, I did. “But I can’t. I told my mom I was just running across the street to tell you something, and I’d be right back home.”

He brushed my forehead with his lips. “Fine, then. I guess I won’t see you tomorrow?”

Those words pained me a little. Seeing Jack was part of my daily routine. I didn’t want to spend one day without him. It showed on my face.

“It’s going to be okay, Sam. We’ll have other time to spend together. I just need you to stay with Olivia for a few days,” Jack explained. “You know I wouldn’t give up time with you without a good reason.”

“I know. It’s just . . . I’m going to miss you.”

“I’m going to miss you, too.”

“Promise?” I asked him.

“You can’t even imagine,” he answered and pulled me close to him.

Olivia and I spent the next day together.

Was I sure I loved Jack? Olivia sat across from me, and this question was the one she posed. After we’d spent the last two hours talking about all kinds of other things, I finally broached the Jack subject. I told her I’d always thought we’d share all the details of our love lives when we fell in love—which is what brought about her question.

“I think so,” I said. “I mean, I’ve never been in love.”

“Are you sure it’s not just because he’s your first boyfriend?” she asked.

“He’s not my *first boyfriend*, Olivia. And besides, what do you know? You haven’t really had any boyfriends, either.”

“True, but I’m not the one claiming to be in love,” she countered.

This conversation was headed in the same direction it had before.

“I feel like I breathe better, easier, when he’s around. I don’t want to be without him. When I’m sitting at school, all I can think about is getting home so I can go and see Jack. Everything I do, he’s in the back of my mind. And I can’t stop myself from smiling when I think about him.”

Olivia looked annoyed.

“I don’t want to fight about this, Liv. I know it could turn out badly, but it could turn out badly with anyone, not just Jack. Look at my mom. She thought she and my dad would retire and travel the world. He died, and now she’s raising a teenage daughter alone. Look at Chloe. She thought she’d be homecoming queen, and now what? She’s been murdered by someone the police can’t even catch.

“My point is, who knows what tomorrow is going to bring? I only know what I have today, and today I have Jack. And I like spending time with him. Why waste it? I could be dead tomorrow. The world could end tomorrow. Who knows? I want to spend all the time with Jack I can. And if it doesn’t work out, so be it. At least I enjoyed the time I had.”

Olivia sighed. “Fair enough,” she said. “You know I’m just worried about you. I just feel like we don’t know much about him, and he’s been tied to so many of the girls who’ve been killed.”

“I know plenty about him, Olivia. I’ve learned a lot over the last few weeks. And there’s no way Jack is the killer.”

“But how can you know for sure, Sam?” I couldn’t blame her for her suspicions. I’d thought he was the killer at one time, too.

“I just do. You are going to have to take my word for it. If you can’t trust my instincts as your best friend, I don’t know how this is going to work. I’m not giving Jack up. And I don’t want to give you up, either. I hope I don’t have to make that choice.”

“You don’t,” she said. At that, I breathed a sigh of relief. Olivia could be stubborn, and being without her the past few weeks had been rough. I didn’t want to lose her again.

We both smiled.

“So, now that we’ve got that settled, is he a good kisser?” she asked. “Tell me everything.”

And as we ordered another cup of hot chocolate, I did.

I spent the next couple of weeks glued to Olivia. We walked home from school together. We ate dinner together. We spent the weekends together. It felt just like old times, before Jack came into the picture.

But I missed Jack. The fear he could call me any day and tell me he was moving on made the time we spent apart even more difficult. Every time he called, I felt my stomach rise up in my throat, both from excitement and dread. The two emotions battled it out, but in the end they wound up in a draw. I'd told Jack several times on the phone that while I appreciated the time with Olivia, I felt the two of us could be squandering the time we had left.

Jack always said the same thing. “Sam, I just need you to do this for me. I miss you, too. But this is important. It’s more important than the two of us. It’s hard for me to say that, and I’m sure it’s hard for you to hear. But regardless of how much I love you and I love being with you, I still need you to do this.”

Every time he said it, it broke my heart and made it melt at the same time. I couldn’t think of anything that was more important than Jack and I spending time together. How could he? But at the same time, he made sure I knew he loved me. I never thought I’d heard anything more perfect than those three words floating out of Jack’s mouth and in my direction.

Even Olivia started to become a little suspicious. “Are you sure everything is okay with you and Jack?”

“Why?” I asked.

“Well, when have you seen him? I mean, you and I have been together all the time, 24/7. You don’t have any free time, let alone any time to plan anything with Jack. Did something happen?”

I picked at the carpet on Olivia’s bedroom floor. I lay sprawled out there while Olivia lay on the bed. We were both looking at college brochures. “No, nothing’s happened. He’s just been busy.”

“So, what you’re saying is, I’m second choice then?” Olivia asked.



I looked at my friend and tried to think of something to say. But just as she opened her mouth, Olivia threw her stuffed alligator at my head. “I’m only *kidding*, Sam.”

I threw the alligator back and Olivia caught it with one hand. “But seriously, this can’t be good for your relationship.”

“It’s probably not,” I agreed. “But Jack hasn’t had a lot of free time for me. Since he couldn’t get back into school, he’s doing home schooling, and I guess it takes up a lot of his time.” Jack and I had already prepared the speech together. Both of us assumed eventually someone would ask why we had gone from spending all of our time with each other to all of our time apart.

“Well, he has to make your relationship a priority. He can’t just neglect you. That’s not fair to you.”

I agreed. Unfortunately, Jack did not. For the first time, I thought I might cry. A sense of panic and insecurity came over me. *What if Jack really just wanted to break things off, and he didn’t have the guts to tell me?* He was pulling away. I was certain of it. How could I have been so blind?

“What’s wrong?” Olivia asked, as she brushed her hair from her eyes.

“You’ve just got me thinking is all. It’s really not fair. I mean if he wants us to be together, he should be making more of an effort to spend time with me. What kind of a relationship can we have when we never see each other? It would be one thing if we were in a long distance relationship, but he lives across the street, for Christ’s sake.”

“Why don’t you just go over there now? I’m getting kind of tired of you being here all the time, anyway. Can’t a girl get some time by herself?” She smiled to let me know she was only joking.

I thought about it. I knew Jack would be disappointed I left Olivia alone. But Liv’s mom was home, and she was in for the night. Her mom would never let her go out after dark unsupervised, and the light was slowly waning outside. Olivia would be safe for one night. One night Jack and I could spend together, and then I’d go back to Olivia’s tomorrow.

“Go on,” she said. “Really. You aren’t going to hurt my feelings or anything.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “What are you going to do? I thought we were spending the evening picking a college.”

Olivia shrugged. “That’s what *I’ll* be doing. You’ll be making out on Jack’s couch.”

I had already started to gather up my stuff. It was still light outside, and I hadn’t ridden my bike. I knew if I walked quickly enough, I could make it to Jack’s house before it got dark. I didn’t want to call to let him know I was coming, because he’d just say not to. Better to make it a surprise, anyway.

I loved my town. I loved how, on most streets, the trees’ branches intertwined, blocking out the sun almost entirely. When I was little, my Dad told me the fireflies that came out at dusk were fairies. I could see their little butts start to light up as the sun went down. They always started early under the canopy of trees, where it seemed much later

in the day than it actually was. I slipped my hands into my gloves as a cold wind stirred up the leaves around me. I walked quickly, finding comfort in thoughts of my father and me.

Before I knew it, I was almost to Jack's house. Just a few blocks more, and just a little daylight left. I might have made it all the way without even realizing how I'd gotten there, only I heard a twig snap behind me. I turned around, expecting to see a car or a kid on their bike, but I didn't see anything. Both the street and sidewalk were empty.

I pulled my coat a little more tightly around me and picked up my pace. I looked back again. Nothing. *Okay, maybe it wasn't my best idea to hike it almost a mile this close to dark. I won't do it again. Ever. Just let me get there. In one piece. Please.* I didn't know who I was talking to, since I wasn't sure I believed in God. Maybe the cosmos. Whoever was in charge of my destiny, and I hoped they were listening.

I kept hearing movement behind me, but when I turned around, no one was there. Not even a dog. Or a squirrel. Nothing. I resisted the urge to run. I knew I was being ridiculous. It was still daylight outside, and I was in a residential neighborhood. It wasn't like I'd decided to walk down a dark alley at midnight. Most of the houses were lit up on the inside, and I could smell the just-lit fires burning inside. I looked behind me once more, and took a deep breath. Still nothing.

I only got a few more steps before a stabbing pain at the back of my neck stopped me. I tried to turn around, half expecting to see nothing as I had before. *It's all in my mind.* Only this time, I was blocked by a large figure in a black hoodie and jeans. He smelled woody, like he'd been camping overnight. Unfortunately, when I tried to get a

look at his face, I realized my vision had already begun to blur. I could barely make out his large, white teeth as his lips curled into a smile. As I fell backward, I heard the loud crack of my skull as it hit the concrete. And that's the last thing I remembered.

My eyelids felt sewn together, and my throat was incredibly dry. I must have fallen asleep. I remembered feeling terrified and running. Running as fast as I could to get home, as if once I made it through the front door I would be safe. I had no idea I'd never gotten the chance. I'd blacked out. I must have. Jack must have been there, lurking somewhere and saved me. Put me back in my bed, just as he had the first day I'd met him.

I could hear the faint drip of water. I took in a deep breath, and realized I felt incredibly sore, like I'd just been hit by a semi-kind of sore. I wanted to go back to sleep. Being awake was too painful, but something gnawed at the edge of my brain. I knew I must have hit my head when I'd fallen. It not only ached like the worst migraine ever, but I could feel a sting near the top of my crown. "Must be a cut," I thought.

I wanted to reach up to touch it, to find out how much damage had been done. I willed myself fully awake and tried to reach behind my head. Only I couldn't move my arms. Why couldn't I move my arms? I tried to move my legs. I couldn't move those either. What in the hell was going on? Was I paralyzed? I didn't *feel* paralyzed.

I tried to open my eyes. They were crusty with sleep or gunk or something. My eyelashes were stuck shut. *Think, Sam. Don't panic. Think. Can I move my fingers? Or my toes? Can I move anything?* I let out a sigh of relief as I successfully dug my fingernails into my palm and then released them. I could move both my fingers and toes.

*I have to get my eyes open.* I strained against the weight of the lids, and as soon as I could see, wished I'd left them closed.

I hadn't just passed out. Whoever chased me had caught me. I lay strapped on a gurney-type table in a damp, dank basement type room. *No originality with this one.* Whoever had me watched one too many horror movies growing up. The place smelled like road kill—a slaughterhouse with no ventilation. I couldn't breathe, and I tried to think back to all the things I'd heard about the previous victims. Not once did anyone mention them being killed somewhere else and then their bodies moved. Olivia's dad had never said anything like that, nor had it been in the paper. Hopefully, he stuck to his regular plan. He wouldn't kill me here. He'd have to move me before he completed that task.

That gave me time. But for what, I didn't know.

I had so many questions. Where was Jack? If it was my time, wouldn't he know? Shouldn't he be here to save me? And what happened to Olivia? I'd left Olivia alone! The killer must have her, too. I felt a wave of despair wash over me when I realized the room had more than one medical gurney. Olivia was not on it. She might already be dead. Why hadn't I listened to Jack? I'd just helped kill my best friend!

I became instantly remorseful. I wished I'd told Olivia about Jack. Maybe knowing there was something after would have given her comfort in the middle of her terror. I should have told her to go to the other side. No matter what, take Jack's hand and follow him to wherever he wanted to go. I should have told her there were things worse than death. I never wanted to think of Olivia as one of those *things* inside the mill. I loved her. She was the closest thing I had to a sister.

I hit my breaking point. I realized I should have been filled with terror or maybe even rage, but all I felt was overwhelmed by grief. My mother would be left alone to pick up everything. How would she get over what was about to happen? And I would never get to say goodbye to Jack. Maybe I would see him on the other side. I'd never asked him whether, when he finally crossed over, he'd be somewhere I could find him.

Tears came down in steady streams. I could taste the snot and dirt as they ran onto my lips. I heard footsteps above me on the wood floors. Tiny particles of dust filled the air as the floorboards creaked.

*This is it. He's coming for me. I'm not going to give him the satisfaction of screaming or begging. I may cry, but that's all he's going to get from me.* I felt a moment of panic rise inside me when I heard what I guessed was the door to the basement open upstairs. But I pushed it down. I had always been prideful. I wasn't going to let someone steal the way I lived my last moments from me.

*I wonder who's here with me. I wonder if Jack is here, waiting to take my hand, and deliver me to my next life. It has to be him. He said the person who takes you over is always someone you trust. Who do I trust more than Jack?*

"Jack?" I thought it worth a try to at least call out for him. "Are you there? Are you waiting on me? I'm sorry I didn't do what you said. I should have stayed with Olivia. I don't know if it was her day or not, but if it wasn't, and I messed it up, I'm sorry." I broke into more tears. "I am *so sorry*. I've never been more sorry for anything. I don't know why I have to be so stubborn. Hopefully, one day, you can forgive me."

I heard footsteps on the stairs. One creak and then another as heavy footfalls came closer and closer. I squeezed my eyes as tightly closed as I could. I didn't know whether I wanted to see who was about to end my life. But I was pretty sure I didn't. I lay as still as possible, and began to think of all the things I loved about being alive.

My arm hair rose as whoever was on the stairs moved closer. I could feel the air change around me. His breath felt hotter as he moved close to my ear. "Samantha," he whispered. "Can you hear me?"

I breathed a sigh of relief. They'd sent Jack! Whoever made the decisions about life and death had sent Jack to take me. A small doubt crept into my head. Maybe Jack was always supposed to be the one who escorted me over. Maybe that's why he'd gotten so close with me. I was no different from Chloe. It broke my heart to think such a thing could be true. So, I locked the thought away in my brain. I wanted to go out thinking Jack loved me.

"Sam?" he whispered again, more of a question in his voice this time. He shook me a little.

I opened my eyes. His face filled my vision. Just knowing he was there with me made everything seem okay, or at least as okay as this situation could be. "I'm ready to go," I said. "I trust you."

"That's why I'm here. Let's get you off this thing," Jack began pulling at the straps on the gurney.



“Wherever it is you’re taking me, I’m ready. I’ve been lying here getting myself prepared. But can you tell my mom I love her? I want to make sure she knows.”

Jack looked confused, so I kept on talking.

I thought of something else. “Wait! What about Olivia? Have you taken her over already? Did she go with you? Is she okay?”

Jack held up his hand to stop my questions and shook his head.

“Sam, Olivia hasn’t gone anywhere. I would guess she’s sitting wherever you left her last night when you decided to walk home by yourself.” It wasn’t hard to hear how annoyed he was.

Now it was my turn to look confused. “But you told me to watch her. You told me to stay with her to make sure she was safe, and I didn’t.” I didn’t want to look at Jack’s face. “I should have, but I didn’t, and now something awful has happened, and it’s my fault. I just thought she couldn’t be alone, and since someone else was there with her, I thought it would be okay to leave. I was coming to see you. I’m so sorry,” I wailed. My tears came back in a free fall. I didn’t know what else to say, other than apologize.

“Sam, there’s not a lot of time here. We have to get going. Please, stop crying, and let me get you loose. Take a few deep breaths. Try to calm down.” He struggled with the straps, a look of stern concentration on his face.

I tried to stop the sobs. “I don’t want to miss my window. I don’t want to get stuck like the people in the mill. Don’t let me miss my window, Jack,” I begged.

Jack grabbed me by my shoulders and looked directly into my eyes with a look that said “get a grip.”

“Sam, you’re not dying. I’m here to rescue you. I’m not here to take you to the other side—not today anyway. So, pull it together. We have to get out of here before he comes back.”

“I’m not...dying? Are you sure?” I asked.

“I think I would know. Don’t you? Now come on, let’s get you out of here before he returns.”

Jack loosened my restraints. His simple touch felt like he pressed a million needles into my flesh. I’d lain stretched on my back so long, I could barely move.

“Can you walk?” Jack asked. “I can carry you, but we may be able to move faster if you can walk.”

“I think I can walk,” I answered. “Can you help me sit up? I need to get some blood to my legs.”

Just as Jack started to help me get my legs off the edge of the gurney, we both heard a noise upstairs. It sounded like a front door closed. We sat still and silent and listened.

“He’s home.” Jack said, and it was the first time I had ever heard panic in his voice. He always seemed so in control. “We have to move fast, Sam. Hold onto me if you need to, but there’s no more time. We can’t wait.”

“Where are we going? How are we going to get out?” I looked around the basement. I didn’t see any windows or secret doors. I started to panic again. The walls felt like they were moving in closer, trying to confine me inside. My legs were still asleep, and I felt I was walking on wet sand. How could I possibly run anywhere?

“Deep breaths, Sam, remember? I have a plan. I always have a plan. It may not be the best plan, but it’s better than nothing. And we’re going out the same way I came in,” Jack replied. “Through the front door.”

“You’re right, Jack. That’s the worst plan I’ve ever heard,” I said.

Back to his normal self, he winked at me. “What’s the matter, don’t you trust me?”

“How are we going to go out the front door? He’s up there, Jack. I can hear him.”

“So can I, Sam. But we have to get out somehow, and there’s no other way. If you have a better suggestion, by all means, let me know.” I didn’t.

“It’s dangerous, Jack. What if you get hurt?” I realized then, I really did love Jack. I was not afraid of something happening to me. I found myself more worried about Jack’s safety than my own. I couldn’t imagine living in a world with no Jack in it. What would be the point?

“I can’t get hurt, Sam. I’m sort of dead already, remember?” It was hard to argue with his logic.

“Good point. I guess I forgot,” which wasn’t entirely true, because that was at the forefront of my mind all of the time.

He took my face in his hands. “I’ll be okay. I’ll be right behind you. I came to rescue you, the white knight and all, and that’s what I plan on doing.” He kissed my forehead.

I took a deep breath to steady myself. “What’s the plan?”

“First, can you walk?” I nodded my head. The feeling was slowly coming back to my legs the longer I stood. “Can you run?”

“I can try,” I answered. My legs still felt stuck to the floor, but I’d give it my best shot. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to run out first. I’ll catch him by surprise, which should cause at least a little distraction. He’s expecting to find you still on the gurney in the basement. There’s no way he’s expecting you to pop out, much less with someone else. You just run. The door is to the left. It’s a straight shot through the kitchen, then the living room. No matter what you hear, just keep running. Don’t look back. Don’t worry about me. Do you understand everything I’ve just said?”

I looked at him uncertainly. I couldn’t run out and leave Jack behind. I just couldn’t. “But…”

“Just *run*. I’ll be right behind you. I promise. I’m just going to distract him long enough for us to get out.”

“You promise?”

He smiled at me, and despite the situation, I felt gooey on the inside. And I realized that I did trust him. One hundred percent. It felt good to finally be able to say it. “I promise,” he said. “Are you ready?”

We crept up the stairs as quietly as we could. I could barely catch my breath, and I hadn't even started to run. All I could think was *to the left of the stairs. Straight shot, to the left of the stairs. Don't look back. RUN.* Over and over. I saw Jack's hand on the doorknob, and the adrenaline hit me. *I can do this.*

Once he turned the knob, everything happened so fast. Jack burst through the door, and I immediately turned to the left. The harsh light upstairs blinded me, and I realized how dark it had been in the basement. I saw movement out of the corner of my eye, my peripheral vision showed the figure of a large man dressed in jeans and a plaid flannel shirt, carrying a grocery bag. He was tall and husky. He looked like a lumberjack. I could see him start to turn, but just as his face was about to be revealed, Jack screamed at me, “*RUN! NOW!*”

For once, I listened. I turned to the left and ran out of the kitchen and into the living room. Both rooms were spotless and homey. It looked like a normal house—like a normal person lived there, not some monster who'd been killing teenage girls. I heard some glass break behind me, but still did not turn around. I ran out the front door, and left it open behind me. It was only when I got to the street I realized Jack hadn't told me where to go once I got out of the house.

*He'll find you* my little voice said. So, I turned right and started running. It didn't take long to realize I wasn't in a neighborhood. I was pretty sure I wasn't even in the

city. There were no rows of houses or tree-lined streets like in my neighborhood. In fact, I didn't *see* another house. At least not as far as I could make out. I was on a one-lane dirt road, and I had no idea how far away the next house or even town might be. My plan had been to get out and call the police, but I didn't have my cell, and there was nowhere to go that had a phone.

After about ten minutes of running, I slowed to a walk. There was virtually no noise outside, and I would definitely be able to hear if a car were approaching. I tried to slow my breathing and fill my lungs with air. I wondered what time it was. How long had I been inside and unconscious? I wondered how long it would take Jack to find me. Should I have waited? Should I have turned left instead of right?

Fighting back tears, I sat down off the side of the road, hidden behind a bunch of tall grass. I'd made it out. I was alive. Thanks to Jack. I knew crying wouldn't help anything, but I couldn't help it. I sat behind the grass and cried for what seemed like an hour. The adrenaline started to wear off, and no longer fueled by its power, I was exhausted.

"Are you okay?" His voice made me jump, and I turned around. "Are you hurt?"

"Jack! How did you find me?" I jumped up and threw my arms around him.

"I always know where you are, Sam. That's how I knew you were here in the first place. It's one of the things I can do. I can sense certain people at all times. *My people*, I guess you could say. The ones I'm in charge of."

"So, I am one of *your people*?" I asked.

Jack nodded. "Come on, let's get going. I want to get out of here as quickly as possible. We can talk when we get home."

"Get going? How? There's nothing out here."

"My motorcycle is parked over the hill, hidden behind some grass a little taller than this. It's not far. If you don't think you can make it, I can go get it and come back for you."

"But what about...?" I looked behind me.

"He won't be coming for us."

"Is he dead? Did you kill him?" I asked flooded with relief at the idea.

Jack shook his head. "It wasn't his time. I just knocked him out. But he won't be up for a while, and once he is, he'll have such a bad headache, I don't think he'll be able to do too much too quickly. And he won't be calling the police on us. We should be safe."

"But we have to go to the police, Jack."

Jack only held out his hand for me to follow him. They walked to his bike in silence. There was a soft rustle of the grass as the wind blew through it, and when I looked around, I realized the sun had begun to set.

"*We have to go to the police, Jack.*" I said it again with more certainty to make sure he understood the importance of it.

"We can't, Sam."



“Why?” How did I know Jack would refuse to go to the police? It was as though I’d known his answer before I’d even said anything. I couldn’t understand why he didn’t want this man caught. It infuriated me. How many times had we had this same conversation?

“I’ve bent the rules already. I can’t bend them anymore. I’m going to have to face the consequences of what I’ve done. The council, the other reapers, I have no idea what my punishment will be. But if I alter the plan anymore, it will only make things worse.”

“What do you mean?” I realized Jack sounded genuinely worried. The smile was gone from his eyes.

“Let’s talk about it when we get home. I want to get out of here,” Jack repeated. His tone indicated that this was more than a suggestion or request. I knew him well enough to know he wouldn’t discuss the issue until we were back on our street.

“Fine,” I shrugged and climbed on the back of the bike. Despite the anger I felt toward Jack, I wrapped my arms tightly around him, and lay my head on his back. I had a feeling this moment was fleeting, and there might not be many more like it. I decided not to waste it because I was angry.

It took about thirty minutes on the bike to get back home. It took at least fifteen before I recognized anything. I thought I'd been everywhere within an hour's drive of town, but apparently not. I'd tried to focus on my time with Jack, but I couldn't stop

thinking. By the time Jack pulled his bike into his driveway, I had at least a dozen questions I needed answered. Surprise, surprise.

“Do you want to come inside and talk?” he asked.

“Quickly, please. Who knows if my mom will ever let me out of the house again once I get inside? I’m going to have a lot of explaining I need to do.”

“I understand the feeling,” Jack said with a half smile.

I went in and sat on his couch. I wished I were there for different reasons. I’d squandered so much time with Olivia. It had been forever since I’d even been in his house.

“Do you want something to drink?” he asked.

“A big glass of water, please.” I’d been so relieved to be rescued and back with Jack, I hadn’t realized I was dying of thirst. Once I’d gulped down the glass of water, and Jack had settled in on the couch next to me, he started to talk.

He began by taking a deep, long breath. “You aren’t going to like this, but I’m going to tell you anyway. This guy, the one killing people, he isn’t going to be caught.” He didn’t stop long enough for me to say anything because he knew what I’d say. “I know it’s not fair. I know you’re angry. But it is what it is. Not everything ends wrapped up with a neat little bow, Sam. It’s how the world works. He may get caught in another town, years from now, but it’s not going to happen here. Not today, not tomorrow. He’ll leave. There won’t be any more murders in Yukon Falls. He knows

someone is onto him, now. And he won't risk getting caught. He'll be gone by tomorrow. But he'll move on. The police will not find him."

I didn't know what to say. I sat mute as Jack spilled it all out. He was right. I was angry. I was incredulous. I felt hate well up inside me, but I didn't know who to direct it toward.

"You have to let him go. I don't know if you have any idea where you were, but if you do, you can't tell anyone. At least not until after tomorrow. He needs to move, and not get caught. There are other people, other *lives* he has to take. It's his destiny."

At that, I couldn't keep quiet. "How can you be so callous?"

"It's what I do, Sam. I'm not trying to be callous. I've told you before, and I know it's a hard thing to grasp, but everyone has a purpose. All of these little pieces fit together to make one big puzzle, and if a piece of the puzzle is missing, it can't ever be completed. Everyone has a death date, just like everyone has a birth date. When their time is up, their time is up. I don't make that decision. I only try to make sure it's as easy an experience as it can be. That's who I am. I never would have understood it, either. Not when I was human. I'm doing my best to make it as easy as possible for you to understand, because I love you, and I want you to understand."

"I don't know how I'm supposed to understand young girls dying, young girls who have their whole lives in front of them. How am I supposed to just stand back when I could stop what has happened here from happening somewhere else?"

Jack looked at me. He didn't look frustrated, he looked angry. "You have to listen to me, Sam. You didn't listen to me with Olivia, and look what's happened! You can't just do everything the way you want with no regard for other people...with no regard for me!"

I stood up and yelled back, "So now this whole thing is my fault?" I knew I was being dramatic, but it didn't stop me. I hadn't listened to what Jack had told me to do. "Olivia is safe, you said so. What's the big deal?"

Jack only hung his head. "It wasn't Olivia I was trying to save. It was you." He looked me directly in the eyes. "I told you to stay with her, because he was coming after you. If the two of you were together, he couldn't get you. He only takes girls when they're alone. I thought it was a simple solution, but you didn't listen to me, and now all of this has happened."

I was shocked. "All of what has happened?"

"I've changed everything," Jack said. He put his head in his hands. "You have no idea how much I've changed...by going there...by him seeing me... I have no idea what's going to happen now. They aren't going to let me get away with it."

I didn't know what to say. What had I done? I didn't need to ask who "they" were. Jack had explained the importance of not altering the plans. He was not a decision-maker, he was only a journeyman.

“I’ve changed everything, Sam. Not just in your life, but other people’s lives as well. The killer? He wasn’t supposed to leave here for another week. He had another girl here to take. Not only have I saved you, I’ve saved her, too.”

“But that should make you feel good,” I countered. I didn’t think I would ever understand.

“But it doesn’t. Look at it this way, Sam. What if something happened with her death that stopped him from needing to kill anyone else? Maybe he almost got caught or she fulfilled his final fantasy. Now he doesn’t kill her, and he moves on to two, three more towns. And he kills twenty more girls. Or what if her brother had started dabbling in drugs, and when she died, he totally turned his life around and ended up being the man who discovered a cure for cancer? Death is a catalyst, Sam. It is a wake up call for the living. For something so final, it can change *everything*. Every action has consequences. I’ve changed those consequences.”

“Oh,” I said, “I see what you mean.” And I really did. Finally, I got it. The light switch was flipped into the on position.

“I’m sorry, Jack. I am! I didn’t realize…” I began to cry again. Jack grabbed my hands. “What can we do to make it right?” I begged.

He sighed and shook his head. “We can’t. What’s done is done. New paths are set. Changes are coming, for everyone.”

“Why did you do it?” I yelled at him. “You said, no matter what, you never alter the plan! You don’t save people, it’s not your call!” I was now crying and screaming,

nearing hysteria. My words spilled out in a jumble that didn't make sense. I felt responsible for everything. Never before had one decision had so much impact on my life.

“I love you, Sam. I couldn't stand to think of a world with you not in it. No matter what happens to me, *no matter what*, it can't be as bad as living and knowing you died, and I could have stopped it. Even if they get rid of me, it's worth it. I'd rather move on than figure out how to deal with losing you.”

“What do you mean move on? They're going to *kill* you?” He said it with such ease, it made me angry.

“I don't want to lie to you, Sam. I'm not going to lie to you. They will have to do something. They can't allow people in my position to go rogue. There have to be consequences. And yes, one of those consequences is to let me go over to the other side permanently. The only way I stay alive, in the way I am alive, is by being able to deliver souls to their next destination. It's a special power I was given after I'd died my human death that allowed me to still move and breathe like a normal living person. But if they take that power away, I'll have to move over to the other side, as I should have done a long time ago. I don't get to stay here on Earth and live out the rest of my days. My human death happened a long time ago. Just because I'm here now, doesn't make that not true. I'm only still here because I serve a purpose in the grand scheme of things. If they don't think I can keep my personal feelings out of it, they won't let me do it anymore. I can't blame them. To be successful as a deliverer, I should stay objective at

all times. I failed to do that. I'll accept whatever punishment they give me. At least you're safe."

I knew I had no one to blame but myself. But I still felt angry. "How could you make that decision without me, knowing what might happen? It's not fair. Why should I have to stay here without you?"

"You weren't really around for consultation, Sam. Had you done what I'd asked you to do, a lot of this wouldn't have happened. You were supposed to stay with Olivia."

I thought about it. "True, but by telling me to stay with Olivia, you'd already altered the plan. Why didn't you just tell me what was going on?"

"I don't know. I couldn't figure out what to do. Knowing that he was going to get you, and there was nothing I could do paralyzed me. I tried to think of some other way we could handle it. For weeks. But I couldn't think of a solution. I figured it was only a minimal change. I would change your fate, but I knew reapers who had done similar things, and they'd been punished, but the punishment hadn't been a death sentence. But when you left Olivia's to walk home, everything changed. I had to save you, even if it changed everything I had to."

"Stop blaming it on me, Jack! You could have told me what was going on. If you'd have told me, I would have stayed with Olivia."

Jack fired back. "Olivia is your best friend. I felt sure if you thought you were saving her life, it would be enough. Telling you that you were at risk was too much of a



well, risk. I didn't want you walking around every day waiting for the other shoe to drop. I did it for you."

"You did it for YOU!" I yelled back. "You had to stick to your rules! We're living, breathing people Jack. We shouldn't all be put in a bucket together, and you get to decide which ones to save and which ones to let die."

Jack hung his head. Apparently, he didn't feel like arguing anymore. I imagined he was thinking about how no one ever understood, which is why up until now he'd managed not to get involved with anyone. It was a mistake. What had happened with me had been a huge mistake. I thought he could see that now. I hoped he loved me enough for it to matter in whatever decision he made next. Someone couldn't just snap their fingers and not be in love anymore, right? He couldn't just erase me.

"Your mom is coming, Sam."

"Did your psychic reaper powers tell you that?" I asked in my most sarcastic voice.

"No. I can see her through the blinds."

I turned around to see my Mom was in fact, coming up the walkway. She looked furious. Apparently, I was going to have to deal with this situation sooner rather than later.

"Crap."

"Go deal with it," Jack said. "Just remember, she's only worried about you. Try to see it from her side, Sam. She's only trying to protect you. Just like I was."

I stood up, just as she started to knock. “I don’t know when I’ll be able to get out of the house again.”

“I’m guessing it will be a while. I’ll be here waiting for the council to try to make a decision, but until they do, I’m on ‘probation.’ So, I’ll likely just be sitting here, quarantined in the house.”

“Come out and wave to me up in my window, okay? At least then I can see you.”

“I will.” He stood up and gave me a kiss for as long as we could. Then he went to open the door. Before he could get it open all the way I whispered, “Jack? Try to stay here with me, if they’ll let you, okay?” He only smiled.

“I saw Sam come in here, Jack. Can you get her for me, please?”

Jack didn’t answer. He only opened the door wider to reveal me standing in his living room. My Mom ran to me and hugged me. It wasn’t the reaction I was expecting.

“Oh my God! You’re okay, you’re okay!” Tears ran down her face. “I’ve been so worried. When you didn’t come home last night...and I called the police...and Olivia...and no one could find you.” She was blubbering.

I pulled her back and put my hands on Mom’s shoulders. “I’m okay, Mom. I did something stupid. I stayed over here, and I didn’t call. I’m sorry.”

“What in the hell happened to you, Sam?” She looked me up and down. I hadn’t thought about all of my injuries. There was no way to hide them. I had to think fast. She reached out to touch the gash on my head.

“The truth?” I asked her. “Don’t be mad, okay? At least not more mad than you already are.”

“I can’t promise that, Sam. But you are going to tell me one way or the other.”

Jack stepped in. “The truth is, Sam stayed over here, because she didn’t want you to know what happened.” He looked at his shoes, as if he were ashamed. “She got in a fight yesterday after school. Someone beat the hell out of her.”

“WHAT?” My mom said. “Sam has never been in a fight in her life.”

“I know, Mom. But it wasn’t my fault. A girl at school just started hitting me. She’d hear I was interested in her boyfriend. I didn’t want you to worry, so I stayed over here. Jack and I were trying to figure out how to cover the bruises with make up.”

“Who was this girl, Sam. I’m calling her mom.” Unfortunately, living in such a small town meant everyone’s parents knew each other.

“I’m not going to tell you. It will just cause more problems in the long run. She already thinks I’m making a play for her boyfriend. I don’t need her thinking I’m a snitch, too. Push me all you want. Ground me for a year. I’m still not going to tell you.”

I knew she wasn’t happy with that answer, but she let it go. I knew I would be grounded anyway, and I couldn’t very well say someone had punched me at school and have my mom call their mom. Then I’d be caught in a lie for sure.

At that, my Mom snapped out of her worried parent routine and turned on her disciplinary parent routine. Her eyes clouded over with fury, and she grabbed me by the

wrist. “We’re going home. And you might as well set up shop, because you’re going to be there for a long time. Get your purse and come on.”

“Can I have just a minute to say goodbye to Jack?”

“No.” She faced Jack, “I’m sorry, Jack, but Sam needs to go home now. She’ll call you when I let her.”

I gave Jack a small wave and walked out the door with my Mom. I looked back at him as we got to my curb. He was still standing in the doorway, just looking at me. Not smiling, not frowning, just staring. It made me sad, as though it might be the last time he looked at me that way. Or the last time he looked at me at all.

Jack stood outside almost every day. I rarely looked out the window and didn't see him standing on the lawn. Sometimes he worked in the yard, and sometimes he just sat on his front step reading. Somehow he always knew when I looked out the window, because he would look up at me and smile. It comforted me to know he was still outside. I thought he might come up to my window, try to sneak in. I knew he could get up there, because he'd been in the room before. But he never did. I felt tempted to stop by and knock on his door on my way to and from school, despite my mom's grounding, but I

knew if I got caught, I'd only be grounded longer. And if Jack respected my mom's wishes, I should respect them, too.

Mom finally gave up on trying to figure out who had hit me, and instead started planning my punishment. I was grounded for an undetermined amount of time. I went to school in the morning, came home at four, and was picked up and dropped off every day by my mom. I wasn't allowed to talk on the phone; nor was I allowed to use the computer. So, I had no direct contact with Jack, short of looking out the window longingly. I felt anxiety every time I pulled back the curtains. I waited for the day when I would peer out on the front lawn to find Jack's yard empty.

And then one day, about ten days after everything, it happened. I was dropped off at home so mom could run to the grocery store before dinner. I went inside and headed upstairs. Jack was never outside between four and five. I assumed he wanted to save me the temptation I'd feel if I saw him across the street, both of us actually outside with no pane of glass and black asphalt between us.

I usually went upstairs to study and wait for five o'clock. I wished I didn't look so desperate, or *feel* so desperate for that matter. I tried to wait until five fifteen to try to catch a glimpse of Jack, but just getting from four o'clock to five o'clock was physically painful. I could barely wait until five, and as soon as the clock showed the magic number, I got up with a sense of trepidation and excitement turning in my stomach. But every day, up until this day, I'd breathed a sigh of relief, because Jack had been there.

On this day, no Jack. *Maybe he's running late. Had to do something. I can't realistically expect him to be waiting on me every day at five o'clock. He has things to*

*do.* So, I waited until 5:15 and checked again. Still no Jack. Then again at five thirty, quarter to six, and six.

“Sam, come down for dinner!” my mom yelled from downstairs.

“I’m not hungry,” I yelled back.

“It wasn’t a question.”

So, I headed downstairs. Spaghetti was on the table with warm garlic bread. One of my favorites. But I could barely eat. All I could think about was what had happened to Jack. Finally, my mom let me leave the table. I went back upstairs, sure I would look out and see Jack on his lawn.

But he still wasn’t there. Even though the days were getting longer, the sun had started to set. No lights were on in Jack’s house, and it would be very hard to see without any lights. I eventually got tired of getting up every fifteen minutes to look out through the curtains, so I moved my computer chair and lamp next to the window so I could just watch. Eventually Mom came upstairs.

“Sam? Don’t you think you should go to sleep?”

I looked at the clock. It was near eleven. “I guess.”

My mother looked concerned. “Looking for Jack?” she asked.

There was no point in denying what I was doing. “How did you know?”

“Well, other than the fact you have moved our whole study space directly in the front of the window and your chair is clearly facing Jack’s window?” She smiled in an attempt to make me feel less stupid.

“It’s that obvious?”

“I’m a mom, Sam. I know all kinds of things. It’s my job. I know Jack makes sure he’s outside every single day from five PM until you go to sleep, just so you can see him. Pretty romantic if you ask me.”

“Yeah, but he’s not there tonight.” I said.

My mom sighed. “You can’t really expect him to be there every night, Sam. You’ve been grounded almost two weeks. That’s a lot of nights to sit outside for four and five hours at a time. Even if you are in love.”

“I guess so. But I’m worried about him.”

Mom must have sensed how upset I was. “I’m sure he’s fine, Sam. But maybe you can go over there tomorrow after school for a few minutes just to allay your fears.”

I felt my first sense of relief all evening. “Any chance I could run over there tonight? Just for a few minutes? Please,” I begged.

“No way. One, you’re still grounded. But two, there’s no way I’m going to let you knock on our neighbor’s door at eleven at night. What kind of mother would his parents think I am?”



I forgot my Mom didn't know Jack lived by himself, and his parents really didn't exist. I could tell by her tone there was no sense in arguing. I'd have to wait until tomorrow.

"Thanks Mom," I smiled a weak smile. "Really."

"You're welcome. Now go to sleep. Seven o'clock comes early."

I tried to sleep. I really did. But every time I would start to doze off, I'd dream about Jack. Most of the dreams were good. Jack and I were together in the park, or by the ocean, or even just in his house. No matter where we were, we were together, and I felt happy. Complete. I'd never felt that way before. Then, my eyes would open, and I'd realize the dreams had only been dreams. The euphoria I'd felt while inside them was immediately replaced by nervousness and uncertainty. Only then did those perfect dreams become nightmares—when I woke up and realized they weren't real at all.

The next morning Jack still had not appeared. I had to get ready for school, whether I wanted to or not. I couldn't imagine how I would make it through the whole day, but I was in enough trouble at home. I couldn't risk not going.

So, I went, and I answered all of Olivia's questions. Not truthfully, of course. I spun a tale about how I'd spent the night at Jack's. Of course, Olivia wanted all of the details. I wished I could tell her the truth. I wished I could tell *anyone* the truth. But instead I had to let everything fester inside me, with no one to give me advice.

I went directly home after school, and for the first time in a few weeks I was anxious to get there. But still, no Jack.

The next day repeated itself, and the next day, in the same pattern. I'd rush home after school and head to Jack's house to find he still had not returned. I felt as I had the first time Jack disappeared. Only this time, I had so much more I had to push aside. *Was it worth it?* I asked myself. And at the time, I remembered using that same argument with Olivia. Only now that I felt that I'd bottomed out, I began to reconsider.

What if I *never* knew? What if the reapers had taken Jack and decided to return him to the . . . well, wherever you go when you die? Or moved him to a new location? Or erased his memory? I could go my whole life and not know what happened to him. I couldn't imagine living every day not knowing what happened. And in the midst of those thoughts, I started to think maybe it wasn't worth it after all.

I barely made it to school that week. And when the weekend finally came, I felt relief. All I wanted to do was shut up in my room and cry. I couldn't sleep, because of the dreams. I barely ate, because my stomach turned constantly. I just wished I could stop breathing or thinking and go into a sort of coma while my heart healed.

As before, my mom left me alone. I was still grounded, but it didn't matter, because I didn't feel like going anywhere anyway. But my mom didn't push me to talk about my feelings or anything like that. For that, I was grateful.

I spent my Friday night in my room writing down all the things I would say to Jack if he were still here. I pretended I was saying them all out loud as he sat across from me. It was the only thing that made me feel better. Because I had been so depressed, my mom had shortened my jail sentence, hoping I'd get out of the house. Olivia called and tried to get me to go out to the movies, a distraction, she said, but I didn't feel up to it. I

just wanted to hide from the rest of the world. If I went to the movies, someone I knew might ask about Jack, or I might hear a song that reminded me of him. At least at home, I could control my environment. I fell asleep on the floor, surrounded by letters I'd written to Jack.

When I woke up on Saturday, I did what I'd done every single morning the previous week. I pulled back the curtains to peer across the street. But this morning, blocking my view, was a folded up piece of paper, taped to my window with my name on the side facing in. I recognized Jack's handwriting, my full name in bold, capital letters. "SAMANTHA."

I cranked the window open. I stuck out my hand and peeled the note off. Very thin, it felt as if it was only one page. I couldn't breathe. I didn't know if I was ready for what was on the inside. I'd spent a week wanting to know what happened, and this letter likely held the answer. But I didn't know if I really wanted to know the answer.

I opened the letter anyway.

So, there it was. All of my answers written down on a piece of lined school paper.

*Samantha,*

*I wanted to run away without having to face you. And I guess, that's still what I'm doing. Because I can't. I can't look at you, watch your face, when I tell you I'm being sent away. It's better, I suppose, than the alternative. But right now, it doesn't feel that way. Life without you feels like it might be worse than death. I think they know that, and when they considered it as part of my punishment, decided this route would be the worst.*

*I couldn't stand to watch your face crumple when I told you. I'm barely hanging on myself, and watching you in pain, I couldn't do it. I couldn't stand to watch what I'd done to you. The worst thing in all of this, is knowing most of it is my fault. I've put you in the middle of everything, and I've hurt you.*

*You are my soul mate. I can say this with one hundred percent certainty. I've met a lot of people, and I've been around a long time. And I've never felt the electricity inside me I do when I stand next to you. I've watched so many people die and watched their loved ones grieve, and I never fully understood what it felt like to lose someone you love. Now I know. Even with everything that's happened, it was worth it. To know, to remember what being willing to give up your life for someone feels like, it was worth it. I'd forgotten something that is an integral part of being human. Remembering it, feeling it, makes me feel whole again.*

*And I'm so glad the person who reminded me of it was you.*

*I know you're stubborn, Samantha. I know you won't give up on me, but you have to. I don't know where I'm going, and I don't want to think about what*

*would happen to either of us if you found me. It's not a risk I'm willing to take. I've taken enough risks with your life and your heart.*

*But know I'll be watching you. I'll be keeping up with everything you do. And when it's your time to go, you'll see me again. I'll be there, if you want me to. Live your life. Live it loud. Take risks. Love someone else the same way you loved me. I gave you a second chance. Don't waste it grieving over what you've lost. Build something new.*

*I love you.*

*Jack*

My heart split. I sat down. The world was spinning, and I couldn't breathe. I wanted to scream, but nothing came out. I ran downstairs and out the front door before Mom could catch me. He left the note, he had to have been there. Maybe I could catch him. I pounded on the door. "Jack!" I ran around to the back of the house and peered in the windows. The house was empty. Jack had moved everything out. He'd vanished. It was as though he'd never existed. I sat down on the back porch and put my head in my hands.

*How will I do this? How will I get over this? I didn't know. I couldn't imagine what five minutes from now would be like without Jack, much less forever. The idea of time stretched out before me, and without Jack, it seemed hollow and meaningless. I won't even get to tell him how much I loved him.*

I sat outside for a long time. My mom never came out looking for me. I guessed she was watching me from the kitchen window. Eventually, I picked myself up and walked back over to my own house. All Mom said when I returned was, "It's going to be okay, Sam. I promise. Time heals all wounds. I'm here if you need me." I went back to my room and crumpled up all the letters I'd written Jack and threw them in the trash. He'd never get them now, anyway. Then I sat down and cried.

Time passed. A lot of time. Spring break. Prom. They all went by, and I stayed in a fog. I moved through every day, but my heart wasn't in it, and they all ran together. I'd given up on the idea of Jack coming back to Yukon Falls. And I'd long since stopped answering the phone thinking it might be him, which turned out to be a good thing, because it never was.

People were concerned about me. I knew they were, and I could understand why. Honestly, I was concerned about myself, but I couldn't shake the way I felt. It was as though my insides had been replaced by someone else's. Olivia couldn't believe I didn't want to go on the Senior Spring Break Trip. She begged me to go with her to prom, but I refused. "We can both be dateless!" she said, but I still declined. In the pictures in my head, Jack and I had done these things together. To do them with anyone else just seemed wrong.

I heard the other students talking about where they'd been accepted to college. The excitement of freedom was so close, I could no longer ignore it. I hadn't even made a decision on any colleges. I'd spent so much time doing my research and filling out all of my applications, and then with everything that happened, I never accepted anywhere. I had several offers, but I just couldn't focus enough to make a decision. I figured no decision was better than a bad one, so I did nothing.

"I can't believe you're going to stay here and go to community college!" Olivia said when I told her. "I was so looking forward to this fall, with us being roomies and everything. I can't imagine it without you! And you're going to start this summer? What about all of the fun things we had planned?" We had planned a lot of events for



our final summer? But I just couldn't make myself do anything fun. It seemed as if I wasn't honoring Jack, and honestly, I was so depressed, I didn't want to ruin anyone else's good time. I thought a class or two in the summer would give me something else to focus on. I said as much.

"You'll be fine, Liv. You'll make new friends, and maybe even meet the love of your life. It's going to be great." I gave her a genuine smile. I really did think it was going to be a great change for her. I knew she'd be happy once everything got settled.

"Yeah," she shrugged, "I guess. But I'm worried about leaving you here by yourself."

"I'm going to be okay. It's getting better every day." This time, I forced a smile for Olivia's benefit. It felt the same as it had the first day I read Jack's goodbye, but telling people that seemed to discourage or upset them. So I lied for their benefit and tried to make them think I was on the mend. Maybe one day it would be true.

Olivia changed the subject, "Hey, did you hear in Idabel, some girls were murdered? They think it might be the same guy who was killing people here. My dad said it's a similar M.O."

As Jack had promised, the killer had left Yukon Falls, and no one else had died. I sometimes looked on the internet to see if anyone had been caught, but without knowing the killer's name, it was pretty difficult to determine. I guessed he'd moved on to somewhere else, though apparently not that far. Idabel was only about 120 miles from Yukon Falls.

“Really?” I asked. I was definitely interested, and I hadn’t seen anything about it on the internet. I made a mental note to put the information in Google when I got home. But of course, Olivia’s dad would have the inside information, since he was the chief of police.

“I know you don’t want to hear this, but don’t you find it interesting the murders stopped here about the same time Jack left?”

I started to tell her I didn’t want to hear it. I started to pick up my lunch tray and storm off. I had to face facts, though. It would look to an outsider like Jack was the one who had slaughtered all of the girls. I couldn’t doubt why people would think it.

Just then, something clicked inside me. A light bulb came on.

“Where did you say it was again?” I asked.

“Idabel.”

“And when was the last murder?” I knew Jack wouldn’t be on *that* case, since the killer had seen him, but he had to be on a case somewhere, right?

I told Olivia I would get with her later and got up from the table. “Thanks, Olivia!” I waved.

“Sam? SAM! Are you mad?”

I just kept walking. I had an idea. One I thought might actually help me figure out what happened to Jack. It was the first time I’d felt alive or hopeful since Jack left. I

had a lot of work to do, but I really felt like it would pay off in the end. I headed home directly after school to get started.

It was the first time I felt a sliver of hope that my heart might be okay. If I couldn't move on, at least I could move forward.

Epilogue

Everyone else spent the summer preparing for college. I took just enough classes at the community college to be considered full time, mostly to appease my mother. My dad had put aside some money for my college before he died, but she still wanted me to be able to apply for financial aid and scholarships for the semester. Then I could use dad's money for something else.

I lived at home and saw Olivia as much as I could in between classes, studying, and working on my Jack project. We did some of the things on our summer list. It wasn't everything, but I didn't want to disappoint Olivia, and I knew our time together would be limited when she went away to college. It would be difficult to stay as close as we had when we started to live in two different places. I was a realist. Everything that had happened only cemented that fact. But, I had felt more like my old self since I'd come up with my new plan. It's amazing how much a little hope can affect a person.

On any given evening, when I was at home, I spent most of my time on the computer. Some of the work was for school, but most of it I spent tracking serial killers. I'd become quite the expert. I'd watch the national news every morning and every evening, looking for something that might seem familiar. I had a large map in my closet, hidden behind my clothes, with push pins of different colors indicating where the killings had happened and how many teenagers were involved.

Jack told me he had been in Yukon Falls because the situation there warranted his services. Each reaper worked a certain type of case, and Jack was always sent to towns where teenage girls were being killed. So, it made sense he would be moved to a city where the same type of killings went on. Unless, of course, they'd changed his

assignment. But I chose not to think about that. I stayed focused on the positive. Which meant staying focused on the things I did know.

I had created charts and graphs. I had pages of notes, organized in a binder, tabbed by city and death. To an outsider, it would look like I had a very unhealthy obsession. Or like I was a total nutball. But all of this information added up to one thing—finding Jack. I had to be careful, because I only had enough college money to travel to one, maybe two places. So I had to catch the killing spree at the beginning. Once it was over, I knew Jack would move on or be moved on, however it worked.

I kept all of these things hidden from my mom, of course. And I never told anyone what I was doing. To Mom and Olivia, I looked like a model student, spending most of my free time studying instead of focused on a nationwide serial killer hunt. Some days I felt crazy. But I had to do something. I couldn't just sit and let my heart be ripped out and never get a chance to say anything about it.

Jack was right. I was stubborn. He'd been alive close to a hundred years and had only found one person he thought was his soul mate. What chance did that leave me of finding two in my lifetime? I wouldn't just let him go. I wouldn't.

I'd narrowed my choice of cities down to three—Chicago, Orlando, and Seattle. Unfortunately, none of them were anywhere near where I currently lived. Hopefully, only a few more days' research, and I'd make an educated guess on my first destination. I didn't know what I'd tell my Mom, but I was eighteen now. I could do what I wanted, though I had to admit, I strongly leaned toward packing my bag, throwing it out the window, and leaving without saying anything. It was the coward's way out, but who was

I kidding? I could be just as much a coward as anyone. And I know she would never willingly let me go. I would call her whenever I got where I was going. I felt a little guilty, but I knew she'd get over it. No price was too great to pay if I could find Jack. Not even a rift between my Mom and me. I got so lost in the planning of it all, I barely heard her yelling at me from downstairs.

“Sam! It’s time for dinner!”

“I’ll be right down, Mom!” I yelled back.

I scooped up my papers and filed them back in my desk, locking it so Mom wouldn’t snoop. I changed the web address up on the computer to my Gmail account, just in case she turned it on to see what I was working on, and turned off the screen. And then I went downstairs to eat spaghetti and meatballs, with a hopeful smile lighting up my face.