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Postmark

by Brittany Vovan

Thesis advisor: Pamela Laskin

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of (Fine) Arts of the City College of New York
Wild Nights -- Wild Nights!
Were I with thee
Wild Nights should be
Our luxury!

Futile -- the Winds --
To a Heart in port --
Done with the Compass --
Done with the Chart!

Emily Dickinson
Dear _____,

My name is Josephine Taylor Weaver. People call me Jo. And I hate my name. They call me Jo because saying Josephine all the time would be too much effort. Josephine sounds too stuffy, too arrogant. It’s the name of an old lady. You know those kids who go by their middle name and not their first? I wish that could be me. But that doesn’t work for me either, because, you see, Taylor is just like Jo. Not old sounding, but boy sounding. It could be a boy’s name, too. Which leads me back to where I started. Josephine is a horrible name. I still don’t understand why my parents chose to call me such an abysmal name.

Okay, I guess that’s a lie. Just a little one. Because I do know why my parents named me Josephine. My mom says I was named after her grandfather. Do you know what his name was? Take a wild guess. You got it! His name was Joseph. According to Mom, my great grandfather was a remarkable man. Remarkable enough to have his great granddaughter named after him decades later. “Whether you were a boy or a girl,” my parents told me, “you were going to be named Joseph.” I asked, what about my great grandmother? Didn’t she do something that was worthy? But it turned out her name was Beatrice.

So it doesn’t really matter anymore, Diary, because my name is Jo and I hate it, but there’s nothing I can do about it. I’m named after some dead old guy I never knew (don’t tell Mom I’m talking about her grandfather like this). That’s why I’m giving you the freedom to choose your own name. Because I think everyone has the right to choose their own name. I can tell you one thing—I would have never chosen Josephine. Perhaps Jessica or Michelle. Those names
seem to destine you for popularity right from the start. Jo? Jo just sentences you as an outcast—the girl who must always be compared to a boy.

So think about it. Think long a hard. You only have one chance to pick the right name. Sometimes people tell me I look like a Penelope. So if I had gone and chosen, say, Jessica as my name, I would have missed out on Penelope. You don’t want to do that.
Chapter 1

As I swung open the door, it announced my arrival with a primitive alerting device: small bells and string tied onto the door handle. I looked around and immediately smiled at the person behind the cash register knowing that first impressions were sometimes the only impression you were allowed to make.

I took a deep breath. I didn’t really know how to do this. This morning I woke up to my alarm that was set earlier than necessary for my first job interview. I was anxious and didn’t mind waking up even though it was the first real day of summer break. Now that I was here, I realized I didn’t prepare for what to do first. Do I just walk up and hand over the application? Should I try to have a conversation?

I had little time to take in my surroundings or to think of something good to say because the lady at the cash register looked at me with a one-eyebrow-raised, quizzical kind of look. Actually, she was looking more at the application that was now trembling in my shaking hands.

I cleared my throat. “Hello,” I managed to strangle out of my mouth. “Are you guys hiring? Er, not you guys. I mean, well, are you, is this place, hiring?” I was already sounding like an idiot. I laughed to try to make up for the awkwardness.

The cashier was chewing gum loudly and I couldn’t help but wonder if she was allowed to do that. This, along with the clumps of dark black makeup around her eyes, burgundy-lined lips, and heavy blush made her look trashy and
unprofessional. She really wasn’t unattractive, I thought to myself. But all the makeup ruined it. She grabbed my application and looked it over while I took the opportunity to finally look around and relax. Sterile walls, sterile floors, sterile music. They could have painted the walls an off white, but instead it was a put-on-your-sunglasses, this white is *that* white kind of color. The floors weren’t that much better. They weren’t white (probably to avoid the fact that white floors show any speck of dirt as if it was a monstrous red wine stain on brand new carpet), but instead a sickly shade of gray. A jazz concerto was covering a Beatles song over unseen speakers. *A Day in the Life* didn’t sound quite right when it was played with a smooth sax and accompanying guitar and piano.

This was a hospital all right. So I made it to the right place. Mom had offered to drop me off earlier when she went to work, but I told her I wanted to do it myself. If I was old enough to get a job, I was old enough to apply to the job without my mother’s help. I knew saying this would make me sound impressive, grown up, mature. But all I was thinking was how embarrassing it would be having my mom drive me to my first part-time job.

My mother worked long, odd hours as a nurse at this hospital and somehow never found the time to relax, even when she was at home. She was the one who suggested I work at the gift shop for some part-time work. I was sixteen, out of school for the summer, and had no other excuse to get out of it. I tried everything: ignoring the issue, finding things to fill in my time, actually saying I’d read the required material for the summer, but nothing worked. My mom pressured me like an irritating salesman, and so here I was.
“What kinda hours you looking to work?” the overly done up cashier asked.

I looked up after observing the variety of snack food lining the walls and the candy under the counter, which included (I couldn’t believe it) candy cigarettes.

“Um,” I stammered. What kind of hours? What kinds of hours were there? As far as I knew, sixty minutes made one hour and that was the only combination in existence.

“Not much of a spokeswoman, huh?”

My lips locked into a thin line, proving her hypothesis. I laughed because I didn’t know what else to do, but I could also feel my cheeks turning red.

“Listen, for a sixteen year old, about twenty hours is normal. So go on. Tell me you want twenty hours.”

I mumbled something incoherent, stuttering because of my nervousness.

“C’mon,” she said, smacking her gum even louder. “I even fed you the words. TWEN-TEE OW-WERS. Simple. Just repeat what I said.”

“TWEN-TEE OW-WERS,” I said, just like she did. Slow and stupid.

“There you go, honey. Easy, right?” she said as she was checking out her reflection on the glass of a generically inspiring poster on the wall. Something about determination. She noticed that some of her piled on black eyeliner was running and rubbed a finger under her eye. “I’m not trying to give you a hard time. I can see you’re nervous, is all. Anyway, twenty hours is normal but I need
someone for twenty-five. Five hours a day, five days a week. Just for the summer.

You in?”

“Yeah. I guess.” I wanted to back down. I wasn’t ready for my first job ever, not working with this lady behind the counter, but I knew I would never hear the end of it from my mom. This was going to be one summer of pure hell.

“Not too enthusiastic, are ya? Weaver?” she said, looking down at my application, “Josephine. You go by that?”

“Jo, actually.”

“You by any chance related to Clare Weaver?”

“Actually, yeah. She’s my mother.”

“You don’t say!” the woman said a little too enthusiastically. She was still smacking her gum, fluffing her hair every once in a while to keep her hands moving. Staring at me with big, scary, raccoon eyes. “Just teasing you again. I knew that already. Knew that when you walked in. You two have the same walk.”

I wasn’t amused. “Really?”

“That, and your mom came in this morning to tell me to expect you. I’ll be anticipating a lot out of you. Your mom’s a hard worker. We’re good friends.”

Great, I thought to myself.

“Karina, by the way. I’ll be your new boss.”
Dear _____,

Have you chosen a name yet? No? Like I said, it might take a while to find the perfect name. So don’t feel pressured.

Wanna hear some juicy news? I think I’m being watched. This is serious.

Here’s the details:

I keep getting calls from a mysterious man on the phone. He always calls when my parents aren’t home and I’m all alone. And unless I’m scaring myself silly, I’m one hundred percent positive that the voice on the other side of the phone is the same man every time.

When the phone rings I always wait two rings before I answer. Never less, never more. Unless I can’t help it.

“Hello?” I say into the phone. For a moment longer than it should take for someone to respond I hear a faint rasping and heavy breathing on the other side. Sometimes he takes so long to answer I have to say something into the phone again.

Then after this silence, he takes a deep breath and says, “I’m sorry,” in a slightly accented voice. “I think I must have the wrong number.” Then he hangs up. This happens about once a week maybe. It might be more or less, I’m not really sure. I just know that it’s starting to creep me out.

Now, every time I’m home alone I anticipate the call. I feel as if he knows the exact moment my parents leave the house or when I get home. I close all the curtains in the windows and I’m forced to do things in darkness even though it’s still light outside. My parents question me when they get home and I try to explain
that I wanted to keep the heat out. They open the curtains back up, but it’s okay
because I’m less nervous when they’re around anyway. If I am being watched, I
don’t know when he’s watching or for how long, but my parents make me feel
safer. Maybe this is because he never calls when they are home.
On my first day of work, I woke up in the morning with a flood of orange light in my room. People say the sun is dying a slow death. And I think: everyone is. If you had to set and rise again every day, lighting the entire world, wouldn’t you get tired of it? Wouldn’t you be counting down the days until your final rest?

A week had passed since I first applied to the job I didn’t really have to interview for. So much for gaining life experiences. My mother practically hand fed me this job and I was no wiser in the job search and application process. I went in one day last week to do paperwork that would make me official, as Karina worded it. As I shuffled nervously in my seat, I filled in answers on official papers as if my life depended on it. Occasionally, Karina interrupted to introduce me to the few doctors and nurses who walked in to buy something or say hello. Most of the women sweetly said hi, while the men were content with a simple head nod. I didn’t remember any of their names.

I groggily ate some soggy Shredded Wheat and changed into the forest green polo I was given on the day I filled out paperwork. The uniform had the logo of the hospital stitched onto the corner. I was told to wear tan khakis, to tuck in my shirt, and to wear a belt. I did all of these things, and I looked at myself in the mirror. Boring. I thought I should have been more excited on the first day of my first real job.
At nine in the morning, I showed up to work at the same sterile gift shop right at the front of the hospital. The same elevator music was playing over the speakers. Everything seemed to move in slow motion.

Nine was when the store opened. Karina had been there since eight-thirty, making sure everything was in place and counting money for the register. When I walked in, the bells rang as greeting of my arrival and Karina looked up briefly to say hello.

“Are you ready for your first day?” she asked while studying a piece of paper and scratching her hair with a pencil which was done up like usual—big and hairsprayed—with equally flashy makeup. I wondered why she was scratching her head so vigorously with a scowl on her face. I assumed something might be wrong with the register. Maybe twenty dollars was missing, or a roll of quarters. “Just gimme a second here and I’ll let you know what to do.”

I tried to act busy while Karina continued to work out her problem. She took another five minutes to wrap things up. By that time, a customer had walked in wanting to buy a simple journal. “I’m going to be here for a while,” he said conversationally. “Bout to become a father.”

“Well, congratulations!” Karina said. She called me over to the registered and briefly explained how to ring up a customer. “She’s new,” she offered, though I was sure that was apparent after the transaction took nearly fifteen minutes to complete. I kept hitting the wrong buttons and getting errors. Then, I would have to void the purchase and start all over again.
When the man left, Karina explained that I wasn’t going to be on the register all the time, but that it was a good idea that I knew how to work transactions just in case she was busy. Mostly I would be responsible for delivering different things to some of the long-term patients. “You’re the candy stripers,” she told me. “Helping out where you’re needed. But never mind about those tacky red and white striped outfits.” I wanted to tell her that the forest green polos weren’t that much better, but I didn’t know how she’d take it.

We gathered the supplies and deliveries from the back storage room, which also doubled as Karina’s office. We both helped to load up the cart I would wheel around, and then Karina helped show me to the different places I needed to go. Once I got the hang of things I delivered various records to doctors and nurses, and to the patients I delivered messages, mail, or meals. Sometimes it was a book or video, candy or snacks. I headed out of the store around ten, made my rounds, took a lunch break when I got hungry, and by the time I returned to the gift store, it was two o’clock and time for me to go home.

Throughout my first work week, if a nurse caught me looking bored, they sometimes asked me to read to the patients, or help clean their beds. I met a lot of strange people, and a lot of nice people, but mostly the atmosphere in the hospital was dreary and depressing.

Shortly after I started working, I had a letter to deliver to room 208 addressed to a Mr. Adam Perry. I was told by Karina that the protocol was to knock first at each room, then slowly enter. Surprisingly, I got a lot of patients who yelled “Go away!” and if this happened I was told I could just leave those
patients alone. Unless it’s something really important, it wasn’t worth dealing with a grumpy old person.

I hadn’t delivered anything to room 208 yet, but that wasn’t unusual. Not everyone received something from the store every day. Plus, there were a lot of rooms in the hospital. I’d probably only met a handful of the long-term patients.

When I reached the door, I knocked gently like I did on all the others.

“Yes?” I heard on the other side. This was my cue to enter.

I opened the door slowly, peeking my head in before taking any steps forward. “Hello,” I said. I thought that every room in the hospital would smell the same, something like disinfectant and clean air. I always pictured each room to be as sterile as the gift store, but I was wrong. Each room had a different smell of staleness. Mr. Perry’s room smelled like something was dying. It was pungent and sour, like the smell of expired milk. I thought pitifully that maybe something was dying. This was, after all, a hospital. “I have a letter for you,” I announced.

I was still nervous about meeting so many new people, and I had a hard time relaxing while I was at work. I was nervous about not knowing who I would meet or what I would run into and wondered constantly if I was doing things the right way.

When I opened the door and saw Mr. Perry, he didn’t say anything for a while and just stared at me holding out his letter. Something about this man gave me the creeps. I wanted to melt away right there and go home, back to my free summers of watching TV all day and waking up at noon. But instead I was in this hospital, getting the up-and-down approval of an old man in a hospital bed.
I cleared my throat and asked, “Candy or snacks or anything?” as I temptingly held out some of the goodies I had on the cart to interrupt the awkward silence.

“Are you a nurse?” he asked.

“No.”

“And you’re not a doctor.”

“No. I just work at the little gift shop at the front. I’m new.” I gave a nervous laugh. “In fact, this is my first week.” I wasn’t sure if it was a mistake to tell Mr. Perry this. I hoped he wasn’t the type to pick on the new girl, thinking it was fun to tell lies to see how gullible I could be.

“You don’t say? Sales are so bad these days they’re practically shoving merchandise down our throats. Well, I don’t want any. And if I did, I would have gone down there myself.”

I highly doubted he could have walked anywhere, considering the amount of machines he was hooked up to through various wires connected to his body. He continued to talk about the economy and how it was much different when he grew up. I listened to his rant half-heartedly and nodded in the appropriate places. Mr. Perry did not make a good first impression. He sounded like every other old person denying the fact that time continues and changes happen whether they want it to or not.

“All this talk about money and I’m afraid I don’t even know your name,” he said after a while.

“Jo.” I paused. “Well, my name is Josephine, but everyone calls me Jo.”
“Josephine,” he repeated in a whisper. He was still staring at me hard and steady. “What a beautiful name.”

“It was my great grandfather’s name. Supposedly he was a great man, but I never knew. I just go by what my mom tells me.”

He whispered again, “Josephine.”

Mr. Perry was no longer looking at me, but staring at the ceiling, studying it like it was a masterpiece, a bona fide recreation of Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel. When he finally looked over at me, chills took over my body again and suddenly I was shivering. Something he said—no, the way he said it—triggered a feeling of unease. I recognized his voice. It was soft and he spoke slowly as if contemplating each word. He had an accent, but I wasn’t sure what kind. He sounded exactly like the voice in the eerie phone calls I was getting.

“Here,” he said, finally grabbing for the letter, “Let me see what this is all about.”

I expected him to reach for the extended card, but instead he grabbed my wrist and pulled me closer. “Can’t reach when you’re all the way over there.”

I complied at first because I didn’t know immediately what was going on. When I tried to back up, he didn’t let go. I wondered if he saw that I was shaking. He was still holding onto my wrist with my fist clenched into a ball when he told me that the letter was from no one in particular. Again, I tried to pull away, but my slightest movement increased the pressure of his grip.

“I’m sure even someone like you could be more interesting to me than this letter,” he said, and then laughed. “What does a sympathy card actually do?”
I stood there in silence, trying to compose myself, because I knew I shouldn’t panic. He wasn’t threatening me, or touching me in a hostile way, but I knew I didn’t want him clinging to me in this way or for this long. I had just met the man, and he had no idea who I was in return. No matter what the situation, he shouldn’t be touching me at all.

I was feeling extremely uncomfortable, and I couldn’t shake the idea that his voice reminded me of the phone calls. The way the man on the phone spoke sounded so much like this stranger in front of me. The situation only heightened my paranoia. Everything was happening too quickly and I wanted to get out of there. But for the moment all I could do was stare and nod.

“Um, Mr. Perry. Sorry, but I have to get to these other deliveries,” I finally said and he immediately let go. I let the air I’d been collecting in my lungs release slowly, soundlessly. I forced my hands to stop shaking. Nothing. It was nothing. This was all just my paranoia.

I left without saying goodbye. I silently took my deliveries and let the door close after me with a sound that echoed through the empty hallway.

I wanted to run and tell Karina right away what happened between Mr. Perry and me. How he had grabbed me and I felt like I was being threatened in a way. I was sure there were some rules or laws that would protect me and would make it so I would never have to see Mr. Perry again. Though I felt scared and defenseless, I at least realized that what he did was not right. You can’t just go around forcing people to do things they don’t want to do.
“Karina,” I began, but then suddenly halted. I just couldn’t do it. I was too embarrassed and too ashamed, even though I did nothing wrong.

I kept trying to force the words out, but each time I did, I only felt tears coming to my eyes and the embarrassment of having to cry in front of Karina in the middle of my shift was enough for me to keep my mouth shut all together.

“Hmm?” Karina answered sweetly and when I didn’t answer, she turned to look at me. “Jo? What happened? Is something wrong?”

I had to act fast, or my cover would be blown. “Yeah, sorry, allergies. I just wanted to ask if you had tissues in the back room.”

“Oh, of course, Jo! You’re working in a hospital, don’t forget. Help yourself.”

It worked. I was both relieved and horrified that I pulled that off. I didn’t know where my bravery went, or if I even had any to begin with, but as I entered the back room where the paperwork, various deliveries, and my purse was kept, I hurriedly pushed the thoughts out of my mind and immediately felt better.

Nothing happened, I kept telling myself. He just got a little close. No harm in that.

And for the rest of the day, I felt fine, though a little shaken.

When I got home, I realized I was alone and immediately I was absorbed by fear. I was terrified, and I knew it had to do with Mr. Perry. His voice sounded so much like the anonymous caller that I couldn’t help but picture him picking up
the phone and dialing my number. I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was being watched.

I was exhausted, and so I flopped down on the sofa, face down trying to cool off and relax after my walk home from the hospital. The fan was on the highest speed and I was just about to doze off.

That was when the phone rang. It was a distant clashing of sounds, and made me jump in surprise. Before, everything was silent and the sudden noise seemed out of place and dissonant.

He knew. Mr. Perry—someone—knew I was home alone. Somehow, I was sure of this.

In my sudden fear, I realized that I never closed the curtains like I had been doing. I could feel his presence. I could feel his glance on me through my open windows. I pictured a man holding binoculars with one hand and the phone in the other, chuckling as he watched me hesitate, deciding whether or not to pick up the receiver.

I walked into the kitchen where the phone was. “Hello?” I said after making a quick decision to pick up. I should have let the phone ring, let the voicemail pick it up, but I wanted to play along. Something in me was daring me, double daring me, to see where this story led.

On the other side of the phone, he coughed. Maybe it was just a tickle, a festering guilt in the back of his throat, but I was suddenly angry. I was furious that he was playing this strange game with me. And I was angry that he always had to pause and hesitate, or cough because he had nothing better to say to me.
“I,” he said, stumbling on the syllable. “I think I have the wrong number. Excuse me.”

“Who are you trying to reach?” I questioned, trying to buy more time until I could figure out how to solve this mystery. I had no ideas.

Again, an awkward throat clearing. “I have the wrong number,” he repeated.

I waited, as my rage was continuing to surmount. I knew that the man could not possibly call the same number over and over again by mistake, and I wanted to know why I was being targeted.

“You’re lying!” I screamed into the phone. “Listen, I’m not deaf. I know you’re the same guy that calls every week, every day even. If your speed dial is wrong, have one of your kids fix it for you, old man.” I paused. I was angry, but I didn’t know why I just insulted a stranger over the phone. The phrase sounded too harsh and cruel.

At this point, I was breathing hard, the light around me was fading in and out as if I had just jolted out of a deep sleep and couldn’t quite focus on what was around me. My head was pounding.

“Sorry,” I managed to mutter through my frustration. “Sorry, I’m just sick of getting these phone calls. It’s been happening a lot lately.” That was when I heard the dial tone. I leaned my head against the wall, trying to pull my head back together from the shambles. My body was still heavy with heat exhaustion from my walk home. I couldn’t seem to gain any control.
I still had no answers about the phone calls and now I just felt embarrassed about losing my composure. Why was I acting this way?

I tried telling my parents what was going on that night over dinner. We don’t say much to each other, really. My parents dutifully ask me things about my day and I dutifully answer back. It’s boring and annoying, but if I give them attitude, they give it right back with punishment attached and so I’ve learned to just answer their questions. This time, at least I have something to talk about.

“Mom? Dad?” I began, while passing the casserole dish filled with molten vegetables and sauce to my father on my left. “These weird, um, phone calls have been coming in. Here at the house.” I was suddenly feeling stupid and silly and I didn’t know why. “A man is always calling, but he keeps saying he has the wrong number.”

For a while my parents continued eating and didn’t say a word. My father had burned himself on the casserole still hot from the over and was busy screaming and shaking his hand. I felt invisible and insignificant, and I wanted to scream.

“It’s starting to creep me out,” I ventured, seeing if this would finally garner some attention.

Finally, my mother who had grabbed the hot plate and was rolling her eyes at my father, said, “What honey? Phone calls? What does he say over the phone?”

“Nothing much. Just that he has the wrong number. Then he hangs up.”

“Strange,” my father finally said. “How many phone calls?”
“A few?” I didn’t know. I hadn’t been counting.

“It’s probably nothing,” my mom said. “Let’s wait to see if it grows into a problem.”

I irritatingly stuffed roasted carrots into my mouth and dropped the subject. My parents in the meantime got into a serious conversation about human’s rights regarding euthanasia. Typical, I thought. Parents never understood.
Chapter 3

At work the next day, I checked in with Karina. She was speaking Spanish to one of the customers in the gift shop and it didn’t sound friendly. I tried to decipher, but I only understood basic words like mañana and persona. Learning Spanish in high school got me nowhere near conversational. I deciphered that she was probably arguing about change because the man in front of her was holding out a wad of cash in his hand and pushing it toward her. She was saying (I presumed) something about the bill he had given her and how the change was correct.

I watched for a while, not knowing what to do or what I could do. I didn’t really know what was going on for certain. I was just taking a guess. And if the man wasn’t listening to Karina, what would make him listen to me?

I busied myself straightening the shelves even though they looked perfect from the night before. It took a long time for the man to leave the store, and when he finally did leave, he left with an unpleasant look on his face. It seemed that no resolution was met.

“What was that all about?” I ventured to ask.

“Josephine, let me tell you one thing,” Karina said, exasperated. “One thing you learn working in a hospital: life is too short to argue over pennies!”

Karina looked tired and it was shortly past nine in the morning. She still had a full day ahead. Her make-up was already clumping and I wondered how long it would take for her to gaze at her hazy reflection in the glass picture and fix
it herself or if I should just save her the hassle and tell her now. I didn’t think this was the right moment to be pointing out her flawed makeup, and so I kept it to myself.

She was still frazzled, pushing the cash register drawer closed a little too vigorously and cursing in Spanish. She started recounting the money in the register, and I guessed she had to see if there was a discrepancy after all. I thought about asking her then if there was something I could do, but instead I grabbed a broom and just started sweeping up the nonexistent dirt. After this was done, I figured I could start my rounds with the cart.

“Karina?” I said to her from the back room. “I’m going to go some deliveries now. Was there anything you needed me to do before I leave?”

She looked at me briefly then waved me off in a way that indicated that I should go. I packed up the cart and headed for the elevator, which was down the hall and around the corner. I inevitably always run into someone. When I say run into, I mean I actually bang into them and they always give me a really irritated look. But this thing is hard to push around. Today, I happened to run into a doctor’s ankle and he actually screamed when the cart hit him. He looked angry enough to hit me, but then maybe my face betrayed my horror in hitting him, that he left me alone. I made a note to walk a little slower with my cart.

When I reached the elevator without injuring anyone else, there was a young girl already inside, somewhere near my age, though definitely a few years older. Maybe she was even out of high school already. Even though I didn’t know
her, I immediately felt a bit of solidarity in that fact that we were close in age. Everyone else I interacted with was at least twenty years my senior. I smiled.

“Hi,” she said, and I returned the greeting.

“New?”

“Excuse me?” I asked.

“You work here?” She said this with her eyebrows raised a bit too high, giving her a phony look.

‘Yeah. Store up front,” I said. “You?”

“Maintenance.”

I laughed.

“No really. I may no look it, but I’m good with my hands. And don’t be thinking no dirty thoughts about that. I get shit from the guys all day long when I say that.”

I couldn’t help but laugh again even though I knew I might be pushing it.

“I can’t say you fit the image I had in mind, but that’s okay.”

“Sarah, by the way.”

“Jo,” I said and offered my hand.

“Jo,” she said, bouncing her head lightly in approval and shuffling her hands in the pockets of her dirty jeans. “I like it. Is it short for anything?”

“Josephine.”

“Whoa, sounds totally out of the Middle Ages or something.”

“Er, yeah, or something. Joseph was my great grandfather’s name.”
The elevator bounced to the next floor with a shudder and opened its doors to let me out.

“Well, nice meeting you, I guess,” I offered before walking out.

This time it was Sarah’s turn to laugh. “Yeah, nice meeting you, too. I guess.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know you didn’t. Don’t worry about it. See ya later.”

Her face eventually disappeared behind the doors and I started my delivery rounds. Knocking, waiting, getting yelled at, being told to come in, and so on, and so on. I might have made a new friend.
Dear _____,

I’ll stop bothering you about the name. I promise. I want you to have all the time in the world. When you’re ready, let me know. That’s all there is to it.

Have you ever thought about death, Diary? Of course not, I know. After all, you’re only about...what?...a month old now? You probably don’t even know what the concept of death is. Everything that lives must die. This is what I learned from working in the hospital. I can see, feel, hear, and smell all kinds of death around me. I see it in the faces of the families: scared, lonely, desperate. Even if someone is just hurt or sick, there is still the sense that their body is slowly disintegrating. The body also reflects a lot of emotions, believe it or not. So if a patient is really anxious, their body doesn’t heal as well as it should. Working in a hospital has told me things I didn’t really want to know. Not yet.

I feel the thickness of the air around me, everywhere I walk. There is also a stench that is impenetrable by the chemicals the hospital use to disinfect. Sometimes it’s stronger in one hallway, and in others I don’t even notice it. It doesn’t have a smell, really, not in the way I usually think about smell. I almost think it’s more of a feeling. Like when I see all the old bodies, or the hurt bodies my mind makes me believe the air smells pungent.

But all of this doesn’t change the fact that I know I’m walking on the same floor where someone took their last step. People die in hospitals. It’s so creepy that I get chills just thinking about it.

Do you believe in ghosts, Diary? I didn’t. But now? Now, I don’t know what I believe. I swear I can actually feel death in those hallways.
Let me tell you this. A hospital is not a place for a sixteen year old to work. The raspy coughs, wrinkled faces, shaky hands, waning smiles—it’s all so sad to look at. And it makes me think about death. I think I’m becoming a little obsessed.

I promised to tell you more about my “stalker.” Yesterday he called on the phone, and you know what? I had this funny intuition. Like I knew it was him. I could picture him in my mind sitting in his chair, dialing my number, knowing that I was home alone. So when I picked up the phone (maybe not the best idea, right?) I let him have it. I called him an old man and told him to stop calling. I felt bad about it afterwards, but he’s starting to really creep me out. I think I just lost my wits for a moment.

I have another secret to tell you. Don’t tell mom and dad (not like you could!). But sometimes, just every once in a while, I sneak out at night. I open my window really quiet (I’ve even gone and Vaselined the hinges), push out the screen and climb out. You know why I do this? Not because I’m running away from awful parents. I’m not a partier and I don’t have a boyfriend to sneak off to. I do it because I love the way the world looks at night.

Think about it. For eight hours of every day we’re sleeping during the night. I only get to see four hours of darkness a day versus twelve hours of daylight. Not fair, right? So that got me thinking. I used to just stare out the window, looking at the way the moon makes everything look different. The way it hits the branches of the trees makes them glow, almost as if they’re lit up with
white Christmas lights. When the wind blows, it looks like a big hand is sweeping across the grass and through the trees.

Then I got the idea to climb out the window. It was more like a calling actually, like I was being pulled by a rope and being commanded to follow. I didn’t even know who was moving when my feet hit the ground. The dew was cold on my bare feet. I knew it wasn’t myself, but at the same time I had full awareness of what was going on around me.

My backyard is the beginning of a vast amount of land that has been a part of my family for years. We have acres upon acres, and no one does anything with it but pass it on through more generations. I played in these woods for most of my childhood, and the first hundred feet are familiar to me. I was never allowed to go out of sight of my house, and so most of the acreage is unchartered territory, as I like to think of it.

So on these nights that I escape out of my bedroom, I walk deeper and deeper into the dense trees, beyond anything that looks familiar. I found a perfect place to sit and stay there for a few hours while I think. It’s a little clearing with a large boulder in the middle. In some ways it’s a little ironic how perfect the clearing is. The rock sits directly in the middle surrounded by sand. Nothing grows in this sand until it reaches a radius of about seven feet. Then, the forest starts again.

So I stay there, and I think, and think, and think. Sometimes I think about Mom or Dad. Sometimes the hospital and the people I meet like Mr. Perry or
Sarah. Sometimes I just think about nothing. Absolutely nothing. I just feel the earth beneath me.

I think of the trees as ghosts because they look like skeletons. Chalky white figures. What really gets me is the contrast. I mean, you know what they say—as different as day and night? Well, it’s true, you know. Everything has a different presence at night. It’s like the moment I step out of my bedroom window out into the night something deep inside my subconscious awakens and I see the world in these strange new ways.

So tonight you’re coming with me. So I can think and journal at the same time.
I was only a few weeks into my first job and already it was becoming monotonous. My friends were going on family vacations. Stacey from my geometry class was even going on a tour of Europe. Me? I was stuck with bright lights, sounds of beeping heart monitors, mumbles from nurses, and the spiraling tire under my cart. It became a pattern that never seemed to break—five days a week, five hours a day. It was room after room with the same conversations, and I found myself getting bored easily. It was all I could do to contain a yawn each time a patient asked me what else I was doing over the summer besides delivering their letters.

“Jo? Hey, Jo?”

I was making my way down the hallway on the third floor when I turned around and saw Sarah calling out to me.

“Hi. Sarah?” I knew her name, but I wanted to seem casual and cool, as if remembering someone’s name would have destined me for desperateness.

“You got it.” Today she was wearing baggy cotton pants and a tank top. I wondered how she was allowed to walk around the hospital looking like that. It was more fitting for a day at the beach and didn’t look sanitary at all. Even though she worked maintenance, shouldn’t she have been given a uniform to wear? Where was her matching forest green polo and khakis? “Hey, listen. I know we just met and all, but you seem like a down-to-earth girl. Couple other employees
and me hang out after the shift. My place. Just around the corner. For a barbeque.”

There was sincerity in Sarah’s eyes. I knew she was telling the truth and not just trying to pick on the new employee. “Barbeque?”

“Yeah, well, I don’t always do this kind of thing but it’s the beginning of summer, you know? Just come if you want, okay? I’ll be around. Just ask for directions.” We had stopped in the hall, me with my bulky cart, her with a light bulb in her right hand. Now she opened the door beside her and walked in with a short wave goodbye. I tried to see into the room since I had never noticed the door before. It wasn’t labeled and blended into the muted white walls since it was painted the same color. I couldn’t see in and I didn’t want to seem nosy so I assumed it was some kind of storage closet.

“Thanks!” I tried to shout before the door closed, “I will!” But I was sure she didn’t hear me because she was already out of sight.

I found her in the hospital cafeteria around one o’clock eating her lunch. Her tray was half empty, and she was sitting with a bunch of guys. I just assumed they were the rest of the hospital maintenance team. I was only there for a fifteen-minute break since I had already eaten my lunch at noon.

I looked around quickly for an empty seat. I didn’t really want to sit alone since that would have definitely made me look like a loser, especially if Sarah saw me. I questioned sitting with Sarah and the guys, but wondered if that might seem like I was coming on strong, like I was trying too hard to be her friend. I
only had a split second to decide since at this point Sarah had noticed me walk in and waved. I waved back and joined Sarah at her table, telling myself that I had to ask directions in order to go to the barbeque this afternoon anyway.

“Jo!” Sarah screamed when I approached. I felt a little better about her enthusiasm. She introduced me to the guys sitting at the table and I gave a small wave.

“I, uh, wanted to ask directions. To, you know, the barbeque tonight,” I started.

“Oh, yeah, no problem.”

She lived only a block away, just like she mentioned. I wrote down the street number on a worn out mini steno pad I had in my purse. I ate a quick snack and when my break was over I told the group I would see them later that night.

“Should I bring hotdogs or anything?” I asked.

I was met with a harangue of laughter.

“Wha…what?” I said, confused.

“Nothing, Jo. Just, they’re guys, that’s all. Don’t let it bother you.” But I saw the wide smirk on Sarah’s face too as she laughed along.

Sarah told me she left work at five, but after my break today I was wondering whether or not I should even go to her barbeque that night. Images of the laughing faces kept spiraling around in my head. I was trying to convince myself that I was just being paranoid and they were laughing in a casual way.
The idea of not going would just cause me more trouble, I decided. If I saw Sarah the next day she would ask why I didn’t come and I would give an answer that she would know to be a lousy excuse.

Once I got home, I took a nap, then changed into some casual clothes, a nice knit top and some dark jeans, and left a note for my parents on the counter: Out with friends. Home before ten.

I should have probably called one of them, but I knew they were both busy at work. They would probably call my cell phone when they read the note anyway to know that I was safe.

I looked up directions on the computer before leaving and about thirty minutes before six, I gather my things and left the house, locking the front door on my way out. Out of some sort of paranoia, I looked over my shoulder expecting an old man to be looking at me with a pair of binoculars. But as I scanned the area, I saw nothing looking at me from the any windows. The sun was reflecting off them so that they looked black and opaque anyway.

I was nervous walking up to the house, but when I reached it I had to check the address I wrote on my steno pad five times. The house was old and decrepit. It was painted a sun-dyed yellow with an aging brown roof. The house looked like my grandmother’s: dark, dingy, and unkempt. There were more weeds than grass in the lawn and scattered around the house were old pieces of cheap decorations left too long in the sun and were now faded, chipped, and cracked. For a moment I felt embarrassed, like maybe Sarah should have cleaned up before she invited us all over. Then I remembered she does this kind of thing all the time
and I should stop being so judgmental. When I rechecked the address number with the one written on the note pad in my purse, I realized I had the right house.

I knocked on the door and waited a minute. I almost expected the voice of an old patient telling me to come in for their letter, but a moment later Sarah answered the door.

“You’re early!”

I looked down at my watch. It was almost six, which was when I thought the event started. “Sorry, I just didn’t know how long it was going to take me to get here.”

Sarah looked nice now that she wasn’t wearing her worn out work clothes. Her hair was down, falling past her shoulders and she was even wearing a bit of makeup. It was nothing like the way Karina wore her makeup. She looked very pretty, I thought to myself.

“Kidding, kidding. Mostly everyone’s here. C’mon. I’ll show you out back.”

As I walked through the entrance, I followed Sarah to the backyard. I walked past piles to dirty clothes and scattered litter. I noticed that the sink was overflowing with dirty dishes. Everything smelled like dogs. Lots of them. Sweating all over the place. I didn’t see any pets though. I thought I might have seen a roach scatter across the floor, but by the time it caught my attention, it had already disappeared. It was hard to hide my shock.

“Where are your, uh, parents?” I asked casually, wondering why the house was in such disarray.
“Not here.”

“Vacation?”

“Nope. Live here by myself, chickie.”

“Here?” I said, incredulously. “Alone? When you’re only…Wait, how old are you?”

“Geez, don’t act so shocked. Yes, alone. I’m an adult now, don’t forget. The ripe old age of nineteen. Feels good, actually.”

I was shocked. I knew Sarah was older, but she didn’t look like she was old enough to own a house. “Yeah but how does someone your age come to own a house?”

“When my grandmother dies and leaves her house to me. Also, when I happen to not get along with my parents. That’s how.”

“Wow,” I said, still blown away by everything around me.

“Sure, could use a little cleaning, but you know what they say: Home Sweet Home. I like it this way.”

Once we reached the back of the house, I was relieved for some fresh air. I felt bad, but I was on the verge of sneezing and I thought that this might offend Sarah somehow. I expected the smell of roasting chicken or steak, corn on the cob, or baked beans to reach my nose, but all that I could distinguish was the pungent smell of marijuana.

“Are you guys…smoking?”
“Don’t act so shocked, Jo. This is our barbeque party,” Sarah said. She took her seat in a lawn chair placed in a circle with the others and took the blunt that was being passed to her.

“Weed? How is this a barbeque?”

Again, laughter sprang up among the crowd. “We’re getting smoked out! Get it?” Everyone continued laughing. “It’s how we get around talking about it and sounding innocent at the same time.” Sarah handed me the blunt.

“Er, no. I mean, I don’t think so.”

“Ever smoked before?”

I didn’t know what to say. Do I tell them yes to try to redeem myself? Tell the truth? They’ll know if I was lying. “Yeah. I mean, no.”

A few people laughed at that. “Perfect opportunity, then. C’mon. It ain’t so bad,” Sarah said.

I hesitated, teetering on the idea of caving in to peer pressure or standing ground.

“Uh…”

Sarah waved her free hand at me and handed the joint to the next guy in line. “Forget about it. Maybe next go around.”

I was frozen where I was standing, not knowing what to do with myself. Sit down and just pass on the blunt when it came around to me? Pretend to smoke it, but never inhale? Leave? Everyone was staring at me and laughing, and this time I was fairly certain they were laughing at me. I just didn’t want to do something illegal.
The doorbell rang and Sarah got up to answer the door. I took the opportunity to follow her inside away from everyone else. Everything reeked in the house, but I risked sitting on the sofa. A girl I might have recognized from the hospital walked in. I gave a weak smile to try and seem friendly even though I was feeling extremely uncomfortable. I don’t think I made a good impression.

“Be out there in a minute,” Sarah said to her friend, stopping in the middle of the living room and letting her pass out to the patio. She looked at me then. “Sorry, Jo. I thought you’d be cool with it.”

“No. I’m not not cool with it or anything. It’s just…”

“It’s just what we do to chill out after work, you know? If you want to try it, go ahead. If not, that’s cool too.”

I gave it another thought, wondering I would forever be shunned at work if I denied the offer.

“I don’t think…”

“If you’re not sure, don’t do it. I can tell you don’t really want to anyway. And believe me. Smoking when you’re not ready is not that way to get introduced to the stuff. You’ll probably have a really bad high.”

What a relief. At least she wasn’t pressuring me to do anything. “Then, no. I don’t think I want to smoke anything.”

“Good girl. You went with your gut. I respect people like that.”

“Is it okay if I leave then? I don’t want to be the wallflower all night long.”
I left shortly after our talk. I didn’t know what I’d do if I smelled like marijuana when I got home. I was only out on the patio for a little while but I was sure at least some of the smoke clung to my clothes. I couldn’t walk into the house where my parents were probably at the kitchen table eating dinner. As I was walking, I periodically smelled my hair, my skin, my clothes to see if I could detect any traces of weed. I couldn’t smell anything, and hoped that my nose wasn’t playing tricks on me. I wasn’t going to have a good excuse if I came home smelling like marijuana and then trying to explain I didn’t actually smoke anything.

But when I got home, the house was still empty. My note was still sitting on the counter untouched, unread. I crumbled it up which echoed through the house and threw it away.

“Mom? Dad?” I called out. No one. The house was empty. It was almost seven. The sun was casting the walls with a gloomy shade of orange as the day slowly turned to night. I shut the curtains of the window methodically.

That was when the telephone rang. *Ring, ring*...

“Hello?” I said into the receiver.
Chapter 5

A few days after the marijuana incident at Sarah’s I delivered a newspaper to Mr. Perry at his request. The gift shop got all kinds of odd requests from some of the long-term—and even the short-term—patients. Most of the time they treated the hospital staff as personal servants because they couldn’t get up and do things for themselves. But still, they could have a little more gratitude, I thought. I rarely got a thank you, even if I went out of my way to make a special delivery.

Since I was the pair of extra hands at the hospital, I was the one responsible for any of these special requests that came in. Most of the time, someone would ring the buzzer next to their bed. You know, that one that is supposed to be for summoning medical attention. Then when the nurse came in they would ask for a Kit Kat Bar, or a pack of gum, sometimes even cigarettes. If the nurses knew we had something in the gift store, she would let us know and it would go on my cart for the next day’s deliveries. Never the cigarettes, of course.

This time, Mr. Perry asked for a newspaper.

When I got to his room, I was prepared for any unwanted advances or wrist holdings. I was smart enough to not let him get away with it again.

“Your newspaper,” I offered, as I handed him a copy on the *Times*. I thought I could tell that there was something sneaky in Mr. Perry’s glance, but then again, it was just a stare.

“Day late. I asked for *yesterday’s* paper.”

“We didn’t get the request until today.”
“I don’t want it.”

I gently took the newspaper back and placed it back in the cart. There was no use arguing. Besides, being a sales woman wasn’t a part of my job description.

“A long time ago, I could but a newspaper for a nickel. How much is that one running?”

“Fifty cents,” I answered.

“Far cry from five cents, if you ask me.”

I nodded politely, but made my way to the door.

“Hold on now! You’re not leaving already? We haven’t even had a chance to talk today.”

I wanted to ask him why he thought I would want to stay and chat with an old man who had so far only given me attitude and unwanted wrist holding. Instead I said, “I have to go.”

“Wait. Have you ever seen a Woody Allen films? Just saw one the other day. I think you’d like it.”

He told me the title and I told him I would try to see it.

“Wife really enjoyed it, too and she doesn’t like films much,” he paused here suddenly, then said in a more melancholy tone, “Miss them all. The whole bunch. Get’s hard visiting me all the time.”

I was feeling brave, I guess, because then I asked, “Why are you here, Mr. Perry? I mean, why are you stuck in the hospital.”

He sighed, and I could tell the thought bothered him. “Oh, you see, I’m old now. Fell down the stairs about a month ago now. Fractured my hip. Came
here and everything was eventually on the path to healing. Then I get pneumonia and everything goes back to shit.”

“How are you feeling now?”

“Sick as hell. It’s no good getting old, but I’m guessing you might already know that. I had pneumonia so many times as a kid and kicked it in a week. No modern medicine. Just my own immune system doing the fighting. Now I fall down and get a little bump and I’m sick for months, imprisoned in this place.”

I was feeling bad for him against my own will. “Are you sure you don’t want the newspaper, Mr. Perry? On me?”

“Oh, well, I guess I could use some reading. Let’s see what’s going on in this godforsaken earth nowadays.”

For a few weeks straight, each encounter with Mr. Perry was pretty much the same. I would deliver either a letter or something he requested from the gift shop. One day he even made a special request that his sheets get changed by—guess who?—me. I helped nurses out when I didn’t have much to deliver, and this included changing bed sheets, but having a special request that I change Mr. Perry’s was odd.

I wish I could say I stood my ground and refused, but the rest of the hospital staff treated the incident as innocuous and so I went in one day and changed his sheets while he mumbled on about the world and his family. I was learning quite a lot about him, in fact. Since little bits and pieces were revealed each time I saw him, I now knew that he grew up poor in the Midwest, but moved
to the Southeast that day he turned eighteen. At least ten years passed before he would talk to anyone from his family again.

“Kinda odd how kids think of family. I for one hated mine. Never wanted to get married or have kids myself,” he told me once, chuckling. “Managed to stay single for a while, but not a long while. When I met my wife I just had this feeling and before I knew it, I had kids.”

I also learned that his favorite food was mash potatoes, but after eating the mash potatoes the hospital served, he had actually grown to hate the side dish.

All kinds of things from politics to the education system to his son’s successful business to his wife’s pottery club were a part of our conversations. But maybe I shouldn’t use the word conversation because that implies that I reciprocated. But all I really did was nod and smile in the right places. Even if his opinions were wrong or offensive, I just agreed and went on with my day.

Like I said, this went on for a few weeks. Then, one day I just didn’t have a reason to visit Mr. Perry. No card or gifts or special requests. Nothing. And so when I passed room 208 on my way to other patients on the floor, I thought maybe I should peek my head in and say hello. But instead, I walked by quietly pushing my cumbersome cart.

I couldn’t believe I was actually starting to care about Mr. Perry. The thought of not seeing him left a kind of gap in my workday. This revelation sent chills up my spine. It was just part of the job, I told myself. If I got too attached, something bad might happen. If I got too attached, the person might die and then I
would be left alone. I was resolved to not let myself become attached, especially
with someone like Mr. Perry.

The first time I saw Sarah after her “barbeque” I was nervous. I first saw
her from a distance, on top of a stepladder, looking like she was changing out a
burnt out light bulb. There were two other guys with her from the maintenance
department, but they were just watching her work.

When I walked past the group, I looked over and smiled and said a quiet
hello.

“Jo! Hey!” Sarah said, eagerly. I didn’t plan on stopping to talk, but Sarah
was walking down her ladder, looking as if she wanted to say something to me so
I paused.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Hey, uh, sorry again for the other night,” she said.

“Really, I guess I should be the one to apologize. I hate being the
downer.”

“Please. Don’t make excuses for yourself. You stick up for yourself. I
respect that.”

We decided to get lunch together and met in the cafeteria at noon. Sarah
was easy to get along with. She was relaxed and funny and we talked about boys
and school and the hospital and I found myself laughing a lot at her silly antics.
At one point, she even shouted out to an imaginary Chris while we innocently
watched to see who would look at us. When they did, we just burst out laughing, both at the situation and at the fact that we were acting so childish.

I almost wanted to tell her about the phone calls just so I could get the thoughts off my chest. I needed someone to talk to about this stuff that wasn’t my parents. About how a raspy voiced man asked for someone whose name I didn’t recognize and how I felt like I was being watched. But I knew our friendship wasn’t at that level yet, and so I tried to have fun during our lunch break and forget about all the other things going on in my life.
Dear ____,

Guess where you are right now? C’mon, just guess. You’re with me in the silvery woods, basking in the moonlight in my secret spot. The one I discovered it a few nights ago. Like a beacon, it drew me to it. Remember I told you that I felt like I was being pulled away from my bedroom into the night? It’s something like a tide. The moon’s gravity drags me toward it and I can’t help my actions. Does that make any sense? I feel like writing this all down makes me out to be crazy, but honestly, that’s how I feel. There is something more magical about the night than there is about the day.

But it’s scary. It’s terrifyingly scary. Every shadow looks like a person following me, the wind in the leaves sounds like following footsteps. Every second I’m out here, I’m so frightened. But I’m curious. I think that’s why I keep going.

I promised to take you out with me, remember? I said I wanted to know what I would write in this totally different surrounding.

But I have something else I have to write to you. Tonight, right before I woke up to come here, I had a disturbing dream. I’m ashamed to even write this, that’s how embarrassing the dream was. But I’ll tell you if you promise not to tell a soul. Ready?

Mr. Perry was in it. Do you remember the man from the hospital? His stare almost melted my entire body, that’s how much he creeped me out. He scares me, and I’m not sure why. It’s just one of those feelings, you know? I still have a hunch that he might be the one constantly calling me.
In the dream, I was running to answer the phone. It was my mysterious stalker, I knew it was. But, like the day before, I felt brave. I knew it was him and I was going to let him know I was on to his pranks.

I said: “Hello?”

And when the man answered I knew with certainty that the man on the other side was Mr. Perry.

“Mr. Perry?” I said. “What are you doing?”

And here’s where it started to get creepy. Really creepy.

He told me: “Josephine. My dear, Josephine. Do you know how beautiful you are?”

“Mr. Perry. You can’t do this anymore! You can’t keep stalking me like this!”

“My dear, Josephine. You are so beautiful.”

I was standing there with the phone in my hand and the next thing I remembered in the dream was that we were in the hospital and Mr. Perry’s hand was clutching mine, my hand still held up to my ear, but now the phone was missing and he was caressing my face.

Phew. I got that much out. This is actually really hard to write down. I keep getting really embarrassed about this. There’s more.

I liked it. I cringe even admitting that to you now, Diary. I liked it, for Christ’s sake! The Mr. Perry in my dream wasn’t the old man I see every day in his hospital bed, decrepit and weary. He looked the same, but was young
somehow. I was caressing his hand as he caressed my face and I felt happy, elated even. I felt like I had a crush. I felt like I was in love.

Slowly, very slowly, Mr. Perry started undressing me. He started at my shoulders, moving my sleeves so they hung below my shoulders. And started kissing them, all over. I hate writing this down. I really do. But I was getting, well, I was getting kinda hot by all of this. His lips were so soft when he kissed me. I was taking pleasure in every second of this serenade. I was doing nothing but enjoying his affection.

Soon his hands moved lower and he was reaching to take off my shirt. I let him, I couldn’t help myself. The shirt ruffled my hair as my head passed through. He was kissing my stomach, my belly button, right below my breasts, until I felt him reach up on my back to unhook my bra.

I teasingly reached back and told him no, but we both knew that I really didn’t want him to stop. The bra comes off, and I think you know what comes next. He started kissing my breasts. First he started kissing softly, all over. I was getting more and more aroused. He was kissing so tenderly, his lips warm against my body. Soon, he started sucking on my nipples, gently. So gently I could hardly feel his mouth—all I could feel was pleasure. This went on for a while—kissing, sucking, licking, grabbing, feeling.

I’m fighting to keep writing. Because I don’t want to tell the rest. And I think you know where this is going. The undressing, the kissing, and caressing continues until, well, until I’m completely naked. I’m lying on the bed, still writhing in pleasure from this young version of Mr. Perry.
But this was where I had to stop. I knew what was supposed to come next. And I knew I wasn’t ready for that yet. I’m still a virgin. I mean, in real life. I knew I didn’t want Mr. Perry taking that from me for the first time, not even in a dream.

In the dream, I told him no and started dressing. Any feelings of arousal were gone now. In fact, I was feeling disgusted by what had just gone on.

“You’re my customer, Mr. Perry!” I screamed. I was afraid I would lose my job. I was scared my mom would somehow find out. Karina, or Sarah.

I think that was when I woke up. I was in my room, in my bed, soaked in sweat, and feeling guilty. I felt like I actually went through with it. I felt guilty for actually taking pleasure in those acts. Most of all—why did it have to be Mr. Perry in my dreams?

Well, I think it’s time to go home. You see, coming out here wasn’t such a bad thing. Being alone out here helped me be honest with you. And I really needed to get that haunting dream out of my head. I probably wouldn’t have had the guts to tell you otherwise.

Work at nine a.m. tomorrow. Oh Diary, what am I going to do when I face Mr. Perry?
Chapter 6

I heard her calling my name: Jo, Jo, Jo, like a drum beat perfectly in sync, echoing off the perfectly white walls. But I couldn’t respond because my mind was somewhere else. Somewhere deep in my thoughts, of my dreams the night before. I wondered how I was ever going to do my job today. I was anxious and still disturbed. Most of all, I didn’t want to see Mr. Perry.

“Jo? What’s the matter with you today?” Karina said, flashing into my view. “You seem completely out of it.”

“Sorry. I, uh, daze out sometimes.” I stated, foolishly.

“You don’t say! I was calling your name for a minute straight!” I’d never heard Karina take that tone with me before. Usually she was calm and conversational. Now, she looked like she was getting angry.

“Sorry, Karina. I’m really tired today.” This wasn’t too far from the truth. My running away in the night was becoming more and more frequent. I was staying out for hours of the night, compromising on sleep.

Once she had my attention, Karina asked me to straighten out the shelves and clean the floors first thing. She usually did it herself the night before at closing, but she said customers were flying in and out all night long and she had a dinner party she had to go to, so she didn’t stay to clean the night before. I didn’t care anyway. The way I saw it, this was my job. I was being paid to straighten things up and mop the floor. The more things I did, the more I was distracted from
thinking too long about my dream. I grabbed the broom and started filling the mop bucket with soap and water from the back storage room.

With each thing that I straightened and cleaned, I knew I was getting closer to the time I would have to make my deliver rounds. I checked Karina’s office where the mail was dropped off to be sorted for the patients. I wanted desperately to leaf through and find any letters for Mr. Perry and throw them away. But I didn’t.

My heart raced as I stood there staring at all the letters and mail, I felt my face flush red, and I couldn’t think straight. Everything stopped. I stopped what I was doing and just stood there like a ghost, totally transparent. Only the presence of Karina’s stares made me aware of my surroundings.

“You must have had a really bad night, Jo. You’re barely hanging on,” she said from the counter.

The door to room 208 stood in front of me like an omen. Right before I left for my deliveries I managed to convince myself to check who had letters or other requests for the day. I was worried Karina would see what I was doing and that I would have to give another sorry excuse, but she was busy and didn’t even pay attention to anything I was doing.

My heart almost stopped when I saw Mr. Perry had a letter in a nice crisp white envelope from someone with the same last name. A family member, I guessed. And even though the trashcan was right beside Karina’s desk and I could
have accidentally bumped the letter into the garbage, I didn’t and instead packed it with all the other cards on my cart.

In front of his door, my lungs were filled with thorns of anxiety and it was making it hard for me to breathe. Flashes of my bare skin, the feel of his lips, the pleasure I felt, were rippling through my mind like a movie reel stuck on fast-forward. I just wondered why the dream had to feel so real. Why couldn’t it have been a dream that disappeared before I even realized it existed?

I raised my hand to the door and hesitated. Couldn’t I just pass over his delivery? Just this one day? But it didn’t matter. I would have to face him someday. One day wouldn’t make a difference.

My fist stayed there, suspended in time. The sound of footsteps made me aware of the awkward position I was in. I knocked on the door and heard the sound echo heavily on the door.

“Come in.”

His voice. His voice was so familiar.

The room was hot. The air was so thick I couldn’t breathe. I tried to steady my shaking hands, but couldn’t. The dream was too vivid, too real, and now that I was facing Mr. Perry, I was ashamed.

“Mr.”—I coughed—“Perry.”

“Please, come in,” he said, pleasantly.

I staggered in, pushing my clumsy cart in front of me, hoping I didn’t look too flushed of color or that my fear of being here wasn’t obvious.
“I hate admitting things like this,” Mr. Perry began and I froze, “But I look forward to your visits, Josephine.”

He called me Josephine. Just like in my dream.

“The family tries their best, but it still gets lonely in this hospital room twenty-four hours a day. It’s nice to see a new face come through.”

I still couldn’t breathe and I was starting to get scared that I would faint from lack of oxygen. Who was this Mr. Perry? Was he my mysterious caller? Why was he in my dream? Why is he being so nice all of a sudden?

I couldn’t do anything but clear my throat. “Sorry, Mr. Perry, but here’s your card. Did you want something from the gift store? I’m running a little behind and I have to get going.”

The moment I said this, something changed in his eyes. They became, somehow, more sad. They drooped so low, lower than I remember them ever being. And his entire body sunk into a pitiful demeanor.

“I’m sorry. It’s just. I’m having a bad day today,” I said. I stood there, waiting for a response, a dismissal, anything. Instead, I was left with Mr. Perry’s pitiful presence.

Then, he whispered something so silently that it was almost imperceptible, “Josephine. My dear, Josephine.”

His voice saying those words sent chills through my body. “Why are you calling me that? Why are you calling me Josephine?”

His lifeless body on the hospital bed looked like it was worse than dead. Slowly, with great effort, he raised his hand upward and I was reminded with
shocking déjà vu of my dream last night. Of Mr. Perry raising his young hands toward my bare and narrow shoulders. To kiss them, stroke them. Of my feelings…

“My daughter,” he managed to choke out. His voice was becoming stilted with grief. I noticed a gleam in his eyes that were tears. “My daughter. Her name was Josephine.”
“Her name was Josephine.”

I stood there with nothing to say. I didn’t know if it would be appropriate to say sorry, or that I understood his pain. Somewhere deep inside me, within the reaches of my subconscious, I felt like I already knew what he just told me. I felt like I knew there was another Josephine, and that this Josephine was his daughter. He had spoken about his wife and son many times in my visits, but he never brought up a daughter, and now I knew why. “Where is she?” I asked.

“Gone. Long ago.”

“How long?”

I didn’t have to question whether or not those were tears I saw forming in Mr. Perry’s eyes anymore. They were now rolling freely off his cheek, soaking into the hospital pillow below his head. “Long,” he said through tears. “About your age.”

She must have been a teenager. Sixteen, seventeen, eighteen. I already knew this. I felt this. I knew this before he told me.

“How did,” I began, but hesitated, “how did she die?” I knew after I asked this question that I was being extremely rude. But just like how I somehow intuited the other information, I also knew that Mr. Perry’s Josephine was dead, and did not have a peaceful death. The words blurted themselves out before I had time to censor myself.
There was no reservation left. Mr. Perry burst into sobs before me, and I felt worse about myself than ever before. Why did I say that? Most importantly, how did I know that? I looked at the man, the withering man before me. The thick feel of the stagnant air came back all of a sudden and I was fully aware of where I was. I was startled that I was having this conversation.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, I managed to decipher a slight nod from Mr. Perry. His wavering voice broke through the sobs. “Please,” he said. “Please, go. I can’t stand thinking about her.”

There was nothing left for me to do but to leave. I knew there was nothing I could say to make the situation better and so I swam through the thick mud that was now encompassing this room. I managed to move myself and my cart toward the door, and as I exited the room, Mr. Perry’s echoing cries still reverberated.

I stood in the hallway, still trying to steady my breathing and forget about what had just happened. The dream, this encounter, the voice, his daughter’s death, the sharing of names. I couldn’t make sense of it all. I didn’t want to. Even with the door closed now, I thought I could still hear Mr. Perry sniffle through his tears. I wanted to run away, but my feet were somehow buried in cement.
Chapter 8

I continued seeing Mr. Perry nearly every day, despite the successively creepy encounters. I had never told Karina what happened from the very beginning, and so I had no excuse to just stop visiting the man. That would mean I’d have to slack off on my job, and I didn’t want to get reprimanded, or worse, fired, because this man happened to frighten me. I was being silly and I didn’t want this to overcome me.

Seeing him had become habit, and I almost forgot about his irrational anger, when he unexpectedly lashed out at me again.

I was bringing him a lunch—something that I didn’t normally do, but when the other staff was busy, sometimes Karina told me I could help out where I was needed. So, that day, with a lot of staff members out sick due to a bug, I was delivering meals. And it was just like delivering letters, though I got a lot more complaints.

Mr. Perry wasn’t looking good, and I could tell this right away when I looked at him. If possible, his skin looked grayer. He looked more frail and thin. I was almost startled by his appearance.

“Hello,” I offered, softly.

But he didn’t reply, or look in my direction.

So, I tried again. “I brought lunch today. The lunch ladies needed extra help. A lot of people seem to be out sick.”
When I got nothing in return again, I took this as my cue to leave the lunch and exit. So I gently placed the still steaming food tray on the bedside table. I frighteningly had a momentary thought that Mr. Perry might be dead, but then I saw him blink his eyes.

I was so paranoid now that he might be dying—he looked so pathetic and weak and so unlike himself—that I knew I couldn’t leave without first making sure he was okay. He hadn’t uttered one word to me, or even looked in my direction.

I tried talking at first, coaxing him to tell me he was okay, but he just wouldn’t answer. I tried reasoning with him, threatening even to call someone else in, but nothing I said mattered to him. It was like I was a ghost.

In desperation, I grabbed his wrist to feel for a pulse. It was the only place where I knew where to locate the veins of pumping blood, but this was a big mistake. I knew this as soon as I touched him.

Immediately, I sent him into a frenzy. He flailed his arms and legs, screamed at me to leave him alone, and even pulled out some of the wire connected to the monitors that might have been keeping him alive. In all this mess, he even tipped over the tray of hot food onto the floor.

He looked like a shrunken beast, but was like a wild, untamed animal. I couldn’t believe what was happening.

I ran out of the room and quickly called down the hall at a nurse for some help. The man came, jogging half of the way. Maybe he saw the desperation in
my eyes, or heard the quiver in my voice. Whatever is was, I was grateful that he was coming to rescue me.

“He pulled some cords,” was all I could say at the moment. I thought this was the most important thing to mention.

When the nurse surveyed the room, he signed heavily and mumbled, “Not again,” under his breath, but I still heard it. So it had happened before, these tantrums, I thought to myself. Maybe I wouldn’t be blamed for this mess.

On the phone, the nurse called for some help and while he began to work on the monitors, I picked up some of the food and put it back on the tray.

“That slut!” Mr. Perry shouted at me from his bed, his eyes now wide and glaring at me with hatred. “That slut tried to seduce me!”

I was horrified, and this must have shown on my face, because the male nurse looked at me with pity.

“I’m so sorry. It’s the medication we’ve been giving him.” He looked back at a wire he was trying to reconnect, then said to me, “Are you Nurse Weaver’s daughter? The one in the gift shop?”

I nodded, still silent and shocked.

“I really wish they didn’t make you do things like this. You’re far too young.”

Even though the nurse was excusing me and not pointing the blame at me, I didn’t tell him how everything happened when I tried to take Mr. Perry’s pulse, and only then did he explode into this hot mess. Mr. Perry was still screaming
some obscene words, but they were less animated now, as if the reel was slowly winding down to a halt.

“I think you should leave now,” the nurse told me, trying to say it as calmly as possible. “I think that’s best for the situation right now.”

I wanted to ask him before I left if I was going to get in trouble. I wanted to ask if he would tell this to Karina or my mother, but I wasn’t brave enough to question him. Plus, I was still scared Mr. Perry would betray me and say that I touched his wrist, trying to get his pulse. I didn’t know if I was allowed to touch patients at all, even if it was trying to make sure he was okay. Maybe I had broken an important rule.

I rushed out of the room and into the closest restroom. I was shaken and had to calm down. When I felt okay enough to speak without a quiver, I called my mom on her cell phone, hoping that she wasn’t too busy to pick up. When I heard her pick up on the other end, my relief was audible.

“Mom,” I said, and though I tried to help it, I started crying.

Later that day, after my shift was done, my mom drove me home. I don’t think her shift was over, but she must have asked if she could leave early to bring me home.

“Jo, what in the world happened today?” My mother’s voice was so filled with empathy, that I realized that I loved her and was grateful she took off from work to drive me home.
I told her everything that happened. How I thought Mr. Perry might have been dying, and so I reached out to take his pulse. And later when the nurse came, how I was afraid that I caused the whole outburst and would get in trouble.

“Oh, Jo,” she said, her voice still sympathetic. “You did nothing wrong. You were just trying to help that deplorable old man.”

I’ve never heard my mother insult one of the patients like that, and it took me aback. I almost felt like I needed to defend the man, and tell my mother that he was all right most days.

“Don’t get yourself too down about this. What the nurse said was true. We changed some of his medications, and that can have adverse side effects. But that doesn’t excuse him from insulting my daughter like that. I am positive he had enough common sense to know what he was doing and saying.”

She sighed as we pulled up to a stop sign. But instead of continuing on, my mother stopped in the middle of the road and looked at me. “Maybe I’ll ask Karina if you can just stop going to see Mr. Perry. What do you think?”

I didn’t know why, but I didn’t like this suggestion at all. It felt childish to have my mother talk to my boss like that. But really, I finally admitted to myself, I didn’t want to stop seeing Mr. Perry.

“No, I think that will make me seem weak. Like somehow he won.” I knew it was a strong answer, and that my mother probably wouldn’t push the matter.
She slowly put the car back in drive and we were pulling up to our house.

“I know you like to act strong, Jo,” she said, “But if it ever becomes too much, it’s not a weak thing to help yourself out of an unhealthy situation.”

I nodded my head, and we were both now getting out of the car. A nap would be a great thing right now, I thought.

Because of my determination to be strong, I was back to work the next day, and again I kept everything from Karina. So, when some mail needed to be delivered to Mr. Perry, I took it silently like a soldier off to the front line in the mist of the worst conflict in history.

I made a vow to myself that I would ignore everything he did or said. I would walk in, drop off the mail on the closest surface I could find, and then run out of there like my life depended on it. I didn’t care about being rude or what other people would think.

Beyond all luck, he was asleep when I entered, and so sneaking quietly in and out was accomplished without any mishaps.

“Jo? Hey, Jo!” It was Sarah calling out to me right when I exited Mr. Perry’s room. At this specific moment, I didn’t want to talk to anyone.

“You look like you just a ghost.” She said as she walked closer, a wild smile on her face. Immediately, I grew jealous. Jealous of whatever it was that was making her smile. Clearly she was happy about something while I was still suffering through everything that had been happening. “Oh,” she said, standing next to me now, and noticing my scowl. “Bad customer, huh?” She looked up at
the room number. “208. Mr. Perry. He can be an unstable one. But I guess you know that now, right? Look, just shake it off. Don’t you have grandparents?”

I nodded.

“And lemme guess—they’re a little off their rocker. Crazy, right? All old people are. Someday we’ll be the same way.”

Again, I nodded.

“Just gotta get used to it. Understand it’s just the way life is written, ya know?”

I didn’t nod. Not this time.

“Jeez, girl. Really beat you up, didn’t he? Why don’t you come over today? No weed, I promise. Just you and me.”

I looked at Sarah, still smiling a sobering grin. Just us. No weed.

“Okay,” I staggered. “Same time?”

“You got it. See you then.” As she walked off I watched the strings of her overalls sway as they dangled, detached, behind her back. For a moment I was hypnotized, but then everything came flooding back and I remembered I still had to make it through the day.

The thick swampy atmosphere from the last few days continued to follow me and I continued to have a hard time focusing on even the simplest of tasks. Everything was cloudy, filtered. Karina noticed, but passed my behavior off as a “teenager” day and didn’t ask any questions. At two o’clock I left straight for
home and collapsed on the couch. Just in case, I made sure to pull the connection to the phone line. I didn’t want to be worried about anything else today.

When I woke up, I was soaked in sweat, unsure of where I was. When my haze lifted, I realized I was on the living room sofa, in my house. Everything was dark. I couldn’t help but feel like I was somewhere else. Somewhere different. Something felt off.

I retraced my steps to try and gather my thoughts. Everything at work was terrifyingly awkward. When I finally left, I walked straight home in a daze. I unplugged the phone…

The phone. I shivered. Thinking about the phone immediately sent panic through my body. Was he here? Could he be here? Did he know I unplugged the phone? Was he watching?

“Hello?” I called out into the house, though I knew no one would answer. My voice echoed off the empty walls, and I suddenly wondered what time it was. Slowly, very slowly, I raised my body off the couch just enough to see the wall clock hanging in the kitchen. Six-fifteen. I was supposed to meet Sarah shortly after her shift ended at five.

“Hello?” I tried one more time. I realized that hearing my voice was making me less afraid. Just slightly. I wished my parents were home. I still felt like there was another presence here and that I wasn’t alone. I needed to call Sarah.
I forced myself to get up and walk over to the phone. The entire time, I was frightened, thinking that at any moment something was going to reveal itself. I was still shaking when I plugged the phone back in.

Then it rang.

I started breathing hard, paralyzed. I wondered if I should even risk picking up the phone. For a third time: “Hello?” I said into the receiver.

“Jo!” It was Sarah’s voice on the other side. I was relieved. “Just checking where you are. Thought you might have forgotten about me.”

“Sarah. Thank God it’s you.”

“What’s the matter?”

“I guess I like scaring myself for no reason.” I laughed and hung up.

I knocked on the same faded brown door as the time before. Three sharp knocks. I looked around. If she didn’t answer within a few minutes, I’d knock more vigorously. But she eventually came to the door and let me in.

The house was still musty and unkempt. I wondered where all the animals were since the place reeked so badly of their stench. Maybe her grandmother had hoarded pets, and the smell was leftover from them. I wondered morosely if the stench was actually the smell of her own death. Didn’t Sarah tell me she inherited the house after her grandmother passed away? I wanted to hold my nose again but soon I got used to the smell. Just like I got used to the smell at the hospital.

“Drink?” she asked when I walked in. I walked in still sweaty from my sleep and from walking around outside. I sat down on the sofa, brown and musty
like the rest of the house, and started watching an indiscriminate TV show, trying to relax. There was a man with an obvious comb over on the screen talking about the dangers of the town’s drinking water after some sewage leaked into the supply. I said nothing, but accepted the glass when she handed it to me, took a gulp, and thought nothing of the man on the TV.

So…” she began, “What’d he do to you?”

At first I had no idea what she was talking about.

“You looked really shaken up after visiting that Mr. Perry guy,” she said.

I another took a sip of water from the glass and flipped through channels with the remote. It had an unpleasant taste, but I didn’t mention this. “Oh,” I said, not knowing when or how to begin. “I don’t know."

“C’mon, Jo. Spill. Did he curse you out? Was he a pervert?”

I decided to play it safe. I took another big gulp from my glass to stall time. “He was creepy.”

“Old men,” Sarah said, shaking her head. “Guys never change, you know that? Horny until the day they die.” She took a sip of her own drink. “You can’t let that stuff bother you.”

“I know,” I said. The background noise of the TV was filling in the void of our conversation. I wasn’t ready to tell her the truth, nor was I eager to open up all my secrets. After all, we had just started becoming friends and I wasn’t sure how much she would accept or reject.
Sarah set her glass on the table next to the sofa and got up. I didn’t move. I didn’t even glance over to see what she was up to. Next thing I know, her hands are on my shoulders, massaging, working my tired muscles.

“Boy, you are tense. Try to loosen up. That drink I gave you should help.”

“What’s in it?” I asked, now intrigued as to why it tasted funny.

“Does that matter?”

I realized then, at that moment, that it didn’t matter. She could have put anything in the drink, I didn’t care. I was too tired to care. And if she had offered me weed, I thought to myself, I probably would have smoked that, too.

Her hands felt great on my back. I closed my eyes and tried to relax. Little by little, I started to feel all my tension slithering up my spine and releasing out of my body through Sarah’s hands. Her fingers were like filters, drawing away the negative and leaving a purer form.

“Doing the trick?” she asked after a little while. I didn’t answer, but continued to relax.

Negative waves continued to flow out of my body and into Sarah’s hands. I was starting to believe her hands were miraculous.

I almost felt completely cleansed when she stopped. “I practice a little bit of, what should I call it?” She was looking up at the ceiling. “Magic.”

I wanted to laugh, but she was being serious. “Was that what you were doing right now? Magic?”

“Something like that. I’m not sure what to call it. But I have special powers with things.”
“I did actually feel you pull all my tension away,” I said, still incredulous of what Sarah was saying. “Was that the magic?”

“Good. You caught on. Sometimes people never do. Or maybe they just don’t want to admit anything. Afraid they might appear crazy.”

I touched my shoulders where she was rubbing, almost as if I might find a hole where everything left my body. “How do you do it?”

“Practice. Maybe I was born with it. I don’t know.” She smiled at me. “I found out years ago. That I can manipulate all the bad stuff inside of people”

“You’re being serious? You actually have…powers…or something that made you manipulate the tension I was feeling?”

“Something like that. It’s hard to explain.”

I stared at her and wondered if she was testing to see how gullible I could be.

“Don’t act so shocked, Jo,” she said. “You’re looking at me as if I’m lying.”

“I’ll tell you one thing. Magic or not, whatever you did really worked.”

A bright smile appeared on her face, as if she were basking in pride from the compliment. “When did you learn how to do this?” I asked.

Her smile now gone. Sarah sighed and I could tell that the question was a wrong one to ask.

“You don’t have to say anything if you don’t want to,” I offered.

“If I tell you,” Sarah said, “You can’t tell anyone. I haven’t really explained my power before. Or whatever you want to call it.”
Of course I promised. I had no one to tell and no one who would care to
know. With the TV still on at low volume, she began to explain how she was born
an only child to a doctor and his wife who was also her father’s personal assistant.
Her father set out to start his own practice almost immediately after graduating
from medical school. Hospital work was too fast-paced for him and he liked being
in more control of his schedule.

Sarah’s mother didn’t start working for her father until a few years into his
practice. It was successful, despite having no experience on how to run a private
practice, and her father needed the extra help. When Sarah’s mother interviewed,
she had little experience and was still working on her degree in art, but her beauty
won her father over (that’s how her father always told the story, Sarah said. She
thinks he told it this way because it always made her mother smile) and he hired
her as his personal assistant. A year or so later they were married. Another year
goes by and Sarah was born.

“I must have heard this story a hundred times, so sorry if I sound like I’m
getting bored,” Sarah cut in. But I was glued to the story much more than I was
interested in a stranger with a comb over talking about drinking water.

“Growing up, I always wanted a little brother or sister and would beg my
parents for one. I don’t remember exactly how old I was, but from my farthest
memory, I always knew my parents didn’t want any more kids. One was enough,
they said.
“The excuse was always something cheesy, like how I was the only child they could ever love and they wouldn’t know how to love another child as much as they loved me,” Sarah said.

“As I got older, I slowly realized that this was due to my parent’s workaholic lifestyle. They were completely unwilling to compromise their careers.

“I spent most of my childhood with a full-time nanny. She would be there when I woke up, she fed me, played games with me—did everything a parent would normally do. Really, she was more like a mother to me than my real mother. All my parents provided me were a check to pay the bills and the nanny every month and a promise to always tuck me in at night.” Sarah scoffed.

“Sometimes this would be as late as midnight. I would hear the creak of the front door hinges and whispers between my parents. I remember that my heart rate would increase, knowing that in a few minutes they would be in my room, kissing my forehead while I pretended to be asleep. I never woke up to hug them or tell them I missed them. I just pretended to be asleep. I think I was afraid of something.” She paused, as if telling this story was bringing up bad memories, and I almost offered for her to stop if it was too much. Then she continued.

“Eventually, I started school. That’s when I figured out I have this, this power.

“All of a sudden, I went from having no one but my nanny to play with, to friends my own age. It was strange and exhilarating, and it was also everything I had hoped for when I was younger—I had about twenty other brothers and sisters!
Teasing and punching, pulling and pinching—everything was about touching, touching, touching.

“I realized later that I only began to notice my ability in school because I couldn’t feel the adults. Their bodies were too big, and I couldn’t feel what they were keeping inside. But the children were a different story. Even the slightest touch would lure out some kind of emotion.

“I didn’t really know what was going on, not completely,” Sarah said. “Not until I started reading some witchcraft books.”

“Witchcraft?” I asked, confused.

“I know. I hate telling people that. It sounds evil, doesn’t it? But it explained a lot about myself in a way. And my condition.

“If a person devoted herself strongly enough to practicing witchcraft they could eventually possess the ability to capture the souls of others. You know how witches are supposed to possess other people? It’s like that, except the witch isn’t inhabiting another body, they’re using their own.”

“But that’s not really what you were doing to me,” I said. “I didn’t feel like I was getting possessed. I actually felt like part of me was being released.”

“Oh, c’mon, Jo. Why do you like ruining all my fun?”

I was shocked. “I…wasn’t trying…I just don’t think witchcraft has anything to do with this”

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” she answered quickly. “Don’t be so serious all the time.
“Think about it,” she told me. “Practicing and devoting your life to the craft is only part of the equation. To do what I can do also takes a certain disposition. Mostly, being born into it. My father’s a doctor. If he discovered this power the same age I did, he probably thought he could heal people. He probably thought he could save the world just by the touch of his hands.”

A healing touch. Whatever it was that Sarah possessed was probably the closest thing to it. “What exactly did you take from me? When you did that?”

“Nothing. Not really.”

“Not really?”

She sighed again. I realized then how hard something like this would be to explain to someone, especially since I was questioning everything she was saying. “I just took what you would give me. What you wanted to throw away. Garbage, unwanted baggage, that sort of stuff.”

“And I gave you some of my tension.”

“Exactly. Some people give me their sadness, some their tiredness. Whatever the body is trying to get rid of, I help draw it out.”

“And I was trying to get rid of my anxiety.”

“Exactly.

“So,” Sarah said after a slight pause. “I told you my story, I think it’s only fair to tell me what happened to you.”

I took a deep breath. The program on the TV had changed from the news to a scheduled show. “You already guessed what happened. Mr. Perry just sort of made me feel uncomfortable today. Don’t you already know this?”
“I can’t see what’s going on in your head, Jo. That’s mind reading. Something completely different than what I can do.”

I tried to think of a good lie that would get her to stop asking questions. I couldn’t tell her about the dream, about his daughter’s name, about the way sounds like the man on the phone. No way.

“He creeps me out. I already said that.”

“Yeah, but what exactly did he do?”

I shook my head. I wanted something to say that would make her forget the question, but nothing came to mind.

“Okay, fine. You don’t have to tell me. I get it,” Sarah eventually said after the silence.

“Sarah, it’s not like that.” She was the one who invited me to her house after seeing I was distressed and now all I was doing was avoiding her. “I just,” I paused. “Can’t yet.”

“Want to know what I know about Mr. Perry?” she asked.

I nodded, thankful for the change. “They tell me Mr. Perry’s a registered sex offender. His favorite targets? Teenage girls.” Sarah was looking straight at me with her brown eyes opened wide, as if she were frightened. She was all seriousness now. “They say he calls them up. That’s how it all starts. First saying he has the wrong number, then slowly working his way in, making them comfortable by talking to him.”

I shivered, but tried not to show her that I was getting uncomfortable.

“Who is ‘they’?”
“Gossip. I hear it all over the hospital. I have no idea who started it, but I definitely believe it. That guy always gave me a weird feeling.”

I nodded.

“I know. It’s cruel. To be honest, I don’t think Mr. Perry is an ex-sex offender. He just seems like too nice an old man. Sure, I believe he has bipolar disorder, but like I said earlier, what old person doesn’t? Gossip makes the world go round. Sad, but true.”

“So this stuff about Mr. Perry. It’s not true?”

“I didn’t say that,” she said. By now our drinks were gone, other than the ice melting at the bottom on the glass. She interrupted to ask if I wanted anything else, but I declined. I wanted her to keep telling me about the gossip she heard about Mr. Perry. “So what’s he doing? Calling you every day?”

“Hah, nooo,” I said a little too enthusiastically. “Not at all. No way. How would he even know my phone number?”

“Oh my God. I can’t believe it. He is calling you.”

“I never said that! Don’t add me to your gossip ring!” I said, suddenly defensive.

“I would never do that. I’m just here to listen, Jo. I want to help.”

“He’s a creepy old man just like every other patient is. If they’re not sleeping, they’re looking at me with these strange judgmental eyes. Mr. Perry is not calling me. We don’t have something secret happening on the side. Okay?”

I adjusted my now shaking legs to make it less apparent how mad I was getting. I felt like she was trying to insinuate that some weird and perverted
relationship was forming between Mr. Perry and me. I realized then that it wasn’t too far from the truth. I was having strange dreams and he’d been acting stranger than usual, like calling me horrible names. Maybe Sarah was lying when she said she couldn’t read minds. If she could manipulate emotions, then why couldn’t she also read what was happening in my head. I didn’t understand why was she trying so hard to make me confess what went on in that room every day between Mr. Perry and me.

Sarah was brushing my hair out of my face. I was shocked by the gesture, but I didn’t want to stop her. Immediately, I was reminded of my dream, letting Mr. Perry do whatever he wanted even though something felt off. Her fingers slid gently through my hair, her fingers barely grazed my forehead. “Reading my mind?” I asked, paranoid now.

“I told you I can’t do that,” she answered with annoyance.

“I’m not sure I completely believe you.”
Chapter 9

Sarah assured me that she couldn’t read minds. She can take away the garbage—stress, fear, sadness—but she couldn’t feel thoughts.

I didn’t stay much longer that night. Luckily I had an excuse when my mother called and demanded I come home before it got much darker. She even wanted to come and pick me up in the car, but I begged her not too. How humiliating.

As I walked home, everything about the day permeated my thoughts and I couldn’t think about anything else. Sarah’s sorcery or whatever she called it, the gossip about Mr. Perry being a sex offender who calls young women on the phone. My head was spinning.

The rumor Sarah told me couldn’t be just a coincidence, I thought. It just couldn’t. Rumors get spread thin until it’s something unrecognizable, but they all start with a premise. One that is usually correct. Maybe Mr. Perry is a phone stalker. Or maybe just a pervert. Or maybe this all got started because he looked at girls with a kind of strange hunger, like the time I first met him when he analyzed my body head to toe.

I had to see if it was true.

My laptop sang its introduction chorus when I booted it on. I typed Perry into the search bar, scrambling to remember if I knew Mr. Perry’s first name. I raced through memories of charts, headers on envelopes, any kind of medical documentation that would provide me with the information.

In front of Perry on the search bar, I typed Adam and hit enter. Web pages displayed on the screen and I scanned the information. A man named Adam Perry ran his own photography business. Another was an English drummer, another an Australian rugby player. I moved on to the next page. Nothing about the old Adam Perry, the one I knew was sitting right now in a hospital bed, were on these pages. I decided to take a different approach. This time, I looked up local sex offenders. The website I found gave me the option to search by area or name. I put Adam Perry into the box and hit enter. A Michael Perry from Colorado appeared on my results page. No Adam Perry. Not even in another state. I sighed and decided this was the end of my detective work for the night. That solves that.

I wanted to let Sarah know what I found out right away so that she would stop thinking that something was going on between Mr. Perry and me. I grabbed the phone, and then thought better of it. What would she think if she knew I looked up Mr. Perry the minute I got home? I didn’t even bother to take off my shoes, my purse was strewn carelessly on my bed with the contents now spilling out. This would be yet another indication that something was up, something weird was going on. I wanted to explain that my relationship with Mr. Perry had nothing to do with the real world. I put the phone aside and decided I would talk to Sarah in the morning. I would tell her I was so freaked out I just had to check when I got home after her place. At least now the rumor could be put to rest. Mr. Perry wasn’t a sex offender. At least, he’s not registered online as one.
Chapter 10

My mother’s shift as a nurse at the hospital began just an hour before mine began in the gift shop, and so I agreed to a car ride even though it would mean I would have to wait around for a while until nine a.m.

“You can hang out with me,” my mother teased as we were getting ready to leave, knowing that would be the last thing I would want to do. “C’mon, I’ll introduce you to everyone I work with.”

“Isn’t that against some kind of rules?” I suggested, trying to nicely back out of the situation. I grabbed a few snacks to eat from the pantry, and shoved them in my purse.

“If there were rules, then why do they let them slide for bring-your-kids-to-work day?”

I was still yawning fitfully from having just woken up when I opened and slammed the car door shut in the passenger side of my mother’s white sedan, ready to leave for the hospital. She already worked in such a sterile environment, so I didn’t understand it when she requested her car be white when my parents went around car shopping a few years ago. It was so plain and boring, but she claimed that white cars were proven to be in less car accidents than cars of any other color. Adventurously, I had asked why. Supposedly, some study suggested it was because white cars reflected light more effectively, thereby making them easier to see in blind spots. Whatever, it was enough to win my mom over and she bought the car.
As I tried to stifle my multiple yawns, my mother sparked up a conversation during our car ride.

“So then, what are you going to do before your shift starts?” she asked.

Even though the question was kind and innocuous, I couldn’t help but feel annoyed. Maybe it was because I was still tired. “I don’t know, Mom. I don’t really care. Maybe I’ll sleep in one of the lounge chairs.”

She tsked at me, as if this was supposed to dissuade me, but she didn’t say anything about it and just moved on to another topic.

“What do you like your job?”

“Uhh, yeah. I guess. There’s nothing really to dislike,” I lied.

I couldn’t really give a straight answer because I didn’t know how I felt either way. The job was just a job, and I didn’t think it was important. I didn’t care about reading to patients, or helping nurses, or smiling politely all the time. I definitely didn’t care about running into the strange patients like Mr. Perry. So, I still woke up early in the morning and showed up ten minutes early for my shift, but there was no heart in it for me. I just thought that’s what a first time job was like.

“Are you meeting new friends?”

I was getting really annoyed now, and not trying to hide it. “Yeah, I mean, there’s Sarah. Maybe some of the other guys in maintenance. They’re nice.”

“Guys?”

“Yeah.”

“Any that, you know, care about?”
“What, Mom?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s just about that age for boyfriends. Just wanted to check.”

“Ew, Mom. C’mon. Those guys are gross.”

“So then no boyfriend?”

“Mom!”

And to my great annoyance, I looked over and she was smirking. As if this was a joke that she found immeasurably humorous.

And while she was smirking and giggling to herself, the only image that kept popping up in my head was my dream with Mr. Perry and the disturbance I still felt inside myself. I wanted to cry and shout and jump out of the car and tell my mom to just drive away without me, but instead I looked resolutely out of the car window to try to hide the fact that I was so angry that tears forming in the corners of my eyes.

I don’t think it worked though because then my mom apologized and told me she was just joking around.

“It’s fine. I know,” I said. “I’m just tired.”

“So you are a teenager after all,” she replied, and then we turned into the hospital parking garage.

I really didn’t know what I was going to do before my shift started. I was somewhat serious when I said I wanted to sleep in the lounge, but then I thought
better of it. It would be embarrassing for someone to see me hunched over like one of the waiting fathers, exhausted from anticipating the birth of their child.

So, to the surprise of my mother, I actually did take her up in following her around during her shift. I was secretly grateful that she didn’t say anything sarcastic because then I would have just walked away and paced the building aimlessly. Instead, she took me under her arm and led me along.

It felt a little childish to be glued to my mother for those few minutes. Especially since for most of the time she was looking at charts and making comments to the other nurses and doctors. I mostly just stood in the shadows where I thought I was out of the way until my mother looked up and introduced me to whoever was standing close by.

“She’s working in the gift shop this summer,” she told everyone I met.

I nodded dutifully in agreement, and then everyone was pretty much on their way.

After thirty minutes of this, I had enough and walked over to the gift store early. I knew Karina would be there, and sure enough, when the bells rang as the door opened, there she was already in the process of filling the cash register with money.

“Wow, Jo. Did you run here today?”

I laughed and answered no, that my mom had driven me.

“Oh, the eight a.m. shift.”
I promised myself that from now on, even if my mom did offer to drive me, I was going to walk. There was no point in wasting an hour wandering around in a hospital.

I saw Sarah down the hall that day at work and waved her down. She was dressed in scrubs with her hair pulled back and no make-up. She looked homely, completely and utterly plain.

“Hey, girl,” she called out to me cheerily and I was relieved that she wasn’t bitter from last night.

“Sarah,” I said, getting right to the point. “I looked up Mr. Perry last night. Turns out he’s not a sex offender. So that thing about him calling up teenaged girls is probably wrong.” Sarah gave me a strange look with a smirk crawling up the edges of her lips.

“What?” I said, exasperated.

“You looked him up?” She was giggling now. My face was turning red, I could feel it.

“I had to. You were creeping me out last night with that story.”

“Didn’t clear away enough of that anxiety, did I?”

“It’s not that.”

“It’s not?” she said.

The scenario I had planned in my head was shredded into tiny pieces the minute Sarah laughed at me. I seemed like an over-precautious, scared little girl
who was too paranoid about what people thought or said about me. Sarah had no way of knowing my dream, but I felt it necessary to protect myself.

“I’ve been getting—” I took a deep breath. It was too late to turn back now. I had half the sentence out. “I’ve been getting phone calls.”

More laughs. I knew I sounded ridiculous. “If you weren’t getting phone calls, you’d be a recluse,” she said. “I’m sure at least your mom calls you every day.”

“You know what I mean,” I snapped. I was trying to be serious.

“Okay, okay. You’re getting phone calls. What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Anonymous phone calls. Only when I’m home alone. It’s the same guy every time,” I said. “At least, I think it is.”

Sarah finally got serious when I said this. Now instead of a smile, her lips formed a straight, tight line. She asked if I was being serious.

“Of course I’m serious!”

“How often?”

“Once a week. At least,” I said. “I haven’t really kept track.”

“Did you call the police?”

“How quickly this goes from a laughing matter into something so dead serious.”

“I mean it, Jo.”

I shook my head no. What would the police do? They would probably ask if the man was threatening me, or if I knew who it might be. No, sir. This man just calls every day when I’m home alone, tells me he has the wrong number, then
hangs up. I would get laughed at just like Sarah did a few minutes earlier. I’d just be wasting their time.

“Jeez, no wonder you got so scared last night,” she said. “Still, it’s probably not a big deal. Did you tell your parents?”

I nodded my head. “They don’t seem to care too much. Maybe they think I’m blowing it out of proportion. Maybe I am blowing things out of proportion.”

“Do me a favor?” she asked.

I told her, “Of course.”

“Start making a journal of when these calls happen. I mean, the exact time, date, what the guy said, any information at all.”

“Got it.”

“I can maybe,” she paused. “Help out.”

“Another special power?”

“Maybe. But keep that stuff quiet around here. I don’t want people starting crazy rumors about me, too.”
Dear _____,

I’m going to use you for a little while as a log journal. I’m screening my phone calls. Not all of them, just the ones from that man I’ve told you about. You know, the one who keeps calling saying he has the wrong number. Anyway, today was the first phone call so I have to hurry up and write it down before I forget what he said.

July 8, 2009 at 3:18 p.m. The conversation was as follows:

Me: “Hello?”

Him: A cough, then: “Is Judy home?”

Me: “No. You have the wrong number.”

Him: A clearing of the throat. “Pardon me. Sorry to bother you.”

Me: “Bye.”

And right before I hang up, he coughs. I swear, the cough sounded exactly like my name: Jo.

July 17, 2009 at 2:58 p.m. The conversation was as follows:

Me: “Hello?”

Him: “Jackie?”

Me: “I think you have the wrong number.”

Him: “Jackie Siegers?” A cough. “Are you sure?”

Me: “She does not live here.”

Him: “You sound an awful lot like her.”

Me: “You have the wrong number.”
He hangs up.

July 20, 2009 at 3:46 p.m. The conversation was as follows:

Me: “Hello?”

Him: A cough.

He hangs up.

July 25, 2009 at 4:02 p.m. The conversation was as follows:

Me: “Hello?”

Him: “Jill?”

Me: “Wrong number.”

Him: “Oh, pardon me.”

I hang up.

August 1, 2009 at 4:32 p.m. The conversation was as follows:

Me: “Who is this?”

Him: “Pardon?”

Me: “Who are you?”

Him: A clearing of the throat. “My name is [incoherent words]. I’m looking to speak with Jessica.”

I hang up.
Chapter 11

I handed Sarah the opened pages of my diary that was used as my log journal. “These are my records for the past three weeks or so.”

“And?” Sarah asked. I was sitting in her living room again, curled up on the couch. My visits have now become frequent and I was getting used to the smell and the general disarray I always found in the home. I was almost shocked when I visited and didn’t smell the pungent odor of pets. I thought maybe she had cleaned, hired deep cleaners for the carpets, but when I saw everything still looked the same I realized it was just because I had gotten used to it by being over so often.

She scanned the papers. “Five calls between July eighth to August first. About one per week. Did it sound like the same man?”

“I could bet my life on it.”

Sarah reached for the journal that I was keeping open with my thumb as the bookmark. I didn’t want her reading my other entries. I still hadn’t told her about my dream with Mr. Perry and that was just a few pages before this log. In order to seem the least bit suspicious, I let my diary go, praying that she wouldn’t want to turn any of the pages.

Her eyes looked intense as she continued reading what I had written. Each conversation had lasted no more than a minute, but I tried being as thorough as possible.

“Interesting stuff,” she said. “Did you notice all the “J” names?”
I grabbed the journal back and looked over the five entries. Judy, Jackie, Jill, Jessica. *Jessica.* All “J’s.” How could I have missed that?

“Think it’s a coincidence?” I asked.

“Hell no. Do you?”

I told her I was so nervous answering each phone call that I never realized the names. Each one sounded the same to me: not anyone who lived in my house.

“What’s with this last entry? He said his name?”

“I couldn’t hear it properly. It just sounded mumbled, garbled.”

“Anything like Adam Perry?”

“No. Not that I could tell.”

“Of course, that’d be too easy.”

Sarah’s eyes squinted as they looked over my entries one last time, looking for the smallest details that could give any clues.

“What can you do?”

She looked up at me with a questioning look.

“Any kind of special powers or anything?” I asked, smirking.

“It’s called my brain. Simple logic.”

I laughed. “Right.”

Sarah closed my diary and handed it back to me. Thank God. She didn’t try to read the rest. “Fine. I’ve still been working on it…this *power* as you call it. I’m not very good.

“Ever heard of a third eye?” she asked.

“Kinda. Like a sixth sense?”
“Exactly. One of those fancy phrases people attach to a number: third eye, sixth sense, nine lives,” she said. “Anyway, I’ve been working on mine. Trying to hone in on it. And I’m not going to call it one of those cheesy names.

“The plan is this, all these clues—your journal keeping—will entice my power to find who is calling.”

“Riiight.” I said, skeptically. “Have you ever done this before?”

She shook her head no. “I’m still honing the skill, remember?”

“So basically, this isn’t going to work.”

“How little faith you have.”

Maybe I did have little faith. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that it didn’t really matter. He wasn’t threatening me. He wasn’t even being perverted. His only crime was creepiness. I wasn’t too sure what the laws were governing the appearance of creepiness, but I was sure he couldn’t get arrested for it. “Maybe we should forget about this,” I said to Sarah. “What would finding the man prove, anyway?”

“It would prove who’s doing it.”

“And then what?”

“Then he goes to jail.”

“For calling me? For always getting the wrong number? Asking for a woman with a “J” name, then politely hanging up after an apology?”

“God, Jo. You’re so negative.”
When I saw Karina the next day, I decided to fill her on some of what had been happening. Not everything. I didn’t tell her about the dream. I just told her about the phone calls to see if she would tell me the same rumor Sarah told me about Mr. Perry.

“Every week? Only when you’re home alone?” she asked when I finished telling her about the calls.

I nodded.

“Are you sure no one else is getting these phone calls? Maybe your mom and dad are getting them, too.”

“No. No one else,” I said, though she had a good point. I never specifically asked them if the same thing was happening to them. I just assumed I was the only one, and that they would have told me if they were getting the same kind of phone calls, too.

“And you’re sure it’s the same man every time?”

Another nod.

“That’s strange, Jo. What with using only names that start with ‘J.’”

“I know it’s strange. That’s why I’m not sure what to do about it.” I was expecting her to mention the rumor about Mr. Perry at any moment, but that moment never came. I suddenly had the suspicion that the rumor was started by Sarah herself.

“You did tell your parents, didn’t you?”

I blushed a little and looked down at my feet. “I told them I got a few phone calls. I haven’t told them about these recent ones.”
“Why wouldn’t you tell your parents what’s happening?”

I thought about this and didn’t really know the answer. I haven’t kept everything away from them. They knew about the phone calls and didn’t really seem to be too bothered about it. “I can’t explain why,” I said, “But I just want to keep my parents out of this one. It’s not that big of a deal and I don’t want them making it into one.”

Karina gave me one of those motherly looks of concern, one that made it known that she would still go and tell my mother when she ran into her.

“Karina, please don’t tell my mom. It’s,”—I hesitated—“It’s important to me.”

Karina reached around and hugged me from the side. Even though the situation was somewhat awkward—being hugged by my manager in the middle of my shift—it didn’t take away from the comfort Karina offered.

“Okay, Jo. But only if you promise to fill me in on all the details. That way I can make my own call if I need to jump in.”

“I promise.”

I was thinking about what I just told Karina and why keeping information from my parents was something important to me. My mom already knew a little bit of what was going on with Mr. Perry. I told her about the incident when I tried to take his pulse, and what happened when he exploded and started calling me names. I had only mentioned the phone calls once over dinner, but I realized I wasn’t letting myself understand that the reasons why my parents might have seemed nonchalant was because I was the one who thought occurrences were non-
important. I was the one who dropped the subject, who insisted the calls were nonthreatening, who didn’t follow up to see if the calls came to anyone else. I was also the one who didn’t tell me parents the suspicious nature of the “J” names.

I loved my parents, and I cared about their well-being, I decided. That was why it was important that Karina not tell my parents what was going on. I kept picturing the shame in the father’s eyes, the fear in my mother’s face. I felt a lot of embarrassment in the way I had been acting around Mr. Perry. I definitely had shame about my dreams with Mr. Perry and how this fact was determining my actions in real life. As I helped Karina are the gift shop, I kept trying to convince myself that I needed to open up to my mother or father. They needed to know what was happening to me.

But no matter what I told myself, I just couldn’t do it.

Visiting Mr. Perry throughout my weeks at work didn’t get any easier from the first day after my vivid dream. Now that I knew his daughter had died when she was my age made me feel a little more remorse than disgust. I could see how heartbreaking it would be for anyone to come in contact with someone who reminded them of a loved one long ago dead. How melancholic he must feel, seeing me, reminding him of his daughter. His potential as my stalker, or as an ex-sex offender, were close to being forgiven in my mind at the times I was delivering various items to his room. How could I dislike someone so pathetic and weary?
After Sarah saw my logs of phone calls, she told me I needed to keep recording the instances when it happens. “But I need one more thing from you,” she told me.

I agreed before knowing what she wanted.

“I need you to talk to Mr. Perry. He’s our number one suspect. Get his story out there. His life, his daughter, his first job, whatever. I just need something bigger to work off.”

We planned out what I would do.

“Just one thing I want to know, Sarah,” I said. “That rumor about Mr. Perry. Are you sure you can’t read my mind?”

Though she was trying to hide it, I could see that she was trying to hide a smile. “I told you, Jo. I’m practicing this new skill, okay?

What was that supposed to mean? I thought.

Following our planned scenario in my head, I knocked on Mr. Perry’s door. I was just the same candy stripper from the gift shop, nothing suspicious, nothing different. I ran through the lines Sarah and I conceived: “No deliveries today, Mr. Perry, but can I get you something from the gift store?” The lines sounded rehearsed, but I was hoping he didn’t notice. I smiled as sweetly as possible, hoping that Mr. Perry would forget everything that happened between us recently, like I was trying to do at that moment.

He looked up at me in a longing way that I took to be regret. I wasn’t his daughter. I was alive and she wasn’t.
I gave him the packet of breath mints he wanted and I collected his change. I couldn’t stand still because I knew what came next in our plan of attack. If I hesitated any longer, I could lose my courage. I didn’t know if today was a good or bad day to be talking to Mr. Perry.

“You said you had a daughter named Josephine. She died when she was around my age.” I began the conversation with a statement, not a question. I had to act curious, not suspicious.

Mr. Perry nodded his head solemnly on his hospital pillow. I hated myself right then for opening up his old wounds. No doubt the man was thinking about his daughter every day of every waking hour since I arrived as a constant reminder of the girl. I was silently cursing Sarah in my head, blaming her for my lack of respect. But the words came out of my mouth, not hers. I had more control than I was giving myself credit for.

“She looked just like you,” he whispered, almost inaudibly. I wanted to run out of the room. I wanted to apologize for making him think about these things of his past, things I was sure have hurt him for many years. “No one knew.”

“Knew what?” I heard myself say, letting my curiosity interrupt the script Sarah and I had formed.

“Knew she was capable,” he said, taking a deep breath, “of doing that. Why did she feel like she had to kill herself? I still don’t know.”
Kill herself. I tried not to let my shock show. I didn’t know what to say that would seem like the right thing. Instead, I started mumbling a rant about depression and how it’s common and often goes undetected.

“Not my Josephine. She had the world on her side. Nothing to be sad about.”

I wanted to tell him that’s exactly what depression is—an unanswerable sadness. At least, that’s what I thought it was. But I kept my mouth shut. That wasn’t a part of our plan.

Ashamedly, the dialogue Sarah and I devised worked just like we thought it would. A simple inquiry sent Mr. Perry into a revelry of old memories and there I was, ready to take mental notes in order to report back to Sarah.

He was married at the age of twenty-two, his wife nineteen, he began telling me. When he ran away from his family, he found a good job in a children’s toy producing factory. They promoted him to manager no less than a year and a half after he started. A year after they were married (on the actual day of their first year anniversary, he pointed out) he and his wife found out they were expecting their first child. It was a boy. Daniel, they named him, after his grandfather. A few years later, Josephine was born, this time named after her maternal grandmother. For a while, the couple contemplated having a third child. His job was going well. They gave him a raise each year for being an good employee and also bribed him with hopes of someday being the store manager, owning the whole operation. By the time Josephine was three, they decided it had to be either now or never if they wanted more children. They decided on never.
“Remember I told you how I never wanted kids? Well, I already had one son and one daughter. Didn’t really think we needed another one.” They were perfectly content, and so they decided not to have any more.

“And that’s how it went,” Mr. Perry said. “Boring really. No house troubles, no wife trouble. Kids were good. Smart, too. Eventually got back in touch with my family, what with the kids being named after their grandparents. Things were good.”

Day after day Adam went in to his factory job, dressed in his manager’s uniform, and strode in like he was someone important. Looking the part was half the job, he said. If he didn’t look intimidating, no one would respect him. And for the most part, this worked. “I acted mean and tough,” he told me, laughing at the old memories,” But everyone secretly knew I was a softy.”

He would supervise production, take someone off the line who wasn’t pulling their part, and then usually place them in an easier position. He had to do the dirty work too: he was in charge of reprimanding employees who were always late to work, dressed inappropriately, or made rude comments to other employees. More often than not, when he called them into his office to threaten them with consequences, he ended up just laughing and talking, and they never got around to the bad stuff.

“All the perks of being a manager,” he said and laughed again. “Doubles as the personal therapist. Anyway, they always knew they could play the sympathy card with me.”
But Mr. Perry also had men who managed him. They would demand things of him: increase production, decrease hours, cut the slow workers, give more hours to the efficient ones. They were going to start cutting jobs soon. It would increase profitability that way. Make the machines do more work. If Mr. Perry could pull that off, it was only a matter of time before Store Manager became his title.

But he couldn’t do it the way they wanted it to be done. Like he said, he was a softy. He couldn’t lay off his employees. He knew who were the slow ones, and the ones other people didn’t care if they saw stay or go. But Mr. Perry knew them, and even had a relationship with them. He knew why they came in tired, wanted to leave early. It was because the factory wasn’t their lives. Other things took priority. He couldn’t blame them for that.

“A young man named Matt Dawson was one scheduled to be cut,” Mr. Perry recalled. “The kid rarely showed up on time, had sorry excuses. He blamed his car, his parents, the pets even, but never himself. A good for nothing worker, the bigger bosses said. Cut him. We’ll make more money that way.

“Matt was dirty. Greasy. An all around scary looking guy. He was young. No more than twenty years old. But he looked to be approaching his thirties, that was how hard life was treating him. Born to the poorest family in the neighborhood. I knew of the family, at least what I saw and heard for myself. Matt’s father never worked, and his mother hemmed clothing for a few dollars when her neighbors had the need. The boy grew up with hand-me-downs, two-sizes-too-big shirts, shoes, pants, you name it. So when it came down to firing
him, I felt bad for him. Even though I knew Matt was a poor worker, I just couldn’t do it. Every day I was getting pressured to the dirty work the other managers refused to do themselves. ‘Got friends in this place?’ they’d say. ‘Throw that out the window. Family? Them, too.’ The managers would preach worldviews like this at their morning reviews. Any personal relationships would have to be terminated for the sake of the company. Profit, profit, profit was the main goal and everything else was negligible.

“So,” he told me from his hospital bed. “I did what I was told. After all, I didn’t want to lose my job, too. I called Matt Dawson into my office a few days later. Everyone knew what was going on, so the workers were on edge. Suddenly friends started turning on friends and reporting even the most minor rule breaking if only to save their own necks. I felt bad that I had to humiliate my workers in this way, I really did, but there was no confidentiality, no room for privacy in an environment like that. So when Matt was called into my office, everyone—included Matt—knew what was coming before I even closed the door.

“‘Sit down, son.’ I said just like that. As stern as possible. No emotion.” Mr. Perry continued. “When he sat down in the chair opposite my desk, I sighed, looked at the poor dirty kid in front of me, and handed Matt his yearly review.

“‘Says here that you’re late often. Make excuses, don’t try to take personal responsibility,’ I told him. I wanted to keep conversation at a minimum to save both myself and the kid. When I looked up from the review I was reading, the young man in front of me was biting his nails and rocking slightly back and forth on the chair. When I tried to make eye contact, he couldn’t. His eyes were glued
on the concrete floor. Maybe he didn’t know how he was going to feed himself in
the week to come.

“So I continued: ‘Some of the other employees even put in a few
complaints toward you: making inappropriate comments, things like that.’ Then I
paused. ‘That right?’ I asked.

“A barely audible, ‘Y’sir,’ came as way of answer.

“‘I don’t want to have to do this, but I think you know what’s coming.’—
And he quietly nodded—‘This is going to be your last day, son. You can finish
out the day or just go home now,’ I told him.

“Because of the humiliation, I assumed that he would agree to take half
the day’s pay and perhaps finish out their day putting in applications all over
town. But afterwards, he just got up, did a sort of bow, and went straight back to
work. The humiliation didn’t bother him. Or else, maybe he just needed the
money that bad. He assumed it was the latter.

“When the bell rang at five, everyone packed up to go home. Still, no one
bothered Matt, and Matt bothered no one. Maybe he wasn’t fired after all, they
whispered among themselves. They were too scared to ask questions, and rightly
so. It was none of their business what happened in the kid’s life.

“As the factory was emptying, I kept an eye on Matt. Something about the
boy touched me. I felt more than guilty at what happened that afternoon.

“So when it was quiet enough and I thought no one was close enough to
overhear me, I walked over to the boy and quietly invited him to dinner. ‘Wife
always makes too damn much.’ I told him. ‘Come on and eat it then. I’d be doing us a favor.’

“I could see that Matt didn’t know what to do. Why would he eat at the house of the manager who just fired him? It seemed like a joke, another jab at what had already been the start of a bad day. But I was sincere at the time, and so finally he agreed to go. If anything, he was hungry.

“My wife did take a liking to the boy right off,” he recalled to me in his story. “I was telling the truth about there always being too much food and so the extra mouth did not seem like much.

“We all spoke congenially to each other, kindly adding Matt into the conversation. Though the situation was a bit odd, I remember that there was a constant smile on Matt’s face. That was one thing my family was always good at—making someone feel welcomed in our home.

“After dinner, my wife bundled up food for the boy to take home to his parents and invited him over for dinner the next night. Matt kindly refused, but she assured him that it would be no problem at all.”

At this point in the story, Mr. Perry let out a deep sigh. “Her insistence of having dinner with the family soon turned into a nagging request that I hire him back at the factory. She was also feeling strangely responsible for the boy’s well-being. She wanted me to tell my managers that I made a mistake. She thought that surely he couldn’t have been that bad of a worker. Not that sweet, kind boy who ate dinner with us.
“‘No,’ I told her. ‘No, no, no. Absolutely not,’” Mr. Perry told me.

“Begging my bosses to rehire someone I just fired, who was known as a poor worker, would have made me out to be a fool. I didn’t have that kind of power or sway, and I wasn’t willing to put himself out to dry.

“But she constantly begged me to do something about Matt’s situation.

“I couldn’t help it. The answer regarding the job at the factory was still no, and would always be no.

“Well, my one night of pity turned into dinner every night with my family, which then turned into giving the boy odd jobs around the house for a decent wage. My wife had finally convinced me”—more like forced him, he joked—“to somehow take care of the boy I fired. His wife still blamed me for the boy’s unemployment.

“I was hesitant at first. After all, I knew Matt was a spotty worker, hence why he was fired from the factory. But my hesitancy turned to hatred once I caught Matt flirting with Josephine soon after he started helping around the house. Got me livid, I tell you,” Mr. Perry commented, his face turning red just at the thought of these old memories. “I fed the boy and his family, and that was his thanks?”

“I slept fitfully after this, mostly because sometimes at night I thought I could hear the voice of a man outside, near Josephine’s window. It was my paranoia, I told myself, trying to act calm and reasonable. But the suspicion never lessened. So one night, I decided to tiptoe to his daughter’s room and listen carefully.
“With my ear against the cold wood door, there were no sounds, not even of my daughter peacefully snoring—she was a sound and quiet sleeper. I realized then, in that moment, sneaking around in my own house, how unreasonable I was being and went back to sleep.

“In the morning, I ventured to ask my daughter if she was thinking about getting involved with that scoundrel, but she assured me she would never lower her standards like that. ‘He’s no good for me, as far as I’m concerned,’ she had told me. What a relief it was for me to hear this. So I convinced myself that the voice I thought I heard was just an old creaking tree limb ready to fall off a dying tree. I brushed the incident away as a moment of weakness and continued with my life. Soon, Matt was told that we no longer needed his help and that he should find employment elsewhere.

“We were nice to him for too long, if you ask me,” Mr. Perry told me from his bed. “It was right about time he look for something else to do.”

“And so life went on normally, as far as I could tell. But a few months later, Josephine was found dead.”

I waited for Mr. Perry to compose himself as he struggled to tell me this part of the story. I was feeling sickly, like I was somehow partaking in a crime.

“January 12, 1961. I went to work in the morning. It was a Thursday. Always could wake up a little easier knowing the weekend was just a day and a half away,” Mr. Perry said, continuing to recall his story. “Wife calls around ten. Said something happened to Josephine. Said something bad happened.
“She was found in her closet, hung by one of my belts. It was my son Daniel who found her when he went to see why it was taking his sister so long to get ready for school. They usually walked together.

“She had everything,” he said, weeping now. “Everything. I don’t get it.”

Maybe she was pregnant, I thought suddenly. The idea popped into my mind like a flash fire that couldn’t be extinguished. The more I tried to push the idea away, the stronger it grew until it became near certainty.

It was obvious to me. Her scorn for her lover was to detract her parent’s suspicion. But she was in love with Matt. Mr. Perry’s paranoia was in fact Matt’s voice and not the groaning of a dying tree. He was visiting Josephine late in the night. They made love only in the moonlight. The only light they were free to love each other. The same eerie light that drove me deeper into the woods on the nights I couldn’t sleep.

“I know what people said,” he continued in an angry rasp, ending my thoughts on Josephine’s death. “I know what they said and I know you think the same. But she wasn’t like that. She would have had nothing to do with the boy. She was too good for him.”

How successfully the mind deceives.
Dear _____,

I am on another one of my night adventures. I’m on my rock in my secret hiding place, bathing in the silvery moonlight. Can I tell you something secret? Of course I can.

I’m pretending to be Josephine. The other Josephine. Mr. Perry’s daughter. I’m pretending to know how it feels to be loved. In an intimate kind of way. The way I felt when I had that dream.

The darkness helps guide these fantasies. I think she must have been like me. We share more than a name, more than our age. We share this secret: sneaking around at night. We slink around, not telling a soul what we’re up to. But we both know that at night, something else inside of us is awakened.

Poor Mr. Perry. Poor, poor Mr. Perry. Always living his life in sorrow. Blaming a child he has no right to blame. Denying a love that should never have been denied. Even Mr. Perry had sympathy for Matt once. Why, with the possibility of a relationship with his daughter, was he unwilling to accept the good he saw in him before?

I am only sixteen, Diary, and I have never been in love. I’ve had crushes on guys. Lots of crushes. The kind that make you act foolish, when all you want is to look cool. I giggle too much when I have a crush, and the butterflies are so strong, sometimes I get muscle cramps. But crushes evaporate, disappear into nothingness after just a few weeks. That’s the difference, you see? Crushes go away, love is forever.
To preserve their love forever, to mask her shame of her growing child, she had to end her life. She was done with the ridicule. She had to go to a place where her family would be accepted.

I know this, Diary. I somehow I believe that this is the reason why she was capable of killing herself. I don’t know how I am so sure of this, but I just have this weird feeling, you know? Maybe I have powers just like Sarah, but I haven’t realized it until now.

P.S. I’ve been thinking. Maybe I am Josephine. Maybe I am Mr. Perry’s daughter. In some alternate universe, I like to pretend we are the same person.
Chapter 12

I ended up telling Sarah the entire story when she invited me over later that night. She wanted to hear everything while it was still fresh in my head. Did I write it down in my journal? she asked desperately, but I said no. I should have, but it seemed inappropriate to jot down notes like I was going to write a book about the death of his daughter.

I wasn’t too far into the retelling of Mr. Perry’s history when I started to feel guilty. I didn’t care anymore if he was the one calling or if while doing so he happened to mention female names that start with a J just like mine. He wasn’t harming me. And in this whole process, I felt like I was hurting Mr. Perry.

“That sounds like the voice of a quitter,” Sarah told me after I expressed how I felt. She was more invested in this than I was.

“Then I’m a quitter,” I replied. I wanted to make my message clear. I didn’t want to probe into Mr. Perry’s life anymore.

“It’s not probing,” she said, looking for an excuse. “He wanted to tell you his story. You were a willing set of ears.”

I shrugged my shoulders. What’s the use of arguing? As long as I wasn’t the target of our next scheme, Sarah could do whatever she wanted.

“Right. So start from the beginning. Don’t leave out any details. Even if you think they’re small.”
I told her about Mr. Perry’s marriage, job, children. I told her he had a perfect life, a bonafide cookie cutter family living in middle class suburbia. It was enough to make anyone sick. Or else question the reality of it all.

“Obviously, something was wrong. Why would his daughter go and off herself otherwise?”

So then I told her about Matt. How he was poor and a sloppy worker. How Mr. Perry thought he misjudged him the first time around and decided to give him another chance at his own expense. I told her exactly what Mr. Perry told me. I decided pointedly to leave out my opinion.

“Ohh. Creepy. I love a good story,” Sarah gushed. “I wonder what could have pushed her over the edge. It was that Matt guy. I’ll bet anything.”

“That’s exactly what I think.”

“Interesting,” she said. “But Mr. Perry still denies it all?”

I nodded my head solemnly. I was thinking about last night when I escaped my room at went to my familiar clearing in the woods. I didn’t tell Sarah that somehow I felt I knew that Josephine, Mr. Perry’s daughter, was expecting child. Somehow I felt her presence as a part of me and that’s how I knew so surely. Should I tell Sarah about these fantasies and my escapes? The strange feelings I got about knowing something I had no way of knowing in real life? Would it help in her investigation?

But I didn’t want to help in the investigation. Too much of me was invested in this story and I wanted out.
Perhaps, I thought, letting my mind wander, perhaps I wanted to be Mr. Perry’s daughter. I wanted to feel that love that she felt for Matt. I wanted to have that intense feeling of love from my dream. Passionate. Intense. Uncompromising. Maybe Sarah and Karina were right. Maybe this was getting dangerous. I couldn’t even believe some of the things I thought up sometimes.

The only problem was: I didn’t want any of this to stop. I, like Sarah, wanted to know how this was going to end. No matter what. And that’s why I wasn’t going to stop helping her get this information. Because secretly, I didn’t want it to end.

I didn’t tell Sarah more than I thought she needed to know. Now that Karina was demanding that I tell her all the details just in case she had to “step in,” I was telling less and less information, even to Sarah, and keeping more to myself. When she asked about the calls, I didn’t tell her that Sarah and I conspired to get Mr. Perry’s life story. All I told her was when I received a phone call, what name was used, if any, and then I cut the conversation short. She gave me a reproachful eye every so often. I thought maybe it was because she could see right through me.

“How’re your powers coming along,” I asked Sarah to try and change the conversation. “Is all this information we’re dragging out from a poor old guy worth it yet?”

“Still nothing. I told you, I’m still new at this,” she said. “You seem stressed. Want a back massage?”
Maybe she thought I would talk more if I was relaxed. Slowly, I felt a creature struggling inside me. Tiny worms filtering through the sand, trying to reach the surface. My body was alive, moving, breathing, in sync with Sarah’s hands on my tired muscles. As my stress left my body, I felt like I was floating, that was how free I felt.

“What does this all mean,” she mused, breaking my reverie. “That’s what I’m still trying to figure out. Mr. Perry, the phone calls, his daughter—how is this all connecting to you?”

Her entrancing powers continued to work on my shoulders until they suddenly stopped. I looked up questioningly.

“There has to be a window.”

“A window?” I asked.

“Sure,” she said. “What’s the one thing you have in common with Mr. Perry?”

“I work in a hospital. He’s staying there?” I ventured.

“God, Jo. You miss the most obvious things.”

“That was obvious to me!”

She let out an exasperated sigh and decided to answer her own question.

“His daughter. Josephine Perry.”

“Then I’m probably connected to nearly half the world. It’s not a common name, but there are more than two Josephine’s out there,” I answered back with annoyance.
“You work at the hospital. He stays at the hospital. You’re sixteen. His daughter has the same name as you, and died around the same age you are now. Think about it,” she told me.

“And the phone calls?”

“If you were haunted by the ghost of your daughter, wouldn’t you want to call her to?”

“So now I’m a ghost?” This conversation was getting ridiculous.

“He thinks you are. Plus he’s senile, probably has bad eye sight,” she said.

“This might also explain his creepiness, as you call it. He’s not being perverted toward you, he thinks you’re his daughter!”

The pieces were loose, but it was shaping a vague picture in my mind.

“Where do we go from here?” I asked.

“Let him believe it,’ Sarah told me. “Let’s just let him believe his own story.”
Matthew Dawson wiped the sweat from his eyes with the back of his hand. He was outside, fixing Mr. Perry’s leaky roof. He was their handyman of sorts, fixing things here and there so Mr. Perry can take a break on the weekends. No wife nagging about the leaky faucet, the squeaky hinges. Instead, the wife nagged about where the neighborhood boy was to patch up the roof.

It was a win-win situation for the both of them. Mr. Perry got to spend time with the wife and family. Their son could play sports and be with friends for the summer. And Matt could see Josephine Perry. A pure, unadulterated view of her.

It was what he woke up for every weekend. He woke up to see her. Everything about her was beautiful. Big eyes, small mouth, petite nose. Her lips were red, her eyes were lined with black. She looked like the embodiment of purity.

She began to notice Matt the days he visited on the weekend. Before, he was just the young man her father brought home from his job at the factory. Matt was the boy he laid off, the child who had to take care of his aging parents who didn’t work anymore. Josephine waved to him when she saw him outside on the roof. She’d gone outside to check the mail.

“It’s hot,” she told him, trying to be friendly. Matt nodded, waved back. “Care for something to drink?”
Something sounded great, he told her.

“So what will you have?”

“Lemonade,” he said.

She smiled before she walked back in. Matt’s heart was beating so loud he thought it might explode. He might die of a heart attack and be found dying on the roof. She would come out and find him and then…

“Here you go, Mister,” she said, holding out a large glass of lemonade.

He wiped off his dirty hands on his pants and climbed the ladder down to where she stood. Mrs. Perry was looking out the kitchen window at them. He knew not to make any suspicious moves.

He grabbed the glass out from her hands, small and white. Sweat was still pouring down his forehead, but he ignored it. He didn’t want to disgust her.

“Taste alright?” she asked, with her sweet voice. “Hot out, isn’t it?”

Matt nodded his head. He stumbled on some words, but gave up. Nothing he could manage to say would sound right. He would make himself out to be an idiot.

She smiled at him again, even though he didn’t manage to utter one word to her. Mrs. Perry was still staring out his kitchen window, eyes keen on what his daughter was doing out there. When Josephine went back inside, Matt climbed back onto the roof. He nailed his thumb hard with the hammer, images of Josephine clouding his thinking. He accidentally missed the nail when he heard Mrs. Perry asking her daughter what those goo goo
eyes were all about. She didn’t need to be sexy around some loser neighborhood boy.

“I think he’s kinda cute,” Josephine admitted to her mother, “All sweaty up there on the roof.”

“Go to your room,” Mrs. Perry answered, playfully. “And get those crazy thoughts out of your head.”

Matt heard Josephine giggle and the dull sound of a thump that must be her bedroom door. He imagined Mrs. Perry might be smirking, while washing dishes at the sink. She might just be thinking that she knew how Josephine must feel.

He lived to see her every weekend now. He woke up dreaming about her. He knew she must be thinking the same thing. She found excuses to go outdoors. She said hello to him when she passed by, coupled with a smile. Skating around the block, picking flowers for the table, sitting on the porch to read her book.

“It’s just too stuffy in there,” was her excuse. She always had an excuse. But he didn’t mind. In fact, he wondered what she would do next.

He was always careful, watching for Mr. Perry’s watchful eyes. Mrs. Perry must have tipped her husband off to their daughter’s teenage crush because Matt noticed another set of eyes watching him from the house windows.
He spent nights sleepless. Pacing back and forth one night, he grabbed a pen to calm himself down and began to write. Writing incoherent words at first, putting his thoughts down on paper. When his fingers started to form blisters, he capped his pen and steadied his breath.

He read what his hand had written. It was a love letter to Josephine Perry. It was all his inner thoughts, freed through the tip of his pen. There, he captured his emotions, his feelings for her.

Reading these words surprised Matt. During his frenzy, he had no idea what he was writing.

After reading every word, he slid the paper into his desk drawer and crawled into his bed. Sleep finally came.

The morning brought Sunday. Mr. Perry told him to start picking the weeds in the yard. He bought a brand new lawn mower and wanted to see what it could do on his lawn.

Matt reached in his back pocket for the handkerchief he shoved in there to wipe off the sweat that kept running down his brow. Something fell out of his pocket as he did this and after drying off the moisture, he reached down to retrieve it.

It was his letter. The letter he wrote when he was frantically pacing his room last night. For a while he held it between his two fingers trying to figure out how it got in his back pocket. He retraced his steps from the night before, but no, he was sure he put it in his desk drawer.
The rumble, putter, and roar of the new lawn mower caught his attention and he refocused on the lawn. There was no time to worry about letters when a pair of watchful eyes were always lurking in the shadows.

Next weekend brought new butterflies. This time, he watched as Josephine came tiptoeing out of her house and toward where he was working. Maybe she wanted to ask him if he needed a drink. Maybe her father sent her out to tell him to move on to get back to work. But she was definitely coming toward him. With the biggest grin on her face.

Once she was close enough, she checked over her shoulders to watch for her mom and dad. They were not in the window, hiding in the bushes, outside in the shed. They were nowhere around.

“I found your letter,” she told him, all giggles. She whispered, “Here,” and shoved a folded piece of paper toward Matt.

He was stunned for words. Letter? But he didn’t give her the letter. He shoved it back into his pocket.

Without another word, she disappeared as quickly as she came, checking over each shoulder with every step. When she reached the front door, she turned in Matt’s direction, smiled, and waved. He managed to wave back, still confused.

Hesitantly, he opened the letter. Matthew was written at the top in delicate handwriting that matched the person who wrote it. He stumbled on the name for a while, admiring the way she wrote it. The sound of Mr. Perry
walking around the corner meant he wouldn’t have time to read the letter just yet. It would have to wait until the privacy of darkness. No one around, no risk of being found.

After dinner with the Perry’s, Matt searched through his desk drawer, his pants pocket, anywhere he could think that he might have left the letter he wrote. He checked between furniture where it could have fallen in between, and his dirty clothes, but it was nowhere to be found. The letter had mysteriously showed up in his back pocket when he was sure he stuck it in his desk drawer, and now the letter mysteriously found its way into Josephine’s hands. Furiously, he paced his room, back and forth. Sometimes he punched his bed while passing, sometimes he would hold his head and let out a sigh. How did it get to her? How did she find it? Did it accidentally drop out of his back pocket onto the lawn? Did she find it?

Matt slammed open his bedroom door and found his parents watching the news in the living room. He was furious, breathing heavy, and frothing slightly at the mouth.

“Are you guys trying to ruin my life?” he shouted. His parents looked up from the television set, but had no comprehension in their eyes. The sight of their son scared them.

“Son,” his father began. “What the hell are you talking about?”

There was no point. They didn’t know. He was sure his parents didn’t find the letter and inadvertently gave it to Josephine. They were too old for that. They were too dumb.
“Forget about it,” Matt demanded. Both parents turned their heads and began watching the news again. His father grabbed the remote and turned the volume up a little higher.

Matt reached in his pocket to make sure her letter was still there. Things didn’t go that bad, he tried telling himself. She was smiling at him this afternoon, waving and giggling. She must have thought he did that on purpose to tell her he was in love with her. She must have thought he had been planning this for a while.

He couldn’t remember what he had written down. Whatever it was, it must have been good, poetic even. What else could have caused her to act so happy?

He stared at his name written at the top of the letter one more time. The way she wrote his name. Something was special about it. The first lines read:

Matthew,

I never knew you felt this way about me. I always thought you were ignoring me, like I was just some kind of young school girl whose only care was to get a handsome date to the prom. I admitted to my mother the other day that I thought you were cute. I didn’t tell her the whole bit of it. The truth was, I had a crush on you.
And I’m so happy to find out that you have these same feelings.

His luck was turning around. Matt had never dreamed that he would wake up and have his dreams come true. That letter was never meant to land in her hands but somehow it did. Things didn’t fail. In fact, they looked up. He finished reading the letter and when he was done he reread it again.

The news on the TV had long been off by this time. Everything was quiet in his house, and now, finally, so were his nerves. He folded the letter back in half the way Josephine had handed it to him. He dug around in the closet and found an old shoe box. The letter went inside, safe, he hoped, from finding its way out.

It was a game of sneaking around, of staying hidden in the bushes and not being found. It was a game of forbidden love. Because she was just a child, and he was a man. No one would accept them. No one could possibly understand.

He went crawling into the woods with her one night. One weekend he loosened the screen on her window so she could easily crawl out at night. They met on a corner with a light, but they hid in the dark. Matt took them to the edge of the woods and started walking.

“Where are you taking us?” she asked.

He said, “I don’t know. Let’s see where it takes us.”
She laughed because she didn’t know what else to do. She loved this side of him, the spontaneous side, the trustworthy side. She loved the way her heart raced when she knew she shouldn’t be doing this. But it was something she couldn’t say no to.

Together they walked. Matt led, Josephine followed and giggled in intervals. He was trying to listen, trying to watch for the perfect place. He would know it when he found it.

There, in the distance. They saw a clearing and they claimed it as theirs. This was going to be where they could safely love one another, away from the critics, from stigmas, from judgment. How could anyone tell them they had no right to love?
Chapter 14

I was just visiting Mr. Perry to drop off a chart when he began ranting and raving about the government after reading the headline about the President’s recent blunder in the news. I had already turned around to leave, but I felt bad just ignoring the man, and so I turned back around to face him and to listen to at least a bit of his rant.

“I’m guessing you don’t care too much about this kind of stuff, do you?”

I was honest. Why shouldn’t I be honest. I was done lying and pretending.

“No, not really.”

“I honestly don’t know what they teach you in school. What are you learning about?”

“I’m on summer break,” I said.

“Good, God. And they don’t have you doing any work?”

“Well, I have my summer reading.”

“There’s a start,” he said, repositioning himself as if preparing for a long conversation. “What books are you reading?”

“Umm,” I actually had a hard time remembering some of the titles. “Night by Elie Weisel.”

He didn’t say anything, so I continued, “The Awakening, Scarlet Letter.”

“Same old stuff, then.”

I didn’t know what he meant by this.
“My daughter had to read the same damn books. You’d think the curriculum would change over the years.”

I shrugged my shoulders, then made my first attempt to leave.

“Mr. Perry I have to…”

“Hang on there. Just let me say one thing.” I prepared myself for a lengthy discussion on the politics of education. I wondered how I always got stuck in these situations, and then realized it was because I was too meek to just walk out. I was too worried it would be considered impolite. “My children always said I was a bit strict on them. Hell, my son still gives me the cold shoulder and then likes to call me a jerk and a bad father. But one thing they didn’t understand was that my being strict actually helped them get by in this world! My parents didn’t give me shit!”

I thought about his daughter, and about how she died when she was as old as I am now. I got the shivers, both from the thought, and from Mr. Perry’s denial of her death.

“I didn’t care much about school work when I was a kid, but I knew I wanted something better for my kids and so, yeah, I pushed them hard. I punished them if they didn’t make As and I guess my son resents me for it now. But look where it got him! He went to a great school, got a great job. He’s already in a better place than I ever was, but he’s still mad at me for pushing him around. Kids need some good punchest sometimes…”
He trailed off after that thought, which left a strange feeling in the room. The hints of abuse, the denial of his unfair treatment of his children, the suicide of his daughter when she was only sixteen…

As if realizing his blunder, he tried to backtrack: “You know what I mean by that. Not literal punches, but encouragement. Nothing wrong with a little punishment to help children become motivated. It’s natural.”

I didn’t agree, but then again, maybe that was because my parents had never lifted a finger against me. My childhood was filled with timeouts and groundings instead.

Because vestiges of anger still welled up in my from time to time at the thought of Mr. Perry, and because I was ashamed at how I had been treating him, I found myself suddenly saying mean things that I knew would upset him.

“What is your fixation on calling me a slut?” It was the first thing I could think of that was bothering me, and that I wanted cleared up. I said it in a loud voice, though not as high as yelling, since I didn’t want any nurses catching me berating a sick, old patient. “I’m not the slut, Mr. Perry. No, not me. I think you’re confusing me for someone else. Someone who shared my name.”

His face was shocked at first, and I thought for a moment that he might not know what I was talking about. If he really was drugged up that day, maybe the moment happened without his knowledge, but then his face quickly turned to hatred, and he started screaming. “Shut up! Shut up!” he said, but I didn’t listen.

“You think I’m just like her, but I’m not. I don’t sleep around with boys from the neighborhood, and then off myself when everyone finds out I’m guilty!”
“Shut up!” he kept repeating, his face beat red.

Looking at his body convulsing in anger was making me scared, and I was regretting making him this angry despite my how he humiliated me. Just the other day I was trying to save him from his death, I was protecting him from Sarah’s desire to know everything about his life. Now, I couldn’t care less what happened.

“She did not sleep with that boy. She was too good for him and she knew it! Everyone knew it!”

“Too good or not, that didn’t stop them from loving each other. What would you know about love, anyway? You just beat and punished her right into the arms of someone who was kind and treated her right!”

Now I really had him going. Spit was flying out of his mouth, he was the color of a tomato, and worst obscenities I’ve ever heard were being thrown at me in every which way.

“If I was well enough I’d beat you until you were black and blue!” I managed to hear, as I was making my way toward the door. As the door closed behind me, I heard one last scream: “There are things men have to do. But you would never understand that, you bitch!”

Finally, I managed to leave the room before any more damage was done.

I left wondering if he really did beat on his children. Maybe there was something more to Josephine’s suicide than Matthew Dawson.
When I went home that day, I was tense and shaken and ashamed at my behavior. If something happened to Mr. Perry because I provoked it, I could never live with myself, and the guilt I was feeling was overwhelming.

I paced my house for hours, trying to find distractions, but mostly failing. I noticed I received a letter in the mail only after these hours had passed. It was late at night when I spotted something on the counter, addressed to me.

“What’s this?” I asked to no one in particular.

My mom answered from somewhere in the house: “Looks like you got a letter.”

“How would I know, Jo? Open it and find out.”

The envelope looked ragged and worn, like it got caught in a machine and had to be forced free. I looked for a return address, but the space was empty. My name and address were printed neatly in the center. I wondered who could possible write me a letter. With cell phones and the internet, who would revert to something so primitive?

Carefully I opened the letter. It was so delicate that this proved to be a challenge.

I unfolded the contents. My Dearest Josephine, it read at the top. Embarrassed, I looked to see where my parents were. My mom was watching television with a bowl of ice cream. My father was reading the newspaper next to her. I thought it was safe from their peering eyes, so I continued on.
I want to warn you that I’m bad with words, and writing this down is taking a lot out of me.

But I want you to know that I love you. You are like the sunshine in my life. Every day I see your face is like a new day. I find I can’t wait to hear your voice again. And when I do, my heart will start to melt and I will feel like I want to freeze time. So I can be suspended in that moment with you, forever.

Should I tell you that I love you because everything about you is perfect? The way you light up a room, the way you light up my face, sparks fly in my chest. I’m captivated by your presence. You will always inspire me, Josephine.

Promise me you’ll visit me sometime? There is something entrancing about the moonlight on your face. I hope that someday, we will be able to leave our hiding place and be accepted by our families. But a part of me loves the secrecy. It makes our love more sacred, more special. Do you know what I mean?

I will be at our meeting place at the same time, waiting anxiously for the sounds of your footsteps. Until then, my heart grows weary without you.

Your Love,
I read the letter over three, maybe four more times. No return address, no signature at the bottom. I was at a loss for who the writer could possibly be. Do I have a secret admirer? I tried to put the pieces together. Whoever this person was, I was supposed to know who they were. According to the letter, I probably saw him often, and I knew a lot about him. But there was no one like that I knew.

The writer mentioned a secret hiding spot, one where the two met in the moonlight. My clearing in the forest immediately jumped into my mind. But no one knew I went there. I was always alone.

Unless…

Unless my stalker phone caller really did exist. Unless the phone calls and this strange letter were in some way connected. Unless this was a sign that something bad could happen to me if I kept wandering alone at night into the woods in my backyard.

I wanted to call Sarah, but when I checked the time, it was almost midnight. Instead, I curled myself up in my bed and prayed that sleep would eventually come. I was frightened, and desperate. I couldn’t tell my parents anything. Gradually I fell into a fitful sleep, dreaming of my stalker and Josephine.
Chapter 15

Every day was starting to melt into the next, lines blurred to the point that I didn’t know what day of the week it was. I managed to remember the days I had to show up to work, and I diligently presented myself to Karina early in the mornings, most of the time with a false smile on my face. Every day was the same, every small task was the same. Clean, organize, take out the cart, walk home. It was no wonder my days blurred together so fluidly—nothing ever changed. All that left and entered my mind were my fantasies of the events engulfing my life. I still hadn’t seen Sarah since the night I read and opened the mysterious letter. No one knew about the letter. I had it tucked in my pocket carried it with me everywhere.

On lunch break, I searched for Sarah among the ranks of the other custodial men. She was the only female on the team, still. Not because the hospital was discriminatory, but because not many females were willing to get dirty every day. I was talking grease under the fingernails, sweaty, dusty, dirty, you name it. Let me just say, I didn’t think I could do it.

I found her right away on the end table away from all the “respectable” employees, as she called them. She reproached herself and her job all the time, but I told her that there was no solid line separating respectable and non- respectable. Just because she had a blue-collar job made her no less respectable. “So you’re trying to tell me my job is just as respectable as the doctors I walk past
every day? C’mon, Jo.” But I saw what she was saying. How would it be if she sat at the same table with the doctors? One word: awkward.

When I spotted her, she was getting up to take her coffee cup to the dishwashing area. I had to catch her before she slipped out of the cafeteria.

“Sarah!” I yelled. “Sarah!”

She heard her name, looked over at me. I waved and she returned the gesture. When we were close enough to talk, I told her I had something very important she might want to see.

“What is it?”

“Have time for a longer break?” I asked, knowing that she was just getting ready to leave.

“No, but I guess I have to.”

We went away to the maintenance quarters where the hospital stored all the miscellaneous tools and gadgets needed to fix things. Carefully, I slipped the anonymous letter out of my purse and delicately handed it over. “This came in the mail yesterday.”

She took the letter and opened it gingerly realizing, like I did, how fragile it was. I watched as her eyes darted back and forth down each line as she read. She reached the end and turned the letter over just in case there was a name written on the back. But it was empty. I did the very same thing.

“What is this?”

I laughed a short high laugh as I shrugged my shoulders. The situation was too strange for me to do anything else but mock it.
“Do you have a lover I don’t know about?” she asked, teasingly.

“No,” I said. “God, no.”

“Then who is this from?”

“If I knew that, do you think this would be such a big deal? Besides, I would never show you something that personal if I knew who the guy was.”

“Who says it’s a guy?”

“What do you mean?”

“The letter’s not signed. It has no return address. And, well, who says it’s a guy?”

This was all beside the point. I rolled my eyes. “Fine. Guy, girl, amoeba. It doesn’t matter. Let’s just stick to assuming it’s a guy. It’s easier.”

“Sexist.”

“Sarah, I’m being serious!” I said, raising my voice. “For all intents and purposes, it’s a guy!”

“Fine. Let’s figure this out.”

I told her what I already knew: I didn’t have any close guy friends, certainly none that I loved and who loved me back. There was definitely no one I talked to on a consistent basis, besides those few guys I worked with of whom I usually said hello to in the hallways.

“Can’t rule them out. And this hiding place?”

I stopped short. Before bringing the letter to work, I wrangled with the idea of showing it to Sarah, knowing I would have to tell her about my alter ego.

“That’s the only connection with myself that I see.”
I kept the explanation to a minimum. I told her I sometimes went exploring at night in the wooded expanse in my backyard. I left my room and followed a path to a secret clearing in the woods that I’ve come to call my own. There I wrote in my journal, nothing else. It was a time for me to find some quiet.

“Jo, you’re only sixteen. All you have is alone time.”

I didn’t divulge any more of my story. She couldn’t know about my strange fantasies. I knew she wouldn’t understand. I wanted to keep it secret.

“Let me see the envelope.”

“There’s nothing on it,” I told her.

“I know that. I’m looking for something else.” She paused and looked up at me. “A postmark.”

It didn’t occur to me to look at the postmark the night before. Letters were like fossils. The way they worked eluded me.

“God, what did you do to this thing? Run it through the wash?”

“It came all beat up like that. Maybe it got caught in a sorting machine.”

“Well, it’s making it hard to read the postmark. Says it came from the same city. So the guy’s a local.”

I looked over her shoulder to follow along with what she was looking at.

“Hang on, the date’s all scratched away. That looks like a one, doesn’t it?”

I grabbed the envelope and took a close look. The number started with a one, but the others were illegible. “Looks like a one to me,” I said.

“That’s not right.”

I looked at her face, searching for a sign. Anything. “What?”
“That means it wasn’t sent anytime recently. Not in the two-thousands, at least.”


“You got me. You were born in the nineties, so I guess it’s possible someone wrote you this letter a decade ago. That’d be really, really creepy.”

“I would have been six in 1999. Besides, we’ve only been living in that house for five years.”

She looked over at me, letter still clutched in her hands.

“My address.” I filled in the blanks. “How would this guy have known my address ten years ago?”

“God, Jo. What the hell are we getting into?”

Later that night, I went over to Sarah’s again, accepting an alcoholic drink with pleasure. I watched as she poured over the letter once again, inspecting every stray line, every letter, to see if there was a clue hidden inside. “Dude has good handwriting, I’ll give him that,” Sarah said to me between sips of her own mixed drink. Everything was written in cursive, with spectacular penmanship. It looked like the kind of cursive in the Declaration—large, sweeping, ornate letters. “And that’s definitely a one.” Sarah had found an old magnifying glass shoved deep inside one of the side tables and she was inspecting the postmark again.

“Losing your eyesight?”

“Ha ha,” she said sarcastically. “I used to be a bad little kid. Killed ants and stuff. Can’t seem to throw away anything. This included. Or, actually, this
might have been my grandmother’s. She really couldn’t see. Anyway, that’s definitely a one.”

She handed me the magnifying glass and I took a look for myself. There was no mistaking it. I looked at the other numbers to see if anything became clearer up close. “This other number,” I said. “Might be a six.” I handed the items back for Sarah to check.

“Okay. So we have a one, blank, six, blank.”

“1960s?”

“If we want to assume it was at least in this century.”

“Was the mail system even around in the 1800s?”

“Do I look like I would know something like that? Besides, it doesn’t matter. We’re not playing with logic here. We still can’t figure out how your address got on that paper.”

“What the hell happened in the sixties?” I was brainstorming.

“The war. The revolution. You know, hippies and stuff.”

I sipped on my rum and Coke, hoping that Sarah would offer a massage so I could relax. The alcohol was doing a good enough job. I was starting to think with a haze. Weariness was closing in.

“Oh my God, Jo!” Sarah screamed. I must have been close to sleeping, because I jumped, startled by the shouting. It took me a while to focus in, my brain was still cloudy with alcohol. “Jo, I just figured something out.”

“What is it?” I said with a yawn.

“How old is Mr. Perry?”
“Eighty-six.” How did I know that? I must have at some point seen it on his chart.

“Making him born in…”

“Nineteen,”—I tried to do quick math—“Twenty-three?”

“He had his daughter…”

I was filling in her sentences: “When he was twenty-two.”

“Okay, so 1945,” she was getting anxious. “And by the time Josephine was sixteen, the year would be 1961!

I let the information soak into my heavy head. Josephine, Mr. Perry’s daughter, was a teenager in the sixties. What did this answer?

“You are so slow sometimes. Think about it. Don’t you remember Josephine’s lover?”

Of course, I thought to myself. His name was Matt. Mr. Perry had taken him in and shown pity on him…

“This letter is a letter from Matt to Josephine. Circa 1961!”
Dear _____,

I’ve started watching people. Don’t worry, I’m not turning into a stalker. God knows how much trouble that’s been putting me in lately. With this mysterious letter that somehow traveled into the future—it all makes my mind turn into scrambled eggs.

So I decided to give it a shot myself. See what the fuss is about. Watching people, I mean.

I do it when I walk home from work. I watch people. I just stare at them. And it’s funny, their reactions. Some people think I’m just a creepy teenager with nothing better to do but make them feel like they’re being watched. Some smile, some even wave. It is so curious.

What I love the most—what I love spying on the most—is conversations. A pretty woman walking her dog was on the phone and walked right past me on the sidewalk. She was on her cell phone talking to one of her girlfriends about the period stains her sister-in-law left on her bed when she stayed on a visit. I mean, gross! Why would you talk about that stuff in a public place where anyone could hear? I was so disgusted that for a while all I could picture was that woman with her little dog, her blond hair gently swaying with the motion of her foot steps and her sister-in-law (who I somehow pictured looking exactly the same) with embarrassedly stained pajamas.

Then there’s the old man I walk by on the bench every so often who talks to animals. I think it must be a part of his own personal therapy to go to the park and feed the birds, but all he ends up doing is yelling at them. Most of the time
he’s telling them to go away, while at the same time he’s throwing them crumbs. He makes me laugh so much! When a person comes around with a dog, he tells them really loud to sit, but the dogs never listen. They just follow the leash that their owner is pulling. Afterwards, the man gets so mad he starts cursing at them real loud. People get offended until they realize the man is senile and old and probably there just to kill time. Then they forgive him, maybe thinking about their grandma or grandpa who’s the same way.

Then there are the other teenagers. They’re on a hunt for nothing, driven by their summer boredom. Most of the time they’re laughing—laughing at anything and everything. The guy driving by, the dog shitting in the grass, when one friend trips on their own feet. When I walk by I kinda sneer at them because their laughing annoys me. I feel like I’m in a gang, sizing up the other members of the opposing fleet. When we walk past each other on the sidewalk, they grow quiet from all the giggling, look up at me like I’m wearing a clown suit out in public, then continue on. A few seconds later, there goes the laughing again. I can’t help but think they’re laughing at me, and I grow embarrassed.

It’s not only the people I meet on the sidewalks, Diary. It’s also people in their cars. This is where my story gets really interesting. It must have something to do with the way people view their cars as a second home. It’s their own little bubble—they mess it up when they feel like it, clean it when it needs cleaning. Some people eat in their cars, some use it to get changed in a hurry. Really, it’s a bedroom on wheels.
When I’m stopped at a light waiting for the crosswalk, that’s when I look for a car with the windows down. I listen to phone conversations, what kind of music they listen to. If it’s a mom, they’re usually yelling at the child in the backseat. If it’s a business professional going home from work, they’re on their cell phones. Younger people listen to music really loud, sometimes even singing along and dancing. Mostly, they look ridiculous, but I don’t care because it puts a smile on my face. The mothers play no music, unless it’s the background noise of the DVD they’ve popped in to keep the kids quiet. The professionals are always on edge, on the verge of a shouting match, maybe over dinner, sometimes over money. I always think what a miserable life it must be, arguing all the times about things like that. The last thing I would want to do is get off from work just to yell and get angry.

The thing that gets everyone going is the staring. I stare, unwaveringly, into their cars. I’m entering into their own private room. I have no right to be staring at them like that—what did they do? Most of the time people stare right back, like an informal competition. How do you like it? sort of thing. Some give off a confused gesture. Is there something on my roof? Is the side of my car dented in? What’s wrong? And then some, the very few, smile back in a kind way. My mother always said staring is impolite. But it’s just too interesting to watch the reactions of people. No one likes to be stared at. I wonder how that came to evolve in humans.

This is what I learn watching people every day. And it’s funny, but I think I actually enjoy it. A lot of people make me laugh. Sometimes I still think about
that old man, wondering earnestly why those stupid birds keep flocking him, or
the sickly giddy teenagers, high on summer life. Things—life—is just so ridiculous
sometimes. You can’t take it that seriously. A lot of people aren’t likeable. A lot
are strange. I can’t imagine living some of the lifestyles I see. I couldn’t live my
life in a suit all day. Or pack my trunk full of music equipment, traveling to one
gig or the next. Maybe they’re thinking the same thing about me. What would it
feel like to be in my shoes? Hot, tired, in the summer sun. Working in a hospital.
Working around death. No, thank you.

Just a little note from me. Didn’t want to bore you with more stuff about
Josephine (Mr. Perry’s daughter, that is) so I hope this was a nice chance of
pace.
Chapter 16

For the first time, I grabbed a flashlight and shoved it into the backpack that I planned to take along with me. The letter was folded safely inside the front zipper. I thought frantically of anything else I might need. Nothing came to mind except for a few bottles of water. I didn’t know how long I would be out there. I tiptoed to the kitchen, grabbed a couple of warm ones from the pantry. Back in my room, I took a deep breath and pushed the window screen out like I had done so many times before tonight.

I wanted to find some answers. I wanted to find them tonight. I needed to figure this all out.

My feet hit the soft ground without a noise, then I was on my way. I couldn’t bring myself to turn on the flashlight yet because I didn’t want to tarnish the darkness. Bringing the flashlight seemed like heresy, but I had to do it. I had to put a stop to this madness. Still, my body was uneasy. My stomach felt like it was boiling my insides. I wanted to turn around. For the first time ever, I didn’t want to be out here at night in the darkness. I knew this wasn’t the same as the rest of the nights when I wandered around. Something was different. Something would change.

After about thirty minutes of walking, I was there. I was in my secret hideaway, tucked into my own little world. There was my rock, the one that cradles me while I think and journal.
There was little light tonight from the moon. Maybe the trees were blocking out the dim crescent. Even the stars looked different. I took some time to soak in my surroundings, knowing that this might be the last time these trees would be mine and mine alone. The leaves hummed with excitement, maybe anxiety. The wind blew restlessly through them. There was no other sound but the cry of the trees. No owl, no crickets. Nothing but my breathing and the wind.

Carefully, I set the backpack down and unzipped the opening. I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Not yet. This place was too precious to me. Instead, I took out the letter and found a spot with enough light to make out the letters written on the worn out paper.

I read the letter one more time. The writing was so faint, I could barely make it out, but it didn’t matter. I’d read it so many times I could fill in the blanks. Something started to make more sense. Now that I was here, I knew for certain that this letter was written by Matt. Josephine Perry’s lover. I knew this like it was plain knowledge, engrained as fact from the time I was little. I had visions of his hands writing these letters, slowly, carefully. He folded the paper in thirds, shoved it into an envelope and licked the seal. I saw this like it was a dream, except I was wide awake. He was writing the address on the front of the envelope. I could make out the name, Josephine. But I couldn’t read the rest. Everything was blurry.

I was shivering now, even though the night summer air was still hot. “Matt,” I shouted, unaware that my lips were moving. “Matt,” I called again, into the desolate night. The flashlight was shaking in my nervous hands now, still
turned off. But I was frightened, and so I hastily turned it on. A beam of light shot out against the night, cutting it in half, breaking the seal of darkness.

There, right in front of me, I saw something. The light was shining right on it like a spotlight. I saw something in the tree. A carving. A clue. It read:

M ♥ J

M loves J. Matt loves Josephine. This was it. This was the secret meeting place Matt wrote about in his letter. This was where they would sneak off to when Matt came to Josephine’s window at night. The reason Mr. Perry couldn’t hear anything in her room was because she was already gone.

I turned my flashlight off, placing me in complete darkness. Everything was darker than before. My eyes needed to readjust to the silvery layout.

I couldn’t believe it.

Here, right now, in this space, I was like the other Josephine, waiting to meet Matthew.
Matthew Dawson grabbed a pen from his father’s desk. The house was quiet. He looked over his shoulder, paranoid, but no one was there. He was alone in this room. His father’s muffled snores were coming from his bedroom. He knew his mother was sleeping, too. There should be no disturbances tonight, if he could just stop freaking out.

Nestling down at the desk in the foyer, he thought of what to write. What will make her smile? God, he loved that smile.

He stopped to listen. Suddenly, the snoring stopped. Without a sound, Matt looked toward his father’s bedroom door. Should he run now? Or was it just a false alarm?

When the snores continued, he breathed again. His father was probably just tossing and turning in the summer heat. It was hard to get a good night’s sleep in the summer with the house so hot and muggy. Really, it wasn’t his father he was worried about. It was his mother he had to watch out for. She was the one who liked to creep around the house like a mouse.

Grabbing a piece of paper, he began, writing in cursive:

Dear Josephine,

I waited for you last night, but you never came.

Don’t say sorry, because I’m not mad. I know you would have been there if you could get away. I only hope
something bad didn’t turn up. I hope you weren’t caught.

I hope your father doesn’t know.

I will drop this letter to you tomorrow morning when I visit. Slipping a piece of paper to you is much easier than trying to have this long conversation. Your father will catch on if we approach each other. He is already suspecting enough, as you have informed me. So for now, we will be tortured in the day, free at night. It is the life of the enslaved, I’m afraid to inform. We are bound and gagged by the unspoken rules of our society. The ones who say a poor, uneducated man can never be with a rich and beautiful young woman.

I’m writing this by the light of the moon, too afraid to risk anything in the daylight. My father would have me killed if he knew I was trying to have you. He would call me a lousy son, even though I hear those same words every other day for a various amount of things. But never mind, those things aren’t important. What is important is your safety. And the fact that very shortly now, I will be waking up to go see your smiling face.

Last night, while I was waiting for you, I kept thinking I heard your footsteps. Over and over again I would run towards the noise, my heart beating out of my
chest, expecting to see you there, your white teeth glowing in the moonlight. I did this five or six times. But you were never there. It was always just the wind rustling the leaves, or an animal scavenging at night.

The forest was alive that night. I’m not sure how to describe it on this piece of paper. Everything was breathing. It felt like everything was humming with life. With a kind of nervousness, waiting for your arrival. But you never came, which made everything buzz with more anxiety. It’s like you were meant to be there and everything was waiting. I wish I could describe it better than that. Just picture our hiding place as a party, full of energy. That’s what it felt like.

So after the sixth time of jumping up, looking for you, I get antsy, too. Something was just different last night. I couldn’t sit still, I was pacing back and forth. Every little sound made me jump. The darkness, for once, was actually giving me the chills. I couldn’t stop having fears that you were stranded somewhere, needing my help. Maybe you tripped in the dark and hurt your ankle, couldn’t walk—that sort of thing. Every possible scenario raced through my head. After about three hours, when I knew for certain you weren’t coming, I called it quits.
I didn’t leave right away. The intensity of the forest died down after a while, too. I took out my pocket knife, walked up to one of the bigger trees, and carved our initials there. So we could forever be remembered by those trees who witnessed our love.

I love you. I can’t wait to see you finally, to know with my own eyes that you are safe.

Yours truly,

He never signed his name at the bottom. He never wanted to give an excuse to get caught red handed. Signing his name would be like signing his own death warrant if these letters were ever intercepted. Soothed by the snores continuing on the other side of his parents’ bedroom door, he turned off the lamp and went to bed to get a few hours more sleep before having to wake up. Morning was only a few hours away.

I woke up from this dream in confusion. For a while I didn’t know where I was. I tried to focus, but everything was still hazy, still heavy with sleep. The fragments of my dream were already slipping away and I fought hard to preserve my memory. It was about Matt Dawson, Josephine’s lover. Clips and images raced through my head like a picture slideshow. Bits and pieces soon fit together, and I could finally recall the story. He was writing a
letter. To Josephine. He mentioned the woods. My secret hiding place: our secret hiding place.

I remembered leaving to go into the woods earlier in the night. I had no idea when I returned to my bedroom or how. I didn’t remember climbing in through the window. Maybe I was already half asleep. Maybe that was why I couldn’t remember where I was when I woke up from the dream. I should still be there, curled up on my rock, shivering from the morning briskness.

The initials, the carving on the tree. I must have had that dream to explain the image I saw shining on the thick trunk. Matt had carved it there as a way to make their love really last forever. And the forest—Matt described it in his letter as being alive. Though it was hard to articulate, I knew exactly what he meant.

Was it really a dream? Everything was so vivid, so real. I could still see Matt writing in the dim light on his desk, scratching out beautiful letters of a clean piece of white paper. Like the letter I received a few days before, this letter wasn’t signed on the bottom. He did this to remain anonymous, just in case the letters were intercepted. He couldn’t dare risk being exposed. That would mean the end of him and Josephine…

She wasn’t at her house when he got there in the morning.

At nine a.m., Matt showed up dutifully to the Perry’s house for work. Since being fired from the toy factory, he hadn’t managed to get another job,
nor did he try that hard to find one. Now that he met Josephine, he didn’t want anything else to get in the way of the few times he got to see her.

The amount of money Mr. Perry gave him was just enough to get by, so nothing was desperate for him yet. And because Mrs. Perry was kind enough to feed him, he was satisfactorily fed for a good amount of meals.

But when he walked up that morning with the letter he wrote just hours before that was now tucked into his back pocket, Josephine was nowhere to be found. He tried not to panic, knowing that she probably had something scheduled that couldn’t have been avoided.

But like recurring nightmares, visions from last night still invaded his thoughts like infantry overrunning guarded lines, and he replayed every moment from the other night in his head. But nothing bad must have happened. Mr. and Mrs. Perry were acting normal. He was sure they would be acting differently if something wrong had happened to their daughter. Surely by now they would notice if their daughter was missing?

Matt gave it some thought, be he couldn’t just come right out and ask where she was. Mr. Perry was already suspicious of him. Last week he pulled him aside and gave him a lecture about how he was acting inappropriately toward his daughter.

“Sir?” Matt asked, trying to play the fool. “Is this referring to something I did?”

“You know what I’m talking about,” Mr. Perry replied. “Keep your eyes to yourself. She’s too good for the likes of you.”
Matt thought he was being coy in interacting with Josephine, but Mr. Perry had wiser eyes. He was going to have to be more careful. Or Josephine would get in trouble, too.

So then how could he figure out where she was? Would Mrs. Perry run and tell her husband if he asked her? Or would she think it was innocent? What about Daniel, her brother? He decided to keep things quiet for now. Maybe he would overhear something sooner or later.

“Matt! Matt!” He could hear his name, but couldn’t respond. His mind was overflowing with other thoughts and he wasn’t getting any work done. Mr. Perry had told him that morning that the gutters needed to be cleaned out. Every time he tried to start something, he couldn’t stop thinking of her and would get distracted. He got as far as getting the ladder set up near one of the clogged pipes, but didn’t get much else done after that.

“What the hell is the matter with you today?” Mr. Perry was yelling at him.

“Sorry, sir.” He had no good excuses, and couldn’t think one up on the spot either. Where was she? Why were her parents acting so calm? Why didn’t she meet him last night?

“I’m not paying you to daydream,” Mr. Perry told him. Matt nodded. He tried his best to focus on his work, or at least feign interest so that Mr. Perry would leave him alone and stop yelling.

The door slammed behind Mr. Perry. He climbed one rung and paused. Shortly after, Matt could hear the muffled sounds of arguing inside. Mr. Perry was arguing with his wife, which made him nervous. Partly, this
was because he hated hearing people fight—anyone. The other reason was because he thought it might be related to Josephine. Or worse, related to him and Josephine. The door opened again with a slam and Matt quickly acted busy.

“She’s at a piano rehearsal. The recital is in a week.” A woman’s voice was whispering this news to no one in particular. Matt looked up, startled, and saw the hem of Mrs. Perry’s dress quickly disappear around the corner, then back inside the house, without another word.

Matt looked around, confused. Who was she talking to? Was there someone else in the yard? But there was no one but him outside, cleaning out the gutters. He checked again: no neighbor waving kindly or mailman delivering the mail. But if she meant to tell him where Josephine was, did that mean she knew what was happening? Was their secret no longer a secret?

Dazed, Matt tried to make sense of what he heard, or perhaps overheard. She was at a rehearsal. Of course, now he remembered. She hadn’t talked about her piano lessons in a while, and the event never occurred to him again. This was why she never showed up last night, he told himself, scoffing at his lack of a good memory. She couldn’t afford to be tired for the rehearsal. If she messed up, even the tiniest little bit, she would be forced to practice hours per day until it was perfect. All that worrying about her getting hurt when she didn’t show up—or worse, thinking she was dying—of course, there was a good explanation. He knew there would be. He
breathed a huge sigh of relief and a veil was removed from his cluttered thoughts. The gutter right in front of him was now clear and focused, and he could see that it was hopelessly clogged with leaves and sticks and other types of debris. Rolling up his sleeves, he dug in, unmoved by the dirty work.

For a while after this odd occurrence with Mrs. Perry, Matt could finally relax and do his work. He worked diligently for hours and when the house was quiet, he took the chance to sneak into her room. It was surprisingly easy getting inside and slipping over to the hallway on the right where her bedroom and her brother’s bedroom were situated. No one, as far as he could tell, were around. And if so, they weren’t running around the house or making a lot of noise.

Her door had a neat, ribboned plaque hanging on the outside that simply said her name: Josephine. It looked old and worn, in the sense that maybe it was made by a grandparent when she was born.

The doorknob was brass, and cold. When he opened her door, he slipped his letter from his pocket and placed it on her desk among all the other papers she had lying there. She knew to look for his letters, but they had to remain inconspicuous. He thought about the fact that in his next letter he would have to remember to tell that her mother was catching on. He would tell her everything that happened that morning on the front lawn, how her parents had argued, and then, like a ghost, he heard the woman’s voice like a prophesying angel.
Finished with his work, he reported to Mr. Perry who inspected everything like he did in the factory, checking to make sure everything was satisfactory. When he got the okay, he went home early, refusing the persistent requests from Mrs. Perry to eat dinner with them. He was too anxious and nervous to sit down with the Perry’s tonight.

“Thank you, Mrs. Perry, but you do too much for me,” he told her politely, and left before she could continue urging.

“Let him go.” Mr. Perry’s voice was heard in the background just as the door closed gently to a smiling Mrs. Perry. Matt tried shouting goodbye through the closing door, but it shut before he was able to say the word.

He walked home in the summer heat, sweat rolling off his forehead, wiped off with the back of his hand, then ending up on his jeans, dried in a matter of minutes. He walked with a slow daze, the kind of stupor he had been stuck in all morning. These long nights were taking a toll on him. He was either waking up to go see Josephine in the clearing, or writing her those long letters that were surprisingly hard to start and finish. He wasn’t a bookish type person, that was without question, and so words and letters weren’t his strong suit.

How much longer could he make it on so little sleep? For now, it was the only solution. He was going to have to fight through it.

When he was finally home, he crawled into his bed, ignoring the taunts by his father about being lazy and asking what they were going to eat for dinner tonight. The lock clicked loudly as he shut his bedroom door and
he didn’t care that this was against the rules in his parents’ home. He vaguely heard his mother trying to calm down her husband, then fell asleep almost immediately.
I was startled awake by my cell phone. I ignored the first rings, then rolled over to see who it was. Sarah. I thought about just ignoring the call and returning it later. But then I thought that maybe it was important.

“Hel-lo,” I managed to mumble. My brain was still drenched in sleep.

“Jo, I need you.” She sounded frightened, panicked. “It’s important.”

I was more awake now, but still couldn’t seem to fight off the sleep. I mumbled a “What?” trying to sound worried, but instead it came out sounding like I wasn’t taking her seriously.

“I’m in trouble. Can you meet me somewhere?”

“What? Uh, yeah.”

We met by the only twenty-four hour gas station in the neighborhood which happened to be where the two biggest roads in the town intersected. The station was within walking distance of my house and wouldn’t be difficult to get to. Sarah said it would be risky meeting there, but it was even riskier to meet at a place where no one was around and there were no streetlights to protect us. As I approached the gas station, I wondered what I was getting into.

I arrived first. The whole town was desolate and creepy. It seemed to be pitch dark outside and no one was around. Nothing stirred or moved. There weren’t even cars on the road. This nighttime was nothing like what it was for me in the woods in my backyard. There, I found peace and solace. Out here I just felt overwhelmingly anxious and scared waiting for Sarah to finally show up.
To get here, I left through my bedroom window, no problem there. I knew where the station was and headed in that direction instead of through my usual path in the trees. I was carrying the flashlight again. Sarah said to bring something heavy enough to break someone’s head in. I thought the flashlight would serve that purpose if it came to that, but I was wondering why I would ever need to hit someone over the head.

Sarah still wasn’t here. I tried calling out her name in the loudest whisper I thought was safe. I caught the glance of the convenience store cashier in the window. It looked like he was alone and bored. After briefly looking up at me, he returned to reading a magazine though I was almost sure he was keeping his eye on me at the same time. I could feel his eyes boring through the back of my head. I wondered if he would get spooked by my waiting there aimlessly and call the cops. That would be a good story to explain to my parents.

When a hand reached around to cover my mouth, I let out a desperate scream that was completely muffled.

“I knew you would do that. That’s why I had to cover your mouth,” Sarah whispered in my ear. “C’mon, ‘round back.”

“You really think this is funny don’t you?” I nearly screamed when she removed her hand. “This better be good, Sarah. This better be really good.”

“It is. Trust me.”

I followed her around to the back of the gas station with my nerves bursting. I watched as Sarah mouthed “more privacy” to me all while pointing to the cashier with her thumb. I didn’t know if she was whispering or talking.
because the air conditioning belt was drowning out all noise. She stopped, knelt down, and I did the same.

“What the hell, Sarah?” I asked with my normal voice since I knew it would be drowned out. I wanted to know why I was dragged out of bed to “save” my friend before I did anything else in the back of this building.

“It’s a long story. Basically, I need a safe place. And quick.” Her breathing was hard and fast. “Know anywhere?”

I tried to think of ideas. My house was out of the question. My parents weren’t the slightest bit understanding. If they woke up and Sarah was on the couch, I would probably get grounded. That’s how unreasonable they are. Besides, my mother had recently taken a slight disliking toward Sarah. She said I spent too much time with her and she didn’t like how I was so secretive about what I did when I was with her.

“What about your parents’ house?” I asked.

“Hell no, Jo. I’m in trouble. A lot of trouble. I don’t want to get my parents involved.”

“Should I be getting involved then?” I asked. I was starting to get worried that if we were caught, I would be charged guilty by association. I hoped she knew not to get me mixed up with the law.

“You’ll be fine as long as we get out of here!”

There was no where else I could think where she could stay except…

Except my hiding place. I didn’t want to take her there. I couldn’t take her there. That was my spot.
“Jo!” she screamed in my ear. “We don’t have time!”

Her face made me terrified. It was pure desperation. “Follow me.” My feet led the way, but my mind wanted to think of somewhere else, anywhere else. Sarah followed right behind me. I heard her heavy breaths, her heavy steps. Every once in a while we both looked behind us, checking to make sure we weren’t being followed. I knew when Sarah did this because her breathing right behind my ears would stop for a split second, then return. A few times, I stopped walking, fighting with what I should do.

“What? What is it?” Sarah whispered, but I just shook my head and continued. When we reached the edge of the woods, I stopped again and took a deep breath.

“We’re going in here? Jo! Wait!”

I continued trudging forward. Sarah could follow or stay behind. I didn’t care anymore. She had no idea how hard this was for me. When I heard her steps following swiftly behind me, I knew she made up her mind.

“Jo!” she tried one more time, but I didn’t answer. I couldn’t answer. I silently apologized to these familiar trees for letting someone else in, but in my head I told myself this was important. I was saving my friend.

Finally we arrived at my clearing. I turned around to face Sarah for the first time since we left the gas station. “We’re here,” I said.

“What is this place?”

I didn’t answer.

“Jo?” She was more calm now and there was less fear in her eyes.
“This is where I go,” I managed to say, “to think. This was the only place I could think of that was safe. It’s far in the woods so you’ll be safe from—”

“This is perfect,”—she said, cutting me off and pausing—“Thank you.”

She knew—she could see it in my eyes, could feel it in my presence—that this place was important to me. More important than she realized.

I cleared my throat, then began: “So, if you don’t mind explaining what the hell is going on now?” This had better be a good story. If we came here because she got busted for some weed, I was going to throw a fit.

Sarah sighed and sat down on the hard forest floor. Good, she didn’t take my rock. “I told you this was going to be long.”

I prompted her to continue. I was already awake. There were still some hours before dawn and I wasn’t going to leave without an explanation.

“You know about my powers, or whatever you want to call them. You know about how I was born with them?”

I nodded.

“Well, it goes like this.”

Sometime in high school, before Sarah had full control or full knowledge of what she was capable of, a group of strange girls befriended her. Sarah was more of a loner type, not by choice, but by default. Puberty had been a time of trial for Sarah, like every other preteen. At a time when all she wanted to do was fit in, she was plagued by these strange powers she didn’t know what to do with. She was scared to touch anyone, even her parents. This caused a rift in the family. Her parents thought she was just being a teenager. Sarah really just wanted them
to understand, but didn’t know where to begin. Would everyone just think she was crazy? Would they send her away to some crazy institution if she told them? She tried not to make any physical contact, ever. She didn’t know if she was harming people. She had no idea she was actually helping.

Even though she knew these weren’t the type of girls she would choose to be friends with on her own, she craved companionship and accepted their advances. They were strange, just like her. She found out later that they were witches. All into Wicca and special chants. Weird rites of passages deep in the woods. Blood was drawn, curses were put on people they hated. Dolls were possessed so they could come to life. Sarah never liked the things they did. Everything had a certain creepiness to it and she didn’t like the way it made her feel. She was looked at differently at school. Instead of being ignored, she was getting attention. Bad attention. Whispers that she was a freak, a person who thought she could possess someone if she wanted to.

“But that’s how I learned about my powers. Through them,” Sarah explained, still whispering. Up close in the moonlight, she had soft features: a delicate mouth, round eyes, a petite nose. She looked beautiful. She was defenseless, she let her guard down, and for that, something deeper about her was revealed.

By the time Sarah’s new witch friends all figured out what she could do, she was initiated against her will. She was used like a guinea pig, but held to a godlike esteem. Eventually they forced her into a leadership position, becoming
the “queen” as they called it, based on the preconceived fact that she had the ability to manipulate the world’s powers.

“Remember I told you I was into this stuff? Witchcraft, I mean. I just didn’t go into detail about how much.” She looked nervous, ashamed.

Everything kept growing, getting bigger and bigger, the group kept getting bigger and bigger. They were inspired by her, they believed in her, and for some, she even gave them hope. The bigger things got, the more intense things became.

“I got into drugs then,” Sarah confessed. “Just some weak stuff at first. You know, marijuana and that kind of stuff. But eventually I was smoking some really illegal stuff. Some stuff I should have never done.” She looked like she was about to cry. She had no one to turn to who could provide the same magical touch she gave me at times like this. Instead, I laid a cold, clammy hand on her shoulders. “Everything was crazy. I was getting scared. These people were out of their minds. Freaks. Doing chants every night, trying to raise the dead, worshipping witches. It was so strange.”

By the time she graduated high school, she was done. She couldn’t live on a witch’s salary (she laughed when she said this). For nights she tossed and turned thinking about how she was going to get out. She was still a large figure head. People looked up to her, admired her, wanted to be like her. It was as if some big CEO just up and quit because he didn’t feel like doing his job anymore. Everyone would go crazy. There had to be a way to sneak out.

Eventually, she stopped going to meetings. She made new friends at her job at the hospital. She didn’t answer her phone calls, stayed in at night, and made
sure none of her old friends knew where she had moved. She was going to try and passively resign.

Everyone was outraged, of course. She just gave up the group with no reservations. Obviously, they meant nothing to her, and their feelings were beyond her. They were furious.

“I thought they were going to kill me that night,” Sarah said. “I really did. They told me I can’t just up and quit like that. I was a member until I died. So the only way to get out—”

They found out where she lived. Dug around, maybe hired a detective—they were crazy enough to do that. With the internet, it probably wasn’t that hard to figure it out, no matter how private Sarah tried to make her life. The first time any incident happened, she woke up to the sound of her windows breaking, shattering onto the floor. She grabbed the baseball bat underneath her bed and screamed that she would call the police. She heard sneers and snickers on the other side of the window.

She sat there, on her bed weeping for hours through the night. The gang who came by just broke all the windows of the house and left. In the morning she saw the word “DIE” in capital letters spray painted to the side of her house.

“But they didn’t do anything else?” I asked.

Sarah shook her head no and understood my confusion. People liked her, many still admired her. The idea of killing off the best sorceress they knew was out of the question, even if she was a traitor. Still, they wanted her back and so
they agreed to scare her into rejoining. They wanted to make her believe that they meant business, or else.

“It’s been nearly a year since I graduated. I don’t know why, but I’ve been safe up ‘til now. But they’re hunting me down. And I don’t think I have the followers I once had. They’ve given up on me because I’ve given up on them.”

I tried to wrap my head around all the details and figure out Sarah’s story.

“They’re out to kill you?” I asked, still bewildered.

She was looking down, scooping up sand in her palms and letting it fall out slowly, and nodded.

“What the hell, Sarah?” was all I could think to say. This was crazy. Was she really being hunted down by witches to get killed?

“I wish I was kidding, Jo, but this is real. I guess I don’t actually know if they’re going to kill me, but I have a bad feeling about all of this. These people are nuts, Jo. They would do anything. I don’t think they have much of a conscience at this point.”

“How do you know they’re after you again? Did they come to your house?”

She was shivering even though the night air was still warm. I put my arm around her to help calm her down, to little effect.

“I heard noises outside. Tonight. Before I called you. So for a long time I didn’t move. I don’t even think I breathed. I just listened,” she looked at me, then continued. “Hours might have passed, I don’t know. Finally I got the nerve to call you. I was so scared I thought my body might explode. I snuck out of my own
house as quietly as I could. I couldn’t hear any more noises, but that doesn’t mean they weren’t out there. I had to be really cautious. No flashlight or anything like that.” She paused, gathered her thoughts. “I didn’t see anyone, none of my windows were broken. I have no idea if anyone did anything.”

“What kind of noise did you hear?”

“Snickering, laughing—the same as before. I think that’s why I got so spooked. I guess it could have been nothing.”

Not the words I wanted to hear. Sarah wasn’t lying, I knew that, but realizing that giving this place up could have been in vain tortured me. I should be happy. I didn’t want her to get hurt and I didn’t want anything bad to happen. This all could be just a false alarm.

“All you heard were people laughing? And from this you thought you were going to die?” I asked, a little annoyed now.

“God, Jo, people can be so bizarre. You know?” She was crying now, trying to speak through her sobs. “I’m sorry I got so scared. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. Sorry I woke you up in the middle of the night.”

I held her there, in the presence of my secret place, telling her it was all right, at least she wasn’t hurt. It was all the cliché things to say. I felt like plain old Josephine tonight. No one different, just the same me I woke up in the morning to.

“Look, it’s okay. I’ll go look in the morning. See if anyone left anything,” I said in comfort. Sarah nodded, continuing to bury her face on my shoulder.

“Sleep here tonight?”
She never agreed, but knew she was too frightened to go back home.

There was a comfort in this place—I could sense she knew that. I pointed at the rock, the moon reflecting off it like a beacon. She let me go, walked hesitantly to the boulder, and sat down.

“I have to get to sleep,” I said. Tomorrow started the weekend.

When I woke up, I thought everything with Sarah was a dream. But my tired body told me differently and slowly, memories of last night started slowly permeating my thoughts. I felt sick to my stomach. I immediately start thinking of my secret place that now belonged to not only me, but to Sarah. I looked at the time: nearly ten. I promised I’d go look at her place to let her know the condition it was in.

I put on some comfy clothes, the kind that laid around in the bottom of my dresser for lazy days like these. I looked like a mess, but I couldn’t care less. I was still tired, and all I wanted to do was to go back to sleep.

Somehow I dragged myself outside, following the path I now knew so well to Sarah’s house. I wondered briefly if I should have taken a weapon of some sort. Perhaps the invaders were sitting, waiting for Sarah to return. But I knew that nothing would be wrong with her house. This was just paranoia at its worse.

I walked up to the yellowed house and inspected the outside before I got any closer. No spray paint on the exterior, no dead bodies. So far, it was as I expected. I ventured closer, still looking for any clues of foul play. Maybe some
local teenagers decide to toilet paper her house, anything. But I didn’t see a single thing—not a single decayed decoration on her lawn—misplaced.

None of Sarah’s window blinds were open for me to look in. I checked her doors: none were smashed in, forced in, or pried off their hinges. For kicks, I tried the doorknob. Locked. I walk around to the back and tried the slider.

It opened. I was startled, not actually believing it would be unlocked.

Shivers raced up my spine and I suddenly felt like running full speed. But my feet were planted out of fear, and if someone wanted to kill me, they wouldn’t have waited so long, I told myself.

“Hello?” I ventured in a small voice. If someone was in there, they would hear the panic in my voice. “Hello?” I tried again. Nothing. Sarah must have left the door unlocked when she ran out the night before. It made sense. You can’t lock a sliding glass door from the outside.

Slowly, carefully, I slipped inside. I was wishing for a weapon now. My flashlight from the night before would have been fine. Anything heavy that I could bludgeon someone with. But I was empty handed. Nothing but the contents in my purse stood between me and the enemy.

I tiptoed around slowly, but everything looked the same, smelled the same. Still, I gave the house a thorough check: under the bed, in the closets, anywhere I thought a person could hide. I quickly opened doors, prepared for a dead body to fall out. I whipped my head around, spooked by shadows. Anything that made a sound made me screech. I was creeping myself out.
When I thought I checked the whole house, I was ready to leave, relieved that everything was okay. I walked out the slider that I came in from, but then wondered if Sarah had a spare key so I could leave through the front door and keep the house locked. I looked around haphazardly, not knowing where she would possibly keep one. By chance I opened a kitchen drawer and found a key there. I took it and tried it in the front door. It worked. I couldn’t believe my luck.

I locked the slider, left via the front door and locked it behind me. Now it was time to go get Sarah and tell her the news. A part of me was utterly relieved, but I also couldn’t stop my emotions from boiling over: this was all a fluke, and I was angry at Sarah right now for overreacting.

I couldn’t tell if my anger was causing me to sweat so much, or if it was just the summer heat that had me feeling so parched. All I could think of was Sarah in my secret place, the only place where I truly felt I could escape and be free.

“Calm down, Jo,” I whispered to myself. I was being selfish. I was Sarah’s friend, I had a duty to protect her, even if it meant false alarms. I was being so possessive about something I didn’t even own. I just one day up and claimed it for myself, calling it mine. Sure, my family had the deed to the property, but in the end, how could a person ever actually own the ground and trees and rocks and grass and….It was like trying to claim ownership on rain or wind.

I took a few deep breaths, which helped calm down. Almost. I was thirsty, tired, and I wondered a few times if I would actually make it home without
passing out, I was feeling so weak. I was running off little sleep, no breakfast, and nothing to drink since the night before. Everything was dragging. Even my mood.

My house finally stood out like a beacon of hope as the tip of it appeared over the small hill. I could finally sit down, have a calm breakfast and gather my thoughts. Mom was doing a shift at the hospital until the afternoon, Dad was outside working on the lawn. At least I had some privacy. Being occupied with their own work meant they would generally leave me alone.

I said hello to my dad when I walked passed him outside weeding.

“Where have you been?” he asked, and I told him I just went out for a stroll. It wasn’t such an outrageous lie that he didn’t believe it, and so he didn’t follow up with more questions.

I sat for a long time at the kitchen table doing absolutely nothing but breathing softly through my nose. I wasn’t thinking, I wasn’t reveling in my anger. I just sat, staring at nothing, wanting nothing. I stayed like that for maybe fifteen minutes. My throat was telling me I better get it something to drink, or else. I grabbed the orange juice out of the fridge along with a bagel and prepared some breakfast. It was already almost eleven and I still had to go check on Sarah. She was stranded out in the forest, and she didn’t know how to get out.

I grabbed my backpack once again and thought about the things I might need to bring. Water for Sarah, maybe some food, too. She had been out there for a while now and was probably starved. I grabbed a granola bar and some other packaged foods and headed out.
I got lost a few times on my way to find her. I even panicked, thinking I had no idea how I was going to get on the right path. Everything looked different in the daylight, I had no sense of where I should go. I had nothing driving me, urging me onward. I felt like I was walking in a foreign place, somewhere I had never been before. I barely managed to find landmarks, specific signs that would point me in the right direction. I vaguely remembered seeing certain things, that rock, or that oddly shaped tree, on my night walks, and it gave me the confidence to continue. More time passed. I didn’t know if I was actually getting any closer. Then I saw the cleaning up ahead.

I laughed when I saw her, curled up on the rock, my rock. She hadn’t woken up since I left her there last night. Exhaustion took over and didn’t release. And to think I was worried she was starving, or thinking I abandoned her. But she was just sleeping. Peaceful in her dreams.

“Sarah!” I said to wake her up. I brushed her cheek gently with the back of my hand.

She startled awake, obviously confused about where she was.

“Wake up, Sleeping Beauty.” She finally recognized me, my voice. It took a little longer for the rest of the scenery to come into focus.

“What the hell,” she said in her mumbled sleepy voice.

“Remember last night?”

Sarah yawned, rubbed her eyes like a crying infant. The pause was long. Finally, a nod. “Did you check out the house?”
“All clear,” I said. “Not a scratch on the house. My guess was that a few bored teenagers giggled by your house, then left.”

She didn’t find my sarcasm funny and didn’t even attempt a smirk. “They could be waiting on the inside, waiting for me to come home.”

“Checked that, too,” I went over to the boulder and found room to sit down next to Sarah. “You escaped through the slider?”

She thought about it for a while, then nodded. “Yeah, figured it was safer. Guess I left it open?”

I nodded. “So I went in and checked everywhere someone could hide. No one. Not a trace.”

“My slider was still open?”

I threw her the spare key I found in the drawer. “Pure luck,” I told her. “You’re not the most organized person I know.”

“I guess I better think of a better hiding place if you could find it that easily.” Sarah yawned again, stretched out her arms. I took the time to look around at the place I hardly recognized anymore now that the sun was shining instead of the moon. The trees were less embracing. There was no magic here, no special feelings welling deep inside of me.

My eyes darted to the tree I discovered a few nights earlier. Even in the bright sunlight, the carving was hard to see. It looked worn well into the wood. I did the quick math and realized it would have been there for nearly fifty years.

“So, I guess it was a false alarm?”
I nodded solemnly, keeping my eyes glued to the ground. Admitting that was still painful for me, but I didn’t want to seem overly dramatic.

“Just a typical Friday night for bored suburban kids, Sarah.” I looked at her and she looked pathetic. The color was still drained out of her, she looked tired. Most of all, she looked sorry.

“I didn’t—” she began, but then trailed off. “What I mean is, look, I’m sorry. I wouldn’t have dragged you out of bed like that—”

I didn’t say anything.

“—Unless I knew I could trust you. You’re really the only one I can turn to.”

I sat there, waiting for a response to pop into my head, but nothing came. Sarah looked at me as if defeated.

“I know about this place,” she told me after some time.

I felt like walking all of a sudden. My butt was starting to hurt after sitting on the hard surface of the rock for too long. I needed to use my feet, to observe things up close, try to figure out where I was, and rediscover this place.

“I,” Sarah said, “I could feel it. Last night. I could sense it.”

I passed by the carved initials and tried not to linger in case she noticed what I was looking at. I stood by a tree, touch its bark, tried to hear if it was talking to me, telling me something I needed to know. Everything was silent and dead. There was no life here anymore.

“It worked,” she explained. “My third eye.”
I stopped, not because I wanted to, but because my feet wouldn’t take me anywhere else. They were on strike.

“I saw visions, dreams. Last night when you left. This place came—” she hesitated. “—it came alive.”

I wanted to tell her that I already knew this, that it wasn’t actually her third eye, just the magic of this place, but saying that wouldn’t matter. She was in on it. This was no longer a secret. The woods had decided to reveal themself to her.

I turned to look at her. “What did you see?”

She shook her head as if words would never be able to explain. “I know about Matt,” she told me. I heard her voice quiver. “I know about Josephine.”

I was pacing now, back and forth, back the forth. My mind was racing. I was thinking of nothing and everything at the same time.

“I know about you,” she said.

“What do you know about me?” I screamed, wondering where that came from.

“I know about you and this place. About you and Josephine.”

“And you saw this all? With your super powers?” I asked in mockery. “Or have you been spying on me? Is this witch hunt thing all a ploy? So you can get me to take you here? Because nothing happened last night, Sarah. And now, magically,” I emphasized, “you know everything about me!”

“You think I’m lying? You think I could do that to you? Look, Jo, believe me or not, I’m telling the truth.”

I was still pacing, madly trying to collect the pieces of my mind.
“I’m sorry. Sit down.”

I listened to her and sat down on the grass, plopping down right where I stood. I took in a few big breaths.

“Let me explain.”

Last night, alone in these woods she saw visions, waking dreams while she tried to sleep. At first, she thought they were a kind of self-induced hallucinations. Maybe her anxiety was causing her to see figures in the night, or making her think that someone had found her and had followed them. She saw the figure of a man first. He was young, maybe around eighteen, no more than his early twenties. Sarah held her breath, fearing for the worst. She had no back up plan. She didn’t want to run away for fear that she would never find her way out. She crouched behind the large rock and waited.

The young man was alone, looking for something. Or someone. The moonlight didn’t provide enough light for Sarah to know for sure, but she was almost positive that the man was not someone she recognized, and so couldn’t be someone who was hunting her down. She had never seen him before, she was sure of that. So why was he out here? Why did he come looking for her?

She watched him for hours, crouched down behind the rock, moving only slightly to relieve her aching muscles that were beginning to fall asleep. Time passed with no sense of movement, and Sarah wondered if she should reveal herself and see what happened. He looked like an innocent guy, not a murderer, and she was tired. Maybe he worked for the police, she thought hopefully. Maybe
one of her neighbors had called in about the disturbance at her house. Maybe they had begun a search effort. Should she call out to him?

But this wasn’t a search-and-rescue, she knew that. The man was too young, dressed in plain clothes. He clearly was waiting for someone. He wouldn’t be standing in one spot if he was searching for her. He would have others with him, maybe a flashlight, a radio, a dog, something more than what he had now, which was nothing. She decided to stay where she was and try to find some answers.

Sarah’s eyes were adjusting to the light. A few times that man stepped close to the rock she was hiding behind, and she got a better look at his face. What she saw then was disturbing. The young man wasn’t complete.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I interrupted. “He was decaying? He had no limbs?” I meant it to be sarcastic. I was still in an irritable mood.

“He was—” she paused to think of the right word “—he was a ghost.”

He was silvery in the moonlight, almost glowing. Sarah didn’t notice until he walked up close to her. But yes, he was definitely shimmering, light bouncing off him differently than from her own skin. He almost seemed to be transparent, letting the light bounce waves off his translucent skin. Sarah checked her arm. Just what she thought—she was a dull colored black, reflecting little of the moon’s light.

“For hours he paced around, waiting for something. Every once in a while he would disappear, go running somewhere into the woods,” Sarah said, picking her brain for an accurate retelling. “I breathed a sigh of relief, thinking he was
finally gone. I could relax. But a few minutes later and he was back, still empty
handed.”

This happened about five times. Sarah started to nod off periodically, 
exhausted from being kept awake. At intervals, she would force her eyes open to 
check for something going on. Once, she saw he stopped pacing. He was standing 
by a tree, cutting something into the bark. A message, Sarah thought. For whoever 
he was looking for. Maybe it would be a message to her: Sarah, if you find this, I 
am here to protect you. Something along those lines. He took his time, 
meticulously using his pocketknife to carve out the message. A few times he 
stood back, either admiring his work or checking for adjustments. From where she 
was hiding, Sarah couldn’t see what was written there. She would have to wait to 
see when he was gone, if that was ever going to happen.

“I fell asleep,” Sarah said. “When I woke up, he was gone.”

I waited for her to continue. So she witnessed the night Matt carved his 
and Josephine’s initials into the tree. That was the night Josephine never showed 
up. I saw a vision, too. In my dreams. I knew the whole story.

“That’s when I saw Josephine.” She looked at me, almost scared. Her eyes 
were blank, wide. Her mouth taut and nervous.

“How do you know it was her?” I asked. How could she be so positive it 
was Josephine Perry?

“Jo,” she said whispering, breathing deeply from her mouth. “It was you.”
Chapter 19

After I left Sarah in the clearing last night, I went back home and fell asleep almost instantly. I thought I remembered crawling through my bedroom window, but the memory was hazy. I was too tired to remember anything clearly. I remember that I woke up this morning in a daze, wondering where I was.

Did I unknowingly go on one of my night walks?

“It,” I stammered, unsure of how to answer. “It was me?”

She nodded. I could see a sense of fear in her eyes, wide and unmoving and different from the fear she had last night while we were running to escape. She was looking at me differently, looking at me like I wasn’t a human being. I was a ghost, like the version of the boy she claimed she saw last night. I was in two places at once: sleeping in my bedroom, and roaming around these woods. Or so I thought.

“I woke up and there you were, looking for someone just like the boy.”

“Like Matt,” I blurted out.

“Yes, like Matt.” She was still looking at me, as if pondering if I was real. “I figured that much out. When I saw Josephine—when I saw you—I put the pieces of the puzzle together. This was that secret hiding spot Matt mentioned in his letter.”

Clever, she was clever. Powers or no powers, any one involved in this story could have figured that out.
“You were waiting, just like Matt. You had the same silvery glow he had. You didn’t look all there.”

“I guess I was a ghost then, huh?” I meant it to be a cruel joke and even laughed half-heartedly. I wanted to make her see the ridiculousness of her statement.

“Listen, Jo. I don’t understand it either. But I know what I saw.” She continued. “When I saw you, I didn’t hesitate to call out to you. I thought you were there to tell me something. Maybe let me know someone was following us or something. Or that my house was burned down. Something tragic like that.

“So I screamed out to you. Over and over again I said your name, but it was like you weren’t listening. You had tuned out the world.”

I tried to again recall events from last night. Everything that happened. When I got the phone call, when I arrived at the gas station, coming to the woods, going back home. But as hard as I tried, I couldn’t remember any details about falling asleep in my bed.

“I don’t know why you’re not answering me, until I walk over to you and see.”

“See that I’m not really human?”

She nodded, slowly. I didn’t know what to think. I was glad Sarah had made me sit down earlier because I was starting to feel dizzy.

“I don’t get it, Sarah,” I said, finally. “I left you here last night. I woke up in my own bed. How could I—” I tried to get the word out, but choked. “—how could I be a ghost?”
“We have a lot to figure out.”

This summer was getting way too complicated.

Sarah followed me as I led her out of the clearing and into our neighborhood through my backyard. We went to her house first. She wanted to see with her own eyes that everything was okay.

“Outside looks fine,” she said as we approached the brown stucco house on the corner.

I wondered suddenly why someone as young as Sarah would want to live alone. Maybe she didn’t get along with her parents, but I didn’t know if it was worth being by yourself all the time. “Do you every get lonely living alone?” I asked.

“Yeah, sure. Sometimes. I mean, I am human, Jo. Everyone gets lonely sometimes.”

“How is it your parents were okay with giving you this house to live in?”

“I told you before. This house was given to me, so it wasn’t theirs to give away. They had no choice in the matter. I wanted to move out. Let’s see what’s inside.” She grabbed the spare key I gave her from her pocket and unlocked the front door. She was hesitant, but I pushed her along.

“There’s no one in there, remember?” I insisted. “Geez, Sarah. What kind of people are you hanging out with that make you this scared all the time?”

“I don’t hang out with them anymore. God, don’t you listen?” She was annoyed at me now. Still, she insisted in checking all the closets, under the bed,
behind curtains, just like I did. Her eyes darted back and forth looking for anything out of place, even if it was just a pen.

“You’re lucky no one came in here with the door completely unlocked. Crazy friends or not,” I said.

She continued her search, then finally concluded that every thing was okay. “I’m still sketched out, but I guess I can sleep okay tonight. No more panicked phone calls at two in the morning.” She smiled at me, a warm, friendly smile that I realized I missed. The walk over here had been painfully silent. I could tell Sarah was avoiding me, still trying to think and explain the weird happenings of last night. She was trying to figure out who I was.

I found a seat on her couch while she disappeared into one of the bedrooms. I heard some rustling, the sound of drawers opening and closing. I was suspecting that she was trying to find a new spot for her spare house key.

“Why don’t you give it to your parents?” I called out. “Just in case you manage to lock yourself out?”

She didn’t answer, but reappeared and offered me a drink. “Non-alcoholic,” I said. I had so many questions running through my head that I didn’t want anything to fog my thinking. I had to know what happened—last night at Sarah’s house, what Sarah saw when she was in the clearing, and what happened to me.

“I only offer alcohol when I’m trying to get something out of you. Now let’s figure this stuff out.”
“Let’s start with the facts,” I offered. I thought about what I wanted answered first, and knew it had to be about what happened when Sarah was alone in the woods. “I want to know what you saw last night.” I wanted to get everything that happened on the table first.


I cringed. I didn’t like where we were heading already. “Are you sure it was me?” I asked again, hopeful.

“I’m positive, Jo. It was you. I even called out to you, remember?”

I nodded my head, trying to make all the pieces fit, but nothing surfaced. I still couldn’t answer how I turned into—what Sarah is now terming—a ghost.

“I had a dream,” I offered. Although I was reluctant, I couldn’t go hiding this from Sarah now. She was too deep into the story. “More like a vision. Like that one you had last night. Minus the ghosts.” I mimicked the way Sarah said the word.

“And?”

“And,” I repeated. “Everything that you saw last night, I’ve already seen,” I said, looking up at Sarah’s eager eyes. “In my vision.”

“What exactly?”

“I never saw Matt,” I said. “Not in his ghostlike form in the clearing, at least. I go to that place often, the clearing in the woods. I go there to think, to clear my mind. I brought the letter with me one night. I read it there, tried to get a feel for it, find some answers, you know. That’s when I saw the carving. And then

I could tell Sarah was taking notes in her head, but everything was getting all jumbled together. She told me to hold on, got up, and disappeared in the back room again. When she returned, she had a steno pad and a pen. She wrote down:

vision, no Matt or Josephine. Bullet points preceded each thought.

“There’s more,” I said, hesitating, inhaling deeply. “I had a dream that night. An actual dream, not some weird waking dream.”

Pen ready on the piece of paper, Sarah nodded as if encouraging me to continue.

“I saw him writing a letter. To Josephine. It was a different than the one I received in the mail. But we were right. The letter was written by Matt to Josephine,” I said. “Because he didn’t sign this letter either.”

I watched as Sarah wrote “letter confirmed was Matt” on her piece of paper.

“That doesn’t confirm anything,” I said, defensive.

“Look, Jo. I don’t believe in coincidences. This is as much proof as we need.”

Just because she didn’t believe in coincidences didn’t mean a thing in the real world, I wanted to tell her. But I knew that would lead us on a tangent. She would never back down from her point and we would end up just arguing about it.

“In the letter,” I explained. “Matt writes about the carving. He tells her he waited the night before, but she never came. He thought he could hear her
footsteps, but they were always false alarms. Before going home, realizing she was never going to come, he carves their initials.”

“So basically, everything I saw last night.”

“There’s one last thing,” I said. I thought to myself: one very important thing. “That night, the night I discovered the carving—I don’t remember getting home.”

Sarah stopped what she was writing and looked up at me.

“I don’t remember ever leaving.”
Dear _____,

I’m scared.

I’m scared that I don’t know who I am. I’m not talking about puberty and trying to figure out my body, that kind of stuff. I really don’t know who I am. The deeper I dig inside me, the more empty handed I return.

Am I a dream? A part of someone’s imagination? A life from the past?

A ghost?

I don’t believe these things because I—well, to put it like Descartes—I think therefore I am. I am a cognizant, breathing, real human being. I get sick. I get happy or sad. I feel pain. When I touch my skin, it’s warm, it gets goosebumps when I’m cold. I have to sleep every night just like everyone else. I am not immune to anything.

I can’t figure out what’s been happening to me. I’m trying to retrace my steps, to see how I’ve gotten this far. But there doesn’t seem to be a beginning. I guess I can call the start of this the beginning of the summer.

That’s when I got the job at the hospital. I met Karina, my boss. I met Sarah and the other guys she works with. I met a lot of patients. Mr. Perry. I think everything might stem from him.

How do I explain what’s been happening? That dream with Mr. Perry—oh, I still don’t like to think about it. How do I explain...turning into a ghost? Being in two places at once. Not remembering when I leave. Waking up in a fog.

I wish I knew what was happening to me. I wish I knew who I was.
Chapter 20

That night, I saw a ghost.

I felt a presence somewhere in the back of my mind and when I woke up I was wide awake. I didn’t move an inch, but rotated my eyes to check the time. It was close to three in the morning.

Someone, something was in my room. I could feel it. Slowly, without a sound, I turned my head to look around. There, it was in the corner.

Instead of fear, I wasn’t scared at all, but calm. It felt more like this was planned and I expected to find him there.

“Hello,” I said. It was the most natural thing for me to do.

The ghost was sitting at my desk. It looked like he was reading a book hunched over, but there was nothing in his hands. He must have been staring at the floor, waiting for me to wake up. When I spoke, he raised his head to gaze at me.

“Have you been waiting long?” I asked. His face was so familiar, although I didn’t know who he was.

The man shook his head no and turned around in my desk chair, his back facing me. I didn’t know what he was doing, or if I offended him. I couldn’t see behind him from the angle on my bed. I decided to prop myself up on my elbows for a better look, but this didn’t help.

“What are you doing?” I asked, with no reply. His right arm was moving slightly, but everything else was still. After some contemplation, I realized that he
was writing. When I turned my head, I heard the noise I wanted to hear: the sound of pen on paper. It was making the slightest scratching noise, indecipherable at any other time but the dead of night. I wondered who was writing to.

I waited patiently for him to finish. I had to keep pinching myself to keep from falling asleep. I knew that if I closed my eyes for too long he would disappear and I would never know why he visited me. I looked at the clock. It was a quarter to four.

When he was done writing, he capped his pen. I waited for the sound of the click, but it never came. The room was still empty of sound. I felt my heart beating wildly in my chest, waiting for what he was going to do next.

He looked over his shoulder to the right as if he recognized the sound of my heart. It was echoing off the walls of my room, and now he was aware of it. I wished it wasn’t so quiet.

Slowly, he stood up and walked toward me. When he got closer, I looked at his face and almost gasped. I realized I knew exactly who he was. He was Mr. Perry.

A young Mr. Perry. Not the old man I visited in the hospital almost five days a week. This Mr. Perry here, in front of me, in my room, was a teenager, as old as I was or a few years older. I almost screamed and the stifled sound of my intake of breath pierced the room.

“Adam,” he said, yet no actual sound left his mouth. I knew what he was saying by reading his lips. He was pointing at his chest with his pointer finger. Silently, I nodded my head.
He stood there, looking at me, admiring me. Tilting his head to the right as if staring down at a young child. He stared, the same stare Mr. Perry gave me when I first met him. As if sizing me up, seeing if I was good enough.

I closed my eyes, just for a moment, wondering if this was just another dream, but then he touched my cheek. I shivered; he was cold. The way Sarah described Matt and Josephine that night I rescued her, Mr. Perry—Adam—looked just like she said. Glowing and translucent.

He continued to caress my face. I let him. I was too tired to protest. Even though he was cold, something felt warm about his touch. I felt ashamed, but my body started to ache, started to yearn for his body, just like in my disturbing dream with Mr. Perry. I think he sensed this. Soon, he began to undress me.

Again, like my dream, he began with my shoulders. I couldn’t feel anything but his cold lips on my shoulders, but I was beginning to feel the warming sensations of the pleasures of his caress. I was burning. I had no control, and I was swept away into my fantasies.

When I woke up, I was naked, sweating in my bed. The morning sun shone light though my window and the slatted blinds. It was already morning. There was no sign of the ghost.
Chapter 21

In the morning, I got a ride with my mom to the hospital, but this time her shift started at nine like mine. Summer was winding down, and Karina was already worried about the extra help she’d be losing once I was gone. Just to be nice, I told her that I might be able to work some weekends, when homework wasn’t taking over, or when I felt like some extra cash. She smiled at me, that motherly smile she always seemed to have under the thick layer of lipstick and lip liner. She said to call anytime. The help was always welcomed.

When we arrived my mother ran off to her shift, and I walked off to mine. I did the usual cleaning around the little store. By this time, I didn’t have to wait for Karina’s instructions—I already knew what needed to be done just by looking around the store. Even when everything looked nice, sometimes I gave the place another good sweeping to pass the time. Karina was usually involved with the cash registers, counting money and asking me to recount it to make sure it was correct. Every once in a while she had to make a deposit at the bank and left the store to me for an hour or so. I got nervous at times like these. I’d worry that I’d get a rowdy customer pressuring me for something I couldn’t give. Like maybe they dropped their candy bar on the floor on the way out and demanded a new one, free of charge. I couldn’t give them a new one, and there was no manager around to ask if it would be okay if I did. Most of the time, the hour passed without anything going wrong. For most of that hour, I wouldn’t even get
a customer. If I did get just one or two, they bought something and left right away.

I stopped telling Karina about the phone calls. I could tell she was on the verge of leaking my story to someone in power: my parents, or maybe even the police. She seemed crazy enough to do that. Once the letter—Matt’s love letter to Josephine—arrived, I told Karina that all the phone calls had stopped all of a sudden. Nothing strange was going on in my life. Everything was back to the laidback summer I was supposed to be having.

Now, as I swept the already clean floor of the gift shop, I wished she knew about everything that had been happening to me. It would have been nice to have someone other than Sarah to talk to. I wanted to tell her about Sarah’s visions, the clearing in the woods, the ghost that visited me.

The ghost. I stayed awake each night waiting for him to arrive. Like clockwork, I would wake up and not feel tired at all. I felt his presence tickle my skin with goosebumps, and I would know he was there. When I opened my eyes, he was already scribbling fast at work on another letter.

I wanted Karina to know. Maybe she could help me get me out of this mess.

Now, she had even stopped asking me why I look so tired every morning. I guessed that she had come to expect it. Our conversations didn’t go beyond some usual small talk. How was my weekend? Did I do anything fun?

I had to make something up. Sometimes I told her I went to the beach with my friends, or went shopping at the local mall and picked up a new outfit. I didn’t
tell her my whole summer was absorbed in this haunted, this stalking, this crazy story.

As I packed up the cart with the list of items in my hand, I knew room 208 was approaching and I would once again have to face the real Mr. Perry after seeing him in my dreams, and now these strange appearances as a ghost. I felt this unavoidable meeting like a force, pulling me toward it. Though I was unwilling, I followed the current.

I was making my usual rounds and just finished with the patient next door to 208. I handed her a card, and she didn’t buy anything. We made the usual small talk about her family and how they wouldn’t be able to visit until next week. I gave a weak response of sympathy and left.

As soon as the door closed behind me, my head was blank, a balloon filled with nothing but emptiness and air. I knew Mr. Perry was in the room adjacent to this one and that I had to enter it.

Slowly I inched myself closer. I forced myself to not be scared anymore. For this entire summer, I’d gotten used to the awkwardness of facing him. I knew his secrets. I wondered if he knew mine.

I knocked, waited for an answer. I heard his voice call out and it rang out like what I imagined the voice of my ghost to sound like. Adam, he voiced to me in my room while he pointed his finger at himself. He never spoke another word to me. Not once.

The coldness swept over my body when I opened the door. He was on the bed, and looked at me when I entered. He was staring at me with those eyes that
were now so familiar. Blue. Deep blue. It was like looking into the deepest expanse of the world and everything that the world survives on.

I asked him casually what he would like today—he had no deliveries. Instead of an answer, he gave me a cold stare and stark silence. “Why you here then?” he said with an attitude that made me feel like I wasn’t welcome.

I stared right back. Slowly, a smile crept over his face, a sinister, senile smile. I was sickened by it, and I was freezing cold. I couldn’t force myself to smile back. Even in politeness. I repeated my question instead.

“Anything for you today—” I hesitated. My tongue almost slipped the name Adam. “—Mr. Perry?”

But still, no answer. Just the smile. The smile with rotten teeth, the smile that had no emotion attached to it.

I started to leave the room. I backed up, my cart following my guidance in front of me, but the room was too narrow to turn it around easily and I struggled awkwardly for a while. Among my clangs and huffing, he mumbled something as I was on my way to the door.

“Excuse me?” I said, a little too loudly.

His voice was deep, throaty, like it was starting to rot from sitting without use for so long. He said, “Tell me where it is.”

I looked at him, long and hard. I repeated myself, this time slower and more reserved. “Excuse me?”

“I said, tell me where it is. Tell me where she is.”
I didn’t have to play dumb. I knew exactly what he was talking about. Somehow he knew all about what was going on—the dreams, the ghosts, my hiding spot in the woods, Sarah and her visions of Matt. He thought I had answers about his daughter, but I wasn’t close to figuring anything out. This was all still a mystery to me.

I stumbled around for a suitable answer in my head, but none surfaced. I was close enough to the door that I just opened it and left. I could hear Mr. Perry breathing deeply as the door closed behind me.

I’d been getting back to the hospital gift store earlier each day after I made my runs. I just stopped being polite, I stopped taking my time with the patients, and I stopped really caring at all now that the summer was coming to a close. Usually I got back with an hour to spare. Today, I arrived a little after noon. I still had an hour and a half before my shift was over.

“Wow, Jo,” Karina said to me, seeing me pulling in my cart. “Quit early?”

I shook my head. “No one really wanted anything.”

Karina bought this story and didn’t ask any more questions. Instead, she said she was glad I was here because she needed to use the restroom and had been waiting for someone to give her a break. I watched the register for her while she was gone. I was exhausted and all I could think about was sleep and my increasing problems.

I watched the doorway of the little shop, looking at the different faces that walked by. Most of the people were middle aged, their parents or grandparents
now old and ready to die. Most of them looked sad, perpetually set in a state of
unhappiness. It was the lines around their eyes, the frowns on their mouths that
gave it away, I decided. They yelled at their children: don’t skip, don’t run, stop
chewing that gum so loudly. Just let them be kids, I thought. Let them be free
before their lives turn into prisons.

Most of the children were running, scared of what they were going to find
chasing them from behind. Nervous and scared, or maybe I was confusing the two
concepts. Either way, I knew no one look happy. How many laughs do you hear
in a hospital? I was inclined to say zero. I hadn’t even heard myself laugh in ages.

A man and his wife walked by. He coughed into his fist, cleared his throat.
She was staring at her feet, sometimes looking up to avoid colliding with a nurse.
The two thought about stopping in the store to ask where to go. They stopped,
looked up at the sign, looked at me, then left. I chuckled to myself, finding the
couple amusing. I guess I was wrong about my laughing theory.

A few seconds later, I heard the man flag down a hustling nurse. He asked
where reception was and she pointed the couple in the right direction. I knew
where reception was. I could have answered their question easily. Another
chuckle.

“What’s so funny?” Karina said, appearing in the doorway.

I shook my head. “People,” I said. “Just watching people.”

“Weird aren’t they?” Karina’s eyeliner looked fresh, a new layer of black.
A smudge of red had smeared on her teeth from the fresh coating of lipstick she
applied. I didn’t feel like telling her it was there. “I watch people sometimes, too. When I’m in here trying to pass the time. It gets slow.”

“Can I go to lunch?” I asked. Usually I took a break half way through my runs, but today sped by too fast that I almost forgot to take one.

“Take what you need. You’ll be going home soon anyway.”

I grabbed my wallet from my purse I kept stashed in the back storage closet and walked out toward the cafeteria. Maybe Sarah would be there. A part of me wanted to see her and the other part wanted to be left alone.

Once in the cafeteria, I grabbed a tray and loaded it with a few prepackaged items—fruit salad, a bagel, cream cheese. I didn’t like eating the prepared food. It reminded me of being in school. It reminded me of what it would be like to get old.

No one I recognized was sitting around on their break. I breathed a sigh of relief. I wasn’t really in the mood to retell everything that’d been happening. I didn’t want to turn those events into words. That would somehow make it more real, I decided.

I ate my lunch, then sat reading the cheesy motivational sayings on the posters on the wall to waste the rest of my half-hour break. When it was time to go, I dumped my trash, gave another quick look around the room to see if anyone I knew came in while I was eating, then exited. Back to work.

The remaining thirty minutes went by in a blur. My mind was sleeping before I even walked out the door.
I called my mother when my shift ended.

“Hi, honey,” she said, a little too sweetly. I had a feeling this meant she was going to tell me she couldn’t give me a ride. “Off your shift? Sorry, Jo, but I don’t get off mine for another few hours.”

I was right. I was walking back home. Again. The sun continued to scorch my back, my neck, my arms, anything that was left open to the brutality. My new thing that I did when I walked home was to smile at people. Everyone. I had my fun with staring, but now I was testing them. What group smiled more? Who never smiled?

I saw the period-stained bed lady walking her dog again. This time she wasn’t on the phone, grossing me out about all the minute details of her life. This was a perfect opportunity to pounce. When she got close enough, I waited for eye contact, then cracked a teeny smile.

She didn’t smile back, just pretended as if she didn’t see me.

The mailman was doing his delivery, sweating just as much as I was, carrying a container full of water strapped to his belt. I tried to smile first, but he nodded at me before I could.

At the stoplight, no one smiled back at me from inside their cars except a little old lady and a few younger kids getting driven home from their daycare.

No one likes to smile these days. It was even a chore for me.
Chapter 22

When my cell phone rang, I saw that it was Sarah and contemplated not picking up. But lately, she was leaving desperate voicemails asking where I’d been lately and why I was avoiding her.

“Hello?” I said, deciding at the last minute that avoiding her wasn’t helping my situation.

A voice obviously disguised asked if Jillian was available. I gave an obnoxious fake laugh. “Very funny,” I said.

“I’m just trying to make a joke,” Sarah said, back to her normal sounding self. “Where the hell have you been lately?”

I shrugged my shoulders, realizing too late that she wouldn’t be able to see what I was doing over the phone. Instead, I told her, “I don’t know.”

“Are you avoiding me? Jo, what’s been going on?”

“I’ve been busy,” I said. I shouldn’t have picked up the phone, I thought.

She let it slide, dropping the subject. “Anyway,” she said, “I have some news. A breakthrough, maybe.”

“What?” I asked, though I didn’t care for the answer. I questioned just hanging up, blaming it on a dead battery or something. But there was no getting out of this.

“I’ve been reading all about wrinkles in time, you know, time warps and that kind of stuff.”
My eyes rolled in the back of my head, and I was glad Sarah wasn’t around to see this.

“It’s so obvious, Jo. You are Mr. Perry’s daughter. Somehow, you entered a time warp, some kind of time machine, and ended up here!” She was so excited, her voice was a high screech. She was so loud I had to pull the phone away from my ear. “And that explains the letter, too!”

She waited for me to say something, but I wasn’t paying attention anymore. Time traveling. I zoned out, completely detaching myself from her voice screeching on the other side.

“Jo? Still there?”

“Yeah,” I managed to mumble.

“What is wrong with you?” she demanded, her voice going from high-pitched to normal.

“That doesn’t make sense, Sarah.”

“Why?”

“Because I came out of my mother’s womb. Because there are pictures to prove that. Because I’m not a ghost, or some girl who lived fifty years ago. I’m just me,” I said in exasperation. “I’m just Jo.”

“You don’t think I looked that up? I thought of those things too. But I’ve read all about it. Some scientists believe that when time travel is possible, you have to start at the beginning. So when Josephine Perry time traveled when she was sixteen, she had to start her new life over from the beginning.” She waited for
a second as if willing me to catch on. “Starting life as a baby again. You were conceived by your mother and father, but were born as Josephine Perry!”

“Sarah, can I go?” I asked her. “I just can’t do this right now. This is ridiculous.”

“Jo! Wait. This explains it all, I promise. Your premonitions, dreams, visions…Everything!”

I heard her voice even as I lowered the phone from my ear. She was asking me what was wrong, can she talk about it with me? But I’d already pressed the “end” button on my phone.
That night, I couldn’t fall asleep. The things Sarah said just wouldn’t leave my thoughts. I didn’t really believe that I was stuck in some kind of alternate reality, or some kind of parallel universe. But maybe Sarah was going somewhere with her crazy ideas.

I had to check for myself.

I knew I had seen pictures somewhere. My mom had shown them to me, or maybe she had shown them to another relative and I had just looked over her shoulder. There were three old, dusty, blue albums that were heavy and thick with old pictures of me as a baby. Some were even polaroids. All I remember about the albums was the heavy feeling of being dated and covered with dust. If the albums didn’t include a clear cover to house the photos under, I was sure that they would have by now been ruined or eaten by bugs.

The last I remember those albums being were in my mother’s closet, piled high on the top shelf. She was working a late shift, and my father was reading the newspaper, so I thought it would be safe to go into my parents’ bedroom. They were never really possessive about their space, and for the most part I was able to enter and exit at will. Only when my mother was in a really bad mood did I get yelled at for entering without asking permission first. But since she wasn’t here and my father was occupied, I just opened the door silently and went straight to the closet door.
Inside was a mess, something I knew my mother always complained about, but my father just never seemed to getting around to throwing his clothes in the actual hamper. Instead, piles of dirty shirts and pants lay in piles surrounding the nearly empty container. If that had been me, I would have been grounded for a week, but I guess with my father, my mother had less control, and so the clothes just lay there in abandoned piles. I wondered if they would ever make it to the washing machine to be washed again.

I took my attention away from the piles of clothes to the top of the shelf. Nothing was neat or organized up there. Everything just looked like it was piled in randomness because the person doing the piling was running out of time. Things were on the verge of falling down, getting lost in the clothes or breaking. Again, I wondered why my mother was so strict on me, but let her own closet look like this mess. But I knew if I ever mentioned this fact to help me get away with not cleaning, I would be punished even more severely, and so I couldn’t even use this knowledge as leeway.

I moved some dusty old purses to one side and looked behind them, but it looked like it was just more dusty old purses in the back. Then I saw an unmarked box in the other corner, closer to my dad’s clothes. I sneezed when I tried to lift it up, but it was too heavy. I wanted to call out to my father to help me lift it down, but then thought better of it in case he decided to put a halt in my detective work. Instead, I kept looking.

There were old bottles of hair spray, a rain jacket that looked like it was from the seventies, some other nondescript bottles of toiletries, a few board games
I have never seen or played, and some hardware to some frames. Just a lot of junk, but so far, no photo albums.

I was almost going to give up, partly because I was paranoid that my father would find me and I would have to explain what I was doing rummaging in his closet, and partly because I didn’t think I would find it in here among all the other junk. I looked at their bedroom door, listened for a moment to the silence that was still permeating the house, and when I focused my attention back over to the shelves, there they were, nestled into a tight corner in the back closer to my mother’s things. They were still big and blue and dusty, just like I remembered them in my vague memories, and they were hard to pull out from underneath a layer of odds and ends. When I managed to dislodge one, the other two came easier, and soon I was resting on the hard wood floor of my parents’ bedroom clutching all three in my lap as I tried to stifle my coughs and sneezes.

The first album opened with a crinkled sound as if I was opening something stiff from years of being dried out. I put the other two albums beside me because they were getting heavy, and because I wanted to focus my attention on the first album.

I skimmed through the pages somewhat quickly, but then would get stuck on a certain picture where my parents looked so much younger, or where I could see traces of myself in my mother’s eyes. I stopped when I noticed a relic from my past and received a bout of nostalgia of things long gone, though to where they have all gone I don’t know. There was an old Lay-Z-Boy chair that I thought I forgot about, but upon seeing it, I was reminded how my father used to read me
bedtime stories on that chair until I fell asleep. He would put the chair in its lounge position and I would lie on top of him, nestled in his arms. It shocked me that I couldn’t remember when this chair disappeared from my life, but at the time it must not have been too shocking to have it removed. I guess I was long past the time of being read stories before I went to sleep.

Through my skimming and stopping, I couldn’t believe what I was looking at. There were many, many pictures of me as a baby—I was taking my first bath, playing in the sprinkler, cuddling my mom, playing with blocks, eating cake at my first birthday, playing a toy guitar—but there was not one picture of my mother’s pregnancy.

I knew it was somewhat common for couples to take pictures of a pregnancy, especially if it was the first. Let’s just say, it wasn’t a strange thought for me to think I would find those pictures in these dusty photo albums. I thought there might be a cheesy picture of my dad with his hand on my mom’s stomach, or worse, with his ear to it and a wistful look on his face, but I didn’t find any of this. Nowhere in the album did my mother show a protruding stomach. There were only pictures of me after the pregnancy and obviously happy and blissful, living in the world.

I slammed the heavy book closed and moved on through the next album at a much faster pace. My father was still quiet as a mouse in the living room. If I listened carefully, I could hear the momentary shuffle sound of a newspaper turning to a new page, and I knew he was still reading.
The second album, though full of pictures of me as a baby and toddler, had no pictures of my mother pregnant. When I quickly thumbed through the third album, the results were the same. Nothing.

The albums now felt much heavier than they were when I first took them off the shelf in my mother’s closet. Though I tried to put them back in the exact way that I found them, they were so heavy and laborious that I had a hard time even lifting them over my head. I wanted to ask my father for help again, but I was feeling bitter and agitated and so I quickly forgot the idea.

I managed to get them arranged to look acceptable. I closed the bi-fold doors silently and exited the room just like I entered it earlier—without a sound.

I had to walk past my father in the living room to get back to my bedroom and even though his face was buried in the newspaper, he noticed me and spoke up.

“Where have you been?” he asked, extending the length of the last word in a playful manner, as if he were teasing me.

“Nowhere.”

“Nowhere?”

“I was looking for pictures.”

“What kind of pictures?”

I paused and stared at the back of the newspaper since all this time he didn’t bother to move it to look me in the eyes. The silence must have tipped him
off and so he moved the paper slightly to the side so that I could see one of his eyes, and half of his face. “What kind of pictures?” he repeated.

“Pictures of when Mom was pregnant with me.”

He must have dismissed this statement. The newspaper went back to covering his face and he sighed, ever so slightly. I guess he dismissed the idea as women’s talk that didn’t concern him. The idea of talking about pregnancy and reproduction with his teenage daughter was a thought he might not have wanted to cross.

“I’m sure they are somewhere. Ask your mother when she gets home.”

I would have actually felt better if he had worded it in a way that made him sure there were pictures somewhere, but instead he sounded as if he wasn’t entirely sure there were any.

But I think I was second-guessing the entire situation. Because even if there weren’t photos, that didn’t mean my mother was never pregnant with me, or that—by some outrageous thought in my imagination—I was adopted. My father may not have sounded sure about the pictures, but he never questioned the fact that my mother was indeed once pregnant with me.

I left him buried in his paper and went to my bedroom. I still felt unnecessarily annoyed that I didn’t find what I was looking for, so I went to my window and opened it for some fresh air. Even though it was early evening, a reflex almost sent me climbing out and walking to my clearing. It would have been nice to take my diary and spend some hours just thinking and writing. But another part of me wanted to wait for my mother to get home so I could get my
I heard my mother’s voice in the living room greeting my father. I caught bits and pieces of the conversation, something about Sandy, one of her coworkers, and asking what he and I ate for dinner.

“Where’s Jo?” I heard my mother say through the walls. Is she here or at Sarah’s?” I presume my father told her I was in my room, though I couldn’t make out his part in the conversation. My mother’s high voice carried much farther through my walls.

I waited a few minutes for my mother to settle in. I heard the microwave going, and click of her hard soles on the wood. She hadn’t even taken them off yet. And when I couldn’t hear any commotion anymore, I exited.

She was next to my father now, with her shoes off and feet propped up at one end of the sofa. My father had switched from reading to doing the crossword puzzle. My mom was watching the television on silent while eating some leftovers.

“Well, there she is,” my mother said in a chipper voice, as if congratulating me on appearing. “What have you been up to?”

I said “Not much” by way of habit. I found it annoying most of the time to relay the things that had been going on in my day.

“Actually, I was looking for baby pictures.”

I didn’t expect any questions, and was caught off guard. “School…” I stuttered. “School project.”

“But it’s summer, dear.” She wasn’t trying to make fun of me, but the dear made it sound as if she were chiding me.

“I just want to know if there are any pictures of you, um, pregnant with me.” Things were getting stranger as I continued with this fabricated story.

“Pregnant? Your school wants pictures of me pregnant?”

I was starting to get hot with embarrassment, when my father jumped in to rescue me. “She wants to make sure you were once actually pregnant.”

Even though I never voiced this out loud, my father caught on right away. I was so grateful for his presence right then at that moment. I almost felt like running to hug him.

“Jo, what is this about? Of course I was pregnant with you! How do you think you got here?”

“It’s just…there are no pictures. I looked in the old photo albums and there was nothing there.”

I was really hoping that this wouldn’t turn on me and that I would get in trouble for rummaging through my mother’s things, but she didn’t mention that aspect.

“Oh, nonsense,” she said. “There have to be some photos somewhere. You probably didn’t look hard enough. Trust me. Your father and I both remember that pregnancy very well.”
My dad grunted an agreement, then added, “Couldn’t eat anything without throwing up. Actually lost weight in the pregnancy. Surprised you weighed as much as you did.”

“Nearly nine pounds!” my mother added.

“Is there any way you could look for pictures?” I asked my mom in a sickly sweet voice.

I knew I was bound to get in trouble sooner or later, the way I was pushing my mother, and that time turned into now. My mother huffed an angry and tired puff and told me, “Maybe later, Jo. I just got home from work!”

I left as peacefully as I could and went back to my room.

I was being crazy. I knew it and my parents were catching on, too. I was letting Sarah’s wild hypotheses get to me, and it was messing with what I knew was true. I have always been my parents’ daughter, and even with the passing of these weird occurrences, I knew this was still true. I wasn’t some alternate Josephine born again from years and years ago. It just wasn’t possible.

I made a vow to myself that I wouldn’t let Sarah push me over so easily. I wasn’t a witch like Sarah, and I wasn’t about to let friends recruit me. I didn’t believe in hocus pocus. I didn’t even know if I believed in an afterlife. So why was I trying to get my parents to admit that my mother was never pregnant with me?

I took out my diary and wrote a short entry until my head felt clearer. I felt better after this, and more tired. As I prepared to go to sleep, I thought about how strange it was that those old albums didn’t have one picture of my mother.
pregnant. I thought I could remember seeing some in my past, but then again, memory is so faulty.

Sarah tried calling me back, but I didn’t bother answering this time. I let the phone ring to voicemail. A few minutes later I saw I had a message. I was bored so I picked up the phone and called my voicemail. The message was Sarah desperately telling me to call her back. She was worried about me. Maybe I’ll call back later.

Maybe.
When I was finally done avoiding Sarah, I paid a visit and sat in my usual spot on her couch. Though I couldn’t really pinpoint why, I felt despondent and even depressed. It was an effort to do even the simplest of things. Taking a shower seemed like a feat to overcome.

“What’s up, girl?” Sarah asked kindly, and the sound of her chipper voice actually sparked a tiny sliver of happiness that was buried inside me.

“I’m tired,” was all I could manage to say in response.

“You looked tired. Been spending all night in the woods?”

That seemed like a good excuse so I shook my head yes.

“I don’t get it. I mean, what is so special about that space? Why do you have to go only at night?”

I said without thinking that it was an escape.

“An escape from what? What could you possibly be running from?”

And that was when I realized I didn’t know why I was running away for hours almost every night. But I felt like I needed to run away, I felt my room was too claustrophobic and stifling. There was an amount of pain in there that I had to leave behind. But Sarah was right. I had no idea where these feelings were coming from. I had a good life, relatively speaking. I was an only child, so fighting with siblings was never an issue. I didn’t fight often with my parents, but if I did it was a minor trifle and then it was quickly over. I was fed every day to
overcapacity and I got a hot shower whenever I wanted. My grades were okay. I’d never been in a fight. I had no idea why I had all these depressed feelings.

“Do you think she was depressed?” I asked out of nowhere.

“Who? Josephine? Well, I don’t think people just go and off themselves if they are happy.”

“Maybe she didn’t kill herself.” I was feeling brave and still a little vengeful. I wanted to pin something else on Mr. Perry. The thought had first suggested itself when I thought about Mr. Perry’s story about punishing his children so that they would do better. Maybe, I convinced myself, just maybe there was something not so perfect going on within his family.

“What do you mean? Like, that she was actually murdered?”

“Maybe. How do we know for certain that she killed herself? Because her father said so? Because her death certificate said so? Those things can be easily doctored.”

“Jo, that’s a heavy accusation.”

“All I’m saying is that it’s a possibility. Think it about it like this. What do we know about ghosts?”

Sarah thought about this for a while, then answered, “That they’re dead?”

I was quickly trying to think about what I actually knew about ghosts. It wasn’t as if this was a subject we learned in school. Everything I knew, or thought I knew, was all based in folktales, fiction, and oral traditions. “Yesss,” I said in a long drawn out way, trying to stall time. “But how do they become ghosts?”

“I’m not really sure. I mean, they have to die first.”
I could tell Sarah was thinking what I was thinking—we didn’t actually know anything about the spiritual world or why some deaths are just deaths and some are hauntings.

“It has to do with the way the person dies,” I said, using movies like *Ghost* and *Casper* as my sources. “If there is something left unsaid in this world, if the death needs to be avenged, or if the death was in anyway uncomfortable, the person becomes a ghost.”

Sarah was finally starting to catch on. “Oh, so they don’t pass over into the death world, or whatever. They stay in limbo.”

“You got it. And with Josephine as a ghost, something must have made her want to come back into the real world. Maybe she needed to tell someone something about her death. Maybe she needed to tell someone she was murdered!”

“Oh maybe she couldn’t pass over to the other side because she killed herself and regretted doing so.”

“Look. All I’m saying is that we can’t be good detectives if we don’t consider all angles.”

I could tell Sarah was frustrated by the way she heavily flopped down on the couch next to me. “I guess you have a point. We don’t entirely know that she wasn’t murdered. Still, it gives me the creeps to think about it.”

“She could have easily been murdered, and then the murderer could have had it fixed so that it looked like she killed herself. Even Mr. Perry said that she
wasn’t the type of person who would ever think about suicide. She was happy and in love.”

Sarah nodded morosely. “But who could have done it. Who would want her dead?”

“I think there’s really only one suspect.”

Sarah looked at me, and I knew we agreed on who I was suggesting.

“Look, I know you and Mr. Perry have some kind of strange relationship, but I don’t think you should be trying to make him out as a murderer.”

“I’m not saying he did it,” I protested. “I’m just saying it’s a possibility. Maybe it’s a small possibility, I don’t know.”

“And why do you think a father would want to kill his own daughter?”

“Because he hated Matt. Because he has a bad temper and would be crazy enough to do that. Maybe he suspected she was pregnant.” I was on a role and couldn’t stop. “Maybe it’s because he beat his children, so if he could do that, why not also kill one? Or because there is something deeply despicable about him, and I don’t know what it is.”

“The phone calls?”

For a moment, I had no idea what Sarah was talking about, but then I remembered the anonymous phone calls I’d been getting that sounded exactly like Mr. Perry and about how I tried to find him as a convicted sex offender online. In light of the other mess around me, the phone calls suddenly seemed like no big deal.
I shrugged my shoulders. “It’s more than just the phone calls. It’s something else. Something more sinister.”

“Like what?” Sarah asked.

“I don’t know. It’s more like a feeling than anything else.” Here I was, trying to justify the idea that Mr. Perry could be a murderer when all I had for facts were my feelings.

I thought Sarah might laugh at me or tell me I was being stupid, but instead she told me she understood what I meant.

“You do?”

“I think everyone gets this strange feeling when they’re around him. He just gives off some bad vibes.”

That night, I was determined to ask my mother if she felt the same way about Mr. Perry the way Sarah and I did.

At the dinner table, I tried to casually bring up the topic.

“Mom,” I said, sweetly. “Do you ever get the feeling that Mr. Perry is, I don’t know, bad in some ways?”

“Bad?” My mother asked, a confused look on her face. “He’s certainly one of our more difficult patients.”

“What I mean is, do you think he’s mean?”

My mother looked me in the eyes and I immediately looked down at the food on my plate.
“He’s not particularly mean to me, no,” my mom said, and I felt disappointed. “But I think I know what you mean. Let’s just say, I don’t think he was a very nice man, now or in his past.”

That was all I needed to know.

When I reported this to Sarah, she started taking the whole murder claim a little more seriously.

“I guess it’s worth examining,” she said. She was starting to side with me about my hunch that Mr. Perry had something to do with his daughter’s death. “I mean, he really is off his rocker,” she told me.

And so, with all our facts and Sarah’s sixth sense, and my eerie premonitions that I refused to think of as supernatural, we examined the idea that Josephine didn’t actually kill herself, but instead was murdered.

“What about the fact that she was found in her closet hanging by a belt?” Sarah asked.

“Could have been easily set up.”

“What about the lack of wounds? If she was beat or bludgeoned to death, wouldn’t that have seemed suspicious to an examiner?”

“Maybe she was strangled, and then hanging was the only suitable suicide method that would cover that up. There would have been bruises and marks on her neck.”
Sarah, who normally wasn’t the one grossed out by these kinds details, gave a grunt, accompanied with a turn of her head in disgust as if the body was lying in front of us. “God, it’s so gruesome.”

“But completely possible.” I wanted to keep us focused.

“Okay, so the alibi is legit. What about the motive?”

“Simple. Mr. Perry hated Matt. He must have known about her sneaking out at night, maybe he had a suspicion she was pregnant and then just lost it.”

“Lost it enough to kill his own daughter?” she said.

“Maybe. I got him to admit that he was a strict parent, so maybe violence wasn’t a new thing in the house.”

“Strict doesn’t mean violent, Jo.”

But somehow, I just knew that the Perry household wasn’t as calm as it was made out to be in Mr. Perry’s anecdotes. There was something that slipped out, somewhere between the cracks, maybe in one of his conversations that made me believe he wasn’t such a nice guy.

“I don’t know, Sarah. I mean, he gives everyone the creeps, even my mom. I just don’t get the feeling he was a nice man. To us, or his family.”

“So let’s say he did find out about Matt, and he was used to raising an iron fist…murder?”

“It’s possible.”

“Yeah, I guess it’s possible, but I’m just not buying it yet.”

The funny thing was that I wasn’t buying it either, even though I was the one to suggest the murder.
“I just have the feeling that Jo wasn’t murdered,” Sarah said.

I finally relinquished and heavily sighed. “Yeah, I get what you’re saying.”

“It just doesn’t fit the story.”

She was right, and I knew it. This was one of the times I had a sense, a certain feeling that I knew the other Josephine harmed herself and wasn’t murdered. Mr. Perry could be mean, but maybe Sarah was right. Maybe he wasn’t that mean.

But something was still nagging me, still crawling around inside of me wanting to burst out. I just couldn’t believe that Josephine would want to kill herself over her relationship with Matt. I felt like there had to be something more, something to push her over the edge. And while my thoughts wandered from Mr. Perry as a murderer, it was replaced with the time Mr. Perry grabbed my wrist pulling me uncomfortably closer, how he called me all kinds of obscene names while throwing a fit, how he admitted to beating his children. I was disgusted, but ashamed. But I had nothing to be ashamed about.

“There is something about Mr. Perry we have to watch out for,” I finally said, resolved not to let the topic drop completely. “I just don’t get a good feeling about him. And it’s more than just being creepy.”
Dear _____,

I realized something interesting today. It’s something kinda of disturbing, and kinda strange.

I realized that the only time I feel like I need to go into the woods is when I visit Mr. Perry and I have a particularly bad experience. In fact, I’m here now and that may be because today he stared at me, long and hard in a way that made me shiver. And when he was good and done with molesting me with his eyes, he called me a “little slut” and then I left in silence. I have no idea what is going on. With him. These outbursts seem so random and strange and I wasn’t wearing anything that was flamboyant or showy. It was just my hospital polo and khaki pants like I wear every day.

But it’s not like I only come here when things get rough at the hospital. Sometimes I come because my body gets used to waking up in the middle of the night and I think, why not? I like the solemnity in the woods and the calm it brings. But then on other nights, nights like this one, I have to come here. It’s as if my life depends on it and if I didn’t run from my bedroom at night into this clearing, a part of me would be lost and unattainable ever again.

On nights like these, I feel like I have to run away to even breathe, to focus on the fact that I’m still alive and my heart is still beating. It’s the only way to relieve the anxiety that slowly heats up until I’m boiling and threatening to explode into a million pieces.

As soon as I saw my rock, I immediately felt better. I grabbed you and started writing, and now I can almost say I’m calm. I can almost say to myself
that Mr. Perry is a crazy man and I shouldn’t take what he says as a personal attack. But I know once I leave the comfort of the trees, I’ll start feeling terrible again and that all the terribleness will stem from him.

As I sat writing this diary entry, I saw a shadow flicker in my vision and looked up, spooked. I was used to the way the forest and trees came alive, so I didn’t know why I jumped. The movement wasn’t a typical dark shadow, but the faint glimmering of a ghost.

At first, I thought it would be Adam, and I wanted to yell to leave me alone.

“What are you doing here?” I called out, before I even looked to see who it was. Now it was my turn to finish what I was writing before I gave my attention away. I finished my sentence in my diary, then looked up.

Nothing was there. Or, at least, not at first. The space was completely empty. It was just me and the trees swaying slightly in an imperceptible wind. I was about to curl up on my rock and relax, thinking I might have scared Adam away with my yelling, but then I saw the image of a person running past me quickly. This was my first indication that the ghost might have been someone other than Adam.

“Adam?” I said, tentatively, then said, “Who’s there?”

Whoever it was ran past me again, and this time I could tell for certain that the ghost was not Adam. He was shorter, less stocky than Adam, and he seemed to run with ease and agility, something I couldn’t imagine Adam doing.
“Hello?” I tried again. “Who are you?”

We were both vigilant, not giving in to the other. I sat on my rock in silence, not moving an inch. Apparently, the ghost decided to stake out one spot too, because it was desolate in the clearing for minutes on end. Just as my frustration level piqued, and I decided I might as well go home and get some sleep, the ghost revealed himself.

He walked to the center of the clearing, and I realized I was staring at Matt.

“Oh, hello.” I said in a friendly way. “I know who you are.”

Matt looked frightened or anxious, and I didn’t understand why. If I was supposed to be Josephine Perry, shouldn’t he recognize me? Shouldn’t he be running into my arms? But he was still studying my face. “Don’t you know me?”

He shook his head yes, but he seemed unsure. His movements were slow and he never released his gaze from my face.

“My name is Josephine,” I said, just in case he didn’t know who I was.

“And you’re Matt.”

Again, a slow motion nod.

He seemed bent on upholding the silence, standing far away from me and not attempting to communicate. I realized by now that ghosts didn’t have a voice, but there were other ways to get a message across. I wondered why he was here now, and if there was a purpose.

I tried a new direction. “Do you have something to tell me?” There. Nice and direct.
But, to my increasing frustration, the only answer I got in return was a slow and steady nod.

“Well, then!” I almost shouted. “What is it?”

We stared at each other again, a battle of wills. Then he turned to me and pointed to the carving in the tree. The one that he whittled in the bark, professing his love for Josephine Perry.

“I know,” I said. “I know all about it.”

He began mouthing words to me, but I couldn’t understand what he was saying.

“I don’t understand,” I tried to say as gently as possible, for fear that he would in turn get frustrated and give up. Then I would never know what he was trying to say.

He moved his fingers in a scissor type motion, and then I understood. Run away, he was trying to say, and now when his lips moved, this became even clearer. We should run away.

“Why run away?” I asked, trying to probe him for answers.

*We need to run away from here. We need to escape,* he mouthed.

I was being antagonistic: “Why? I like living here. I have my piano lessons and my good grades. I don’t need to run away.”

He seemed almost defeated by my answer, like I had just rejected his request to go to the prom. I was beginning to regret that I said it because I wanted him to stay and explain everything to me. I needed him to explain my part in Josephine Perry’s life.
“I’m sorry,” I hastily added. “But I would miss my family.”

You are running away from your family.

“I don’t understand. I don’t want to.”

You need to escape him.

At the last word, a noise rustled in the bushes. I saw the last glimmer of Matt’s ghost disappear as he ran at full speed away from the clearing. I knew that he would not return.

I looked toward the bushes where the noise came from and discovered an opossum crawling out with its shining green eyes. I was both disgusted and infuriated. I almost wanted the kick the beast and send him in the same direction where I saw Matt run off to, but I didn’t even dare myself to be so cruel.

Him, Matt had said, his last word uttered to me in silence. I couldn’t even be sure he said him, but with my minimal lip reading skills, that was what it looked like. You need to escape him.

If I had had more time, I would have asked who? and maybe Matt would have told me Mr. Perry. That I had to run away from Mr. Perry.

But I also didn’t know who was he talking to. Was he talking to me, Josephine Weaver, or was he talking to his lover, Josephine Perry? Was he telling me to get far away from Mr. Perry, or was he telling Josephine Perry that she needed to run away from her father?

When I thought about the answers I could have possibly gotten out of Matt tonight, I was driven to a rage. I kicked the sand around the rock, the bushes where the opossum escaped, some of the roots that were sticking up out of the
ground. My toes were stubbed and pounding with pain, but my anger was so intense, that it temporarily numbed the sensation. It wasn’t until later as I was writhing with pain that I thought I might have possibly broken a bone in one of my toes.

I was so focused on the idea of Mr. Perry, that it took me awhile to finally come to terms with the idea that him could be anyone. When I saw my diary lying flat on its spine on the rock, I threw it across the clearing, thinking about how I came here tonight to relax, but instead my head was turning, and now there was real pain emanating from my feet. I couldn’t stand or put any weight on it. Instead, I grasped in and writhed in pain, clenching my eyes shut in hopes that the pain would go away. It was a long time before the dull ache subsided enough for me to calm down.

Once again, Sarah confirmed my suspicions.

“He said ‘You need to escape him?’” she asked. We decided to rendezvous in the cafeteria on our lunch break.

I nodded my head, still playing along to the fact that I agreed to tell Sarah everything. It almost felt like going to confession, seeing an old man in a small door, and freely voicing all the sins of the world. “I think he was talking about Mr. Perry.”

Sarah was exasperated, I could tell by the way she rolled her eyes. I would have missed it if she had turned completely around, but she thought it was sufficient to just avoid eye contact and pretend I would miss seeing the rude
gesture. “Jo, what *is* your hang up on this guy? I’m really starting to believe there is something you’re not telling me.”

I blushed, thinking about the dreams and my love for Adam. “Like what? I’ve told you almost everything about my life.”


It still befuddled me how she seemed to know everything. “I’m hung up on him,” I began, not even trying to hide my annoyance now, “because he’s had it out for me since the day I started at the hospital. Because he thinks he can treat me exactly like his daughter just because we share the same name.”

“Okay, fine, whatever. Let’s get to the point of Matt’s warning. He didn’t say Mr. Perry, or your father, so we really don’t know whom he was talking about. And it would be silly to conclude it was Mr. Perry and then move on from there.”

“Silly? I don’t think it’s silly at all.”

“Of course you don’t. Because for some reason you hate Mr. Perry enough to get him tried for murder. Well, I have news for you, I don’t hate him that much, and I’d like our investigation to be fair and just.”

I scoffed at this last sentence, mostly because I had nothing to say and felt that Sarah had a point.

“Who knows? Maybe she was running away from a bully, or some guy who was harassing her.”

“Yeah, her father,” I said, definitively, just to further drive home my point.
Sarah was finished with her lunch, and she got up abruptly. “Gotta get back to work,” she stated before hurrying out of the cafeteria.

I waved goodbye cheerfully to rub it in that I didn’t care how annoyed she was. I secretly vowed that I would stop including Sarah into every detail in my life.
Chapter 25

I started visiting my clearing late at night more often to look for Matt and also because things were still intense at the hospital. Even though my feelings toward Mr. Perry were getting more intense, I hadn’t taken anyone’s advice by putting a stop to visiting him. Something still felt like I couldn’t avoid that room. I kept telling myself it was because I wanted to preserve my dignity by not letting an old senile man upset me so much, but I knew that was far from the truth. The double life, the strange occurrences, the ghosts—these were the reasons I kept going back to Mr. Perry.

I was back at the clearing tonight, waiting desperately for Matt to return so I could get some more answers, but night after night, I fell asleep for hours, or minutes, I was never sure, and then would wake up on the rock cold and still alone. Even if he had visited, I was deep asleep and would have missed him.

I started running away in order to find peace and solitude, but lately even the forest and the canopied trees didn’t provide any protection. I felt more lost than ever, and the summer was slowly winding down.

On the fifth night of my stake out to find Matt again, while I was fighting off sleep, but reluctantly caving in, I saw a faint shimmer in the corner of my vision. I whipped my head in the direction, but when my eyes finally focused, there was nothing there. I thought perhaps my mind was playing a trick on me because it was overtired and craving sleep, but then I saw that same faint shadow
in another corner of my vision, and this time when I turned, Matt was standing out in the open.

“Hello,” he mouthed. I was glad he didn’t want to play any games this time. I was far too tired to put up with it.

“Hi,” I said back, and was startled by the sound of my own voice in the quiet forest.

“Where did you go?” he mouthed next.

“I’ve been here, waiting for you.”

He shook his head slowly. “No. Where did you go?”

I didn’t know how to answer the question. I already told him the honest answer. I had been here for the past five nights waiting for him.

“Um,” I began. “Well, I went to the hospital today. I work there. Then I went back home.”

But he shook his head violently this time and even stomped his foot of the ground. “Where did you go,” he mouthed for a third time.

I was confused by his impatience, and had no idea how to answer the question in a way that would make him happy. For a moment, I thought maybe my lip reading skills were off and maybe he was asking me something completely different, but then I shrugged that idea away.

I thought about how to answer his question for a few moments until I found a suitable response. “Where did I come from and where did I need to go?” I asked, hoping he wouldn’t finally lose it and then dart away through the trees, never to come back.
I paused, waiting for his response. He was silent, but he didn’t look annoyed or angry.

“You have to escape.”

So that was what he was talking about. I shifted my position on the rock out of excitement. Maybe I would get some answers tonight. But only if I didn’t make him angry first.

“Yes, I remember. You said I needed to escape from someone, but I don’t know who.”

“You need to run away. Go somewhere far away,” he said.

“Yes, but from who? Who am I running away from?” It was my turn to shout and get angry. He was avoiding answering my question.

“Please. Just listen to me. You need to get away. Get away from here.”

And then he was gone.

I wanted to curse and kick and shout and stub my toes like the night before, but I had no energy left. I felt so defeated and abandoned that I cried the whole way back to my window and bedroom, and then I curled up on my bed and fell into a fitful sleep. When I woke up, my eyes had crusted together from the dried salty tears, and I had to rub them clear before I could open them again.
Chapter 26

She woke up when she heard the sound of his rapping at her window. He just tapped ever so slightly, but since she had been waiting for the almost imperceptible sound, she instantly woke up as if her mind had not truly fallen asleep.

She had grown accustomed to sleeping in day clothes so that she didn’t have to change and keep Matt waiting. All she had to do was slip on shoes and a light jacket.

When she woke up, Matt was outside waving to her, so she held up her hand in a quick gesture of hello. For a few nights, her father had been pacing around the house with a suspicious scowl, and she knew he was beginning to suspect things. Even though she knew he thought he was being sneaky, Josephine could always hear the crack of his shifting ankles as he tiptoed to listen at her door.

So she hurried along and quickly slipped out her bedroom window. She gratefully took Matt’s offered support in lifting her down, and with their two bodies pressed together, she began to feel a warm sensation crawling through her body despite the chill that was hanging in the night air.

His head reached toward hers for a kiss, but Josephine was still feeling the rush of paranoia about her father and so she whispered hoarsely, “Later” and started off into the woods.
After some minutes of trekking, they reached the clearing and Matt was the first to speak.

“What’s going on?”

She knew this was going to happen. She knew he would ask about what happened in front of her window just a few minutes ago, why she didn’t kiss him.

“Nothing,” she lied. It was an automatic answer. She knew she would eventually tell Matt everything. She trusted him and loved him and she knew somehow that he was going to be the one to save her.

“Oh, come off it. Do you really expect me to believe that was nothing?”

“What did I do?” she asked, trying to stall time.

“Outside your window!” He was getting irritated, she could tell.

“We have to talk.”

His face almost did the speaking for them, because it suddenly morphed from being annoyed, to be concerned. “What…is something wrong?”

“Yes. Well, no. What I mean is, probably not.

“My dad is following me around. He’s been stomping around the house, just looking for something to yell at me about. I think he may know what’s going on. I hear him outside of my door. He’s trying to spy on me.”

“He’s spying on you?” Matt asked, incredulously. “He really doesn’t trust you?”
Josephine signed and looked for a place to sit down. She led Matt to the side of a large tree and leaned her back against it. “It’s more than trust, really. I think it’s about possession, if I had to guess. He doesn’t want to let his daughter be taken care of by someone other than himself.”

“But, Jo. You’re sixteen. You’ll soon be seventeen. You’re not helpless anymore.”

“I know that. But he sees it completely different.” As she said this, she began soundlessly sobbing into her hands, her cupped palms quickly gathering wetness from her eyes.

“Jo, Jo, what is it? What is it? Is there something more?”

She knew exactly the reason why she was crying. She knew why her father was following her, spying on her, making sure that she wasn’t hanging around Matt too much. It was because he had a secret that he couldn’t afford to be revealed. And to ensure his secret remained a secret, he locked his family away in their own home and never let them out too far.

“Jo?” he asked, in both a question and a scream.

Josephine’s thoughts were on her father and his barbarity. It never used to be like it was now. He used to be a good father, loving and playful and funny. But ever since she started middle school, ever since her body started shifting from child to woman, her father began to change.

The first time she notice anything was strange was in the summer before she started middle school. The door to the bathroom in the hallway between her room and Daniel’s room had a warped frame, and so even with
the door closed, if you looked closely enough, you could see into the bathroom through a crack that was barely a few millimeters wide.

In that summer, Josephine was in the bathroom, but was rushing to finish what she was working on in her room—and this point, she had forgotten what she was rushing to, but it was probably to practice the piano, or to draw in her notebook, or to watch one of her favorite movies.

When she quickly opened the door, she was startled by the swift movement of her father trying to hide himself, but getting stuck in the hallway with nowhere to go and no alibi. Instead, he hastily said, “Sorry” and then went away. Josephine thought nothing of it for the moment. It wasn’t until much later in the week that she began to watch the slight crack between the bathroom’s frame and door and would often see shadows moving in and out of the light. She even thought she saw the white of an eye peering in.

But each time, by the time she had washed her hands and exited, the shadow was gone. Only her father would be in the surrounding area, but he was always busy doing something—reading the newspaper, rummaging through a kitchen drawer, microwaving leftovers, sleeping on the sofa.

At that time in her life, she thought nothing about the incidents, and eventually convinced herself that the shadow was just a shadow and nothing more.

In the summer before Josephine began high school, something else happened that reminded her suddenly about the occurrences three summers
before. Again, the incident had to do with the bathroom and the crack in between the frame and the door. And this time, she caught her father sulkily hiding behind the door when she exited. He made no attempt for excuse or hiding. Instead, he looked at her embarrassedly and stated quite plainly, “I was just curious.” After that, he disappeared for the remainder of the night and didn’t come home even for dinner. Her mother had stated something about an emergency at the factory that he had to attend to.

She was horrified and confused and overwhelmed. Her mind could not process what had just happened to her. It went from replaying all the sequences of events over and over, and then switching rapidly to forgetting everything to the point where she second guessed if anything happened at all. When she was almost completely convinced that she had just imagined things, her mind went soaring once again to the look of embarrassment on her father’s face, and the sentence he mumbled to her in the hallway.

Over and over, she thought about what her father could have meant by the incident. What did he mean when he said “I was just curious”? Did he actually say those words at all, or was her mind confusing things again?

The only way she dealt with what happened was by keeping it a secret and pretending it never happened, which was surprisingly easy to do. When she used the bathroom, she hung a towel over the crack and hoped it was enough of a deterrent. But even still, her eyes continually darted to the tiny open space, and she never felt like she was completely alone. She felt eyes burrowing into her even behind closed doors.
She was also hyper aware of where her father was at all times. When he came home from work, Josephine began to notice his habits, where before she had ignored what her parents did in their free time.

She now noticed that her father seemed to purposely avoid her. If they happened to make eye contact, he looked immediately away. When she entered a room, he quickly left. If the family was gathered around the television watching TV, he found an excuse to get out of the house. All of a sudden, the factory needed him at all kinds of crazy hours in the evening. Family dinners were often herself, Daniel, and her mother. When her father joined, he brought a newspaper to distract him. The few sheets of fragile paper were strong enough barriers to wrap the entire dinner in silence.

Her mother, Josephine noticed, successfully ignored everything that was happening around her. She didn’t ask questions when her husband left. She didn’t demand that he read the newspaper later, and she never asked Josephine what was bothering her, although she too kept everything hidden so successfully.

After a few weeks of this, Josephine found herself face to face with her father for the first time after the strange incident in the bathroom hallway. She was doing homework, her mother was away at a church function, and she let her father enter her room when she heard a knock at the door.

For a while, the two were silent. Josephine felt a bitter rage toward her father, and so said nothing. She couldn’t even look at him.

Then, he said, “Look, I’m sorry, okay?”
But she held firm to her silence, and didn’t dare mutter the words
“It’s okay.” She didn’t feel okay, but trapped inside her own mind,
tormented by something her didn’t understand.

“Just don’t tell anyone. Especially not your mother. I could get in
some trouble.”

Josephine stopped working on her math homework so that she could
digest what she just heard. He could get in trouble. So that answered the
question. Something disgusting happened that day in the hallway. It wasn’t
just her imagination.

“Goddammit, Jo. Can you listen to me?”

He was shouting now, but she couldn’t say anything. If she opened her
mouth, a river of tears would pour from her eyes. She didn’t want him to
have even that.

“Jo! JO!” he said, his anger increasingly rising. His face was red and
he was sweating. “Look at me, goddammit. I won’t have none of this
disrespect in my house!”

In a rush, Josephine was on the floor, clutching her ear, a dull ringing
sound penetrating her thoughts. She had no time to cry or realize what was
happening. She vaguely remembered seeing her father leave, abandoning her
on the floor as the pain slowly started rushing in, and her clarity started to
focus, she realized what had happened, and she gave in and cried.
In bits and pieces, this was what she told Matt. She tried to be honest, but she realized that her mind could not centralize everything that had happened. She could not voice out loud her confusion, her embarrassment, her shame. And so she tried as much as she could to skirt the issue while still letting Matt know that she was desperately afraid. She needed him more than she ever needed anyone in her life.

“He hits you?” he asked, expressions of confusion and disgust mixed on his face. “You’re telling me he hits you, Jo?”

“It’s not like that…” she started to say.

“Jo, stop making excuses. Does he hit you?”

Silently, she managed to nod her head.

She’d never seen Matt lose his temper, but suddenly he started cursing, at her father, at the world, at himself. He was going crazy, in a fit of wildness. His eyes even began to bulge out as he stared at her, asking a million questions about what happened.

She collapsed, watching the madness unfold in front of her, accepting the brutality of human emotions like she did on those other occasions with her father’s anger, and began to unravel. First one tear fell, quickly followed by another, and then she couldn’t catch her breath. She felt as if at that moment the world was going to end.

Matt rushed over to her side and tried to engulf her entire body in his embrace. “Shh. Everything will be okay. I will fix things. I promise you. I will fix this.”
Chapter 27

After the night when I saw Matt again in the clearing, things started crumbling before me. I couldn’t rouse myself from my bed most days, and I called into work for a week straight. I told Karina I had the flu, but with my parents I had to be more crafty because they could tell it wasn’t the flu—I wasn’t throwing up or sneezing or coughing. I was just tired. Inexhaustibly tired.

And so I slept sometimes for twenty hours a day. I woke up just to eat a few scraps of food, and then I went back to bed. I lost maybe ten pounds.

On the third day I called out of work, I think my parents had had enough. My mother felt my temperature for the hundredth time and huffed when my skin felt fine. My father tried asking what felt wrong, but I just told him something generic about my stomach hurting and not feeling like I could hold down food. I thought I would have the house to myself again, like I did the previous two days when my parents left for work, so I was surprised when my mother came back in that morning to tell me she was taking me to see the doctor.

“I don’t need a doctor,” I protested, and then coughed to emphasize my sickness.

“If you don’t need a doctor, then you can return to work.”

“I don’t want to do that either.”

“Okay,” my mother began, he hands on her hips, “what is this about, Jo? A job is not something you can just skip out on whenever you like. It will have serious consequences.”
“Like what?” I asked, because I felt like being more of a pain.

“Like possibly losing your job.”

I rolled my eyes, but made sure my mother wouldn’t see me. “What do I care really?” I mumbled, more to myself than to my mom, who I knew would find the comment infuriating.

“That’s because you’re pampered and spoiled by your father and me. Once you’re an adult, you won’t have the same kind of leisure.” And at that, she slammed my bedroom door shut as she exited. About thirty minutes later I heard the front door open and close and I knew she had left for a long shift at the hospital. She wouldn’t be back until well after dinnertime, but my father would show up shortly after five and attempt to feed me.

I turned on the TV and watched a few moments of inconsequential reality shows in which I fell asleep on and off. Around lunchtime I felt well enough to grab something in the kitchen. I grabbed the fastest and quickest thing to eat, which was cereal. I had been eating that for lunch, and then finding something sweet to nibble on afterwards.

Once I poured myself some cereal, I ate it dry, not thinking I could handle the taste of milk. I kept picturing it in my head as sour and lumpy, even though when I checked the expiration date, it was still a good week from going bad. I nibbled like a little kid who was a picky eater and would only eat small bits here and there. Then, because my bed felt old and too warm, I went back to sleep on the couch.
I had all kinds of strange dreams, but each time I awoke from one of them, I felt relieved that they weren’t dreams about Adam. He was never sitting at my desk and writing secret letters, or reaching out to me with an embrace I couldn’t resist.

Instead, I had horrifying dreams about Sarah dying by being speared with tens of arrows, or of my mother taking up smoking, or of my father falling down a dark ditch trying to save my diary that I loved so dearly. I awoke from each with shock and fear, and I was always sweating. One of the dreams even made me cry, but I didn’t honestly know why. I didn’t cry about Sarah or my father dying, but instead by the idea of my mother smoking cigarettes.

In the dream I had asked her how she thought she would get away being a smoker and working in a hospital and her answer was just a careless shrug. I knew she was going to lose her job because of her addiction, so I tried to shake some sense into her. “You’re going to lose your job!” I screamed.

“What do I care really?” she answered, and that was when I broke down and cried and cried and continued crying until I woke up and realized it was a dream.

Each day after the third, my mother would come in my room and huff with her arms on her hips and threaten to take me to the doctor. But she never would. She would just disappear and then in a few minutes I would hear the front door close.
On Sunday, I had maintained the same lifestyle as the week before. I did absolutely nothing but the bare minimum and was so depressed, I could barely get myself to change into clean clothes when the ones I had lying around in were beginning to smell. I couldn’t figure out why I was feeling this way, or why it was so debilitating. Karina and Sarah bought my excuses of sickness, and so called every once in a while a check up on me. On these occasions I would plug my nose and keep the conversation short, and they gobbled the whole thing up, even commenting on how terrible I sounded and that I should take all the time I needed to rest up and get healthy again.

It was my mother who wouldn’t leave me alone and on Sunday at the dinner table where I dragged myself to eat she threatened to take me to the doctor’s again “to see Dr. Towsley,” she added.

I knew who Dr. Towsley was and I also knew he wasn’t a medical practitioner, but a shrink.

“I’m not seeing him,” I said with more force that I thought I possessed when talking to my parents. I almost regretted sounding like that, but I had this anger engulfing me and I didn’t know where it was coming from. Suddenly, I was getting hot and angry and confused, thinking about my parents sending me to a shrink because they thought I need psychological help. But they didn’t understand. They were so far from understanding.

I knew that was my fault. I was the one who refused to tell them about Mr. Perry and my feelings of unease around him. I was the one who refused to stop
seeing him, despite the negative effect he had on my personality. I was the one to blame.

Every time I thought about opening up these secrets, I felt a surmounting anxiety of guilt. I didn’t want to be judged, or have someone feel sympathy for me. I didn’t want my parents to blame themselves. I didn’t even want something to happen to Mr. Perry, if truth be told. I just wanted everything to go away, without a mess, without hurt feelings, and without a psychiatrist getting involved.

“Why not?” my father asked gently, and I knew I was off the hook.

“You’ve been out from work for a week and by the looks of things, it doesn’t seem like you are planning to go back.”

He had a point, I thought. When did I realistically think I would go back to work? I hadn’t given the question any thought.

“Because I’m not crazy.”

“Oh, Jo,” my mother said, exasperated. “Dr. Towsley isn’t for crazy people. You need to stop. He can help you.”

“Help what? I don’t need any psychological advice.” I was sure my face was red and that steam was coming out of my ears. I had to blink feverishly to keep the tears back.

“Help your depression, or whatever it is that you are going through,” she said.

“It’s not depression,” I returned, though I didn’t sound confident in saying so and I knew this. I was depressed, in a way. I felt like I was trapped in something I couldn’t get out of, and I didn’t know how to solve any of my own
problems on my own. Despite knowing this, I couldn’t help but feel deeply offended. “I just haven’t been feeling well. I’m tired all the time.”

My mom turned to me and I knew then that she was going to speak to me in a gentle, confirming way. “Excessive fatigue is sometimes a symptom,” she said, and I could tell she was sincerely concerned and not trying to be patronizing. “We’re going tomorrow. I’m sorry, Jo, but you don’t have a choice in the matter.”

“If I go to work tomorrow, do I have to go to the doctor’s?” I asked as a final pitch to be let go. I had no desire to see a shrink. I didn’t want to have to tell one more person about what was happening to me this summer. If I couldn’t bring myself to talk to my parents, opening up to a stranger would be even more difficult.

My parents both looked at each other, as if searching each other for the correct answer. Finally, my father told me if I went into work I didn’t have to go. But if problems still subsisted, I would have to eventually go.

I hastily finished dinner and excused myself to get away from my parents. I was done with their concern for me, and though I knew it was because they loved and cared for me, something about it was incessantly irritating. Once I got to my room, I was shocked by the sudden tears that were falling down my cheeks. I let myself cry with loud sobs and gasps for air that I muffled into my pillow. And then suddenly, I stopped.

I looked for my hospital polo and found it crumpled and dirty on my floor. I tried smoothing it out and snapping it in the air a few times to bring it back to life, but it didn’t want to unwrinkled and so I gathered a few of my smelly clothes
and turn the washing machine temperature to hot. My polo went in, and when it came out it looked as good as new.

When the buzzer to the dryer sounded, I grabbed the hot clothes and the iron and went to work. My khakis always needed ironing, which was annoying. I couldn’t think of a worse chore than dragging a steaming hot plate against clothes until they looked smooth. Well, I guess cleaning the bathroom was really the worst.

When the khakis were smooth and straight and wrinkle free, I laid it on the back of my desk chair for the morning. The polo looked fresh and clean from the dryer, so I didn’t bother with the iron and just laid them out with my pants.

After being lazy for the past seven days, even this small chore of laundry had me beat. I felt exhausted despite how much sleep I got that day, which again was approaching the twenty mark. At around nine, I had had enough. I switched on the TV and fell almost immediately to sleep. At some point in the night, I must have turned it off, because when my alarm went off, the screen was blank. My pillow was damp from tears.

The look on Karina’s face when I walked into work on Monday morning was nothing short of shock.

“Oh, my poor baby,” she said to me, reaching out to hold me as if I really was a baby or even her child. “You just look god awful.”

The way she said awful made me feel sick again, and I wanted to pass out.
“Just look at you. Look at you! You have lost so much weight. I don’t know what kind of bug is floating around this place. I guess I’m just glad it didn’t catch me,” she was still fawning over me and my weakened body with this sad pouty look on her face. “Though Lord knows I could have lost a few pounds. You though. You were already skin and bones to begin with.”

I gave a weak cough. I thought it was the only right response.

“Jo! Are you sure you’re okay to work today? If you’re still sick, I can take care of the shop, don’t worry about it.”

I wanted to agree to her suggestion, but my mother was working her shift today and I knew that if I went home, the threat of the shrink would come back up at dinner tonight. So I shrugged and tried to look as pathetic as possible, but I told Karina I was feeling better and desperately wanted to get back to work.

The day was excruciatingly long. Even though I worked my typical five hour shift, my body didn’t have the energy to be on my feet for those hours when it was used to no pressure being put on them at all. I was exhausted by eleven, and so I took my lunch break early and tried to rest in one of the lounges. Even in the lounges I couldn’t find any peace, so I went ahead and ate some cafeteria food and waited around in the lunch room for longer than my allotted thirty minutes. I figured if someone caught me not working while I was on the clock, I could use my supposed illness as my excuse and with the way Karina acted toward me this morning, I was sure she would let the incident slide. Maybe she would actually be happy I wasn’t pushing myself too hard.
At noon, when I finally felt motivated enough to move around again, I spotted Sarah at the entrance, though she wasn’t coming in for her break. She was carrying around a bucket of cleaners and had stopped to talk to one of the nurses. After their conversation ended, I sidled by.

“Sarah!” I called out, and I wasn’t surprised when her reaction to seeing me was eerily similar to the way Karina reacted when she saw me this morning.

“You look like hell!” It wasn’t quite as kind as Karina’s wording, but I’m sure she was thinking the same thing. “What happened to you?”

“Couldn’t eat much for a few days.”

“Looks more like you couldn’t eat anything for a month. Man, you are wasting away.”

I got annoyed, so I told her to relax.

“Okay, okay. Sorry. Glad to see you here today,” she said, then her demeanor changed and she said sweetly, “I’ve missed seeing you around.”

“I missed you, too,” I lied, though I wasn’t entirely sure if it was a lie. I knew that Sarah had been getting on my nerves lately and that I didn’t want to tell her every single detail from my life anymore, but as a person and as a friend, I guess I did miss seeing her and hearing all her ridiculous stories about the things going on around the hospital. She always began the gossip with, “You wouldn’t believe…” and then I knew I was in for a long story about the love affair between a married doctor and a young nurse. It was like she stole the plot lines to a soap opera.

“Just come from your break?” she asked.
I shook my head.

“I don’t go on mine until another half hour or so.”

“I’m going to head straight home after work. I’m so exhausted still. It’s hard for me to even get through this day and I have two hours left,” I told Sarah, so that she had the idea not to invite me over later that afternoon. I didn’t have the energy.

She told me to feel better, and that it was good to see me, and then we went our separate ways. For the last two hours of my shift, I mostly walked around aimlessly trying to look busy. When I went back to the store, I tried sweeping, but Karina took pity on me and told me to just relax in the back room that doubled as both storage and her office.

I sat at the swiveled chair and stared at the ancient computer collecting dust on the desk. I had never seen Karina using the computer, and wondered if it was actually working or operable. I checked for an electrical cord, which I found, plugged into the wall, so at least it had a power source. Still, it might not have been turned on in years.

I was still contemplating turning on the device when instead I just stared at the pictures Karina had posted around on the walls. They were equally dusty, and I was shocked by how young Karina looked in most of the pictures. Her hair was a lighter shade and looked undyed and natural. She wore less makeup and hairspray. And in most of the pictures, she was posing with a young girl who was maybe ten years old.
“Karina,” I ventured, walking to the doorway. “Do you have a daughter?” I had never heard her mention any children before. Maybe her daughter was grown and had already graduated college.

“Who? The little girl in all those pictures? Those are of me and my niece. I never had a daughter.”

I was bad at guessing ages, but I imagined Karina might be past the age of childbearing at this point. “So, you don’t have any children?”

“None, sweetheart,” and when she said this, I felt a pang of remorse. I thought maybe it was because I imagined Karina would have been such a good mother. “Gotta find a father before you even think about bringing kids in this world.”

“It’s funny,” I said, because I was feeling precocious. “I always thought you were someone who would be great with kids.”

“That’s what I had my niece for! I love her to death. I helped raise her, so in a way I was a mother.” She sighed, and then continued. “Having children is just not something to take lightly. It’s a big responsibility and takes up a lot of time and money. I see enough couples in here, about to have a baby, the mother huffing and turning red and basically looking like hell, and the father, one look at him and I know he never signed up for any of this. Still too selfish to think about what it means to give your life to a little child. Most men find it relieving that they aren’t the ones responsible for a child. The mother has to feed it, nurture it. The guy just sits back and relaxes. But still. Next time you see a couple in here about
to have a baby, take a look at how the father is reacting. Most of the time it’s pure fear.”

I never gave it much thought. I had never had a boyfriend, let alone thought about the idea of raising kids. I always just thought that one day I would have a family, but that future seemed so distant from my life right now. Now, I couldn’t even figure out the voice on the other side of the telephone or why I was seeing the after images of people dead decades ago. I didn’t know why Adam Perry was haunting my dreams, or why I was having fantasies with him in it.

I looked at Karina, and suddenly felt sad that she was alone in the world without a husband or a child. I wondered if she was plagued by loneliness.
Dear _____,

I don’t think I can stay here very long. And by here, I mean this place, my house, the hospital, this town. School is starting soon, my whole summer break is behind me. I spent the time working at the hospital at a job my mom got me. I met a lot of people. My whole world got turned upside down.

That’s why, at some point, you won’t hear from me anymore. I don’t know when this will be. I can’t bring you with me. I’m doing this because I want to leave this entire weird summer behind. Everything. Even you.

Because I still haven’t figured out the answer to my question. You know, the one about not knowing who I am anymore? I’ve been thinking about it all the time. Thinking about it wherever I am—at work, when I’m sleeping, eating, showering. It is always on my mind.

But I still don’t know the answer. I can’t even tell myself who I am. And that scares me. No matter what, I don’t want to be the time-traveled Josephine Perry. I don’t want to live someone else’s life.

I just want to be me…

P.S. Please accept my apology now.
Chapter 28

A report goes out that I was missing. I heard it all over the news when I could catch snippets in the homes of other people. Through the windows, sometimes their garages. They were looking for me. I hoped they would never find me. They all hoped that I hadn’t been killed.

All sexual offenders in the area were questioned as suspects. All seemed innocent in the case, which only confused law enforcement. The town was in shambles. One of their own. But I was safe. I ran away. I knew exactly where I was.

The times I felt the most regret was when I saw the pictures of my parents crying, grieving over their loss. I was their only child. They were sending out messages to me over the newscast to come home, and that they loved me so much. Once, I saw my mother on the TV screen, telling me directly that she wanted me home. If I heard this, please come home, she said. Those times were the only times I was tempted to go back. But I really didn’t want to. I really didn’t.

I went there. To my hiding spot. I hoped Sarah was smart enough to not tip off authorities. They were offering money now. A lot of money. Enough money to let anything go, even a friendship. I really hoped she didn’t tell. She was the only one who knew where I might be hiding.

At night, when everything was dark, I secretly hoped he would come. Adam. I felt both shame and exhilaration at the thought of him appearing. The
thoughts waged a war inside my conscience, making me question myself even more. I desired the love of a man much older than me in real time. I knew this was wrong and strange. Something didn’t feel right, but I felt drawn to Adam nonetheless, as if some other force was in control.

Every night, I waited for him to arrive. I curled up on my rock and waited for the sensation of tickling on my skin, the feel of cold all around my body. That was how it used to feel in my bedroom, when I knew he was there. The temperature changed.

I woke up cold a lot of nights, but he was never there. I was both sad and relieved in this realization. My conflicted feelings continued to battle within me, making it hard for me to feel calm most of the time. I was a maelstrom of madness and I couldn’t find the end to all the confusion.

The weight of the forest surrounded me. Sometimes, I saw shimmers of light dancing in the distance and I knew it was one of them, one of the ghosts. I saw faces in the shadows, dances of light. Sometimes I thought I saw the shadow of Matt, sometimes I even thought I saw my own reflection bouncing off some strange shadow, but I refused to accept the fact. It must be my imagination, it must be a consequence of the static night. I must just be confused about what I want and who I want to meet.

There were other ghosts, too. Ones I didn’t recognize. I tried to see their faces, but the harder I concentrated, the less I recognized anything at all. I never saw Adam, even though I secretly hoped that someday he would be among the others haunting this place. Maybe he didn’t know how to find me out here, I
thought. I wondered if he still visited my room every night. I wondered if he was still writing his letters to no one.

Once, before I had run away, I had asked Adam to see a letter. I tried to sneak up behind him, to see over his shoulder. He sensed my movements, turned around, told me to stop. He never shouted. He never raised his voice. He didn’t even have a voice. But the look on his face was enough to scare me and I sat back down on my bed.

“What are you writing?” I had asked, trying a different approach.

He didn’t answer, just turned around and continued to write.

“What are those letters for?”

I thought, suddenly, that maybe Adam did not write letters at all. Maybe he was keeping a diary, a journal of his thoughts. Maybe he was unloading his thoughts onto paper. Maybe he was telling his diary about me.

I had nothing with me but my backpack full of essentials: water, a light blanket, some food. I only took enough for a week on light rations. After that, I hoped the forest would lead me to what I needed. Or, I would have to scavenge homes at night. I hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

I was in a constant dream world, drifting through the days, not knowing exactly where they began and where they ended. Sometimes thoughts of the people I left behind entered my head. Like what my parents did when they discovered I wasn’t at home, in my bed. They must have scrambled to think of what I did the night before, who I was with, anything that would ease their worry.
Sarah would be named and called. I spent most of my summer with her. God, I hope she didn’t let them know I was here.

Sometimes I thought about Karina. The first morning I didn’t show up, I wondered what she did. I wondered if she thought I was just recovering from my fake illness, too tired and ill to wake up. I wondered if she tried to find my mom, to tell her I never showed up. I wondered if she realized my mom had called out from work because I was found missing in the morning. I wondered if she put two and two together and realized I was gone.

The trees around me were alive, talking to me like they did only at night. All day I listened to their song, trying to interpret a meaning. I listened to the sounds the forest gave me, and turned them into something meaningful. I told my diary that I wasn’t going to take it with me, but I just couldn’t leave it behind. When I thought about leaving all these thoughts and confessions there in my room to be used as evidence, I just couldn’t do it. My diary was the only personal object I took with me. Nothing else mattered.

Sometimes I thought the forest was telling me to stop running. I had no purpose being sixteen, a run-away, camped out in the middle of nowhere—a clearing in some acreage of woods my family owned. They sent images of my crying parents, images of my bedroom, my own bed. They wanted me to go home. A week’s worth of food rations was not going to last very long.

Sometimes I heard them taking me in like a lost child, inviting me to live like the other animals. I may use what I needed, but could not waste. They
embraced me like a mother, and I missed my parents no more at times like these. The woods were alive. They let me know their presence.

   It would be a slow process, finding myself. But I knew this was the only place I would find her, find the Josephine that was me. This was where I could finally know the truth.

   Most days I sat on my rock, sunbathed in the warmth of the sun, and wrote in my diary. I told it all kinds of things. Mostly, the things that were on my mind.

   The first day I was on my own, I woke up to the heat of the sun cooking my back. I was uncomfortable, the blanket was too hot to keep on. I tossed it off, groaning about being woken up when I was still tired. Sleep wasn’t something I received a lot of these days. Most nights, I was kept awake, fascinated by the people swarming the area, breathing words I couldn’t understand, but trying so desperately to interpret.

   Once I stretched, flopped back down a couple of times, and yawned three times in a row, I was ready to start my day. There was nothing on my agenda. What did these woods have in store for me today? I reached in my bag for a bottle of water. I took a sip, swished it around. This was going to have to suffice as brushing. I couldn’t waste space in my bag on things like a toothbrush and toothpaste. I grabbed a granola bar and unwrapped it just enough to take a bite. This was my breakfast.
At noon, I realized I was bored and lonely. One day into this and already I was thinking about going back home. No wonder kids never ran away too far or for too long. Once the loneliness sets in, it was hard to stay focused on the goal.

But I had to stay focused. The idea of turning back seemed worse than my situation now. I spent a couple hours pacing in circles. There was nothing else to do. On a whim, I decided to go exploring.

I’d never walked farther than this clearing. I didn’t know the trees beyond here, and nothing looked familiar. I had no compass to help me navigate if I got lost. Even though I knew I could get lost where no one would think to find me, the knowledge didn’t deter me from walking into the unknown territory.

I headed north where the overgrowth was thick with plant life. What looked like a nature-worn trail stood before me and I followed it. It must have been the result of a makeshift river from recent rainfall, uprooting everything in its way and leaving only the trail I was standing on now. I wondered if this was coincidence, or if I was supposed to be led here. By the forest. By them. By the ghosts. They were trying to show me something.

I followed the water path for ten minutes. When I looked behind me, I discovered the path had disappeared, hidden by different angles. I started to panic. My breathing got heavier. I wondered if I should try to turn around before I got deeper into these woods.

But at that moment, I felt something tugging at my shirt. I whipped my body around, startled. I felt a hand, someone touching me. But there was no one there, and I knew they were trying to lead me. They wanted me to follow.
I continued to walk onward and didn’t turn around because I knew I would panic. I might just turn around and head back to my campsite if I kept looking over my shoulder. I marched through the woods not knowing where I was being led or where I would end up.

After about an hour of walking, I saw something beyond the trees one hundred feet ahead of me. It was a building, some kind of shed. Definitely man-made, I decided. I was tired. I had no water. I hoped, desperately, that this building was manned. I didn’t care if this meant I would be brought back home to my parents.

As I got closer, I knew my hope of finding some water there was futile. The old building was dilapidated, obviously built a long time ago and never kept up. I wondered what this old shack could be, all the way out here in the forest. I wondered if the town and roads and houses started again soon after this landmark. I knew my parents’ property was located right in the center of the city. Our house was at one edge, and there had to be an out at the other side. The trees were just a big clumping that was kept undeveloped because it had been in my family for years.

The building looked like a shed, the kind you put in your backyard to store the lawnmower or bicycles, things like that. It was so old, it was literally leaning to one side. The wood siding was coming off in multiple areas. So much was missing, I wondered how the thing was still standing. There was one window and one door, both facing the front, both facing where I stood. I checked for
movement in the windows, but they were so dirty, they just showed my own reflection, startling me into thinking that I saw someone.

I tiptoed as I walked up to the door. No one was in there. I knew this because the forest itself would have provided better shelter than this wood junk pile. An animal might have found this a great place to hide out, or get away from the sun. But that was the only living thing that might run me off from this place.

My hands wiped black off the door window and I peered in. It was too dark to see anything. My eyes were too adjusted to the bright sun to see inside the dark room. I cupped my hands around my eyes to help them adjust. Spots of sunlight shone on the floor through the cracks in the wall. There was a piece of paper on the floor. A letter.

The door opened when I tried the ancient doorknob, immersing every inch of the tiny room with sunlight. It was definitely a letter I was looking at through the door window, but that wasn’t the only one. There were quite possibly hundreds of letters piled up in the corners of this abandoned shed in the middle of these woods. I picked up a letter and read the address. I didn’t recognize the name. The handwriting was the same kind of style from the letter by Matt. It was all written in cursive, long fluid letters that rose tall and sunk low.

I couldn’t comprehend what was in front of me. I saw it with my eyes, but it didn’t make sense by the time it reached my brain. How could all these letters be here? What was this place? Outside the door I saw the faint outline of a bird in blue. A post office. I grabbed a letter and checked for a postmark. All the dates
were nearly fifty years old. If this decrepit building really was a post office, it was a post office circa 1950.

I grabbed a handful of paper and started sorting, looking for anything that might lead to something else. I didn’t recognize anyone, not even a hunch. I was searching mostly for his name. Mr. Perry, or Matt. I was searching for me.

The sun was getting low and I knew I had to head back to the clearing, back to my campsite, before it became dark. I felt a tugging on my sleeve and knew that was what they wanted too. I contemplated taking a few letters with me, but decided against it.

I turned around and closed my eyes. I started walking forward, letting them lead me to where I needed to go. When I opened my eyes again it was almost completely black outside. I shivered from nerves, or maybe the cold. Either way, things didn’t feel the same as they used to. There was something menacing surrounding me, threatening me. I tried to figure out what it was when I reached the clearing. The moon was sending weak rays off my rock, illuminating it in silver light. My beacon. I grabbed some water and gulped down half a bottle. I fell asleep immediately.

The moment the sun’s dim rays hit my skin, I opened my eyes. It was still dawn and they didn’t have to adjust to bright sunlight yet. I was starving still from the night before. I had eaten little all day. I had gone on a far hike with nothing with me, not even water. I ate a small breakfast of water and a granola bar. This time, I took my backpack with all my rations along with me.
I waited around for some signal. What, I wasn’t sure. But I knew I couldn’t possibly find that old post office by myself. Not through those thick trees on a narrow path that may not even be there today. I waited for them. They wanted me to find that place yesterday, so I was hoping they wanted me to go back. To find something. Something must be there for me to find.

I walked to the edge of the clearing and found the little brown path from the other day. No other weather had disturbed it, so I was lucky. As far as I could see through the trees, the path looked clear. Narrow, but it led the way. I took a deep breath and stepped to the other side of the clearing, north.

I made sure to stop a few times, drinking plenty of water. Sometimes I would stop to relieve myself. Sometimes I just needed a rest. Even with the proper food and water, I was getting tired. Hiking this far into thick trees was wearing me out.

I guessed that it was about noon when I reached the dilapidated post office. It looked the same as the afternoon before. Rotting wood trying hard to support the weight. A giant dust bowl of decay. I was reminded of rotting teeth, the way they sit crooked over time, eventually falling out. A streak of mud was wiped off the front door window. I had cleared it off yesterday to see inside. It gave an eerie feeling to the site, as if I disturbed something I should have left alone.

Inside, the room smelled old. A rotting smell reached my nose and I pinched it shut with my thumb and finger. This smell wasn’t here yesterday. But neither was the baking hot sun. I could feel my shoulders getting burned and
wished I had remembered sunscreen in my day pack. Instead, I went inside and eventually uncovered my nose.

Compared to the twilight from yesterday, the room looked different today, clearer, like a lens was pulled off and my eyesight cleared up. Flecks of dust were swirling all around me, illuminated by the rays of sun peaking through the cracks. I sneezed, twice, and when I opened my eyes, the steady swirl turned into a tornado. There were possibly thousands of letters sitting in front of me. I was going to look at them all. I needed to.

The first letters I grabbed felt soggy, the aftermath of the morning dew soaking into the paper. Even fifty years ago these letters should have been long disintegrated. The most damage I could see was some molding on the envelope, and a dry, cracking feel of the ones sitting in direct view of the sun. If this post had stood intact for most of these years, maybe the letters could have survived. But this building looked like it had been destroyed for a long time, alone deep in the forest with no one to maintain it. I presumed that no one knew this little cabin existed.

A woman’s name was printed on the first letter I picked up, her name written in that fancy cursive writing. The address was listed on Wilmot Street, a road I recognized, but I knew no one who lived there. Postmark: 1969.

The second letter was soggy like the first, addressed to a different woman. Belmont Avenue. Some road I hadn’t heard of. The moisture had lifted up the seam, no longer able to remain sticky. The open flap tempted me, and I decided to look inside.
Dear Marcy, the letter read. The woman’s name was Marcy Bellevue.

We all miss you back home. Charlie’s been telling me he can’t remember what his aunt looks like and, well, I think that means you’ve been gone for too long. I know the trip is far, but could you at least visit for the holidays? This Thanksgiving I want to get a big turkey, the biggest one I can find. I want to invite everyone down for a big reunion.

What do you think?

I stopped reading here and looked down at the signature at the bottom. It was signed, Your Mother. A letter from mother to daughter. Nothing that interested me. Nothing that led me any closer to some answers.

Some of the letters were written to men. I was curious to open more, to read about these lives I didn’t know, but part of this felt like it was an invasion of privacy. Wasn’t there a law against opening mail that wasn’t yours? I didn’t risk it. It was just wasting my time.

When I guessed it was around three, I dug around in my backpack for something light to eat. I packed some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Beside the granola bars, it was the only other thing that I could think of that wouldn’t spoil without a refrigerator. The peanut butter stuck to the roof of my mouth and I ended up drinking more than my share of water for the day. I’d have to be careful about water rationing now. Or I might just have to sneak back into my own home and hope no one finds me while I smuggle more rations.
The sun was still beating down against the earth and my body. I found shade under a tree. I couldn’t stop sweating and all I could think about was how thirsty I was. I decided to get back to work to distract myself from drinking all the water in my pack.

When the sun looked like it was approaching dusk, I finally found what I was looking for. There, in the middle of a pile of abandoned letters, I caught the writing of my name from the corner of my vision. When I picked up the delicate letter, it shook slightly in my unsteady hands.

I read the address carefully five times in a row just to make sure. I thought I might be dreaming, hallucinating. I thought I might be tricking myself into believing this letter was for me. But I knew this was for me.

The letter was for Josephine. No last name followed the first, but this letter was for me. I stood there trembling. My address was printed neatly under my name. The ink still looked new. It was still dark and shiny, and the handwriting looked different. Postmark: 1961. The year Josephine was sixteen.

When I ripped open the seal, I held my breath. The handwriting was the same as before, in the first letter that was delivered to my house. My eyes darted to the bottom and even though I snuck a glance, I pretended not to know. The suspense was greater that way. But while I was reading it, I knew it was a love note from Matt to Josephine. Written fifty years ago.

The cheesy poetry flooded my head. I wanted to gag and cry at the same time. I read the letter over and over, looking for clues like Sarah with her magnifying glass in her living room, pouring over each stray mark. There was
nothing here but a history of two lovers, scared to stand up to their parents. I was
no closer to an answer than I was before. I was even more frustrated and
confused, wondering why the ghosts had led me here to find this useless piece of
paper with nonsense written on it.

When I finally looked up at my surroundings, the sky was almost black. I
guessed that I had half an hour until complete darkness.

I shoved the letter in the front pocket of my backpack and located the trail
in the dim light. A flashlight was the other thing I didn’t remember to bring.
Everything looked the same in the semi-darkness, the trail was getting lost in all
the brush and shadows. I didn’t even know if I was following a trail or if my eyes
were just fooling me. I waited for the familiar tug at my sleeve, an indicator that
they were there, following me, guiding me. But it didn’t come. They had all
abandoned me.

I finally admitted that I was lost when my legs started to burn and my
mouth was crying out for water. I thought about my water-rationing plan, but the
craving was too strong and I gulped down an entire bottle. I let myself rest, sitting
down on the forest’s floor, asking myself why they had decided to abandon me all
of a sudden. Why did they leave me alone?

It was because I found the letter. I found what they were leading me to.

I started to drift off to sleep against the side of a tree. The constant stab of
sharp bark into my back kept me fitfully awake. The cries from the night birds
startled me. The shifting of brush made me look around in fear. I constantly felt
the shifting of earth underneath me, perhaps from different insects burrowing
underneath me. I told myself that I had to keep walking. Just ten more minutes. Then I could give up. I had to push myself a little harder. I was never going to get sleep out here anyway.

I got up with difficulty, my bones aching from this long trek. They screamed at me, but the more I ignored the pain the more it went away. My thighs were hot and sticky with sweat. My backpack felt incredibly heavy.

In front of me I saw something glowing, faintly. I thought it must be one of them. It must be a ghost. Even though I knew it wouldn’t hear me, I called out. “Hey! I’m lost.”

The ghost looked directly at me then said, “You’re here.” No words actually left his mouth. He spoke, but with emptiness, without sound.

Beyond him, I saw a clearing, an area without the densely packed trees. In the shadows, through the brush, I thought I saw a shimmering gray rock. The ghost told me I was here. Just a little farther.

I tried to get a better look at the ghost, to say thank you, but when I looked at his face, he disappeared, blending in to the night. I saw him walking, following me, out of the corners of my eyes. Something was shining right in my peripheral vision, but when I turned my head he was always gone.

I was so exhausted I collapsed on the sand still warm from the baking sun earlier in the day. I wrapped the blanket around my body. The ghost watched me as I fell asleep. Every time I looked up, nothing was there. I fell asleep, sharp knives piercing my tired muscles, but the rest felt miraculous.
I woke up when the sun lit the world and I fell back asleep immediately. The next time I woke up, I was hot, sweating, burning in the sand. I moved to the shade and fell asleep again under a tree. I had gotten virtually no sleep the night before. When I tried to open my eyes, they wavered, burst open, wavered, then closed and I was asleep again.

It was the hunger that finally woke me up. The sharp pins of pain rolling around in my stomach. I checked my bag to see what was left. Five bottles of water. A bottle a day to last me the rest of the week.

I took the tiniest sip of water to rinse out my mouth, then ate a granola bar followed by another tiny sip of water. My stomach felt better, but not full. I was tempted to grab a sandwich, but I stopped myself.

Matt’s letter to Josephine was sticking out of the front pocket of the backpack. I grabbed the letter and started reading it. I read it over, on a repeat cycle, like a disk that kept skipping. Pictures of Sarah swam along with all the other images in my head, reminding me of our detective nights in her living room. Was there something that I was missing? What did this mean?

Before I knew it, I’d fallen back asleep. I had a dream:

Adam was there. In my room. When I felt the chills running up my arm, I knew he had arrived. When I opened my eyes, he was sitting at the desk like always, writing something down on a piece of paper. Something seemed different about him, something a little off. I stared for a few minutes, trying to figure out what had changed. The air felt a little thicker, the light coming in through the window was brighter. Then I realized what it was. Adam was real. His skin shone
peach like mine against the sunlight. He was no longer glowing. He was as real as I was, real blood was flowing through his veins.

“Adam,” I cried out, unable to stop myself.

He heard me, and looked over his shoulders, though not directly at me. He finished the sentence that he was writing, capped his pen and stood up.

“Adam,” I said again. “You’re real.”

He was facing me now, smiling at me with his perfect white teeth. They were so bright it was all I could stare at.

“How?” I began, but he shook his head at me. This was not the time for questions.

He pointed at me as if indicating for me to look at something. I looked behind me, but nothing was there. He shook his head. No, look at yourself, his pointed finger told me.

I looked down at my silver skin. I was shimmering in the dark, emitting a faint glow. I felt cold all of a sudden. I felt as if I was only a dream.

“I’m a ghost?” I asked the human Adam. Slowly, he nodded.

I was crying, sobbing, an endless fountain of tears. “When did I die?” But Adam kept shaking his head. I didn’t know what he was trying to say. I wanted to be human again.

As I was crying, he reached around and grabbed something off the desk. His letter. Whatever it was that he wrote every night in my room. He was offering it to me. He wanted me to read it.

I hesitated. He pushed the letter closer to me. Take it, his gestures said.
I did what he told me and took the letter. It was folded in half so I couldn’t read what was on the inside. No name was on the back of the letter. I realized among my grief that this might finally be a moment of truth, this might be the answer I’d been looking for. But I couldn’t seem to open the letter. I didn’t want to read what was inside.

When I looked up, Adam was gone. The air was so heavy now, I had a hard time breathing. My skin was still glowing translucent. So this was what it felt like to be dead, I thought.

I had no choice but to read what was inside. By the faint glow of the moon and my reflecting skin I read what he’d written.

It was an apology. It was a promise. He was asking for forgiveness. He was saying sorry, he was so sorry. The letter was full of remorse, pain embedded in each letter, in each stroke. At the bottom, he promised to let me live again, let me live the life I missed because of him. He promised that we would meet again.

At the bottom it was signed, Matthew Dawson.

If I woke up after this dream, I wasn’t sure. I wasn’t startled awake. When I was done being tired I opened my eyes—that was all there was to it. The memory of the dream immediately surfaced. I looked at my skin; the twinge of the cold still hovered. I was back to normal now. I was human again. It was late afternoon. I could tell by the way the sun cast shadows on the ground. I had spent the whole day sleeping.
I had created indentions in the paper where I still held the letter from the previous day, my sweat pouring into the paper, the residue from my fingerprints. My body felt weak, the result of getting too much sleep. I always found it ironic how I would feel more tired on weekends, the days I could sleep in for as long as I wanted. My head couldn’t focus. I was drifting in and out.

Finally, I folded the letter from the small post office in the woods back into its envelope and tucked it safely back into my backpack. I should be hungry, but I wasn’t. All the better. Longer rations. The longer I got to stay tucked away from the world.

I tried circling the clearing a couple times, seeing if that would help my head clear up. I was yawning every few seconds, shaking my head to clear out the fuzz. Adam, the dream, was this the purpose of the letter I found? Was my dream a hidden message?

Pieces of the dream were already starting to filter out, lost forever in my subconscious. I tried hard to recover them, to resurface them. The walking was helping. I could feel the blood pumping through my body, up into my brain. Adam was human. I was a ghost. The letter I saw him write, it was signed by Matt. I wonder what all of it meant.

When it was finally dark outside, I waited for the ghost people to come out. I wondered if they would lead me somewhere else, deep in the woods. Maybe they would give me another letter. Maybe they would give me another dream.
Hours passed and nothing came. I wondered when sleep would finally come to me. By sleeping for so long, I’d knocked my whole system out of balance. I wondered why no one had come looking for me.
Dear _____,

Have you ever felt lonely? I wonder, why do people feel this way? Sitting out here, alone in these woods, I’m trying to dissect my feelings, but I can’t reach the root of it. It’s like trying to find the buried treasure under the marked X. You know it’s there, the X is clearly marked, but the farther you dig, the less you find and soon you’re giving up, moving on to the next X in your life.

That’s how I feel at least. I’m trying to figure out why I feel lonely out here, but I don’t have an answer. I have the ghosts to talk to, the trees, the earth. But nothing seems to fill that void, that gap that people talk about when their husband of twenty five years up and leaves them for a girl fifteen years younger. Anyway, that hasn’t happened to me. I guess I just miss everyone.

I’m out here to find a piece of myself, but what that piece may be, I’m at a loss. The treasure isn’t where it’s marked—one of those things again. I’m trying to figure out what love is and in turn, what it means to not love at all.

Isn’t it strange how the one major goal in our lives is to find that one special person who you will marry and live with forever? I find it strange that people find meaning in this. Their lives seem to have only one purpose: finding a partner. They have children together, build a life together. Many get divorced and start the cycle all over again. It is my understanding that everyone is looking for love. In one way or another.

And I’m not so sure I get that. I don’t get what love is. Or loneliness. Or how to go about finding who I am.

Have you ever felt that way?
Of course not.

When I find the answers, you’ll be the first to know.

Sarah visited me on my seventh day, the day I ate my last rations of food. I heard her approaching before I actually saw her, but I didn’t have to guess who it was. I knew it was her.

I heard her walking around for ten minutes, then she finally appeared through the trees in the clearing. I was on my rock, relaxing, looking straight at her as if she were invisible. No look of comprehension reflected in my eyes. For a while, she was silent, staring back at me with the same empty stare.

I broke the silence: “Did you tell them?”

She shook her head no, slowly, as if she had given up. She face was not as fresh and young as I remembered it. She was dressed in her work outfit, baggy clothes that were unflattering and dirty. Right now, she looked like she was ten years older. Like she grew up over night to look middle-aged.

“How’d you get here?” I asked, still calm and nonchalant.

“I have a decent memory if I pay attention,” her voice was soft and beaten. Maybe she was dehydrated, tired. I was sure she got lost along the way. The path was not easy.

“Water?” I asked.

She nodded, walked over to me. I had one water bottle left, and it was half empty. She finished the rest in less than a minute. I was right, she was tired.

“How long have you been out there?”
Sarah said, “Left work early. Couldn’t take it anymore. I knew you were here. I had to come find you.”

“And you remembered how to get here?” I asked, dubiously.

“Generally. I got lost a few times. For a while I didn’t think I was going to find you.”

I nodded. So I was right again. There wasn’t much to remember when everything looked the same.

“So?” she began. She wanted me to fill in the blanks, but I didn’t want to. She wasn’t going to pressure me to explain. There was nothing to say. “What are you doing, Jo? Why are you doing this?”

I didn’t give her an answer. I didn’t even shrug. She had invaded my space, ruined my concentration. She was partly the reason I was here. Anger was slowly building up from the bottoms of my feet to my brain, pulsing my hands into fists that opened and closed at intervals.

“Why are you here, Jo?” she asked again with ferocity. “Why are you doing this to all of us?”

I was growing more and more furious. Doing this to them? What about what they were doing to me? Sarah didn’t understand a thing about me, or why I needed to come here. And I knew that nothing I said would explain the situation sufficiently. With shaking hands I handed over my diary. I didn’t want to, but right now I wasn’t in control of any of my emotions. They were. The woods. The trees. Everything surrounding me.
Sarah took my diary with caution, seeing the rage and unwillingness on my face. She was scared again. The look on her face looked the same as the time when she saw a ghost of me. She tried to say something, but thought better of it. I thought she wanted to ask another question. Or maybe she wanted to know what I was handing her. Either way, she kept quiet.

I settled down in the soft sand and extended my body into a full stretch. Breathing exercises. Anything that would calm me down. I heard the subtle sound of flipping pages and I knew she was reading it. She was reading my life, my secrets, reading things about me I hesitated to admit to even myself. I had a sudden moment of deep regret, and I wondered desperately why I handed her my diary. I wanted badly to take it back and erase her memory.

Soft, wet tears rolled down my cheeks. I didn’t try to stop them from coming. I just let them fall, watering the ground beneath me, giving it life from my sadness. As each page turned I felt a little of myself being torn away, disintegrating in the wind, being scattered throughout the forest.

I knew when she finished reading when I didn’t hear the pages turning anymore. I could feel her looking at me—she was looking at me crying, knowing that it must have taken a lot for me to hand over my diary to her. After awhile, she got up, walked over to me. I was still lying in the soft, warm sand, letting it wrap around me like a blanket. I didn’t want to move from this spot. Ever.

“Jo,” I heard, but the voice was far away. My name was repeated, each time until it was closer, almost touching my face. It was like a bee that buzzed in my ear—I wanted to swat her away. I wanted her to leave me alone. I’d already
given herself any little bit of myself I had left. And now I had nothing. I was no
one.

“Jo,” she said, again.

I opened my eyes.

“You don’t need to be here,” she told me.

I wanted to tell her that I did. I needed this.

“I want to take you back home with me.”

I said nothing, just let my mind wander deeper into the warm sand. My
thoughts traveled down to the roots and up through the leaves. Each leaf was a
different thought and I was staring at thousands.

“Jo,” she said. I wasn’t listening and she was getting restless. “Jo!”

She dragged me to my feet. I didn’t fight. I stood on my own, not willing
to struggle or make her struggle. When I stood up, I was still sending thoughts
down through my feet to filter to the trees. I wondered what Sarah must think of
me now.

**I followed her as she led the way,** I made corrections when she made
wrong turns. I knew exactly where I was going. Even now, in the daylight, the
forest guided me. I wandered through the trees as if this was my home, this path
just an old familiar hallway. Sarah was breathing hard. We needed more water. I
was starting to sweat. I didn’t know how long it would be before we got some. I
knew there would be a storm of media once I arrived back home. The thought of
this made me want to die.
We were half way there when Sarah said something. I didn’t hear her at first, my thoughts were elsewhere, thinking of other things. Then I realized she was speaking. She said: “I wish you would have told me all this. You didn’t have to go out here like this, you know.”

But she didn’t know a thing. I had to go out here to find answers, to make sense of this crazy summer. I had to deal with my shame; I had to figure out what I wanted.

When I stepped into my backyard, my window was there right in front of me. I had the urge to climb in like I did each night I snuck out, but I didn’t. I was stopped, dead in my tracks, unable to take another step forward. I heard faint voices from the inside of my house. My mom, frantic. My dad, talking to someone. It sounded like he was on the phone.

Sarah stepped past me and walked up to the back door. She didn’t knock, even though I knew she wasn’t on that kind of friendly basis with my parents. She should have walked up to the front and rang the doorbell like everyone else, but she didn’t. I heard screams, desperate cries from my mother.

“Jo? Oh my God, Josephine,” my mother cried, and soon her speech was muffled with her sobs.

My father took one look at me and said, “Josephine,” in a small whisper.

They were running out of the house now. They were running toward me and the moment was suspended in time. While I looked at my mother and father, they somehow seemed fake and plastic, like Barbie dolls molded to perform at
will. But I knew the tears were real, the emotions were real, the streams and hysteria were real. It was my thoughts that were plastic—hard and unmoving.

My body didn’t move as they hugged me, crying into my shoulders. My mother was grasping me as if I had died and come back to life. I wanted to tell her the way she was holding me hurt, but I couldn’t find my voice. She was screaming, gasping for air, and my father was stolid, but in an unbelievable sort of sense. I guessed perhaps he had resolved to never see me again, and now that I was back, he didn’t know how to react. After the wailing and fits from my parents, they looked at me with their tear filled eyes, but I stared back with a void. My mother asked me what’s wrong, dear God, what’s wrong?

What was wrong, I asked myself. What was wrong?
Chapter 29

I was the media’s newest addiction. I played on the television in constant intervals. People, strangers, were happy I was alive. Hundreds of cards and letters arrived in the mail. I checked the postmark of every piece of mail addressed to me. All of them were dated 2009. Most of those letters ended up in the trash, unopened and never read. I was asked by the local news if they could interview me. The answer was no. My parents answered on my behalf. They were just happy to have their daughter back home with them and they wanted to keep me safe from any more trauma.

I didn’t go back to work. For the two weeks left before school started, I stayed at home, locked away in my bedroom. My parents gave me the space they thought I was looking for. After a week, I began therapy with Dr. Towsley. I never saw Sarah. Sometimes she would call. I would let my phone ring through to voicemail.

When school started, therapy stopped at my request. I asked to go back to work on the weekends. My parents looked at each other, not sure what answer to give me. I knew they were eager to reclaim their titles as “good parents” which pretty much meant anything went if I wanted it. They said yes to working at the hospital again. I went the next afternoon to see Karina.

The acrid smell of the hospital wafted through my nose, and I wondered briefly why I was doing this. From working all summer, I had gotten used to the smell, but now it was coming back with a vengeance.
I walked into the gift store at the front of the hospital. There she was, standing behind the register, talking friendly small talk with the customers in line. I overheard something about a certain doctor’s personality. She smiled a fake smile at the person across from her, accented by her overdone lipstick.

“Jo?” she said, finally noticing me in the corner. “Oh my God, is it really you?” Tears were already threatening to smear her heavy mascara and eyeliner.

I couldn’t help it, I had to smile. Her familiarity was comforting. I missed seeing her every day. “It’s me, Karina. I came to ask for a weekend job.”

I don’t think she heard my question as she was still looking me over, holding back tears. She reached out to hug me and I patted her awkwardly on the back. She was still muttering oh my God and asking if I was okay.

I was okay, I told her. I’m fine, really.

Once she settled down, I repeated my question. “A weekend job? With school? Are you sure?” she asked.

I nodded my head yes. I wanted to be back here.

“How’s your mother?” she asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. She should know better than I did.

Karina hesitated, stalling for more time. She tried too hard to be my mother, looking out for my best interests. I was starting my junior year in high school. I needed to stay focused; college was looming in the next few years, she told me. Finally she said, “If you think that’s what you really want, I could always use the help.”
I smiled, the first time in what seemed like weeks. My cheeks even hurt from being stretched after my no-smiling hiatus. This was a way to keep myself busy, to get me away from my parents’ ever watchful eye. Nurses and doctors that never paid me any attention before, were not staring at me with no reservations as if I were an exhibit on display at a museum, People thought I was crazy. What I’d come to realize is that there was nothing wrong with that.

Later that week on Friday, it was the last day of the first week back to school. Everything was the same old boring process: wake up, somehow stay awake through six classes, go home, do homework. But now I had something to look forward to. I wished I had felt this way about work all summer. It would have made it gone by with a little more fun and a little less foreboding.

On Saturday, I took my usually morning walk to work. I watched the people go by. Some of them recognized me and halfway smiled when we passed each other. I wondered if this was because they knew me from the news, and the greeting was one of sympathy. I got angry thinking that some stranger was feeling bad for me when they had no reason to. Only when I fell into trouble were they willing to offer small acts of kindness.

When I arrived at the hospital, Karina was counting change like usual. She smiled at me, that motherly smile I’d gotten so used to and waved me over toward her. “Cleaned the place pretty good last night, so go ahead and get an early start with the cart. Maybe you can go home early,” she said. Then on second thought: “If you want.”
I started grabbing the things I needed and placed them on the cart. Usually I left the cart halfway full of snacks and things from the day before, but Karina must have cleared off everything after I took my time off. I wondered if things were okay here while I was gone. I wondered if any of the patients asked where I was.

I made my rounds like usual. I was glad Karina sent me out early because it turned out everyone in the hospital knew about me and my brief disappearance. The old patients had no reservations and asked blunt questions and expected them to be answered without my feeling ill at ease.

A woman named Opal in room 321 looked at me kindly and said she recognized me which made my heart sink.

“You just look so familiar,” she began, “Like I’ve seen you on TV. You’re not a famous movie star, are you?”

No, not quite, I thought to myself and almost laughed at the absurdity. Once Opal figured out I wasn’t a movie star, but a disturbed runaway child, maybe she would laugh, too.

I didn’t tell her this, though, and instead decided on saying nothing at all. Before I left the room, I saw her face change from smiling to concerned, and I knew she finally figured it out on her own. She knew why I looked so familiar.

“Gotta go, bye!” I shouted, before she could ask any questions.

One man in room 113 simply said to me, “I ran away once, too,” out of the blue. We had barely said hello to each other, and I was busily rushing along. After he said it, he didn’t elaborate and I didn’t ask. I didn’t ask if he said that to make
me feel better, or if it meant he knew who I was. I suddenly felt angry that these patients had nothing better to do than to watch the local news all day so that they felt they could sympathize with me. I didn’t need a stranger’s remorse.

I did my best to avoid each prying patient and left the rooms as soon as I could. I had to fight my way out sometimes, and exited only when they would look the other way. I felt guilty, but I was sick of answering questions. To others and to myself.

I knew all day what was eventually coming and who I would eventually have to see. I knew that his room was the reason I really asked to take this job back on the weekends. Because I had to see him. I had to ask him some questions of my own.

I knocked on room 208 and entered before I heard the sound of his voice. He was watching the TV when I entered. I heard the sound of my name on the program, the monotone voice of some newscaster still updating the world on my status. When he saw me, he quickly switched off the TV and stared. I waited to see who would cave in first.

I did: “Hi,” I said, sheepishly.

He continued to look at me like I was a ghost. I thought I saw a glimmer of happiness lighting up his face, but this was just a hunch I could have been making up in my mind. He could have easily been looking at me with disgust.

He cleared his throat, then croaked out a hello. “You’re back.”

I nodded my head, looked down at the snacks in my cart.

“Saturdays now?” he asked.
“Weekends,” I said. “School’s in.”

He nodded like he knew this all along, but he wanted to hear me say it first.

“I knew what happened to you,” he told me. “Even before the news caught on. I knew what was happening.”

Somehow I knew this, too. That’s why I had to see him. It was an urge buried deep within my subconscious, burrowing out of my brain, making my decisions for me.

“Then when you never showed up to work, I knew my brain wasn’t tricking me. You had really gone out there.”

I gave him time to catch his breath. He looked so pathetic, old, dying in that hospital bed. I couldn’t help but picture the ghost of Adam that visited me late in the night. I saw the young man in the old man, buried inside. The eyes were the same, except now they were wrapped within wrinkles and leftover skin. The chin was the same, now slightly less pronounced. Without all the strains of the years, the nose would be the same—strong and narrow. I saw Adam in this face of a dying man and I thought even through all the pain he had caused me, that I just couldn’t deny that I loved him.

“How did you know?” I asked, whispering the words just loud enough for him to hear.

His breathing was hard. “You,” he began, “already know.”

I nodded, looked back down at the cart, my feet, anything to stop me from having to stare in his eyes. “Yes, I guess I did.”
“I’m sorry, by the way.” He was fumbling with something at his chest. He looked like he was in pain. “Sorry for all the mess I must have cost you. Really, I’m sorry for everything.”

“Not just me,” I said. “Those around me, too.”

“You know what I mean,” he said. “Everyone. Everyone who has a part in your life.

I nodded, wavering where I stood, wondering where this conversation would go from here. I was feeling uncontrollably nervous. “I knew it was you. I knew it all along. I just didn’t want it to be so easy, I guess.”

He shifted in his bed, trying to sit up, but struggling. He was still gripping his chest, eyes clenched in pain.

“What are you doing,” I asked, concerned. I wondered if I should call the nurse, press the button next to his bed. Was he dying in front of me?

I grabbed his arm and helped him sit up. He gave me a look with contorted pain and continued his struggle.

“Do you want me to call the nurse?” I voiced.

By the time I said this again, he was already sitting up, panting, looking miserable. The blood had drained out of his face making his skin look gray. Like death. Like he was already dead.

“Thanks for help,” he said between heavy breaths. His body was a constant reminder to me that he had become so old.

I waited for the color to return to his face. I saw glimpses of him now and again. Pictures of the man who began to love, like snapshots in a family reunion’s
slideshow. All I wanted to do was to look at the picture longer, but the person at
the projector changed the view and I missed all the details. I was missing the
details of this life. Of his life. He might not have much time left. I felt my feet
moving toward him. One step, another, another, until I reached the edge. I stopped
before his bed and lifted up my hand, reaching for his cheek, his eyes, his nose,
his chin—those features I knew so well but had to look so closely to find.

Gently, he took my hand into his, wrapped his cold fingers around mine. I
stared into his eyes, unashamed now. In that moment, I saw him. He was there.
“Adam,” I whispered.

“I’m sorry I did this to you.” Tears form in the corners of his eyes. I was
compelled to wipe them away.

He squeezed my hand harder, his touch was just as cold as the other

I asked a question that could not be answered, and I knew this. I expected
no answer. Instead I got another squeeze of my hand.

I took my lunch break at noon, wondering if I would run into Sarah. It
would be nice to see her face again. Say hello, make some small talk. I owed her a
lot, but mostly a thank you.

However, she was nowhere in sight. I grabbed my lunch off the pre-made
refrigerated section, paid, and found an empty seat. There were congregations of
nurses and doctors, though no one I recognized. I sat by the window. It was
something to keep my eyes occupied and away from everyone staring at me.
When I looked at the clock, I had five minutes left of my lunch. That was when she finally came.

I saw Sarah standing with her cohorts, arguing about how good Saturday’s lunch menu was. She was laughing and this immediately put a smile on my face. She was a harsh contrast with the other maintenance workers. Or maybe it was the other way around.

In a few seconds, she spotted me. I heard her tell the others that she’d be right back. They let her go with no problem and just looked at me and smiled.

“You’re lucky,” she told me, reaching her leg over the bench to sit across from me. “I don’t work Saturdays. I’m covering someone’s shift.”

I didn’t think about that. Of course, I always saw her on my shifts in the summer. Monday through Friday, weekends off. I guess I was lucky.

“So?” she asked, trying to progress the conversation.

I thought of something to say. Finally, I said what I was thinking about earlier. “Sorry.”

“For what?”

“For being—” For being stupid, for not listening, for ignoring her, for not letting her help, for keeping secrets “—for being a bad friend.”

She wasn’t hurt, just relived that I finally said sorry. And secretly, she was relived to finally see me again, she told me with a big smile. Everyone’s been worried about me since I disappeared.

“I have a lot to tell you,” I told her.
She gave me an inquisitive look, like she was curious but reserved. Her feelings were hurt, but she couldn’t take herself out of the story. She sighed. “My place? After work?”

I agreed. Looking at the clock, I realized my shift had been over for five minutes. I told Sarah I had to go and said sorry one more time. Her head was in her hands. She looked like she was crying.

I called Sarah when my shift ended. It went directly to her voicemail and I left a message for her to call me back when she got off work. When I got home both my parents were waiting at the dinner table for me. They said, in unison, that they wanted to talk to me.

“About what?”

They both looked at each other as if expecting the other to answer. Finally my mom pitched in. “Dr. Towsley said we should probably talk more. Be around for you. Be better parents,” she said.

I rolled my eyes. Dr. Towsley was my counselor, my shrink. A modern day advice giving guru whose job it was to tell people unrealistic things to do with their lives. I didn’t need both my parents waiting for me at the kitchen table just to talk when I got home from work. I didn’t need to talk. My parents weren’t the reason I ran away.

“I’m going over to Sarah’s when she gets off from work.”

“She’s working today?” my mom asked. She must have known Sarah didn’t work weekends.
I said, “Picking up someone’s shift.”

My parents looked at each other again, contemplating what they should do or say to be “good parents.” Lately they’d been giving me room, my own space. Maybe Dr. Towsley told them friends would help boost my confidence. They didn’t say anything against it.

At five Sarah called and told me to come over in half an hour. I ate a quick dinner with my parents (Dr. Towsley suggested eating dinner as a family). By the time I was out the door it was already quarter to six. I thought about calling, but decided against it.

The doorbell rang in a sequence of tones. It reminded me of a haunted house, or some old mansion I read about in nineteenth century romance. Sarah answered, her hair still wet, fresh from the shower. I could still smell the soap she used on her skin. She smelled good and looked refreshed.

“I was really worried about you,” she told me, once I was settled in. I’d missed visiting Sarah so much that I felt tears forming in my eyes. I tried to blink them back, but the harder I tried, the more the tears came.

Sarah either didn’t notice or chose not to say anything to save my embarrassment. “But, you said you had things to talk about. Should we cut to the chase?”

Good thinking. Better to keep my mind off things that were suddenly making me burst into tears.
“Number one,” I began, reaching into my purse. “Is this letter.” It was the one I found in the abandoned post office deep in the woods. I gave Sarah a chance to read through it before I gave her the back story.

“Another sappy love note. God, he’s a bad writer.”

“I know,” I said. “There’s more.”

“Of course there is.”

I told her about the wooden shack full of old letters from fifty years ago—some younger some older. I told her it was in the middle of nowhere, abandoned and left to rot away. I wasn’t entirely sure she believed me or not. The frown on her lips suggested that she thought I went nuts all alone in those woods.

“Nothing was nearby?” she asked. “No road, or bike path or anything.”

Nothing, I told her. She remembered how far out into the woods the clearing was. It wouldn’t have made sense for there to be an inaccessible post office in the middle of nowhere. There was nothing else man-made around.

“Then it must not have been a functioning post office. I don’t know how.”

Ignoring her disbelief, I said, “That letter was in the pile. Addressed to me. Josephine. My address.”

“Just like the other letter.”

I nodded.

“You said there’s more?”

I thought about where to begin. “I had another dream. Or, vision.” I told her about Adam. I didn’t go into any details, but she already knew. She read my
entire diary. I told her about being a ghost, about reading the letter, and about it being signed by Matt.

“You’re positive Adam wrote it?” she asked, still holding the letter and rereading lines every few seconds.

“Positive,” I said. “I watched him write it.”

“Adam is Josephine’s dad,” she said. “But he’s signing letters as Matt. Maybe he’s forging love letters from Matt to Josephine. That way when he catches the two together, he has motivation to off them both.”

I shook my head no, closed my eyes to get the idea out of my head.

“Impossible,” I said.

“Why?”

“Because it doesn’t make sense.” It wasn’t a good answer.

Sarah set the letter down on the table, got up, and headed for the kitchen. I could hear her filling a glass with ice. She didn’t offer anything to me. “It makes sense, Jo.”

“That’s not it,” I said one more time. “He wouldn’t want to make his daughter fall in love just so he would have a reason to kill them.”

I agreed to take Sarah to the abandoned post office tomorrow after I got off work. She was done filling shifts and was going to enjoy her day off. We could get an early start, hopeful to avoid getting lost as dark was approaching. Just in case, I told her to be ready with a bag of rations. Food, water, the necessities. I was finally going back.
At work I rushed through my runs. I sold a lot more than usual since it was a Sunday. More families felt obligated to go, I guessed, and so they bought things from my cart. Or maybe it was just an odd day. I got those every once in a while.

I passed by Mr. Perry’s door, room 208. I didn’t knock, I didn’t say hello, I didn’t rush in and out. I just passed right by.

At two I said goodbye to Karina. She told me to have a good week at school and I left. Sarah’s house was just a few blocks away. I texted my mom so that I wouldn’t have to talk. She didn’t text anything back.

When I rang the doorbell, Sarah met me at the door with the bag full of the things I told her to bring. I had both letters shoved into my back pocket. We left right away.

In the woods, she followed, and I led. When I looked back, she was absorbed in looking around, trying to memorize everything for the next time she had to save me. When we got to the clearing, we stopped for some water. I pointed at the trail to the north.

“I’m not sure how to get there.”

“How did you get there before?” she asked.

“Them,” I told her. She nodded, understanding. “Let’s hope they’ll come back.”

The trail made from runoff water disappeared after only a few minutes of following it. When I looked behind me, I could still see it. I wasn’t as nervous as
the time before, but I didn’t want to keep going. I had nothing to go off. The ghosts were nowhere to be found.

“Now what?” Sarah asked.

I kept walking. Straight. What I thought was to keep going straight. Everything looked the same, every tree had the same gnarled knob, branching limbs.

“Maybe we should go back,” Sarah said, beginning to get nervous. I was beginning to think she was right. The little post office could be anywhere. And I had no idea where I was going.
Dear _____,

Today I watched a thunderstorm. You know, the kind with big bursts of lightning, rumbling thunder. The kind you love to listen to in the comfort of your bedroom, but are scared the minutes you walk outside. But I was watching it from my bedroom window, so it was okay.

Even though it was the afternoon, the sky turned a dark black. No one was walking outdoors. No cars rode up or down our street. You could see the rain in the distance, slowing coming our way. It was like a nightmare, a fate you didn’t want to come true.

The blackness was coming, but first the wind. Tree branches were flung against my window. Swirls of sand rose up like a tornado. I saw the neighbors’ stray trash flying across my yard. This was going to be a bad one.

When the rain finally came, it came down hard. I couldn’t see beyond my narrow lawn. I couldn’t see the brand name of the piece of garbage that had landed in the grass. Shallow mud lakes formed in the trenches, rivers started to free the excess rain water. My backyard had turned into a sea battle, fighting against the elements. Lightning streaked across the sky in intervals, sometimes so bright it was like turning on the world’s light switch. For a moment I could see the world in daylight, the next second it was gone, The thunder never stopped, a constant rumble through the sky. It was a comforting kind of power.

I watched the rain for hours wondering what kind of force can create this kind of power. The lights in my room began to flicker. My parents were watching TV in the living room. I heard it shut off with a time-warped sound. Like the sound
was sucked into a vacuum. The electricity hovered on, then off, trying to outlast the wind outside, but losing the battle slowly. When the lights finally died, I left my bedroom and found my parents in the living room.

“Ice cream?” they asked. Why not.

My mom lit all the candles she could find in the house. With the dim light, the distant thundering, and the penetrating raindrops on our window, I felt close to my parents. I got the bowls and spoons, my dad scooped the ice cream. It was just plain vanilla, but it tasted delicious. Better by candlelight, in my opinion.

That night as the rain dripped down on our house, the rivers flowed in the backyard, we ate ice cream that was melting. I think I might have laughed. I think I might have had a good time. Just didn’t let my parents know. I didn’t want to find out this was just another prescribed routine of Dr. Towsley.
Chapter 30

I stopped waking up at night for a while. After the night I had the dream where I was a ghost, Adam stopped visiting. I had come to believe that everything from last summer had finally been resolved.

But tonight I woke up and felt the familiar icy chill prickling my skin. I expected to see him at my desk when I opened my eyes, but he wasn’t there. He was beside me, leaning against the wall by my bedroom door. I tried to focus and realized it wasn’t Adam at my door. It was Mr. Perry.

“What are you doing here?” I asked him, without any fear and without wondering how he got into my house. A young and blithe Adam had been replaced with a body of wrinkles, loose skin, gray hair. He was replaced by age, the physical reminder that every living thing must eventually die. The man I usually saw struggling to sit up in his bed was standing in my room.

Like in my last dream with Adam, Mr. Perry pointed at something to look at. I looked down at my skin, but I was still the same. I was still alive.

I looked back and he pointed to his own glowing skin. He pointed at me, then himself, then at me again. He was trying to tell me something, but I couldn’t quite follow.

“What do you want?” I tried asking. “What are you doing here?” I repeated.

He kept pointing, back and forth, back and forth. “What do you want me to do?” My eye lids were getting heavy and before the mystery was solved, I must have fell back asleep. When I woke up and it was morning.
It was my cell phone ringing that woke me up. I haphazardly threw my hand to pick it up and checked to see who it was, but the number was not one I recognized. I opened the phone to press ignore, but in my haze I pressed the talk button instead.

“Josephine,” I heard a voice say on the other line before I even had a chance to say hello, or to hang back up again. “Josephine.”

“Hello?” I said, curious.

“Is Josephine there?” the voice asked. I recognize it as my mysterious stalker, the man who started this all.

“What do you want?” I asked.

He was breathing heavily over the phone, his voice raspy. Then he said:

“Come visit me.”

I knew immediately who it was then. Last night in my room, my dreams. The voice was Mr. Perry. “Why did you call me?” I asked.

“I don’t have much time left,” he begged. “Please, come visit me.”

The time was six in the morning, the time I should be waking up to get ready for school. I hung up the phone and scribbled a note for my parents.

When I got to the hospital, none of the nurses tried to stop me from coming in. I pretended I was on the clock. I didn’t think anyone knew my schedule anymore, so the lie wouldn’t be caught.

Getting past the desk and through the doors was easy. I avoided, at all costs, walking anywhere near the gift shop in case Karina spotted me and became suspicious.
I closed my eyes and walked down the second floor hallway with steady steps. When I heard voices ahead, I open my eyes. The door to room 208 was open. There was a nurse inside talking to Mr. Perry.

She saw me standing in the doorway and questioned why I was there. “Hello,” she said in a sickly sweet voice. “You’re from the gift shop?”

Great. She recognized me. “Delivery,” I mumbled and hoped she believed me enough to not run to Karina.

“Please,” Mr. Perry’s raspy voice cried out. “I asked her to be here. I might not have much time left.”

The nurse looked down at her clipboard. It looked like she was confirming something, maybe about his declining health. Maybe she knew this was not as simple as a delivery from the gift store, but if she did, she decided to let the man have his dying wish. The door slammed shut behind her leaving me alone with Mr. Perry.

I had no cart in front of me to distract me, or to buy me time. I had no excuse to leave. But all of a sudden, like how I always felt when I was alone in this room with Mr. Perry, I didn’t want to be there.

The air was thick with the smell of old, of aging. I forced myself to look up, to look him in the eyes. I was scared.

He told me, “Please come closer.” He only whispered this. His voice was almost gone completely.

I stood there, frozen in place. For a while I didn’t know if I should actually go through with this. I wasn’t sure why I agreed to come in the first place. I felt
my feet carry me forward. When I reached the edge of the bed I stopped and waited.

“Please,” he said, “Come here.” His left arm was extended out to me. The “here” he was referring to was in his arms. I thought about how I could get in trouble if the nurse happened to come back in. She could tell me I was breaking some sort of law and I could lose my job. My part-time summer job. No, weekend job. The one I never wanted but found that I missed when I wasn’t here.

He shifted to one side, giving me room to crawl in next to him. “I don’t have much time.”

My feet began to move, carrying me into his open arms. Everything about him was cold, already distant from feelings. His skin was not soft, but rubbery and his eyes shone with half the brightness of his younger counterpart. My eyes began to water as I was held close to this man. I started to cry. “The dream,” I whispered close to his ear. “What were you trying to tell me?”

He was breathing deep, heavy, the air was trying to filter though to his weak lungs. He didn’t answer me, not for a long time. Every noise outside the hospital room made me jump.

“I was trying to say,” he began, but paused. I couldn’t tell if he couldn’t breath or just didn’t know what to say. “I was telling you to come with me.”

To come with him. That was why he was pointing back and forth, me to him, me to him. He wanted me to follow him to death. To become one of them. A ghost.
I started to stutter something for an answer but he stopped me, his unsteady hand on my lips. “You don’t have to answer,” he said. “Not right now.”

“You’re close, aren’t you?” I asked.

I didn’t look, but I felt his head nodding against my shoulder. “I think the time is almost here.”

“How much longer? How much time do I have?”

“Josephine,” he whispered. “Know one knows the answer to that question. Not even me.”

I stayed there in his arms. Everything was quiet, the sound of his breathing steadying mine. There was something alive in the room, even though it contained a dying man and an already dead teenager. Something was bigger than all this. The story went deeper.

In his arms, I felt like I belonged. I felt no shame. There was no confusion, no mystery, no questions. In his cold, dying arms, I felt peace.

“Massage?” she asked me, but for once I denied her offering. I was watching a movie, eating popcorn and gummy bears. “Not stressed out?”

I shook my head, grabbing a handful of snacks. “Sometimes,” I said, thinking of the right words. “Sometimes I like feeling this way.”

“Pain, fear, anxiety?” Sarah asked. “Sure who wouldn’t?” She was being sarcastic, and I knew that.

“Don’t you ever get tired? You know, of taking on other people’s troubles?”
“I never take them on,” she said. “I just take them out.”

I crunched on my popcorn. “I just want to get through this on my own,” I said. “No help from anyone else. Just me.”

She was pretending to be engrossed with the movie, ignoring me. I knew she was thinking about what I just said, and thinking it might be true.

I fell asleep toward the end of the movie in Sarah’s lap. She gently scratched my head as I relaxed. While I slept, I could feel something deep inside me slowly dissipating through her fingers. In a few moments, everything around me went blank.
Chapter 31

I had one last dream. Chills ran down my back and I woke up seeing my own breath. The temperature had dropped. A white shadow was sitting at my desk, writing.

“What are you doing here?” I said, a bubble of white escaping my mouth. The shadow didn’t look at me, not at first. He waited until he finished writing his last sentence, capped his pen and looked up. When he looked over his shoulder, I couldn’t see his face. As he stood up, the chair didn’t move or scrape against the carpet in my room. Instead, the movement had a certain grace to it, as if he were standing up to take a bow.

He turned, and I finally saw his face. Adam, Mr. Perry. I couldn’t tell who he was. He was a form of young and old, meeting somewhere in the middle, a circle of time. The harder I tried to focus, the harder it became to see.

“What are you doing here?” I asked again. “Go home. Go see her.”

Instead of answering me, he walked to the edge of my bed and I let him take me in his arms. I felt like I was wrapped in warm sand, letting the earth channel its energy so that I could be warm again. I wasn’t cold anymore, not like those times before when the iciness would permeate through my body and all the way to my bones. This time, instead of cold, I could feel something strange crawling through me. The feeling was as if Sarah’s hands were on my shoulders, and in my dreamlike trance, I told her no, not realizing that she was not in the room. “Sometimes I like feeling the pain,” I said out loud. But when I opened my
eyes, Sarah wasn’t there. The young/old Mr. Perry was still holding me. The tingling feeling I was experiencing was not something being taken away. Mr. Perry was giving me part of himself.

I felt hot. Suddenly, I was tired. So much more tired than just a few moments before. My eyes closed slowly, sleepily, heavily. Each time I left them closed for longer than the time before.

“What are you doing here?” I asked for the third time, before I let myself fall asleep.

As I fell asleep I heard his voice in my dreams. It was deep with remorse, happiness, pain. It was filled with a life long lived. He asked me to share his love before I left to join him.

In this dream, I felt strange—fluid and viscid. I looked down and thought that maybe my skin would shine with a faint glow. I felt like a different person.

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When I left, I left definitively as if I knew I wasn’t coming back this time. As if I knew I would never see my parents again. My mother would cry, my father would question what went wrong. Dr. Towsley would write a paper, trying to find a solution for children just like me.

With each footprint, five small toes and my shimmering glow left behind traces of my betrayal. I broke the lock my parents put on my window and crawled silently out like every other time before. Figuring out how to leave behind their backs wasn’t difficult. Once my feet hit the ground, I left to go visited Sarah. At least with her, I knew I couldn’t leave without saying goodbye first.
When I arrived, I didn’t have the heart to knock on the door and wake her. I knew she would get spooked and probably run out of her house through the back yard and frantically try to call me. Instead, I entered quietly through the walls, tiptoeing to her bedside.

I watched her there for a few pregnant moments and took in my surroundings. Her breathing was calm. She was hugging a pillow, her mouth slightly open. She looked so young and peaceful.

Gently, I touched her with my fingertips and let them rest on her temples. I was going to give her what Adam gave me. I was doing what he told me to do. She was going to live a full life and save the world—her and her powers.

I watched as her skin rose in flecks of goosebumps at my touch, but she didn’t wake. She shifted her legs and pulled the cover closer, but I knew she would not open her eyes. She was in a deep sleep.

When I had finished at Sarah’s, I followed the familiar path to the clearing. I followed each hidden face in the trees. I listened to the trees when they talked. What I felt was different, something intense. I felt exhilarated and free, but my apprehension could not be quelled. When I reached the clearing, they were all there, the ghosts, having a party. They screamed and shouted when I arrived, yet everything was silent. It was a party just for me. I knew no one, but it didn’t matter, they all knew me.

“Welcome,” they said, mouthing the words silently. “Josephine, we’ve been waiting.”
I smiled, I waved. I wasn’t the least bit concerned that my hand was translucent and white. I greeted each one I met and told them thank you. “What is this all about?” I asked, bewildered. I didn’t know why everyone was so happy.

They patted me on the shoulder, some gave me hugs. When I tried to look at their faces, they became indistinct. I thought I saw Matt out of the corner of my eye, but when I turned, all I saw was the ghost of a man I didn’t know. He was with someone, a young girl.

Hastily, I tried to catch the indistinct ghost. “Wait! Who are you?” I tried asking the girl whose face disappeared when I looked directly at her, but I didn’t get an answer. I looked at her out of my peripheral vision, but her face still didn’t become clear, not with any angle. “What are you all doing here?” I tried one more time, but still, nothing. The ghost disappeared within the crowd before I could catch up.

A man interrupted my frantic search for the girl as he walked up to me and gave me a chilly hug. I recognized his touch and immediately knew he was Adam Perry, young and old. He was here to take me away.

“You know why we are here,” he whispered to me in my ear, sensing my confusion. This time, I heard his actual voice, not like the other ghosts who couldn’t talk. It was the same voice I heard over the phone, the same throaty voice he used as he laid in his bed at the hospital. The sound of Adam’s voice completely distracted my thoughts away from the girl. I had other questions that needed to be answered.
“I don’t know. Who am I?” I asked, still unsure about why I was here.

“Which Josephine am I?”

Adam looked at me, and I longed for him. “You know which Josephine you are,” he answered simply.

“I know that I feel like me. That is, I feel like I am just Josephine Weaver and no one else.”

“Then that is the answer to your question.”

I nodded my head, and rested it in his shoulders. Maybe I did know why I was here. Adam was going to take me away. I could feel it in each step I took and through his tight embrace. I could feel my escape crawling up through the trees, into the soles of my feet. They were telling me, guiding me. The tide of the moon was leading me by a rope. I had no choice but to follow.

Suddenly, I was startled by the vision of the girl as she ran by. I looked up, searching for her. She was there, standing right in front of me. I couldn’t make out her features, but I understood that she wasn’t celebrating like the other ghosts in the clearing. She was just standing there staring.

The sight of her made me stop walking and when Adam looked at me to see what I was wrong, I felt a sort of resolve grow. “I don’t want this,” I heard myself saying, but my voice was weak. I could feel cold tears falling off my cheek and when I went to wipe them away, he beat me to it. “This isn’t right. I don’t want it,” I said, a little louder.
“Jo, what could you possibly mean?” His voice was sickeningly sweet and his smile let me know he wasn’t taking me seriously. His grasp around my shoulders was still strong.

I looked to the girl for support, but when I did, I saw that all at the wispy faces were now staring at me in earnest distress. The celebrating had ceased. “If I’m the girl I think I am,” I choked out, “if I’m Josephine Weaver, then I owe you nothing.”

Coldness began to pierce me and my head felt foggy. Everyone was still staring at me. I wanted to say something more, but instead I looked toward Adam.

“I don’t think I understand. We are all here for you. This is your celebration!”

I stopped myself from crying. There was no point now. “You’re not my father,” I told Adam, whispering in his ear, hoping that the rest wouldn’t hear. “I gave away your love just like you told me. There is nothing left for me to sacrifice.”

“You can’t mean this,” he said, now regretful. “You can’t forget me.”

“I won’t forget you,” I told him honestly. “But I choose something different. I don’t want to follow in your daughter’s footsteps. I am not Josephine Perry.”

The silence that surrounded me was suffocating and I waited. I waited for Adam to register what I said and to accept it. I held his gaze, too afraid to look around me at the other ghosts.
When he finally broke eye contact, he looked toward the ground and nodded, slowly bobbing his head in a rhythm. “I will go then,” he said, “without you.”

I watched, too terrified to move, as Adam waved a curt goodbye. The others were waving at me, smiling and cheering once again, but this time they were patting Adam’s back in encouragement. In the moment when they were almost gone, I looked around frantically for the girl, but I couldn’t find her. Losing her from my sight lessened my courage, and when I found my voice and shouted for Adam to come back. I wanted him to hold me one last time, to tell me that he loved me. I thought I had made a mistake.

“Wait,” I said, loud and clear. When he looked back at me, he smiled and waved goodbye for the last time. When I blinked to clear my vision clouded by tears, he was already gone though the wisps of the glimmering shadows lingered behind in the clearing.
Epilogue

“Jo, Jo, Jo,” I heard, somewhere far off in the distance. “Jo…Jo…JO!”

When I opened my eyes, someone was staring at me. She was young, with light brown hair and a pretty smile.

“Oh, hello,” I said wispily, not quite awake from what felt like an immensely deep sleep. “Who are you?”

“Jo, wake up,” the voice said, and finally my mind began to focus. Sarah. Sarah was here, trying to wake me up. “Jo, wake up,” she said more clearly, “you’ve been sleeping for days.”

My eyes slowly focused so that I could see the exact outline of Sarah’s face. Her face was so close to mine that I could count the number of freckles on her cheeks.

“Sarah…” I said, but then trailed off. Where was I?

“God, Jo. Everyone’s been worried sick.”

“How long…” I began, but again couldn’t finish the thought.

“You’ve been out for three days. Some kind of self induced coma. The doctors had no idea what was going on.”

At the word “doctor,” I finally gained enough cognizance to realize that I wasn’t in my bedroom, or sleeping in my bed. I was in the hospital. Sarah was wearing her work clothes.

“Three days?” I said sleepily. I even yawned.
“Yeah, sleepy head,” she said with a bit of annoyance. “Had all of us on this side of the world worried about you. We thought you might have…” and she trailed off.

“Might have what?”

Her voice shook as she answered me. “Might have become a vegetable or something. Like, maybe you would never wake up. Maybe you passed on to the other side.”

And that reminded me of what happened. The memories felt like a dream, something I had to dig deep for, and the excavation only brought forth a few dull scenes. I had dreamt of Adam. I had met him in the woods. There were ghosts. Lots of ghosts, and they were celebrating something. But I couldn’t remember why I was there celebrating along with them. I didn’t know why Adam was there with me.

Vaguely, I started to remember asking questions. One important question was answered, but I couldn’t bring it to the forefront of my mind.

Then, suddenly, I remembered. I asked Adam who I was, and when I realized the answer, all my problems seemed to be resolved.

“What happened exactly?” I asked, while inspecting the various tubes coming out of my body. I was horrified and tried to suppress my surmounting sickness.

“I don’t know. No one knows. You went to sleep and then didn’t wake up for two days straight. Last night you were brought here and slept for another
twenty-four hours or so. In fact, I better go find your parents to tell them you’re okay.”

“Where are they?”

“Eating. I told them I would watch after you.”

I suddenly felt horrified that I had put my parents through something else, though this was unconscious.

“I’ll be right back.”

“Wait, Sarah!” I called to her before she could leave the room. “What happened exactly?”

“I already told you.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense. How could I just fall asleep and not be able to wake up for three days?”

“I don’t know, chickie. But it looked like you were in some kind of dreamworld. Your eyes were fluttering like crazy.”

“And so randomly I just decided to wake up?”

“Well,” Sarah started, looking a bit sheepish. “I don’t want to take too much credit here, but, I maybe, you know, helped out some.”

“What did you do?”

“Okay, okay. So I haven’t been completely, totally honest. But hear me out and don’t get mad, please?”

I was still too out of it to care. She could have told me World War III had started, and I would have had little reaction.
“So, uh, my ability to feel emotions and the sixth sense I always told you about…they’re kinda the same thing. And, well, I think I can read minds a little bit.”

“I knew it!” I shouted, and the effort left me short of breath.

“Hey, listen. It doesn’t work. Not all the time. In fact, I have no idea how to control or harness it. It’s just sometimes I see things and sometimes I don’t.”

“And so you read my mind while I was sleeping?”

“I saw bits and pieces. Just enough to know your brain was still a-okay. You weren’t brain dead or anything.”

I wondered how much Sarah was letting me in on. Did she see my dreams? The one with Adam and the woods and the celebration? I was tempted to ask, but then I realized it didn’t matter. It was a dream, and now almost gone from my thoughts. It didn’t need to be rekindled.

Sarah had just gotten back up to go and retrieve my parents when she stopped halfway. “Uh, Jo. There’s one more thing I have to tell you.”

I could tell this was going to be serious, so I braced myself.

“I know you just woke up and everything, but I think you should know this sooner rather than later. Mr. Perry died. On the night when you fell into your coma.”

I remained silent, and Sarah took her cue to leave. I was left suddenly alone in a sterile hospital room thinking about everything Sarah had just told me. I was beginning to feel overwhelmed, but another feeling was overpowering it. There was a deep sense of calm resonating within me.
I turned my head toward the door Sarah had just walked out. The room looked so familiar, and that made sense. I had spent the past few months walking in and out of rooms like this and seeing patients that I realized now looked exactly like me. Motionless with monitors buzzing and beeping all around.

But no, there was something else. Something eerie about the space.

I didn’t have time to dwell on it much longer, because my parents burst into the room as if the hospital was about to explode. Tears were already streaming down my mother’s face and my father looked as if he aged ten years.

And that’s when I saw it. When the door slammed open against the wall, I managed to glimpse the numbers pasted outside of the door. I was in room 208.