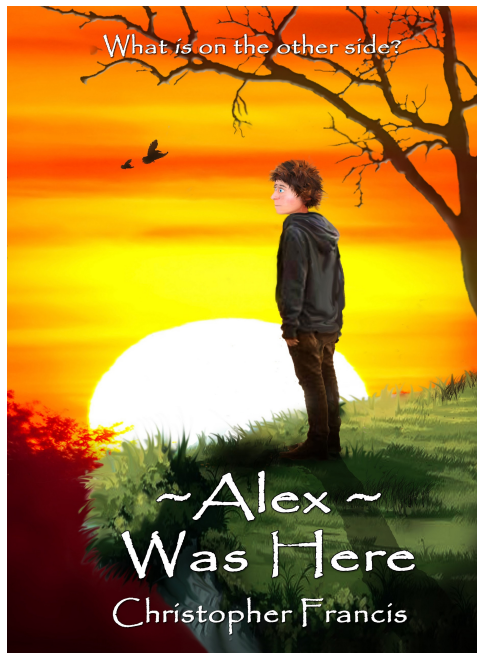


Alex was Here

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Chapter One: The Voice

The sun kissed the edge of the earth, painting the sky with intense red and orange. Like Daisy Darlington, this was my favorite time of the day—maybe because time seemed to slow down during twilight like the world had finally let me take a break from all the ridiculous improper fractions and ratio tests—or the laps around the world's largest soccer field—although that was all over now—at least for two months. I guess summer was like the twilight of the day.

Hub. Mrs. Oxford would be proud of that metaphor.

I stood on the ledge of Screaming Ridge—miles from my home—miles away from town—looking out over the valley. I hadn't been up here since last winter when my life spiraled out of control.

What am I doing here again? Am I in trouble?

A small butterfly danced along the gentle breeze out in front of me before landing on a rock. The tiny creature opened its wings a couple of times and then settled in the heat of the sun. I pushed back my floppy brown hair from my face and soaked in the clean air.

It sure beat being in that moldy classroom all year—day in and day out.

I loved being outside—except when it rained.

Or when I was alone.

Like now.

What's happening to me? Think Alex, think. Why would I be up here?

I inched closer to the ledge, peering down at the tips of the pines and giant oaks. A songbird called out across the landscape, filling the day with energy. I slid closer now, letting my shoe hang out over the giant rock.

A calmness swept over me—a strange calmness.

I shifted my head around and eyed an old house through the shadows. I knew the place. I had been inside once before, last winter with Daisy—when we used to hold hands—when we used to be close.

Is she here now?

“Hello?” I called out. “Daisy?”

The wind pushed over me, sweeping up from the valley, cooling my skin. I closed my eyes for a moment, letting the air cleanse my thoughts. I lowered my head, giving in to the memories that invaded my dreams every night.

Visions of the winter entered my brain, picking away at the scar that will forever carve into my mind.

Somehow, the saddest times of my life were also the best. Does that make sense?

“Daisy? Are you here?” I picked up a tiny stone and rolled it around in my fingers. I wanted to remember. I hated this feeling.

I wondered if I was supposed to be here. Maybe I was looking for her. Maybe she was lost. Maybe it wasn't me, who was in trouble.

"Daisy?"

"Yes?" A voice tickled my senses, scraping the insides of my ears. Shivers crawled down my back.

"Daisy, are you here? Where are you?" I stepped back from the ledge and shuffled up toward the old house. The warmth from the sun slipped away immediately as I navigated around the trees.

"Hello?" the voice called out—only I wasn't sure if it was her.

"Daisy, is that you?"

"Hello?" called the voice, much louder. A sharp pain jabbed into my forehead. It killed like a fat McDonald's straw, shoved into my brain.

"What's happening?" the voice said.

I rubbed my temples. It sounded like that little girl from the winter. "Kaylee? Is that Kaylee's voice I hear?" Maybe she never left. Maybe she stayed in that house.

"I'm alive," the voice whispered from behind.

I stopped, feeling my heart skip a beat. I looked back at the cliff.

Nothing.

Kaylee Cooper. Could it be her? Could it be the little first-grader who haunted me each night?

Could it be the little ghost who Daisy and I met last

November?

Is that why I came up here?

I strained my eyes past the shadows, out into the sunlight, looking for someone, or something. I half expected to find little Kaylee dancing along the side of the cliff, inches away from the ledge. Why would she care if she fell?

I stepped around the nettles and crept toward the house again. Kaylee's face appeared in my thoughts. Her toothy smile beamed at me—her curly blonde tangles bouncing about her head. Somehow I knew I was supposed to be up on the ridge now. If I only knew how I got here.

"Kaylee, are you there?" I whispered back. "Is that your voice I hear?"

The straw dug deeper into my brain. Every word that pierced the fading light was like air sucked out of my ears.

"I'm alive," the voice whispered again.

Darkness crept over the house. White fungus covered the shingles along the roof. A crow perched itself on the top of the crumbled chimney. Kaylee had to be inside. She must have needed me again.

If only Daisy were here. She'd know what to do.

I stepped closer. Cold air slipped through the tears in my jeans.

The crow looked down at me. Its head tilted and turned away.

As I stepped up onto the porch, the wooden boards shifted

and moaned. I reached for the handle on the door and turned the knob.

Chapter Two: Wesley Stone

A shadowy figure caught the corner of my eye. A flash of light flickered around me, bouncing off the faded red door and boarded up windows of the house. A tall boy stepped out from a row of twisted crabapple trees beside the gravel drive. His ridiculously large flashlight shone out toward a dinky old shed and then again over to me. I ducked down and jumped off the porch.

"Hey, kid. Where are you?" His light beamed out to the house and across the yard.

I crept over the tall weeds and hid behind a large stumpy tree standing alone in the middle of the front walk. I don't think the boy saw me. The crow squawked overhead and lifted itself off the chimney ledge, disappearing into the maze of leaves.

My head didn't hurt anymore.

Thank God.

"Kid! Come out from hiding. I want to talk to you," the boy shouted. "What were you doing in that house?"

I had no clue what the guy meant. I hadn't been in that house for ages, and the only reason why I would be going inside would be to find my friend Kaylee.

The last shimmers of light slipped away leaving a stale, still darkness.

A drop of sweat trickled down my armpit. I hated when that

happened. My mom bought me stupid spray-on deodorant and not the powder kind. I had to wait a whole month before she would buy me another one.

I squeezed my knees together and pulled my head down to the ground. I held my breath and focused on the tree in front of me. Maybe Kaylee was watching me. I still wasn't sure if that voice was hers in my head calling out to me or not, but I didn't want to leave—not yet anyway.

The boy's light hovered overtop, pulling shadows from the branches and giant milkweeds.

Who is that guy?

I shuffled my knees closer to the stumpy tree. As my eyes adjusted, a bunch of words appeared scratched into the bark. I pulled out my phone and held the screen close to the carved letters.

Wesley Stone was here.

"Huh," I muttered. I had heard of the guy. I remembered hearing about the kid a couple of years back. His family and police posted pictures of him all over Timpleville. *What's he doing up here?*

Another salty drip crept down my arm. I poked my head out again for a second before adjusting myself in the thick grass at the base of the tree.

Wesley Stone.

I remembered Daisy was the one talking about him. We were in the cafeteria at school, before I had built up the courage to speak to her. She sat all pretty with her gossipy group of girlfriends from

Mrs. Featherly's homeroom class. We were in the fifth grade at the time. I still remember what she wore when she told her friends the story of how he got all upset after some Entrepreneurial Fair at school and ran away. People called it the Wesley Stone Sabotage. I had no idea what it meant. I remembered her hair was up in a ponytail, with strands dangling down at the side of her face. She wore a white knitted sweater with a red scarf wrapped loosely around her neck. Her voice was the only one I remember hearing. It sang in my ears like a lullaby. I could listen to her talk forever.

For months there were old posters with Wesley's face on it, thumbtacked to the library corkboard and in the front foyer of the office.

I don't think anyone ever did find him.

I looked out again at the boy. He peered between the boards on the windows of the house and wandered around to the other side. His flashlight shot about the backyard and over to the crabapple trees.

Is that Wesley Stone? I clenched my hands together and curled up against the smelly trunk.

The voice inside my head muttered and mumbled, but I couldn't make out what it was saying anymore. Maybe the voice wasn't Kaylee's.

The light returned, shining on the ground beside me. "Kid, where are you?"

I wasn't sure why, but my heart raced, beating my chest like a

jackhammer. I wasn't scared of Wesley Stone (if that was him out there searching for me.) He was just a missing teenager who probably wanted some attention. But something wasn't right. I couldn't place it.

As the boy moved closer and closer to me—as the light revealed my pathetic hiding spot—a rush of energy exploded inside.

I don't know why.

I couldn't describe the insanity that took over my brain.

But I jumped up and bolted toward the ridge.

The wind brushed over my hair. The voice faded to a slight hum.

In seconds I catapulted myself over the edge of Screaming Ridge, finding myself high up above the earth.

I didn't think I could fly or anything, but for a split second, it sure felt like it.

My hands reached out, hoping to grab on to something, anything.

My right leg snagged onto a branch, somersaulting me down a large tree. Sharp, twisted timber snapped and bent as pieces caught onto my clothes. Leaves and twigs slapped me viciously, scratching and tearing at my skin. A second tree, shorter, with fewer limbs, snagged me halfway down, finally resting my limp body on a large branch leaning out over the small lake. I wanted to scream, I wanted to weep, but it hurt too much. The boy's flashlight from the top of the ridge faintly spread out around the valley floor, lighting up the

creepy black lake below me.

But hey, I survived. I had a lot more holes in my jeans, and the beaded necklace I made in fourth grade was now scattered all over the valley, but at least I lived.

Chapter Three: Daisy Darlington

I'm not sure how long I clung onto that branch. I didn't have the strength to climb down. Blood pulsed around my entire body, even between my toes. Flashy sparkles of white light shot about along the lake below—the moon glowed. Looking high up at the ridge I could only see darkness now.

What just happened had to be a dream, this pain—this wild episode was only my stupid senses playing tricks on me. At any second I was going to wake up. My summer nightmare would be over, and I'd be back at school, ready for my first day of the seventh grade, sitting in class beside Princess Daisy, of course. I relaxed my body and slowly breathed in and out.

The soothing hum from the water swept over the rocks along the shoreline. In the darkness of the lake, the face of a person appeared in the water.

Kaylee?

The branch, too weak to hold my weight, finally gave way. It figured as such. Positive the fall would kill me this time, I clenched my fists and held my breath. Like being power-slammed by the town's meanest tormentor, the impact sent a giant wave of pain through my entire body.

The muffled sounds of water bubbles filled my ears as I sank to the bottom. Streaks of light filtered down from above.

"I'm here," said the voice.

A single bright beam shone down onto a face.

A young face. The face of a boy.

Water rushed down my throat and into my lungs like a bursting dam. I kicked my legs and pushed myself up to the surface.

Gasping for air, I tread water, searching through the black haze for the shore.

The face of that boy burned into my mind, not because he was dead, not because he was under the water. I'll remember him forever, for the simple reason, the boy I saw, was me.

I could not tell you the exact day that happened. I could not tell you how I got there, but the one thing I will never forget about that strange twilight hour up at Screaming Ridge was the overwhelming insanity that squeezed its way into my head, pulling me off that cliff.

Like, what was I thinking? I wasn't Superman.

Most of the summer turned into a fog after that, leading into the new school year.

Sometimes I relaxed my body and imagined myself hanging out with Daisy. She helped me think straight. Picturing her in my mind kept me from going back to Screaming Ridge. I didn't trust myself up there.

At least not after throwing myself off a cliff.

I'm such an idiot.

Thankfully I didn't wander off to any strange places anymore that summer.

On the way to school on the first day back, I needed her.

Daisy.

It wasn't like I needed, needed her, I just needed her voice. It had been too long. I closed my eyes and focused as I sat on the bus—the very back seat—window side. I saw her face, drifting into my thoughts. No one around me existed. No one mattered. I just needed to get through the first day.

When I finally opened my eyes, I found her, laughing and smiling, standing on the tarmac at school. Her eyes followed a boy hanging out with her as though he was the only person on earth—I don't remember seeing Daisy look so happy. But she wasn't staring at me, nor talking to me. Daisy was talking to someone else. Why was she talking to him? Why? Why?

His name was Damian Dermite.

Argh. I hate even saying his name.

With short blonde hair, and a body, the size of a rhino, the guy could easily be mistaken for a grown-up. He was in the ninth grade at Timpleville High, only a few blocks away. I don't know how he did it, but looking at him made my armpits sweat. I always thought of him as a boy without a soul.

Standing there, waiting for the bell to ring, I couldn't help but want to walk over. There were so many things I wanted to say.

"What does she see in him?"

My best friend Henry stood beside me. He was a giant as well, the tallest boy for his age in the entire district to be precise. Every football and wrestling coach from across the country approached him, but the big lug wasn't interested—probably because he couldn't hurt a fly. "Beats me," Henry replied. He scratched his curly orange mop on his head and shrugged. "Maybe she likes him because he's older and unpredictable."

"That's what scares me," I said. "Look, Daisy's touching Dermite's arm. Why is she touching his arm?"

"I don't know."

"Oh my god, she just snorted. She's laughing so much she is snorting."

"Stop staring," Henry said, nudging me.

"But she's snorting."

The big orange teddy-bear dropped his Goliath hand on my shoulder. "What's wrong with snorting?"

"Snorting means she likes him," I squeaked.

The bell finally rang. I walked into the school and found my locker. Being in the intermediate-wing was strange—we were like those junior high school kids from the states. For the first time, I felt like one of the leaders now, someone who others looked up to. I wanted to do so much that year. I wasn't nervous anymore. I wasn't scared to walk down the halls, always wondering if Damian Dermite might appear around the corner. My nerves calmed, knowing he was in high school. I could breathe again.

As I sat in Homeroom class that morning pretending to listen to Ms. Mesh rhyme off all of the rules and routines for the students, I noticed Daisy seated by the back window playing with her phone. Whoever she was texting made her happy. I had no doubt in my mind who she was talking to.

I did my best to ignore her, but it wasn't easy.

Ever since I laid eyes on Daisy in the fifth grade, I knew right away there was something different about her—something special. I remember thinking I was in the presence of a real angel. She was perfect. I wish I could describe the utter mess she left inside my heart—every time I looked at her—every time I saw her. The light that shined through the window onto her auburn hair each day that year pulled all of the boys' gawking stares toward her. There wasn't one guy in that class who wasn't drooling over the Auburn Princess, Daisy Darlington. I swear she was a dream. I had never seen anyone so beautiful as her.

I spent an entire year admiring Daisy from the back of the classroom like a stupid kid in a candy shop without any money. I just couldn't get the courage to talk to her. It just made sense to me that she was too good, too 'high-up' to have any part in my dull and mediocre life.

It wasn't until I was in the sixth grade I finally found the confidence. It took some time, but with the help of her step-brother Henry, I became friends with Daisy Darlington.

Kinda.

Just like how we 'kinda' dated.

"What are you doing?" Henry pushed back his dwarfed chair and eyed me as I got up from my desk. I couldn't help myself. Ms. Mesh had organized an art activity that morning where we were to make an abstract image that illustrated something about ourselves. I drew a picture of myself sitting at the bottom of a lake, but then crossed it out. Daisy had her paintbrush placed on the side of her page for ages as she secretly typed away on her phone again. I wanted Ms. Mesh to catch her and take it away.

"I'm going to talk to her," I replied. "I gotta know what's up—it's bugging me."

"Leave her, Alex. You're not gonna get anywhere. Trust me—she dances to her own beat."

"Dances to her own what?"

"Beat."

"She dances?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"To her own beat?"

"Yeah."

"Since when does she dance?"

Henry shook his head and rolled his eyes.

I didn't know what he was trying to tell me, so I merely shrugged and walked over to her anyway.

Light 'artsy' music filled the room as Ms. Mesh sat down beside a couple of students by the door. I leaned over Daisy and

carefully placed my hand on her desk. I casually breathed in her perfume and shampoo. I think Aubrey Peakmeadow caught me with my eyes closed for a second, but I didn't care.

If this were two years ago, I'd be shaking in my boots, standing over Daisy as I was, but I had nothing to be scared of now.

I was a man.

Sort of.

More like a five-foot-two, one hundred and ten-pound 'drink-of-water.'

"Hey," I said to Daisy, rubbing the long hair on my chin.

Her eyes shifted briefly up to me and then back down to the phone. "Hey."

Wow, her voice was like a symphony in my ears.

"Who are you texting?" I asked, pretending to admire her painting, pretending to be the coolest kid at Timpleville. I knew that sticking my nose in her business wasn't cool, but as I said before, we dated—several times—briefly—for a few minutes.

"Um, I'm on Snapchat, and it's just a friend," she replied.

"Just a friend," I muttered under my breath. I knew what it meant. I knew exactly what it meant. "What do you mean?"

Daisy put down her phone and picked up her brush. She dipped it in the water and dabbed a bit of green onto her paper. Her eyes focused on her strokes as she feathered the lines into tiny blades of grass. "Alex," she began, "what do you want?"

I bit my lip and swallowed. I wanted to tell Daisy she was

making a big mistake. I wanted to ask her to stop talking to the biggest creep who ever roamed the halls of Timpleville. "I want to be sure you're okay."

Daisy continued to paint as her picture began taking the shape of beautiful red flowers surrounded by greens and warm yellows. "You know something?" she began as she dipped her brush into the water, washing off the remnants of red and yellow from the tips of the bristles. "For some reason, my friends see me, but don't know me." She picked up some paint from her pallet, testing the color on a scrap page on her desk.

"I know you," I said. "I mean like I know you pretty well. I don't like, watch you, or study every move you make at school or anything, but I like—know you. Ya know?"

She placed her brush on the picture and guided it toward the bottom right edge of her page. "Maybe you do, maybe you do more than anyone else."

"Probably," I replied. "I mean, especially since the whole Kaylee thing up at Screaming Ridge."

She dabbed some purply-blue on to the page, mixing the color into the bright reds and greens.

"Yeah, probably. But everyone else sees me as a red flower—the rose—the pretty red rose in the beautiful green valley. But I'm not, Alex. I'm not that person. I don't want to be like all of these red flowers. This is me, right here." She dipped more purple onto her brush and slowly outlined the pedals.

I nodded. "Right."

She looked up to me for a second. "You understand what I'm saying?"

I smiled and shook my head. "Not really."

She continued to spread thick gray lines down her page. "I'm not who you think I am," she replied.

Chapter Four: Regan Dermite

I'm not sure why it bothered me so much. I mean, she's just a girl. Why should I care that Daisy's spending every second at school texting—sorry—Snapchatting—that jerk?

But what bugged me more was how quickly she changed. Last year she was bubbly and funny and happy. She chewed pink bubble gum and skipped down the halls. I didn't get how she could become an entirely different person in one summer. What happened to her? She used to have color in her cheeks and life in her eyes—but now, it's like she's—she's—gone. Maybe I made her nervous because she liked me so much.

Maybe not.

I stood outside that morning, during lunch break by a group of grade seven guys. We always huddled together like we were some kind of mob, as though we didn't have our own brain and had to follow the loudest personality in our group. I hated it. I guess safety in numbers was a philosophy held by all living things.

Except for that crow I saw in the summer at Screaming Ridge.

At least Henry joined our group. Despite being bullied last year by Damian for his unusually large body size, most of the Timpleville population liked him.

"You do realize that it's physically impossible to move something with your mind," Henry said, raising his palms up to the

sky.

"This guy proves it, just watch," replied a boy named Rudy.

"It's on a video—it's going to be just trick photography."

As we hovered by the basketball court, I spotted Daisy chatting with a little girl by the back doors near the kindergarten pen.

As usual, my heart fluttered.

I folded my arms and turned my back to the group. Rudy Jerqson, a loud, opinionated skateboarder showed us a video on his phone about telekinesis. Our school banned phones and iPods during lunch breaks, but we always found a way to use them as long as we huddled together and had extra eyes looking over our shoulders. The sun created a glare on Rudy's screen. I couldn't see a thing anyway but continued to laugh and nod along with everyone anyway.

"See? How can that be trick photography?" Rudy asked. He brushed his scraggly blonde hair out of his eyes. He was a tall kid with freckles all over him, even on his forehead. His long golden eyelashes stuck out like whiskers on a cat.

"It's not real; it's totally bogus. Come on, can't you see that?" Henry replied.

I nudged Henry on the arm. "You didn't think ghosts were real at one point until you met Kaylee Cooper."

"That's different."

"Teacher alert," muttered one of the guys. Rudy tucked his

phone away in his back pocket as we directed our attention to the tiny stones on the basketball court. This routine was standard practice in our gang. We were confident all the teachers in the school had us on their radar. We couldn't go more than five minutes without a suspicious orange and yellow duty vest hovering over us. I never cared, though, because I wasn't dumb enough to bring my phone outside at break.

Especially on the first day.

I glanced over again at Daisy.

Ga-bump.

Ga-bump.

Ga-bump.

She had her back to me now, as she knelt down on the tarmac.

She used to hang out with Lisa Weatherly and Samantha Jerqson (Rudy's twin sister). The three were inseparable for the longest time. But whenever Henry and I spent time together this past summer, Daisy locked herself in her room—I guess transforming into this new dark Ice Princess. Maybe she didn't like having Henry as a step-brother anymore?

"Who's she talking to?" I asked.

"That's Regan," replied Henry.

Her tiny frame danced around on the blacktop as she looked up to Daisy.

Just then, Mr. Pembleton stepped into our little circle and

casually moved the stones on the ground with his feet. "I hope you're not doing what I think you're doing."

"I'm not sure what you're talking about," Rudy replied.

The group quickly spread out, leaving Rudy standing alone with Mr. Pembleton. It wasn't cool to ditch your friends when they were getting in trouble, but that was part of being a kid. Having one of us picked out of the group was normal. We just had to take the blame and brush it off.

Rudy Jerkson's problems were the least of my concerns.

"Who's Regan?" I asked Henry, finally.

"You don't know?" replied Henry. "That's her. That's his sister."

"Who? Who's sister?"

Henry looked at me and raised his brow.

"No way." The two years I spent at Timpleville P.S, I had no idea Damian Dermite had a little sister at the school. I couldn't imagine anyone related to that beast.

I stood on the blacktop near the basketball court for the rest of the lunch break walking around with Henry. Now and then I stole glances over at Regan bouncing and spinning around in her pink frilly skirt. Her striped red and white cotton socks hiked up as high as they could go, and a white t-shirt about three sizes too small was too tight to fit around her little belly. To top off the nutty outfit, were pink bows tied into her uneven pigtails.

"I can't believe I didn't know," I mumbled.

"Come on man, the bell's about to ring," said Henry, nudging me on the shoulder.

"Sure," I replied, following him to the back doors.

"I didn't know for the longest time either," said Henry.

"When Daisy told me that Damian had a sister I was like, wow. Is she a freak like him? But uh, I've met her a couple of times, and she's nothing like him."

"What's she like?"

"She's different; I'll tell ya that. Really different," Henry replied.

I shook my head and meandered toward the doors. "So is Daisy."

"What's that supposed to mean? Daisy's still your friend Alex. She's still my sister."

Henry had a strange way of getting into my head. It wasn't a bad thing at all, just a little creepy at times. I was pretty sure he knew what I thought of his sister spending so much time with Damian. I guess I was sort of protective over her. I mean, I did know her longer than Henry. Sounds strange, I know, but they had only been stepbrother and sister for like a year and a half.

"You guys owe me big time," grumbled Rudy, pushing past us as we waited at the door.

"Sorry man," I replied.

"Whatever."

"Are you going to open the door with your mind?" Henry

laughed.

Rudy shook his head and ripped a 'Welcome Back' sign off the wall. "Very funny."

I turned around one last time to the Primary doors to see Daisy giving Damian's sister a hug.

Ga-bump.

Henry pushed open the doors. "It wasn't our fault you got caught."

Rudy marched on ahead of us shoving a few sixth-graders out of his way.

Even though I hated being apart of a big group, I didn't want to mess anything up with them. I mean, they were all good guys, and they would stick up for me in a heartbeat. But there were times when I missed hanging out with just Henry. He knew me like no other. We didn't always agree, but I was comfortable around him. Besides, Daisy didn't say 'boo' to me when I was with the rest of the guys anyway.

When the third period started, I rushed to the back of the classroom with my 'crew.' It wasn't the smartest place to sit on the first day of school because the teacher would instantly label us as the 'loud-mouths' and split us all up. Although I wouldn't mind, and maybe I would be assigned a seat beside Daisy—or as I liked to call her now, 'The Auburn Princess'—or 'Angel.'

(Still working on it.)

Despite being angry, Rudy also joined us in the last row.

Mr. Pembleton walked into the classroom and took off his duty vest. "You'll get your phone back at the end of the day." He eyed Rudy and stopped at the front of the class.

The freckled kid shook his head. "Ya right, whatever."

Mr. Pembleton was our business and math teacher for the year. I heard he was pretty tough but actually really good. I liked having strict teachers because at least it meant we had to work hard and therefore be motivated to get good grades.

"Okay class, let's get started," began Mr. Pembleton. Most of us knew him as 'Mr. P'.

Daisy snuck in the door and tiptoed to an empty spot two rows away. She sat quietly at her desk and pulled out a notepad, not once acknowledging her friends, Lisa and Sam.

"Let's first go over some rules that already need to be addressed," continued Mr. P.

"Oh boy, here we go," Rudy muttered.

As Mr. P. began his endless list of expectations, my mind wandered. I thought about the picture Daisy painted in Ms. Mesh's art class. The thick gray lines slashing angrily across the paper stuck out in my head. I wondered if she was crying out for help. Maybe she needed someone. Maybe she needed me.

I tried my best to listen to Mr. P. that period as I didn't want him to think badly of me. My brother liked him a few years back and said that if it weren't for his class, he wouldn't have gone into advanced math or want to start his own business. I respected what

my brother thought but just couldn't get my mind off of Daisy. I pictured her kneeling down on the blacktop with Regan. I don't know, the way they connected with each other, just didn't seem right. I didn't get it. It looked like that family had brainwashed my perfect 'angel' somehow.

I slumped back in my chair as Mr. P. passed out an assignment to the class. I'm pretty sure Rudy was talking to me about something, but I honestly couldn't make out a word he said. I looked down at the sheet of paper in front of me. The title read *Entrepreneurial Fair Assignment*.

"Okay class," began Mr. Pembleton. "Your job over the next few weeks is to develop a small business plan where you create an original product and sell it at our annual Entrepreneurial Fair at Timpleville High School. There will be investors there, and like previous years, you might be one of the lucky ones who get to sign a contract in front of the entire town."

The class broke out into conversations as they had been waiting to do this project since kindergarten. My brother got an investor a couple of years ago with his business plan. He came up with the idea of having magnifying lenses that attach to your phone. He received something like two grand from the "Computer Corner" on Main Street. That was the year of the 'Wesley Stone Sabotage.'

I stared at the handout. Sample proposal letters, ideas, and business plans filled the page. I flipped through them, looking for anything worth reading. I never understood why the teacher spent

so much time explaining everything when clearly it was outlined in the handout.

As I got to the final page, my face heated when it said we'd be working with a partner. I don't know why, but I always worried who I would have to commit my time to. Somehow, whoever I would be with could determine what grade I received, and in this case, if I would make some money.

"Awesome, we get to work with a partner!" Rudy whispered, high-fiving Garth Noblestein. "This means I don't have to do all the work."

I didn't know Rudy all that well, and I couldn't trust him as far as I could spit. I'd never say it out loud, but I didn't like Rudy all that much.

Henry, on the other hand, would be perfect. "Do you want to work with me?" he asked skimming over the pages. "I already have a cool idea."

Henry and I teamed up last year at the school's annual multicultural fair. We rocked that assignment and made a promise to work together on the next major project.

"Are we allowed to choose our partners?" I asked. "If so, then—definitely." I gave Henry a fist pump and casually turned my attention up to the front.

The teacher walked back to his desk and picked up a shoebox. His chubby hands wrapped around it as he turned to us. "Okay, to determine who you'll be working with this term, I've decided that

the fairest way will be to draw names. Based on previous experiences, there seems always to be difficulties with some of you guys being left out. So, whoever I pull out of this box, will be your partner—no questions, no complaining—no nothing."

"No, no, no," I mumbled. Drawing names were never good. I remember I once had to work with Samantha Jerqson last spring on a stupid French presentation. All she did was talk to me about her hair and how much she loved Jared Del Porto. First of all, Jared Del Porto was a pyromaniac who followed Damian around like a shadow. Second, Samantha Jerqson was a two-faced 'Drama-Queen' who would be best friends with Daisy for one day and then go around and stab her in the back the next. She couldn't hold a secret to save her life and was notorious for spreading gossip. When I threw the pizza in Damian Dermite's face last year on the basketball court, she posted pics on her Instagram and shared with everyone she knew. When I got home that day, my brother told me he got text messages from his buddies in the Valley and even as far as Red Pines in the next district. That project had to be one of the worst three days of my entire life.

Even worse than throwing myself off that cliff this summer.

I watched nervously as Mr. Pembleton began calling out the students' names, directing them to sit beside their new 'business associate.' In a matter of seconds, the mood in the room switched from worry to terror.

Any second he was going to call out me.

Ga-bump.

"Alex Thomas and—"

And—

Faces blankly turned toward me. Their numbed minds waited carelessly to hear who I would be taking with me on my entrepreneurial business venture.

Mr. Pembleton reached into the shoebox.

He unfolded the tiny piece of paper and cleared his throat.

Chapter Five: Partners

I felt lost in a mild trance. Somehow the name that floated out of Mr. Pembleton's mouth did not seem to click. Muffled voices slipped in and out of my head. I knew I heard him, but I don't think I could believe it. My mind wouldn't let me.

Mr. P. looked at me and nodded as he placed the piece of paper into the recycling bin.

The words fluttered about in my head for a while before finally entering my brain.

"—and Daisy Darlington."

It was true. It was actually true.

"Holy cow," I mumbled to myself.

The night Kaylee Cooper reunited with her dead family was the first time I ever saw Daisy appear nervous. The way she clung to my arm as we staggered home that evening told me she forever connected to me, somehow, someday. She looked the same way just now as I stood up from my desk.

Even though a ton of things had changed since then, this project had an essential role in our strange friendship.

A buzz filled the room as the students talked to their new partners. Daisy bit her hair and rolled up the handout as I sat down beside her.

"Hey," I said, screaming for joy inside.

"Hey." She half turned her head, placing the assignment pages on the desk. "So I guess you're stuck with me."

I sat on my hands and squeezed the back of my legs against my chair. I suddenly had an urge to pass gas.

Not now!

"Hey," I said again.

I wanted so badly to ask her about Damian and his little sister. What did she see in the guy? Moreover, why would she suddenly take an interest in Regan? I mean there's no point getting close to the little kid, especially when her relationship with Damian falls apart.

"Hey," she repeated.

"So, whaddya wanna do this project on? Got any ideas?" I asked.

The voices of twenty-seven kids all talking at once, sharing their ideas filled the tiny classroom. Henry sat beside a boy named Valerio Del Porto. His brother Jared was, of course, Damian's friend, which was weird.

Daisy played with a small silver ring on her hand, spinning and pulling it around her finger.

"Is that from him?" I asked. She took it off and placed it on her desk. She looked at it and nodded.

I didn't know what to say. "It's nice."

"You don't like him, do you?" Daisy asked.

I wanted to answer as bluntly as I could. I mean, nobody liked

Damian. I remember meeting him for the first time in the sixth grade. A jerk back then and a jerk now.

When Henry enrolled at our school last year, Damian suddenly found a new toy to play with. Henry's unusual size somehow permitted Damian to tease him any chance he could. On the very first day, Damian hunted him down and finally attacked the poor guy after school in the playground. I remember seeing Henry pinned to the ground like he was failing to impress some new wrestling coach from out of town. At the time, I didn't know the kid that well but something in me wanted to stop Damian from torturing the terrified giant. The idea of being a hero and saving Henry in front of a curious crowd of onlookers seemed like a good idea, especially when I knew Daisy was watching. I remember reaching into my school bag and pulling out a leftover slice of pizza from my lunch. Bits of sauce dripped everywhere. I lifted it into the air and tossed it right in Damian's face.

The pizza exploded into a thousand pieces.

I would never forget the look on Damian's face, glaring at me as cheese and tomato sauce oozed down his forehead.

I didn't regret helping Henry, but I changed the way I handled sticky situations, for the most part, anyway.

Since that crazy pizza episode, I had a unique relationship with Damian. He hated me, and I cowered in fear at the thought of him. The school suddenly became a war zone as I tried to get by each day, alive.

Most days I had a planned route to my classes so I could avoid seeing Damian in the hallways. His schedule turned out to be somewhat predictable as he usually spent the breaks behind the school dumpster smoking cigarettes. Between classes, he hung out by the junior boys' washrooms tormenting any idiot dumb enough to go in. Sometimes I would see little fourth-graders drenched from head to foot walking miserably down the hall after being dunked in the bathroom sink. Somehow, he never once got caught. The kids were smart enough not ever to tell on him either.

When Damian finally graduated last summer, most of the school celebrated, especially the boys.

Thinking about Daisy's question was tough. To say I liked the guy would be a total lie, but to say I despised him would not be smart either. "He's different," I said finally.

Daisy picked up the ring from her desk and placed it back on her finger. She spun it around making sure the little red gem appeared at the top.

"I like that he's different," replied Daisy. "He's a nice person. If it weren't for him, you and I wouldn't have been able to help that girl."

"Kaylee?"

"Yes, he helped us a lot that day."

"How?" The relaxed tone of my voice disappeared.

"If it weren't for him, we wouldn't have been able to sneak out of the school, remember? We wouldn't have been able to get to

her in time. She would have been trapped with us, having to spend the rest of her life as some sort of living ghost."

Maybe I had the guy all wrong, but I couldn't help but want to take that ring off her finger and throw it out the window. I wanted to tell her how stupid she was. I wanted to tell her that she was blind.

"I know you don't like him," she continued, "but I see a different side of him. We talk all the time on Snapchat, and he sends me the sweetest messages."

"Sweetest messages?" I repeated. "Damian Dermite sends sweet messages?" I knew better than this. I knew not to pick a stupid fight with Daisy over something she clearly didn't understand. It was not the time or place to be trying to convince her to see the guy through the eyes of everybody else on this planet. "So, what do you want to do the assignment on?" I asked. "We better come up with a topic. It says on the sheet that we need to have an idea by tomorrow. And, it can't be food."

"You know what we should do?" Daisy turned her chair toward me.

"What?"

"You. We should do our project on you and how you're able to talk to the dead."

"What? How are we supposed to make money?" I replied.

She rolled up the paper again in her hand. "Maybe you can talk to loved ones who have passed on, you know? People would

pay top dollar for that kind of thing. We can create a website, get some followers."

"I don't know about that."

"Think about it, remember Wesley Stone a few years back who tried something like this?" She tapped my knee with the assignment. For a brief moment, life entered back into her eyes. "Everyone was excited to see it in person. He was making tons of cash..."

"But he didn't get the contract from the investors; it was a total wash." I wanted to tell her how I hated the idea, mainly because no teacher in their right mind would let us do something like that. Besides, the voices in my head never actually made sense to me. If anything, I wanted to ignore them, just in case they tried to make me jump off another cliff. When Wesley Stone attempted this idea during the fall E-Fair two years ago, there was a huge turnout because of him. But the presentation bombed. People thought he faked the whole thing, but then again, I didn't want to be the one to squash her idea. The last thing I wanted to do was to push her away, but I just couldn't see it working.

"Sounds great," I said. "What do you want to call it?"

"I dunno, good question. Something smart, you know, like a play with words." Daisy replied.

"Yeah, good idea."

"How about, 'The Talking Dead?'"

"Awesome." I wrote it down on the sheet.

"Or, how about 'Crossing Over'?"

I nodded and wrote that down as well. I looked at Daisy for a second as her finger rubbed her lips. Her long eyelashes flickered as she looked over to me. "The Deadline," I added.

"Not bad," she replied, "but I don't know if that sounds too creepy or not. Maybe we shouldn't use the word 'dead' or anything that might scare people away."

I nodded and crossed it out on the page. "Good point."

Daisy leaned forward and put her hand on my knee. The hairs on my arms stood on end. "The Spirits of Timpleville."

"Awesome," I replied. "That's really good."

We high-fived each other and leaned back in our chairs for a moment. I could still feel the spot on my knee where she touched.

By the end of the period, the two of us came up with a rough proposal for our business plan. I smiled at her as we went our separate ways down the hall. I couldn't get her out of my mind for the next three classes.

When the bell rang to end the day, I gathered my things and lined up for the bus. I knew Daisy walked out the front doors with Henry or Samantha. I wanted to be hanging out in line so that they could see me. Standing beside my neighbor, Bradley Blunker, I eyed the front of the school. Rudy Jerqson slithered out the door and jumped over the hedges. He gave me the nod and took off through the parking lot. After a group of skateboarders jumped off the steps, Daisy finally appeared hand in hand with little Regan. I inched

forward and shifted slightly to the left so that she could see me. I didn't want it to look too obvious I was staring, but it didn't take long for Daisy's eyes to catch mine.

"See you tomorrow," she said, moving her head above the crowd of kids pouring out onto the front walk.

I nodded and smiled. It wasn't much, but it was enough.

Turning back to the line, I felt a little tug on the bottom of my shirt. Little Regan looked up at me as Daisy stood behind her.

"Hey, sorry, I think Regan wants to take a picture of you."

"Okay," I replied.

Regan tinkered with an iPhone in her hand and pointed it at me.

"Smile," Daisy said with a laugh.

Regan looked at the picture on her screen and pointed it at me again. "Does she talk at all?" I asked.

Daisy shook her head. "No. I've never heard her say a word, but she uses my phone to write me messages so that we can talk that way."

"That's your phone?"

"It is."

"Well, if you have a picture of me, then I need a picture of you." I pulled out my phone as the roar from a powerful motor rumbled into the parking lot. The heads of about a hundred kids all turned in the direction of a beat-up silver cavalier screeching over the speed bump and pulling wildly up to the curb behind my bus.

The driver door swung open, and a heavy set of steel toe boots stepped out onto the sidewalk, owned by none other than Damian Dermite. It looked like he had grown a couple of inches since I saw him earlier that morning, maybe because I suddenly felt very small.

His huge hand reached out and grabbed my neck, pushing me hard against the side of the bus. I looked into his crazed eyes as he reached his fist back behind his head. Small blotches of hair spread about unevenly along the craters on his face. "Got a text from Jared who heard from Samantha Jerqson that you've been talking to my girl today." The white knuckles of his fist moved toward me. Droplets of spit splashed from his mouth.

Chapter Six: Time

I'm not sure what happened after seeing Damian's giant fist because the next thing I remembered I was stepping off the bus at my house. As it drove away, I stopped and turned to my neighbor, Bradley. We used to hang out a lot a couple of summers ago when I first moved to the area. That was the same year his brother died. Bradley's mom once told me that she was so happy I moved in next door because it helped him mourn his loss. I guess I sort of distracted him. However, since I became friends with Henry, Bradley stopped calling me. In the last few months, we've been somewhat distant. I sort of miss hanging out with him because he always made me laugh.

"Hey, so that whole thing that happened at school just then, did you see it?" I asked.

Bradley picked up the newspaper at the end of his drive and nodded. "Yeah man, that was pretty intense. Are you sure you're okay?"

A small garter snake slithered across the gravel road and into the ditch on the other side.

"Why?" I asked. "Why wouldn't I be okay?"

"Well, because of what happened."

I scratched my head for a second and shrugged. I didn't understand why I couldn't remember anything after Damian pushed

me against the bus. Maybe he knocked me out. "I guess I banged my head pretty hard eh?"

Bradley looked at me for a second, twirling the newspaper around in his hands. "I guess." He turned up toward his house and walked up the driveway. I watched for a few seconds wondering what I did to make the guy so different. Bradley was a few years younger than me, and it made sense he would be a little jealous of my friendship with Henry, but I didn't like how we were now. Maybe he just missed his brother. I knew, at some point, I would have to make an effort and call him up one day to hang out.

That evening I sat on my bed with my iPhone. Besides having a slight headache, I felt pretty good. Surprisingly, I wasn't nervous or scared about the whole Damian thing. I guess because blocking it out of my mind proved to be a small victory. I don't even think the big idiot intimidated me anymore, either. If shoving me up against a bus and telling me to stay away from Daisy was supposed to be some sort of scare tactic, he was sadly mistaken. If anything, I felt a bit excited. Whatever it was, I decided to search up Daisy on Snapchat.

"Stay away from my girl...whatever. Maybe you should stay away from me. You don't wanna mess with the—master of disaster." I stood up and flexed my forearms, squeezing whatever tiny muscle might have been clinging to my bones. I pointed to a row of stuffed Smurfs on my window ledge. "You mess with me, you mess with my whole family."

I sat back down and typed Daisy's name on my phone. The second her profile appeared, my hands heated. The photo she used for her cover page looked almost glamorous, like a model from a magazine. The more I analyzed the background of the picture, the more it looked like Screaming Ridge. I recognized the huge rock Daisy, and I leaned against for several hours one afternoon while waiting for Kaylee's parents to come back for her.

I remember walking home from Screaming Ridge in the blistering snow, holding hands with Daisy. We were both beat from trying to save that poor girl. Whenever I had nightmares about seeing those disturbing faces inside that house—the faces of Kaylee's dead parents—I would force myself to think about the walk home with Daisy, and somehow it always calmed me down.

She was like medicine.

As I hovered over her username on my iPhone, I wondered what to say. I wanted my words to be relaxed and cool, but at the same time, I needed her to know everything was okay. I mean, technically I had just been in a fight with her boyfriend.

"I'm the master of disaster. The king of pain."

With a deep breath, I added her and closed my eyes. The house was still. My parents were out walking the dog, and my brother hibernated in his bedroom blasting his new liquid crystal speakers, not wanting anything to do with us.

I tapped on my profile again and noticed Daisy had added me back already. I propped my pillows up against my headboard and

opened up her profile.

I typed the words, Hey Daisy on the chat page and floated over the send button with my thumb. Unsure whether striking up a conversation straight away would seem too forward, I decided it best to wait a few hours.

Patience has been one thing I've learned a lot about lately. It's been a weakness of mine for ages and had created a whole ton of problems in the past.

Standing in that snowy field last December at Screaming Ridge, I remember wanting desperately to run over to Kaylee. I couldn't stand waiting for her parents to come back for her. Who knew if they were ever going to return from the afterlife to get her? But as I stood there, mumbling to myself, complaining about the cold and how horrible it must be for Kaylee, I remembered Daisy's words. She held me back. She calmed me down. Sure she might have looked vulnerable, but her words were something else.

Be patient, she said to me. These things take time.

I don't know how she knew, or why I trusted her so much, but she was right—things take time.

I'm still not sure if I heard Kaylee's voice in the summer, but I see her face now and then. I can't help picturing her sitting in the snow beside the house on Screaming Ridge. When her family finally returned to her, when they found her after so many years, I felt like they took a part of me away. Man, I'd like to know if Kaylee was inside that house.

But I am not going back there; that's for sure.

Strangely enough, I had spent a month last year trying to avoid Kaylee Cooper, trying my best to find the most calculated way to stop her from bugging me and following me around all day at school. I mean she was a first-grader and wouldn't stay out of my face. She should have been hanging out with little kids, not me. But I guess I was too busy with other things that I totally failed to notice this girl was a ghost—who didn't know she had died—a ghost who roamed Timpleville for like, a gazillion years. She needed me; she needed my help, and I selfishly turned a blind eye because I was too impatient even to take the time to notice.

Time. That's what it takes.

As I watched the ceiling fan rotate, pushing cold air around the room, I heard a sound coming from my phone. I reached over and unlocked my screen to see that I had a message on Snapchat from Daisy Darlington.

Patience.

It was all about patience as well.

Sweat dripped from my armpit again.

Hey, she wrote, followed with a smiley face. The wall vibrated as the base pounded from my brother's room. I guess the house wasn't exactly still. Clearly, my parents weren't back yet. Otherwise, he would be told off. I watched the screen on my phone as the words typing appeared under the inbox. My thumbs paused over the keyboard, waiting for her next words. *I know someone who can help us*

with the afterlife website.

Excellent, I replied, wondering of course who the person might be. Probably the Rhino.

I'll tell you about it tomorrow in class.

K, I replied. I waited for a second to see if she was going to type anymore. I wondered what her thoughts were of the whole incident in the parking lot. I wanted her to ask me how I was doing, and whether I was all right. Sitting on my bed, feeling my room shake I noticed my fingers begin to twitch. This shaking wasn't the first time it happened either, but it seemed to occur more and more.

"How's your chin?" she asked.

I read her message a second time and slid off of my bed. I wasn't sure why she asked about my chin when the back of my head hit the bus. I could still feel it pulsate now and then. Clearly, she didn't see the whole incident. I guess there must have been a lot of people gathering around when Jerkface decided to attack me.

I checked out my reflection in the mirror on the cupboard door. I quickly noticed the massive cut below my lower lip and along my jaw. Dried blood covered part of my left ear.

I hurried over to my phone to ask Daisy how I got the cuts, but for some reason, she was gone.

Chapter Seven: Enemies

The next morning the sun beamed into the bus, warming my face. I closed my eyes for a second, playing with the cuts on my chin. I still had a headache and didn't sleep that well the night before. I sat beside Roland Stemwater, a sixth-grader who always smelled like mothballs. I wished Daisy sat there. I placed my finger on the misty glass and drew a small heart in the middle of the window.

"Give it up, Thomas," said Rudy Jerqson, sitting behind me. "It's never gonna happen."

I hated when he called me by my last name.

I smeared my hand across the window and pretended to check my phone. There were never any messages, at least not from anybody important. If ever I did get any they were usually from Henry reminding me to do my homework or to check out a stupid new show on the space channel.

The driver ground her gears as we pulled into the school driveway. I felt a tap on my shoulder as we stood up in the aisle. "Wh—why are you here?" asked Valerio Del Porto.

"What do you mean? It's Wednesday. It's a school day. I'm supposed to be here."

I smiled over to Rudy, waiting for his approval. However, for some reason, he chose not to listen and kept his head down as we

moved toward the front of the bus.

"Single file," sang the driver standing at her seat. "One at a time, come on, let's go." Walking past her, she winked at me and rubbed her chin. "How are those cute chops of yours? Did you get any stitches?"

"No, it was nothing. I'm fine, Mrs. Swift."

I stepped off the bus in front of Roland and walked past a group of kids gathered by some yellow caution tape wrapped around the front window of the school. Roland turned to me and adjusted his glasses. I waited for him to say something but he never spoke. I wondered if he ever considered washing his clothes.

Over by the portables near the playground, Daisy stood with Regan again. Henry sat on the blacktop with his oversized backpack listening to his iPod. Last year Henry wouldn't be caught dead be sitting around as relaxed as that, not when Damian ruled the joint. Before the bell rang to start the school day last year, Henry usually paced around the side entrance counting down the seconds for the duty teacher to let us in. The second the doors opened he would bolt through the kindie-wing and escape into the junior halls. But things were different now, or at least they were getting that way.

Henry looked so chilled sitting on the ground that morning. It wasn't until my shadow blocked the sun in his face that he even noticed me standing there. He pulled off his earbuds and looked at me. "Hey man, what are you doing here?"

"Why is everyone asking me that?" I grunted sitting down

beside him. He passed me one of the buds from his tangled headphones and put it in my ear.

I sat beside him watching Daisy skip about the blacktop with Dermite's little sister. Her hair waved about like a woman in a shampoo commercial as she chased Regan up and down the hopscotch squares. I liked her hair down. I watched for several minutes, hoping she would sneak a peek over to me. Maybe she'd see the scar on my chin and want to touch it.

Damian's car skidded wildly into the parking lot again, cutting short the quiet moment. Dust and exhaust fumes poured out of the back as if it was on fire. A herd of mindless ankle-biters formed around him as he stepped out of the tin-can on wheels. I couldn't believe the guy drove, especially considering he was only about fourteen. Then again I did hear rumors he failed a grade—or three.

"Where is he?" the beast shouted, pushing open the car door. "Where is that freak?"

Confident he was hunting me down, I did my best to pretend another 'freak' in the playground angered him. Besides, the teachers would soon kick him off the school premises. So, like everyone else, I watched him attract the attention of about eight hundred kids.

The librarian on bus supervision stepped in front of Damian as he pushed his way down the sidewalk toward the back of the school. "Where do you think you're going?" the woman shouted.

"Get outta my way!" he grunted indignantly. A flock of crows feasting on a dead raccoon beside the school sign shot up into the

air. A couple of little girls screamed and rushed over to the back doors.

"You need to get off of this property right this minute, young man." The librarian pulled Damian's arm and turned him around. I slipped back behind Henry, feeling my mouth dry up. I'm not sure if he saw me or not, but it seemed as though he was forcing his way right toward me.

I wanted to run, but I knew it wouldn't help. Besides, I had faith in that tiny librarian. She could hold her own.

I think.

In a flash, Daisy brushed past us, jumping in between Damian and the lady. "Damian, stop. It's okay. Relax." She grabbed his shoulders forcing him off the curb and into the parking lot. The rhino's muscular body immediately let go, his powerful arms fell gradually down to his side. I had never seen anyone take control over him so fast and so efficiently before. The guy always got his way, and if he didn't, he would rip apart whatever tried to stop him. Damian took pride in his crazy freak-outs. It showed everyone not to piss him off. Last year Damian used to drag little kids into the cornfield behind the playground and up to the cemetery at the top of the hill. He would lock them in the gated area until they cried. It was those stupid things that built terror around the school. Sure he got suspended many times, but it didn't stop him. Getting in trouble simply fueled his inner 'bully.' The strategy worked pretty well because no one would ever mess with him.

Well, except for maybe that librarian.

And Daisy.

The two walked down the parking lot to the front of the school drive, hand in hand. Somehow she tamed that angry beast like no one else.

As I watched them stand near the main street, I felt a tug on my sleeve. I turned in time to see little Regan take a picture of me with an iPhone and run away to the Primary play area.

"She likes you," Henry said, putting his iPod into his bag.

I half smiled and picked at the scab again on my chin. My heart raced. My face felt hot. "What did I do to get him so mad?" I asked. "He was the one who attacked me yesterday."

"What do you think?" replied Henry.

"I believe the guy is insane." I stood on the blacktop beside Henry for a few minutes watching Daisy's arms wave about like she was swatting flies. She obviously cared about the guy; I just didn't get why. "The guy doesn't even have a neck. His shoulders just go right up to his head."

"He has a neck," Henry replied.

"No, he doesn't. His chin starts at his chest. Look."

Henry shook his head and put his earbuds back in.

I eventually turned away and leaned up against the school wall. I started thinking about what Daisy said in art class the day before. I'm not who you think I am. was that a good thing? It couldn't be. I had to find out what was going on with her. Clearly,

this Damian guy was a problem. A big problem. But how on earth could I get him to stay the heck away from her?

"So, you couldn't help but show up, eh?" Rudy said, walking up behind me. "You should have known he'd come back looking for you." He slapped his hand onto my shoulder and nudged me forward. I wanted to punch him, but I had bigger fish to fry.

"I guess," I said.

I stepped away from the wall and dragged my feet along the blacktop. Henry and Rudy followed me as I watched their shadows overlap mine.

"You know what they say, keep your friends close but keep your enemies closer," said Rudy.

"What do you mean by that?" I stopped and turned to him.

"Quit trying to make him mad all the time. You can't play his game man."

"I'm not!" I snapped.

Henry inched forward, likely wanting to make sure everything was cool. He hated confrontations. I did too, but Rudy got under my skin.

"Hey man, relax." Rudy raised his hands up to me.

"I am relaxed. I just don't see how sucking up to Damian will help anything."

"Dude, you don't have to suck up to him. Just don't go putting his head through school windows." Rudy's eyebrows scrunched together as he inched in. "Know your enemy. That's all I

gotta say, man, know your enemy."

"You're talking all crazy, man," I stated with a laugh. "As if I could do something like that."

He fixed his backpack and pushed past Henry and I.

"Whatever, Dude. I think you're the one who's cock-coo, not him."

"No. You are!" I shouted.

Rudy shook his head. His baggy pants sagged halfway down his butt, showing his bright red boxer shorts. He swaggered back to the school. I couldn't let another year go by being terrified. There was no way. Maybe Rudy was right. I had to do something about it. I had to find a way.

A soft muffled whisper floated into my head again. That wasn't the first time it happened lately. Ever since the summer, I heard it more and more. I wondered at times if the 'dead' were trying to talk to me again. I turned to Henry. "Did you say something just now?"

Henry stood beside me, staring up at the crows circling overhead. "No, why?"

"Nevermind."

By the kindie-pen, Regan stood against the brick wall, playing with her iPhone. The kids from her class hovered around in front of her, hugging their parents and skipping along the blacktop. But not Regan, she stared at that phone like it was the only thing on earth—her world seemed so simple, but then again I used to think the same way about Kaylee.

"I'm gonna talk to her," I said. "I wanna know more about this little sister of his."

Henry grabbed my arm; his fingers wrapped all the way around my wrist. The black pupils in his beady blue eyes, surrounded by freckles all around his face, narrowed as he looked at me. I had never noticed eyes do that before. "I wouldn't talk to her," he said. "She's different."

"So? That doesn't mean anything."

"But it's Damian's sister."

"That's exactly why I want to get to know her. Damian freaks the heck out of me." I pulled my arm away and turned toward the kindie-pen.

"So, how is talking to his little sister gonna help?" Henry asked.

I shrugged and looked over at Regan. "I dunno. It just will."

"She's not like the rest of the kids. She doesn't talk, Alex; you know that right?"

I nodded, not taking my eyes off of Regan. "You don't need to talk to communicate."

Chapter Eight: She's like Art

I knelt down beside Regan while she stood on the blacktop.

Her eyes stared at the red bricks. Her fingers felt the cracks and dents.

"Hi Regan," I said as my voice cracked. I cleared my throat, placing my hands on the wall. "It feels rough, don't it?"

Regan watched my hand run up and down the side of the building. Her eyelashes fluttered. A smile grew on her face. She studied my movements, pushing away the long blonde locks from her forehead—just like how Kaylee used to last year.

"Do you like bricks?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Do you like touching them?"

The little girl nodded again.

"Me too."

Regan reached down to her little pink backpack and unzipped the front pocket. She pulled out a phone and pointed the small lens at me. It looked the size of an iPad in her tiny hands.

"Do you wanna take another picture?" I asked.

She glared into the phone and nodded. She pressed the screen and snapped a shot.

I smiled for a second or two while she held down the button and took more pictures of me.

"My name is Alex," I began. "I'm in the seventh grade, in Ms. Mesh's homeroom class. I don't know if you know me or not, but I know who you are."

She moved to the side of my head and focused the camera lens on my ear.

"I know you don't talk too much, but that doesn't mean I can't talk to you, right?"

A ball bounced wildly off the blacktop and rolled to the wall beside us—scared the heebie-jeebies out of me, but Regan didn't budge. She moved around to the back of my head. I heard the phone click as she took another photo. I pushed the ball away and then stayed as still as I could.

"Anyway, the reason why I wanted to talk to you was that, well, I want to get to know you."

Her lips smacked together, making a clicking sound. She leaned on my back while I continued to kneel down beside the wall. She rested her arms on my shoulders and played with my hair.

"I think getting to know you will make me happy."

Her fingers explored every inch of my head. A whistling sound sang out from her nose with every breath she took. It gave me goosebumps all along my arms. She finally pulled herself around to my front again, still holding on to her phone. She pointed it at my mouth and took another picture.

"Are you studying me?" I asked.

She nodded, swaying her body back and forth.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, tuning out anyone else around me. "I really like a girl in my class. I like her a lot, actually, but I'm worried that she likes someone else more." I opened my eyes again. Saying those words out loud seemed strange. "She's really nice, and smells good too."

Regan's eyes blinked. Her toothless grin somehow erased the images of her raging brother trying to hunt me down minutes before.

"You know which girl I'm talking about, don't you?"

She nodded and reached into my pocket. She tugged at my phone and pulled it out. She handed it to me and smiled again.

"What do you want me to do with this?" I asked.

She tapped on the camera app. She lifted her phone up to her face again and looked at the screen.

"You like her too, don't you?" I looked into the camera screen at Regan as she looked into hers.

Again, she nodded.

The kids collected their school bags and standing in their class lines by the door.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?"

Regan stepped closer to me, glancing at me over top of the phone. She giggled and looked at the screen again.

"She's like art," I said.

For a minute, Regan reminded me of Kaylee Cooper again, probably because she was so little, and that the weirdest things

amused her. Meeting Regan felt like a second chance. All the horrible things I said to Kaylee that year, all the times I ignored her and told her to go away, could be taken back. Maybe I was supposed to meet Regan. Maybe this was another chance to prove I was a better person. Maybe there was someone out there, watching over me.

The little girl reached into her pocket and pulled out a small bracelet. She placed it in my hand and closed my fingers around it.

"Thank you," I said.

My new little friend tucked her phone into her bag as the school bell rang. She threw the straps over her shoulder and rushed to her line, disappearing into a sea of children.

"So?" nudged Henry, tapping me on the shoulder. "What was that all about?"

I stood up, looking at him through the camera screen. "I just met a really cool kid."

"Oh yeah? Do you think she is as weird as her brother?"

"No," I replied in a whisper, trying to find her in the crowd of Primary kids. "She's weirder."

"Did she make you feel better about Damian?"

"Sort of, I don't feel better about Damian, but I feel better."

"Oh yeah? How so?" asked Henry.

I turned to him as we entered the school. "I'm going to ask out your sister."

Chapter Nine: The Swing

Walking into the school that morning a rush of adrenaline entered my body—like a dozen cans of Red Bull flowed through my veins. I felt awesome. Pumped. My walk changed, my balance changed, my attitude changed. I was in control—there was no point being scared. I had to stop this irrational fear inside me, not Damian.

"Hi, Mr. Ravi!" I shouted, giving the custodian a high-five. He smiled and raised his hand out to me.

"Greetings Alex," he replied.

I strutted to the locker-bay, winking at a couple of sixth-grade girls.

"Excuse me," heaved a deep voice from down the hall. Over the heads of a kabillion students shoving their way into the school, Principal Stanson stood with his arms folded. As the stream rushed around him, he repeated the two words. "Excuse me."

He sounded like Darth Vader.

I approached the man, trying out my new walk. I held out my hand to shake his. "Hello sir, how are you this fine morning?"

"Alexander Thomas," he began. A giant black mole twitched on the side of his mouth.

"That's me." I waited for a sec with my hand stretched out. He wrinkled his nose and tapped his foot. "I was certain I

made it clear to you yesterday that you were to spend today at home. Did you not understand those instructions?" He adjusted his glasses and gestured to the back door. "I really don't think I want to get the police involved. You know that?" Henry continued down the hall as I tried to focus on Mr. Stanson's words. "Do you understand?"

I dropped my hand back down to my side. "Are you saying that I am suspended? But I didn't do anything."

He dropped his hands on my shoulders, guiding me back down the hall. Mr. Pembleton waited by the door, holding it open for us.

"Would you like me to contact his parents?" asked Mr. P. His voice shook. "I can escort him to the parking lot and make the call from there."

"That's okay. We can bring him to the office and call his parents," Mr. Stanson replied. "I spoke with his mother yesterday, so I'm not quite sure why he's here today."

The two continued to ramble on with each other. It felt like a dream. I remembered talking to Bradley Blunker after school the day before, but nothing else. Regarding this morning, last I checked, my dad, had already left before I woke up and Mom was driving my brother to school.

Can Mr. Stanson please contact the office right away? Mr. Stanson.

Screams shot out from the front of the school. The PA continued to echo out into the halls.

Can we please have any available teachers come down to the office.

"That's okay," I said finally. "I'll call my mom. She'll come to pick me up." I pushed the door open and stepped out onto the blacktop. "Have a nice day!" I didn't really hear anything else they might have said except that Stanson was needed again at the office because of an intruder. I guess I wasn't that important.

"So much for my new walk." I dragged my feet along the tarmac and over to the swing-set by the learning garden. Muffled screams and shouting bounced about the houses near the main road. I couldn't see what was happening, and I really didn't care. I still had my mind made up. I was going to ask out Daisy. I refused to let anything get in my way, not even some stupid suspension. It wasn't the first time anyway. I can remember spending a day at home with my mom the year before after throwing that pizza at Damian by the basketball courts. She seemed to understand me that day. She knew it was for a good cause.

"Hey buddy, I wouldn't stick around here if I were you."

I lifted my head toward the sun to see a lanky kid standing in front of me; Jared Del Porto, Damian's best friend.

"Whatever," I replied, pushing myself back on the swing. "I can sit here if I want to."

"You don't get it, do you?" said Jared, lighting a cherry bomb and tossing it into the garbage can behind me.

He spent every lunch-break last year lighting cherry bombs and bottle rockets in the cornfield behind the school. When teachers found out about it, he simply got permission from his folks to go

home at lunch and continued on with his pyrotechnics. He followed around Damian like a sidekick. I was actually surprised to see the guy by himself.

"Yeah, I get it," I replied, "but this isn't your school anymore. So maybe you should be the one not sticking around."

I wouldn't have said that the year before. Not a chance. But, I lived and breathed differently, and even though the day started off pretty crummy, I continued to feel that red bull kind of confidence inside. Sure I might have been terrified of the guy. I mean, he was partially responsible for the nightmares he gave half of the junior and intermediate boys at Timpleville, but he didn't belong here anymore.

Plus, my armpits were sweating again.

"Maybe I'll chat with Dermite and see what he thinks," said Jared. He leaned into me and fixed the collar on my shirt. The scratch on my chin itched, and the headache returned. "I don't think you know what's happening, do you? You're too weak, Dude. You're too weak to know."

"What are you talking about?"

"The house on Screaming Ridge, man," Jared replied, flicking his lighter. "We saw you in the summer. You can't handle it. You shouldn't have gone inside. Stay away from it, stay away from Damian and stay away from his girlfriend." He lit another cherry bomb in front of my face and tossed it toward the school.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Are you hearing voices in your head? Are you forgetting things?"

"What?" I asked. "That's none of your business."

"You are. It's happening to you. You don't even remember the fight you had with Damian, do you?"

"What? was that you following me in the summer? When I fell off the ridge?"

Jared laughed. "You're clueless. You don't know what you're getting yourself into." He shook his head and walked back toward the main road.

I sat on the swing, watching him disappear around the front of the school. A minute later a heavy bass drum shook the ground, and Damian's Cavalier fishtailed down the street.

I haven't been inside that house since last winter. What's he talking about?

I pulled out my phone and flipped through my old messages. I thought about calling my mom, wondering why on earth she didn't tell me the principal kicked me out of school. I mean, I was pretty sure I spoke to her at some point after the Damian incident.

Just as I put it away, I heard someone call out my name. I checked around the playground until I finally saw Daisy stepping out the back door of the school.

Wow. Man, every time I saw her was like seeing her for the first time.

She walked over to me, glancing over her shoulder. I quickly

checked to see if my armpit sweat had soaked into my shirt.

Figures. I lowered my grip on the swing and tucked my arms in.

"Alex, are you okay? Did Jared say anything to you?" She stood a few feet away from me as if I was contagious or something. Maybe I smelled.

"Nothing much," I replied. Her feet were awkwardly crossed over each other as she played with her hair. I nudged my head over to my shoulder and casually sniffed and coughed at the same time.

No smell.

"How did you get out of the school?" I asked.

"I told the teacher I needed to print something in the library for the E-Fair. Besides, I'm a girl, I can get away with anything. What did he say to you?"

"Nothing really big—he just told me to stay away from 'what's-his-face.'"

"I'm sorry," said Daisy, inching a little closer to me. "I think D's just having a rough time at school, you know? There's like a lot of pressure for him to do well this year. His grandmother isn't exactly like the nicest person in the world, and with this whole E-Fair thing going on, he's got pressure to make money for the family."

"He's doing something for the E-Fair too?"

"Yeah, it goes from eighth-grade up to twelfth. You knew that. Your brother's in it."

"Oh yeah." I scratched my head. This whole Entrepreneurial event actually brought in a lot of money for the teenage population. "What's Damian doing his project on?"

"I dunno. It's a surprise. He said he's going to show me tomorrow."

"Cool, I guess." I pushed my feet along the stones. "Were you shouting my name earlier?"

"No."

"Just before you came out of the school, was that not you?"

"No."

"Oh. Okay."

"Why?"

"Just wondering," I replied. My feet started to itch. "I'm hearing voices again."

"The dead?" she asked.

I shrugged.

The wind picked up for a second, blowing around dandelion bits. A little white seed landed in Daisy's hair. I reached my hand out to grab it but pulled back. Instead, I pointed to it, watching her fumble about trying to pick it off.

"Daisy," I began, feeling my chest tighten and the sweat in my armpits drench my shirt. "Will you go —"

"He needs the money."

"Um—who needs the money?" I asked.

"Damian. He's under a lot of stress, that's probably why he's

been acting so weird."

"Right," I replied, bobbing my head. "You know, you don't have to make excuses for him." The crows settled onto the grass by the parking lot, cawing back and forth to each other.

"I'm not, I'm just saying. I'm just really sorry about what happened, and hopefully, he'll calm down soon." She reached out her hand to me, almost touching my chin. "I just can't believe you put him through that window. Everyone's talking about it, you know. He was lucky he didn't get seriously injured."

The hairs on the back of my neck moved. "What window? Since when did I put him through a window?"

"Yesterday."

I shook my head and laughed. "You're funny."

Daisy glanced back to the school, spinning the ugly silver ring on her finger. "Sorry. I'm sure you don't want to talk about it."

"I'm happy to talk about anything. I've got nothing to hide." I wanted to tell her to stay and sit on the swings with me. I wanted to talk to her all day. I was ready to ask her. I was ready to ask Daisy Darlington out. I mean, she came all the way out here, risking getting in trouble, to talk to me. She had to like me.

The door opened at the back of the school, and Mr. Stanson barged out. He looked over toward us with a walkie-talkie in his hand and a ruler. I'm not sure what he planned on doing with the ruler, but he marched along the blacktop like an awkward foot soldier. His long skinny arms flung from side to side with each step.

"I better go. He looks mad, plus he has a ruler." I giggled nervously and slipped off the swing. My headache dug into my temples like tiny knives pushing into my skull, but I couldn't show the pain. Not while she was with me.

"I'll come with you," she said, following me into the backfield.

"You don't have to, you're gonna get in trouble," I replied. I wanted her to follow. Who was I kidding? I wanted to run off into the ravine with her and hang out for the day. I'm not sure why, but the thought of even going up to Screaming Ridge crossed my mind. "I don't care. This day couldn't get any worse," she said. "I don't feel like being here today, not with that idiot Principal running the school."

"All right," I said, quickening my pace. "Follow me. I wanna show you something."

Mr. Stanson stopped at the edge of the playground. The dark silhouette of his balding head and sports jacket outlined the horizon as we disappeared over the hill.

Chapter Ten: Alex was Here

I no longer had a headache when I woke up the next morning.

It must have been pretty bad as I couldn't remember a thing that happened the day before.

I wanted to ask my mom if she picked me up from the Ravine, but I didn't want to creep her out. Besides I was still mad that she didn't tell me about my suspension. Or maybe she did? I vaguely recall a lecture from my mom, but for all I know, it could have been from a few weeks back.

Did she ground me and I don't even remember?

Henry sent me a couple messages about what I missed as I grabbed some toast and ran out of the house. I hustled up the drive to the bus stop. Bradley stood by the school hut totally zoned into some war game on his phone that he didn't once look up to acknowledge me.

I still couldn't believe what a difference a summer could make. Two days ago we were at least talking, but now he didn't even know me anymore. It didn't matter. I was getting older, and life moved on. I guess I really didn't have time for him anyway. I slipped on my earbuds and chimed into my favorite playlist on my phone.

It wasn't until the bus pulled up to the school that I realized Jared's brother, Valerio, sat beside me. For a moment, a brief moment, I wanted to grab him by his neck and tell him that his

brother was an idiot and should stay away from our school. But it wasn't the kid's fault. I actually liked Valerio. He talked funny at times—like really slowly and with a stutter, but no one ever seemed to tease him about it. His short, stocky frame reminded me of a rounder version of Jared.

I walked around to the back by the playground and waited for the bell to ring. Henry and Daisy's bus hadn't arrived yet, so I plopped myself down onto the blacktop and decided to check Snapchat. I began writing a message to Daisy. As I thought about what to write and how I would go about asking her on a date, Regan Dermite skipped up to me and placed a dandelion on my knee. She giggled and ran back to the kindie-pen. Somehow, in a matter of seconds, any tension I had in me, left.

Halfway through the second period Henry and Daisy arrived. The two handed Mr. Pembleton a late slip and found their seats. I pretended to be focused on our E-Fair assignment when Daisy finally pulled up a chair.

Man, did she smell good.

"Where were you guys?" I asked, slipping my page of cartoon doodles into my desk. "Did you miss the bus or something?"

"Sorta," Daisy replied. "I got in major trouble for ditching school yesterday.

Dad wants me to see a shrink."

"Yikes. Is that a bad thing?"

She nodded.

"How did you get to school?" I asked.

"We got a ride."

"With your old man?"

Daisy's hair dangled down along the side of her face. A shiny gloss brightened her lips. "Alex, I had fun yesterday with you."

"Yeah, me too." I blanked, not remembering a thing we did.

"Who gave you a ride?"

"You made me forget about all the things going on in my life right now. You know?" The ring on her finger glared in the fluorescent light.

The ring.

It dawned on me how she got to school. How could I be so stupid? Since when did she get rides to school anyway? Her life seemed to be so complicated all of a sudden. Less than a year ago, we were getting closer to each other, so much, in fact, I was confident if we kept hanging out, we would have been a couple. For real. Sure, I was only in the sixth grade at the time, but we were mature. We had to be. Otherwise, we would have never saved Kaylee.

Daisy looked at me, moving the long brown hair away from her eyes. Her shiny red lips slowly separated, showing her white teeth. "Yesterday was really fun. I wasn't expecting it, you know, but it was nice. I had a great time with you. I just hope that it doesn't mess things up between us. I like you. You make me laugh."

I wasn't sure what could have messed things up, but man did I

ever like her too. I wondered if Henry watched me stare deeply into his step-sister's eyes. What did he think of my interest in her?

"I make you laugh?" I asked.

"Yeah, you're funny when you're nervous. I can always tell because you talk so fast."

I wanted to ask her exactly what part of yesterday amused her, but I didn't want to spoil the conversation. Besides, I didn't often see her this relaxed. I knew she had problems with Lisa and the two-faced gossip queen, Samantha, not to mention her weird relationship with Damian, 'The Beast-Master,' so just going with the flow made the most sense.

"I talk fast, eh? Did you know you play with your hair when you're nervous?" I replied with a laugh.

"I do not."

"You totally do. You pull it to the side of your face and brush it like it's a horse's tail."

"Are you calling me a horse?" Daisy smirked as she glared at me.

"No, no, no, not at all. I didn't mean to, I mean, I totally wasn't meaning to suggest that—"

"Relax," she said. "You're talking fast again." Daisy nudged me with her elbow and raised her hand.

"Yes, Daisy?" Mr. Pembleton walked over.

"May we work in the library today? I believe my dad spoke to you about what the doctor said?"

Mr. Pembleton nodded and wrote our names on his clipboard.

As collected our books, I couldn't help but think about her getting into the car with Damian. It stung me every time, and I couldn't control it.

I tried to get Henry's attention when we walked out of the classroom, but he was too busy talking to his partner. I wondered how he felt about driving in the rust-mobile that morning. Daisy and I walked side by side down the hallway to the library. I carried a class iPad with me, and Daisy brought her binder. I wanted to do well on the assignment because I knew getting a good mark was important for my final grade and Daisy would likely want to work with me again. I just thought it was funny we were designing a website about talking to the dead when really all I cared about was talking to her.

Chapter Eleven: Secret

As I held the library door open for Daisy, she walked in, sneaking a quick peek at me before looking down at the floor.

Ga-bump.

"Do you know my brother asked me about our project?" I said.

"What? That is weird," she replied.

"Totally weird. He said he wants to talk to a kid he used to go to school with."

"Is this kid dead?" Daisy held her binder up to her chest.

"Yeah, I guess. He was serious too. He's such a dork. It looks like this project might work."

We sat on the big red couch in the back corner. Daisy's legs were almost close enough to touch mine, but she put the binder on the cushion between us. I kept wanting to look at her knees but did my best to focus. I opened up the iPad and filled out an organizer for our proposal.

"Your brother sounds like Henry," Daisy said. "Do you guys get along?"

I handed her the iPad to check over the organizer. "With my brother? Yeah, I guess. Although lately he's been on my case because he has to play his music quietly in his room now because of my headaches." She glanced down at the dot-jots I made on the template and nodded her head. The room was quiet enough to hear the faint stream of air inhale and exhale from her nose.

She sounded like Regan.

"The headaches are that bad, eh?" asked Daisy. "Do you get them a lot?"

Before I could reply, the door opened at the front of the room, and in wandered Valerio Del Porto. Red patches covered his face. He must have needed some space to focus. I sometimes wondered if being Jared's brother bothered him.

"You get along with Henry, right?" I asked Daisy.

"Yeah, yeah, he's nice. We look out for each other," Daisy replied. Valerio hovered by the fish tank, tapping the glass. Soon enough he settled down at an old desktop computer with the big square monitor. "Henry has been cool with me," she continued, "since my mom started having all those problems awhile back. I think he tiptoes around me some days because I get kinda moody when I think about her." Daisy never really talked about her parents and their divorce. There were times when we were at Screaming Ridge last winter that we talked about them, but she never said a lot. I knew that she missed her mom, and hadn't spoken to her in some time. Daisy's parents went through their break-up the year I transferred to Timpleville. Mrs. Darlington had a drinking problem because of some mental illness. Or, she had a mental illness because of her drinking problem. It started affecting the family, and in 2012 she disappeared for a while. Daisy's dad finally had enough and called it quits. The courts ruled Mrs. Darlington unfit to take care of Daisy, or something like that, and her dad ended up with full custody. It made sense that she would be sad sometimes.

"It also doesn't help that my friends are messed up as well," Daisy added.

"What friends?" I asked.

"Exactly."

Since Henry's mom and Daisy's dad married, the two couldn't keep their hands off of each other. When I went over to their house to visit Henry a few times in the summer, they always held hands and kissed and stuff.

"Well, Henry is a good friend to me," I said, moving my leg closer to hers.

"That's because Henry is good at everything he does. I wish I were a better sister to him."

"You are," I replied. "Why wouldn't you think that?"

Daisy shrugged and looked at the iPad again. Faint laughter echoed from outside in the hall. A group of second-graders rushed out of a classroom to the washrooms. Little Regan casually walked out, twirling a raggedy dandelion between her fingers.

"Henry still has nightmares," whispered Daisy. "Don't tell him I said anything; he'd kill me if anyone knew."

"Nightmares?"

"Yeah, he was pretty messed up after Damian and Jared bullied him last year. I guess it got pretty bad. They have apologized to him, but Jared still freaks him out. I just wish I could help him."

"I'm not surprised," I said. "Those guys were jerks last year."

"Yeah."

Damian ran our school for far too long. When I stopped him

from tormenting Henry awhile back, I figured the whole bullying scene ended, but I knew it still stressed out Henry whenever they walked by us in the hall. I chuckle now and then when I picture Damian's face with pizza sauce all over it. The guy deserved every piece of pepperoni.

"What did Jared do to freak him out so much?" I whispered.

Valerio had large headphones plugged into the computer as he continued to sit at the other end of the room. I pulled out a piece of gum and offered one to Daisy. She smiled and put out her hand.

"I'm not sure if Henry wants me to tell you. It was pretty bad." She chewed on the piece of gum, smacking her lips together a couple of times before standing up. The kids out in the hall got louder as the time moved closer to the end of the period. She shuffled toward the library door and eyed the little primary rugrats in the hallway. "Okay, you promise not to say anything?"

"I promise, but um, you know who's over there, right?" I shifted my eyes widely over to Valerio.

Daisy shrugged and walked over to the non-fiction shelves behind me. "How many times have you been back to Screaming Ridge?"

"Huh? I don't know, only once I think. Why?"

"Just wondering. Why did you go up there?" She casually scanned the book spines along the wall.

"I dunno. I was curious I guess." I lied. I still had no clue why I went up there in the summer. I wasn't in a hurry to tell anyone I threw myself off the cliff either.

"Me too." She pulled out a book and browsed the pages.

"Why are you asking?"

Daisy closed the book and brought it back to the couch. She sat down beside me and grabbed my hand. "Jared took Henry up there this summer. He sorta tricked him." She inhaled slowly and closed her eyes.

"Tricked him—how?" I asked.

"He tried to kill him."

"Who?"

"Jared. Jared tried to kill Henry."

"Wait. What?" I shouted.

Valerio glanced over at us for a second and focused again on the computer screen.

"Keep your voice down," whispered Daisy. Her hand gripped tighter onto mine. It was only the second time we'd ever held on to each other like that. "He lured him up there. Jared tricked Henry into thinking that I was hurt or something. He made up some crazy story that there was some fight between the Timpleville locals and a gang from the city. Someone had apparently knocked me out with a rock. As soon as they got up there, Jared tried to convince him to break into the house, saying something about helping him get his wife back. When Henry laughed at the idea, Jared cornered him on the porch with a piece of broken glass and started scratching his own arms. He then turned on Henry and swung the glass at him. Jared kept saying that his wife is up there and Henry has to help him."

"Whose wife?"

"I dunno. It didn't make any sense. It was a miracle Henry managed to get away."

Daisy looked at me, analyzing my face. It didn't seem real. It

sounded like something you'd read about, or watch on TV. "Why didn't he call the police? Why didn't you guys do anything? This is serious Daisy. Jared should be locked up."

"I know, I know, but let me finish. She rolled the gum between her teeth and quickly checked back toward the door again. "Apparently after the encounter, Jared dropped to his knees and cried. He said that he didn't know what he was doing. I think the guy is sick."

"You're telling me." The bell rang, and Daisy rose back up to her feet. The halls overflowed with children, plowing into each other to wash their hands for lunch. "So, that's it?" I said, letting go of her hand. "That's nuts. The guy isn't just sick; he's psycho. We should call the police. Seriously."

"No, you can't. We can't. Henry doesn't want to do anything about this. Besides, you know the rules about Screaming Ridge. We've talked about this already."

I stood up and walked to the door with Daisy. I didn't remember talking about the so-called rules of Screaming Ridge, but I recently learned about them from my dorky little gang of friends. I hated that I didn't recall the conversation with Daisy, though. I had to do something about this memory of mine. It was getting worse.

During this past summer, the kids from Timpleville started sneaking out in the evenings and visiting Screaming Ridge. No one ever tried going in the house; I guess because the windows were boarded up and the doors bolted shut. Since the word got out about the Cooper family who died in that house a hundred years ago, everyone wanted to check out the joint. I mean, the idea that a family had burnt to death in

a fiery New Year's Eve night, sounded cool.

Sad, but cool.

And then there was Kaylee Cooper.

A ghost.

A ghost from that house. To think, she was lucky enough to escape the fire but ended up freezing to death in the snow.

Brutal.

Mrs. Oxford would call it 'irony.'

The fact she froze to death and somehow remained here, roaming around the living world seemed crazy. Nobody outside of Timpleville believed anyone saw her, but we didn't care. We knew her. We were friends with the Ghost of Kaylee Cooper.

Somehow in the past couple of months, rumors spread through some media sites that trying to go inside the house was disrespectful. So, no one has tried. Instead, the land surrounding the home became a tourist attraction. Every kid or teenager from the Valley all the way out to Timpleville Falls came out to see the place. Some people posted on Instagram that they could feel a rush of energy every time they visited. They believed other spirits lurked about the area, communicating and haunting anyone who crossed onto the land. The locals put a rule in place saying 'What happens at Screaming Ridge, stays at Screaming Ridge.'

"I get it. We don't call the police," I said to Daisy finally. I held onto the door as she tucked the book under her arm. I didn't want to step out into the hall just yet. I wasn't ready to escape into the busy world of chaos and wild children. "What book did you get?" I wanted to

stall her. I had to know more about Jared. Someone had to know about this.

"It's on ghosts," Daisy replied, showing me the cover. "Listen, please don't say anything about Jared. I trust you; that's why I told you."

"I won't," I said. "You can trust me." Her eyes scanned my face. I had never done anything to her or Henry ever to make them think differently. I looked at the book again, wondering if she thought about Kaylee as much as I did.

"I gotta go." She swallowed. "See you after lunch."

"Wait," I said. "What are you doing after—um—are you free—would you like to—"

Daisy touched my arm and smiled. "I can't. I'm going out with D after school."

A lump pushed up into my throat. I couldn't win. I didn't stand a chance with the guy. How could I? I was half his size, in the seventh grade and didn't drive. "Does he know about Jared?" I looked over to Valerio, still sitting at the computer, like a statue.

"Yes, he knows about Jared. I gotta go."

"And you're not scared at all?"

Daisy leaned against the door and faced me. I wanted to kiss her. I wasn't sure how, but I definitely wanted to kiss her.

"No. I know Damian would look out for me."

"But what about Jared?" I asked.

"What about him?"

"How do you know he won't hurt you?"

"He won't. Damian won't let him. The guy crossed the line, and

there isn't any going back. Damian knows that. They fight about it all the time, but Jared keeps saying it wasn't his fault. Damian's like, whatever man, you know?" She tucked the book inside her binder. Students trickled into the library by the front. "Anyway, I gotta jet. Please don't say anything to Henry, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, okay."

"Damian said he'd help us with our website. You know he's the creator of 'thelight.com'? I'll tell you more about it later." She looked at me for a second before hugging me. "See ya."

And just like that, she was gone.

A cloud of white brushed over me; the floor wavered from side to side.

I wasn't sure how long I stood there, soaking in the giant hug I just received. I had never been that close to her. I mean, both her arms wrapped all the way around my back.

She touched my back.

I wanted to remember that moment. I had to. The little moments like that motivated me to wake up each morning. I needed to carve this into my mind.

Warm-faced and dizzy, I stole a marker from the librarian's desk and neatly wrote 'Alex was here' in the smallest print I could along the hinge of the door. The very spot I stood when she hugged me.

Now every time I went to the library, I could see my name and bring it all back.

Chapter Twelve: An Invitation

I sat beside Henry during music class that afternoon. I wanted him to talk to me about what happened with Jared. It disappointed me to know he couldn't talk about the whole 'Jared incident.' We were supposed to be best friends and all.

We both watched Mr. Purvis conduct his pathetic seventh-grade orchestra as Henry and I pretended to blow out some notes on our French Horns.

Daisy sat up at the front with the Clarinets. During each pause, she turned to Delanie Cartonbuck and carried on a conversation with her. Since moving to this school, I had never seen the two of them talk to each other once. I guess she was branching out.

"Hey, Henry, you know you can tell me anything, right?" I asked, tipping the wad of spit out of the top of my French Horn.

"Yeah man, sure. Why?"

"Well, just if you're ever in trouble or anything. You know you can come to me. There's just been a lot going on in the past few days with Damian and Jared. I just wanted you to know that if they ever bug you again, that I'd step in to help." I placed the mouthpiece back onto my instrument and looked down at the notes on the sheet. I had no clue where we were in the song, and for the most part, I didn't care.

"Thanks, but I think I can take care of myself," he replied.

Mr. Purvis tapped his conductor stick against his music stand and looked proudly out to the class. We all sat in clumsy rows with our

awkward brass and woodwind instruments in front of us. Most of the students had no idea how even to hold their 'noise-maker,' let alone make musical sounds come out of them.

"I know you can," I said finally. "I'm just worried about things. I guess I'm a little paranoid." I stared at the music sheet, hoping Henry could see the concern in my eyes. Ironically the title of the piece we tried to play was 'Ode to Joy.' With the one exception of Daisy hugging me with full arms around the back, the afternoon completely lacked any feeling of joy whatsoever. My best friend kept secrets from me, and the girl of my dreams dated my worst nightmare.

"Stop thinking about them," said Henry. "You're paranoid because you keep yapping on about Daisy and Damian. Just forget about them."

Mr. Purvis pointed to us with his magic wand, and on cue, Henry played a series of awful farting sounds with his horn. I watched him for a second, wondering what jumped inside him. He seemed different all of a sudden. Just two days before he was on my team—inside my head, putting me at ease. Somehow, everything felt different now.

"Do you know anything about thelight.com?" I asked.

"What?" Henry stiffly turned toward me with his right hand tucked inside the end of the horn. "Pay attention, will ya?"

I turned to face the front of the room and mindlessly pretended to follow along with everyone else. As we paused for a break while Mr. Purvis stressfully walked through the rhythm section with Simon Carpenter, I felt a tap on my shoulder.

"Meh, meet me after school by the front walk," whispered Valerio

Del Porto. "I wa...nna talk to you."

"Just hit the cymbal when I point to you, okay? When I point to you, count to three and hit it!" Mr. Purvis marched back to the front of the room, "One and two and three and four and one and two and—"

I nodded to Valerio and scanned the room in time to see Daisy looking over at me. She flicked her hair and turned back to the front.

"Okay, Class, from the top. This time put a little air into those instruments. I know it's your first week back, but this is easy stuff here. One and two and—"

The room filled with noise once again, and my headache returned. I should get a doctor's note so that I didn't have to sit through three periods a week of torture. I made a mental note to talk to my mom.

When the day ended, I waited at the front entrance for Valerio. Part of me wondered if he heard Daisy and I talking in the library that morning. There was something 'different' about the guy.

"How do you kn...kno...know about 'thelight.com'?"

Valerio stood behind me. His gaze hovered below my chin as he held onto his school bag.

"I heard Daisy talking about it. Why? What's it about?"

He stepped down onto the front walk and gestured for me to follow. The front entrance filled with students pushing their way out of the doors. I couldn't help but search for Daisy in the crowd.

"When wa...s the last time you were up at the Ri...Ridge?"

"A while ago, why?" I replied.

"Did you fe...feel anything when you went up there?" he asked. He scanned the pile of kids pouring out of the school and bit off a

hangnail on his thumb.

"No. Are you talking about the rush that everyone has been spreading on Instagram and Snapchat? Is that what this is all about? Has he made a stupid website about that? Damian is just jumping on the bandwagon. I bet he'll cash in on this too." I shook my head and turned toward the school bus waiting at the curb.

Before I could start walking, Valerio grabbed my arm. "Damian didn't de...design the site. It's not his. My brother made it. It's an invitation."

"An invitation for what?" I asked, pulling my arm away.

"T...t...to go up there...to feel the rush, to see the light. They say it feels like you are l...leaving your body. They say a light comes down and brings energy to you. New energy."

The bus door opened, and the kids from my route started filing in. Past the row of hedges at the end of the school drive, Damian's car sat idling. "Seriously?"

"Yeah," replied Valerio.

"It sounds like a scam to me. People are probably just spooked and what they are feeling is 'fear.'"

"No," he replied, following me to my bus. "It's not like that at all."

"I think that's what it is. Think about it. Kaylee Cooper? Wesley Stone?"

Wesley Stone went missing before the whole Kaylee Cooper fiasco happened—before Kaylee Cooper ever made an appearance at our school. The news didn't say much, but apparently, the guy had

locked himself in his room for a day or two and then ran away. There wasn't much talk about it because Wesley's dad banned the media from pursuing the story only because the man made a heap of cash and had paid them all off to keep it quiet. Some people think Wesley was embarrassed after what happened at the Entrepreneurial Fair earlier that month. He claimed to be a psychic and had a lot of people believing he could talk to the dead. I thought it sounded cool, but who was I to have an opinion that mattered? He must have had the same gift as me, although he was on a level of his own. When his project got sabotaged by a couple of kids, he freaked out and lost his chance of getting a student contract from any of the local business investors. The newspapers called it the Thanksgiving Tragedy. The entire town spent weeks searching for him. Members of the community planned to light candles every year in front of the tiny church at Timpleville Cemetery. According to the Mayor at the time, Wesley was a victim of a generation who was 'negatively influenced' by social media and video games. He played a significant role in trying to ban Instagram, Snapchat, and any other media outlet the kids used to communicate with each other. He also made some bogus commercials about video games and the harmful impacts they have on children today. His only victory was the addition of 'social technology community awareness' to the school curriculum. By the time you're in the second grade, video games are labeled as 'poison' and will corrupt your brain. Somehow it worked because the local kids seem to spend far less time glued to their technology than ever before, except my group of friends. In a way, the town had become sort of like a utopian community.

Wesley Stone.

Strangely, the very next year on the way back from Wesley's candle lighting ceremony, there was a severe accident on HighCreek Road. There was too much traffic for such a small location, and they canceled the event. As a result, the community simply forgot about Wesley Stone.

All that remained of him were the leftover posters stapled around the school and the telephone poles.

When the bus pulled away that afternoon, I spotted Daisy through the window hugging Damian in front of his car. I knew what that hug felt like. Man, he was lucky. Jared stood a few feet away from them, smoking a cigarette and spitting onto the road. Cigarettes were the only 'poison' that Timpleville allowed. They'll likely be banned soon, too.

"I know...know where they're going," whispered Valerio sitting beside me. He always stuck his neck out and closed his eyes when he tried to push out his words. I didn't feel like talking to him, so I put on my earbuds and slumped down in my seat.

When I got home, I couldn't stop thinking about what Valerio said. I had to know more about Screaming Ridge. I should have asked him. How could it give you energy? I didn't remember any 'rush' when I wandered up there in the summer.

After some easy math homework, I asked my mom if I could go and hang out with Bradley. Despite being grounded for the suspension the other day, she caved in and let me go. I hopped on my bike and

pedaled up the road toward Screaming Ridge. Hopefully, my mom wouldn't go calling on me at Bradley's.

"Yes," a voice whispered, fluttering through the wind. I was about twenty minutes into my journey. I peered around, nearly losing control of my handlebars. Somehow, my eyes caught sight of a small bracelet by the side of the road.

"Who's there?" I shouted, gliding for a moment before jumping off my bike. I waited for a second but could only see a white haze drift in and around the trees and open fields. I stepped back and picked up the bracelet. It had green and red beads looped between a bunch of crafted knots. "Hello?"

I put the bracelet in my pocket and continued up the long stretch of road.

Chapter Thirteen: The House on Screaming Ridge

I propped my bike up against the white rock that landmarked the driveway leading up to the house.

The House on Screaming Ridge.

Yikes, I was here again.

The place flooded my dreams at night—like an evil curse. The shadows that spread out over the horizon had disappeared entirely. The fog continued to thicken all around the yard, right out of a horror flick. By the side of the house, next to a frail and battered oak tree was the rusty Cavalier. Damian was here, somewhere.

Planks of wood boarded up the windows of the house as I remembered from the summer. Blackened leaves and old twigs outlined the eaves trough along the roof. The house itself looked in good shape, but its gray siding, and weedy garden made the place look like a dump. It didn't matter how many times I'd been up here; it still gave me the heebie-jeebies.

Memories of Kaylee Cooper running up along the side of the house suddenly filled my thoughts. I remembered the snow falling heavily. Her little body skipped through the yard with excitement all over her face. She knew she was going to see her family again. She was finally going to exit the world of the living and allow her beautiful spirit to join her folks. The home had been hers for decades. Her family's legacy rested inside.

Only now, the place had turned into a stomping ground for any kid looking for a place to escape for a little while. I guess I was responsible for it. At least I felt that way. If I could go back in time, I wouldn't have talked about Screaming Ridge to the kids in my class. I wouldn't have opened the door for people like Damian and Jared to come up and take over the land. I would have listened to Kaylee and helped her sooner. But as I walked along the stone path, I wondered once again, as I did in the summer, if the house was still haunted. Did the family leave?

I smiled to myself for a moment, picturing her looking up at me with her arms folded. *Wanna know how I know?*

I have a friend who can hold his breath forever, wanna know how I know?

It was her signature question. It drove me nuts—only now—I miss it—like crazy.

Very few people knew about the loose board by the north side of the house. I never thought I would ever want to go back inside, but I had to find out what Damian was up to. I pushed with all I had on the wood and noticed it give just enough for me to squeeze inside.

I moved slowly into the first room.

Light filtered between the tiny holes in the walls and ceiling.

"Hello? Is there anyone here?"

The vision of the bodies that roamed freely in the rooms and halls came back to me. This house made my stomach turn. I tried not to think about the fire and the terror that must have filled the rooms. They should tear the place down if you asked me.

I turned up a long hallway toward a light at the top of the stairs. I

knew what was up there, at least what used to be up there. I remembered the dark figure—the woman—Kaylee Cooper's mother, her dead mother, who waited a hundred years for her lost daughter to come back. Along the floor, drops of blood splattered on the wooden boards. The once weak glow of light from moments before now danced about the walls and ceiling.

"Daisy? Are you up there?" I listened, unsure if I wanted to enter that room again. Maybe Kaylee's family hadn't left, but why should I care? Why did I need to know? However, for some reason, I wanted to go. I grabbed tightly onto the stair rail and crept up to the second floor toward the room where the charred woman once waited. The light glowed brighter with each step. A deep hum filled the house. "Hello?"

At the top of the stairs, cobwebs and chipped plaster covered the walls. The floors creaked with every step. The glow grew brighter and stronger—the humming noise louder with each second. The house started to spin. An explosion of light burst through the entranceway at the end of the hall. was this real? Or just happening in my head?

A pain—a sharp, tight pain entered my body. I couldn't move—paralyzed, perhaps from fear or a strange force or an electrical charge.

And then darkness.

Silence.

"Kaylee?" I mumbled, rubbing my eyes. I stumbled forward along a dirt path. For some reason, the house was behind me now; a faint yellow glow shined into the thick fog. I dragged my feet, swaying from side to side toward my bike, still leaning against the white rock. "What happened? How did I get outside all of a sudden?"

"Let go," fluttered a soft voice from the branches.

"What?" The mist crept up to the darkened limbs. "Who's up there?"

The evening sounds of crickets and prowling coyotes filled the air. The voice was gone. Perhaps Daisy was gone too. I got onto my bike and pedaled down toward the road leading back to the valley. Part of me wanted to see if Damian's car was still at the house. Part of me wanted to tell him to leave her alone, but I was scared. I'll admit it; I was genuinely scared. I didn't have much time to make any considerations, as a curious figure suddenly appeared in the fog.

"Alex!" cried a girl, stumbling along the gravel path.

"Daisy! Are you okay?" I asked her. "What happened? You're soaking wet!" Her body trembled. Her teeth chattered.

I jumped off my bike to help, not sure whether to wrap my arms around her or not. She looked cold. She looked like she had just seen a ghost.

"I wanna go home. Can you take me home?" Dark blobs of mascara ran down her cheeks. The sleeves on her drenched shirt were ripped off, leaving nothing but threads hanging around her shoulders.

"Yeah, let's go." I helped her onto the handlebars and carefully balanced the bike until we reached a steady pace.

I peered around her waist. Her hands shared the grips with mine. With her feet tucked along the sides of the front wheel, we carefully made our way back to Timpleville.

We didn't say a word to each other on our way into town. Her mind likely flooded with a million thoughts, or perhaps nothing at all.

However, I knew not to say anything—I knew not to upset her.

Bats scattered about the trees along Daisy's street as we pulled into her driveway.

"Are you sure you're okay?" I asked.

"No." She stepped off the bike. Her feet dragged along the tarmac like a zombie drifting through the darkness.

"Wait," I said, setting the kickstand on the drive. She just wanted to go inside—I could tell. But, I just couldn't let her go. "What happened? What happened up there? Did he hurt you?"

She wiped her eyes with her knuckles. "No."

"Where is Damian? Where's Jared?" I asked, finally. She held herself, trembling. I wanted to grab her and hug her. I wanted to let her know that everything was going to be okay. "Daisy?"

"Yes?"

I swallowed and lifted her chin up so she could see me. I looked at her, formulating the right words in my head. I inhaled and calmly released the knots inside. "Go out with me. I mean—will you go out with me?"

She turned the knob on the door and slowly opened it. The smell of freshly roasted beef escaped into the night air. "Yes. I'll go out with you." She stepped into the house and closed the door.

Chapter Fourteen: The Date

I couldn't sleep that night. Uncontrollable thoughts filled my head—faces of people I had never seen before. I wanted to focus on Daisy, I wanted to fall asleep to her beautiful eyes, her smile, that hug. I wanted to forget about Screaming Ridge, I wanted the weird explosions of light to disappear from my memories. But instead, I drifted into what seemed like another nightmare. When I awoke the next morning, my head killed—again.

At school, I decided that Daisy and I would go to the movies on Saturday night—not very creative but being in the seventh grade had its limits. My dad would have to drive us in our dorky mini-van, but I guess it was better than picking her up on my bike. I doubt she would want to be seen sitting on my handlebars again.

"Pick me up at seven. We can get ice cream afterward,"

Daisy said, after hearing about the plans.

The hours leading up to the big date seemed never to end as I grew more and more excited. I checked my Snapchat account every ten minutes to see if Daisy added any thoughts or stories. My mom gave me some extra beads, and I put together a new bracelet for her from the one I found on the road. I changed the colors and placed it inside a small box. The night had to be just right. Daisy needed to feel truly special. During dinner that evening, my parents attempted to delve into some hypothetical, philosophical conversation about Romeo and Juliet. They rambled on about the innocent youth and how Shakespeare's

tragic story was the result of thoughtless ambitions, led solely by love and not by logic. I knew they were trying to tell me to be careful and to make good choices and all that mumbo-jumbo, but where they failed was in their timing. I was hooked. I liked Daisy and didn't care about the consequences.

I quickly got ready after dinner and fixed my hair. I caked on my mountain breeze deodorant and dabbed on a bit of my brother's cologne. While I waited for my dad in the front hallway, I tried practicing what I would say to her when I knocked on her door. However, my mind filled again with voices.

The ride to Daisy's house became a blur.

Before I knew it, my dad pulled into her driveway.

Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god!

He turned to me, placing his hand on my knee. "Your mom and I are worried about you. We want to trust you again."

"I know, Dad," I replied.

"Daisy is a sweet girl. We both feel spending time with her will be good for you."

"I think so too."

"Make good decisions tonight."

"I will."

"And good luck," he whispered, unlocking the passenger side door. "When all else fails, be sure to quote Shakespeare. It always worked for your mother."

"Thanks, I think." I took a deep breath and walked up the pathway.

"Hi Alex." Daisy opened the door before I could knock. The evening sun glistened on her flowery white dress. A warm glow spread over her face, highlighting the little freckles along her nose and neck.

"You look like—like a to be or not to be," I said.

Daisy giggled as she slipped on her shoes. "What?"

"Ro—meo?" I squeaked. I fixed the button on my shirt. "I mean, Romeo."

"Romeo?"

"Yeah. Romeo and Juliet."

"That's not from Romeo and Juliet."

I swallowed. My face heated up. "Shakespeare. I was quoting Shakespeare. My dad told me to—quote—never mind."

A twisted lift in her brow brought confusion to her face. "Okay."

"What I me—meant," I continued, "is you look great. You—you always look great."

Daisy closed the door, stepping out onto the front porch. She looked at her feet, following me down the steps to the car. "Thanks."

We walked side by side down the path. I waited for her to step ahead of me so I could fix the stupid elastic on my underwear. At least my deodorant worked.

"I got you a gift." I stopped on the driveway, pulling out the box and handing it to her. "It's not much, but I wanted you to have this."

Daisy opened it and smiled. As she slipped the bracelet through her hand, a small tear welled up in her eye. I hoped she had remembered our conversation in Ms. Mesh's art class. Red beads were wrapped brightly around her wrist with purple letters, spelling out

‘Daisy.’

"This is perfect," she whispered.

"I like that you're different," I said. "I want to be the purple flower sometimes too."

Daisy draped her arms around me and squeezed tightly. "Thank you so much. You know little Regan made me a bracelet once. She's obsessed with them."

"Well, I guess this isn't exactly an original gift," I said.

"It is. It's perfect."

That was the second massive hug in less than a week. Her perfume covered me.

The rest of the evening went by too quickly. I wanted to remember every moment, every second of the date. At one point during the movie, she leaned her head on my shoulder. The smell of her shampoo reminded me of the garden in our backyard. I couldn't focus on the plot at all. I didn't even remember the name of the movie. I closed my eyes and imagined holding her hand.

When the lights came up, we snuck out the side exit and into the parking lot by the ice cream cafe. For the first time, I thought about the two of us being out in public together—like two grown-ups out on the town. We found a seat near the window as kids piled in.

"What can I get you? I asked, pulling out my wallet. I saw my dad do that with my mom from time to time. "Do you want an ice cream cone or a cup? You can have large, small—or medium, or extra-large, or halfway between small and medium. There's also this new flavor with jellybeans and walnuts, but if you're allergic, then I totally understand.

Isn't Henry allergic to nuts or something?"

"Alex. I'm good," she replied. "Sit with me for a minute. There's no rush, right?" She grabbed my arm and pulled me back to my seat.

I took a deep breath and relaxed, picking my fingernail. "What did you think of the movie?"

"You're so funny. One day you're Mr. Cool, the next day you're Mr. Fidget."

I clutched my hands together and stopped grinding my teeth. "That's me."

Daisy leaned forward. "Relax. I'm not going to bite. The movie was good, I guess. What did you think?"

"Yeah, I guess it was all right," I replied, bouncing my knees under the table. "What was your favorite part?"

She pulled out a few napkins from the metal container and folded them neatly into small squares. "I dunno. I wasn't paying attention," she said with a laugh. "I can't even remember what it was about."

"Yeah, it sucked," I said.

"It totally sucked," she replied. "Wanna know how I know?"

We giggled for a minute. We loved referencing Kaylee's famous saying whenever we had a chance.

"The movie was the worst movie ever made, wanna know how I know?" I replied.

Daisy looked out the window for a second before giggling. "Cats have unique patterns on their nose, just like fingerprints on people. Wanna know how I know?"

"Good one."

We watched the various people walking in and out of the cafe. Old 90's dance music from the jukebox filled the room.

I picked up the bottle of sugar on the table and poured a bit onto the table. "Whatever happened to the white cat?"

"The custodian's cat? Maddy?"

"Yeah, you adopted it right? You never talked much about it." I ran my fingers into the sugar, licking the grains that stuck to my skin. Part of me wished we both adopted it. When the custodian's wife died a few years back, his little white cat ran away from home. During the months Kaylee Cooper roamed our town, the little furry feline appeared from time to time, looking for what I thought at the time was just attention—looking for love—or a scratch behind its ear. However, the little thing wanted to help me—to help Kaylee find her family. When Mr. Ravi heard we rescued it, he happily let Daisy have it. I guess it reminded him too much of his wife.

"I sometimes dream about that cat," I added. "It like, appears in the strangest places. Like one time, I was drowning in water, only it wasn't water, it was pizza sauce, and just as I was about to give up, the white cat jumped in and rescued me."

Daisy's eyes widened as another giggle escaped from her mouth. "That's weird."

"Totally weird. And what was strange was that not one drop of sauce got on its fur. It was perfectly white—white as snow."

Daisy shook her head and smiled. She carefully tapped one of the grains of sugar and looked at it on the tip of her finger. "I don't know what happened to little Maddy."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"She ran away again, a few months back." She lifted the tiny sugar grain to her mouth and gently licked it off her finger.

"I wonder if she found somebody else to look after," I said.

"Maybe."

"I wonder if it belonged to someone else before Mr. Ravi."

The white cat not only helped Daisy and I find Kaylee Cooper, but it also helped me keep calm when losing hope. I'm not sure anyone knew, nor did we ever think to talk about it, but the cat was special, at least to me. It somehow had the sense to find Kaylee that night in the snow, like a guiding light.

"I'm gonna miss Maddy."

Daisy tilted her head and flicked grains of sugar at me. "Am I seeing a sensitive side to Alex Thomas?"

"Haha, very funny," I replied. "Okay, I have a question for you."

"Shoot."

"Well, on the subject of animals. If you were an animal, what kind of animal would you be?"

Daisy lifted her head and rolled the napkins over the table. "What kind of question is that?"

"It's a good question," I said. "Besides, you asked me a deep and meaningful question the other night, so I figured it was my turn."

Daisy rolled her eyes and leaned back in her chair. "I did? How is that meaningful? How is that deep?"

"It's totally meaningful and deep. It's better than your question."

"What did I ask you the other night?" Daisy asked.

"You asked me if I was real."

Her question was one of the only things she said to me on that bike ride back from Screaming Ridge when I found her drenched, wandering the old gravel roads. I remember helping her onto my handlebars. She turned to me and looked so deeply into my eyes. "Are you real?" she said to me. I didn't quite understand why she asked me that, but she looked so lost and confused that I didn't want to question it. There were many times we both wondered if Kaylee Cooper was real. The fact she was a ghost, somehow confused the idea she was alive and communicating with us. I often wondered, what 'real,' really meant?

"You were like an angel that night," whispered Daisy, rubbing her fingers along her bracelet. For the first time, I noticed Damian's ring missing from her finger. "You're—interesting, you know that? I like this side to you. You don't always have to be so—forward with me like you were the other day. Although, I can't stop thinking about that."

"The other day? How was I forward?" I leaned my elbows onto the table, shifting to the edge of my seat.

The music stopped while the jukebox changed songs.

The voices in the cafe lowered to a whisper.

Daisy jumped as a group of kids outside in the parking lot sprinted toward our window. They stumbled up onto the sidewalk and pushed open the double doors. A tall girl, maybe a couple of years older than us, tripped over one of the tables by the front counter. "Help me!" she shouted. "Somebody help me!"

One of the guys who followed her in had blood pouring down the side of his forehead. His right arm was all bent in the wrong

direction. "Block the door! Block both those doors!"

A crowd of kids rushed toward the entrance holding tightly onto the door handles. People plastered their faces against the windows, splashing their hands all over the glass. I could only assume a drunk guy had wandered in from the city. Since no one drank or did drugs around here, they stood out like a sore thumb.

When the cops finally arrived, we enjoyed our ice cream and got picked up by my dad. On the ride home, we didn't speak very much at all, but it didn't matter. Just being near her was good enough for me.

"Good night," I said as we sat in the back of the mini-van. "Parting is such sweet sorrow." I opened the sliding door and stepped out onto her driveway. As I reached for Daisy's hand, she shyly giggled and pulled me into her. She kissed me on the cheek, her soft lips opened and glided up to my ear.

"You're a goof," she whispered. "Do you have that whole book memorized or something?"

Every hair on my body moved, as though I stood under a warm waterfall. I wasn't even sure what she asked me. I saw her mouth move, but nothing clicked. "Pardon?"

"Didn't we read Romeo and Juliet last year? I think you were the only one who understood it."

Again, she said something. I think she mentioned Romeo and Juliet. "Um. Good book. Saw the movie. Good movie."

"You think so? I hated it. She killed herself. How is that good?"

I wanted to tell her to speak up—that I couldn't hear her over the pounding of my insides. "Good story."

Daisy tucked her hair behind her ear. "Well, I guess it was kinda romantic. Besides, the two were able to spend eternity in the afterlife—just like Kaylee and her family."

"Yup," I replied.

She looked at me with a glimmer in her eye. I wanted her to kiss me on the other cheek. "I had no idea you were such a mush-ball," she whispered. She stepped out of the van, looking at her new bracelet again. "This means a lot."

My dad turned on the radio in the front as I edged closer to her. Maybe he wanted to set the mood for us. My hands shook. I knew this was the moment; I knew it had to be right there and then. I wanted her to know how much I liked her. She needed to understand it. I wanted her to be my girlfriend.

"I would be a deer," she said.

"Wh-what?" I replied.

"What kind of animal I would be." She turned away from me, looking up at the night sky. The sounds of some cheesy 80s tune waffled out of my dad's tinny speakers. "I always felt that a deer was so—elegant and beautiful, but like totally terrified on the inside—you know what I mean?"

"I do," I replied.

As I followed her up the driveway, My dad turned up the radio in the van as a news broadcast came on.

"Hold on guys," he said, calling to us through the passenger window. "Listen."

According to sources, Jared Del Porto was last seen at roughly 3 pm on

Thursday afternoon. Reports say he was picked up in a silver sports car in front of Timpleville High. If you have any information regarding the whereabouts of Jared, please contact the Timpleville Police or our missing person's hotline at 1 888 555 3576. In other news a white cat—

My dad turned it down and rubbed his chin. "Do you know this kid?"

Daisy and I looked at each other. Her face went white. I think mine did too.

Chapter Fifteen: Jared Del Porto

The news about Jared's disappearance spread quickly over the weekend. Newspapers and TV stations highlighted the details around the community's attempts at finding him. Families from across town combed Timpleville and the surrounding areas without any luck.

I spent most of the weekend in a trance. Having my mind occupied with Daisy and then on Jared's disappearance just made everything blurry. The lights in the house bothered me. My headaches were worse than ever, and I barely remembered anything from Saturday right through to Monday morning.

It wasn't until Daisy walked into class last period that I could finally focus.

"Where have you been all day? Are you okay?" I asked, pulling out a chair. "Henry said you were sick or something." Actually, Rudy Jerqson was the one who told me, but it didn't matter. The truth was, Henry still acting weird around me, and I didn't have the energy to figure out what bothered him so much.

"I'm fine," replied Daisy sitting down beside me. She opened her binder and shuffled through some pages.

"Any news about Jared?" I asked.

Her hair dangled over her face, as she pulled out a pen. "Nope." She wrote down the date on a blank page.

"Oh, okay," I replied. "Well, Mr. P. just finished talking about the

business guys that are coming to the E-Fair. We really gotta get some bites on this project. Can you imagine if we got a contract?" I glanced back and noticed Henry looking at me. He slumped over his desk while his partner talked to him.

"Yeah, cool," Daisy mumbled.

"So, did you hear from Damian at all? Does he know where Jared might be?" I hated asking about him. I hated the air he breathed. "It's just strange, don't you think? Did you see him up there? was he mad at you guys or something?"

"Why is he looking at me?" whispered Daisy. Her eyes looked anxiously over to the front of the classroom.

"Who?"

"Him." She pointed to Valerio sitting in the corner by the teacher's desk with his laptop and headphones. His eyes shifted back to his computer. "Like, what's his deal, anyway? Why is he even at school?"

She had a good point. It didn't make sense that Valerio would be sitting so calmly in class working on his assignment when his brother was out there somewhere. Maybe he didn't get along with him. Or, Valerio knew something.

I didn't know

Valerio Del Porto that well, except he rode on my bus and he liked to sit beside me sometimes. Oddly, he chose to do his Entrepreneurial Fair Project by himself. He was the only one in the class to do that. I remember asking on the bus one time what he planned to do for the big E-Fair assignment and he told me he wanted

to write a children's book.

Weird.

Before I could refocus on our business plan and get Daisy back on track with the direction we wanted to go in with the project, Rudy Jerqson rushed into the classroom. A spacey trance spread across his face.

"They found him, they found Valerio's brother!" he whispered in a heavy voice.

"Sit down!" Mr. P shouted. "You cannot just come into my class late and disturb everyone."

Henry and Rudy's friend Garth swiftly shifted over to the back of the class where Rudy strategically stationed himself. "Sorry, Mr. P." His eyes peered over at Valerio across the room.

It figured Rudy would be the first to find out. He constantly looked for reasons to leave class and always seemed to have vital information about the community before anyone else—just like his sister. Daisy and I both hustled over to the back, but before we could get any juice on what happened, the Principal, Mr. Stanson walked in.

He was new that year, and from what I had experienced already, the guy was pretty strict and not exactly fair either. He wore a dark grey suit with a purple tie—a small shadow formed under his giant mole. He quietly chatted with Mr. Pembleton by his desk. The two both looked over at Valerio. It all seemed to happen in slow motion, but in only a matter of seconds, Valerio slipped off his headphones. He stood straight up and rushed over to them. When Mr. Stanson wanted to speak to him outside Valerio dropped to his knees.

"His brother is dead," whispered Rudy.

It seemed impossible. Mr. Stanson reached out his arms to help Jared's little brother up to his feet. Valerio's hands covered his face as he left the room.

"What just happened? Did that really just happen?" whispered Garth Noblestein. "That was crazy, man, how could his brother be dead?"

We turned to Rudy to see if he knew anything else, but he simply stared blankly ahead. The entire class seemed to have the same shocked feeling, sitting silently at their seats. Mr. Pembleton stood at the front of the class with one hand on his hip while the other rubbed his forehead.

I felt a tap on my shoulder. "Let's get out of here." Daisy looked at me and gestured to the door.

Chapter Sixteen: Sick

Daisy and I asked if we could take a couple of laps around the upper floor to collect ourselves, and then slipped outside the back doors of the school. I followed her over to the garbage dump by the staff parking lot. I had never dared go back there because Damian used to spend his breaks in that very spot, smoking cigarettes and plotting his next bullying-attack. Around the south-side, facing a row of trees was a private little space with a few old buckets placed upside-down as chairs. Graffiti covered the chipped bricks, with tags and random statements.

"Why are we here?" I asked Daisy, finally. Cigarette butts littered the ground.

"It's a place where I can escape, you know?"

I stood a few steps away, looking past Daisy, into the trees.

"Aren't you worried about the eighth-graders coming, or any of the high school kids?"

"Whatever," she said with a giggle, pulling out her phone. "We're intermediates now." She unlocked her screen and opened up her messages. "Sit down; you're making me nervous."

"This is crazy," I looked up at all the writing on the walls. "My brother's name is up there. I didn't know he used to hang out back here."

"Yeah, you'd be surprised who hung out here. You'd be surprised what goes on back here too. Look there," said Daisy, pointing up to a name. "Do you remember him?"

I looked closely at the words written in red marker.

Wesley Stone was here.

"What was the deal with that guy?" I asked. "Do you think he's still alive?"

Daisy opened up her picture album on her phone. "No," she replied with a slight laugh. "The town just has trouble letting go of something they don't have the answers to."

"What do you think really happened?" I picked at my fingernails.

"Who knows?"

"Do you think he really could talk to the dead?"

Below Wesley's name were the letters, *RIP*. It seemed strange that Wesley hung out behind the dumpster. From what I heard he didn't seem the type to be socializing with the scum who usually vacated the spot.

Daisy continued to look at the pictures on her phone.

"What are you looking at?" I asked.

She paused and looked back up at the wall. "Nothing," she replied. "Damian feels bad for what happened that day, you know."

"What day?" I inched my bucket closer to Daisy. I could still see Valerio's face in my head as he fell to his knees in the classroom.

Daisy looked at me and shifted her eyes back up to Wesley's name on the wall. "The E-Fair."

"What?" My head already started to jumble. "Why does Damian feel bad about the E-Fair?" I scratched the back of my neck. "Are you talking about the Wesley Stone sabotage a couple years back?" That was what we called it. The journalists even quoted it in the paper at one

point when the townsfolk were out searching for him. From time to time, I heard kids talk nervously about their E-Fair projects in the halls or class and reassure each other that their presentation could never be as bad as the 'Wesley Stone Sabotage.' "I don't get it."

She looked at me up and down and then put the phone on her lap. "You mean you don't know?"

"I guess not," I replied.

"Damian and Jared sabotaged the E-Fair. They were the ones who ruined it for Wesley. I thought you knew. Everyone knows."

I had to think about that for a minute. The two years that I lived in Timpleville, I had no clue Damian and Jared were behind it. I mean, the incident was something people tried to forget, and I could understand why, but to think that a poor kid ran away and never returned, all because of two idiots.

"I guess Jared had it coming then," I mumbled to myself.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Daisy reached into her shirt pocket and pulled out a lighter and a half-smoked cigarette. She fumbled about with the flame trying as hard as she could to look like she'd lit a butt a thousand times before. "Jared was sick; you know that," she said. A cloud of smoke wafted into the afternoon air.

"Yeah. The freak tried to kill my best friend. The guy was demented."

"He was sick," Daisy repeated.

I watched her inhale the cigarette and tap the ashes onto the

ground with her finger. I wondered if she still tried to be like a deer and if she really was screaming inside.

"He's dead." I'm not sure why I said that, but I needed a reaction from her.

She picked up her phone again and continued looking at her pictures. "I know he's dead, Alex. I know more than you think." She stopped on a photograph and handed the phone to me. On the screen, a picture of Jared appeared, sitting on a rock looking over the valley of Screaming Ridge. "That was taken a while ago. Jared sent that to me."

"Why would Jared send you a picture of himself?"

Daisy covered her mouth and coughed out some smoke. Watching her with that cigarette was like imagining a princess with a skull and crossbones tattoo. "He sent me a few. I guess he wanted me to see the other side to him."

I chuckled. "Other side to him? Which side? The mean side or the really mean side?"

"Just look at it."

I tapped on the picture and looked closely at Jared's face. "He's smiling. I've never seen him smile before."

"I know," Daisy replied. "There's a kind side to him."

"When was this taken?"

"Before he got sick. Before people started feeling the energy from Screaming Ridge."

"You think Screaming Ridge made Jared crazy?"

Daisy shrugged and dug her butt into the dirt. "You're the one who can talk to the dead. Maybe you should ask him?" She looked at

her fingernails and pushed back the cuticles on her thumb. "I think after the whole Wesley Stone thing, he started to change. Damian said he wasn't the mean guy everyone knew him to be."

"He's always been mean since I've lived here."

"That's just an act. He was starting to become a good person. And then, something happened to him."

I looked at the picture again and noticed a little girl in the background. "Is that Regan?"

"Yeah."

"Why is she there?"

Daisy shuffled over to me and leaned in. The stale Marlborough's and nicotine now poisoned the once flowery smell of shampoo.

"Damian has to take her everywhere he goes. Ever since the accident, you know? Their grandmother works night shifts at the Bingo Hall, so he can't leave her alone."

"That's nuts," I replied. I wasn't sure what accident she referred to, but I assumed Damian's parents weren't around anymore.

Her hair dangled in front of me as she looked closely at the picture. "She's such a cute kid," Daisy added. "She's like a little sister to me."

I wasn't sure about the timing, but as her body grazed against my side, a stirring of warmth filled my chest. I didn't want her to move. A crazy kind of energy told me she would one day be my girlfriend. I wanted to carry on the conversation about Regan, or Jared, or Wesley, or whoever. I didn't care. I just wanted to be with her. "Regan is an interesting girl." I swiped the picture and opened up another one from

her album.

She pulled out a piece of gum and popped it into her mouth. "She is. That picture was from the summer. We were checking out the house."

"Kaylee's house?" I asked.

"Yeah. It's really cool. People are starting to call it—"

"Sacred. Yeah, I know." I flipped to the next picture in the album, but couldn't tell you what I was looking at. I didn't care anymore. Daisy filled my every thought. Sure, the death of Jared Del Porto had to be a big deal. But, the guy was a creep, and I knew I wasn't going to be losing any sleep over it. But, the situation wasn't so black and white for Daisy. "Are you okay?" I asked finally.

"Yeah, why?"

For all I knew, the timing couldn't have been worse, but for me, I couldn't think of a better moment. "Will you be my girlfriend?"

Chapter Seventeen: Follow Me

I never asked anyone to be my girlfriend before. Garth

Noblestein, Rudy's best friend, dated twelve girls in the sixth-grade, but most of them were dares. I mean, all he did was walk around the playground holding hands with them. I guess we didn't do much else in elementary school, except Ryan Matthews last year. In the eighth grade at the time, Ryan had a girlfriend for three months. Henry and I used to catch them kissing each other on the mouth behind the learning garden. Daisy said they used to make out by the dumpster all the time too.

"Why would you ask me that?" Daisy stood up and brushed some ashes off her pants.

There were so many things I wanted to say to her. "I'm sorry."

"Jared Del Porto is dead. He was a friend of mine. Having a boyfriend is the last thing on my mind right now." She kicked over the bucket as her hair fell over her face.

As she rubbed her eyes, a sparkle of light glistened from her finger.

"Why are you wearing that?" I asked.

She pulled her hands down from her face and looked at Damian's silver band. Tears trickled down her cheeks. She twisted off the ring and dropped it to the ground. "I have to go."

As I sat there, on that uncomfortable plastic bucket, watching Daisy scamper back into the school, a cold stiffness traveled through

the muscles in my body. Asking her to be my girlfriend was like preparing yourself for the most important test of your life and then realizing at the last second you didn't study.

"I'm an idiot," I mumbled. I felt trapped in a dark room, forced to complete an impossible puzzle. Once I would find the last pieces and put it together, the light would come on, and I would see the big picture. Daisy Darlington was going to be the final piece to my puzzle. I just had to be patient.

Staring out at the trees behind the dumpster, feeling the knots tighten inside, I felt Daisy's phone vibrate in my hand. I opened the screen and saw that she was receiving a message.

Hi, the text read.

I looked at the two-letter word. Something wasn't right. Something wasn't right at all.

I rushed into the school, up the stairwell, and down the hall to our classroom. I pushed open the door and scanned the room. "Where is she?" The kids all turned to me, sitting quietly at their desks. I hurried over to Henry in the back. "Where's Daisy?"

"I don't know man. She never came back. Are you okay?"

Mr. Pembelton marched over. "Alex, you were gone a long time. I was about to call the office."

"Sorry, Mr. P. I wasn't feeling well, but I think I'm okay now." I pulled up a chair and sat down next to Henry. "I'm freaking out here, and I'm totally confused."

"You look like you've seen a ghost or something." Henry shifted his body around to face me as Rudy and Garth dragged their chairs

over.

Mr. Pembleton cleared his throat—standing over me now. "And where might Daisy be? Didn't you say you wanted to do a couple of laps?"

"Um, yes." I fumbled with my thoughts for a moment. "Um, I believe the French teacher pulled her aside—wanted to talk to her about something."

He scratched his chin and turned back to his perch at the front of the class.

I turned back to the group. "I just got a weird text. I don't know what it means. I don't know how to reply. I don't know what to do."

"Relax buddy, let me see." Henry looked at the phone message and nodded. "This isn't your phone. You know that right?"

"I know. It's Daisy's." I pulled my hand back.

"Why do you have her phone?"

"That's not important right now, man." My voice shook. "What's bugging me is the fact she's getting a message from Jared Del Porto."

Please excuse the interruption. We have an important announcement we'd like to make this afternoon. Mr. Stanson came on over the P.A. System.

"That's impossible," Henry said.

We want to take this time to remember a former student of ours, Jared Del Porto.

"I know it's impossible, that's why I'm asking. Why is he texting her?"

Timpleville Public school and the community would like to send our deepest condolences to the Del Porto family.

Henry shrugged. "Someone is playing a joke on you." He turned to Rudy and nodded. Man, I hated that the two of them hung out. I wanted to tell him Rudy was an idiot, but I know Henry liked being part of the group.

I looked down at the phone again, opening up the message. The circuits in my brain fired. My sweaty fingers pressed the letters on the QWERTY keyboard.

Where are U? I watched my thumbs shake. I waited for the reply. Henry and Rudy continued to ramble on about Jared's death, but I decided to tune it out. I tuned out a lot of things lately.

Meet me at the cemetery, replied the text.

The voices in the classroom faded into numbing white noise. Their faces blurred. Mr. Stanson continued to read out his formal message to the school over the PA. I don't think anyone listened. Jared was a jerk. Nobody cared about the guy.

When the day finally ended, I slipped out the front doors of the school, ignoring everything and anybody around me. Images of the cemetery brushed over my thoughts as I steered myself toward the bike rack by the guest parking lot and pulled out an unlocked BMX.

The seat was too low, and the handlebars were wobbly, but I didn't care. I powered out of the lot, past parents, and little bratty kids. I pedaled up the street toward the cemetery at the top of Timpleville hill. I reached the front gate by the church. Warn tombstones surrounded by overgrown weeds, and tall grass jetted out randomly around the yard. The shrill of crickets pinched my eardrums. A young adult man placed flowers on a large gravestone with two crosses on the top. He bowed

his head, lowering himself to one knee. Along a row of hedges, at the back corner of the property, a small girl stepped into the open, placing an object on top of a gravestone. She stepped back and looked at it for a second before pulling another object from her wrist. She twirled along the grass and stopped beside a stone-cross dressed with salmon-colored roses and purple lilies. She put the bracelet on the top of the stone and smiled.

A glare from the sun pushed between the trees behind the church as the girl disappeared again through a hole in the fence. I looked back to where the man knelt, but he was gone as well.

I dropped my bike on the ground and hustled over the black iron rails and into the cemetery. Part of me wished I returned the phone to Daisy and grabbed the bus home. I could have been watching 'Wheel of Fortune,' and enjoying some day-old Jumbo Pizza. I wouldn't have made a fool out of myself either.

"Why did I ask her to be my girlfriend?" I mumbled to myself.

I stopped at the first tombstone and picked up a small string bracelet, looping it around my fingers. The purples and reds blended perfectly into each other. Better than what I made for Daisy. I had no idea how someone could spend so much time weaving those little threads together so perfectly.

Patience, I guess.

I looked at the tombstone and read the engraving along the front.
James Seymour Winegar, January 15th, 1932 to November 27th, 2013.

I didn't know our old custodian past away. He only retired a year or so ago when my friend Mr. Ravi took over his job. We used to call

the guy Mr. Vinegar because he used French fries dressing to clean everything.

Mr. Ravi was the best custodian our school ever had, tens times better than Mr. Vinegar. But, at the beginning of last year, the school, including our principal, showed him very little respect. Mr. Ravi only wanted to make people happy, but not one person in the school saw him as a person. He came to our school after his wife died in a terrible storm a couple of summers back. I liked him. Henry, Daisy and I decided to do our Multi-Cultural Fair on him last year rather than on a country. At first, our teacher hated the idea, but once she saw the initiative behind the project, she ended up loving it. The school and the town respected Mr. Ravi after that. I was proud of what we did for him. He said he would be forever thankful. He even stopped by my house over the summer to tell me he was promoted to head Custodian for both Timpleville Public School and Timpleville High. He said he owed it all to me for what I did for him. I hoped the E-Fair project with Daisy would be just as successful.

I walked along the tall grass and picked up the other bracelet from the stone-cross.

Hugo Parcel Courier, May 1st, 1943 to June 23rd, 2013. Timpleville's finest postman, may you rest in peace.

I scanned the grounds for the girl, looking past the cemetery across an overgrown farm field, but nobody was there. However, as the sun slipped behind a cloud, I caught sight of a house along the tip of the horizon. I recognized the place. I didn't know you could see it from the hill at Timpleville Cemetery.

"Screaming Ridge," I whispered, tying the bracelets to my wrist.
"The house on Screaming Ridge."

I opened the screen on the phone again and checked the messages.

Follow us, it read.

A car door slammed behind me. The sound of an engine revving and grinding gears escaped into the trees behind the church. Dust ballooned up along the farmer's field as the car sped off along a dirt road.

was Jared in that car? was he really alive?

I jumped on my bike and pedaled as fast as I could along the old path.

Screaming Ridge.

Here we go again.

Every time I went near that place, a cold shiver crept over my skin. I sometimes wondered if it was Kaylee trying to communicate with me.

Along the way, I thought about Daisy again. When did I not? I pictured her face at the dump, transform from a smile to a look of disgust. All because I asked her to be my girlfriend.

I'm such a dork sometimes.

Pulling into the overgrown driveway, I steered over the tall weeds and thorn bushes. I hopped off my bike and leaned it up against the side of the house.

I was back. I didn't think I was ever going to return after that strange encounter the week before, but somehow I couldn't stay away.

was I being pulled?

Around the back of the house, a worn path led into the woods, zigzagging along the ridge looking out over the ravine and valley. At the highest point, at the edge of the path, past the pines and rotten tree limbs, a small lake glistened. To the east, deep tire tracks carved out the grass field behind the house leading to the silver cavalier.

I rechecked Daisy's phone.

No new messages. Maybe Jared faked his death somehow. But, why would he? was he hiding in the house?

I wondered if the cat was up there. On a bike ride back in July, I saw it scampering along the road up to the ridge. By the time I followed it to the house, it had disappeared. I hadn't seen it since.

Light from the sky broke through the clouds and beamed down to the house. The ground trembled at my feet. I stopped in my tracks. A teenage boy appeared around the side, sitting on a swing under an old Maple tree. With his eyes closed, he wrapped his hands around the frayed rope, gently rocking back and forth.

"Damian," I mumbled to myself, stepping back behind a row of hedges. "Where's his friend?"

My pocket vibrated.

Another message came through.

Turn around, it read.

Chapter Eighteen: Infected

Between the thin pine trees and waving ferns, the little girl from the cemetery poked her head out and smiled.

"What the?" I mumbled. She picked up a stone and tossed it over the side of the ridge. A few seconds later it clanked on the boulders that spread out along the ravine. She looked back and smiled.

Regan Dermite.

As Daisy said, she followed Damian around everywhere. She had to. They lived with their grandma, and she worked shifts. Henry recently told me that Damian's mom and died in a car accident a few years back.

Regan crept over to me and sat down on the ground. Dozens of colorful bracelets decorated her arms. She studied my face before pulling a phone out of her pocket. She touched my chin with her fingers and then handed me the device.

As I glanced down at it, she stood back up and skipped over to the ledge. She was just like Kaylee.

Only the kid wasn't dead.

I opened the phone to a picture of Damian and Jared standing under a big tree with the house behind them. The photograph appeared to be from the same spot Damian sat right now.

The wind calmed for a second, enough to hear a soft whimper brush my ears. Damian's hands covered his face while Regan patted his back.

I didn't understand why she led me there with Jared's phone.
What was she trying to say?

Did Damian push Jared off the cliff? But, they were best friends.
Maybe he slipped.

I checked out the landscape one last time. The reds and yellows
blended like Daisy's pastel picture from last year.

I watched the light from the sky for a few minutes before
stepping back along the path leading to the front of the house.

What did Regan want? Why did she lead me up there?

Worried about getting in trouble, I decided to head back home.

On the ride, the voices returned in my head. At times, I could
make out what they were saying, but other times it just sounded like
white noise and scattered whispers. I got pretty good at ignoring it, but
not when the headaches arrived.

I passed the cemetery and turned down the old country road that
led back into Timpleville. I thought about returning the bike to the
school, but I needed to get home. I hadn't checked my own phone in
hours, and my mom had likely called about a hundred times.

I thought about stopping by Daisy's house. I needed to talk to
her. She needed to know I took her seriously and should have waited
before asking her to be my girlfriend. I mean, I could wait. I would wait.

Gliding into town, passing Jumbo Pizza and the Pool Hall, a
teenager stepped out onto the bike path. His feet dragged along the
tarmac. I checked behind me and swerved into the car lane to avoid
him. I figured he was a punk from the big city wandering into town. He
shrieked and stretched out his arm as I tried to get past him, snagging

his fingers on my shirt. The impact messed with my balance and throw me clear off the dinky BMX.

My head hit the road like a sledgehammer.

A bright light blocked my vision, and a ringing filled my ears.

I lifted myself out of the gutter, pulling grit and dirt out of my hands. While I searched for the bike, the punk sprang at me, scratching at my face. Pus oozed out of his eyes. Blood painted the side of his jaw and splashed out of his ear. I couldn't tell if the shrill in his voice was of anger or pain. I didn't care. I swatted at him, pulling myself away.

"What do you want?" I shouted, grabbing my bike. He ripped at his face, stumbling to the ground. A couple of guys pushed the door open at the pizza joint and ran over.

"Get out of here kid." The one boy kicked at the punk and pushed me back onto the road. "He's infected or something. They're all over the place."

"What are you talking about?" I shouted back, not wanting to stick around to hear the boy's answer.

"Just go!" The boy pushed a garbage can toward the punk. "It's happening kid. This town is gonna fall apart."

The punk screamed, shoving the trash can to the side. His hands flailed wildly. "Make it stop!" he yelled. "Make it stop!"

More teenagers burst out of the Pool Hall down the street and circled the crazed psycho.

"Get out of here kid. We'll call the cops."

"Okay." I turned back up the street and pedaled as fast as I could out of town toward home. What was wrong with him? The guy didn't

look drunk. At least not from my experience. Not that I ever had alcohol before, but I've seen it plenty of times on TV. There was something different about the guy though. Something totally different.

The voices in my head muffled into one big eighth-grade orchestra of noise by the time I turned down my street. My brain pounded. I knew my parents were going to be sitting at the dinner table, waiting for me. I could already see my mother's scowl, her one eyebrow turned up and her lips tight. My dad won't be looking at me. He will pretend like nothing was wrong, only he'll cut into his meat more aggressively, and his teeth will grind. The knife and fork will clank loudly on his plate. My brother James will be oblivious of course, probably rambling away about himself and how great he's doing in school.

I propped the stolen bike against a tree beside my house with the full intention of returning it one day.

All I wanted to do was race through the front door and jump right into bed.

"Alex?"

I turned around. A boy appeared from out of the darkness. The flickering light above the garage door lit up his face.

"Valerio?" I replied. "What are you doing here?"

Chapter Nineteen: Valerío Del Porto

Valerio Del Porto stood under the light of the garage. Bugs flew about above his head. His hands hid inside his jean pockets as he looked up to me. "I have...have to talk to you. It can't wait til to...tomorrow."

I leaned up against my dad's van, parked along the flower garden. For a moment, the voices went away. "How did you get here? Don't you live on the other end of town?" Valerio took the same bus as me, but our route zig-zagged all over Timpleville. I used to get knots in my stomach when we picked Jared and Valerio up last year. I avoided eye-contact with both of them for the simple fact they had a connection with the Damian. I was so glad when Jared graduated in June. I could finally breathe again on the bus.

"I wa...walked," he replied. Valerio picked up a dandelion growing out of my driveway and lopped off its head with his thumb. "You were there, right?"

"Where?"

"You ca...came from Screaming Ridge, di...didn't you?" Valerio stared at the head of the dandelion on the driveway, hovering his foot over the top of it.

"Yeah, why?"

"Did you fe...feel it?"

I knew what he was talking about, but strangely I had forgotten entirely about the rush. Damian didn't seem to be filling his body with

energy up there, and his little sister wasn't acting any stranger than usual. "I didn't feel it. I didn't feel anything."

Valerio crushed the dandelion with the end of his shoe and twisted it. "Yo...you must have felt some...thing. You must have felt him."

I moved away from the garage light and brushed off the moths from my shoulder. "Are you talking about your brother?"

"Yeah. You can ta...ta...talk to the dead right? Did you hear him? Did he talk to you?"

I rubbed my chin and closed my eyes for a second. I knew it would happen at some point. I knew people would start asking me to talk to their dead friends or family members, but not before the E-Fair. I wasn't ready for this. "I dunno. I don't know what I hear sometimes. I just hear a lot of voices."

Valerio looked up at me again. "I thought you could ta...talk to them? You said you could talk to the dead. Is...isn't that what you're going to put on your web...site? Your E-Fair?"

"I can, I have—it's hard to explain. I guess I can hear voices from somewhere outside of—"

"I need you to talk to him." Valerio stepped forward, his face just a couple feet away from mine. Swatting at the moths dancing around his head, he continued. "Tell Jared I'm sorry for not being there for him. Can yo...you do that?"

"I don't know if—"

"Tell him. Talk to him." Valerio rubbed his eyes and sniffed. Taking a big breath, he exhaled slowly before continuing. "I mi...miss

him."

"I understand."

Valerio shook his head. "No, you don't. You... don't understand. It was his fault this happened. It was his time. He shouldn't have teased that kid. I told him over and over no...not to tease him."

A car drove by along the main road. A heavy base from its stereo broke the silence in the air.

"Are you talking about Wesley Stone?"

"Who do you think I'm talk...talking about?" He turned his back to me, pacing up and down the driveway. "My brother was sick Alex. He was totally sick." Valerio pulled another dandelion from the cracks in the driveway. He folded the flower over itself, digging his thumbnail into the stem. "He tried to hurt me some...times. He used to go crazy. He'd scratch his arms and head all the time. I was positive he was a different person like something was taking over his mind. But, just recently in the last few months, it got wor...worse. Like real bad. I didn't know who my own brother was at times."

"That's too bad," I replied. The light on the main floor switched on in my house. The shadows of my mom and dad appeared through the blinds in the living room. I knew they were talking about me, wondering where the heck I was.

"One doctor said Jared had a mul...tiple personality disorder," Valerio continued. "Other doctors told us he had an unknown virus. But I know that was just a load of baloney. If you were to ask me, I think he was possessed."

"Possessed?" I looked back over to him. He stopped pacing and

waited for me to continue. His eyes blinked as he rubbed them again. I raised my brow. "Possessed by a demon?"

Valerio shrugged. "Maybe. Whatever it was, it crept inside his bo...body and took over. My brother was invaded, man."

I turned toward the front porch and shook my head. I knew Valerio wasn't talking crazy or anything, but I honestly didn't have time for the guy. There was definitely something strange going on out there, and maybe Jared had been infected as well—but enough was enough. I had to go to bed. "I gotta go."

"No. You have to help...me. Ple...please." He grabbed my arm. His fingers dug into my skin. For a second he glanced up at me and then let go. Tucking his hands into the pockets of his hooded sweater, he stepped back and looked down at the ground. "There wa...was a morning, not that long ago, where I woke up to my brother leaning over my...bed. At first, I thought he wa...was sleep-walking or something. But when I asked him wha...what he was do...doing, he just smiled."

"So?" I replied.

"So, it was four in the morning. My ma has a tough time getting him out of b...bed before noon." Valerio bit off a nail on one of his fingers.

"Maybe he couldn't sleep." I shook my head and turned back to the house again. "I really gotta go. My parents are gonna kill me if I don't get inside." I stepped up to the front porch. I didn't want to be rude, but I just couldn't talk to him anymore. "Are you okay getting back? Do you wanna borrow that BMX?"

Valerio stood still in the middle of the driveway, not taking his gaze off of me. He weaved his hands together, lifting them up to his face. "There was... blood all over his shirt."

I let go of the doorknob. "Wait, what? Your brother?"

Valerio nodded. "He had blood all down his front." A bird squawked and flapped its wings in the trees above us.

"He had what?" I asked.

"Blood. He had...its...its head in his hands." Valerio separated his fingers, folding them into fists. "Blood was all over my pillowcase."

A heavy lump grew in my throat. I tried to swallow. "Whose head? You're not making any sense. Whose head did your brother have?"

His lower lip quivered. "A cat's head. A wh...white cat."

Chapter Twenty: It's a Virus

I'm not sure how much sleep I got that night, but I couldn't get the white cat out of my mind. I didn't understand why someone would want to kill it. What got into Jared? It didn't make sense. I wished I could creep through his phone, but the screen was locked. I had no idea how Regan knew the password.

I wondered if Daisy knew about the cat?

Daisy.

I still had her phone as well. I had to see her. What was she doing with Damian's ring? What was going on with those two?

On the ride in the next morning, I sat at the back beside an eighth grader named Kelly Lu. I knew Valerio wouldn't try to sit with me because he didn't feel comfortable around girls. I kept picturing him on my driveway, telling me about his brother.

I tucked my knees up against the seat in front of me and played tic-tac-toe on the window. The smell of soap and perfume drifted into the back of the bus. Kelly pulled out a mirror from her bag. She wore a short blue dress, inching up past her tanned knees. I only knew Kelly because the school appointed her as the bus monitor the year before. She used to stick up for me when Jared would take my hat and toss it around with his buddies. I never thanked her for looking out for me, but by sitting beside her each day, I think she knew I was grateful.

Pulling into the school parking lot, I felt a tug on my shirt. I half expected Kelly to be reminding me to pick up any garbage I might have

left on the floor.

"Who's your friend?" she asked.

I looked out the window and then across the aisle from me.

"What friend?"

A white bubbly liquid dripped out of the side of her mouth. Her hand gripped onto my shirt. "I see him."

"See who?"

Kelly's eyes fluttered. Her gaze hovered above my head. Milky saliva pooled on the green bus seat. "Thank you for turning on the light."

I shrugged and jumped past some people in the aisle.

The bus stopped, and the kids got up from their seats. I probably should have said something or maybe checked to see if Kelly needed help, but I scooted to the front, thanked the driver and hustled into the playground.

What is happening to this town? I slumped down onto the blacktop by the back door.

Henry stepped around the corner and sat beside me. "It's a virus. It has to be a virus."

"What are you talking about?" I sat up straight and crossed my legs. I glanced around the blacktop for a second. "What virus?"

"All these people who are going crazy. It's gotta be some sorta virus."

"Or they're possessed," I added.

"Possessed?"

"I dunno, I heard someone mention it once." I scanned the group

of kids walking onto the blacktop behind Henry. His bus must have arrived just after mine.

Henry scratched a circle into the blacktop with a small stone. He glanced over at me. "She's not here today."

"Who?"

He tilted his head and rolled his eyes. "Who do you think?"

"Oh."

I picked up a stone and scratched lines into the blacktop as well. A siren broke the quiet yard around the front of the school. Doors slammed, and loud muffled voices projected out toward us followed by screaming children. Henry and I looked at each other. We both knew what was going on. For some reason, it didn't faze us anymore.

"Is she okay?" I asked.

"Daisy? I don't know." Henry shook his head. "She didn't talk to me at all last night. She just hid in her room as usual."

When the bell rang, I got up and grabbed my bag. The usual crowd of kids pushed their way to the back entrance of the school, ignoring the request for order and manners from Mr. Pembleton.

"Kelly has it now," a girl said beside me. She elbowed me in the ribs trying to squeeze past. "Sorry."

"I wonder if it's contagious," replied another girl.

I shuffled to my locker and squeezed my oversized textbooks onto the top shelf. Henry stood beside me for a second and tapped me on the arm. "Daisy cried herself to sleep last night. I heard her."

I pulled out some old juice boxes and granola bar wrappers from the bottom of my locker and tossed them in the bin. "What do you

mean? Why was she crying?"

Henry shrugged and then closed his locker door. I liked talking to him when Rudy wasn't around. A little bit of me didn't want him to go to class yet.

"I think you should talk to her." He turned down the hall toward homeroom class.

"Wait," I said, running up to him along the hall.

Henry's shoulders slumped as he turned around. "What is it?"

I tucked my hands into my pocket and lifted my shoulders. He was my only link to her. I knew as soon as he got into class, he'd start joking around with Rudy, and I wouldn't be able to get two cents in.

"Tell her 'hi' for me, will ya?"

"Tell her yourself." Henry raised his eyebrow and looked up over my shoulder. I turned around to see Daisy walking in from the back entrance. "See you in class."

I stood in the hallway, gripping tightly onto my binder and pencil case. Daisy held the back door, slowly letting it shut behind her. Her faded denim bag hung over her shoulder. I remember in the sixth grade she used to have a bright purple backpack that looked like new for the entire year. She walked differently back then. Her hair, always in a ponytail, or neatly tucked back with some hair accessory, now hung over her face. I liked it at first, but not anymore.

"You're here," I said, scratching the skin off my thumb.

She slid her feet along the floor, stopping in front of the girls' bathroom. "I'm here." The sparkle from her eyes appeared between her long bangs. She looked up at me. "We need to talk."

"Um, yeah. Sure." I stepped over to the wall and slid down to the floor.

"Not here."

"Oh." I jumped back up to my feet again. "Sorry."

Daisy checked up and down the hall and then pushed me into the girl's bathroom. She gripped onto my shirt, forcing me up against the hand dryer. Her face was just inches away from mine.

"What is it?" I asked. "Are you okay?" She turned away and rushed over to the sink. I stepped toward her, fixing my collar. "I have your phone. I've been trying to find you."

"Where is it? I need it."

I pulled it out of my pocket and held it up to her. She reached over and snatched it from my hand. "You didn't go through it, did you?"

"Um, no." I swallowed.

"I need to put a passcode on this thing," she mumbled.

"Listen, I'm sorry about earlier." I shuffled closer to the sink, tucking my hands back into my pockets. "I'm sorry for asking you—well, you know."

"You mean when you asked me to be your girlfriend?"

"Yeah. I just, well, I just like you."

Daisy scanned her phone, sliding her fingers in all directions.

"Did you see a message on here by any chance?"

"Um, what?" I swallowed again.

"Nevermind. I gotta talk to you. This is really important." She slid her phone into her denim bag and turned off the tap. "It's been eating

away at me, and I gotta tell someone."

"What? What is it?"

Behind me, the door swung open. A young girl with pigtails and sticker tattoos all over her arms marched into the bathroom. Her eyes blinked repeatedly. Her face twitched. "Mrs. Aubrey says I have to rub these off. Mrs. Aubrey says they are not appropriate." She pushed past Daisy and turned the taps on the sink. Blood dripped from her nose. Daisy stepped over to me and grabbed my arm. "Meet me under the big tree at recess."

Chapter Twenty-One: Promise

At recess, a curious silence spread out over the playground.

The warm breeze carried a stale odor. We walked along the backfield toward the large tree behind the portables. A black crow fluttered about along the border of the yard, pulling the flesh off a dead animal.

Behind us, a car spun its tires, tearing up the road toward the town.

"How did you get here?" I asked, picking away at the raw hangnail on my thumb.

"What do you mean?"

"I was gonna ask you in class, but Mr. Pembleton wouldn't stop watching me. You didn't take the bus. Just wondering how you got here."

Daisy lowered her head, letting the long strands of auburn hair fall over her face. We stopped at the tree and sat down. I waited for a minute, hoping she would tell me that she rode her bike because she slept in. But, I knew Damian dropped her off.

Daisy pulled some blades of grass out of the ground and sprinkled them over her legs and bag. "Damian was Jared's best friend." She looked at me, biting her lower lip.

I pulled up some grass, dropping them on my legs as well. "I know," I replied.

"They would go to the house on Screaming Ridge almost every day over the summer. The place was their second home." She ripped more grass up, dropping them one at a time onto herself.

The crow screamed out behind us, launching itself into the air. I guess there was no more flesh to eat.

"I think they went there because Damian needed an escape." Daisy looked at me. "Do you ever feel like you want to escape? You know, run away?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I guess. Sometimes."

"Me too. That's why I wanted to go with them." Daisy moved the grass about on her legs. "That's why I was there."

"Are you talking about when I saw you, on the road?" I asked.

"Yeah, I wanted to get away. I wanted to see what they were talking about all the time. They wouldn't shut up about it. You know what I'm talking about, right?"

I bobbed my head, sticking a blade of grass on the edge of my lips. "Sure."

"They said if you stand in this one spot, looking out the window of one of the rooms, and close your eyes, you feel it. They said it was the best feeling ever, like nothing else in the world mattered. It took away all their pain and worries. They said they felt like somebody different."

"Why are you telling me this?" I said, uncrossing my legs and sitting back against the trunk of the tree. "What happened that night? Why were you all wet?"

Daisy brushed the grass off her legs and leaned back beside me. She looked out toward the cornfield, watching the crow fly about overhead. I don't think I ever saw a crow by itself before. I

thought they always worked in groups.

"You gotta promise me something, Alex."

"Sure. I mean, of course," I said.

"Say, you'll swear. You'll swear that you will not repeat this to anyone."

"I swear."

"Not even Henry."

"I swear, not even Henry."

Daisy inched closer, turning her shoulders toward me. Her hands trembled before she clutched them together and tucked them into her lap. "I was up there on the ridge with them that day. The day Jared went missing. The fog was rolling in thick. We couldn't see the valley at all, and the clouds were really low in the sky."

The crow cawed above us, settling on a branch.

"It's like you're touching the top of the earth," I added.

Daisy nodded. "Yeah. Damian and Jared wanted me to feel what it was like. They kept saying it was out of this world like something drove through their body. Almost like a door opened in the sky, and filled that house with energy."

"What did you do?" I asked.

"And so, I followed them into the house."

"Did you try it?"

"No, I didn't get a chance. I'm not sure I really wanted to, anyway. I was kinda scared. But, what I wanted to tell you, as we were walking around the main floor, Jared started talking really weird like. He kept saying that someone was following him. He

would stop and look behind him, telling us to be quiet. And then he just climbed back out the window and disappeared into the fog."

"was there anyone following you?" I asked, rubbing sweat from my forehead.

"I dunno. I don't think so." Daisy pushed the hair away from her face, tucking it behind her ear. "But I know why they wanted me to go up there."

"Why?"

"Damian wanted me to get hooked on the rush. He said he wanted me to become an official member."

"A member? A member of what? A gang?"

"Yeah, crazy eh? He said he has a following from his website, and the only way you can join is if you go into the house and let the rush fill your body. The guy is making money on this. The house is like a piece of real estate he has claimed as his own."

I shook my head, looking up at the crow as it adjusted its bony feet along the bark. "I wonder if something happened to Screaming Ridge when Kaylee returned to the dead."

"What?"

"Maybe you're right. Maybe a door did open. Maybe it opened in the sky that night to allow Kaylee and her family to leave this world—remember? The light in the sky? But maybe—" I glanced back to the crow again. "—maybe the door never closed."

A leaf drifted down from the top branches, landing in between us. Daisy picked it up and twirled it in her fingers.

"You sound pretty confident," Daisy replied.

"I think I am. Those voices I hear, in my head. I think they're spirits, trying to get back to the living world. Or, maybe they already are."

Daisy nodded and brushed her hair back over her ear.

"Maybe that's what the energy is coming from. Maybe that's what Jared felt. I dunno. I don't know why he just left. But he was gone. And I was alone in the house with Damian."

I held my breath for a second. "Alone?"

"Yes," replied Daisy. "When he tried to kiss me, we heard a scream."

"He tried to kiss you?"

Daisy nodded. "Yeah, he did. But nothing happened. We both raced out of that house to see what was going on outside. I don't like him like that anyway. At least not anymore." She looked behind her across the playground. "We called out for Jared, but he didn't answer. We couldn't find him."

I tucked my knees into my chest. "What happened to him?"

Daisy took a deep breath and swallowed. "You promise not to say anything right?"

"Yeah Daisy, I promise."

Chapter Twenty-Two: I saw You

Daisy's eyes welled up. She pulled on the long strands of her hair, stroking it over and over again. "We couldn't see anything in the fog, but when we heard him freaking out, we knew what happened."

Little bumps formed all over my arms. "He...he...how?" My thoughts immediately jumped back to the summer, the ridge, the trees, the lake.

"He must have slipped, I don't know. I guess he got lost in the fog," Daisy rubbed her forehead and breathed heavily through her nose. "We climbed down the ridge and found him at the bottom. He was a mess. Like, he was broken up really bad." A cool breeze swirled around the trunk of the tree, brushing gently over the branches. The laughter from a group of girls playing four-square nearby faded into a soft hum. Daisy lifted her head again. "We tried to save him, Alex. We did, but he died right there in front of us. I...I've never seen a dead person before."

"Me neither," I replied. I thought for a second about Kaylee Cooper, but she felt real to us. It wasn't the same thing. "Why didn't you guys call the police?"

Daisy looked over her shoulder. "Are you kidding? Damian already has a bad enough reputation around here. They would pin it on him in a heartbeat."

She was right. The guy had a few run-ins with the cops this

year already. They weren't anything major, just little stuff like vandalism and trespassing. Still, I could see why he would second-guess seeking help from the heat.

I sat up and placed my hand on Daisy's shoulder. "It must have been awful. I couldn't even imagine what you went through."

Daisy pulled out more blades of grass, nodding her head for a minute. "We made a promise that we wouldn't say anything, to anyone. We washed up in the lake. Damian ripped the sleeves off my shirt to hide the blood stains, and we went our separate ways."

"Why are you telling me this, then?" I asked.

"Because the police are going to suspect us at some point. They're going to figure it out." Daisy reached for my hand and squeezed it. "You need to believe me. I didn't do anything."

"I believe you, Daisy."

"I know you do. I just wanted to make sure." She gently rubbed her thumb over my knuckle. "There's one more thing."

A utility ball bounced along the grass. A few boys eagerly rushed around a row of pylons, kicking the ball to each other. By a section of hedges bordering the playground and the cornfield, a tiny rabbit bounced out of hiding and hopped frantically across the field.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I told Damian I saw you that night, on the road. I...I told him I like you." She let go of my hand and pulled herself up to her feet. "I told him about our date."

"You did? Why?"

"He's mad, Alex. And, now he thinks you know."

"But...I *do* know. At least, now I do." I stood up, reaching for her arm. "Why are you telling me all this?"

"Because Alex, he's going to hurt you."

A twig snapped behind me, causing a jolt of energy to rush up and down my spine. Through an opening in the hedges, Damian stepped out and onto the playground. "She's right," he muttered. "And this time I ain't gonna trip through some stupid school window."

Like a raging bull, Damian charged toward me, cracking his knuckles and grinding his teeth. His plaid red lumber jacket, tied around his waist, flopped around with each powerful stride. His orange peach-fuzz glowed in the sunlight as he held up his baggy blue jeans. In seconds he pinned me against the maple tree, gripping onto my throat.

"Damian!" shouted Daisy. "Leave him alone. He didn't do anything."

A voice in my head shrieked, ripping open the insides of my brain. I couldn't breathe, I couldn't think.

"So, you don't seem so crazy like you were the last time I had you by your neck. This is gonna be easy."

I clawed at his giant hands, pulling at his fingers. "Wha...what are you talking about?"

"Don't act like I don't know what happened. Where do you think I got this cut from?" Damian rubbed his forehead. "I saw you." Damian let go of my neck, dropping me to my knees. His words faded in and out as I tried to catch my breath. "How's your

back?" he asked.

"What?" I replied.

"I saw you in the summer. You went into that house. I know what it did to you, man. It gave you that crazy strength. It's inside you, dude." He reached out his hand and helped me up to my feet.

"What? What is?"

"The rush. You got the rush, man. You don't remember? Are you kidding me? If it wasn't for you, Jared wouldn't have been able to go inside. You showed us how to get in. Do you realize what's happening? That house changed you, dude. No human could ever survive that fall you took off that ridge. You got the rush. Your body had the rush. You were the first to get it."

"What rush? I didn't feel any rush, and I didn't go into that house in the summer." I stretched my neck and took a big breath. "At least I don't think I did."

"Exactly man, You don't remember. And you know what? You could have been our first member. You could have been one of the leaders, but you decided to go and mess it all up by fighting with me. What were you thinking?" Damian pointed to Daisy. "And then you go chasing after my girl." His finger shook as he looked Daisy up and down. "But instead, Jared was the first." He lowered his finger and fixed my collar. "But he's gone. He shouldn't have fallen off that edge, man. Something happened to him. He was smarter than that. Maybe the rush didn't make him as strong, but it made him smarter. Oh yeah, it made him crazy smart."

"I'm sorry about your friend," I replied, fighting the voices in

my head. The murmurs and whispers blended into one. I started making sense of the words.

"Sorry? You're not sorry. Besides, I don't give a fat flying piece of donkey turd that you're sorry. I'm gonna make a fortune off that place, thanks to Jared's brilliant idea. Do you know how much people will pay for a change? Do ya? We're never satisfied with ourselves—you know what I'm saying? But this place, man, this place gives you what you want. It's a gold mine. It's my turn to try it next, and you know what? I can't wait. That ain't no lie." Sweat dripped down his forehead past his rat-like, beady eyes.

"I think you're mistaken, Damian. I don't feel any different. It didn't change me."

"Let go," the voice whispered in my head.

"Yeah, I'm not surprised," muttered Damian. "Jared was right. He said you couldn't handle it." A scowl grew on his face, baring his yellow smoke-stained teeth. "I've already got half of Timpleville High signing up on E-Fair day, man. They saw how it changed Jared. They know it works. There are a dozen punks from up the hill who are living proof. Plus I got my entire business class meeting me there tonight. Told them the light makes them smarter. But you know what?" He reached for my throat again, spitting on the grass beside me. "I don't need to tell you all this, now do I? You know our secret. For some reason, you seem to know everything."

Daisy stepped forward, grabbing hold of Damian's wrist.

"Come on, leave Alex out of this."

Damian turned his head and glared at Daisy, carefully pulling

her arm away. "No. He needs to know what he's done."

"Damian, please." She stepped back, looking over at the school.

He leaned into me, pushing harder on my neck. "Be quiet," he said. "This kid thinks he can steal my girl from me? He thinks he can fight me and get away with it? He thinks he can follow us up to Screaming Ridge and just walk away?"

"I invited him," Daisy replied.

Damian shook his head. "You're lying. Stop defending this joker." He turned back to me. "You realize you're messing with the wrong guy, don't you?"

I strained the muscles in my neck and nodded. "Ye...yes."

"You know I would have given you my left shoe to have you in our gang, but now, after what you've done, you'd have to fight me for it. You should have died that day. And you know what? I wish you did."

Chapter Twenty-Three: Lockdown

In seconds Daisy rushed toward us, wildly slapping Damian across his face. "Be quiet, be quiet, just be quiet! You have no idea how much you have messed up my life!" She pushed me aside and slapped the big rhino again, "I can't sleep at night, I can't eat, I can't think! We should have called the police. We should have done the right thing. You just don't want to admit that you screwed it up. Jared is dead because of you. Leave Alex out of this. Leave me out of this." She stepped back and reached for my hand. "Come on Alex, let's go."

A faint sound of the school bell drifted through the playground, repeating three or four times. By the back entrance of the school, Mr. Pembleton waved his arms at everyone. The kids from the blacktop hurried back to the school with the teachers on supervision guiding everyone inside. The bell rang again. A heavyweight grew in my chest. My balance shifted to one side. The words in my head continued to get clearer. "Let go," the voice said. "Just let go."

Mr. Pembleton blew his whistle again and marched along the blacktop to the field. "Get inside now!" he shouted.

I stumbled over the grass focusing on one step at a time.

Left, right, left right.

"Come back here!" Damian shouted, his voice faded in and out of my head.

"Stay away from us, or I'll go to the police," Daisy shouted.

A sharp pain poked at my temples. "Please let go," the voice continued.

The grass moved under my feet, like a conveyor belt. Daisy's hand gripped onto mine as we made our way onto the blacktop.

Left, right, left, right.

"Didn't you hear my whistle?" Mr. Pembleton asked. "We're locking the doors and canceling all outdoor activities. It's too dangerous out there."

Little white spots appeared all around me. My legs grew weak. "Okay, Mr. P," I replied, following a yellow painted line along the ground leading up to the back door. The fluorescent lights blinded me as I stepped inside. Another sharp pain scratched over my temples.

"Alex, are you okay?" Daisy asked.

I staggered alongside her to our classroom. Mr. Pembleton's voice continued to carry on—slipping into the tiny compartments in my brain. He followed us down the hall. "Please make sure you stay inside," he said.

As we turned the corner down the Intermediate wing, I strained to see Bradley rushing past with his friends. He didn't look over once.

"Holy cow, what's going on? You look terrible! Both of you." My best friend rushed over to us. As Daisy let go, we both collapsed to the floor in front of the classroom door.

"The lights, they're too bright," I muttered.

Henry reached out his arm and lifted me to my feet. Daisy stood up beside us. Tears welled up in her eyes. The three of us leaned against the math display board beside the door. I flexed my thighs, trying to keep from buckling over again.

"It's messed up out there," Henry said. "There are crazy people everywhere."

Rudy and his buddy Garth Noblestein peeked out the door, checking up and down the hall. "Is the coast clear?" Rudy asked. The two slipped out and joined us. "This is nuts."

"What's going on?" Daisy asked, wiping her eyes.

A buzz from the PA system tuning in over the speakers filled the hallways. *Good morning, this is Principal Stan...son.* His voice crackled as he tapped on the microphone. *We are going to be having a Lockdown. Can all staff and students please follow the Lockdown procedures. Thank you.*

Like clockwork, the teachers along the corridor closed their classroom doors, placing black paper over the windows. "Get inside your room," shouted Ms. Mesh, turning her key and checking the lock. "Do you realize what is going on out there? Where's Mr. Pembleton?"

"He's coming," replied Henry, walking toward the classroom door. "Come on guys. We better go in."

"Is this all because of Damian?" Daisy asked, still standing in the hallway. "He's just angry. He'll cool down." She pulled on my arm, trying to stop me from walking in.

Rudy turned around, pushing Garth into the room. He picked

the side of his nose and looked down the hall again. "Damian Dermite? Are you talking about Damian Dermite?"

Daisy nodded. "Yes."

Rudy shook his head and laughed. "You think all of this has to do with that giant freak?" He shrugged and looked at me for a moment. "She thinks the world revolves around her and that idiot. What a joke."

"Take it easy Rudy," I said, sticking out my chest.

"Take it easy? Do you know what's going on out there? A kid from Timpleville High just got up in the middle of math class, jumped through the window and ran up Sutton Drive, smashing all the mailboxes with a baseball bat."

Daisy lowered her hand and reached out for mine. "So?"

"So? Did you hear what happened to Mr. Ravi, the custodian?" Rudy nodded and leaned into Daisy and me. "Yeah, one of Jared's friends, Austin Patterson broke into Mr. Ravi's house this morning before school and tried to light the basement on fire with bottles of vinegar." He claimed that it was his house and that Mr. Ravi stole his job.

Garth slipped back into the hall, pushing his shaggy hair out of his eyes. "Yeah, and when the cops came, they needed like six officers to hold him down. Didn't you see all the flashing lights when the buses pulled in?"

I shook my head and bit my lip. "No."

"Who tries to light a fire with vinegar?" Rudy chuckled, pushing Garth back into the room.

Garth rolled his eyes and stuck out his tongue. "Cra...zy."

The back door by the playground rattled, echoing through the hall. A loud bang shook the handles. Through the window, a face peered in, before slipping out of sight.

"Get inside your classroom," shouted Ms. Mesh again from up the hall. "Get inside, and lock your door." She pulled a garbage can from inside her room and wedged it up against the handle of her door before closing it again.

"Yes Ma'am," Henry said. He nodded and turned toward the classroom, shoving Rudy inside. "Come on guys. We better get in." Henry looked at us, a drop of sweat slipped down his forehead, resting on the tip of his nose. "Alex, you know your neighbor, Bradley?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

Henry's knuckles turned white, holding firmly onto the door handle. "A kid tried to sneak into Bradley's bedroom window a few nights ago, claiming to be his brother."

"Jeff?" I asked. "His brother, Jeff? That's impossible. Jeff died last year."

Henry shrugged. "Exactly. Weird eh? I didn't know if I should tell you."

Jeff Blunker's death ripped a hole inside Bradley. He wasn't the same afterward. I never asked him the details of his brother's passing, simply because I didn't want to upset him. All I knew was a car hit him, and Bradley had witnessed the whole thing. I couldn't have imagined how horrible that would be to see his brother die.

I scratched my chin and followed Henry into the classroom.

"No," said Daisy, pulling on my arm. "I can't go in there."

"We have to. Come on. It's gonna be fine. We'll be safe in here. You heard them. It's dangerous out there." I nudged her on the shoulder and pulled on her hand.

Walking in, I immediately noticed everyone eyeing her.

"See Alex? They can't stop staring at me," Daisy whispered. She walked closer to me, gripping onto my arm. Her handbag tucked over her shoulder.

"It's fine, everything is fine," I said. If I remember correctly from last year, we are all supposed to huddle at the front of the class, away from the windows and doors—although, last year we had a teacher in the room.

Daisy pulled out a tissue from her bag and dabbed the corners of her eyes. "Where is Mr. Pembleton, anyway?"

"Beats me." We sat down at the back near Henry and Rudy. Lisa Weatherly and Rudy's twin sister Samantha sat on their desks by the front, stealing glances at us. They leaned into each other, clearly whispering and giggling.

Daisy sat beside me, folding up her tissue and letting her hair drop over her face. "I can't be in here."

"Yes, you can. It's cool, they're just jealous of you."

"They know Alex. They know about Jared," she whispered.

"No, they don't. What makes you think that?"

Daisy got up, kicking her chair into the aisle. "What are you looking at?" she shouted, throwing her arms up over her head.

"What are you all looking at?"

Chapter Twenty-Four: Unforgiven

The faces of twenty-four snot-nosed, judgmental, adolescent thirteen-year-olds all turned to Daisy. Their emotionless stares followed her furious march to the classroom door.

"Wait?" I shouted. "You can't go. It's okay, Daisy. Ignore them. They don't know you." I kicked over a couple of chairs and followed her to the front of the room.

"I can't do it, Alex. I can't be in here, not with these people. I know what they think of me, they've been judging me for a long time. I can't take it." Tears streamed down her perfect cheeks.

I grabbed a tissue from the whiteboard ledge and offered it to her. "Please don't go."

She shook her head and wiped her eyes. "I'm sorry. I wanted you to know what was going on. That was the only reason I came today." She opened the door and stepped out into the hallway.

"You're going to see him, aren't you? That's why you're leaving. You're going to meet up with your boyfriend."

Daisy's neck went red. Her nostrils flared. She opened her mouth as if to say something, but instead, she turned away and ran down the hall toward the back entrance.

My face warmed, and my throat tightened. I knew I shouldn't have said it, but as much as I cared about her, I had trouble with trust. Heck, I didn't know who I could trust anymore, including myself.

"I told you just to leave her be," Henry said from the back of the room. As if on cue, The class broke out into conversations.

But, I didn't care.

I only cared about Daisy, and now she was mad at me, again. I didn't blame her either. I said the dumbest things sometimes. "Tell Mr. P. I had to go to the washroom, and I couldn't hold it. I gotta go after her."

"You're digging your own grave, dude," Rudy said with a laugh.

I bolted down the intermediate-wing and out the back door to the playground. Around the perimeter, groups of police officers scanned the cornfield with German shepherds pulling excitedly on their leashes.

I circled the learning garden checking to see if she might have escaped to the upper field by the baseball diamond. I ducked behind a garbage can by a set of wooden bleachers as the officers scanned the tree line near the parking lot. As I hovered over a rotten banana and a half-eaten bag of salt and vinegar chips I noticed some words carved out into the wooden frame beside me.

Wesley Stone was here.

As I waited for the officers to finish their search, I picked up a nail in the dirt and scratched my name into the plank.

So was Alex.

After a few minutes passed, I moved toward the dumpster at the other end of the lot. A cloud of cigarette smoke lifted over the graffiti-covered brick wall. I had no clue why Daisy started

smoking. She was only a seventh-grader.

"There you are," I said, stepping around the corner.

Sitting on the plastic bucket seats, flicking ashes on the ground was Damian. "Perfect timing," he muttered, tossing the cigarette against the bricks. Kicking over the pail, he cracked his knuckles and ran at me.

I turned back to the school and raced to the front entrance. Principal Stanson stood at the door as I whizzed past him. Damian's heavy feet shook the ground like a herd of elephants. My first thought was to get to my classroom with the hope that Henry and my semi-reliable group of friends would jump at the opportunity to back me up.

"Help!" I shouted, banging on the classroom doors.

Damian's short, choppy grunts exploded out of him with every bounding step. "Give it up, buddy!"

I cut through the gym, pushing my way past a group of fifth-graders, huddled by the storage room. "Where's Coach Mason?" I shouted.

No reply.

I plowed through the rear doors of the gym and into the primary-wing. Up the hall, near the office, I spotted our school secretary closing the staffroom door.

Perfect.

I raced along the tiled floors and slyly slipped into the teacher's lounge. Once inside, a wave of relief came over me. Despite being a temporary solution, it at least bought me some

time. I scanned the room in preparation to justify my unwelcomed arrival but discovered it was empty.

"You gotta be kidding me."

Before I could move, Damian slipped in and quietly shut the door behind him. "You need to stop running." He stepped forward, backing me up against the wall. He reached out his giant hand and grabbed my throat. "I didn't kill him."

"Okay," I replied.

"No, it's not okay." Damian leaned in, punching me hard in the ribs with his other hand. My legs buckled. Damian let go of his choke-hold, stepped back, and let me crumble to the ground.

I clutched my stomach, writhing helplessly in agony. "I do...don't get it."

Damian knelt in front of me. The stench from old cigarettes filled the air. He slowly reached for my hair and pulled me up to a seated position. "Of course you don't get it. Like I said before, you can't handle it."

"Handle what?"

"The Rush, you idiot." He pushed my head against the wall. He flared his nostrils and looked coldly into my eyes. "I got it all figured out now. I can't believe I didn't see it before."

"See what?"

Damian's eyes narrowed. The muscles along his forearms flexed. He chuckled to himself, letting go of my head and standing up. "Let me see if I got this right." He scratched his square-shaped chin and glared out the large window by the staff lunch tables. "I try

to make your fat friend eat a worm last year as a joke, and you throw pizza at me. It was a joke. A joke! You made me look bad, dude. After talking to you about that whole ugly scene, I thought we were good. But, no. I help you save that ghost, Kaylee Cooper, and what do you do to repay me? You go and steal my girl. But wait, that's not all ladies and gentlemen." Damian picked up a banana from a fruit bowl on the table and put it up to his mouth like a microphone. "The story gets even better. Not only do you go behind my back and take Daisy Darlington on a stupid movie date—oh yes, I know about that date." He waved the banana around his head and stepped toward me. "You convinced her I'm some evil freak. Meanwhile, it is you who is the freak."

I rubbed my throat. The imprint of his hand still pulsated around my neck. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Did you hear that ladies and gentlemen? This show gets even better. The little weasel doesn't know what I'm talking about." Damian pulled a chair out from one of the tables and turned it backward before sitting down. "Dude, you are so full of it, you know that? I saw you. Get that through your thick skull. I saw you that day in July. You were following some stupid white cat up to Screaming Ridge. You went into the house, and there was a light. Some whacked up light came from outside and blasted through the window and hit you. Don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about."

Staggering up to my knees, I felt my head finally clear. "The ridge...I fell off the ridge."

"Yeah, dude. You bounced around the rocks and trees like you were in a pinball machine. I tried getting your attention, but you were in some sorta trance."

I stood up and leaned against one of the tables. I pulled out a chair and sat down. "You had a really big flashlight?"

"Yeah man," replied Damian. "I was trying to get your attention. I was trying to call out to you, but you couldn't hear me, or something."

"How did I survive that fall?"

"Beats me, man. You walked out of that house like a...like a zombie, and when I tried to find you, you jumped right off the edge of the cliff." Damian pulled a half-smoked cigarette and lighter out of the front pocket of his lumber jacket. "I told Jared about it. He tried it. He stood where you stood in that house. The light came down again. But, he didn't go jumping off no cliff. He told me it was the biggest rush he had ever felt. He changed. You changed. But, that ain't important no more."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I can't forgive you for what you did to me." Damian pulled the chair from under him and pushed it aside. He lit the cigarette and tucked the lighter back in his pocket. "You humiliated me in front of my girl."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I honestly don't remember."

"I get that. But, there's something else I can't forgive."

"What? What did I do?"

Damian took a long drag from the cigarette and exhaled a

cloud of smoke into my face. "You killed my friend Jared Del Porto."

Chapter Twenty-Five: Look at Me

Blinded by a wall of toxic fumes, I stumbled back against the window ledge. Wires in my brain seemed to tear from the hub and spark wildly around my head. My eyes twitched uncontrollably, pulling my lip up and down like a bouncing ball.

Damian's face flashed around the room. The floor and ceiling blended into each other. My arms swatted out at him, striking his face, the walls, the cupboards.

A mixture of white noise and scattered movements filled the next thirty to sixty seconds. My stomach churned, and my body contorted. I didn't know who I was. I didn't know what was happening.

"Alex, stop!" Mr. Pembleton burst in the side door linking the staffroom to the front office.

For a brief moment, I had clarity again. Mr. Pembleton had his hand on my collar, dragging me across the floor. My fingers on my right hand squeezed tightly onto something, but my vision blurred and a cloud of white blanketed over me.

"Meet me at Screaming Ridge," I mumbled. I wasn't sure why I said that, but I heard my voice repeat it over and over. "Meet me at Screaming Ridge."

The white cloud weighed down on me as though a ton of snow had buried my body; only I could breathe, I could feel.

I could think.

Only the thoughts weren't my own.

When the cloud disappeared, I found myself walking along a narrow street.

"Hey man, you're back." A kid skateboarded over to me. With his hat yanked sideways and his pants sagging halfway down his butt, he flipped his board into his hands and stepped up onto the sidewalk. He picked a scab off his arm. "Sorry. Wow, for a second you looked like someone I used to know."

"Um, okay." I shook my head and scanned the area. "Where am I?"

The kid adjusted his hat while blowing a bubble with his gum. "Are you all right buddy?" He looked to be a few years older than me, but nobody I'd ever seen before. On his wrist was a bracelet. I'd seen one like it before.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Where am I?" A dense cloud rested above, darkening the skies. A warm breeze pushed up the street, pulling the odd leaf off the branches of nearby trees. I looked up ahead to the end of the road. It took a second, but I finally knew where I was. I'd been here several times.

The kid pointed at the tree line at the top of the hill. "I think you're going that way."

"Yeah," I replied. "Screaming Ridge."

"Hey, are you sure you're okay?" the kid asked.

"Yes, why?"

He pointed to my hand, before dropping his skateboard back onto the pavement. "You're carrying someone's shoe."

The kid was right. For some reason, I held Damian's left shoe. "I'm fine. I gotta go."

"You're not alone. You know that right?" The kid scratched his scab again, causing blood to drop down his arm. "Do you feel it, man? It feels good, don't it?"

A rumble from the clouds vibrated the gray skies. A raindrop splashed lightly on my wrist. "I don't know what you're talking about, but I gotta go."

The boy dabbed the blood from his arm and wiped it onto his face like war paint. "I know your friend. Tell him to come out and play." He licked his finger and smiled. "It feels so good to be alive, don't it?"

I backed away, stepping off the road and into the ditch. "Sorry man, I don't know what you're talking about." Another drop of rain landed on my forehead.

"Whatever, buddy." The boy dropped his skateboard onto the tarmac, popping a bubble in his mouth.

"You know, I didn't even know how to skateboard before last week and look at me now!" He rolled down the hill, not once taking his eyes off of me. He disappeared around a row of hedges just as a crackle from the sky vibrated the ground.

I jumped over an old wooden fence and cut across a grassy field. The tall blades swayed back and forth as the wind continued to pick up strength. The boy on the skateboard appeared in my mind. I suddenly knew his name; I'm not sure why.

Simon Rustaclove.

Hours seemed like minutes and minutes seemed like seconds. By nightfall, I stood on the weed-stricken driveway in front of the house on Screaming Ridge Road. The rain came down gently, like a mist at the bottom of a waterfall.

At the end of the drive, a plastic sign attached to a wooden stake stuck out of the ground. It read: *Welcome to the rush. Welcome to a stronger and smarter YOU. TheLight.com*

Dark purples and deep blues painted the sky. Damian's car was parked behind the maple tree by the cliff edge. A lone hawk circled above. Its silhouette outlined its long wingspan. Sheets of lightning bounced between the clouds.

Damian's presence brought a touch of excitement to me. I wanted him there. I didn't understand, but I needed to see him.

I stepped through the boarded up window and slipped along the main floor to the stairwell, still holding onto Damian's shoe. An eerie silence filled the house. Drops of rain pecked at the roof.

The voice returned to my thoughts, clearer than ever before. "Find him."

Cobwebs coated the railings leading up the narrow staircase. A bracelet dangled on the door handle of one of the main rooms. I turned the knob, but it was locked.

Farther along the corridor, a strip of light flickered from under a door, the last door. I remembered the room. For a moment I wondered if Kaylee's ghostly mother sat in her rocking chair, once again waiting for her angel to come home. I moved slowly along the floorboards, feeling nothing but the oxygen in my lungs. Before

reaching the end of the hall, I passed a room with another bracelet on the handle. This time, the door was unlocked.

"Daisy?" I whispered. "You're here." I dropped to the floor beside her, huddled in the corner of an empty room. More cobwebs stretched along the frame of the window, glowing from the thin beams of moonlight peeking through the wooden boards.

"Al...ex," Daisy whimpered. She opened her arms and wrapped herself around me. "I'm so scared."

"What is it? Are you okay?" I dropped Damian's shoe beside me and opened the light on my phone, shining it around the room. The voice in my head, the presence was gone again.

"Damian's here," she whispered.

"I know."

Her body trembled as she looked at the entrance of the door. She loosened her grip around my chest and tucked her knees up against herself. "I saw what happens Alex. I saw what that room does."

"The light from the sky?"

"Yes," she replied. "It comes down and goes through you like you're being electrocuted. Like all the energy from the heavens are bursting through the clouds and entering into your body. He has kids lining up. They...they're paying him for it. I'm so scared Alex."

Her body felt warm against mine. I wanted to squeeze her tight enough to stop her trembles. "You'll be okay. I'm here. I'm here." I leaned into her, pressing my nose against her ear.

As though she'd been waiting for me, waiting to let go of all

her pain, she grabbed me again, only this time with might—with anger and sadness. Daisy wept. Her eyes clenched shut. Her mouth draped open. Tears poured down her face.

"I'm here," I said. "It's going to be okay." I closed my eyes, letting the emotions flood out of her. I wondered how much she was holding in, like the deer screaming on the inside. I wanted to listen to her, I wanted to help her. I guess now was the time. I tucked my thumb under her chin and turned her face to me. "Look at me. Look at me."

She wiped her eyes and lifted her gaze. Sparkles of light bounced off the whites of her eyes. For a moment the rain stopped.

Everything stopped.

In a blink, she moved her face forward and kissed me on the mouth.

I wanted time to stand still.

Chapter Twenty-Six: The Room

Daisy pulled away, letting her hair drop over her face. She tucked her knees into her chest, wrapping her arms around her legs. For a minute or two, we sat in silence. She no longer trembled.

"You okay?" I asked, still feeling the power that one kiss can have on a person.

Daisy nodded, slowly rocking her body. "Sorry about that."

My heart pounded against my chest. "Don't be sorry. That was what I imagined our first kiss would be like. It was perfect." I nudged her arm. "Wanna know how I know?"

She lifted her head and looked at me. "Very funny, but it would have been funnier if that was our first kiss." She stood up and looked out between the boards of the window, pulling a cobweb out of her hair. "It's quiet. I wonder if they're gone. Maybe they left."

I sat on the floor and scratched my head. "What do you mean that wasn't our first kiss?"

Daisy walked to the other end of the room, placing her ear to the door. "Because our first kiss was here, in this room, silly, and our second kiss was under the bleachers." She walked over to me and kicked me in the shin. "Wanna know how I know?"

"When?" I asked, picking myself up off the floor and rubbing my legs.

Daisy placed her hands on her hips, raising her eyebrow.

"Seriously, Alex? You don't remember? You're joking right?"

I looked at my feet for a second and nodded. "Yes, of course, I'm joking."

Daisy moved her hair away from her face and tilted her head. "You're lying. I can always tell when you're lying."

"No, no, I remember, I was...just...um, joking as I said."

Daisy grabbed my wrist and pulled her close to me. "We were right here, on the day you were suspended. You were acting strange that day, real strange."

"Strange like...how?"

"You were talking all funny, like. You kept saying how much you hated Jared and Damian, but in the next breath you would hold my hand and say the sweetest things to me." Daisy reached for my other hand, swinging them back and forth. "You're a hard one to figure out, Alex. One day you act like you're afraid of me, the next day you can't stay away."

"This is me now. I'm not afraid of you. I like you, Daisy."

"I know you do," she replied.

"I'm sorry for what I said at school. I say the dumbest things sometimes."

"It's okay."

We looked at each other. Her pupils danced back and forth from one side of my face to the other. She smiled and turned her gaze down to my mouth. I paused—fearful I would kiss her incorrectly. *Do I turn my head to the right, or to the left? How much do I tilt my face? How did I kiss her before?*

I looked at her forehead and turned to the cracks of the window. My heart doubled in size, but I couldn't do it.

"You wrote your name on the wall just after we kissed," Daisy said, looking over her shoulder. She pointed to a panel of wood by the window where the words, Alex was here, was etched into the grain.

Nothing was familiar about it at all. Nothing registered. "Yeah, I remember, I was just in a strange mood because I got suspended, that's all." I let go of her hands and looked closely at the writing.

"What were you doing in that other room?" Daisy asked.

I rubbed my fingers along the etched words and shrugged.

"Seriously Alex, you wrote your name and then left."

The rain continued to tap lightly along the roof.

Another flash of light illuminated the hall, followed by loud cheers and laughter.

I stepped out, looking up and down the top floor. A white light beamed through the gaps of the door at the far end of the house. Feet stomped along the floor shaking the walls. Seconds later everything went black. I switched the light on my phone and stepped out, creeping along the creaky boards to the locked room.

"What are you doing?" Daisy whispered, poking her head out of the other room. She tip-toed over to me, grabbing onto my arm.

"What's in there?" I asked.

"I don't know," Daisy replied. "You wouldn't tell me."

I yanked on the handle, but the door wouldn't budge. "I gotta

know what's in there."

"Why don't you know? I thought you said you could remember."

I pulled on the handle again. "I don't remember. I'm sorry, I don't remember a thing. What was I doing in there?"

"You said you couldn't take it anymore and ran in there. You were like in there forever. I almost left you."

At the end of the hall, the door burst open. A roar of teenagers poured out of the room. "Follow him!" A kid shouted.

Daisy and I tucked ourselves into the frame of the door, blending in with the darkness. The loud teens stomped along the corridor, following a small kid down the staircase to the main floor. As they brushed past us, Daisy grabbed hold of my hand, squeezing it as though she was wringing out a sponge.

I held my breath, waiting for the chaos to end.

"Is it over?" Daisy whispered. "Are they gone?"

I exhaled, listening to the muffled voices fade into the rainy lull from outside.

Turning to the door again, I felt my arm hairs stand on end. I suddenly knew. I paused and turned to Daisy. "When you hugged me in the library, I wanted to remember that moment. I wanted to capture it forever. So, I wrote my name on the door, right at the very spot you hugged me."

"You did?"

"Yeah. I did that when I was younger. Whenever something happened to me, something incredibly special, I felt a need to

engrave it into the earth somehow. That way I could always see it and remember. Do you know what I mean?"

"I do, I really do."

"That's why I wrote my name on the wall. That must have been why I did that." I grabbed the handle on the door, clenching down hard.

"But why did you go into this room? What was so important that you had to lock yourself in here?"

I took a big breath and exhaled. Daisy's face appeared in my mind, standing by the window. We were in the other room—her eyes closed—her hair pulled back, just like she used to before the summer.

"I can see you now," I said. "We were standing in that room, holding hands, just like we were tonight."

"Yes," replied Daisy.

I closed my eyes tight and breathed in slowly. I remembered the sun shined between the cracks in the boards. The high pitched sound from the grasshoppers filtered into the house. The room was warm. "We kissed."

"We kissed," repeated Daisy.

"But, I don't get it," I said rubbing my eyes. A vision of my body, standing before Daisy, talking, laughing. "I see myself."

"So?"

"That wasn't me there that day." The rain pelted down harder onto the roof. A crackle of thunder vibrated the walls. I pushed the door with my shoulder, shaking the handle with all my strength.

"Alex, what are you saying?"

I pushed on the door again. "Something isn't right, something seriously ain't right."

"What?"

I stepped back and lunged forward with all my weight, popping the hinge off the door, driving it open. A loud crash echoed out as fragments of wood bounced about everywhere. My gaze immediately focused on the large words scratched wildly into the center of the wall.

Wesley Stone was here.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Losing Control

The room started to spin. My stomach twisted and turned. Before I could warn Daisy, I pushed past her, back into the hallway, throwing up my insides all over the banister and hardwood floor.

I dropped to my knees, feeling the weight of stress and exhaustion.

"Alex!" Daisy ran out to me and rubbed my back.

I wanted to close my eyes and escape. I wanted to pass out and wake up in my bed.

On the main floor, a little girl stood at the foot of the staircase. Her eyes glowed in the darkness like two stars in the night sky.

"Regan," I whispered. "What's Regan doing here?"

"Damian watches her. Their mom works shifts, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember."

Regan lifted her hand and pointed to the back of the house. I wiped my mouth with my sleeve and stood up.

"What are you doing?" Daisy asked. "You just threw up. You should sit down or something."

"I'm supposed to follow her," I checked the time on my phone and pulled myself up to my feet. "I have to go."

Daisy grabbed my arm, her eyes widened. "Alex, don't. Something is happening to you. Listen to your heart."

I pulled away from Daisy, giving into the darkness, giving in

to the unknown force inside me.

I couldn't tell you how long I blacked out. Perhaps an hour?

When I came to, I found myself outside—standing over the ridge—my clothes drenched.

"I'm here," said Damian, standing behind me with a group of teenagers. Streaks of rain streamed down in front of the headlights of half a dozen cars pointing directly at me. "You wanted to meet?"

"Yes," I blocked the lights from my eyes. "But I just want to talk to you, Damian."

"Let go, Alex," the voice whispered in my head. "Just let go."

Damian hobbled over, wearing a tattered old shoe on one foot and a soaking wet sock on the other. A deep cut bordered his left eye. He stopped and pointed to a small boy sitting on the swing under the big maple. His body hunched over his knees. "Another one has joined the club. It'll take him a little while to adjust, but he'll wake up a changed person. From geek to chic in a flash." Damian pulled out a thick wad of cash wrapped tightly with an elastic band. "And I have you to thank for it."

I wiped the rain from my face. "Whatever."

Damian pulled off the elastic and handed me a fifty dollar note. "Here, I owe you this."

I crumpled it and tossed it over the cliff edge. "No thanks."

Damian nodded his head and snapped his finger. Behind him, a car door opened. A big burly kid wearing a beat-up lumber jacket

stepped out and opened the back door. He held out his hand and escorted Daisy from the car. His large hand pulled on her arm. She stumbled and fell into his chest.

"Daisy!" I shouted. "How did you get there? Are you okay?"

"She's fine," Damian said, moving his body to block her. "She and I are going for a little walk back into the house. My friend Carter and his boys here are going to make sure you don't go anywhere."

Carter's sturdy frame trudged over to me like an enemy tank positioning itself for an attack. His long wet hair clung to his face like strands of spaghetti. He crossed his arms and grimaced. Drops of rain poured down his uneven nose and chiseled jaw.

A booming crack of thunder rattled the cliff edge. "Let go!" screamed the voice in my head.

The muscles in my body twitched and jerked. The Neanderthal-like face of Carter blackened. The sound of rain thinned into a mixture of rushing water and wind. Drowned in my thoughts, I surfaced from time to time, only to catch images of faces and weird movements.

My clearest thought seemed to come minutes later when I found myself running at full speed along a steep embankment. Daisy's voice called out. She leaped over unsteady rocks holding onto Regan's hand. The moon hid behind the clouds creating a wash of blacks and grays. Dark shapes and shadows spilled out

from all sides.

The voice in my head returned, pounding my skull, screaming for me to stop.

"Damian's right behind us," Daisy shouted. "We need to hurry."

The ground disappeared into a mist of white cloud, only to return moments later. "Turn around!" The voice demanded. "Let go, let go!" The words dug deep. I dropped to the ground, rolling down a steep slope.

A large rock stopped me, in mid-tumble, sending a surge of pain through my back. "We need to split up," I said, forcing the words out between breaths. "I can't stop him!"

Daisy held Regan close to her, checking back up the hill. Through the rows of pine the sound of branches snapping and rocks tumbling, echoed into the night. "Yes you can, we can go to the police, Alex. I'm ready to go to the police."

"No," I replied. "I can't stop the voice." I rubbed my forehead, waiting for Daisy to look at me. "I'm talking about the voice inside my mind. I can't fight it anymore."

I closed my eyes.

Another branch snapped, closer this time.

My eyelids grew heavy. Forcing them open, Damian appeared.

"Alex," he said, pushing past a thick branch. The light from the house lit up the trees behind him. "You're losing control. You need to control it."

"I...I can't," I replied. "It's taking over."

"Dude, you're weak, man. Stop crying like a baby and stand up. Take control." The smell of ashes and tar drifted into my nostrils. Damian stood inches away from me now. His fingers squeezed the back of my neck. "Look at me."

I winced, tucking my shoulders into my ears. Rain continued to pour down on us; thick droplets slapped at my face. I collected myself for a second and met Damian's eyes.

"I'm here," I muttered.

"Daisy is with me," Damian said. "Do you understand? She's my girlfriend."

"Yes," I replied, dropping my head. "I understand."

Damian squeezed my neck again, driving his fingers into my spine. "I'm not finished."

"Okay." I looked at his mangled face again.

The moon crept out, beaming a pale, ghostly light into the whites of his eyes. "You followed us that night, the night Jared went missing, right?"

I nodded.

"Answer me."

"Yes," I replied.

"What happened? What happened up there?"

Chapter Twenty-Eight: That Day in July

Standing before Damian Dermite, the town's most feared teenager, I found myself once again in a state of peace—a calming Zen-like feeling—where my mind was able to drift freely into the past.

Damian's face faded.

The rain disappeared, turning into a bright haze.

Time shifted—backwards to that day in July.

I was there, in the fog, the afternoon I had followed Daisy, Damian and his buddy Jared up to Screaming Ridge. The curiosity and the jealousy had become too much for me to hold back. I had to know more about the 'rush' and why Daisy would have any interest in going up there with them. I understood the interest a girl had in a tough guy. I'd seen all the TV shows and movies about thrill-seekers and rebels. These guys always seemed to have flocks of women following them like lost puppies. I guess Daisy fit into that category, at least for a short spell.

I sat on the swing. The fog was thick that day—the warm mist tickled my face.

Why were these memories coming to me now?

Ahead of me, through the wall of white, the shadows of three figures appeared, walking along the cliff edge.

I remembered whispering Jared's name over and over again. The sound of his name climbed up over me, floating in and around

the branches as I crept around the trees.

"Jared. Jared. Jared."

He stood alone in a clearing. Below him was a misty covered lake surrounded by the gray outlines of giant pines. Damian and Daisy were no longer visible.

"Who's there?" he asked.

But I didn't reply. The air around me heated. Like a wild dream, twisting, painful words pulled me down like a pack of wolves. I heard Damian and Jared's voices, laughing and calling out. I saw them pointing at me, kicking me while I lay on the sidewalk in front of the school. Only it wasn't me. These weren't my memories. Tiny explosions burst into my head all around. I saw through the eyes of someone else. Jared's hands lit firecrackers, holding them close to my face. I could smell the burning wicks. A sign was posted behind them, *Entrepreneurial Fair, 2012*.

Are these Wesley Stones' memories?

The voices faded, and the knots in my chest pulled tighter. I was back at the ridge—back to that day in July again. I saw Jared's face along the ledge. He rushed toward me, with terror in his eyes. His frozen body flashed inside my head, like a photograph—a new memory.

Perhaps it was the other way around. Perhaps I rushed toward him.

Seconds later, Jared's body lay motionless on a pile of rocks at the foot of the lake. I didn't go to him. I remained still at the top of that cliff, in front of the house on Screaming Ridge.

I drifted over to the swing, rocking to and fro. The sound of a girl shrieking scratched the quiet space around me. I knew it was Daisy. But I did nothing.

I wasn't sure how long I sat there on that swing, but I must have been there long enough—still enough for a deer to confidently approach me. Its ears twitched, and its tail swayed from side to side. He sniffed my face, rubbing its nose along my cheek.

The question only comes to me now as I slip back into the present: were those my memories?

"What just happened?" I asked, rubbing my eyes. Feeling dizzy I collapsed to one knee, noticing my breaths were short and my heart rate high. The sun rose up over the lake.

For some reason, morning had arrived.

Time had slipped away.

About ten yards ahead, Damian lay on his side. Scabs of blood surrounded one of his eyes. "It's you," he said, rolling over onto his back. He lifted himself up and sat unsteadily on a patch of mud and rock.

My hands throbbed. Bits of torn skin flaked from my knuckles. "Who did this to you?" I asked.

"Wesley Stone."

"What?" I asked.

Damian shifted to his hands and knees, grimacing with each big movement. "There's a person inside you, dude," he began. He crawled a few feet before sitting back down. His jeans were ripped, covered in mud and bits of small rock. "Wesley Stone is taking over

your body, man. I saw it happen. I saw the light from the sky come down and enter into you that day in July."

I moved my fingers, checking the fronts and backs. "Wesley Stone? How is this possible?"

"Do you have headaches all the time?" Damian asked, picking the dried blood off his face.

"Yeah. I do."

"So did Jared. He had them all the time."

"But, why? I mean—" I scratched my head, gazing up at the red and yellow clouds.

"Wesley Stone wants to hurt me. You, want to hurt me."

"I don't want to hurt you," I replied. "I just want everything to be normal."

Damian staggered to his feet, working hard to keep himself steady. He kicked off his remaining shoe, watching it land in a deep puddle a few yards away. "You wanna know something?" He leaned up against the side of a tree and took a big breath. "I used to think it was you who killed my friend."

"Pardon?"

"You heard me. I don't think you killed Jared, not anymore." He let go of the tree and took a step forward. "I think Wesley Stone killed Jared."

"I...I don't know what to say."

Damian took another shaky step forward. "But your body—" he waved his arms up, outlining my head and torso with his hands. "Your physical body pushed him over Screaming Ridge. And that

my friend, I cannot forgive."

"I had no control. I couldn't help it." The blood rushed into my head, and my heart pounded.

"Somebody real important to me entered into Jared's brain." Damian bit his lip and looked up at the sky. "An extraordinary flash of light came down on him." A ray of sunlight peeked out over the horizon, shedding warm colors onto Damian's face. "My dad." He shut his eyes, fighting back his emotions. "I got to be with my dad again. My dad was inside my best friend." An explosion of mucus shot out of his nose as the need to weep became too much for him to hold.

Damian Dermite was crying.

Damian Dermite, the boy who I feared for two straight years, cried in front of me.

"Is that why you've been bringing people here? So you can be with your dad again?"

Damian wiped his nose with his arm and nodded. He dried his eyes and cleared his throat. "You...you killed my friend. You killed my dad."

"But I didn't," I pleaded. "You said it yourself. Wesley Stone did."

"I don't care. I can't forgive you for that." Damian reached down and picked up a rock. Grasping it in his hand, he lifted it up over his head. He looked into my eyes, grinding his teeth. "I can't let you get away with this. I can't let Wesley Stone get away with this."

I covered my eyes with my hands and waited.

I wasn't sure how long I waited. It felt like an eternity. But as time passed, the rock in Damian's hands eventually crashed along the ground behind me. I opened my eyes to see Damian crumbling once again to his knees.

I don't know who was more messed up, him or Daisy. Who was I kidding? I was pretty messed up myself. Regardless, when Damian looked at me with his bloodshot, swollen eyes, in my heart I knew he needed somebody. Anybody. I crawled over to him, through the mud and dirt, through the pain and fear, the sleepless nights and scarring memories. I opened my arms and embraced Damian.

He leaned on me and once again let go of his emotions.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Sick

The tall pines brought Damian and me shade as the sun moved slowly along the edge of the tree line. The ridge, some two hundred feet above, carved out the valley, with the lake just a stone's throw away. Somehow we managed to zig-zag our way to the bottom, unaware of the dangerous caverns and loose rocks.

Damian and I sat on the base of the hillside for a couple of hours that morning. We managed to clear the air and get everything we needed off our minds.

Curiously, the idea of Wesley Stone in my head—in my brain, didn't bother me—at least for the time being. It meant I wasn't alone.

"My parents were killed when their car drove into Timpleville Creek, the night the town had gathered at the church to remember Wesley Stone," explained Damian. He picked up a small pebble and tossed it toward the water. "A white cat jumped out onto the road, causing them to swerve and drive right over the bridge."

"Really?" I watched the rings from the pebble form in the lake, slowly making their way to the shoreline.

"Yeah, some kid said he saw the whole thing."

"Bradley Blunker?" I asked.

"Yeah, his brother was killed as well. My dad's Grand Marquis fishtailed and knocked the kid right off his bike." Damian pulled his socks off of his feet, sniffed and smiled at me. "Want

these too?"

I know he was trying to make a joke, but I couldn't pull together enough energy to laugh. We looked out at the lake, breathing in the fresh cool breeze circling about the valley.

"That's where I found Jared," Damian said finally, pointing over to a pile of rocks. Behind it, a giant pine jettied out of the earth towering up near the tip of the ridge. Close to the base where the ground met the cliff wall, another tree, a tall cedar, stood firmly along the valley floor. A lone crow perched itself on a large branch stretching out over the lake.

"How did you know your dad was—"

"How did I know Jared was possessed by my dead father?" Damian said, throwing another stone into the water. "Sounds weird when you say it out loud."

"Yeah."

"He changed," Damian replied. "Jared changed. His eyes, his body, his walk, his talk—everything man. But more importantly, his words. He said things to me only my father would say. I knew it was him, I knew my father was back."

I bobbed my head, not taking my eyes off the crow. "But, why rope everyone else in? Were you really doing this for the money? I mean, that's a lot of cash you got there."

"I had my father back, man." He picked up another stone whipping it farther out into the lake. The splash startled the crow causing it to caw and fly away.

"But, look what it's doing. Look what's happening to

everyone. It's messing them up. It's messing me up." The hair on my arms stood on end again. My head grew heavy. I gathered myself and walked over to the lake, cupping some water to drink with my hands. As the rings spread out, my reflection appeared, slowly becoming clearer. "Wesley Stone," I whispered. "What do you want from me?" I looked at my face, touching my mouth and nose.

"Revenge," Damian replied, stepping to the shoreline behind me.

I splashed my hand into the water, destroying my reflection. Standing up I turned to Damian. "And Daisy, why her? Why do you want to mess with her? Your business venture is turning the town upside down. It's out of hand."

Damian pulled his fingers into his palm, forming fists with both hands. His jaw clenched as his arms shook. He stretched his neck and kicked the rocks at his feet. "You don't know!"

"What don't I know?" My heart raced again, the blood in my veins flowed wildly. "What Damian? What don't I know?"

"I miss my parents. I had my dad—my dad was with me again. I wanted Daisy to...to stand under the light, I want my mom back. She's up there—she's up there trying to come back to me, to my sister. Regan hasn't said a word since the accident. She doesn't talk. She cries herself to sleep every night." Damian grabbed my shirt and pulled me toward him. "That cat, that white cat. If it weren't for that stupid cat, my parents would be alive!"

Behind us, by a matrix of jagged rocks and fallen branches,

Regan and Daisy stepped into the clearing. Daisy stopped at the foot of the lake as little Regan walked down to us. She lifted her hands up to Damian, he lowered himself to her. Touching his face, she closed her eyes and kissed his forehead. Damian wrapped his arms around her.

Looking over to Daisy, seeing a smile grow on her face pulled the pain away from my head, from my messed up thoughts. But my exhaustion got the best of me, and as Wesley's words echoed in my head again, I closed my eyes and let go.

Darkness.

Silence.

Peace.

It took some time for my eyes to adjust to the light when I finally awoke. I sat upright in a chair—a soothing hum filled the small room. "Where am I?"

"You're in your dad's mini-van," replied Daisy. Her hair was pulled back, dark shadows stained the bags under her eyes. "It's him, it's Alex, he's back."

The van pulled over on the side of an old gravel road. The air conditioning blasted in my face. Rubbing my eyes, I leaned forward. "Wesley Stone." A twisting and churning in my stomach took over all my senses. "Let me out!"

Daisy pulled up the door of the van as I stumbled onto the road and into a ditch. There was no more food inside my stomach, there was nothing. My body convulsed, trying to project something

from deep within.

My dad's voice faded in and out, "He needs to go to the hospital."

Another male voice muttered something back to him. It sounded like Damian. "What can a doctor possibly do to help? This is something beyond medicine, Sir."

Staring at the bile on the gravel road, leaning over on my hands and knees, I thought about Wesley Stone.

How was it possible? How was it possible that a missing kid from Timpleville, Ontario had settled himself inside my brain?

More importantly, how could I get him out?

The gravel dug into my knees and my hands burned from the heat on the road. I wanted water but worried I would throw it up again, and I would be right back on all fours, puking up nothing but acid and blood.

Regan stepped out of the van and crouched down in front of me. I looked up to her, forcing out a smile. Looking into her eyes was like looking into a whole different world. She always managed to pull me away from my whacked-out thoughts. Regan didn't need words—she spoke with her heart.

"Thank you," I said to her, patting her head.

I staggered to my feet, and turned to Damian, Daisy, and my dad, "I don't want to go to the hospital."

"What do you mean?" Daisy asked. "You're sick. You're really sick. I know what's going on. We all know what's going on."

Behind them, Regan stood in the middle of the road, looking out

beyond the hills into the town of Timpleville. The church steeple extended out over the tree line. Below it was our school—our homes.

"Where did Wesley Stone live?" I asked.

Chapter Thirty: Listen to Him

The ride back into town couldn't have been more awkward, not to mention nauseating. Damian sat in the passenger seat beside my dad. The sleeve of his jacket flapped in the wind as he dangled his arm out the window. Next to me, sat Regan and then Daisy. I would never have imagined in a million years that the five of us would ever be traveling in the same vehicle.

During the scuffle with Damian the night before, Daisy told me she and Regan made their way into the neighboring village where they were able to get phone service. I never asked her why, but Daisy chose to call my dad for help. I guess she figured he might have a better understanding of what was happening to me. She obviously didn't know my father well enough. Nonetheless, I still wondered if my family noticed me acting strangely from time to time. Maybe they just thought I was going through a rough phase in puberty.

When my dad learned Damian's age, he refused to let him drive home. So, there we were, sitting in his nerdy minivan escorting us back into town.

Back to Wesley Stone's house.

I needed to meet his family. They needed to know what happened to me—him.

"Stop!" Daisy shouted. "Mr. Thomas, stop."

My dad slammed on the brakes and pulled over to the side of

the road. A young girl stood next to a rusted old tractor with weeds growing up over the wheels. She wore ragged jeans with long red hair tucked into the back of a St. Louis Cardinals baseball hat. She waved her hands at us, stepping out on the road.

"Hey, you're from my business class," Damian said, sticking his head out the window. "You okay?"

My dad pulled up closer. The girl scratched at an open wound on the side of her face. "My tractor isn't working no more. I can't get the piston pump changeover plate to come off without my darn tools." She put her face to the window at the back, smearing her dirty hands along the glass. "Who's back there?"

"Do you need a ride, young lady?" My dad asked.

"It hurts, it really hurts," she replied. "You got a band-aid?"

"Drive away, Dad," I shouted. "Trust me, drive away."

"Who's in there?" the girl shouted. "Can they help me?" She banged on the glass. "Who's in there? Molly? Is supper ready?"

My dad pushed his foot down on the gas, spitting up dirt and gravel. The girl heaved a rock at us, landing inches away from the van.

We raced up a narrow dirt road, leaving a cloud of brown dust behind us. I'm not sure anyone spoke for about five minutes. We'd seen these crazy people too often. I knew Damian must have felt responsible, but I didn't know whether he cared or not. He looked back out the window at the girl, disappearing as we entered a small village just minutes outside of Timpleville.

My dad didn't move. His hands at ten and two gripped tightly

onto the steering wheel.

"It's just up here to the right," Damian said finally. "Wesley's house is at the top of that hill." He looked back at me for a second and nodded. "You wanna still check out their pad, right?"

My dad looked at me through the rear-view mirror.

"Yes," I replied, clearing my throat.

Pulling up to the property, we all looked out to a row of trees lining a stone driveway leading up to a giant brick house. I had ridden my bike past the place before with Bradley over the summer, imagining ourselves owning a mansion like that when we struck it rich with the lottery or from becoming famous rock stars.

My dad stopped the van at a large gate with curved tops and intricate metalwork attached by a mechanical arm. Brick pillars bordered the end of the driveway, with bronze light fixtures on the top. Under one of the pillars, a stone engraving read, Stone Residence.

"His dad makes big coin," added Damian. "He's going to be one of the investors at the E-Fair. You know what?" He turned back to me in his seat, pulling his arm over the headrest. "I think he'll be pretty stoked knowing that his son is alive and well and living inside you."

"What?" Daisy shouted. "You're kidding, right?"

"Do I look like I'm kidding?"

My dad turned off the van and pulled it into park. "Kids! Enough." He unbuckled his seatbelt and turned to me. "Alex, you have five minutes. I'm willing to stop here if you feel it's necessary

to talk to the Stone family. I'm not quite sure why you need to see them, but if this will help you feel better than I'm all for it. Your mom is worried sick about you and to be honest, so am I."

The four of us watched my dad talk about his problems and concerns, but not one of us likely heard a word he said. He didn't understand. He wouldn't ever understand. When Damian tried to explain to him in the van that the ghost of Wesley Stone had taken possession of his son, my dad scoffed at him and told him I had the flu. As for the rest of the town, my dad convinced us a dangerous virus had infected everyone. He was like that sometimes, just oblivious, stuck in his own adult world, making sure he paid the bills and put food on our table each day.

"I'm going in," I said, opening the van door. "They need to know."

"I'm coming with you." Daisy took off her seatbelt, stepping out of the van she reached for my hand. "This is the right thing to do, Alex."

Damian stuck his head out the window and spat on the ground in front of us. "Put in a good word for me." A throaty snicker escaped from his mouth.

"You're a jerk, you know that?" Daisy rushed up to his window and slapped him in the face. The noise echoed out behind us. "You know, for a second I was starting to think you were a decent guy again, but thanks for reminding me why I dumped you."

Damian ripped off his seatbelt and pushed open the van door. My dad grabbed at his collar, pulling him back onto the seat.

As the three wrestled, screaming profanities at one another, Regan sat calmly in the back. Her seatbelt still wrapped snugly around her shoulders and waist. The commotion and erratic movements in the front of the van slipped slowly into my peripheral, like the clouds drifting in the afternoon sky. I focused on Regan. Her gaze shifted over to me. A smile grew on her face.

With a nod of her head, I knew what was happening.

"Daisy?" I said. Regan held out a neatly woven bracelet, dangling it from her fingers. I took it from her and placed it around my wrist. "Daisy?" The sounds of water washing up on some rocky shore filled my ears. "Daisy?" Clouds of white floated over my eyes—a fresh, cool breeze brushed over my hair.

Daisy's fingers wrapped around my hand. "Alex? Is it happening again?"

"Yes," I whispered, hearing the soft chatter of birds in the trees behind me.

"What can I do? What do you want me to do?"

Regan continued to smile at me inside the van. Her teeth glowed in the light coming in from the sunroof.

"I'm letting go for a little while. Listen to him," I replied. "Listen to Wesley. Find out what he wants."

Chapter Thirty-One: I can see Him

The blades of the ceiling fan rotated above my head, pushing an offensive odor around my bedroom. I wanted to gag. The soaking wet sheets, stuck to my skin. I wore a bunched up, twisted pair of jockey shorts that I'm pretty sure I had been wearing for a little too long. My mother placed a cold face cloth on my forehead. Her face beamed. At the foot of the bed, my dad paced back and forth, talking on his phone. The light on the night-stand flickered. Outside the window, was darkness.

"Daisy? He's back." My mom turned the cloth over and patted my head with the other side.

The door opened and Daisy tip-toed in. She eased down at the end of my bed. "Alex," she whispered.

I needed
to hear her voice.

"Dai...sy," I replied, feeling a scratch in my throat. "Daisy."

She leaned over and kindly pulled the sweaty covers over my legs and stomach. Like an Egyptian Mummy, I rested still on my back, with my arms folded over my chest. She inched up the bed and leaned forward. "How are you feeling?"

"Like Romeo...after he drank the poison."

My mom handed Daisy the cloth and pulled my dad out of the room. She looked back at me again and smiled, leaving the door open a crack.

"Romeo and Juliet. Very funny," she whispered.

"I know."

She folded the blood-stained cloth a couple of times in her hands. "It's crazy out there. It's getting pretty bad."

"How long was out for this time?"

Daisy looked at her phone. She stood up and walked to the window. "Four days."

"What?" I pulled my head up and painfully turned onto my side. "You gotta be joking."

"No." Daisy closed the curtains and sat down again on the bed. "We kept Wesley in here the whole time. We didn't know what to do." Along the walls, scratched into the paint was his name, repeated over and over again.

"Holy cow," I muttered.

The burning pain clicked in my brain. I lifted my hands to see the skin torn off the tips of my fingers. Open wounds and deep scratches covered my arms. Daisy dipped the cloth into a bowl of water on the side table by my lamp.

"Did you talk to him?" I asked.

She wrung the water from the cloth and placed it on my right forearm. Like my mom, she smiled, gently tending to my raw skin. "The kid is confused. He has been using your body to get back at Damian and Jared, but it all got messed up at the Ridge." She had dark patches around her eyes.

"Daisy? You okay?"

She blinked a few times and exhaled. "He killed Jared, Alex.

He said he didn't mean to. He just wanted to scare him."

I swallowed, eyeing the water on the side table. "I know," I replied. "I think I know." I lifted myself up, resting back on the headboard, and reached for the glass. Daisy leaned in to help, but I grabbed her hand and forced out a smile. "I got it." Bursts of sharp, burning pain shot into my body. Everything hurt. I think my hair hurt.

I closed my eyes.

Images of my face, my body, sitting in the room with Daisy flashed around inside my head. "I can see myself. This is weird."

"What?"

"Yeah, I can see myself," I whispered. "But, it's not me. It's him. This is totally weird."

The pain in my body suddenly stopped. Wesley was pushing his way into my memory.

"What do you mean?"

I heard Daisy's question, but I was already gone.

"I want Alex's life," Wesley said, sitting on the window sill. His arms were clear of cuts and scratches. The walls were normal again. The glass of water was gone. There was no blood-stained cloth on the side table.

"Why?" Daisy asked. She stood on the other end of the bed, holding a blue sweater in her arms. My bracelet was still tied neatly around her wrist.

Wesley continued—his actions, his words, his voice seemed so different. I watched myself be somebody else. But how could I

see this? How could I see myself? I had left my body and become the room somehow. "Jared and Damian used to hang out at the Ridge all the time," Wesley said, "lighting fireworks and smoking cigarettes. But they didn't realize I was out there listening. Someone opened the door. I was able to see Timpleville, Screaming Ridge—everything."

"The door between the living and the dead," Daisy added.

"Yeah," Wesley replied "I awoke one day, in some kid's body, this body. Like learning to walk and talk again, I guess I was able to figure Alex out. I need him, man." He wiggled his fingers and touched his face. "I need this body. It's small and is taking a lot of getting used to, but I'll take it."

"But Alex is here, now. He's alive. You can't take him." Daisy folded her arms squeezing her sweater.

Wesley shook his head, rubbing his brow with his fingernails. "No. I mean, I know. I can't. I've not finished my life yet." He pounded the window ledge with his fist. "I just wanted to help people. That was all I wanted to do. I had a gift. I could talk to the dead. I wanted to bring closure to those who mourned their lost ones. They needed a bridge to cross over, you know what I'm saying? They needed to say goodbye." Wesley stood up and pushed his thumb into his chest. "I was that bridge."

The door behind Daisy opened, and my dad poked his head in. "Everything okay in here?"

"Yes," Daisy replied.

My dad looked over to Wesley. "Alex? You okay?"

Wesley's jaw clenched. He folded his arms, biting on the side of his mouth. "Yes, all good here." When my dad closed the door, Wesley heaved out a gasp of air and sat back down on the ledge. He continued to rub his nails along his forehead. "I want to be that bridge again. I have to. All that hard work I put into the E-Fair, was ruined. I need people to believe in me again."

"Let Alex do this," Daisy said. "He has the gift like you did. Just give him that chance. He's just like you."

"He is me," Wesley replied, chuckling to himself. He stopped scratching his face and looked around the room. "Alex was here, but Wesley is here now." He dug his fingernail into the wood on the window ledge and carved out his name. He nodded his head and continued. "Did you know my dad wanted to buy Screaming Ridge?"

"What?"

"Yes, after those idiots sabotaged my presentation, I tried to show my dad the spiritual energy that surrounds the area, but all my dad saw was money. He wanted to buy the land and sell it to potential builders. I begged him not to, but he refused. So, I ran away, hiding out at Screaming Ridge."

"Did you stay in the house?" Daisy asked, picking lint off her sweater.

"Yeah, I did. Spent a while up there, actually, but I'm not exactly sure how long. That part was foggy. Anyway, I ended up meeting someone up there." Wesley stood up again, twisting his torso from side to side.

"Who?" Daisy asked.

Wesley ripped a broken nail off his finger and flicked it on the floor. "Kaylee Cooper."

Chapter Thirty-Two: The Fly

"Kaylee was a strange little girl, that's for sure," Wesley said, stretching his back. "She didn't know how to stop talking. Did you know this; did you know that, wanna know how I know? Blah blah blah, she drove me nuts sometimes, but I liked her."

"Yeah, that sounds like her." Daisy walked over to the window ledge by Wesley. The smell of her perfume wafted throughout the room.

"She told me she was an angel," Wesley added. "And you know, I sort of believed her."

Daisy nodded, outlining the scratched letters of Wesley's name on the ledge. A faint smile grew on her face. "She is. She really is."

"Man, this is so hard. I feel trapped in a snowsuit that is five sizes too small." Wesley chuckled and sat down beside Daisy.

"I remember you," Daisy said. "I remember you from school. You were two years older than me. I mean, you are two years older...than me."

"I remember you too," Wesley replied. "You had the sweetest smile. The kids in your grade worshiped you."

"Very funny."

"It's true." A grin grew on his face as he pushed the cuticles back on his fingernails. "You're a beautiful girl, Daisy."

The door opened again on the other side of the bedroom,

and my dad walked in. He held an iPad in one hand while holding on to the door handle. "Okay Daisy, I think it's time for you to go home now. It's getting late." My dad likely stationed himself on the little bench in the hall next to the bathroom. He didn't trust anyone.

"Okay, Mr. Thomas, just another minute." Daisy tucked her hands between her knees and sat up straight.

My dad nodded and slipped into the hallway, once again leaving the door open a tad.

Wesley looked at his reflection in the window. His hands gently touched the sides of his face. "You like this Alex kid, don't you?" he asked.

Daisy nodded. "Yeah. I do."

The two sat in silence for a while, looking out the window. As they sat there, I wondered what other memories I could channel since the possession over the summer. All the blackouts, the confusion, and missed events were perhaps lodged somewhere in my brain. I wanted my memories back.

"I guess I better go," Daisy said, finally. She picked up her sweater from the bed and walked to the door. Before slipping into the hall, she turned to Wesley. "What happened to you?"

The ceiling fan clicked and buzzed as it pushed the air around. A tiny fly whipped around the room, landing on the lamp beside the bed.

"I wanted to go home," Wesley said. "I just never made it home. I didn't plan on staying out there forever." A tear dropped on his lap. "I remember looking over the lake at the valley and the

town on the other side. The view was so beautiful. I was finally at peace with the whole thing. I was ready, but I don't know what happened after that. I wanna go home, Daisy. I wanna see my family."

"You will. I promise." Daisy gently turned the doorknob and closed the door behind her.

For a minute, Wesley remained still on the window ledge. The little fly buzzed around, bouncing into the light by the bed.

Wesley inhaled and slowly exhaled. He turned his gaze to the fly crawling up the lampshade on the bedside table. He watched it carefully, following it lift off and scatter about the room. The buzzing grew louder, vibrating the walls and ceiling.

The fly continued to bump about, clumsily looking for a way out. Moments later, it rested on the ledge beside Wesley. He lifted his hand, hovering over top of the tiny creature.

He waited.

And waited.

In a blink, he slapped his hand down onto the ledge, killing it instantly.

Wesley smiled to himself, wiping its guts on the curtain. He took another breath before turning his gaze up to the ceiling fan. For a moment he watched it rotate, each blade moving in a calming circle. His eyes shifted, still looking around the room.

Then his face turned in my direction. Wesley Stone looked directly at me.

And then nothing.

A switch turned off in my head. I found myself back with Daisy.

Like a tiny bug navigating the tunnels in my brain and finally settling down to rest, Wesley disappeared.

For now.

The air warmed.

"I saw it," I muttered, watching my hand tremble. I placed my glass of water down on the side table. "I saw the conversation. I was there. I mean, I was—like a fly on the wall, watching you two talk, watching Wesley inside my body."

Daisy still sat on the bed beside me. She reached for the pitcher, pouring more water into my glass. "You're joking?"

"No, I saw it. I was like, floating, watching the whole thing."

I pointed to the window ledge. "He carved that. You sat beside him as he carved his name into the wood."

Drops of water splashed onto my arm. Daisy placed the pitcher down, quickly wiping up the spill with a cloth. "That was the first night before he started going crazy." She dabbed my arm, making sure not to rub the wounds. She patted my forehead and dropped the cloth into the wash basin. "It's happening to everyone who went under the light, Alex. It's happening to you." She inched closer to me. "What's going to happen to you?"

I'm not sure how long we sat there looking into each other's eyes. But as I focused on her flawless skin and beautiful features, I realized what I needed to do. I suddenly knew what was going to

happen to me. I knew what was going to happen to Wesley.

"We need to finish our E-Fair project," I replied.

"But it's in two weeks," Daisy said, playing with the loose string on the end of my bracelet.

"Perfect," I replied.

Chapter Thirty-Three: Samantha Jerqson

If Wesley Stone were in my head, he'd likely know all of my thoughts. If true, it explained why he disappeared during the remaining days while I focused my efforts on school, and got myself back to normal again. The headaches still came to me, but mostly at night. He spoke at times, through our thoughts. The words we shared were not words, but ideas, and feelings—perhaps a sixth sense.

My parents drove me to school each day because they were worried about me having more 'episodes.' I worried more about the freaks on the streets.

"State your full name, date of birth and home address." A police officer stood at the front entrance of the school with her guard dog. She kept a hand on her gun, looking carefully into my eyes.

"Alexander Winston Thomas, June 21st, 2001, 1260 Bryn Mawr Lane, Timpleville Ontario."

She nodded and waved me past.

Rudy Jerqson greeted me in the locker bay and slapped my shoulder. "Hey, Mr. Scratch, what's up? There's like cops patrolling all the schools in the whole district, nuts eh?"

"Yeah, crazy."

"Why weren't you on the bus? Are you worried the driver will go nuts and drive us into a lake or something?" Rudy laughed to

himself, snorting a couple of times before turning into the washrooms. He lifted his hand in the air, giving me a thumbs up. "Welcome back, Scarface!"

"Remind me why I'm friends with that guy," I mumbled to myself.

At the end of the hall, a group of girls gathered in a circle near my homeroom class. As I walked toward them, their gaze shifted my way. Samantha Jerqson, the Gossip Queen, tucked her phone into her boot and stepped out of the group. "I heard you got the rush, that true? Do you feel any different? What happened to your face?"

Nothing was a secret in Timpleville, not when you had over two hundred adolescents spending most of their waking hours on their phones, (so much for the ban on them). The seventh-grade girls were the worst. You just had to come to school with a zit on your chin, and the entire town would know about it before first recess.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I replied.

"My best friend's older sister from dance camp said that her brother saw you up at Screaming Ridge. And she said that he said that you were the first person to get the rush." She blew a giant bubble with her gum and sucked it back into her mouth.

"Who?"

"Paula Reed. Her brother is Garret Reed. He's on the lacrosse team. Tall, wears a stud in his nose, really cute. His best friend was Austin Patterson?"

"Um, I don't know what you're talking about."

Samantha rolled her eyes. "Oh, come on, as if. Everyone knows Garret Reed."

"Well, I don't."

She shrugged and blew another bubble. Yasmin Peri, a seventh-grader from the French Immersion class, whispered in Samantha's ear. Samantha giggled and turned back to me. "Are you in love with Daisy Darlington?"

"What? No. That's gross."

I felt a tap on my back. Valerio stood behind me with his binder and iPad. "Did you talk to my brother? Did you see him?"

"Can you really talk to the dead?" Samantha asked. "Like, was Kaylee Cooper real? Lisa Weatherly told me that you and Daisy helped Kaylee find her dead family."

"Yeah, that was when Daisy was cool," added Yasmin.

"Before she started hanging out with Damian Dermite."

Samantha lifted her hand to my face and poked my cheek.

"What happened to you? Did you get in a fight with Damian? was it because he's in love with Daisy as well?"

Lisa pushed past the crowd and pulled out her makeup bag.

"Hi, Valerio," she said. "Did you ask Alex yet?"

"Yeah," Valerio replied. He tucked his hands into his pockets.

Lisa looked at me and fluttered her eyelashes. "You know Jared, and I almost dated like twelve times."

"Um, excuse me?" Samantha hissed. "He was like into me. We like practically lived together."

"Whatevel! You got stuck in an elevator at the mall for like five minutes."

I shook my head and walked into the classroom with Valerio. "I didn't see Jared, I'm sorry."

"Are you going to try and talk to him at the E-Fair?" he asked, placing his binder on his desk. "I mean, that's what your project is gonna be about right?"

"Yeah, it is." Daisy already sat quietly in her seat. A policeman walked past the classroom windows outside at the back of the room. In the parking lot, several police officers escorted some students to the side doors of the school. Bradley Blunker walked by, sliding his hand along the pane of glass.

In the corner by the door, Mr. Ravi changed the recycling bins and added new bags for the compost box. "Hello, my friend Alex, how are you today?"

"Great, Mr. Ravi."

"Are you going to help me talk to my brother again?" Valerio asked, snapping his fingers at me.

I nodded, rubbing the itchy scars on my arm. "Hold on a sec, follow me," I said to Valerio, stepping back out into the hallway. Valerio and I weaved between a couple of girls from my class and stopped in front of Lisa and Samantha. The two carried on several conversations at the same time with their friends and the kids coming in from outside. "Excuse me?" I said. The girls immediately halted their conversations, shifting their hips and tossing their hair to one side. Samantha chewed wildly on her gum, while Lisa

finished putting mascara on her eyes. I collected myself for a second and spoke. "You're right; I can talk to the dead. I can communicate with anyone who has passed away. You name it, your Great, Great Grandmother, your lost Aunt or Uncle, Elvis or even Jared Del Porto."

Chapter Thirty-Four: It's Happening

Daisy thought I was nuts using Lisa and Samantha to help spread the word about our project. For the first time since the possession, I felt focused. Wesley's mind settled into mine, and in a strange, inexplicable way, we shared thoughts, ideas, and memories.

He had forgiven Damian. Part of him believed the white cat was an angel, looking out for his shortened life, helping avenge his death but taking the lives of Damian's parents. I didn't agree, but our minds understood how to handle different opinions.

I tried asking him a few times where we went when we died, but Wesley always said I was asking the wrong question.

Over the next several days, Daisy and I spent the indoor breaks in the library. We focused most of our project on the presentation piece which we knew had to stand out to the investors, Mr. Pembleton and most importantly the people of Timpleville. Daisy's organizational skills were way better than mine, so she pulled together a kick-butt business plan, outlining promotional strategies, pricing, and the product.

"How are you going to actually communicate with the dead?" Daisy asked. We sat at a round table near the fish tank.

"I hear them in my head, talking to me," I replied.

Daisy scrolled down the pages on her laptop. "I thought you just heard Wesley in your head."

"At first I just heard, like, um, muffled, babbling voices

bouncing around in my mind, like being at the Arcade on Cassidy Square, only all the conversations were going on at the same time, right in my ear. But, Wesley has been teaching me how to understand them. It's cool. Sorta like he's been translating and categorizing everything they are saying and filtering them into my thoughts in a comfortable and clear way. Does that make sense?"

Daisy nodded. "Yeah, perfect sense. Can I add that to the business plan? It will help solidify your service."

"Solidify my service? Listen to us; we sound like a couple of old-fogies working for some bigwig in a giant perm."

"Perm?" Daisy asked. "Giant perm? Don't you mean, firm?"

"Yeah, something like that."

We giggled for a minute and settled back to work. Near the end of the break, Principal Stanson walked into the library. "Alex Thomas?" he began. "You have a visitor at the office. I suggest you make this quick before the bell rings for class." He nodded and marched back out of the room.

"He's a friendly guy," Daisy whispered, nudging my arm.

"No kidding." I followed Mr. Mole-Face into the office where he introduced me to a senior woman, escorted in by a couple of police officers.

She reached out her bony hands and pinched my cheeks.

"You are Alex Thomas, yes?" she asked. Her voice gurgled. "Please, may I have a word, yes?"

I shrugged and folded my arms. I looked over to Mr. Stanson for confirmation that this woman was safe, but the stiff just walked

into his little worm-hole and closed the door. "What can I do for you?" I asked.

"My granddaughter told me you were the one," the woman said.

"The one what?" I replied.

"The one who can bring my Hugo back to me. Oh, I miss him." She pulled a tissue out of her sleeve and blew her nose. "He was the best postman our town ever had."

"Mr. Courier?" I asked. Like a wireless internet service, Wesley's energy searched for Hugo Courier and uploaded his information, placing his voice on the surface of my thoughts.

"Yes, oh my dear sweet boy yes." She stuffed the dirty tissue back into the sleeve and fixed her hair. "Is he here? Is he here with us now? Can I talk to him? Hugo? I'm sorry. I'm sorry I got you fired!"

"Um, yes, he's here. He'll always be here," I replied.

Daisy pushed open the office door, wrapping her arm around my waist. "And, if you come to Timpleville's Entrepreneurial Fair next Wednesday, you can speak to him for just \$29.95. If you buy a ticket online at www.spiritsoftimpleville.com, you can save \$5."

Daisy smiled and pulled me back to the door. "Excuse us, Ma'am, but we have to go to class."

Daisy Darlington was brilliant. Wesley Stone was brilliant. I was becoming a better person because of them.

I pushed the office door open and walked with Daisy into the lobby. Through the glass entrance at the front of the school, a car

pulled up to the curb. Valerio swung open the passenger door, stomping across the sidewalk and into the foyer. His eyes, red and swollen, welled with tears. Inside the car, a man peered at us from the side window.

"Do you know that guy?" I asked. The man slid his sunglasses down the bridge of his nose and waved us over.

"Nope," replied Daisy. "But that old woman is about to come out into the hall. Let's go."

The man waved at me a second time. I wondered if he was Valerio's dad, or if he also heard about my spiritual abilities. "Hold on; I wanna see what this guy wants."

"I'll be in the library getting our stuff. See you in class," Daisy said with a nod. "Don't forget your sales pitch if he ends up being another potential client."

I chuckled as Daisy slipped around the corner. The man sat in his car, playing with the buttons on the front dash. He looked back up to me, winding down the window on the passenger side. On his arm, a row of red lines zig-zagged down to his wrist. Pushing the first set of doors open, I spotted a bracelet lying on the school floor mats. I bent down and picked it up. I knew it belonged to Regan, but didn't understand why she would drop it there. I checked behind me to see the little girl standing by herself in the front lobby. She waved to me and smiled.

As I turned back to the man in the car, an officer rushed toward him with his gun drawn. "Don't move," the policeman shouted. A blinding flash of orange flames exploded into the sky,

blasting the car into a million pieces. Chunks of metal burst through the glass doors, shattering the windows, and knocking me to the floor.

A high pitched squeal rang out. Feet bounded past. Bits of glass slid across the tiles. Wesley's voice radiated inside my head, "It's happening Alex. It's happening."

I rubbed my eyes. Regan's knobby knees presented themselves just inches from my face. She handed me my phone which must have catapulted out of my pocket. On the cracked screen, a text message appeared from Damian.

Dude, Screaming Ridge out of control, need your help – D.

Chapter Thirty-Five: Shutting Down

The heat from the blast singed my arm hairs but luckily nothing else. Besides the odd cut to add to my collection of scratches from Wesley, I felt pretty good.

A hand reached down, helping me up to my knees. The ringing in my ears faded a bit. Daisy's face appeared from the dust. "Oh my god, are you okay?" she wrapped her arms around me.

Another hug.

The wall by the office entrance collapsed. White dust covered Mrs. Woods as she crawled over bricks, glass, and parts of her desk. Mr. Stanson and the assistant secretary pushed the debris out of the way and pulled Mrs. Woods away from the rubble.

The school filled with dust and smoke. The car outside burned to the ground, enveloped in giant balls of fire. The flames climbed as high as the flagpole. The alarm in the school echoed down the halls.

Officer Green marched over the rubble and ripped the extinguisher by the library door off the wall. Behind him, a teenaged boy, dressed up in a football uniform took off his helmet and blocked the entrance way.

"Out of the way kid," Officer Green shouted.

The boy had red stripes on his face and fresh scars down his forehead and arms. He looked at me for a second and nodded.

"Thank you," he said.

"Out of the way now!" Officer Green repeated.

The boy clasped his hands tightly around the helmet and swung it wildly at Officer Green's face, knocking him straight to the ground like a falling tree.

"We gotta get out of here," Daisy shouted.

The boy stood over the unconscious policeman and dropped his helmet to the floor. His eyelashes fluttered, white dust swirled around his head. I stepped over shards of glass and placed my hand on his arm.

"Alex, what are you doing?"

I looked at the boy and nodded. "It's okay. Everything's okay."

The boy lifted his hands to his face, shaking uncontrollably. "What happened? Did I just do that?"

"You're possessed," I replied. Wesley's energy raced through my veins, more than I had ever felt before. I placed my hands on the boy's shoulder and guided him to the library. "It's not your fault. It wasn't your fault."

A second explosion rocked the walls, knocking us to the ground again. The boy covered his head, curling up behind the librarian's desk. A woman screamed behind us, falling to her knees. Her name was Mrs. Pilkington. For some reason, I didn't know that until just now.

"We gotta get out of here," Daisy shouted.

"What is your name?" I asked the boy in the football gear, tapping him on the shoulder. He covered his ears and closed his

eyes. "What's your name?" I shouted. Wesley's words danced around me, guiding me through the chaos. Before the boy spoke, I suddenly knew what he was going to say.

"Just...Justin," the boy replied. He was an eighth-grade jock, who recently got suspended for stealing iPads from our tech room.

The librarian whipped open the door, grabbing her laptop and jacket. I'm not sure if she saw us or not, but glancing out into the hall, the kids filed out of their classrooms and out of the back of the school. Little Regan stepped out from a cloud of dust and waved at me. Coach Mason grabbed her hand and guided her over the rubble. Daisy pulled on my arm, yanking my sleeve.

"Look at me," I said to the boy, tapping his shoulder. "Look at me."

Justin looked up, wiping the tears from his eyes.

I leaned into him, clasping my hand around his ear. "Let go. Don't fight. The person inside you, needs you."

I shook his hand and stood up. The alarm blasted our ears, likely creating more panic in the school than needed. We grabbed Daisy's iPad and binder and slipped out the side of the school into the parking lot. Police officers and firefighters guided everyone to the back of the playground by the cornfield. We were all organized into our classes and told to sit on the grass as the teachers and administration took the attendance. If they only knew there were exactly eight hundred and thirty-two students present, with forty-three absent and two missing. They sat quietly on the field, most of them wide-eyed and shaken.

Daisy sat beside me, holding tightly onto my hand. Around us, sixteen officers and eleven firefighters stood side by side in a u-shape at the front of the yard.

To my right, Henry looked over. "You okay?" he asked. "Looks like Damian's little project is getting out of hand."

I wasn't sure how much Henry knew, but I figured Daisy kept him in the loop. He was right, though, Damian had screwed everything up. "Screaming Ridge is developing a mind of its own," I said, catching my breath. "The door that opened in the sky channeled all of its energy into the house, more specifically, Kaylee Cooper's bedroom. But now, the spirits up there are learning, and finding new ways to return."

Rudy sat on the other side of Henry and laughed. "Who told you that?"

"I have my sources," I replied.

Principal Stanson held a megaphone in his hand and stood on the rocks in the learning garden. He played with the switches before holding it up to his mouth. "Is this thing on?" he mumbled. "Okay students, I need your attention right away, please."

"What sources?" Rudy asked. "Let's face it, Damian is a screw-up, and the smart thing to do would be to tell the cops. I can't believe nobody has ever done anything about it."

Garth sat in front of us and turned back to Rudy. "I think everyone is scared of ratting on him, plus your sister was madly in love with Jared."

"What does my sister have to do with anything?" Rudy

muttered. He picked up part of an orange peel from the grass and chucked it at Garth.

"Because she would slap any fool who would try talking to the cops." Garth stuck out his tongue and turned back around.

Principal Stanson began his noble attempt at comforting the school. "You have nothing to fear. You are safe. As it stands, the school will be closed until we can get more information about what is happening out there." A wave of cheers and chatter spread around the students. They didn't see the panic, not the way the adults did. For most, especially the older kids, they saw the commotion as a rush of excitement. Being scared of a bully like Damian Dermite was one thing, but being scared of something big, like this, was just too tough to understand.

"So much for the E-Fair," Rudy said. "Damian is an idiot."

A light mist of water drifted out to the field from the fire truck hoses. The ominous cloud of black smoke from the smoldering car thinned as it faded into the sky.

"Blaming Damian isn't the answer. Going to the cops isn't the answer." I said. "This Screaming Ridge thing needs to be approached from a different angle."

Henry sat quietly, biting on his fingernail. He shook his head and mumbled to himself.

"You okay?" I asked him.

"What does it matter to you?" He shifted his body away, looking out to the learning garden.

Principal Stanson continued. "Unless we can get this sickness

under control, I am told we will be forced to shut down the city."

Chapter Thirty-Six: Let me Speak

Principal Stanson cleared his throat, taking a big breath. The fire alarm echoed out into the yard. "We as a town have never seen an outbreak like this before and are not equipped. I am going to pass you over to an important man in our town who will share with you the details of what we need to do. Please listen, as your safety and others are important." He handed the megaphone to a police officer.

The officer stood up on the rock and shook Mr. Stanson's hand. I'd seen him before; he used to do drug awareness workshops in our sixth-grade class the year before. I remembered he had fat ears with thick black hairs sticking out of them. "My name is Constable Ryan, and I'm here to reassure you that everything is going to be okay."

"Here we go," I muttered. "He's going to say the same thing Stanson said. They don't know what they're doing."

Henry turned his head back to me. "And you have all the answers, I guess?"

"What's up, Henry? Are you mad at me, or something?"

"Mad? Mad? Why should I be mad?" He shrugged and faced the front again. "As if you would actually care."

Constable Ryan continued. "Your parents are being notified right now and will be picking you up soon. Are there any questions at this point?"

"What are you talking about Henry?" I asked, letting go of Daisy's hand. "What did I do?"

The kids in front of us turned around. Bradley Blunker looked at me from a couple of rows up. He pulled up the hood on his sweater and tightened the strings. The kid had so much going on inside his head.

"You've changed, Alex. Enough said." Henry picked at the leftover bits of nail on his finger.

A fire lit up inside, lifting me to my feet. A sickening, empty feeling filled the pit of my stomach. Wesley Stone felt it—I felt it. How could no one see it? How could no one see the answers? "I have changed, Henry Greenfield!" I shouted. "And I have never been more proud of who I am now." Constable Ryan put the megaphone down and stepped off the rock. A couple of officers standing behind him followed. Around me, the kids shuffled their bums away from where I sat. I looked at Henry, rising to his feet to face me. I stuck out my chest and stood tall. "Yes, I am glad you noticed I have changed. This is the new me. Smart, wise and finally awake."

The wires in my brain fired more than I had ever experienced. I could see, feel, smell and hear everything. Ideas came to me, lighting up everywhere inside. As the students cautiously slipped further away, the officers had surrounded me from all sides.

"Alex, be quiet, what's going on?" Daisy asked. "Is Wesley doing this?"

I shook my head and laughed. "No, both Wesley and I are

doing this." I raised my hands and stepped toward Constable Ryan. "I'm safe. I'm not one of them. Please, I want to talk to you. I want to talk to all of you." I looked back at Henry and shook my head.

"Alex, sit down," Daisy shouted.

I navigated through the kids and stepped up onto the rocks. Constable Ryan and Principal Stanson moved to the side, almost as if they knew something about my abilities. Above the crowd, the cops hovered their hands over their guns. It didn't faze me at all. The Constable approached, looking carefully at my arms and face. I wondered if he knew about the scars—how infected people behaved from the spirits in the sky—spirits fighting to take over a host's body.

It does sound like a virus.

"Please, let me speak," I said to the Constable. "What I have to say will help you. You asked if we had any questions right? Well, I have a question that will help this town."

He checked his watch and handed me the megaphone. "Make this quick."

The students chatted with each other, making their way back to the grass. I waited for them to be silent, for every single face to turn in my direction. I knew all of their names now. I felt the worries and thoughts inside their head. The fire alarm in the school stopped. The birds overhead settled in the trees around the perimeter of the playground, chirping and singing to each other. "When was the last time you really listened?" The kids all looked around at each other. "We spend too much time talking, just to hear

our own voices. That's all we ever do, is talk, talk, talk, blah, blah, blah. Do you know how to sit in silence? Do you know how to listen?"

I stepped off the rock, keeping the megaphone up to my mouth. I walked through the students on the grass, stopping in the middle of them. I wasn't an awkward twelve-year-old anymore. No way. I wasn't someone who could be beaten down with words. Maybe a handful of them knew about Kaylee Cooper, Maybe a small number believed I had a gift, but it wasn't enough.

"I'm listening to you, Alex Thomas!" I looked out to see Daisy standing in the middle of her so-called friends. She pulled her hair back and tied it with a scrunchy. The faces of eight-hundred-plus turned to her. "I will be silent for you."

"This is your chance, Alex, make it count," Wesley's voice sang. "I need this. The spirits of Screaming Ridge need this."

I walked over to Daisy and hugged her. I didn't want to let her go. We'd come so far together, and here she was, standing up for me. As if time stood still, I soaked in her thoughts, trying to read her feelings. I mean, she liked me, she really liked me. But was it love? If I asked her to be my girlfriend, would she say, yes? Man, being in the seventh grade was complicated. She looked up at me and pinched my arm. "Save this Town, Alex. I believe in you."

I nodded, closing my eyes for a second. "Wesley Stone is here," I announced, touching the side of my head with my forefinger. I searched for Valerio through the sea of blank faces. He leaned against the trunk of a tree, his legs crossed on the grass.

"Jared Del Porto is here." Near the back where I had been seated, I stepped around some more kids and stopped in front of Bradley.

"Jeffrey Blunker is here. Those who we loved, those who aren't with us anymore, are actually here. Yeah. It's true. This is not some stupid outbreak. This ain't no virus. You wanna know what's going on?" I pointed up to the clouds. "Ghosts."

Bradley, pulling the strings of his hooded sweater, jumped up to his feet. "You're losing it," he shouted. "I'm listening to you, but all I hear is my ex-friend pretending to be somebody he is not."

"I second that!" Henry shouted.

Bradley's friends laughed, clapping and chanting to one another. The seventh and eighth-grade students shifted and shuffled about on the grass. Rudy lifted his hand into the air and waved it about. "Can we go into the school now, Mr. Stanson?"

Constable Ryan waved his hand to me, gesturing for me to return the megaphone. Principal Stanson folded his arms and looked at his watch again.

"Wait!" I shouted. "Please stop!" I hurdled over a couple of kids and rushed over to Valerio by the tree. "You talked to your brother today, didn't you?"

Rudy lowered his hand and sat down on the grass. Bradley loosened the strings on his sweater, pulling the hood off his head.

I moved the megaphone to Valerio. He swallowed before looking up to me. "Yeah, I did."

I faced the school, placing one hand on my hip. "I know, I know because I talked to Jared today, too. I can hear his voice. I

can hear all the voices of Timpleville. How? You might ask? Prove it, you might ask?" I eyed Bradley again on the grass. "Bradley, your brother misses you. He said he is sorry for leaving you." The birds behind me sang out, taking flight into the cornfield. The smoke at the front of the school had disappeared, leaving a burnt smell in the air.

"How do you know?" Bradley muttered.

"Like I said, I talked to him. He's inside a boy from the valley named Gavin Langley. He is your brother's host. He wants you to know that he enjoyed visiting you the other night and he didn't mean to scare you. He wants you to know that he saw you that day. The day the car knocked him into Timpleville Creek. He saw you jump in after him. He saw how brave you were."

Bradley rubbed his eyes. His lower lip trembled. "I miss him."

"I know you do," I replied. "He misses you."

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Listen

Bradley stood up and walked over to me. Like Damian and Daisy, I felt the pain he held inside. He had wanted to let go for so long. I opened my arms and hugged him. He buried his face into my shoulder and cried. "I can help you, Bradley," I whispered. "He wants to say goodbye to you."

He pulled away and wiped his eyes. "Okay."

I dropped the megaphone on the ground, cracking a piece off the handle. The teachers and police officers paced around the learning garden. Most of them were on their phones. Wesley's energy continued to fill me with hope. "Constable Ryan? Mr. Stanson? I know I'm just a kid, but I can help this town."

Mr. Stanson scanned the kids on the grass. He rubbed his brow, pacing up and down the front path of the garden. He loosened his collar and undid the front button on his shirt. "How?"

"By listening to these...these spirits. They need to be heard, Mr. Stanson. I can give them that chance. Please."

"Young man, I'm afraid you need to sit down now." Constable Ryan clipped his walkie-talkie into his shirt pocket. He nodded to the officers. "Folks, we got word that it is safe to return to the school gymnasium. We will be holding you in there until you get picked up. We are working diligently at this time to contact every one of your parents. If you don't have access to a mobile phone, please let us know."

Wesley snapped inside me, I felt the urge to scratch my arms and forehead. I felt the weight of his pain and frustration. "And then what?" I shouted. "Then we go home and wait? Are you just going to keep...collecting these people and take them away? If you keep this up, there will be no one left in Timpleville."

Valerio marched around a group of girls playing with each other's ponytails and found the megaphone on the grass beside me. Clicking on the talk switch, he looked out to Mr. Stanson. "Alex is right," he began. "The ma...man who blew up his car in fro...front of our school was named Ivan Gold...smith. I met him on the way to school this morning." He took a second, looking out at the birds in the cornfield. Taking a breath, he continued. "My brother's spirit, or soul, or whatever was in...side that man. Ivan Goldsmith was like a host, or something." Valerio picked at the corner of his eye. "Jared told me the man could...couldn't take it anymore. I do....don't think Jared meant to harm him. My brother said goodbye to me today. My dead brother said...goodbye to me today." He dropped to his knees as Samantha rushed to him. "My dead brother said good...bye to...me to...day."

A bright beam of light shot down from a cloud in the sky, striking Ms. Mesh in the back. Lifting her hands up, she screamed. Her body shook for a few seconds before the light disappeared. The color from her face vanished, leaving her pale and motionless. She lowered her arms and slowly walked over to the rocks and sat down. Her face looked blankly out to the cornfield.

Seconds later, the roar of an engine broke the brief silence.

Damian's Cavalier jumped the curb in the parking lot and skidded to a stop on the tarmac in front of all the children. Our attention immediately turned to the bang from his engine and a cloud of gray smoke shooting out of the back. He pushed open his door and staggered out. His face, black and blue from our encounter the week before, had fresh cuts along the cheeks and forehead.

"Hold it right there!" A policeman with a scar running down the side of his face shouted, drawing his gun. The officer side-stepped cautiously toward Damian. A tall woman officer and a short, stocky man rushed to Ms. Mesh's aid by the garden. A group of teachers circled her. Another officer, a young guy, maybe twenty, stepped through the kids near the tarmac and drew his weapon on Damian.

"Stop!" I shouted. "He's okay, please!"

Damian bent over, panting heavily. "Al...ex, it's crazy out there. I messed up, man."

"How bad is it?" I knelt to see his face. The cops surrounded us, still pointing their guns at Damian.

"It's happening everywhere. You need to do something."

I felt a tap on my shoulder. "Alex, this is your chance, you gotta tell Mr. Stanson," Daisy said, with an urgency in her voice. She stepped in front of Mr. Pembleton who guided students back into the school. "Please Mr. P, don't cancel the E-Fair next week. If you can do anything about it, please don't shut down the E-Fair."

He glanced at her for a second, and then barked orders for the students to hurry back into the school. The officers continued

to circle us, as teachers and firefighters diverted the students away. "Please don't panic," Mr. Pembleton squeaked. "Please calmly make your way to the gym. No pushing, please."

I guided Damian upright and put my arm out for him to lean on. His body felt like rubber. Beside me, a hand reached out to assist Damian as well. Bradley nodded to me. "It's now or never."

I glanced behind me, searching for Mr. Stanson. He was my last chance to help the town. I didn't understand how he couldn't see this. Maybe he didn't have a choice, maybe the law enforcement took charge of a situation like this one, but being the principal he could convince them, make them see what was right. Henry Greenfield stood beside me, with Rudy and Garth. Bradley and Valerio looked out over the wall of anxious kids shuffling along the playground and onto the tarmac. Firefighters carried Ms. Mesh. Another blast from the sky lit up the yard.

In the middle of all the chaos, Wesley returned. "I want to go home Alex. I'm ready to go home," he whispered. He was ready to end this. And with his words—his quiet calming words, I saw it.

Like seeing a picture before someone painted it, I stepped in front of Samantha Jerqson, holding tightly onto her hands. "Keep spreading the word this week. The E-Fair is going on, no matter what."

Samantha raised her brow. "How? They're shutting down the town."

I looked at her closely. "Trust me. Spread the word."

"Okay, I will. I promise."

I turned to the group, pulling each one close. "This E-Fair is happening next Wednesday, with or without the teachers. I just need to talk to an old friend. We're going to save Timpleville."

Chapter Thirty-Eight: The Town

I felt more alert and clear-headed than ever before, as the days led up to the E-Fair. Sure, I still had the headaches, but I never felt so good. Wesley felt the same way. Daisy texted every hour on the hour for the last six days since our parents collected us from the car explosion the week before. All day and night, my mom and dad glued themselves to the television, keeping tabs on the mayhem going on around Timpleville. The town issued an emergency shutdown, which meant no one could leave their home. We had doctors and police officers knocking on our door, checking us for any signs of the so-called virus. Every evening for two hours, the streets were empty. Through a half-dozen social networks I set up, I learned that this was the case all over town, making it very convenient to escape to Timpleville High. As my parents sat down to macaroni and cheese in front of the kitchen TV, I swiftly slipped out of the garden room in the basement with my awkward E-Fair Display board and snuck around to the garage to get my bike.

I hooked up with Daisy about twenty minutes later on Matthew Crescent near her place and rode the rest of the way to school together. Henry got a ride from Rudy and Samantha's older sister, Tamara, who was also part of the E-Fair in the tenth-grade division. My brother opted out, choosing to drown his worries in the basement with his new iPhone.

Riding alongside Daisy that evening, we saw giant police

trucks along the highway carrying more and more 'crazies.' They looked like caged animals on their way to the zoo. Even though Damian and I had finally made a truce, I knew he still wanted to bring his parents back. It surprised me that the police were yet to link Damian to the community's upheaval.

"Are you ready for this?" Daisy asked, fixing the collar of my shirt. "I think half of Timpleville is gonna be here tonight."

"Yeah, let's just keep our fingers and toes crossed that the cops didn't change their check-in schedule."

We locked our bikes in the parking lot in front of Timpleville High school. The E-Fair was just an hour away from starting. The building's size dwarfed our school. The library opened its doors to the public all year round. The school had three gyms, a track, three football fields and a couple of baseball diamonds.

We buzzed the front entrance, clumsily holding onto our E-Fair presentation. Past the football field and through the pines leading up to the hills, lights continued to flare out from the night sky.

"My two favorite kids, how are you?" Mr. Ravi pushed open the door displaying his usual big toothy grin. Strands of his black shiny gelled hair flopped over his eyes. He nodded to us, shaking both our hands.

"Hi, Mr. Ravi," I said. "Thanks for doing this for us."

Mr. Ravi unlocked the door before stepping out, checking the parking lot and front road leading into the school. He tucked his hands into his overalls and shuddered. "I'd only stick my neck out

like this for you, Alex; you know that right?"

"Yes, sir," I replied.

A bright flare shot down from an opening in the clouds, striking a man walking his dog near the track.

The three of us watched him tremble and shake before falling to his knees. As his dog licked the victim's face, he slowly rose to his feet and continued on his way. We knew it was just a matter of time before the possession would intensify. As the spirit forced its way into the host's brain, the body reacted in different ways. Some people, like Jared and me, were able to share the energy, causing headaches and blackouts. Often, an internal conflict occurred, driving the host completely insane. The term, 'crazies' stemmed from this.

"This wouldn't be happening if we kept Kaylee here with us," Daisy said, watching the dog pull away from the man, whining, and barking.

"When my wife died," Mr. Ravi began. "I felt like she was gone forever—that I would never see her, or feel her again." He picked up a wrapper from the front walk and dropped it in the garbage bin. "But, now, I'm positive she visits me from time to time. I look into the eyes of the people I see, wondering if my wife is in there, trying to find me, trying to say goodbye." He coughed and patted his chest. "I might lose my job tonight, but if this is one step closer to giving these lost and confused spirits a way of properly saying goodbye then I fully believe it's worth the risk. You are a special boy, Alex. I knew that when I first met you last year.

This gift of yours, make it happen tonight."

Daisy tapped me on the shoulder. "Alex, look."

Across the football field, a ginormous group of people flooded along a path between the row of houses. Hundreds of them marched toward the school, carrying poster boards and bags. At the front of the school, cars pulled in, one after another, gradually filling the parking lot. I couldn't take my eyes off of everyone. The word had gotten out. For all I knew, the entire town arrived all at once. In a matter of minutes, a sea of faces stood in front of me, waiting to be let inside, waiting for the answers.

I looked out, making eye contact with each person, nodding and smiling, passing on the confidence I held inside. Through the crowd, Mr. Pembleton stepped up onto the front step, holding Ms. Mesh's hands. Her eyes, swollen and dark, looked up to me. Deep scratches carved into her arms and neck.

Henry stood by a tree to my left, holding his display board. His cheeks pulled his mouth into a grin. Bradley stood nearby, holding hands with his parents. Valerio stood beside him, wearing a t-shirt with Jared's face on it. He held onto a box of books he planned to sell. By the parking lot, a tall man stepped out of his Black SUV, closing the door behind him. I rubbed my eyes for a second, unsure I saw things clearly. As he strutted onto the front walk, a warm flutter bounced around inside. Somehow I knew he would come.

"Hi, Mr. Stanson," I said. He stepped up onto the stairs and shook my hand. He turned to the crowd and waved. His eyes were

red, his balding hair tangled, and out of place.

"My wife is sick," he said, turning to me.

"Okay," I replied. "I'm sorry."

"This town is counting on you, Alex." Mr. Stanson's chin quivered. "The police will come, they will not approve, but please, just fix this."

The sun escaped, pulling in a gust of frigid air. Like a funnel, the gray clouds swirled around a small light in the sky. Daisy opened the doors to the front of the school and stepped aside. "I'll meet you in there," she said with a comforting smile.

I led the anxious and frightened crowd into the lobby.

Mr. Ravi guided me toward the gyms, pointing to the one for the seventh and eighth-grade presentations. "This is where your school is presenting, and down the hall is the other two gyms for the high school students. Why don't I lead the townsfolk into the second and third gyms while you get yourself set up."

"Thanks, Mr. Ravi, that would be great." I navigated down the right hallway to the entrance of the first gym. Above the double-doors, a bronze sign read Wesley Stone Gymnasium. A lump formed in my throat. I had no idea. I tucked my display board under my arm, pulled out my phone and typed a quick message to Damian Dermite. Did you tell them to come? The school filled with the murmur and clatter of people filing into the front lobby and down the hall. Most of them dragged their feet, quietly whispering to each other. The sense of urgency wasn't present, but rather a deflated look of sadness and despair. In just a short time, life

escaped from Timpleville. I realized I was their last chance, the final option before the military and police declared the town a write-off. Was it possible Timpleville could be quarantined and perhaps destroyed? Would we have to be removed from our homes and forced to resettle somewhere else? Maybe I wasn't the solution. Maybe I didn't have the answers.

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Alex Thomas

A flare lit up the interior of the school from outside, followed by a startling scream. Faces of hundreds of people turned down the hallway toward the front entrance. Another victim had become possessed. The sky opened up all over; the door was no longer just over Screaming Ridge.

"I can't hold on, Alex," Wesley said. "I need to go home." My skin tightened. The nerves in my body pulsated, transmitting countless messages in my brain. I could hardly find space for them. The voices became overwhelming again.

"Please, hold on Wesley, I just need a bit more time." I rushed to the gym stage where a stack of tables was set up, ready for the students to take. I grabbed one, unfolded the legs and propped up the display board. Banners were already set up above the curtains, Welcome to the 15th annual Timpleville Entrepreneurial Fair, 2015. Mr. Ravi's custodial team entered the gym from the backstage doors, with a sound system and folding chairs.

Mr. Pembleton snuck in behind them and tapped me on the shoulder. "Are you okay?" he asked. "Can I let the other students in? Do you need more time?"

"Where's Daisy?" I asked. "Just as soon as the mic is set up, I'm good. But I won't start without Daisy."

"The people are getting restless," Mr. Stanson shouted,

poking his head through the gym doors. "Alex, how soon can you be ready?"

"I need Daisy," I replied.

Mr. Stanson turned back into the hall and shouted. "Where's Daisy? Does anyone know where Daisy is?" He stepped into the gym, buttoning up his collar and fixing his tie. "Who's Daisy?"

I propped up the display board, re-gluing some of the letters back on. My stomach gurgled and moaned. Through the gym doors, Henry and Rudy walked in, followed by a group of eighth-graders from my school. They walked up to the stage and grabbed a table for their projects and began setting up. More students piled in, quietly and calmly getting their presentations ready. Mr. Ravi shuffled from table to table along with Mr. Pembleton, making sure everyone had what they needed.

I scratched at my arms, eyeing the gym doors. I checked my phone. Damian had not returned my text.

The lights flickered. A drop of blood rolled off my wrist and landed on the gym floor.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned around. Daisy leaned against the stage, gasping for air. "Where's my husband," she whispered.

I inched closer to her. "Pardon?"

"Where's my husband?" She looked at me; only Daisy wasn't there. "Where is he?"

The front door of the gym burst open again. The townsfolk were ready.

"Who is your husband?" I asked.

Daisy pushed past me, scanning the crowd of people pouring into the gym. Her head bobbed about frantically, eyeing every face in the room. She clenched her fists, squeezing them so tight her hands shook. "Umar. Umar Ravi." The lights flickered again. Daisy reached out to me before collapsing to the floor.

A sharp pain jumped up my spine. Voices in my head slipped out, crying for help, crying for answers. I picked Daisy up and guided her to the stage. I jumped up, waving Henry over.

"Alex, what's up? What's going on with Daisy?" Henry marched past a couple of tables and stepped up onto the stage with me.

"The light, it must have hit her outside. She's got it now, too."

Henry swallowed and knelt to her. "Daisy? Are you there? Talk to me."

"I don't know what to do," I muttered, "I'm not ready for this. Everyone is counting on me."

Henry lifted Daisy's head and placed it onto his lap. Rubbing her hair, he looked out to the people. They stood shoulder to shoulder, their faces filled with hope. "They're so quiet," he whispered.

Through the countless faces, sad and confused, I saw her, practically hidden by all the people. Regan Dermite, looked out to me, half her face blocked by a man in a sports jacket. I walked over to the microphone and pulled it off the stand. Clicking the 'on-switch,' I tapped the mouthpiece a couple of times and cleared my

throat.

I looked out again to the blur of people. Regan was in front of me now. I reached into my pocket and checked my phone. A message had come through from Damian.

Cops.

I placed the microphone back on the stand, pulled my sleeves over my arms and swiftly stepped off the stage.

Seconds later, a herd of law enforcement officers entered the front doors, led by a man in a black suit. Like a ripple in the water, the people shuffled to either side, squeezing closer to one another. The man in the black suit stepped up on the stage as a half-dozen officers followed behind.

"Sorry for the interruption folks, but I'm afraid we need to shut down this event tonight."

For the first time, a hum of whispers and chattering bounced off the gym walls. The man scanned the crowd, finally pointing to Ms. Mesh rubbing her arms near the front of the gym by the stage doors. He nodded to the officers who hurried across the stage, grabbing her by the hands and forcing her against the wall. Two of the officers held Ms. Mesh while another threw handcuffs on her wrists. She looked up to me for a second before being pushed out the stage door and out of sight.

The crowd stirred. A woman raised her hands over her head. "What do we do now?"

Principal Stanson rushed up to the stage and grabbed the microphone. He lifted his hand out in front of him, patting the air,

gesturing for the people to calm down. "Chief, please, you can't shut this down."

"And you are?" the chief asked.

"I'm the Principal of Timpleville Public School." Mr. Stanson pointed to a larger woman in high heels and a bright red dress, standing near my table. "And this is Mrs. Fitzpatrick, the Head of this High School."

"So?" the chief asked, waving in more police officers from the back. He pointed to a scruffy-haired boy with black nail polish and socks hiked up to his knees. Red marks lined his face and arms. The police hustled over and cuffed him.

"So?" replied Mr. Stanson. "This is all we have left in our town. We've been trapped inside for six days. This is our last chance to be together. In desperate times like this, we need to reach out to our children. Please, if you can give this town anything, at least give us this tonight."

The chief checked his phone for a second before looking back up to Mr. Stanson. He turned to the crowd, filling the gym like sardines, stretching out into the halls and beyond. He rechecked his phone and nodded. "Okay. You have one hour."

A burst of sighs filled the gym like air released out of a tire. Mr. Stanson stepped across the stage and extended his hand out to the chief. "Thank you."

The chief shook Mr. Stanson's hand and looked down again for a third time at his phone. "I just need one favor from you."

"Absolutely, just name it," replied Mr. Stanson.

"Constable Ryan has fallen ill; we can't risk any of our staff catching this virus as we are short-staffed as it is. The army has been called in, but may not arrive for several days. We have reasons to believe a boy has passed on this virus to our Constable and is responsible for the outbreak in Timpleville and three neighboring villages. He is highly contagious and must be removed from this school—this town. So, Mr. Stanson, you can have your...your little tea party here tonight, if you can hand over Alex Thomas."

Like a dagger slicing into my chest, I pulled back, nearly tripping over my chair.

Daisy looked at me, resting her head in Henry's hands. She lifted herself up and leaned over to me. I held out my hands as she stumbled forward. I wrapped my arms around her. "What's happening?"

"Daisy?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied.

"You're back."

She pulled away for a moment, looking at the fresh cuts on her arms. "Where did I go?"

Valerio appeared at my table, with Bradley. Their eyes looked blankly at me. Behind them, the faces of hundreds of people fearfully turned in my direction.

I touched Daisy's forehead and looked into her eyes. "You didn't go anywhere. You just bumped your head."

The chief walked across the stage and stopped at my table and display. Stepping down, he glanced at the words on my board,

Spirits of Timpleville. Analyzing the presentation, he adjusted his holster. Two officers stood behind him.

I placed my hands over Daisy's cuts and smiled at the chief of police.

The tall officer to his right unclipped his handcuffs and handed them to the chief.

"Alex Thomas?"

I swallowed.

The sound of a baby crying rang out from the hallway.

A thin stream of blood trickled down my hand.

"Are you Alex Thomas?" asked the chief again.

The stage door opened behind me, and Damian Dermite stepped out, walking up onto the stage. "Yes," said Damian. "I am Alex."

Chapter Forty: Meeting Wesley Stone

The tall police officer clipped the handcuffs around Damian's wrists, pulling his arms behind his back and locking them.

The chief picked up a business card from the table and placed it in his shirt pocket. He adjusted his badge and turned away from Daisy and me.

"Make sure my sis gets home safe," Damian whispered to me while being escorted past.

The officer walked Damian toward the front doors of the gym. Of all the times to have difficulty processing anything, at that moment, I was blank. Before exiting, Damian nodded at a curious man standing by the entrance. Dressed in a beige suit, he returned the nod and then reached out to hold hands with a woman and a little girl. Damian looked back at me one last time and winked before the doors closed behind him.

"That's them," Wesley whispered. My body tingled from head to toe. "They're here, my parents, little Chelsey. My family is here." A sharp pain steamrolled up the back of my head again. My spine heated up.

My emotions mixed with Wesley's as I tried to grasp what Damian had just done for me, for Timpleville. He'd come through for us. The guy just gave up everything. He actually cared about something other than himself. Maybe Daisy was right, maybe Damian did have a good side to him.

"Alex, it hurts." Daisy stood beside me now. Her skin looked pale—the blue from her eyes had turned to an eerie gray.

"I know, I know it hurts," I replied.

On the stage, Mr. Stanson held the microphone. Beads of sweat formed under his thick sideburns and dorky glasses.

"Are you going to help us?" a woman with bleached blonde hair and bright pink lipstick shouted from the back of the gym by the storage room. "They took my son. I don't understand what's happening to my son." She pushed her way to the front of the stage. The people around her shuffled to the side, unfazed by her aggression. She looked up to Mr. Stanson, pointing her trembling finger at him. "What are we doing here? I want my son back."

I squeezed Daisy's hand and guided her to the side of the stage by the stairs. I helped her up and stopped beside Mr. Stanson. He handed me the microphone. A light mist covered the insides of his glasses.

"Your son is Owen," I said to the woman.

She closed her eyes and nodded.

"And your name is Margaret."

Again, she nodded.

"Well Margaret, this is my friend, Daisy." I lowered myself to my knees, guiding Daisy down with me. I faced her, looking into her eyes. "She hurts. Daisy hurts like your son hurts." I placed my hand on Daisy's head. A woman's voice echoed inside me, like an animal trapped in a cage. "There's a woman, who would like to say goodbye to her husband. This woman died last summer in a terrible

storm. She's here tonight, inside the mind of Daisy Darlington."

Tears welled up in Daisy's eyes.

"But I'm not going to help Daisy. I'm not going to help you either."

The woman turned to the people beside her and shook her head. Her angry words washed out by the loud buzz of frustration throughout the gym.

"There is someone here who never got the recognition he deserved. This person can hear all the voices, every cry, every tear." I pointed to the woman with the bleached blonde hair. "He can hear your son, Owen."

"Owen? He can hear Owen?" The woman reached her hands out to me, her pink lipstick smeared along her cheek. Black eyeliner ran down her face. "Owen? I love you, Owen!"

"Daisy?" I said.

"Yes, Alex?" Her face grimaced.

"I'm going now."

Daisy's mouth stretched along her cheeks, forcing out a smile. She sniffed, biting her upper lip. "Okay."

I lowered myself to her again. "You're going to be alright. Wesley will make this all better. He will listen to the souls of Timpleville. He will fix all this...this suffering. He will make sure every spirit is heard."

"Alex?" Daisy inhaled, relaxing her body on the stage.

"Yes?"

"I love you."

Her words danced inside me, taking away all the pain along my head and spine. A white light pierced through the back of my eyes, pulling Daisy's face away from me. The voices escaped from my control. Visions of people appeared in my mind, the faces of mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and children—thousands of children—and then I saw him. For the first time, Wesley Stone was there, standing on the stage in the gym that was named after him.

Bradley Blunker hid in the arms of his weeping parents. Jeffrey's words spilled out from Wesley, for all to hear. His host, Gavin Langley, locked up in a high-security facility outside of town, felt Jeffrey's soul escape him. Gavin got his mind back. It would only be a matter of time before Gavin Langley would pass the government tests and be safely reunited with his family.

Jeffrey Blunker, at the same time, said goodbye. No longer robbed of life, no longer confused about his exit, Jeffrey lifted his soul and returned to the afterlife.

Valerio Del Porto sat quietly at his own table. He had written a children's book about him and his brother. He titled it, *Brothers 4 life*. On his laptop, he played a slideshow of Jared skateboarding and setting off fireworks in their backyard. The video looped over and over again. Not once did Valerio take his eyes off the screen that night. He had said goodbye to Jared the week before. I knew Valerio wanted to move forward, he just needed a bit more time.

My body lifted out into the halls and parking lot. Hundreds of people lined up, carrying bouquets of flowers while holding tightly

onto their families. The sun set through the dense clouds, changing the sky into a canvas of majestic purples and warm reds.

I remained a distant observer for hours that night. No police officers came by to break it up, no government officials stepped in. I saw every last resident of our town walk through the doors of Timpleville High. The entrepreneurs came out with profits—the townsfolk came out with closure.

A quiet sobbing filled my senses as I returned to the Wesley Stone Gymnasium. Mr. Ravi stood in the center of the gym. Beside him, was Daisy. The two locked arms, listening intently to Wesley's words. "I am sorry for leaving you," he said. Wesley's voice took on the accent of Mr. Ravi's wife. "You must know, I've been with you every day since the storm. I had held your hand at night when you cried for me. I sat in the office at Timpleville Public School when you were interviewing for your job. I will always be close by. I promise." Wesley slipped off the stage and walked over to the center of the gym. His chiseled features and broad shoulders dwarfed Daisy and Mr. Ravi. I had no idea Wesley was such a big kid.

"It's time," Daisy whispered. "I can feel her."

Mr. Ravi turned to Daisy, lifting her hand to his forehead. "I love you my...my sweet," he whispered, wiping his eyes.

Daisy gasped, pulling her hand away from Mr. Ravi. She buckled over, short of breath. "She's gone. I felt her go."

More voices sifted into my thoughts. The hands on the clock moved steadily over the numbers. The people in the gym continued

to browse the E-Fair projects, slipping into the other gyms to see the older students. For the first time in ages, the town began to feel...normal. Sure there were tears, but there was happiness as well.

I'm not sure I would ever be able to explain what happened to me during those weird hours. To say I left my body and drifted through a layered time and space would be the best way to describe the experience. As the night drew to a close, Wesley and I knew there was one final chapter we needed to complete before closing the doors.

Chapter Forty-One: The Drawing

Drifting back to the Wesley Stone gym, one voice remained in my mind. All the spirits had returned to the clouds—all, except one. Floating down to Wesley, I once again returned to...me, my physical me. Wesley's presence felt stronger than ever, his mind—clearer. As we connected, I felt cheated. There were so many questions I had been thinking about for ages. I wanted Wesley to help me. He had guided me through so much, making me the confident person I had always wanted to be. I didn't want him to go.

"What really happened to me at Screaming Ridge that evening in July? Did I actually fall off the cliff?" The energy shifted through the nerves of my brain, firing around, bringing me images of that day. The white cat had led me to the house, to the room—Kaylee Cooper's room. Wesley's voice filled my head, escaping into the gym. He was saying goodbye. His parents, his sister, they stood in front of me—in front of us.

Wesley continued to control my body as though I was the one inside him.

"Don't go, Wesley. I need you," I said. "The white cat, he was yours, wasn't he? He ran away when you left your family. Mr. Ravi's wife took care of it until it found Daisy and I. Is that right?"

Wesley's dad wrapped his arm around his wife. He smiled down at his daughter.

"Don't say goodbye," I said. Daisy's face appeared—she sat at our table, with tears streaming down her face. Henry sat with her. The two listened carefully to Wesley's words. Around the gym were hundreds of people, all soaking in the moment. "Wesley stop. What happened when the light hit me? Why did I fall off the cliff? Did you do this to me? Did you want me to fall?"

Little Chelsey Stone let go of her dad and walked over to Wesley. Her eyes, filled with pain and happiness, seemed to show an understanding of what was happening. She loved her brother, she knew he was finally saying goodbye.

"Have you seen Kaylee Cooper?" I asked. "Wesley? I have felt her close to me. Why hasn't she tried to make contact with me?"

Wesley's parents stepped forward and embraced him. The people in the gym applauded.

"The deer, when I saw the deer that day, was that Kaylee?"

Mr. Pembleton took the microphone from Wesley's hands. The Stone Family continued to hold on to each other. Wesley's words were fading from my thoughts.

"What about the crow? Maybe the white cat? was it Kaylee's face I saw at the bottom of the lake? Or was it mine?"

The lights in the room brightened. My body trembled.

Darkness.

Opening my eyes, I found myself face down on the gym floor.

Mr. Pembleton reached out and guided me back up to my feet. Henry and Rudy rushed over. Daisy stood beside me.

"You did good, Scarface," Rudy said, patting my back.

"Seriously man, you did real good."

Henry shook my hand, like the gentleman he always was. He didn't have anything to say, but he didn't need to. He was my friend, and I knew we were okay.

"Alex? How are you feeling?" Daisy asked.

"Not great," I replied. My stomach twisted around in knots, I wanted to throw up.

Mr. Pembleton pulled out a chair and sat me down at our table. The people in the gym continued to clap. With the microphone in his hand, Mr. Pembleton waved out to the crowd. "Okay, okay, I think we need to give our hero some space here. Please hold your applause."

I didn't notice right away, but Wesley's mom sat down beside me. I looked at her, feeling the pain leave her body. "We will be forever grateful," she said. Her gentle voice soothed me, like my own mother when I was sick in bed.

I smiled at her for a moment, before turning to Daisy. Watching Mr. Pembleton step back up onto the stage, she played with the bracelet I had given to her on our first date.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," Mr. Pembleton began. "It's been a long night. But wow, what a night it has been." He extended his arm out, directing it to me. Polite applause filled the gym. "By now, you

have had the opportunity to say goodbye to your loved ones who have passed on." He lowered his head. "May they rest in peace." Mr. Pembleton paused for a moment before continuing. "But, we need to think about your children, the future of Timpleville. Being able to close the door on our pasts is one thing—a valuable thing, but what makes this town so strong is our ability to pick up and move forward."

The lights in the gym flickered, sending a shiver all over my body. "Did you see that?" I whispered to Daisy.

She shook her head.

Mr. Pembleton walked to the stairs at the side of the stage. "I would like to take this time to thank all the students who participated in what can certainly go down as one of the most memorable Entrepreneurial Fairs we have ever had."

"Are you sure you didn't see it?" I asked Daisy.

"See what? What's going on?" she replied.

"Something feels funny."

"What are you talking about? Are you going to be sick?" she asked.

Mr. Pembleton acknowledged the students grouped together near the front of the gym. "I hope your business venture was profitable."

I let go of Mrs. Stone's hand and rubbed my temples. The ache in my stomach turned into a lump in my throat. "I feel it."

"What do you feel?" Daisy asked.

"Can I please ask our biggest investor, from Stone Property Enterprises to come up to the stage," Mr. Pembleton said. "I'm honored tonight to introduce you to Mr. Anthony Stone."

The lights flickered again. A faint whisper bounced around the room. "Someone is here," I asserted.

Daisy leaned into me. "Who? Who is here? Is Wesley still with you?"

"No. It's not him. Someone else is here."

Mr. Pembleton handed Mr. Stone the microphone and shook his hand. "Thank you, Mr. Pembleton, you are too kind." He walked back to the center of the stage, sitting down on the edge with his legs hanging over. He looked over to my table, rubbing the dimple in his chin. His daughter, Chelsey ran up to him, jumping onto the stage, snuggling into his chest. Mr. Stone's wife touched my hand and elegantly walked up to join her family.

I sat on my hands, forcing myself to focus on Mr. Stone. He kissed his wife and helped her onto the stage ledge. The family sat together as if they were getting ready for a photograph. Only one member was missing. Or was he?

The vibrations of a soft voice hovered over the hairs on the back of my neck like someone was telling me a secret.

"Alex Thomas, would you and your business partner be so kind as to join us up here on the stage?" Mr. Stone lifted his arms and initiated another round of applause.

Daisy stood up with me—holding hands we approached the

Stone family. Taking a deep breath, I tried Wesley's techniques and channeled my energy away from the voice. I needed to fill my mind with emotions. Wesley taught me that feelings were stronger than thoughts. I didn't understand why there were still words floating around uncontrollably in my head. I had no choice. I whispered into Daisy's ear as we shimmied ourselves up onto the stage ledge. "Will you be my girlfriend?"

Daisy squeezed my hand and smiled. "You're asking me this now?"

"Yes, I'm sorry," I replied, holding my breath.

"You have the strangest timing."

"I know." I curled my toes inside my shoes.

"Of course," replied Daisy.

Like resting in a cozy bed after an exhausting day, I felt the voice fade away. The tingles, the quiet words were gone, for now. I didn't want to hear them anymore. I only wanted my own.

Mr. Stone passed me his business card and shook my hand. "I would like to make an investment in your company," he said.

I nodded, already anticipating what he was going to say.

"Thanks, Mr. Stone, but we don't need your money."

Mr. Stone looked at his wife and back to me. "I don't understand," he replied. "I'm willing to make a sizeable investment with you tonight. You have a gift young man, a powerful gift."

I turned to Daisy. Her blue eyes glowed. Her face beamed. "I know I do," I replied. "I really do."

I hugged Daisy. I didn't want to let her go. Daisy was my girlfriend. I was no longer trapped in that dark room in my mind. The pieces of the puzzle were finally falling into place.

"Can I ask you a question?" Chelsey jumped off the stage. She had freckles on her face, perfectly scattered along her cheeks.

"Yes, of course," I replied.

"Where is my brother?"

My ears tingled. The quiet murmurs returned to my head. The gym became cold. "He's in a special place now," I said, forcing myself to focus on the girl.

Chelsey lifted her hand and pointed to the ceiling. "He's in the clouds," she said. "I know that already."

I let go of Daisy, squeezing my own hands, hoping no one could see me shake. "Then I don't understand your question."

"He left his body behind. I want to know where it is." She pulled out a piece of paper from her little heart-shaped purse and handed it to me.

On the page was a crayon drawing of a man, a woman and a little girl holding hands. They stood side by side on a thin line of green scribbled grass under a tree and a blue circle. On the other side of the picture was a gravestone with Wesley's name written on top. Under the stone, below the scribbled green grass was an empty coffin.

"I know," whispered the voice.

I couldn't escape it. I closed my eyes, searching my mind.

Who's there?

Mrs. Stone stepped over to us, placing her hands on Chelsey's shoulders. "We would like to put our son to rest. It pains us that we don't know where his body is."

An image of a light, beaming through a dark, cold, empty space, appeared in front of me. I shook my head, rubbing my temples again. Daisy wasn't the last piece of my puzzle. She was my happiness and love that I had been dying for, but I realized there was something else, something that had been eating away at me for a long time. *Is that you?*

I knelt down in front of Chelsey and looked at her in the eyes. Wesley didn't have the answers, he didn't know everything. However, there was one person who knew where his body was. I should have known it all along. "There is someone here to see you."

Through the crowd of people, still filling the Wesley Stone Gymnasium, Regan Dermite appeared. Her eyes widened, her mouth stretched widely along her face. She had been learning, just like I had been. She connected, the same way I did. It took her time, but I knew Regan was hosting an extraordinary girl in her mind. She placed her tiny hands on Chesley's face. Dozens of bracelets still decorated her wrists, covering up the scratches along her arms. Regan looked into Chelsey's eyes before speaking for the first time since her parents died. "I know where Wesley is," she said.

I realized, at that very moment, I was supposed to fall off that cliff. I was supposed to sink to the bottom of that dark, cold lake.

Chelsey's eyes lit up. She placed her hands on top of Regan's.
"You do?"

"I do," replied Regan. Only I knew it wasn't Regan's words.

Daisy turned to me, tears instantly flooded her eyes again. "Is it her?"

I nodded. "Yes. She's back. The little angel is back."

Regan took the picture from Chelsey and pointed to the blue circle by the tree. "Wesley is holding his breath underwater. Wanna know how I know?"

THE END

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Christopher Francis was born in Brisbane, Australia, on June 21, 1974. At 19, he was accepted into the Animation program at Sheridan College, and then graduated with a degree in Sociology from McMaster University. Following a two year adventure overseas working with children, Christopher completed a Bachelor of Education at York University. He is now teaching junior level students in Burlington, Ontario.

Through Christopher's experience working with children, he found writing and illustrating to be one of his passions. Currently working on a middle grade series, Christopher has recently completed the first four books entitled: *Solving Damian Dermite*, *Respecting Mr. Ravi* ,

Remembering Kaylee Cooper and Alex was Here. Recently, *Remembering Kaylee Cooper*, has been published by Curiosity Quills Press Publishing House. In addition, Christopher has completed a Paranormal Teen Fiction novel, titled, *Stoneway*, and recently finished the Teen Fiction Sci-Fi, titled, *They Came from the Trees*, based on a short story called, *That Thing in the Sky*. He has also created eight primary levelled books called *How to sneak your Monster into School*, *Mr. Pancake Turkey*, *I Don't Want to go to Sleep! It's Up to You*, *How Mr. Monster Biggens Changed My Life*, *There's and Ogre-Beast in the Playground*, *Bigger than Alexander* and *The Whispering Tree*. Additionally, Christopher has illustrated children's novels for several independent authors and publishing companies including *Kids4kids.com*, *The Hamilton Spectator*, *BrendanKelly Publishing*, *Highview Press.com* and *Trimatrix*. Most recently, They all can be viewed on francisart.com.