A Snapping Sound

by Represent

Summary

"You're new Sam, so you don't know. This will be the only warning you get. Don't trust your eyes or you'll be tricked. Nobody in Amity is who they seem. Nobody."

Notes

Update 6/16/2016: This story is being put on hold while I write the final chunk.
Update 11/1/2015: I restructured the fic so diary entries are found at the bottom of a chapter instead of in having their own separate chapters.

Warning— This is a horror AU. Future chapters have disturbing images and scenes.

Thank you Cordria for beta-ing this enormous beast. Your relentless hacking and slicing was just what this fic needed to get it into shape. Also, your endless knowledge about hospitals, police, school suicide protocols, arson... and all things dark are equal parts impressive and unnerving.
She noticed the chandelier first. It was loud; an overabundance of crystals that glittered and fluttered overhead. A gust from the front door caused the gold-drizzled chains to sway gently, glinting in the low light. Rubies. Tacky, icky things.

Sam didn't like excess. She had never not had it, therefore she had the privilege of despising it.

"Well, what do you think?" the realtor asked, spinning on her stilettos. Her hair was ashy blonde, skin a leathery tan— probably from one too many hours on a beach somewhere far away from here, somewhere expensive. She held out her hands, palms up, in front of herself as she gestured to the enormous front hallway and double staircase. The pair of stairs ascended on each side, curving gently, to meet together at the second floor landing.

"It's beautiful," Sam's mother sighed dreamily. "Lovelier than any other house we've seen in this city."

"It's perhaps the oldest," the realtor said. "The man who built it had a taste for grandeur. The man who added onto it, even more."

"The craftsmanship is really something. They don't make houses like this anymore. I can't believe the asking price is so low," her father uttered, taking a few steps over to the wall to run a hand along the smooth, unblemished, wood panel. Mahogany. Or so they had been told. All original, nineteen twenties. If there was one thing her dad loved, it was being sold the promise of fine craftsmanship. Their old garage was full of brand new wood-working tools. He had a habit of starting things and never finishing them. "What do you say, Sammy?"

Sam glowered. "I don't think it's big enough," she cut sarcastically.

Her parents exchanged a knowing look, before they powered on as if she hadn't spoken.

She heaved a sigh that ruffled her bangs. Sometimes she felt like a ghost within her own family.

_**Great. Yet another extravagant place too large for a family of three,**_ she thought. She crossed her arms and glared at each of the many details, as if they had personally offended her in their ostentatiousness. Intricate glass and metalwork chandeliers, musty runners that had dizzying floral patterns, walls and ceilings covered in frescos of nude women and beasts. The only redeeming thing was it's age. The whole place was dusty. Sam inhaled slowly. The scent of time. Like an old book. Despite being cleaned before this showing, particles hung in the air, a lingering haze, as if this house could never be— would never be— without a thin film of dust. It had history, and history meant there was—

A shadowed movement near the second story railing caught Sam's eye. She whipped her head around and gazed up, seeing nothing, but she felt as though something else was seeing _her._

"So… anyone die here?" she found herself asking.
Her mother shot her a warning look.

The realtor paused mid-sentence. She struggled wordlessly for a moment, hand flopping, before she twitched her head over to the second story to follow Sam's gaze. She gave Sam a patronizingly polite smile, lips strained. "Why do you ask, dear?"

"It's just... a house this old...I'm sure it has some stories, right?"

"As a matter of fact, there was a death. Two and a half years ago. Suicide. Horrible thing," the realtor muttered. She gripped the papers in her hand tightly. For a brief second something flickered across her face, then she was all bubbles again. "You two don't seem like the type to believe in the paranormal," she laughed in her parent's direction.

Her mother pulled a face. "Of course not."

A death huh? *Interesting.*

The realtor braved on, "*Anyway...* It's in a great location. Five blocks west is the main entrance to the park, which has a playground and man-made pond..."

Sam remembered that park from the car ride. It was badly maintained, poorly lit, spanned five blocks, and was surrounded with a rusted gate. The only thing of note was the eclectic mix of businesses near the entrance: a 7-11, a frozen yogurt shop, and a cemetery.

Sam tilted her chin thoughtfully, combat boots clunking noisily around the front landing as she paused at each doorway, sticking her head inside each room. Beyond each lay a huge room with more wood paneling, more hand chiseled arches, more hand painted ceilings. At the left staircase she stopped and hooked her arm around the railing, leaned back, elbow interlocked, and spun idly around to gaze up at the empty second story landing. Above her a painting of lions devouring gazelles swirled. "I like this place," Sam decided. A rare smile crossed her lips.

Silence.

Sam blinked and righted herself to glance back at her parents. Her mother was gazing at her, jaw unhinged, as if she couldn't believe that Sam and her agreed on something.

Her father raised an eyebrow. "You do?" he asked.

Sam's smile faded. She rolled her eyes and scuffed a bit at the old hardwood floor. "It's alright," she admitted with a boneless shrug.

"That's it then," her father said, addressing the realtor. "We'll take it."

Welcome to Amity Park: self-proclaimed most haunted city in America, and her new home.

Sam peered out her window at the dense pine trees and the hastily attached fire escape that looked like some kind of last minute addition. She picked this room because of it's quick escape route, liking the idea that she could sneak in and out of the house at will. Outside the sun was falling as night approached. They had been moving in all day. Sam stretched a bit, wincing at the tense muscles in her back and neck.
Her parents said they moved to be closer to her grandmother, but Sam knew the truth. They moved because of her and all her 'issues.' Her rebellion, her lack of friends, her self-isolation, black eyeliner, metal music, sarcasm, morbid fascinations... and, yeah, she might've been in a few fights. But she hadn't started any, despite what her parents thought. She had defended herself.... and got expelled.

Sam grunted and lugged a box full of photos and books onto her new bed. She glared down at it.

Moving felt like running away. She wasn't afraid of her peers. She was different and different was good. Different also stuck out in high school. The tauntings, the bullying... Casper High would be the same. Summer vacation officially ended tomorrow, and with it began a new school year, in a new town, with the same old cliques.

"Samantha?"

Sam paused, seeing her mother hovering in the hallway. "What?"

"Need any help unpacking?" Pamela pushed herself off of the doorframe and moved into the bedroom, looking across Sam's things with ill-concealed worry.

Sam gazed at her horror movie posters and black ruffled bed sheets. "I'm fine."

"I wish you had just let the movers do this for you," Pamela said quietly. She tugged at her silk robe, pulling it tighter across her body with a shiver. As she walked near Sam's desk her fingers reached out to graze several of Sam's sketchbooks.

"I like doing things myself," Sam muttered. "Besides, I hate when people go through my stuff." She sent a pointed look at her mother.

Pamela withdrew her probing fingers and crossed her arms, holding them around her middle. She gazed at Sam for a long moment before she sighed and took a few steps forward to brush some of Sam's black hair out of her eyes. A lock was tucked behind her ear. "This will be so much better for you, honey." She smiled, cupping Sam's cheeks. "You can start over, clean slate."

Sam frowned, twisting out of her mother's grasp to look back down at her records. She flipped through a few of them silently. She wasn't sure if she wanted a clean slate.

"You know, when you were little you were so optimistic, so happy, so... different," her mother continued. "Your father and I just want you to be our happy, little girl again."

Sam gritted her teeth, not knowing what to say. It seemed happiness was something that faded with age. "That's not me." She was a realist. The only hope she had abandoned was false hope. "That's just not me. Not anymore."

"I know, sweetie, I know," her mother hummed, petting the top of her head for a few moments. Sam forced herself to stay in the embrace. Touching wasn't her thing, especially touching near her neck. "Anyway, isn't this place magnificent? And the town is... charming."

Sam peered around. Her room: four walls covered in purple victorian wallpaper, filigree trim, a four poster bed with plentiful pillows, and a tall three-up bay window complete with a window seat that overlooked the side garden. The garden itself was unkempt, grown wild from years of neglect. Several enormous pine trees swayed gently in the chilly September wind. They loomed up the side of the house to form a natural wall. "It's definitely different," she said. And she liked different. Different was good.
"You're the new girl?"

Sam tore her gaze off of her locker and turned, schedule in hand, to look over at a short African-American boy. He had on a red beret, glasses, toothy grin, and loose baggy pants. All of these things combined made him feel warm and likable. Sam shut her locker with a bang. "I'm the New Girl," she confirmed.

"Oh." He looked flummoxed for a moment, before he tilted his head. "Is that nose ring real?"

Sam reached up to tap at the ring. It bounced several times convincingly.

"...You really like black, huh?" the kid noted.

Sam resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Instead she stared straight back at him, face emotionless. "No, I hate black. I'm only wearing it to be ironic," she deadpanned.

To her surprise, the kid threw his head back and laughed. It was a loud and rambunctious laugh, one that made several students pause and look at them, their eyes lingering curiously. She could feel the weight of their judgements already. Her shield flew up, her shoulders hunched. "What do you want?" Sam snapped.

"Oh, sorry. I'm Tucker, Tucker Foley." He extended a hand, but took it back with a nervous chuckle when Sam made no move to shake it. He tapped his hand a few times against his leg instead. "I'm—uh—I'm supposed to show you around. You know, welcome you to Casper High. Go Ravens, and all that."

Sam slumped a little, feeling her guard break down at the pouty face the kid was giving her. "Look, sorry. I'm Sam Manson." She held out her schedule apologetically. "Wanna show me where these classes are?"

Tucker perked up. He grabbed her schedule from her, straightening his glasses as he squinted to read the small print. "Right. Oh man—You have homeroom with Teslaff. This way."

Casper High wasn't as big as her last high school. There were two main wings, east and west, connected by a large middle corridor where the cafeteria and main office were. The gym was near the back of the eastern wing, down a narrow set of cement steps, next to the football field. An early-morning mist curled about the grounds making the school feel sleepy. Beyond the football field a dense pine forest walled off the boundaries of the yard.

Halfway through her tour Sam knew she no longer needed directions, but she kept her mouth shut and continued nodding as Tucker dragged her along. Her mother had sent her off this morning with one task: make a friend. She was trying. This Foley kid seemed nice enough, although he was a little strange and talked a lot.

"—and this is where the band practices," Tucker was babbling, gesturing towards a pair of twin doors. "It's empty most of the time. Kids use it to make out." He wagged his eyebrows suggestively at her.

Sam wrinkled her nose, unsure if he was flirting with her. Beyond the small windows Sam could see rows of seats. An auditorium. Although, it seemed empty. Empty except for… "Who's that?" Sam asked.

Tucker paused, following her gaze. "Oh," he stated.
"Oh?" Sam asked. She took a few steps closer to peek inside, curious. There was a young woman sitting at the end of the first row. Her head was tucked between her crossed arms, body bent, hair spilling across the table, obscuring her face. She looked… sad. Sam knew incredible sadness when she saw it. She felt the urge to open the door and ask her if she was okay.

Tucker sidled up between her and the handle, making Sam retreat, blocking her view. He held his open hands out in front of his chest. "That's someone you shouldn't bother."

"Why not?" Sam challenged. She bristled at the warning. She could talk to whomever she wanted. "That's… That's Valerie Gray," Tucker whispered. He glanced around the empty hallway like just speaking her name would cause something to happen. Nothing did.

Sam frowned. Everyone here seemed paranoid, on-edge, as if they were tip-toeing atop a minefield. Sam craned her neck to try and see around Tucker. "So, what'd she do?"

"She didn't do anything," Tucker glared, voice tinged with ire. His face softened after a moment and he sighed. His hand darted to readjust his glasses and he looked down at the linoleum floor.

The doors around them slammed open as the bell shrieked and within seconds they were engulfed by a sea of high schoolers. Chaos and chatter, scuffling and shoving. Sam stumbled as she got knocked in the shoulder. Tucker pressed her schedule back into her hands and gave her a thumbs up.

"We have English and US History together," he said loudly above the noise, "Try not to get lost until then."

"I won't get lost," Sam shot back defensively.

Tucker laughed another one of his boisterous laughs. His eyes twinkled with mirth. "I know you won't. The great Tucker Foley taught you, after all. Who can forget a face like this?" And with that parting remark he faded into a sea of sweaty youth.

Sam found herself alone, once again, in a crowd of people. She looked back through the door to the auditorium, but Valerie Gray was gone.

"So?"

Sam glanced up off of her plate. Her parents stared back at her expectantly. Her mother had on one of her trademark fake smiles. Sam looked back down at her plate and shoveled her broccoli around before trying to stab them over and over with the fork. "So, what?" she mumbled.

"How was your first day?" her father asked.

Sam shrugged, not really in the mood to talk about it. If she was being completely honest, she would rather just eat her dinner up in her room and avoid family time altogether, but instead she let out a slow breath and said, "Fine."

"You make any new friends?" her mother probed, while loading up her plate with salad. She smiled encouragingly.

Sam knew it must be hard on her parents, her being this way. Especially two gung-ho optimistic
bright shiny parents who had too much energy to know what to do with. Both jobless after inheriting a small fortune, they flung themselves at every and any cause. Already her mother had begun a petition to clean up Amity Park's namesake: the three-block-long central park that was quickly becoming a landfill. It was a trait that Sam both admired and hated. Oftentimes their campaigning bled into Sam's personal life. They pried with the same vigor they gave speeches. Always digging for an answer; never satisfied with the ones Sam gave.

"You don't make friends in a day," Sam stated flatly.

"Of course, honey," her father said. "But you are making an effort?"

"I said I would," Sam answered noncommittally. That seemed to appease her parents. They smiled at each other before returning to their meal. She thought of Tucker and Valerie, two people that she could, potentially, be friends with. But the thought of getting close to anyone made her tired. The people she loved had a habit of disappearing.

"I'm glad to hear that, honey," her mother said softly. "It'll be good to make some new friends. To move on."

Sam felt a snap of anger rush through her. Her eyes narrowed and her grip on her fork grew tight. "I'm not replacing anyone. I'm not moving on and just... just forgetting about her."

"We know" —her father blinked— "But—"

"It's not that easy," Sam continued. Her throat constricted and she felt her cheeks burn hot with frustration and sadness. Her neck ached. She reached back and rubbed it several times. "It's not that simple."

After dinner, Sam sped up the staircase, taking the steps two at a time. This house still didn't feel like her own. It had a dizzying amount of rooms. It didn't smell like home, it didn't sound like home. She stepped on the second step from the top and it creaked, loudly. She hadn't learned how to sneak about in this place, but it seemed like everything she touched creaked or moaned.

As she yanked herself to the top of the stairs, intent to lock herself in her room for the rest of the night, a movement from outside gave her pause. She whipped her head around and gazed out the large entry windows. A group of people walked down the street, bundled in close formation. A strange light bounced, as if someone was leading the way with a flashlight.

Sam frowned and padded her way down the hall until she reached the master bedroom, which overlooked the front lawn and the street.

A group of about fifteen people were huddled together on the sidewalk, stopped at the metal gate that marked the beginning of the house's cobblestone walkway. A man dressed in all black led the group. He had on a top hat and what looked like a genuine oil lantern. His hands gesticated wildly as he addressed the group. Sam pried the window open, just a little, to try and hear what he was saying. A bitingly cold breeze shot through and ruffled the curtains, but Sam couldn't make out what the man was saying. She watched until he made a small motion and turned, gazing once over the house, before moving on down the street, the throng of people following, a few snapping pictures. Sam hid behind the curtain and shut the window. Weird. Bizarre.

A gong-like sound resounded and echoed up the stairs into the room. It was deep and reverberated in
her chest. Sam jumped. The sound continued, hitting three or four notes. It was only when it hit that last discordant *bummmm* that Sam realized it was the doorbell.

Sam returned to the second story landing as her mother came whirling out from the dining area.

"Wow, that was something," her mother laughed breathlessly, although she looked frazzled. She peered through the small peephole in the door before she unlocked the deadbolt and cracked it open a bit. "Hello? Can I help you?"

"We hope so," a woman's voice laughed cheerily. "We're some of the neighbors. We thought we'd welcome you. So, you know, here we are. Welcome!"

Pamela opened the door fully. "Oh, hello. You gave us a scare. We weren't expecting anyone at this hour." The porch light illuminated two figures, one a taller African-American woman, the other, a lanky dark-haired teen with pale skin. The boy held a basket full of what looked like peaches. They stood awkwardly on the doorstep, even after Pamela motioned for them to step inside. "Come in, it's getting cold outside. You'll catch your death."

"Thank you," the lady smiled an enormous grin. The pair took a few steps inside and spun, once, around the entryway as if absorbing in every detail. Sam could see them clearly now in the light of the house.

The older woman looked about late-thirties, early forties. She was dressed in a pair of faded jeans and a tan leather jacket, maroon scarf wound around her neck. Her hair was wild, spilling in tight ringlets about her shoulders, skin dark and smooth, unblemished. Her smile grew nostalgic. Her hand moved to rest atop the shoulder of the boy in wonderment. The kid looked like some sort of actor, although she couldn't place exactly who. He had a timeless quality. He had on a soft-looking gray sweater and black pants. His dark hair was parted and sculpted with gel. Sam fidgeted against the banister, and immediately a pair of the bluest blue eyes were upon her. She felt like she had just swallowed an icicle. He made her nervous.

"Sam, come on down and meet…?"

"Evelyn." The woman smiled. "And this is Danny."

Mr. Blue— no *Danny*— sent her a shy smile. Evelyn tightened her grip on his shoulder.

"Pamela Manson," her mother introduced, shaking each of their hands. She seemed to like these two with all their politeness and peaches. She glanced down at the basket in awe. "These are just lovely. I didn't know peaches were in season."

"Oh, if you know where to look…" Evelyn waved a hand. "I saw the moving truck. Your family moved in about a week ago?"

"Yes, it's been a fiasco. Boxes everywhere," Pamela chattered. "Come on in, we'll put these in the kitchen. This way. " She wandered down the hallway.

Evelyn followed her mother, but the boy stayed behind.

Sam made her way down one of the staircases, managing not to trip. With a thud she landed on the last step and cast a wary gaze over at the boy.

He merely raised an eyebrow at her. "Nice boots."

"They're good for stomping."
"Sam's short for Samantha?"

"I prefer Sam," she said, clipped. She winced. This was exactly why she had trouble making friends. She was instantly suspicious of anyone that seemed to enjoy her company. She hated small talk, and had a biting sarcasm that scared away most prospects.

The boy merely grinned, unaffected. "Sam it is." He held out an arm and gestured at where her mother had trailed off. "After you, Sam."

Sam eyed him suspiciously, having never encountered a boy with manners. Immediately she wondered what his motives were. As she moved down the corridor she glanced over her shoulder at him, but he paid her little attention. He was looking up and down at the paintings, at the filigree, running a hand along the wood paneling. His fingertips traveled over the grooves of the hand-carved wood, knocking little pockets of dust free.

"...This is all…. new…" Evelyn was saying as the pair of them entered the kitchen.

"A lot of the old appliances were from the sixties, so we'll be replacing them. Don't want any accidental house fires now, do we?" her mother asked breezily. She placed the basket of peaches on the middle island. Already bits and pieces of the kitchen had been removed to prepare for the remodel. Most of the stovetops and the oven had been gutted.

"Oh certainly not," Evelyn agreed, although her face had lost it's rosy tinge. She was eyeing the torn up kitchen with ill-concealed distaste. "It's just, with a house this old one must be careful to preserve the original style."

Sam leaned against the counter and glanced over at the boy who was taking in the kitchen the way one took in their bedroom after a month long trip. She suddenly felt uneasy. Like, even though this was her house, she didn't belong here.

"Although we're all so glad your family moved in here," the woman continued. "Did you know they were going to demolish this house if no one bought it? A house such as this? What a waste."

Her mother paused in taking out two glasses for water and peered back at the pair of them. "Where did you say you two live?"

"Oh, just up the street," Evelyn beamed.

"Right," her mother breathed. "Would you like some water? Tea?"

"We're fine, thank you. So tell me, is it just you and your daughter? She looks to be, what? Fifteen? Sixteen? Almost the same age as you, Danny."

"She's sixteen. Sophomore in high school."

"She can talk, you know," Sam muttered.

"My husband's out running an errand but he'll be back any second," Pamela cut in smoothly, filling up her cup with tea, sipping at it nervously.

Evelyn blinked several times as she processed what her mother said. Realization dawned upon her features. She gasped. "Oh! Of course. I apologize. How rude of us to just barge in here and act like we own the place. We'll be on our way. It's getting late, anyway, and there's still plenty to do." She motioned for the boy to head for the front door. Sam wondered briefly who Evelyn was to him. A surrogate mother? Stepmother?
He pushed himself off of where he was leaning against the wall and followed Pamela and Evelyn as they made for the front entryway.

Sam took up the rear, watching their backs as they ducked through the dim lighting of the house. The lights glimmered off the boy's shoulders and cast strange shadows at his feet.

"I don't mean to rush you guys out, it's just that we weren't expecting visitors," Pamela explained, opening the front door.

"It was nice to meet you." Evelyn held out a hand. "I can't wait to get to know you and your family better."

As the two women exchanged pleasantries, Danny faced Sam. He tossed her a small smile. It was sweet. Sam couldn't help but return it.

"I'll see you around, Boots," he promised, then moved out of the house and onto the sidewalk before Sam could respond. The two of them vanished just as inexplicably as they had appeared. She peered beyond the curtain, unable to see their forms on the sidewalk or the street.

Her mother closed and locked the door. "Well," she announced, "they seemed nice."
"So, how are you liking Amity Park?"

Sam unrolled the top of her bag and took out her lunch, spreading it out across the cafeteria tabletop. Across from her Tucker settled into a chair, clattering down a plastic tray with a slice of pepperoni pizza. Her hand lingered atop a peach, one of the ones that the neighbors had brought over. "The people seem nice. We had a few come over and welcome us last night."

"Ew, what's that?"

Sam paused, peach halfway to her mouth. She glanced down at where Tucker was pointing, nose wrinkled in disgust. "That is a tofu and broccoli stir fry," she informed him. "With peanut sauce."

"Are you… like…?" Tucker asked, eyes wide behind his glasses.

Sam frowned. "A vegan? Yes."

"How do you get your protein?" Tucker tittered. "Don't you crave meat? Your body needs it, it's why we have these" —he tugged at his lip showing her his incisors— "'cause we're meat eaters—"

Sam took a gigantic bite into the peach instead of answering. Immediately something was wrong. An awful sour taste flooded her senses. The inside of the peach gushed mealy chunks of congealed goo into her mouth.

Sam lurched forward and spat it out, gagging, placing her hand over her mouth as she nearly vomited across the table top. She stumbled and ran over to the trashbin, spitting up into it over and over, trying to rid herself of the taste.

"Are you okay?" Tucker asked. He held out his bottle of Coke.

Sam grabbed it and sloshed a mouthful of it around in her mouth, spitting it out. She grimaced and wiped the side of her mouth with her sleeve. The taste lingered.

"That's weird," Tucker mentioned. "It looks perfect on the outside." He held the peach in his hand, spinning it around in the light.

Sam plucked up the peach, her stomach squirming mutinously just looking at it. The inside was black with rot. She tossed it into the trash. "Yeah, weird." She shuddered.

A voice with an accent chimed in. "Looks like day two isn't going so hot for the New Girl."

Sam spun. Two girls, arm in arm, peered at her. Mischief sparkled in their eyes. Besides the fact that one of them was a petite Latina woman with sloping curves, while the other a tall boyish blonde, the two could be twins. Their mannerisms were identical, as well as their mocking smiles and their cheerleading uniforms. Sam tensed. So it begins.

"Nice outfit," the blonde one piped up.

"Goth huh? Goth's super in. We were just wondering..."

"...are you, like, into Goth type things?"

Sam wondered what they thought constituted a Goth type thing. Honestly she was more punk than goth, but she doubted these girls knew the distinction. Their ability to finish each other's sentences was nauseating. Sam felt her stomach start to churn, yet again. "If you mean sacrificing cheerleaders
Both of them paused and peered at her like a dog smelling prey. Then the darker haired one laughed. It was light and airy and perfect, just like the rest of her. "I'm Paulina," introduced Miss Perfect. "And this is—"

"Star," finished Star. Great. Even their names were cute. "You're *funny*. Anyway, we run the Spirit Club here on campus. We thought you might be interested."

"Seeing as you, you know, dress that way."

Sam tried not to get offended. "Spirit Club?" she repeated. "Like school spirit?" She glanced down at her outfit. Black pants, black metal band shirt, black ripped up jeans jacket, black hoodie, complete with (surprise) black boots. "Me?"

They both laughed in unison. The blonde teetered drunkenly with mirth, her hands fluttering up to rest atop her breastbone. Sam's heart sank. Was this some kind of joke? Were they making fun of her? Mocking her?

"She thinks it's *school* spirit!" Star gasped. "Oh my God," Paulina giggled. "She's totally the cutest. We *must* have her."

"They mean *ghosts,*" Tucker piped up.

Sam blinked, having forgotten he was there.

Tucker was gazing at the three of them, expression furrowed and serious. "They run a club dedicated to speaking with and summoning spirits." He affixed Paulina with a wary look. "Dangerous stuff, disturbing the dead. Especially in this town. They should *stay* dead, if you ask me."

"Good thing no one asked you, Foley," Paulina snapped. Her face turned ugly. "We were talking to…"

"Sam," Sam supplied. "Yeah, we were talking to *Sam*. So stay out of it."

Tucker backed off. His gaze dropped to his shoes, cheeks red, visibly chastised. By the way he instantly surrendered Sam felt as if this had happened before, many times. He went back to his pizza and sat alone.

Sam frowned. She spun back around to face Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum. "That's not how you treat another person," she noted.

Paulina shrugged. "It's just Foley. He's used to it."

Sam opened her mouth to retort, then paused. Her mother would be furious to find out she had started something on day two, no matter how noble the cause. And while she was certain these girls would never be her friends, she didn't want to make any enemies. Especially enemies with the popular crowd. At least, not yet.

"So are you in or out, goth girl?" The two gave her a pair of smiles.

"I'm still settling in here, so I'll have to pass for now, but thanks for the invitation. It sounds interesting," Sam said. She really meant that last part. Casper High was certainly an unconventional
place. A school where the popular crowd was into ghostlore?

"Well, if you change your mind, we have our weekly meetings on Tuesdays at ten. We meet up near the hospital on Roswell and Union," Star said. Together they spun and skated away, elbows interlinked, bouncing lightly on the balls of their trainers.

Sam returned to the table and sat down across from Tucker. She picked up her fork and stabbed her tofu a few times.

"You join?" Tucker asked demurely.

"No," Sam stated around her tofu. She chewed slowly, ignoring the shocked look on Tucker's face, before swallowing. Honestly, she hated conforming to anything popular. If everyone here was about ghosts, she wasn't gonna get sucked into it. "What?" she asked, when Tucker still hadn't gone back to his pizza.

He blinked and straightened. "Nothing. It's just… no one's told them no before."

Sam shrugged. "I didn't tell them no. I just said no, for right now."

He nodded. "Probably smart. You don't want them mad at you. They can make your life miserable."

"You speaking from experience?" Sam raised an eyebrow.

"They don't know what they're doing."

"Everyone's into that stuff," Sam snorted. "Vampires, werewolves… I blame Young Adult fiction. Awful, mindless drabble. Team Edward or Team Jacob. It's not even cool anymore. All the scary's been sucked out of it."

"Yeah, well, vampires and werewolves don't exist," Tucker muttered. "Ghosts do."

Sam almost laughed, thinking he was joking, then she saw the expression on his face. He was serious. "You've seen a ghost?" she probed.

"Well, yeah." Tucker said brazenly, as if she had asked him if he had seen rain. He stuffed the rest of his pizza in his mouth and pulled out his phone, effectively ending the conversation.

"Riiight," she breathed, feeling suddenly weird. She didn't believe in the supernatural. There was no science in it. But instead of telling him that and getting in some kind of debate, she took another bite of her tofu.

"Settle down, settle down."

A horrible squeak of pen. The entire class shuddered as "Mr. Lancer, US History, Welcome Back" was scrawled across the whiteboard. The man dusted his hands off and spun to face the class. He was slightly overweight and wore an ill-fitting polo shirt, his hair half-balding, face handsome enough despite the stubble and dark circles. He was one of those middle-aged men that tried too hard. The kind that asked students to "chill out" and described himself as "in the know." A mug of coffee spun in his hand, as if permanently attached.

"Right," he said with a nod. "Let's get started, shall we? House rules. You all know them. No
cellphones, no gum, no food, no cheating…” He waved his hands a few times as if to say etcetera etcetera, eyes scanning along the crowd of faces.


Sam was displeased to find Paulina in this class. She was sitting directly in front of her, perfume radiating about her with the force of a nuclear leak. Sam wondered if her skin cells were being penetrated. This girl was literally going to give her cancer. When Paulina's name was called she spun around and gave Sam a wink. "Aquí," she piped up, adorable accent in full effect.

Sam gritted her teeth and sent back what she thought was a neutral smile. It seemed to do the trick. Paulina spun back around.

"Manson," Lancer called.

"Here," Sam said.

Lancer paused, scanning her face. "That's a new one," he mumbled, looking down at his roll sheet for a moment. "Samantha Manson…” He tapped her name a few times like it was giving him grief, before moving on through the list.

"Okay," he announced, placing the role sheet down against the desk and clapping his hands together once, loudly. "Just because it's the second day back, doesn't mean I can't assign our culminating project." The class collectively groaned. Lancer trudged forward anyway, raising his voice. "For the final you will be paired up and given a time period. You will research the history of the United States as it pertains to your time period, and more specifically the history of Amity Park. Don't think you can find that kind of information on Wikipedia. You are going to have to go to the library on this one. The archives. A fascinating place." Another collective moan. "On the last two weeks of the semester you will present your findings, dressed in that era, and will turn in a seven page research paper of what you learned."

Already students were rustling about in their chairs, leaning, making faces, pointing underneath their desks at their friends like: You wanna suffer through this project together? Sam felt a pang in her chest. These kids already had their friends. So where did she fit in?

"Your partners have already been chosen," Lancer continued, as if he read their minds. Sam scowled. With her luck she would get paired up with Miss Perfect. Another groan, this time louder than before. Lancer ignored them. "Wiley, Gomez, and Xia, you get the 1910's. Baxter, you're with Hui. 1920's." —Sam heard the slap of a high-five from behind her— "Bittle, Ingram, Fincher get 1930's. Henderson, Jimenez-Sanchez, and Davidson, 1940's. Manson, Voss and—" He paused for a second, having lost his place. "Foley."

Sam and Tucker glanced at each other. Tucker offered her a grin. A boy sitting two seats in front of Tucker waved at her. He had an acne-riddled complexion and thick framed glasses.

"You three will do your report on the 1950's." Lancer raised an eyebrow at her. "You might find that time period interesting."

If there was one thing Sam valued most, it was her privacy. She would go to great lengths to preserve it. Like right now, wandering Amity Park at night, book in hand, looking for a spot where
she would never be bothered. A quiet place. A thinking place. One to call her own.

The cold air was nice. The sharp contrast of it against her warm skin made her feel alive. She meandered past the park, seeing all the propaganda her mother had posted, rallying for a cause, stirring up trouble. Mansons were good at that. Although, sometimes Sam just wanted to be left alone. More and more that was the case. When she came across the cemetery she knew, instantly, she had found it: her spot. No one would dare enter a graveyard, much less bother her in one. Especially not in this overly superstitious town.

She reached in her backpack and grabbed her flashlight, flicking it on, sweeping it across the lot. Stoic tombstones and angels marked the soil. Huge trees hid parts of the graveyard from the street. She tested the gate. Locked.

Sam backed up and gazed at the fence. No barbed wire. She glanced around the deserted street, before putting the flashlight in her mouth and hoisting herself up and over the fence with ease. She had practice in climbing things. There was something nice in putting a few feet of distance between yourself and the rest of the world. People hardly looked up. Rooftops, tree canopies, road signs... all great hiding places. When she was little she had climbed a lot of trees. Lately, she had climbed out of a lot of windows.

Sam straightened the backpack straps against her shoulders and took the flashlight in hand again, trudging her way up the hill. A slow fog rolled in through the trees. The wind bent and billowed it downwards like chiffon. She lightly touched the tops of each headstone with her fingertips as she passed. Thomas Evans. Maxwell Atkins. Elizabeth Rose Gardiner. She wondered who they had been; how they had died.

She found the perfect reading spot underneath a flush pine. Settling at the base of the trunk, her back resting against the bark, she pulled out her book. With a content noise she began to read. Hours passed. It was in the middle of a page flip when Sam caught a small movement out of the corner of her eye and looked up.

She cast her light out. Two identical tombstones lay in front of her: Madeline and Jack Fenton. They had been there the entire time. However, the boy sitting atop one of them was new.

"You again?" Sam asked.

The neighbor boy— Danny?— put a hand up to shield his face from the light. Sam ducked the flashlight. "That's it?" he asked. "You again?" He sounded a little put out. Although Sam couldn't see his face clearly, she was certain he was pouting. She smelled the scent of cigarette smoke. But it was strange; almost too sweet.

"How long have you been there? It's rude to lurk," she chastised.

"Been lurking awhile," he admitted softly. He hopped off the tombstone and sat down, cross-legged, adjacent from her. He took a long drag from a cigarette before releasing it in a cloud of smoke. "What are you doing here?"

"Needed a place to read where no one would bother me. Guess I was unsuccessful." Sam waved the book in her hand. "What about you?"

He stared at her for a second. "You do know people work here, right? Who do you think digs all the holes?"

"Oh." She felt stupid. Of course there would be cemetery workers here, guarding this place from
robbers and… and people like her.

"I won't tell." He crossed himself above his chest and smiled. "I'm a whiz at keeping secrets."

Sam made a face at the smoke, fanning it from her face, even though he was blowing it away from her, but he didn't seem to get the hint. She raised her book back up, intent to start reading again, but after a second she lowered it. He was still sitting there, smile across his face, enjoying that cigarette. She wrinkled her nose at the smell. The kid really knew how to stare. Sam frowned. "Why don't you go to Casper High?" she blurted.

He blinked. "What?"

"I mean, you're my age, right? I haven't seen you there. It's not a very big school."

"Homeschooled," he stated. "Special needs."

"What sort of special needs?" Sam probed, although she instantly felt bad for asking it. Maybe the kid had some sort of social problem? Maybe that's why he stared? "Sorry," she amended. "You don't have to answer that. You're Danny, right?"

He nodded, once. "And you're Sam. Just Sam."

"What happened to 'Boots'?" Sam kicked out her legs, her black combat boots caked with moss and mud. She tapped them together a few times. Dirt flew off.

The boy peered down at them amusedly. "I knew it," he stated.

"Knew what?" Sam placed the book down, not sure when she had decided to give this Danny kid her undivided attention.

"Knew you liked that." He sighed out a plume of smoke and looked up. Behind the thin veil of fog a wealth of stars littered the sky. Each one seemed to catch and reflect in his eyes. "Although 'Boots' is so last week." He said the line in a high-pitch voice, like reciting a movie.

Sam laughed. It was something she would have said.

He tore his gaze back down at her, aghast, cigarette paused halfway to his lips. "Are you laughing? In a graveyard?"

His expression only served to make her laugh harder. Her chuckles turning into unseemly giggles. She snorted.

He watched her with growing fascination, like he'd never heard anyone snort while laughing before.

She wrangled control of herself. "Yeah, so what?"

"It's against the rules," he said soberly.

She couldn't tell if he was joking or not. She liked that; deadpan humor. "Too late for that," Sam gestured her flashlight out towards the fence she had hopped. "I've never been good at rules."

"You're one of those," he accused. Then that smile was back. He returned his attentions to his cigarette.

Sam's eyes trailed along it. "You really shouldn't smoke."
A long drag, as if to spite her. "Why not?"

"That shit will kill you."

He laughed. "Doubt it."

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't around me. You might not care about your lungs, but I do," Sam grabbed her book back and placed it defiantly in front of her face. She watched out of the corner of her eye as he stamped out the rest of it. "Thanks," she said, tilting the book, finding him looking at her— glaring at her. The reflection of her flashlight caught in his eyes, a flare of caustic green. She suddenly felt uneasy. Something about him was dark. And while Sam loved dark things, she wasn't so sure she liked the look he was giving her. She almost wished she had just let him smoke it in peace.

Special needs. Was that just a nicer way to say mentally unstable? Criminally insane? She shivered violently, suddenly very aware of how alone she was in a place with many holes for her to fall into and never come out of. She blinked. Where had that train of thought come from?

"You're reading Dracula in a graveyard, alone, at night?" he asked.

"Well, I was reading it," Sam groused. "Until you showed up."

"You don't scare very easy, do you?" he noted. The question hit a funny chord in her. His tone was weird. As if he was calculating what it would take to scare her.

"Why? Should I be scared?" Sam asked lightly, fighting to keep her tone even. She jutted her chin out defiantly at him.

"Yes." He sounded frustrated.

"Well, I'm not." She closed her book and tucked her boots back underneath her. "Don't you have to go work? Dig holes? Walk around? Something?"

"I guard the graveyard. Keeping an eye on intruders is part of my job." He tapped at his temple a few times, winking. Sam relaxed a bit as that sweeter smile came back. Mood swings, this one. Although she wasn't one to judge. She had issues of her own.

"Why'd you move?" he asked.

"Got expelled from my old school district," Sam clipped. "Ripped a girl's hoop earring out and stabbed her in the face with a pen a few times."

"She deserve it?"

Sam glanced up, surprised. It was a strange question to ask. "No. She probably didn't." She glanced down at the moss and the tiny blades of grass, plucking at them, ripping them out of the soil in big handfuls, piling them by her knees. "I don't even remember it all, to be honest. One minute she was shoving me, saying shit, I saw red... the next thing I know the fight was over. It was like someone else took the reins, someone meaner and gutsier than me."

She glanced up to find him considering her.

"You regret it?" he asked.

She hesitated, answer not forthcoming. "Am I a monster if I say no?"
"You're not a monster," he declared, with such conviction that Sam blinked.

"How do you know?" she wondered.

"I know." He leaned closer, the moon washing over his features, defining them. "I know you."

She opened her mouth to tell him to shove it. How could he possibly know her? They had spoken only a handful of times. But, from this distance she could count all the freckles that dusted his cheeks and see the different types of blue in his eyes. Her hostility faded. "You know me, huh?" she challenged. She found that she wanted to believe him. It would be nice, having someone know her. Having a friend.

"I think so, yeah." A tilt of a head, a blush. "A little." He leaned back and cleared his throat after a moment. "So, why'd your parents choose that house?"

"Why are you and Evelyn so interested in it?" Sam shot back, suspicious.

He shrugged. "Everyone in Amity is interested in it. You tell any of your friends at school you live there? I bet you'd be the most popular kid in a heartbeat."

"Why?"

He paused, as if weighing his response. "It's old. Mystery and ghostlore surround it. Anyone that grows up here knows about it and it's not everyday someone moves in. I bet most of the kids in your school would be itching for a peek inside."

Sam scowled. Well, if that was the case she'd have to make sure to keep her mouth shut about it. The last thing she wanted was for the Spirit Club posse to catch wind and actually try to recruit her for real. "What kind of ghostlore?" she couldn't help but ask.

He grinned. "Long story. Maybe another time... it's almost morning."

Sam glanced at her watch. "I should go."

He got up and dusted his pants off. "C'mon. I'll walk you home. Don't want any vampires to get you." He play-snapped his teeth. For a split second Sam was certain they were longer, sharper, but then he was walking away from her down the bluff.

Sam chuckled her book back in her backpack and got up, following him through the grave markers and down the soggy hillside. In a span of less than an hour, Sam felt like she had made a friend. Maybe her parents were right. Maybe this whole making friends thing was easier than she thought.

He paused at the gate and unhooked it.

Sam blinked. "Wasn't there a lock on there before?" It swung heavily outward with a slow, steady, squeak.

"Was there?" he asked, following her out. "You climbed over the fence?" He waved a set of keys.

"Smartass," Sam muttered and shut the gate behind her. Together they walked down the sidewalk. The streets were deserted. It was eerie how dead this town got at night. Sam glanced back down at her watch. It was almost three in the morning. Her parents were going to kill her, if they had noticed her missing. She prayed they hadn't checked on her.

Sam felt a prickly icky feeling against the back of her neck. She glanced over her shoulder. Fourteen
eyes stared back, suspended like shiny pebbles in the dark, unblinking. She whipped her head around and shuffled closer to Danny. She wasn't sure why, but she felt safer next to him. Under her breath she whispered, "There's seven kids following us."

He glanced at her. "They don't like being looked at. Don't look back and they won't bother us."

"You know them?" Sam breathed. "Why are they following us?"

"Yes."

Despite every muscle and every nerve in her body screaming for her to look again, she kept her gaze forward. They walked in silence until her house grew up out of the fog. It was only when they crept through the side garden that she chanced a peek, but those kids were gone.

"You're new here, so you don't know," he said, nothing but his lips visible in the thick shadow beneath her bedroom window, "This will be the only warning you get: don't trust your eyes or you'll be tricked. Nobody is who they seem. Nobody."

Sam pulled her coat closer, shuddering in the cold autumn breeze. She took his freezing hand and allowed him to hoist her up until she caught the last rung of the fire escape. She hauled herself atop the landing. When she leaned back over the railing, only his blue eyes were visible.

"Not even you?" she whispered down.

"Especially not me. I'm the worst one."

She couldn't tell if he was joking.

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—Diary Entry, I—

Saturday June 21st, 1953

Dear Diary,

Me and Danny are going to visit our uncle for three months. We are on a train. It will take 2 more hours. I am very very angry. Mom said they are almost done with their work and don't want us around. I don't want to go. Amity is far away from my friends. I don't remember our uncle. What if he is mean? Danny cried when we left. I was embarrassed even though he is 6 and I am 8. He thinks Mom and Dad don't like us. I hate my parents. I hate them!

.

Saturday June 21st, 1953

Dear Diary,

The perfect husband:
1. Smart
2. Loves me
3. Likes kids
4. Rich
Sunday June 22nd, 1953

Dear Diary,

We are at uncle's. He lives in a mansion. There is a pond in the backyard that has tadpoles. Danny is afraid of the house. He said he heard someone crying in it. He doesn't like it, but I think it's really neat. Our uncle is nice. He made us cookies. They were just as good as Mom's. Don't tell her that!

Thursday June 26th, 1953

Dear Diary,

I like Amity. I wish Mom and Dad moved back so we could stay here forever. Danny and I played outside in the woods behind the house today. He caught fireflies. They glowed. Then they died.

Friday June 27th, 1953

Dear Diary,

Uncle said we are going to camp and fish. I don't want to fish. Girls don't fish.
Walking Behind You

In a rare bout of enthusiasm and productivity that only came from the beginning of a new school year, Sam and her two US History partners had gone to the Amity Park Public Library after school on a Tuesday afternoon. To her right, Tucker; to her left a kid named Mikey Voss.

Mikey was skinny and freckled. He had vibrant red hair that was gelled so much it looked wet, thick rimmed glasses that made his brown eyes look enormous, and a set of crooked teeth that were adorned with braces. He spoke in a know-it-all way that grated on Sam's nerves.

After spending about an hour on the internet, they had come to the realization that there was an absence of information about Amity Park from 1950 to 1960. The records were silent when it came to things like elected officials, laws and ordinances that were passed, and any criminal activity.

Tucker had been beyond frustrated.

Hence— the Amity Park library.

"Where do you think the archives are?" Sam asked.

Tucker looked at her blankly and then turned once around the library, gesturing helplessly at the rows upon rows of books. "How should I know?" He scowled darkly and glared around. "Archaic, this place," he muttered to himself.

"We have to ask for permission to enter the archives," Mikey stated in a high-pitched voice. "Anyone who's been to the library at least once knows that."

Tucker sent Mickey a glare.

"Great," Sam said underneath her breath. She tried to ignore the bickering pair as she made her way up to the front desk.

A middle-aged woman glanced up from her book. She peered through her glasses at the trio, her eyes narrowing suspiciously at Sam and all her black clothing, as if she was already up to trouble. "Yes? What is it? The computer stations are in the back."

"Where can we find information about Amity Park in the fifties?" Sam asked.

"What sort of information?"

Tucker leaned forward onto the desk, smiling a flirtatious smile. The more Sam got to know him, the more she realized he behaved this way with most women, regardless of age. Sam tried to appear unembarrassed. "Like any major events that took place, elections, trials, festivals, movements, that kinda stuff."

The librarian smiled. Sam kept her jaw wired shut even though it was threatening to fall open. Did Foley's flirting actually pay off? By the look on Mikey's face, he was just as surprised.

"Oh, well, we have the archives downstairs. But you'll need a pass to get down there. She rooted around behind her desk and pulled out a keycard. "I'll take you."

She wound her way from behind the desk and took off through the Mystery and Romance sections to the back of the building. They had to speed-walk to keep up. As they passed through, Sam gazed
up in amazement at the sheer height of the ceiling. It was old. Sometimes she was struck with just how old Amity Park really was. The library had huge gothic columns that stretched up and curved into points. The lighting was by dim chandelier, making the whole place seem hazy and dark. The bookshelves were at least two stories tall in some places, with books of every kind crammed into the nooks and crannies.

"This way, watch your step."

Sam followed the woman through a newer door, the keycard pinging, lock giving way. The archives were down a narrow spiral staircase. As they descended the air seemed to thicken, muffling noise, making everything eerie and sacred.

"Wow," Sam managed as she got her first glimpse at the place. Rows of shelves with faded boxes extended outwards from the door. Metal drawers lined the walls. Harsh fluorescent lights hummed overhead, flickering every once in awhile.

"You are not allowed to take anything from the archives, but you can place them in that bin over there to save it for when you come back." The woman rooted around in a box for a moment, yanking out a pair of white gloves. "Please only handle things with these. A lot of the stuff down here is fragile. And lastly, when you leave put the time and sign on this sheet."

"Got it," Sam nodded, taking the gloves and slipping them on. She gazed over at Tucker, glad that she wasn't alone, as the librarian retreated back to her post upstairs and the door slammed shut, making the lights flutter and wiggle.

"Now what?" Tucker asked dryly.

"She wasn't very helpful. There's a billion things down here," Mikey said.

Tucker shivered. "This place gives me the creeps."

"Well, let's start by figuring out how they're organized." Sam moved to the first aisle and yanked out a box, seeing it was filled with Time Magazines dating back over fifty years. She felt her heart start to sink. Were things not arranged by date?

"This one has a bunch of Playboys," Tucker chuckled.

Sam rolled her eyes and shoved the box back, taking in the room. Everything seemed to be misplaced, as if someone had ruffled through each box. Lids were slightly ajar. Sam doubted that anyone had organized this place in years.

"Hey, this one says 1958," Tucker called.

Sam glanced back as Tucker waggled an issue at her. A woman posed on the front in what might have been considered obscene in 1958, the thin strap of her dress falling suggestively off of one shoulder. Despite herself, Sam took a step closer and flipped through it. She snorted. "Awful," she mumbled, trying to quell down her inner righteous feminist as she scanned a few of the centerfolds.

Mikey stole the magazine from her and was looking at the spread like he had never seen something so profane before in his entire life. His ears turned beet red and he put the magazine back in the box, scalded.

"Well, at least we know Playboy was big back then," Tucker grinned. "See? Already learning."

Sam looked at the box with ill-concealed disgust and pushed it back into place. "Great. We can dress
up like bunnies and talk about Hugh Hefner and the objectification of women for our final.” She placed her hands on her hips. "No, what we need are some newspapers from that time period."

Tucker's shoulders slumped as he gazed around at the hundreds of boxes. He sent her a wry grin. "Got a Snickers?"

Dusk colored the sky a deep indigo as the trio trudged dejectedly out of the library. Nothing of real importance had been gleaned, despite swimming through tons of information. Sam felt exhausted, like she had inhaled a ton of dust and was slowly petrifying along with the brittle yellowed papers.

"Well, that sucked," Tucker intoned blandly.

Sam's spider backpack was heavy with the weight of American history books. They would probably tell her what she already knew about the fifties. Misogyny, Elvis, suburbia, the Cold War, and the space race. Nothing interesting had been found. Nothing about Amity Park, that's for sure. "Well, at least we know what boxes not to look in," she muttered.

"You don't mean we have to go back?" Tucker whined. His eyebrows knitted together.

"Of course we have to go back. We have to finish the project," Mikey said.

Sam took the cement steps one at a time, slowly, like a funeral march. She gazed about the city. Little windows twinkled light; people rushed around the street preparing for nightfall. This town had the potential to be beautiful. She glanced over at Tucker to see him absorbed by the glow of his phone; took one glance at Mikey to see he was absorbed by the glow from his watch. She rolled her eyes.

"I gotta go," Mikey said suddenly. "Spirit Club starts in a half hour. Paulina will freak if I'm late."

With that parting remark, Mikey shot off down the cement steps and hooked a right. His backpack bounced up and down as he disappeared off down the street.

"Mikey hangs out with the popular kids?" Sam wondered aloud.

"They only let him 'cause he does all their homework for them," Tucker muttered. "It's kind of sad, actually."

"So," she began, "the popular crowd is into ghosts and witchcraft?"

Tucker glanced up from his phone for a brief moment, eyes narrowing. "Yeah, and football and cheerleading. And drinking and bullying."

"They bother you?" Sam asked lightly. She hadn't missed the way Paulina had treated him. Or that Tucker always seemed to pick the back row of the class.

Tucker shrugged bonelessly. "They're whatever. Dash is the annoying one."

Sam tilted her head. "Dash?"

"Baxter," Tucker growled, shoving his phone back into his cargo pants. Together they landed on the last step of the library entrance and started down the sidewalk towards their respective houses.

"Loves to shove me around every chance he gets. Did you know you can fit two people in a single locker? If they're skinny enough?"
Sam frowned. "No, I didn't," she mumbled. She adjusted the strap of her backpack nervously. Tucker seemed to notice her hesitation.

"Oh, don't worry. He won't bother you," he said quickly. "You're a girl, you're new, and you're too pretty. I mean, he leaves girls alone, most of the time… man I'm not good at this reassuring thing, huh?"

Sam laughed.

"I'd stay away from Dash, and the rest of them. Don't get why Mikey even likes hanging around with them. They treat him like dirt," Tucker finished. As they reached an intersection he paused. "Anyway. I'm this way. See you tomorrow."

"Night," Sam called.

Tucker took off down the street in the opposite direction from her. His form got swallowed by the descending night. It was just dark enough to make it hard to see, but not yet dark enough for the street lights to come on.

Sam shivered and found herself alone on the sidewalk. She turned left and started down the street. She was pretty sure her house was this way.

That prickly icky sensation was back. The hairs on the back of her neck tensed. She was being watched from behind.

Sam came to an abrupt stop, despite the fact that her body screamed to run. Her hands clenched at her backpack straps and she tilted her head, slightly, to the side, daring to peek behind, but just when she was about to give in to her own curiosity something burst out of the bushes in front of her and she was forced to turn back around.

A dog barreled out onto the sidewalk. It paid no attention to her as it darted into the street like it was being chased, just as…

"Don't—!" Sam lurched to follow, to dive after the dog and grab its collar, but she was too slow. Twin headlights roared down the street as a car sped towards her, tires screeched, a horrible yip accompanied the distinct sound of… of… Sam had never heard bones breaking before, but she knew without a doubt that's what that sound was.

Sam's hands flew over her mouth as she stared at the bloody mess in the street. Had that just happened? It was so fast. The dog had been nothing but a black and white blur.

The driver's side door flew open and someone staggered out. They shuffled into the other lane where the dog had been thrown. It was still; a pulpy lump. With a soft, "Oh my god," they crouched down and hovered a trembling hand above the fur.

Sam's legs carried her off the sidewalk into the street. As she neared the vehicle she saw blood stains, a dent in the fender, and chunks of fur imbedded in the driver's side tire treads.

The driver gazed up at her. She was young, dressed in black, with dark hair and tears streaming down her face. "I didn't see it. I swear, it just ran out, I couldn't stop—," she muttered, pleading her own case. Her frazzled hair illuminated as another car's headlights cast a halo around her hunched form.

Sam opened her mouth to say something, but no words came to mind. Her feet paused. Just as she found the right words (It wasn't your fault) a horn erupted—a trumpeting urgent sound. There was a
scream of metal upon metal, of tires desperately trying to fight an engine, and Sam watched as the 
young woman with dark hair disappeared underneath a black Toyota Prius.

"Let's go over this one last time. You were walking home from the library, alone, when you 
witnessed Ms. Scully get struck by oncoming traffic."

Sam nodded.

Her mother's fingernails dug uncomfortably into her shoulders, even through the thick wool blanket 
that was wrapped around her. "We've already been through this. She needs to go home and rest."

"Yes, Mrs. Manson, but parts of your daughter's story are inconsistent with the scene. We just need 
to make sure we have her testimony right. These things are best done while the memory is fresh."

"She will speak with you tomorrow. You can ask your questions then. Sammy, honey, let's go 
home."

Sam closed her eyes slowly. Beyond her eyelids she saw blue and red flashing lights. They whirled, 
endlessly. That siren felt as if it was still wailing against her eardrums. Her father grappled 
underneath her armpits and tried to yank her to her feet. With a grimace she reopened her eyes and 
stopped. "No. I'll tell them again," she said. Her feet found their grounding and rooted.

Her parents paused. "You've already helped them enough, baby," her father murmured gently.

Sam sat back down on the uncomfortable plastic chair. Above her fluorescent lights buzzed. This 
police station was filled with cheap government-purchased chairs, old wooden desks, and policemen 
milling about. She could hear the distant sound of a fax machine printing.

She gazed at the African-American policeman, at his badge: Damon Gray, Amity Park Police 
Department, and wondered if he had any relation to Valerie Gray.

He gave her a reassuring smile.

"Ask away," she said.

"Where were you tonight?"

"Amity Park Library, the archives. I signed out at seven fifteen and started walking home."

The officer nodded. "And then?"

"I got a weird feeling so I stopped… walking, that is," Sam continued. She reached out from the 
blanket to grasp at a mug of hot coffee. Usually her parents wouldn't allow caffeine, but they said 
nothing. The heat from the mug spread through her hands. It was only after grasping something so 
hot that she realized how cold she was.

"Where did you have this feeling?" Officer Gray asked.

"I don't know," Sam said. "Pine street. I was somewhere on Pine."

"Then what happened?"
"An animal flew out from the bushes in front of me. A dog. Black and white spots. Medium sized. Before I could stop it, it ran into the street and was hit by a car."

"Which way did it run?"

Sam gestured, waving her hand from left to right.

"Ms. Scully's car? Can you describe the car?"

Sam frowned. "Uh… it was a sedan. Small. Four door. I can't remember what color… Blue maybe?"

"That's alright," Officer Gray said warmly. "Now, you're sure it was a dog that made Ms. Scully stop?"

Sam nodded. "Yeah. She was crying because she hit it. Another car came out of nowhere and she was gone. Dead." Sam took a huge gulp of coffee. It burned her tongue.

"Alright. Thanks for speaking with me. I know you've been through a lot tonight." The officer looked up at her parents and gave them a small frown and a nod. "Usually we would have her speak to a councillor, but we're understaffed at the moment. Don't be surprised if someone checks in on her later this week. That's all I have for now. Take care of her."

Her father hoisted her up again. He pinned her tightly to his side.

The car right home was silent. Like meerkats, her parents darted quick glances in the rearview mirror back at her, worry lining their faces. They took the long route home to avoid the road closure where Amanda Scully's body had been strewn across asphalt. Didn't matter. Sam had witnessed it all. The smell of burnt rubber; Scully's body folded in half, spine snapped, the car lurching and jolting over her frame; the sound of her skull cracking open, and a hand, limp, red nail polish, pointing directly at Sam in a growing pool of blood.

"I'm fine," Sam uttered, even though no one had asked her. She ran her burned tongue across her teeth. Her eyes flicked from streetlamp to streetlamp. They were on now, and they wavered and blurred as if underwater. She knew she should cry. Most people would cry in this situation, but the thought of it was exhausting. She felt numbed to the whole idea. "I'm alright," she told herself instead. "I'm fine."

——Police Report——

Date of Incident: 09-25-15
Type of Incident: Suicide
Officer: Damon Grey
Amity Park Police Department

***Officer's Case Report***

At approximately 9:45pm Amity Park County Communications Office received a 9-1-1 call reporting that an adult female had been struck by oncoming traffic at the corner of Truth and Pine.

I was three blocks away at the time of the dispatch, filling up gas at the Chevron station at 144 Truth
St. I called in and drove to the scene. I arrived before paramedics.

Upon arrival at the scene I observed a black Toyota Prius license #RWQ-423 OH spun horizontally, blocking the left lane of the road. A blue Honda Accord license #ROX-966 OH was parked on the opposite side of the road against the curb.

A young man (dark hair, 140lbs, late 20's, later identified as Eric Cross) was standing several feet away from the driver's side door of the Toyota Prius. To his right, near the Prius's passenger-side front wheel a woman lay face down on the pavement.

The man told me the woman had purposefully ran out in front of his car. I approached the woman and took her pulse. She was dead at the scene.

Several feet away a young woman (dark hair, 100lbs, 16 or 17, later identified as Samantha Manson) was sitting on the curb next to the parked Honda Accord. She reported that she was walking home from the library when she witnessed the woman get struck by the Prius.

I took down each witness's testimony, taped off the scene, and waited for backup.
Sam wound down the stairs and entered the ripped up kitchen. She avoided the basket of peaches and grabbed a piece of toast, sliding atop a barstool, half-listening to the news as her mother cooked some soy sausages and hummed merrily as if to drown out the reporter's voice.

"Morning, honey," her mother greeted. "How are you feeling?"

"—the result of the apparent—"

Awful. Tired. Sam had laid awake for most of last night, replaying what had happened over and over. She wasn't sure if the images in her head were even true anymore, or if her memory had made them more gruesome. The hour and a half of sleep she did get had been fraught with nightmares. More than once she had woken up, breathless, with the distinct, unshakeable feeling that someone—or something—was after her.

Sam stuffed her mouth with bread, chewing without taste. The loaf soaked up any moisture she had left. She choked. Her appetite fled and she put the rest of the bread down.

Her mother poured her a cup of orange juice and scooted it over to her across a plywood board. Much of the old finished had already been torn out to make way for the renovation.

Sam took a swig of it. "Is this new?" she asked, pointing at the dark wood cabinetry.

"—suicide of twenty-two year old—"

"Oh that?" her mother piped up, eyes dancing. "I had it installed yesterday. What do you think?"

"—Amanda Scully who was struck by oncoming traffic early last night. This is the first suicide case since—"

Sam frowned. "It's nice," she admitted. Although, she wasn't entirely sure if it was eco friendly. "Was it shipped from some remote place, wasting gas and—?"

"No," her mother interrupted. "It was sourced ecologically."

"—string of suicides three years ago—"

Sam paused, thrown off guard. "Really?" she asked, searching her mother's face for some kind of lie. Her parents rarely took her environmental causes seriously. Her mother sniffed, flicking the sausages and lamenting softly at the burned pieces. Sam narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

"—culminating in thirty-nine year old Evelyn Gray's—"

Pamela sighed. She plucked the sausages off of the grill and onto a plate, half of them blackened. "I don't think they're edible."

Sam poked at them for a moment. "It's alright," she sighed. Wasn't like she was hungry anyways.

"—in the Masters villa—"

"Weather looks nice this morning," Pamela noted.
"—And now we'll go to Lance Thunder, with the weather."

"Yeah, looks sunny."

"Gonna be a sunny one, Tiffany."

News traveled fast in Amity Park.

The minute she stepped inside the school all eyes swiveled and stuck to her. Whisperings followed as she passed. Whenever she sent glares their way the students quickly spun around and pretended to pay attention to something else.

Sam yanked her locker door open and fished around inside for her math book. When she moved to slam it shut, she found herself face to face with Paulina Jimenez-Sanchez. Despite herself, she jumped, her heart galloping wildly in her chest.

Paulina's eyes were wide and curious. "How was your night?" she asked.

Sam hesitated. "Uh…"

"We heard you were there when it happened," Paulina continued. She gestured behind Sam. Sam turned to see Dash, Star, and Mikey watching her curiously from a few feet back. "Is it true?"

"Yes," Sam stated shortly, and finished shutting her locker door.

"Must have been horrible," Paulina whispered. There was a strange tone in her voice. Almost reverence. It made Sam pause and stare at her curiously. "If you want to talk about it, you can always talk to me," Paulina finished, placing a manicured hand atop her chest.

"Thanks," Sam gritted. Don’t make enemies, she reminded herself. "I'm late for homeroom." She took a step to move around Paulina but the girl side-stepped and blocked her way. Sam tried left, Paulina moved left. Sam tried right, Paulina went right.

"Oopsie!" Paulina giggled. "Lo siento. Talk to you later." She stepped fully out of the way.

Sam restrained herself from lashing out. If anyone was going to test her admittedly shaky patience, it was going to be this girl. Instead of picking a fight, she hunched her shoulders and stormed her way through everyone, ignoring the stares.

As sixth period neared, Sam took a seat in the far back of her US History class and propped up her book so that it covered her face. If she slumped a little she could hide almost fully behind it. She knew, of course, that other people could still see her, but it was a small comfort to not have to see them seeing her.

"You stole my chair," Tucker grumbled, sliding into the seat next to her. "I usually sulk in the back. You trying to steal my thunder? I thought you had your own punk thing going on."

Sam's lip twitched. Her mood lightened a touch. She let the book fall back against the desk with a
sharp *thud*, causing everyone to whip their heads around and look at her. She leaned back and tilted her chin defiantly. *Say it. Do it. Bring it on.* "Thought this chair looked comfortable. You want it back? I'll move."

"No, you're gonna need it." Tucker shook his head. "You're the talk of the town."

"Already?" She hadn't even ripped out anyone's earring yet.

"Sorry I didn't walk you home last night," Tucker said earnestly.

Sam glanced sideways at him and shrugged. "Better you didn't. Both of us didn't need to see that."

"So…" Tucker paused, weighing his options. Sam knew what he was going to ask. It was a question she had been asked multiple times already. She gritted her teeth. "...What happened?"

"Dog ran out into the street, got hit. Girl ran out into the street because of the dog, got hit," Sam summarized.

"Everyone's saying it was a suicide," Tucker whispered, leaning into her as he scooted his desk and chair an inch or two closer. "The news didn't mention a dog. People think you're lying."

"I'm not lying. Why would I lie?" Sam snapped. The class broke out into whispers. Sam grimaced and lowered her voice. "I saw what I saw. It wasn't a suicide. It was an accident." She gazed over at Tucker and couldn't tell what he was thinking behind those glasses. The brim of his hat shaded the top of his eyes. "...*You* believe me, right?"

He said nothing for a long beat. "I believe… that it's a good thing you didn't run out into the street."

Sam bristled and opened her mouth to give a scathing reply that she could *take care of herself; thank you very much*, but she paused. She closed her mouth. After all, she had been five long strides away from taking Amanda's place underneath that oncoming car. She had run off the sidewalk with every intention of grabbing that dog…

Tucker seemed to sense what she was thinking. "You need to be more careful."

Sam huffed and propped her book back up. She kept her face impassive, but inside her thoughts were whirling. She thought of Danny's warning. She *had* seen a dog. So why were all the reports saying Amanda Scully had *stepped* in front of the oncoming car?

Sam rode her bike down the same stretch of road back home after school. She had to see it for herself. As she neared Pine and Truth dread pooled deep in her stomach, turning it sour and tight. She pressed onward, regardless. The sun shone down, warming the crisp September air.

As she approached the intersection she saw the police had finished their investigation. The street was open again, and there was hardly anything to say an accident had taken place. Not unless you knew where to look.

Sam paused and got off her bike to gaze down at the skid marks that scarred the road. She blinked. There was only one pair. Her hands clenched her handlebars. There were faint stains where Scully had bled across the pavement. Sam wondered if the next rain would wash it away, or if it would linger, the way a nuclear blast stained shadow people across walls.
Sam crouched down to the pavement and tried to find any evidence of a dog—any stray dog hair—but there was nothing. She even retraced her steps back to the sidewalk where the dog had jumped from the bushes, she trudged around the brush looking for some sort of sign, but there was nothing.

Having seen enough to placate her own curiosity, she got back on her bike.

Sam whizzed down each block. She absorbed the way the leaves fell gently, the way the distant sound of a train echoed throughout the valley, and the way the crisp fall air stung her cheeks. Anything to avoid thinking about Amanda Scully.

As soon as she stepped inside the house she knew something was up. There was an unfamiliar car parked in the driveway. Not one of the vans that were getting more and more common the more her mother remodeled the house—no, this was a personal car.

"Samantha. You're home. Good," her father greeted her, blocking her usual route. After school Sam loved to drift up the stairs and into her room. She spent most of her afternoons avoiding her parents.

Her father grabbed her shoulders and directed her towards the living room. Her mother had recently purchased new furnishings. Two Dutch-modern couches unfolded in front of her. Sitting on one was her mother. Sitting atop the other was a woman she had never met before.

"Who're you?" Sam asked bluntly. She knew she was rude. She didn't care.

"Sammy, this is Ms. Spectra. She's a counselor from the school. She wanted to speak with you about what happened last night," her mother introduced.

Sam gazed up at her father, before glancing back over to the woman who was perched, stiffly, atop the armchair. In her hands was a notebook and a pen. Her hair was immaculate. She held onto her smile too confidently. "You can call me Penelope. It's nice to meet you." She reached her hand out, clearly expecting a handshake.

Sam dropped her backpack to the hardwood floor with a heavy bang and scowled. She knew exactly what this was. "You're a shrink. I don't need a shrink. I'm fine." Sam violently shrugged her father's hand off of her shoulder.

"Please sit down, Samantha," Spectra said gently. "I want to talk."

"My mother paid you to talk to me, didn't she?" Sam snapped. Figures. Her mom loved to avoid having intense mother-daughter conversations in lieu of just hiring out professional help. After everything that had happened…with the fights and…Sam had been subjected to a number of psychiatrists, all more irritating than the next.

"Your mother and I are worried," her father said cautiously. "You don't talk to us anymore." He gently pushed her into the opposite chair of Ms. Spectra.

Sam plopped down into it, finding herself sandwiched by her mother and this psychiatrist. She ground her teeth. "That's because you never ask the right questions," she muttered.

Penelope Spectra was unfazed by Sam's attitude. She probably dealt with unruly teens all the time. "You've been through a lot of trauma recently. Your parents are just concerned that what happened last night, given your recent move and your—"

"I'm fine," Sam interrupted.

"Well, that's great to hear," Spectra said smoothly.
Sam clamped her jaw shut.

"Sam... I can call you Sam, right?" Spectra paused. Sam said nothing. Spectra continued onward, ignoring the glare. "How have you been sleeping?"

"I haven't," Sam said blandly. "I saw a girl get run over by a car."

"Have you been experiencing any nightmares while awake?"

Sam tensed. "What do you mean? Like seeing things? Things that don't exist?"

Spectra wrote in her notebook for a second. "So you have?"

"Is this about the dog? Is that why everyone's freaking out? Look, I made it up. There wasn't a dog, ok? I don't know why I lied, but I lied. No dog. We good? Can I go to my room now?"

Her mother frowned.

"I'm done talking with shrinks." Sam stood. "If you and Mom want to talk, I'll be upstairs." She stormed out of the living room and bounded up the stairs. She whirled into her room and slammed the door shut as loud as she could, which was impressively loud considering it was a solid oak door. Arms crossed, she glared at it and sat on the edge of her bed, half expecting her father to force her to go back downstairs.

"I saw a dog," Sam whispered at the door. "I saw a god damn dog." Her whisperings turned hysterical. Her breath caught in her throat. "I saw it. I swear."

A half hour later her mother came into her room, furious. Sam could tell because Pamela's fists were drawn tightly to her sides and her smile looked agonizing, like it was taking all of her might to keep the corners of her mouth upturned. The result was that she looked like she wanted to bite Sam. Sam laughed, and then sobered instantly. Her mother wasn't amused.

"Honey, why were you so rude to Ms. Spectra?"

Sam scowled and resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "I don't need a shrink. I can't believe you guys hired her without even telling me."

"We didn't hire her," her mother snapped. "She came on her own accord. She was concerned for you. You'll have to speak to her again eventually." She sat down next to where Sam was lying on her bed. She reached out and brushed some of Sam's bangs out of her face.

"She doesn't even know me," Sam muttered petulantly, well aware she sounded childish.

"No one knows you, Sam," Pamela sighed.

That wasn't true. There was someone that claimed to know her. Sam's eyes flicked to her window, to the fire escape, her mind following that tangent to the graveyard where Mr. Blue was no doubt working. Sam echoed her mother's sigh.

"How do you want us to try?" Pamela asked, her hand drawing back into her sides. Her voice grew defensive. "Tell me, Samantha, because I'm all ears. I feel like I've tried everything to get through to you, but you keep shoving me away. What do you want me to do?"
That meanness within her, always simmering beneath the surface, bubbled forward. Sam found herself inexplicably angry. "I want you to stop buying shrinks that you think will magically make all of this better," Sam exploded. "Stop thinking money will solve this. Nothing's gonna solve this. I. Am. Not. Sick."

"You won't let your dad and I help you, so what else are we supposed to do? Nothing?" Pamela snapped right back. "Just let you get in fights, get expelled, throw your life away? Not care?"

"Maybe this isn't something that can be fixed! Maybe instead of trying to make things go back the way they were, you could listen!" Sam threw up her arms and made a punching gesture into the air before letting them flop back against her sides. "Listen to me for once! Stop telling me what to do and how to feel and just shut up and listen!"

"Tell me," her mother goaded, hysteric. "I'm here. Tell me. I'm listening. What do you want? I don't know what you want from me."

"I want you to stop pretending everything's perfect!" Sam screamed. "I want you to stop waiting around for me to get over it. I want you to stop talking about the weather when a girl died in front of me last night!" Sam grabbed her pillows and threw them. "Stop being so fake!"

Her mother deflected the first two pillows, but the third hit her square in the face. "I swear, Samantha Jean Manson. Sometimes I just want to strangle you," she hissed, her hair miffed, eyes gleaming strangely in the low light.

"Yeah? Do it," Sam challenged.

Pamela left instead, slamming the door in her wake.

Sam panted. The brief flush of victory faded as she listened to her mother's muffled sobs down the hallway. Guilt gnawed in her guts. She hadn't meant all that. What was wrong with her? Everything was her fault.

Sam laid onto her stomach and buried her face into her last remaining pillow. She squeezed her eyes shut and screamed 'I hate you's' into it, not sure who, exactly, she hated more—herself or her mother—until all that was left was breathless emptiness.

She was alone in a room with no features. Loneliness crippled her. She just lost everything. Gasping for air, she bowed her head, as if gravity had doubled, tripled, for her and her alone. She gazed down at her naked body and found she was covered in mosquitoes. A maddening buzzing noise filled her ears. They were inside her ears, nesting within her. The wings fluttered against her mouth and down her throat. She tried a scream. Dozens of them flew out and came back to rest upon her cheeks. She watched as, in one simultaneous choreographed dance, they pierced their needles into her and sucked all the life right out.

Sam woke with a jolt.

She peered up at the old ceiling at the crack that fractured the room in half. She traced that crack several times to root herself before her gaze rested to her vanity where, next her mirror, a dark-haired girl stared back.

Sam blinked, unsure if she was seeing correctly. Was she dreaming? The girl was still there, blue
eyes staring back at her, face blank. She was crisp and defined, dressed in a red sweater and flared jeans. She swayed back and forth.

Sam blinked again and tilted her head from side to side, heart hammering in her chest, as she told herself that this vision before her was just a trick. A shadow. A dream? She slowly sat up in her bed, yet the girl persisted.

"Better watch out," the hallucination warned.

"Why?" Sam asked. She darted her hand out, blindly, in the darkness until she hit her lamp. Light flooded the room. The girl vanished. In her place was Sam's black winter coat, swaying gently, caught in some kind of draft. Sam let out a breath of air she didn't know she had been holding. Must have still been dreaming.

With a sigh she swung the covers off and padded out of her room. She hooked a right towards the staircase with the intent to grab a glass of water from the kitchen below. As she descended the stairs she saw the light was already on, a soft old amber that bathed the bottom floor in a gentle glow. Sam paused and listened for any sign that her parents were still up and talking about her. No voices, but a weird repetitiveshhhhhhh... shhhhhhhhh...

Curious, Sam crept her way into the kitchen. Her father's back was to her as he leaned, hunched, over the new kitchen island.

"Dad?" Sam whispered. "What are you doing?"

He turned slightly. Sam's eye caught the glint from the edge of a knife. It reflected the light and sent it sizzling towards her, sharp and unforgiving. Her chest caught.

"Samantha?" her father murmured. His eyes were half-lidded and dilated, his movements jerky. Sleepwalking. Sleep-sharpening-knives. "Why are you up?" He deliberately sheathed the knife back into the knife block and set down the sharpener onto the counter.

"Couldn't sleep," Sam said slowly. "What were you doing?" Her eyes trailed along the rack of knives uneasily.

Her father's brow furrowed and he looked around at the kitchen and then down at himself as if he could hardly believe it. "Nothing," he stated. "I was doing nothing. Goodnight." He glided out of the kitchen and was swallowed by darkness.

Sam's gaze lingered upon the knives for a minute, before she shook her head and got her glass of water. When she returned to her room her curtains were swaying gently, back and forth, just like that girl, window wide open.

Sam ripped a flyer off of the wall near her locker and glared down at it. As September drew to a close and October began, the entire town seemed to chatter on and on about Halloween. Sam was learning first hand how it was one of the most widely celebrated holidays in Amity Park. She turned the orange and black flyer around in her hand. A little clipart ghost with a friendly smile was shooting out of a tombstone that read "Casper".
"Are they serious?" Sam asked aloud, knowing without a doubt that the ghost clipart had been Paulina's idea.

"Dead serious," a voice said to her right.

Sam frowned and glanced over to see Tucker looking rather pleased with himself. She folded the flyer in half and shoved it into her spider backpack.

Tucker stared, clearly waiting for a laugh.

She scowled, unwilling to deal with Foley. She had been plagued by nightmares for the past week, her mother was still pretending she didn't exist, and her mind kept replaying how that dog's guts had spilled across the ground over and over. Dog guts that— according to everyone else— didn't exist. That familiar depressive cloud was rolling in. Instead of running from it she wanted to lose herself in its obscurity. She swung her backpack over her shoulders and made for the exit.

Tucker trailed behind. "Hey, are we going to the library?" he asked tentatively, weaving in and out of the crowd.

It was Wednesday. They worked on their project on Wednesdays, but Sam didn't have the energy. She opened her mouth to tell him to bug off, but he was suddenly sprawled across the floor, his glasses clattering across the tile into the middle of the busy hallway.

"Watch where you're going, Fouley," Dash sneered. He withdrew the foot he had used to trip Tucker before anyone could notice. A conniving gleam winked in Dash's eye.

Sam scooped up Tucker's glasses before they got stepped on and grabbed him by the arm, yanking him upright.

Dash's eyes narrowed. He glared at her as if he expected her to say something. He was one of those boys always itching for a fight.

Sam wanted to say something. Lately she was one of those girls always itching for a fight too. Most times she looked down and found her hands pre-curled into fists, but she took a few deep breaths, shoved Tucker's glasses into his hands, and left the school as quickly as possible. Outside on the lawn she fumbled with the keys to her bike lock. She missed the keyhole twice. It was all the time Tucker needed to catch up.

"Hey," Tucker gasped, out of breath, as he stumbled to her side and leaned against the metal bike rack. "Thanks."

Sam didn't know why she was so angry at him. Maybe because he was always so goddamn happy all the time and she wasn't. Maybe because he let people bully him around and never stood up for himself. Maybe because he couldn't take a hint. He was one of those puppy-dog types. He hovered over her, incessantly. Asked her tough questions, pried into her life, annoyed the shit out of her most of the time…

Sam yanked her bike out of the rack and quickly walked it around to the side of the street. Still, Tucker followed. "Are you avoiding me?" he asked.
"Yes," Sam clipped.

Tucker's eyebrows knitted together. "Why? Because you're still upset about the suicide?"

"It wasn't a suicide," Sam grated, hurt. "I told you it wasn't a suicide." She flipped her leg over the bike and sat atop, but just as she prepared to push off of the curb, Tucker stood directly in her way.

"Move," Sam grumbled. She twisted the handlebars to make the front wheel whack against the side of Tucker's leg. Her irritation lit and exploded into white hot anger the more he refused to let her pass. First her parents, now him? Why couldn't people just leave her alone? All she wanted anymore was to be left alone.

"No," he huffed. "Why'd you keep the flyer?"

"What?"

"The gala. On Halloween. You're gonna go?"

"That's none of your business, Fouley," Sam snapped. "Why do you care so much if I join that club or not? Afraid I'll get popular and stop hanging out with you?"

Tucker flinched.

Sam knew she hit the nail on the head. Immediately she felt horrible, but swallowed her apology. If hurting his feelings would get him to stop pestering her, then so be it. She wondered if this was why she could never keep a friend. Because, really, deep down inside, she felt as if she didn't deserve one. Still, he remained in her way. Each time she tried to go around he followed. She resisted the urge to plow right through him.

"I thought you were cool," Tucker said mournfully. That— more than anything else— pissed her off most of all.

He let go of her handlebars and took a few steps to the left. She shoved her bike around him and propelled off the curb.

When she looked over her shoulder she saw him watching all betrayed and deflated like a kindergartner watching his parents drive away on the first day of school.

As she rode home she felt guilt start to creep into her stomach and she slowed her frantic pace to a crawl. Tucker had been one of the only people to befriend her since moving here.

Sam shook her head and frowned. She didn't need anyone. She was better off alone.

Her shoulders slumped. But... she shouldn't have to be so mean to him. She had been just like Dash. A bully.

Her lips tightened. Was she really feeling sorry for this kid? Tucker would probably be over it by tomorrow. He was annoyingly upbeat.

She weaved. What if he wasn't over it? What if he would never be over it? What if he was just as lonely as she was? Just as sad? Only he hid it behind flirty grins and ostentatious hats instead of sarcasm and hastily thrown punches?

Sam groaned and skidded to a stop. Hardly believing it, she yanked the bike around and pedalled back towards the school as fast as she could. As she rounded the block she caught the sight of his red
beret bobbing down the street, ducked, alone. She bit her lip at the sight. As she pulled up to his side she hopped off of her bike and walked it next to him. He refused to look up at her.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean what I said."

He shot her a sideways glance, eyes obscured by his hat.

"I've been angry lately," Sam continued. "I have… I'm not very good at… at people."

Tucker paused. He turned to face her and she could see the moisture clinging to his eyelashes. Sam remembered the sound of her mother's sobs. It seemed she was best at spreading her own unique brand of misery. Maybe she should patent it.

Tucker gave her a wavering grin. "Wanna go to the Valley of Unrest?"

"Sure," Sam said before she processed the question, relieved he wasn't going to make her talk anymore about it, relieved that he seemed to forgive her. She made a face. "Wait, where—?"

"It's just a stupid name the Spirit Club gave the Amity Park junkyard," Tucker explained. He continued walking and Sam fell in line next to his side. "They love to rename things after Edgar Allan Poe stuff. Used to be called just 'The Valley'. Rumor says it's haunted. Then again, most stuff here is rumored to be haunted."

"...And why would we go there?" Sam asked slowly.

"Because" —Tucker grinned— "Amanda Scully's car was impounded there last night."
It was nearing sundown when, on the outskirts of Amity Park, Sam Manson found herself standing beside a thick forest, two tires, and a Port-a-Potty. She gazed amongst the heaps of waste with a sense of hopelessness. Tucker was right. This junkyard was haunted. Haunted by the corpses of rusting twice-used appliances, consumed and disposed of through mankind's own gluttony—

"Cool!" Tucker's voice broke into her philosophical internal monologue. He held up a contraption. "It's an egg poacher," he explained.

Sam rolled her eyes and stepped lightly across the gravel thing-infested walkway. Metal pieces scattered underneath her boots. Plastic bags haunted the ground, floating like little ghosts. "Focus, Foley. We're on a mission. That mission doesn't involve egg poachers."

"Right." He straightened his cap. "The cars are over there."

Sam wrapped her coat further around herself and took off in the direction he had gestured at. As she wound around one of the rows she caught sight of stacks and stacks of crushed cars. Behind them hundreds of cars that still awaited impaction were parked.

Amity Park's junkyard was along the city limits. They had passed the Amity Park welcome sign on their way here: *Amity Park, a nice place to live.* The yard was shared with Amity Park's sister city, Elmerton. This caused it to be huge and overflowing with unorganized waste. Rows and rows of it spread out, barely contained, in front of her. The outermost reaches of the yard faded into mist. Sam could see a treeline maybe a mile away that marked the end of it.

"How are we going to find it?" she asked, heart plummeting at the sight of all the cars.

"We look," Tucker said, unhelpfully.

"You take the left, I'll take the right. It has to be with the newer-looking cars. It's probably somewhere where they can drive it out of the lot easy whenever her family comes to get it," Sam reasoned. She spun and walked, alone, to the right side of the lot. Rusting cars flicked past her. 1998 Honda Accords… 1984 Ford something-or-others… 1991 garbage…

"Find anything?" Tucker asked, coming up behind her.

"No. You?"

"No. Sorry. It's getting dark. We should go before the sun sets," Tucker said. He stared at her from behind his fogged glasses. Night was descending, bringing with it a frosty chill.

"Why? You have a curfew?" Sam teased. She ignored the fact that, technically, she had one as well.

"No. Let's just say night isn't the best time to be out and about in Amity Park." Tucker shuddered.

Sam laughed. "Oh come on, you too Tucker? You believe in this cultish voodoo nonsense?"

Tucker flushed. "You don't? You saw one yourself, last week." He gestured helplessly around at this place, as if to say: Why else are we here?
"The dog?" Sam asked.

Tucker nodded. "If we find this car and prove the dog doesn't exist, will you believe in ghosts?"

Sam didn't know. The whole thing seemed farfetched. She reached inside her backpack and withdrew her trusty flashlight. She flicked it on and cast the beam out in front of them. "Let's just find the car. If we don't find it in a half hour we can go."

Tucker gazed up at the pink sky, at the fading sun as it dipped beneath the forest in the distance, before he sighed and nodded. "Let's make this fast," he muttered.

Sam scowled. Ghosts didn't exist. She was a realist, a scientist, and even a part-Atheist. She had seen a dog. If what she had seen could be disproven, then, and only then, would she begin to question some of those beliefs.

Together they scanned a few rows. The sun disappeared fully, leaving them in what would have been almost complete darkness if not for the steel lamp posts that were scattered about the yard. Sam was about to call it quits when her flashlight caught something familiar.

"There," she whispered. "That's it."

There was no doubt. That was Amanda's car. As Sam and Tucker drew closer, Sam noted that it looked perfect. No dents in the front bumper; no blood right off the bat. Of course, someone had washed the car. Sam frowned and crouched down low next to the front-right bumper. But... the dog had to have left a dent. There wasn't one.

Tucker held the flashlight out in front for her. "See what you need?" he asked anxiously.

"One second," Sam murmured. "Can you shine the light down to the tire?"

Tucker adjusted the beam.

Sam leaned closer and peered into the tire treads. The grisly image of the dog's matted fur stuck within the treads of the tire had been one that had been permanently ingrained. And yet, these tires didn't have any gore imbedded in them. They must have washed them, Sam thought. But, there was a thick coat of dirt and grime on them, as if they hadn't been washed since Scully had purchased the car.

"Sam?" Tucker whispered. The light disappeared as Tucker cast it out nervously across the yard. "It's time to go. I feel like we're being watched."

Sam stared down into the darkness where she knew that tire was. Little balls of green light danced in front of her eyes from the sudden absence of bright light. She crouched, stunned, in silence. The dog hadn't been real? Maybe this was the wrong car. But her gut knew it was the right one. It was roiling right now, telling her that she had been tricked, duped. She got the distinct feeling she had been ripped off. Her hands drew into fists as anger flooded through her at the thought that she might never know what happened. Sam shook her head. Ever since the accident guilt had been clawing its way through her. She was going to find out what had happened to Amanda Scully. She had to. She had to make sure it had't been her fault.

"Look what we have here," a cold voice said from her left.

Tucker gasped loudly and flung the flashlight's beam out.

Sam stumbled upright and took a few steps back as a large man with dirty blue overalls stepped out
of the shadow, eyeing the pair of them suspiciously. He wore a nametag, but the name was smeared with soot. He had appeared suddenly, without any noise.

"A pair of trespassers."

"We were just leaving," Sam managed out. She fought to keep her voice level. "We're sorry. We didn't know we were trespassing."

Sam noted that the temperature suddenly dipped. She could see her own breath hanging in the air. She spun, grabbed Tucker by the arm, and moved to get away as quickly as she could, but the man stepped in front of her way. He was fast.

"Didn't know?" he growled. "You two can't read?" He gestured at the gate which Sam and Tucker had clipped the lock a few hours before, where, hanging limply a sign that declared, in yellow non-nonsense type: NO TRESPASSING. "People these days, breaking into here, thinking they can just take whatever they want—" The man took a menacing step towards them and Sam felt Tucker's hand on hers clench in surprise.

"We weren't stealing," Sam soothed. "We were just taking a look around, it was a dumb joke really. A dare."

"Sam, something's wrong," Tucker whispered underneath his breath, "Something's really wrong about this."

"—Thinking they can just steal what's mine. I guard this place, got it? You can't just come in here without consequences."

Sam's back hit the side of a car. Tucker huddled to her right. Trapped, the two of them turned to face each other, gazing wide-eyed up, the red paint from the car caught and reflected in the man's eyes making them gleam with madness. The faint smell of cigarette smoke wafted through the air.

Sam balled her hands into fists. A "fuck you" welled up and filled her mouth, dancing upon her tongue, but she clamped it down. More angry than afraid, she grabbed the flashlight from Tucker and prepared to swing it right into the man's crotch.

"Leave them alone, Max," a voice rang out to her right, clear as day—a familiar voice. Sam's head whipped over to the source, bringing the flashlight up with it, revealing **him** in the harsh lighting.

Tucker went rigid next to her.

"Danny," Sam greeted in surprise. Relief flooded through her.

"They were trespassing. Stealing!" Max growled. He pointed a crusty finger at Sam, hovering inches from pressing it accusingly against her collarbone.

With a sharp smack the boy whacked Max's arm away. "She doesn't want your useless crap. She was just looking for a dog," he said, tossing Sam a wink.

Sam froze. **How did he—?**

"I should tie them up, take their hands! Chop them right off. No one comes into my territory and takes my things—" Max shot the boy a look. "No one except you, of course."

"I'll keep an eye on her," the gravekeeper vouched, nodding in Sam's direction.
Max retreated down the row, grumbling all the way about youngsters and hoodlums.

When he faded out of sight, she turned to the gravekeeper. She noted he had on yet another sweater. This one was sky blue with a red and white striped trim. "Thanks," she said.

A shrug. "He's harmless."

Sam shivered. She hardly considered wanting to chop their hands off 'harmless.' She made a face. "Why are you here?"

"Geeze. You're welcome," he said in mock outrage. Then his expression grew serious. "I heard about what happened last week. You okay?"

"I'm fine," she huffed.

"Let's go," Tucker interrupted from her left. He tugged on her arm over and over. Sam glanced at him and saw his pale terror-filled face. "Right now, Sam. We need to go right now."

"Hang on." Sam ripped her arm out of Tucker's grasp. She gestured towards the boy who was now leaning against the hood of the opposite car, eying the pair of them. "Tucker, meet Danny. Danny, Tucker."

She turned and found Tucker missing. He was running full tilt towards where they had broken in. Feeling indignant, and a little abandoned, Sam muttered a short apology to the gravekeeper and started running after Tucker.

"You're so rude!" she panted as she caught up. Together they stumbled to a halt and Tucker grabbed a hold of the wire gate, shoving it open, but it refused to budge. They both stared down at the lock. They had clipped it not two hours ago. It was in place now, unclipped.

"But we—" Sam struggled. "How—"

"I told you Sam!" Tucker shrieked. He shook the gate frantically a few times, but it refused to give way. "I told you we should have left at sundown! Now they have us trapped!"

"Calm down," Sam hissed. "I bet this is just the wrong gate." She reached around for her backpack and felt around inside it for the bolt cutters, but they were gone. Her eyes widened.

"They're gone," Tucker guessed. "We're trapped. They have us right where they want us. I'm so stupid!"

Sam spun once, taking in the huge lot while Tucker berated himself. "What about the other gates?" she asked, pointing out into the fog.

Tucker nodded. They took off running down the side of the fence. Each gate that popped up had a lock on it, each heavier and more damning than the next.

"We could try to climb over. Or we can just stay here the night," Sam reasoned. "They'll have to open it up in the morning." She stopped herself. "Maybe Danny knows how to get out, since he got in. Or Max could open the gate."

"You don't get it do you?" Tucker nearly shouted. He spun around and grabbed her by the shoulders, giving her a shake. "They're both—" He cut off, choked, staring at something behind her back.
Sam spun around and saw Danny standing five feet from them, holding out the pair of bolt cutters.

"You dropped these," he said, walking up to Tucker until they were inches apart. Sam noted what it was, exactly, that she was seeing in his gaze whenever he looked at Tucker: animosity. It was the same green-glowy glare he had levelled her with when she had made him put out his cigarette. Tucker shrank underneath it.

The boy held out the bolt cutters. When Tucker made no move to take them, he dropped them onto the ground, spun, and stalked off into the night. He took the scent of smoke with him.

Sam bent over and grabbed them up off the dirt. She clipped the lock and shoved the gate open. It squealed, hinges rusted.

Tucker took off down the path, kicking up dirt and rocks as he sprinted away from the junkyard. "Sam!" he called out behind him, "Come on!"

Sam hesitated. Her hands clenched and she looked back into the junkyard. The yard was still and peaceful. She didn't get why Tucker was so freaked out. With a scowl she realized that Tucker had completely abandoned her in his cowardice. She stood at the gate, alone. With a sigh she held up her bolt cutters in the moonlight, wondering how they had managed to escape her backpack without her noticing. They were heavy.

She shoved them back into her bag and spun around, leaving the gate deliberately open so she'd be able to hear if someone tried to close it behind her.

As she wound her way through the yard she squinted into the thick fog.

"I know you're still here," she called.

Nothing.

"I've got questions," she continued.

"Of course you do."

She paused and glanced around, looking for the source of the voice, finding him sitting atop the hood of a Corvette, cigarette in one hand, blue eyes gleaming through the dark. The Corvette's paint was peeling, the chassis riddled with holes where weather ate through metal. Sam knew that it used to be a valuable car, before all the parts had eroded. Now it was useless, even to a collector. She walked closer until she could see him clearer.

He crossed his arms and tilted his head. "Why didn't you leave?"

"How'd you know about the dog?" Sam shot back.

The boy stared at her in shock. He uncrossed his arms. "How come you like sneaking in places you're not supposed to be?" he countered, defensively.

"I have to find the truth. And you're avoiding the question." She glared up at him.

"News travels fast in this town. I heard about the dog from a friend. Everyone thinks you're a kook."

He considered her for a moment, dumb grin on his face. "Are you a kook?"

Sam knew he was trying to bait her, but she couldn't help but get irritated. She gritted her teeth. "You saw the dog too," she assumed. "That's how you knew about it. You were there."
He shrugged and took a drag. "I'll never tell." His eyes twinkled in mirth.

She tried to be frustrated, but was too busy liking the brat. "I'm not nuts," she stated. She planted her hands atop her hips.

He threw his head back and laughed delightedly. Smoke billowed from his lips and melded into the surrounded fog. His laugh had a scratchy quality, like a worn out vinyl record, skipping over and over and over and over… "I know you’re not," he sobered. That sweet smile settled back across his lips. "I was just teasing you 'cause you're quick to anger."

Sam opened her mouth angrily and then stopped, closed it, and let out a slow breath. She realized he was right. She was quick to anger. Oftentimes she found herself mad for no reason. Ever since...

Unsettled, she frowned instead.

"But brave," he continued, thoughtfully. He jumped off of the hood and trotted around the car until he was standing close to her. He reminded her of a coyote trailing alongside its prey, watching out of the side of its eye, constantly nipping, teasing. As he drew near he dropped the cigarette and stomped on it. "Not like your friend. He's kind of a spaz."

Sam fought a shiver at his closeness. The smell of smoke and cologne clung to him. It was a scent she used to abhor, but was now growing fond of. Her eyes locked to his. "Tucker thinks this place is haunted," Sam confided. She was painfully aware of how close he was. His breath hung in the air, pearlescent, multi-colored.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" he asked quietly. And for once, he sounded serious.

Truthfully, ever since seeing Amanda's car she wasn't so sure anymore. Not that she'd admit it. "*No.* This whole town is overly superstitious. Anyway, why are you here? Don't you have to work?" Sam asked. She took a step backwards and breathed easier.

"Got the night off," he smiled. He looked over at the Corvette and tapped the hood. "Was scrounging for parts."

"You own a Corvette?" Sam asked, skeptical.

"Well…" He blushed and looked down shyly. "This one's mine. But don't tell Max that. I've been guarding it, been trying to find parts to fix it up, but these parts are almost impossible to come by anymore."

Sam stared at the car and didn't have the heart to tell him that it was beyond repair. Each part rotten, each piece inoperative. But, instead she nodded and said, "It will be beautiful."

He was staring at her again. A vacant— yet intense— stare. He leaned back against the hood of the Corvette. Sam noted how it barely dipped and wondered just how heavy he was, if at all. "About what your friend said before… This place *is* haunted."

The hairs on the back of her neck stood up. "What do you mean?"

He pointed out towards the treeline in the distance. "This site used be a giant empty field, used for the state fair. A traveling circus set up here. It burned down, tent collapsed and trapped over a dozen people. They burned alive. All the animals, too. The ghosts haunt those woods."

"When?" Sam breathed.

He squinted his eyes as if thinking, hard. "1964? 1954?" He shook his head. "Hmm… Can't
She felt her stomach drop. "That wasn't in any of our research." Tucker and her had been searching for anything, but most of the news reports about Amity Park from the 50's was full of mundane happenings and car show advertisem—

"What research?"

She blinked and looked over at him.

He was peering at her, eyes glinting a green that made her uneasy.

"Tucker and I have a project for school. Amity Park in the 1950's," she rambled, not sure why she felt the need to explain herself. "You could help," she continued. The kid seemed to know a lot about this town. More than most.

"No."

"Why not?" she argued, indignant.

A siren erupted in the distance. Red and blue lights bounced around the yard, reflecting off of bits of broken glass, scattering into a psychedelic kaleidoscope of color. Sam wrenched her head around and saw a police car flying down the dirt path. It skidded to a stop in front of the open gate and a cop got out, casting a heavy beam from a flashlight their way. Sam squinted as it shined directly in her eyes.

She looked back, half expecting the boy leave— he seemed the type to disappear when you least expected— but he was still there. He had taken a few steps back to duck behind the shadow of the Corvette. Sam briefly wondered why he felt the need to hide from police.

"Samantha?" the cop called out. He was striding through the gate, across the yard. "Samantha Manson?"

"Later, Boots." the gravekeeper said. His face faded into darkness until only his smiling teeth remained.

"We're not done talking," Sam promised. She had too many questions; she suspected he held too many answers.

That grin widened. "Duh."
Sam watched houses flick by in rapid succession. She slunk deeper into the leather seat of the police car and crossed her arms. At least the sirens and lights were off.

As she peered out the window her mind wandered between what happened at the junkyard, Max, the undented car of Amanda Scully, and the possibility that she had been wrong about ghosts.

Officer Gray cleared his throat.

Sam glanced up and saw him peering at her in the rear view mirror, through the metal grate that separated the police officer from the back of the car. She couldn't help but feel like some sort of felon back here, even though he was just giving her a ride home.

"Who were you talking to?" he asked. "Back at the junkyard?"

"A friend," Sam sighed, resting her forehead against the cool window. She was surprised to have admitted it out loud. A friend. She— Samantha Manson— considered someone a friend.

"That place is dangerous, especially at night," Gray continued.

Yeah yeah yeah. Sam resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She sighed loudly and oozed down the seat, heels out, butt on the edge, until her seatbelt reined her in. "Tucker called you and told you to get me, didn't he?"

"Good kid, Tucker. Known him since he was a baby."

So Tucker hadn't completely abandoned her. A little bit of her anger at him bled out. Sam breathed onto the window and drew a tiny skull in the condensation. It winked out at her for only a few seconds before it faded into nothing but the faint imprint of oil left behind from her finger. "How's your daughter?" she asked, suddenly.

She didn't know for sure that Officer Gray was Valerie Gray's father, but the sharp gasp told her she was right.

"You've seen Val?" he asked. His eyes trained back to the road in front of him.

"At school. I see her around from time to time. Seems sad. Lonely." Sam realized she could have been describing herself.

"She never used to be— Left or right? Where did you say you lived?"

"Left," Sam supplied. "And I didn't."

Gray's hands clenched on his steering wheel and he looked back into the rear view mirror. He seemed to guess where she was taking him and he didn't like it. Sam wondered what it was about her house that had everyone so on edge. Ever since her conversation with Danny she had kept her address under wraps.

"You live in that house," Gray stated, voice strange. He turned right.

Sam's hands clenched at her seat belt. She stared at the back of the officer's head, internally debating whether or not to say something. After a moment of indecision, she said lightly, "You missed that turn."
"I know."

"Where are you taking me? I have a cellphone. I can—" she trailed off. She could what? Call the cops?

"I'm taking you to the station," he grunted. "Trespassing illegally is enough to hold you overnight. Or, at least until your parents come get you."

Sam leaned back into the seat, hard. "What? You're arresting me? But I didn't do anything!" she exploded.

"Trust me. This is for your own good."

"With all due respect, sir, you have no idea what's good for me," Sam scathed.

"I know more than you think," Gray laughed humorlessly. He refused to look back at her as he drove further and further down an unfamiliar road.

Sam punched the back of the cage. It hurt. Blood welled up and dotted her knuckles. She didn't want advice. She… She didn't know what she wanted, but this wasn't it.

Officer Gray had been kind enough to let Sam sit in the lobby of the police station instead of in a cell. They both knew he wasn't going to really arrest her or book her or whatever.

Like a wounded cat, Sam curled up on one of the uncomfortable plastic waiting chairs, huddled her biker jacket around her, and shot mutinous glares at the back of Gray's head where he was ignoring her at his desk.

The door to the station whipped open and her mother strode in and spotted her. "Get up. Get your things."

Sam climbed slowly out of the chair. As soon she got to her feet and slung her backpack through her arms, her mother grabbed her by the elbow. Her fingernails dug through her coat and into her skin.

Pamela leveled her with a stern glare.

Sam flinched. She knew she was in a world of trouble when they got home. Her mother had too much tact to lose it in front of anyone else, but she looked about two seconds away from self implosion.

"Officer Gray," Pamela addressed. She turned to the ma. "Thank you so much for keeping an eye on my daughter. I honestly have no idea what's gotten into her. I promise it won't happen again."

"Just doing my job," Gray stated. He got up from his desk and wound around the station to the door, holding it open for the pair of them. They were halfway through it when he cleared his throat. "Hey, just so you know. Some really strange things have happened in that house of yours. You might want to think about moving."

Pamela's grip on Sam's arm tightened. "Excuse me? What kind of strange things?"

Officer Gray looked extremely uncomfortable. Sam wondered what it was he had against the house. Whatever it was, it was personal. Intimate. Gray's face paled and his eyes glazed over.
"Unexplainable things, ma'am. Please, for your own safety, and for your daughter's safety, move."

Her mother stared at him for a long moment as if trying to ascertain if Gray was a lunatic or not. She cracked a careful smile. One of her activist, sweet, empty smiles. "My husband and I will discuss it. Thank you for your concern."

Gray opened his mouth to say something more, but her mother whisked Sam out the door into the cold empty parking lot.

"Unbelievable," her mother ranted underneath her breath. Her heels click-click-clicked across the pavement. She dragged Sam along forcibly. Sam stumbled trying to keep up. "Absolutely unbelievable. Unacceptable behavior for a respectable young woman. What if someone saw you, at a police station, or in the back of the cop car? What would people say?"

"Who cares?" Sam grumbled.

Her mother stopped suddenly. Her hands grasped Sam's shoulders and she yanked her, hard, to face her. She gave her a rough shake. "What is wrong with you?!" she screamed breathlessly.

Sam almost whacked her mother's hands off, but something in Pamela's tone made her wary. She knew she had pushed her mom too far this time. Instead, she ducked her head and glared down at her boots. "Sorry," she muttered.

Her mother froze as if trying to figure her out, before she shook her head and continued, alone, to her car. It was the only one, parked directly underneath a street lamp. Pamela slammed the driver's side door shut with a loud echoing boom that seemed to continue on endlessly through the empty lot. The engine started with a roar.

Would her mother would leave her out here? Sam wasn't so sure anymore, so she picked up her pace and trotted over to the passenger door, slipped inside, shut it, and put on her seatbelt without a word.

The drive home was silent.

She peered at her naked body in the mirror.

Her hand ran along her chest bone across smooth pale skin. At her right armpit she felt a bump and, as she inspected closer, she discovered an enormous scar that traveled from underneath her right breast, around her side, and gruesomely down her lower back. Or was it her left side? Seeing as she was looking in a mirror and all, and when one looked in mirrors they saw things reflected…

Two brilliant white lights appeared before her. They grew in intensity, as if approaching fast. The mirror exploded. Her jaw fell open in surprise and she got a mouthful of glass.

A horn assaulted her ears as she tumbled, smashing into things— steering wheels, car roofs, limbs, luggage, loose change— and fell through darkness. A hand reached out of the black. She lurched to grab it, but she was too clumsy. She missed. As she fell further and further she noted dismally to herself, aloud, that, "There's no way back up."

The longer she fell the less she smashed into things. Objects were falling in tandem, only, they flew upwards as she spiralled downwards. She caught sight of a shovel, a broken watch, a lock of blonde hair, and a set of dentures locked in a permanent grin. She winced as a toy rocket hit her square in
She hoped she would hit the bottom soon and just get it over with. Death was better than this endless falling, this endless dread of what would hit her next.

Just as she started plotting how to off herself, Sam woke up.

She took in a few gulps of air and stilled in her bed. At first she was certain the dream had awoken her, but a split second later a wail, accompanied by the sound of shattering glass, erupted from down the hall. Her mother's.

Sam flung her covers back and raced to her parent's room.

Her mother was still in bed pointing— hair half out of her curlers— at her shattered mirror.

"What happened?" Sam asked.

"There!" her mother cried. "She was right there."

"Shh, sweetie. It was just a shadow," her father coaxed. He looked over Pamela's shoulder at Sam and gave her a look.

Sam frowned and picked her way around the broken glass until she reached the mirror. Her pale reflection watched her in what little pieces remained. A lamp lay, dented, on the floor where Pamela threw it. The shade was torn.

"It was not a shadow, Jeremy," her mother snapped as she wrestled her way out of his grip. "There was a young woman staring at me. She was standing right there."

"It was just a dream. People have waking nightmares. You used to have them yourself in college, remember?"

"I— Maybe, but... She was so real..."

Sam ignored them. A faint draft caught her bangs and she looked at the huge double windows that overlooked the front lawn. Outside the street was empty. The window was open. She shivered and walked over to it, grabbed ahold of the frame, and yanked it shut with a bang.

Her parents jumped.

"Did you guys open this window?" Sam asked.

Her father's gaze darkened. "Sam, you and your mother stay here. I'm going to go make sure everything is safe." He left the pair of them and descended down the stairs.

Sam stood, at a loss. She didn't know what to say to reassure her mom. Pamela's hair was sticking out on one side. Her hands clenched together in her lap, wringing helplessly. "Did she have long black hair?" Sam asked. She wasn't sure why she asked. It was doubtful that her mother and her dreams were the same, but it seemed too coincidental.

Her mother nodded.

"She say anything?"

"No... No... how did you know she had black hair?" Her mother got up from the bed and wrapped her silk robe further around her body. The room was still chilled from that open window. Outside,
muffled, dogs barked.

"Lucky guess," Sam murmured. She bent to start picking up the pieces of mirror.

"Leave those. You'll cut yourself."

She ignored her mother, grabbed a piece of dirty laundry to wrap her hand, and started gathering the sharp bits. As she collected, she saw a shape move within all dozen of the glass shards. An outline of a person standing in the doorway holding what looked like a knife. Sam froze.

"Jeremy?" her mother asked. "Everything okay?"

Sam sat back on her heels and turned.

Her father peered at them from the doorway, kitchen knife in hand. Sam recognized it as the one he had been sharpening before. He furrowed his brow.

"Honey?" Pamela prompted.

He shook his head. "Yeah, no. Didn't see anything."

"Well, that's good." Her mother smiled.

"Strange... The window being open," he continued. He hesitated in the doorway for a moment before he shrugged. "Guess one of us opened it and forgot about it."

"You know, I'm starting to think that Lancer gave us this assignment just to mess with us," Tucker grumbled. He pointed his pencil at her, before shaking his head and looking back down at the stacks of newspapers.

Sam and Tucker were back in the library, this time without Mikey. It was Friday night. It wasn't like Sam had anywhere better to be, but this wasn't her ideal way to start her weekend.

Sam scowled. No matter how deep they dug into the archives, all history of Amity Park in the 1950's was gone. Even when they had discovered a box full of newspapers from that era, all contents were dull and uninspiring. She was beginning to agree with Tucker. She wasn't about to tell him that, though. She was still seething at the fact that he had sent a cop to go get her from the junkyard. Thanks to her brief stint in jail, her mother and her were on shaky ground. The only way she had avoided a grounding was by agreeing to go see Penelope Spectra every Monday for an hour. And Sam knew her mother would call and make sure she not only attended, but cooperated. Joy.

"Hey, about earlier this week... Sorry I kind of ran." Tucker said nervously.

Sam glanced up at him. "Kind of?"

"Ok. I ran," Tucker admitted. "But, you should have followed. It wasn't safe there. I thought you were right behind me. Why didn't you run?"

"Because, unlike you, I don't believe in voodoo," Sam sniffed.

Tucker fell silent.
Sam chanced a peek up from her papers and found him staring at her in disappointment. He was peering over the top of his glasses. "What?" she asked.

"Even after seeing the car… even after all that happened… you don't believe in ghosts?" Tucker asked incredulously.

"I— Well— Of course not," Sam struggled. She wasn't entirely sure anymore. She thought about Scully's undented fender and blood-free tires. Sam shifted in her seat uncomfortably. She didn't like thinking about it too hard.

"How do you explain the car?" Tucker asked.

Sam bit her lip. She turned to the next page of the newspaper. July 30th, 1964. "There has to be some logical explanation. Maybe the dog didn't dent the car like I thought it did. Maybe—"


Sam sucked in a quick breath.

"I believe you, though," Tucker continued hurriedly, "You and Amanda Scully saw a dog. A ghost dog."

Sam let out the breath and deflated a little. "Ok, fine. The dog could have been a ghost. Happy?" She wasn't completely convinced, but at least that meant she wasn't crazy. That she wasn't seeing things.

"It's a start." Tucker went back to his newspaper. June 15th, 1954. Together they were combing for any news reports of a circus disaster. He turned a page in the paper and sighed. "It feels like someone already went through these boxes and got rid of anything interesting. If I read one more advertisement for a microwave, I swear…"

Sam hummed in agreement as she scanned her newspaper, her eyes glossing over the ads a story about some lady whose Golden Retriever got first place in the Ohio State Fair.

"How'd you find out about this circus thing anyway?" Tucker asked.

"Danny told me."

Tucker stiffened. "How do you know him?" he asked.

Sam paused. She frowned and looked up at him. "He lives down my street. What was your problem, anyway? He helped us and you were a total jerk to him."

"He wasn't helping, Sam," Tucker said lowly.

Sam shook her head and continued to scan the newspaper. "How was he not helping? He made that Max guy back off. He found the bolt cutters. He told me about the circus…"

"Why doesn't he go to our school?" Tucker asked.

"Homeschooled."

"How did he know about something that happened sixty years ago?"

Sam shrugged. "He probably grew up here. Maybe he heard about it around town."

"Ok." Tucker leaned back in his chair. "So... what's his last name?"
Sam bristled at the interrogation. Despite only knowing Danny for a month she felt attached to him. For the past few weeks she had gone to the graveyard for his company. She considered him a friend, and she was nothing if not loyal to her friends. "I've only known him for a few weeks. Sorry if I haven't asked for his biography. I get it. You don't like him." She fluffed her newspaper up so it covered her view of Tucker's face.

"I think he's dead."

"Holy shit, Tucker," Sam exploded in exasperation. "He picked up the bolt cutters. He was solid. Not to mention he has a job. I doubt they employ people that are registered as deceased."

"I mean… Ghosts can—"

Sam gasped. Her eyes went cross-eyed as she spotted exactly what they had been looking for. Right there, page A3, a report of a circus disaster. "There!" she announced, slamming the paper onto the table. She pointed. "It's right there!"

Tucker frowned and leaned forward in his seat. "11 Die In Freak Circus Accident," he read aloud. He paused. "You'd think this would have made the front page."

"You're right," Sam said. "This should've been the top story."

Tucker grabbed the paper from her and began reading.

"Eleven bodies have been found after a massive fire burned a traveling circus to the ground late Saturday night. Identification is still underway. Paul Garrett, spokesman for the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, told The Amity Daily newspaper that the fire was accidental. According to authorities, an electrical problem was the source of the July 29th inferno.

"The collective heart of Amity breaks for the victims of this senseless tragedy,' said Mayor Masters on Monday, after visiting the survivors at North Mercy Hospital—"

"Mayor Masters?" Sam interrupted, scribbling the name down on a sheet of notebook paper. She underlined the name three times.

—Diary Entry, II—

Sunday April 12th, 1955

Dear Diary,

Tommy at school asked me to be his girl! He is very cute. He asked me to the hop. He has blond hair and brown eyes.

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Wednesday April 15th, 1955

Dear Diary,

Tommy broke up with me. He asked Peggy to the hop instead. I cried all night. Now I have no one to go with and it's tomorrow night. Danny got in a fight with him and is in trouble. He said I could go to the hop with him but he's my brother. I can't go with him. It's against the rules. Besides, he's grounded now.
Thursday April 16th, 1955

Dear Diary,

Dad brought home the new record. We all danced around the living room to it. I got to wear my skirt after all.
"I'm so glad you agreed to see me."

"Don't get the wrong idea. These meetings weren't my choice," Sam mumbled. "It was either visit a shrink every Monday during lunch, or be under house arrest for the next month."

Sam shifted in the plastic school chair. She gazed around Spectra's office. Lots of motivational photos of different landscapes decorated the walls. She crossed her legs and tapped her foot, glancing around at the plethora of wilting plant life. Over a dozen plants in various stages of decomposition lay browning in clay pots. It looked as if, whenever a plant died, this woman went out and bought a new one, yet never threw the others out, and never took the time to water them. It was sad. Some kind of plant torture.

Penelope Spectra straightened her cat-eye glasses and leaned forward on her desk. Her two-piece suit strained. "Of course it was your choice, dear. You, after all, forced this ultimatum upon yourself by breaking your parent's rules, did you not?"

Sam instantly bristled before she remembered she didn't care. Besides. What kind of therapist said something like that? "That's one way to think about it," she said noncommittally.

"How are you liking Amity Park?" Spectra asked.

Sam glared, but didn't answer.

Spectra sighed and leaned back in her chair. She yanked open a file cabinet and pulled out an inch thick manila folder. With a sharp *snnap* she flung it onto her desk, flipped it open, licked her thumb, and began to page through it.

Sam remained silent. The longer Spectra paged through, the more agitated she became. Once again, she tried to remind herself she didn't care. Punk. Unaffected. Cold indifference. She ran her hands down her skirt to iron out the wrinkles and picked a bit at the dirt underneath her nails, if anything to think about something other than Spectra. The past few nights she had snuck out to the cemetery, spending time amongst the dirt and the dead, chatting with her new friend, reading up on Dracula… although with Danny constantly bothering her she'd never finish the damn thing.

"Sorry... It's just that your file is rather extensive." Spectra shut the folder and took her glasses off. "I've read about your expulsion and your simple assault charge."

"I was never charged," Sam corrected.

"I was hoping that I could hear what happened from you," Spectra countered.

Sam crossed her arms. "Doesn't it say everything in that file?" she asked, defensively. She hated the idea that all her misdeeds were on twenty-ish pieces of paper, stuffed in a ugly manila envelope, and shoved in this woman's desk. She started to plot how to steal it. It'd look pretty on fire...

Spectra sighed. "Sam, all of us get angry and that's okay. It's part of being human. I want to better understand you so that we can work on managing some of your anger and turning it into energy more suited for productive things!" Her voice took on a peppy cheer.

Sam wrinkled her nose, repulsed.
"So? Help me out here. I want to get to know you. Let's start over from the beginning," Spectra said with a nauseating smile. "What happened? Why did you hurt that girl?"

Sam frowned and looked down. The last thing she wanted to do was tell this woman about the fight, but she knew that her mother would— no doubt— check in to see if she had cooperated. Sensing a grounding on the horizon, Sam would rather give in a little here in exchange for her freedom. *It's not really giving in*, Sam thought. At least, that's what she told herself. She cleared her throat and glared down at the linoleum. "There was a girl at my old school. Joy Nguyen. Super popular. Pretty. Star of the softball team. Her group of friends used to say things to me all the time."

—The smell of freshly cut grass filled her nose. A petite Vietnamese girl smirked at her, oval face, large brown doe eyes, full lips, small flat nose, hair shiny, straight, and sleek down to her mid back even when pulled up in a high ponytail. A bat rested atop her shoulder, hand perched on her hip. 'What are you doing here, Manson? I thought you hated softball.'—

"What kind of things?"

Sam shot Spectra a glare. Wasn't it obvious? "Stuff like freak, devil-worshipper, dyke, witch… Anyway, whatever. Doesn't matter anymore." As the words left her mouth she felt gloom weigh her down. They were just words, she reminded herself. *They didn't mean anything.* Her tormentors at her last school hadn't even had the decency to be creative with their insults.

Spectra stared at her for a long moment.

Sam gritted her teeth. "What?" she mumbled. "It's not like I go to that school anymore."

"Do you want to go to that school?"

"No," Sam snapped. Her neck tinged and she reached up to rub at it a few times. Her fingertips trailed along her collarbone where a scar, still pink from healing, cut through her skin. "That school was shitty anyways. Besides—" Sam caught herself and paused.

Spectra waited for a long moment for Sam to finish her train of thought, but, after realizing she wasn't about to continue, she glanced back down at the manila folder and marked a few things. "It says here that you and Ms. Nguyen—"

"People change, you know," Sam interrupted. "I've changed, since then."

She wasn't lying. She just didn't know if she had changed for the better.

Later, after the bell rang for the end of the school day, Sam tapped her pencil against her history book as she watched as students ambled slowly out of the classroom until all but a few remained. A group of four stayed behind, too busy chattering on about their Halloween costumes to go home.

Sam slid out from around her desk and tucked her book underneath her arm. She flung her spider backpack over one shoulder and walked up to the front desk.

Mr. Lancer paused from where he was looking at a stack of ungraded papers. "Yes, Miss Manson?"

"I—uh…" Sam cleared her throat. "I wanted to talk to you about the final project."
Lancer placed the paper down deliberately onto the desk and gave her his full attention. "Okay. What about it?"

Sam grimaced. Internally her stomach squirmed at admitting defeat or asking for help, but... "We've been looking for weeks on information and got nothing. Well, almost nothing..." She looked down at her hands. "I was wondering if you had any advice on where to look, besides the archives."

"What have you found so far?" he asked.

Sam swallowed. "Well, we found out about a circus that burned down. And about a parade that used to be a yearly town celebration, but got cancelled and never got picked back up. That the town used to be called Amity, but got renamed Amity Park in 1966. We also found out the mayor back then was a man named Mr. Masters, but he only served one term."

Lancer leaned back in his chair. "A circus accident? Interesting. I didn't know about that." His mutterings grew too soft for Sam to make out.

"Wait," Sam interrupted. She made a face. "Aren't you supposed to already know all this stuff? You're the teacher."

Lancer gave her a bemused smile and shrugged. "You two are the first to get the fifties for the final project. I usually skip over it. Students have trouble finding enough information to write a halfway decent report."

Sam felt a hot wave of indignation run through her. "So you gave us the hardest prompt?"

"Yes," he admitted. "You looked like someone who doesn't get easily discouraged. Already you've found out more than anyone else who got your prompt." He tapped his fingers along his desk before pointing at her. "Seems I was right about you."

"Well, there isn't enough information. You've set us up to fail." Sam scowled.

Lancer sighed. Sam felt like he was disappointed in her. "You have almost the whole semester until you have to give your presentation. Of course, if you and your partners feel your topic is too difficult we can arrange an alternate prompt. Perhaps the 90's would be more suitable." He picked up the paper he had been grading and got back to it.

Sam knew she was dismissed. Defeat started to coil. She also knew that if Tucker were by her side he would leap on this opportunity to make the final easier. Mikey... she didn't know him well enough to know if he'd be up for a challenge. Although he seemed like the type to like solving difficult puzzles. They were alike in that regard. She felt as if she had something to prove. Lancer believed in her. Afterall, he wouldn't have given the prompt to her if he thought she would fail. Sam gritted her teeth, pride winning out. "Fine. I'll keep looking," she told him. "I won't give up."

Lancer peered back up at her and offered her a grin. He had goaded her. Of course. "Good," he said. "But if it gets to be too difficult the offer still stands."

Sam nodded, said goodnight, and left feeling childish— yet determined. Some part of her wanted to prove Lancer right. He seemed like a nice enough teacher, as far as teachers went.

Lost in thought, she walked down the empty hallway and caught a familiar mess of hair out of the corner of her eye. Sam paused. That girl— Valerie Gray— was standing outside in the high school parking lot, alone.

What was it about Valerie Gray that had everyone walking on eggshells? Why was the girl so sad
and was there anything Sam could do to help? She didn't know why she cared, but she did. Maybe it was the way that Valerie seemed to ghost from class to class, hardly speaking, avoiding all human contact... it reminded Sam of herself not so long ago. Perhaps she was just drawn to the people most desperate to keep her away. Either way she found herself walking with purpose through the huge double doors.

"Hey," Sam greeted.

Valerie spun, bewildered look on her face, before she saw Sam approaching. She paled.

Sam frowned. *What the?*

Valerie turned and started walking at a brisk trot away from her. Her backpack bounced across her back as she fast-walked down the sidewalk.

Sam stumbled for a moment. Had she not heard her? But she had *looked right at her.* "Wait up!" Sam called, "I just want to talk." She picked up her pace until her combat boots were clunking full force against the pavement.

They must look ridiculous, Sam thought to herself. *This was* ridiculous. Just when she thought she had closed the gap, Valerie took off in a dead sprint. The girl was *fast.*

Sam stopped. Her lips settled into a determined line. A wave of annoyance battered through her. *Fine.* Now they were *really* gonna talk. She remembered her bike and ran around the side of the school to where it was locked up. Well aware that Valerie was quickly escaping, Sam fumbled with the key to the bike lock. After the third attempt she got the bike free, threw the lock into her backpack, yanked the bike out of the rack, jumped atop, and peeled off down the street. She didn't even know why she was chasing this girl down. She didn't stop to think maybe she should leave someone alone that clearly wanted nothing to do with her.

After two blocks of pedaling at a dead sprint, Sam caught sight of Valerie's orange dress. The other girl glanced over her shoulder, saw Sam, and spun around, digging her heels into the dirt as if to brace herself. "Leave me alone," Valerie warned as Sam got closer. "Stay away."

Sam panted as she came up within five feet.

Valerie's hair was unkempt, her dress wrinkled. She looked as if she hadn't had a good night sleep in months. Sam got the impression that Valerie used to care a great deal about her personal appearance, until something had happened. Now she cared about other things more, or nothing at all.

"Why'd you run?" Sam asked, breathless. "I just wanted to—"

A fist sailed at Sam's face.

On instinct alone, Sam ducked her head to the left just in time. Valerie's punch landed against Sam's right shoulder, knocking the wind from her lungs and her hand off of her handlebars, dislodging her from the seat of her bike. She crashed onto the ground, her foot getting tangled in the peddles, bringing the bike down on top of her. Gravel ripped through her jeans and chewed into her knee.

Sam spent two seconds being stunned before she moved onto more useful emotions. Like anger.

And outrage. "Ok. Now I'm *really* pissed," she grated. She shoved the bike off of her violently, not caring as it clattered loudly against the pavement. The fury rushing through her dulled the pain in her throbbing shoulder and her stinging knee. She leapt up off the ground and glared.

"I *said* to stay away from me," Valerie growled.
"No shit," Sam spat. She raised her hands up near her face in fists in case Valerie tried that move again, but she felt hilariously scrawny by comparison. "What the hell is your problem?"

"You! You're my problem!" Her voice hitched. "You're everyone's problem!"

Sam blinked, hurt. She lowered her hands and took a shocked step back. "What? Why? What did I — Why?" Sam stuttered. "You don't even know me."

Valerie's face crumpled and twisted into something awful. "I know you," she said, voice hysteric.

Sam bit her lip and hovered uncertainly. This was second time someone had told her that, but for some reason it sounded way more ominous coming from this girl than it did from Danny. Valerie was nuts. Maybe that's why everyone at school walked around her like she was surrounded by a fifteen foot bubble.

"Look," Sam soothed. "I think we started off on the wrong foot." Understatement of the year. "I'm new here. I just wanted to introduce myself. I've seen you in a few classes. We even have homeroom together. I thought—"

Valerie ripped her hands away from her face. Her eyes were full of tears. "You thought what? That you could move into that house and nothing would happen?! Now they're back! And it's all happening again!"

"What's happening again? Who's back?" Sam asked. She started to get the sinking feeling that she had triggered some kind of nervous breakdown. Her hand dipped into her jeans pocket and she felt around for her cellphone in case she needed to call a doctor, or the police, but her pocket was empty. Her phone was in her backpack, which was strewn on the ground behind her.

Valerie's eyes were wide in panic. "They're back."

Okay… Sam stopped trying to dig for information. It was clear that Valerie was only getting more and more upset. "Breathe," Sam tried to soothe. "No one is—"

"It fancies you! It follows you around!" Valerie continued. "You have to stay away. I can't let it find me again."

Sam put her palms up in front of her and backed off. "What are you—"

"Stay away from me," Valerie repeated. "I mean it."

"Or what?" As soon as Sam said it, she knew it was a mistake.

"Or I'll kill you myself," Valerie growled darkly.

Sam wasn't about to test Valerie's conviction. For some reason this girl struck her as the type that kept her promises. She also had a serious right hook. This girl was dangerous.

By the time Sam got over her shock, Valerie had already run away, through the bushes and into the thicket of forest to the right of the road. Her bright orange dress disappeared in the perpetual mist.

Sam breathed out slowly. Her breath condensed in front of her face. All around her the street was eerily silent. From above the grey sky split and a small drizzle coated the ground, dying the pavement black.

What the hell had that been all about? Sam remembered the look in Officer Gray's eyes when he had
warned her and her mother about the house. Sam wasn't stupid. Something had gone down there, and the Grays had been involved. A million questions stormed in Sam's mind. Who were 'they'? What, exactly, was happening again? Who was following her around? Why did it matter if Sam was living in the house? More questions. No answers.

Sam shook her head. Maybe the girl was nuts like everyone said she was. Although she couldn't help but feel unsettled.

She walked over to her abandoned bike and reached down for her backpack. As Sam slung it over one shoulder, a piece of paper fluttered out of one of the unzipped pockets. A bright orange flyer.

She paused, before bending down to scoop it up. She unwrinkled one of the corners and tried to dry off the edges where the wet pavement had started to make the ink bleed. Spirit Club. Right. What day was it? Monday afternoon? They didn't meet until tomorrow night.

Sam bit her lip as she stared down at the paper. Tucker would kill her for even considering attending one of those meetings. She doubted that Paulina would know anything about Amity Park's past, but she might know a thing or two about what had happened with the Grays. Paulina loved to gossip, loved have dirt on just about everybody. Maybe she would tell her what Valerie's problem was.

She shoved the flyer back into her backpack and climbed atop her bike. Time to go home. Wherever, and whatever, home amounted to anymore.

The sun dipped beyond the pines, casting her shadow out in front of her as she made her way back. She flicked on her bike light, although she hadn't seen a single car for over five minutes.

A small red sign peeked through the mist on the left of the street as she rode along, declaring, in white letters: I know. It looked as if it had been there for ages, but no one had the heart to take it down. As Sam peddled onward, another followed it. Sam quickly realized why it had remained for so long, even though vines and plants had started to try and pull it down. It was a jingle. An old ad. It read:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I know} \\
\text{he's a wolf} \\
\text{said Riding Hood} \\
\text{But grandma, dear} \\
\text{he smells so good!} \\
\text{Burma-Shave}
\end{align*}
\]

"Comforting," Sam muttered to herself as she stared at the last sign, her neck twisting as it flew past. She stopped paying attention to where she was going. It was why she nearly ran straight into a blockade. With a gasp she skidded to a stop, tires a half inch from ramming straight into the metal.

ROAD CLOSED AHEAD, USE DETOUR.

Beyond the sign the road stretched onward, seemingly fine. She glanced around. To her left was a dirt road that wound deep into the woods. A detour sign was propped up against a tree.

She spun her handlebars around to follow the path, before she felt that strange cold feeling. It crept up her spine and into her scalp. She was being followed again. Only, this time, Valerie's warning blared in her head. Apparently she had attracted some kind of stalker.

A gust of wind picked up and she could hear rustling the leaves behind her. It almost sounded like children whispering, giggling, conspiring.
Sam froze and gritted her teeth. The urge to run nearly bowled her over but she stood her ground. Copying Danny, she didn't look back. Instead she gazed between the two signs in indecision.

The dog… the dog hadn't existed. As baffling as that fact was, Sam found she accepted it as truth. She had already been tricked once.

Sam rolled her bike up to the road closure sign. She reached out hesitantly and brushed her hand along it. It felt solid, but cold. Ice cold and too smooth. Almost like what solidified air might feel like. Certainly not like any metal she had ever touched.

Her stalker was watching her intently, awaiting her decision. Sam felt that it—or they—wanted her to follow the detour route. That, if anything, made her choice easy.

She took off full-speed down the street, ignoring the road closure sign. After a few minutes the creepy feeling faded. She shook it off, rolling out her shoulders, as she pedaled. She made it home, never encountering a felled tree, a downed powerline, or any other reason for why the road would be closed.
Sam didn’t tell Tucker that she was attending a Spirit Club meeting. She knew he wouldn’t approve. Not that he held any sway over her decisions, but the pair of them always seemed to be on the edge of a fight. No need to cause any unnecessary tension. Tucker was one of the only friends she had. Besides, she needed him to pass US History.

She pedaled her bike towards the old abandoned hospital. It stood upon a hill, looming all grey and ominous. The windows looked half boarded up. Shards of glass glinted like teeth in the dim lighting. It was a square building, with square windows. Very rectangular and boring. Utilitarian. Like it had once served its purpose, but was now pointless.

Sam caught sight of a cluster of people milling about the entrance to the road that led up the hill. A huge metal gate blocked the way but, Sam noted, it could be easily climbed.

There were five of them. As Sam drew close she began to pick them apart— Paulina and Star, Dash and Kwan, and... Mikey. She should have known he’d be tagging along. The kid was hunched in a permanent slouch, head ducked, eyes darting around between the others as if constantly gauging their opinions.

"Look who it is," Dash sneered as Sam hopped off her bike and walked up to the group.

"Baxter," Sam greeted blithely.

Paulina bounded over to her. Her billowing hair fluttered out behind her. She leaned in too close for comfort and grabbed Sam by the arm. "Oh, you came!" she exclaimed. "I knew you would! Didn't I say she would?" Paulina spun around to look back at the group.

They all mumbled affirmatively that yes, of course, Paulina had said she would.

Sam was too busy trying to not look completely uncomfortable with this girl touching her. She extracted her arm gently, hoping that Paulina wouldn't get offended, but the girl didn't even notice. Her eyes had a distant glazed look about them, as if she couldn't really see any further than herself. "I came to see what the hocus pocus was all about," Sam muttered.

"Hocus pocus?" Mikey spoke up. "This isn't some kind of a joke." He turned to look at Star and Paulina for encouragement, but Paulina waved a hand like batting a fly.

"I don't joke," Sam stated flatly.

"Shut it, Mikey," Paulina snapped. "Don't make me regret letting you tag along."

"Yeah, Mikey," Dash warned. He cracked his knuckles.

Mikey looked down at his shoelace.

Star smiled a wide vacant smile. "You're in luck, Samantha. Tonight we're going to the tracks."

"It's Sam—"

"Let's go." Paulina had her by the arm again. Sam didn't wrench it out this time.

"—I thought we were going to the hospital?" Sam asked weakly. She stumbled after them as they abandoned their bikes and took off down the street. She glanced back behind her shoulder and
looked up at the old building. Dread curled up in her stomach. What was more haunted than a run
down hospital?

"—They say a ghost haunts the shipping boxes down at the train yard," Kwan was saying. He shot
her a wavering grin, not looking too excited about it.

Great. Sam shut her mouth. Really, she knew what she had been getting herself into. Although just
how many more ghostly encounters she could handle, she didn't know.

After maybe half a mile, the five of them veered off into tall wild grass off the side of the road. As
soon as they crested the side of the bluff Sam could see the tracks Star had been referring to. Four
parallel railway tracks cut through the landscape. Among them, abandoned train carriages and
shipping containers lay littered about.

Sam was about to mention that it might not be a great idea to stand around on train tracks, but the
group had already taken off, running at breakspeed down the hill with joyful whoops.

Sam grimaced and followed, running up behind them, until they hit a chainlink fence.

Dash reached around into his backpack and drew out wire clippers. One by one he snapped the
chain away. The entire time, Paulina harped at him to go faster. *Hurry it up already, it's nearly
sundown. Papa will freak if I'm not home in an hour.*

After enough wires had been clipped he yanked back the fence and they all plucked their way inside.

"This one," Paulina whispered, gesturing up at a red shipping container, the door slightly ajar.

Kwan hoisted her up and she yanked the sliding door open a few feet further with a loud squeak.

"You go," she told Dash. "I can't go first, what if there's, like, a murderer? Or worse— a homeless
man?"

In the end, Dash threw Mikey up into it. Once it was deemed vacant, one by one they filed inside.

Sam took up the rear. As she stumbled into the container, she caught the fetid scent of mold and
mouse droppings. She wrinkled her nose for a second, blind, before a brilliant light lit up the
underside of Paulina's face. Sam jumped, despite herself. Paulina was freaky enough without her
features harshly lit by a flashlight.

"Boo!" Paulina giggled. She cast the light down around the ground and illuminated different wooden
crates, dirt, and rust. "Ew," she commented. "Let's make this quick."

Someone rustled around for a moment, before passing something… red…

"What's that?" Sam asked as she watched Dash dip his fingers the substance and start to spread it
around on the floor. From her right a match was struck and Mikey lit a few candles, placing them in
the center of what looked like the beginnings of an alchemic circle.

"You would know, Goth girl," Star hummed.

"It's blood," Dash said. He paused menacingly, before tacking on, "*Chicken* blood."

It took considerable effort, but Sam swallowed her outrage. She wasn't here to debate the ethics of
how they obtained that chicken blood. "So how come you guys started doing this?" Sam asked.

"Ghosts are so cool," Paulina sighed. "Have you ever seen a ghost?"
Sam was about to shake her head before she paused, thought about it, and then nodded. "Yeah. I think I have," she said aloud, surprising herself even as she did it.

Paulina's eyes lit up. "Really? What did it look like?"

Star, Kwan, and Mikey paused to glance at her. Even Dash stopped what he was doing for a second and looked at her with genuine interest.

Sam fidgeted uncomfortably underneath the weight of their stares. "I saw a dog, but I don't think the dog actually existed. Maybe I made it all up in my head, but…" She trailed off.

"Oh," Paulina said, looking a bit disappointed.

"Why?" Sam asked. "Have you guys seen a ghost?"

Yes, yes they had. Sam could look across each one of their faces and see a different range of emotions, but, in the flickering candlelight, most of their expressions were serious. Except Dash. By the way his eyes kept getting magnetically attracted to Paulina's cleavage, Sam could deduce that Dash was only here because of the cheerleader. And Kwan was probably here because of Dash.

Mikey shook his head once, lips pursed. "I saw my grandmother I think," he spoke quietly.

"I saw—" Star began.

"I saw a boy," Paulina interrupted. She leaned to one side and peered up into the dark rusty ceiling of the container, batting her long eyelashes dreamily. "I was crossing the road and didn't see a car and he saved me. Out of nowhere."

Star closed her mouth and sat back on her heels, effectively shushed.

"Three years ago we spent a whole night together. Super handsome and old timey. He had the best fashion sense. Nice shoes— those wingtip ones... and hair done like"— Paulina waved her hand to gesture up at her forehead as if combing a part— "He may be a ghost, but that doesn't mean we can't be together. Ever since that night I've been searching for him. That's why I started this club. I know he loves me. He'll come back to me."

"Maybe you don't want him to come back for you," Sam reasoned. So far, all the ghostly encounters she'd experienced involved cunning, manipulation, and bodily harm.

"No, you don't understand. Not him. We're in love." Paulina's eyes sparkled maniacally in the candlelight, her tone turning sharp. "He could never hurt me."

A pause. Dash continued to draw whatever circle he was drawing. The rest of the crew stared at the candles for a long moment.

"Guys…" Kwan spoke up. "What happened last week… with the suicide… do you think… what if it's happening all over again?" He had his back to the door, prepared to leap out of the container at any second, although he tried to lean casually so as to not show any fear. "The ghosts could be back. Maybe this isn't such a good idea anymore. Spirit Club was fun when nothing would happen, but what if we draw attention to—"

"You're not afraid of a couple spooks are you?" Dash cut in, sneering. He smeared blood across his cheeks and leered at Kwan who, despite himself, skittered away. Dash barked a hyena-like laugh. It yipped and jabbed, echoing over and over across the tin compartment.
"What happened last time?" Sam interrupted. She didn't come to this thing for chicken blood and the pleasure of Dash Baxter's company. She came for answers.

Mikey stared at her hard, as if she had asked a dumb question.

"She's new," Star said. "She doesn't know anything."

Sam gritted her teeth.

"Three years ago Amity Park had an epidemic of accidental deaths, missing people, and suicides," Mikey explained clinically. "Eleven people. Some went missing and were never found. People reported strange happenings. Apparitions, hallucinations… ghosts."

Sam frowned. "So… why did they stop?"

Dash went back to work at whatever lopsided blood circle he was working on. The boy was many things, but an artist was not one of them.

Mikey shrugged. "The ghosts started with Valerie Gray, they ended with Valerie Gray."

"It has something to do with their old house," Paulina mused.

"We don't know that for sure," Star cut in, rolling her eyes.

"C'mon, Star," Paulina scowled. "We broke in there last year ourselves and looked around. You can't tell me that place isn't haunted. It's super creepy. Especially that chandelier…" She trailed off, shuddering.

Sam refrained from mentioning the fact that she currently lived in that super creepy mansion. Paulina's hand on her arm broke her out of her thoughts. Sam flinched and immediately took back her arm and pinned it close to her side. She had a strict no-touching rule.

Paulina looked as if she was waiting for Sam to ask her a question, and when she didn't, she couldn't help herself but answer anyway. "Mrs. Gray hung herself from that chandelier," Paulina whispered conspiratorially.

"She did?" Sam asked coolly, but her mind raced. That certainly explained Valerie's father's aversion to the house. Sam pictured that chandelier and all its old-glory, with the body of a woman swaying side to side, toes and fingertips pointed.

"Valerie came home and found her hanging there. Poor thing. I know 'cause we used to be friends." Paulina recited this all with the apathy of someone who had never witnessed the death of a loved one. "She just came back to school this year. My cousin said she was in a mental institution for the past two years. If you ask me, she shouldn't be allowed back. I tried to say hi but she completely ignored me. She's clearly not all there anymore. Pretty fishy the same month she comes back there's a suicide…"

Star twirled her finger next to her head and grinned.

Sam closed her eyes. *Images of broken glass, her own cut up hands, and the sight of a pale face, dead marble-like brown eyes, mouth bloodied and downturned, gaping, red smeared across a temple, down a pale cheek—* She shook her head and sucked in a quick breath.

She wasn't sure if she completely forgave Valerie for her death threat, but she certainly didn't hold it against her. Instead she found herself empathizing.
"You gonna hurl?" Dash asked her.

The blood smeared across his face made Sam breathless. For a moment she thought she was still lost in that memory, but then she remembered the chicken blood. Right.

"No," Sam muttered. "But if I do, I'll make sure to get some on you."

"What was that?" Dash asked dangerously.

"Nothing."

"Is the circle almost done? It's getting late," Star piped.

"Good enough," Dash grumbled. He gestured down at the crudely drawn circle. "Oh, almost forgot." He got out a huge jar of salt and poured it around the group of them, creating a thick white line.

Sam tried not to laugh. It looked like the lot of them had googled what an ancient rite circle looked like and attempted to imitate it. The candles they used weren't long-lasting and were already dripping wax all over the floor.

"Circle up," Paulina ordered.

They obeyed. Sam begrudgingly took her place in between Mikey and Star and, because she told herself she was here for knowledge, she didn't complain about having to take their hands. Mikey's was slightly sweaty. Sam instantly made a face.

"After this I have to tell you something," Mikey whispered.

Sam glanced over at him. "What?"

"Alright," Paulina announced. "Everybody close your eyes and repeat after me."

*This is so stupid.* Sam rolled her eyes inside her head, eyelids fluttering.

"Shadowed creatures of the night, I summon you, come to us tonight," the group chanted.

Sam noted it was only really Paulina, Star, Mikey and Kwan doing the chanting. Sam peeked open one eye and saw Dash looking down Paulina's shirt while she had her eyes closed. *Pig.*

"Shadowed creatures of the night, I summon you, come to us tonight."

Star's cold hand tightened around hers. Sam assumed that meant Star knew she wasn't chanting. With a sigh, Sam joined in for the last recitation. "Shadowed creatures of the night, I summon you, come to us tonight," she incited in monotone. She kept her eyes open. Just like she expected, nothing happened.

"Box Ghost, if you are with us, blow out the candle," Paulina whispered.

They all stared at the candles, but other than an odd flicker, none of them blew out.

Paulina didn't seem discouraged however, and none of the others looked very surprised. Sam wondered why she had even come; it wasn't like these people knew anything about ghosts. She doubted their candlesever flickered out.

"Phantom, if you're with us tonight, blow out the candle," Paulina continued. She leaned forward
and stared, hard, at the lot of them. After a few seconds one petered and died out. It left nothing but a soft glowing ember behind.

Sam stared at it in shock. Did that really just happen?

Paulina squealed. "He's here!" she exclaimed.

"The candle just ran out of wax," Kwan said quietly.

Sam looked down. Sure enough. The candle had run out of wax. It hadn't been blown out.

"Shut up. He's here. The candle wouldn't have gone out otherwise. Phantom, blow out another candle if you came back for me."

No breeze. Nothing. The four of them watched as Paulina addressed an empty room, directing questions to a being that didn't exist. Sam wondered if her mystery lover had ever existed in the first place.

By the end Paulina was pouting.

Mikey reached forward and grabbed up the remaining candles, blowing them out, and flicked the flashlight back on.

"Say a ghost had come, what's the salt supposed to do?" Sam asked.

"Protect us," Paulina answered glumly. "Ghosts can't cross salt lines."

"Well maybe that's why he couldn't blow out any of your candles," Sam reasoned.

Paulina stared at her, hard. Her face contorted like she wanted to say something awful back, then it cleared and brightened. "You're right! Of course! That's why he hasn't talked to me! This whole time we've been doing it wrong." She kicked her sneaker down at the line, breaking it apart with her toe.

Mikey and Kwan shot Sam a glare.

She didn't return their gaze, knowing full-well that next time Paulina attempted to summon the dead, she would do so without a salt barrier. Sam wasn't sure just how much ghostly lore she believed in yet, but she believed enough to want a salt barrier.

Feeling like she had wasted much of her night, Sam broke away from the group to retrieve her bike back at the old hospital. It was still there, to her relief.

She yanked it up by the handlebars and climbed atop. With one last look at the grey building upon the hill, she took off down the street and rode towards town.

At least it hadn't been a complete waste. She now knew what had happened to the Grays. She knew more about Valerie, more about the house she lived in, and all the stories and hysteria surrounding it. Not to mention she found out one little rumor about ghosts that she was going to put to use.

She skidded to a stop outside a convenience store a half block away from the Amity Park Cemetery. With practiced ease she locked her bike up and strode inside.
A little bell chimed. A blast of hot air and pop music pelted her in the face.

She walked down the first aisle, grabbing a bottle of water. When she turned the corner to the second aisle she caught sight of what she was *really* here for. She cracked a crooked grin, grabbed the jar off of the shelf and— after tucking the water underneath one armpit— spun it around in her hands to bathe it in the brilliant fluorescent lights. Morton Salt.

"Is that all?" the cashier asked her tiredly.

Sam nodded, slamming a ten onto the counter.

Tucker was convinced her gravekeeper friend was dead. Sam disagreed.

There was only one way to settle this.

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---Diary Entry, III---

Friday June 13th, 1957

Dear Diary,

Danny and I are leaving for Amity tomorrow for the whole summer. We go every year, but I think this might be our last. Danny has friends that he wants to hang out with in Cincinnati. Besides, I have to study if I want to go to college. I can't spend a whole summer being a child anymore. It's time to grow up.

.

Friday July 4th, 1957

Dear Diary,

In Amity at Vlad's. It's July 4th. Danny won't stop trying to get me to go catch the fireflies like we used to. He's been shooting off fireworks and launching his toy rockets out in the backyard all day. I'm never going to get any studying done with him around. He won't let me finish a book.

.

Monday September 15th, 1959

Dear Diary,

I haven't written in here for years! I lost it for a while and just found it crammed in my desk drawer. Sorry diary! Life has been so busy. I've been spending all my free time studying. Can never be too prepared.

.

Friday July 14th, 1961

Dear Diary,

I met a boy today at Henrietta's. He's a year older than me and rides a motorcycle. He's interesting and quiet. There's something wonderful about him. I can't tell what he's thinking. And get this— his name is Johnny. Isn't that cute? He let me ride on the back of his bike and took me to Cedar Hill. I
I want to know more about him.

Monday, September 30th, 1961

Dear Diary,

I think Johnny might be the one. He's so sweet. He's not like any of the other boys. Danny and him don't get along, but don't all brothers hate their sister's boyfriends? He'll come around once he understands how serious I am.
After exiting the convenience store, Sam crossed the street, popped open the top of the salt, sprinkled a tiny line along the iron gate of the cemetery, shoved the rest of the salt back in her back, and began her customary climb of the cemetery fence.

She barely crested the top when a voice from somewhere below her spoke out. "If it isn't my favorite punk. I was wondering when you'd break and enter. Dracula's not going to read itself, you know."

Sam jumped. She was glad she had poured the salt line outside of the gate instead of inside it. She wouldn't have been able to pour it without him knowing if she had waited.

She glanced down.

Danny's head was nearly one foot below her dangling heel. Sam had to squint to see him in the gloom.

She hauled her other leg up and over the top of the fence, careful to avoid catching her already ripped up jeans, and slowly spun around to start her descent into the graveyard. "Oh look— an annoyingly upbeat nerd of a necrophiliac," Sam shot back, out of breath.

"Don't make me blush," he cooed. Sam could tell he was grinning by his tone of voice. Someone was in a good mood tonight.

"Wasn't planning on it," Sam muttered. She took another step, missed, and nearly fell. With a startled squeak she grabbed onto the top rung just in time— dangling precariously. Her feet scrambled as she regained her footing.

"Whoah," he said. "You know, next time you could ask me to open the gate for you. The last thing you need is your own tombstone."

Sam started to climb down with more care. "Isn't opening the gate against the rules?" Sam asked breathlessly.

"About that… I've been thinking... Rules are pretty dumb."

Sam landed with a soft thump against the soil and turned to face him, taking in his sparkling blue eyes and dark green sweater vest atop a collared shirt. This particular outfit made him look out of place, like he was from another time. It struck her as odd. A nagging voice told her he dressed like this because he really was from another time. She squashed it. The salt line had been poured. She'd find out soon enough if he could cross it when he walked her home. He always walked her home. It was that politeness she was counting on.

"Rules are dumb?" she repeated. "I'm rubbing off on you."

"Something like that," he admitted, tone conflicted.

Sam paused, trying to decipher what that meant, but before she had the chance he was already walking away from her up the bluff. "Hey. Where are you going?"

"Gotta finish something up," he said over his shoulder.

Sam grabbed her flashlight out of her bag and flicked it on, shining it where he had gone, but he
wasn't there. It's not like she expected him to be.

With a huff, she blew some of her bangs off her forehead and headed towards her tree. She settled underneath it and propped her flashlight up so that the gravekeeper would have a harder time sneaking up on her. For some reason he had an unhealthy obsession with trying to scare her. So far, mission: unsuccessful. She shivered, the crisp October night air biting through her vegan leather jacket.

She fished inside her backpack for her book, her hand bumping against the salt container.

As she read, her thoughts began to race. What Valerie said yesterday had stuck with her. The death threat and the stalker bit. And what about that ghost Paulina said she had seen? Phantom. A boy with manners and nice shoes— Sam immediately thought of the gravekeeper. Her eyes paused halfway through a line. What if Paulina's crush was the gravekeeper? What if Danny was Phantom?

Sam blinked and realized she had been reading the same paragraph over and over without comprehension. She refocused and tried to forget about all she had learned tonight. Forget about the chandelier… about the unexplained deaths and suicides three years ago… about the town that kept getting stranger and stranger with each passing day…

A pair of shiny black oxfords trotted up to her left. "You're never going to finish that book with me around."

Sam looked down at Dracula, then back up at the gravekeeper, who crossed the clearing and sat haughtily atop the adjacent gravestone.

"Is that a threat?" she asked.

He steepled his fingers and rested his chin upon them. "Yes."

Sam reopened the book. She ignored him.

"Hey, c'mon," he laughed. "I was kidding."

She turned a page pointedly.

"Bo—ots. Pay attention to me."

He drew out her nickname pleadingly.

Sam broke and glanced up at him. He had his hands out before him in prayer, legs crossed at the ankles, lips pouted, those blue eyes watery. He probably didn't know how cute he looked. With a long-suffering sigh she placed the book down. "Alright, fine," she conceded. "Attention whore."

He grinned triumphantly.

"Isn't it kind of rude to sit on someone's gravestone? Don't you have any respect for the dead?" Sam asked.

He blinked. "What?" he asked, glancing down at the rock, oblivious.

Sam rolled her eyes. Sometimes the way he treated death so casually irked her. "I mean, what if you were this person's"— Sam tilted her head to read the tombstone aloud— "What if you were Madeline Fenton's son and you came to give her some flowers and instead find some creepy dude sitting on her grave marker?"

He stared at her blankly. "Hey. Did you just call me creepy?"
"For the love of—" "Nevermind," Sam groaned.

"I work in a graveyard," he stated, as if this explained everything.

Sam supposed it did. If she worked around death all the time she'd start being thick-skinned about it too. Recently she had noticed that death was disturbing her less and less. This realization only served to disturb her in different, more profound ways. Ways that got her wondering if she was losing small chunks of her soul with each death she encountered.

Danny leaned forward and put his chin in his hand. "So, what's new in Sam's mad, mad world?"

"I found out a woman hung herself off the chandelier in my house," Sam said bluntly. "I also received a death threat, and used chicken blood to try and summon a ghost. It didn't work."

He leaned back. His face darkened. "Who threatened you?"

Sam opened her mouth, paused, and closed it again. There was a green glint to his eye. She knew she was glimpsing another version of him, like peeling back a curtain. His question was loaded with intent to hurt someone. Valerie had been terrified of attracting any attention to herself. She had only lashed out because Sam had cornered her. The girl had been through enough.

"It was nothing. Just a joke." Sam regretted even bringing it up. "So you already knew about Mrs. Gray," Sam assumed. He seemed to know everything about Amity Park.

"I know all about Gray," he said.

"Oh yeah?"

"I buried her," he stated matter-of-factly.

"You must know a lot about who's died in this town," Sam hummed.

He tilted his head, observing her cautiously. "Maybe. Why? What do you wanna know?"

"Has anyone else died in the house?" Sam asked.

"Of course." He smiled. "It's an old mansion. Emphasis on old."

"I mean recently. Like the past five years."

"Not that I know of." But he squirmed a bit and looked too-intensely at her. His hand twitched like it wanted to rub the back of his neck. He always did that when he lied. Sam had been hanging out with him a lot this past month; she knew his ticks.

"You're lying," Sam noted. "Why?"

"No I'm not." His eyes grew huge.

"You don't have to protect me. I can handle the truth. I'm gonna find it out sooner or later," Sam warned. If anything, this only made her more determined to figure out what had happened.

His smile dropped. "Sam, you're a really nice girl. Smart too. One of the smartest I've met in… in a really long time. First you're asking me about stuff that happened sixty years ago, now about the house… Both topics are dangerous. Don't go digging up stuff you can't put back."

Sam fell silent. She had never been called nice before. That was new. Her fingers plucked at the
grass around her feet as she absorbed his warning. What was wrong with trying to finish her report? Or trying to learn more about where she lived?

"You're going to do it anyway," he guessed.

She shrugged. "I'm not the type to run away."

He stared at her sadly.

"About that question you asked me, back at the junkyard. About whether or not I believed in ghosts. I do believe in ghosts. And I think one's following me."

He froze. "Oh? Is that why you killed a chicken?"

"I didn't kill the chicken," Sam corrected. "But that's not the point. The point is that I'm being haunted. So, how do you get rid of a ghost?"

"Why are you asking me?" He hopped off the gravestone and paced, agitated.

Sam swallowed. Was there some truth to Tucker's claim? Why else would he get all nervous? "You work around dead people. You knew about the circus thing. Is it so far-fetched to think you know about ghosts too?"

"Oh," he stated, stilling. He sank down across from her. His shoulders slumped as he relaxed a touch. "Okay, yeah. That makes sense."

"So?" Sam prompted. "How do you get rid of a ghost?"

"Not with chicken blood," the gravekeeper laughed. He caught his breath and sobered. For a long moment he looked at her like he was internally debating what to say. He bit his lip, then blurted: "You have to finish their unfinished business."

Sam tilted her head. "What's that?"

"It's whatever they need to be at peace. Solve a murder, find somebody, give an heirloom or a message to a family member… you name it, all ghosts are different."

Sam frowned. "So... why not just tell someone what to do to help?"

"They can't," he whispered. "That's the curse. Some stay a ghost so long they forget they're a ghost. Others don't want to leave."

There was something different about him. Sam stared, searching. Her eyes widened in realization and she leaned back. "What?" His eyebrows scrunched in worry.

"You're not smoking." She sniffed the air, catching the scent of burned something and… mint? "And you're chewing gum. Are you trying to quit?"

His cheeks flushed and his hand shot through his hair, mussing up the strands until they fell out across his forehead, escaping the comb wave. "I thought you didn't like it when I smoked," he murmured.

"I don't," Sam said. "It's terrible for you."
He waved a hand as if to bat away her concern.

Sam beamed. "I'm proud of you." She meant it.

He coughed, looking up into the night sky with a shrug. "It's no big," he said softly. But, Sam could tell he was pleased with her praise.

Sam huffed. "It's big."

He shrugged again. "How far away do you think that star is?" he asked, pointing up into the sky.

Sam let him change the subject. She put her book back in her backpack and scooted closer so they were sitting side by side. Together they settled onto their backs. A small smile tugged at her lips as she stole a glance at his face. "My physics teacher said that the light we see from the stars is millions of years old. That star might not exist anymore. We could be looking into the past, seeing it's echo. It's almost like time travel." Sam said quietly.

His eyes flicked to hers. "We're seeing the evidence of its life," he murmured.

Sam nodded. His face was inches away and all his attention was glued to her. The blue of his eyes was startling. Were they even real? His sweetness, his humor... He was such a beautiful person. Was he even real? A sudden intense feeling of fondness washed over her. Not thinking too hard about it, she leaned forward to kiss him. For a second she thought he leaned in too. But then he was leaning away from her and she wished she could take it back, because it meant that she had crossed some sort of invisible line. They were friends. With the potential to become best friends. And she had just... ruined it.

"I'm sorry," she said.

The look on his face was one of pure devastation.

Sam panicked. She had had no one else that she could talk to like this in years. No one else that she could be her true self around so freely without fear of judgement or pity. Dark thoughts consumed her. "I don't know why I did that— I didn't mean— I'm just— I'm so lonely all the time. You're one of my favorite people. Can we just pretend that never happened...?" Sam trailed off hopelessly. "Please don't hate me."

"I don't hate you," he chuckled. He propped his head up onto his hand, resting upon his elbow. His smile faded slowly. "But we can't be like that. I shouldn't be spending as much time with you as it is. I have a job, you know."

"No!" Sam interrupted breathlessly. "I can't lose you too." She was begging him; strike a match, set her pride on fire, watch it burn to ash at his feet.

"Too?" he echoed.

She closed her eyes, berating herself, spinning away from him to press her head into the soil, hard. The scent of grass overwhelmed her. She just wanted to sink into one of these graves and wait a good year before crawling back out, claws first. She needed a break. She wasn't great at this 'moving forward' thing. Why had she tried to kiss him? She didn't even know. She was a mystery to even herself now-a-days.

"Sam." He sent her a sad-sweet smile as she looked up at him. "I'm no good. You can't lose me 'cause I'm like that star; already lost."
Sam shook her head, confused. "Can I still come back here or not?" she whispered.

He leaned back and studied her for a moment before nodding.

Sam felt like she had shed a fifty pound coat. "Good," she whispered. Good. She slumped in relief. Maybe she hadn't ruined the one good thing she had.

He climbed to his feet and offered her his hand. "Let's get you home."

Sam opened her mouth to ask him if he was kicking her out, but she took one glance up at the sky and could tell it was pinkening. Dawn was approaching. She had been out all night. Bewildered, she realized that she had spent hours and hours chatting with him. Every time she hung out with him her sense of time warped. Hours passed like minutes.

She took his hand and straightened, dusting the dirt and grass off her jeans. As they wound their way silently down the hill she could sense there was something awkward now between them. So wrapped up in her own thoughts, she forgot about the salt line. It wasn't until they turned the corner to her house that she remembered.

When she did, she stumbled to a stop and gasped.

He paused ahead of her. "What?"

She stared at him. They had sauntered out of the graveyard through the gate. The salt line hadn't even made him flinch. He had crossed it. There was no way he had avoided it. Which meant he wasn't a ghost. He was a real person. A person that just happened to have an affinity for sweaters and wingtip shoes. Tucker was wrong.

"Sam?" he asked warily. "You okay?"

"I'm okay," she breathed. "I'm great, actually." She continued to walk, catching up. As she passed she took another, more critical, look at him. Besides the green tint that his eyes sometimes got and the wavering quality of his shadow, he looked human enough.

He quirked an eyebrow at her as she passed. "You're weird."

"Thanks," she quipped.

Together they crept through the side garden, avoiding the nettles and the blackberry thorns. She raised her arms and he grabbed her from underneath her armpits, hoisting her up into the air so she could get ahold of the bottom rung of the fire escape.

"Good morning, Danny," she said as she leaned out of her window. "I'll see you again soon?"

He glanced towards the hills in the distance, where the sun was beginning to crest from behind twin peaks, then he turned back to her. His eyes softened. "See you later," he promised, much to her relief. With a lazy salute, he took off around the side of the house.

Sam smiled to herself as she quietly shut her bedroom window and crawled to bed. Her head barely hit the pillow before her alarm clock went off.
Something had happened.

Sam caught Tucker's eye from down the hallway. She had been at school for a whole minute and a half and already knew something was up.

He shot her a look and shook his head once, slammed his locker door, and weaved his way through the crowd of students over to her locker. Clumps of students clustered about whispering. Sam strained her ear to try and listen in, but couldn't catch anything.

"Who died?" Sam joked, as Tucker approached.

His look darkened.

Sam immediately knew someone had, in fact, died. She sucked in a quick breath and finished taking her books out of her locker. She didn't even need that math book for first period, but she took it anyway. "Oh," she said.

"Mikey," Tucker whispered. "Last night."

Her mind raced. Mikey? Mikey Voss? But he had been fine at that Spirit Club meeting when she had left the group to get her bike. "What happened?" she asked.

"I don't know the whole story. I overheard some people saying it was a suicide. I suspect they'll make an announcement in homeroom before the rumors get too out of hand."

Sam swallowed several times, her mouth dry. "That's…" Her gaze wandered over to a group of students weeping openly. A pair of girls were clutching each other, while a boy patted their backs, looking lost and helpless. Must be kids that knew Mikey. Sam quickly averted her eyes, feeling like she was intruding on some kind of moment. She had only known the kid for a month, so really, she didn't know Mikey at all. "That's awful," she finished.

Teslaff was three and a half minutes late to homeroom. Sam kept her eyes on the clock, watching as it wound around and around, dread curling in her stomach. Her thoughts were stuck on Mikey had last said to her. He had wanted to tell her something. What was it? Why hadn't she asked him about it before she had left? She had totally forgotten.

At four minutes and seventeen seconds, Teslaff entered the room without her usual fanfare. The door didn't swing around and bang with the force of her shove. Instead she quietly closed it behind her and walked to the front of the class. The whisperings died out like someone ripping a needle off a vinyl record. From somewhere behind Sam, someone sniffed wetly.

Teslaff cleared her throat and stood there at a loss, before she found her voice. "This morning we found out some… some news," she said finally. Sam had never heard her speak so gently. Usually she boomed orders with the volume of an air horn. "Last night Michael Voss passed away. Cause of death is still undetermined. An investigation is underway."

A few students sucked in a soft gasp. A chair let out a squeak. Sam wrapped her fingers around the
edges of her desk and sat as still as possible. When Tucker had told her it felt like a rumor. With Teslaff announcing it in her blunt gruff way… this was real. Mikey was really gone.

"The Voss family asks that we all respect their privacy. Mikey was a great student and a loyal friend. He will be missed."

Teslaff paused for a moment, as if to collect her thoughts. "While we don't know the cause of death, in light of what happened three years ago, Principal Ishiyama wanted me to urge each and every one of you to practice caution," Teslaff continued. "Have a buddy past sundown. Do not wander. Keep track of friends and relatives. Make sure you know where they are."

Over half of the class craned their heads over to Valerie's desk, where she was sitting, stiffly, looking determinedly out of the window.

"We have a team, including our counselor Ms Spectra, holding sessions this week for anyone that wishes to talk about what happened."

"Also, if anyone is feeling… depressed, or hopeless, or know of anyone feeling this way, please reach out to someone. Do not suffer in silence. You are not alone." She bowed her head. "Let's take a moment."

Sam watched as students dipped their heads and clenched their eyes, looking for all intents and purposes like a crowd bracing for a tsunami. This moment of silence felt fraught with suspense, like everyone was holding their breath. No one wanted to know what would happen next; certain it would be awful.

The rest of homeroom passed in tense silence. As soon as the bell rang students jumped up and made for the door. Sam got up to follow suit.

"Manson. A word?"

Sam froze in paranoia. Did Teslaff somehow know what happened last night? With the seance? With Mikey? Did she— Sam forced away the thoughts. She was being ridiculous. There was no way Teslaff could know that.

"Yeah?" Sam asked, as she crossed the classroom.

Teslaff held out a slip of paper. It was a late pass. "If it's alright with you, one of our therapists, Dr. Matthews, would like to speak with you before first period."

Sam hesitated. "What does she want?"

"Just to see if you had any questions or want to talk about Mikey's death," Teslaff said. "Your choice, of course."

Sam glared at the slip of paper. She had talked to enough psychiatrists in the past two weeks. But… she did have questions, and while she wasn't sure if this Dr. Matthews could answer them, Sam figured she could at least ask them. She reached out and took the slip, glancing down at the room number.

Dr. Matthews turned out to be an old lady. She had intelligent blue eyes that were enormous,
magnified behind black rimmed glasses that were attached to her neck with a beaded chain. Thick white hair fell right above her shoulders in a bob. Her face was marred with sunspots. She had a hunch, and was dressed in a plain sea-foam green long-sleeve sweater and black pants. She looked soft, like the human embodiment of a pillow. Her hair, the color of her sweater, her eyes, the sagging skin around her mouth...

As soon as Sam entered the room, she was greeted with a smile.

"Good morning. Have a seat, Ms. Manson," Dr. Matthews said. "I appreciate you taking the time to speak with me." Her voice was soft, polite, yet confident. Sam immediately liked the woman. Something about her was familiar… and calming. Maybe it was the fact that she was a kindly old lady.

"It's Sam," Sam said on auto-pilot as she took a seat. She crossed her legs and glanced around the room. It was plain. It had a whiteboard along one side of it, a desk with various office supplies organized in neat rows, and a small house plant in the corner. Sam guessed it was an unused office. Or perhaps it was someone else's office and had been commandeered for the day.

"Pleased to meet you, Sam. My name is Dr. Matthews." The lady leaned forward a bit on the desk and squinted to see Sam better. Her gnarled hands wove together and rested gently atop the desk. Sam noted she had really long fingers that bulged at each knuckle, red nail polish, and a very sparkly marquise diamond wedding ring. "I am stepping in temporarily for a few days to help Ms. Spectra provide support for anyone that needs it."

"You're a psychologist," Sam accused.

"I am a grief counselor," she corrected gently. "Although, yes, you are absolutely correct in that grief therapy is a branch of psychology." She spoke in a very slow and deliberate manner, as if she was plucking each word carefully from an expansive vocabulary. And yet, Sam didn't feel stupid in her presence. "But that's enough about me," Dr. Matthews continued. "I called you here to discuss Mikey's death, and answer any questions you might have, should you desire to talk about it."

"Is it true? Did he commit suicide?" Sam asked.

"Where did you hear that he committed suicide?"

Sam frowned. "There are rumors going around."

"As far as I know, the cause of death is still underway. The police have yet to release an official statement," Dr. Matthews said solemnly. She paused and considered Sam for a moment. "How did you feel, after you heard the news?"

Sam's shoulders hunched. Immediately a mental wall flew up. At the same time a voice in her head screamed GUILTY. Sam bit her lip and looked down at the floor, her eyes tracing the puke-colored carpeting. Her gaze found a stain near the right-front leg of the desk.

She had just seen Mikey last night. Was there something that had happened that had set him off? Something she had done? After a full three minutes lost in her own thoughts, she realized that Dr. Matthews was still sitting there, patiently.

Sam glanced up and cleared her throat. "Sorry," she murmured.

"It's quite alright," Dr. Matthews said, as if nothing strange had happened. "I know his death must come as a horrible shock."
Sam nodded in agreement. They sat in comfortable silence for another minute or two. She felt her shoulders relax away from her ears as she realized Dr. Matthews wasn't going to press her. This lady was... nice. Sam blinked. That was the first time she had called a shrink nice. Sam got the feeling that Dr. Matthews would be content sitting there with her for hours. Sam pictured the woman pleasantly knitting a scarf at her own leisure or something to pass the time while Sam sat there, mute.

"It's perfectly normal to have no words to describe how you're feeling right now. Everyone deals with grief differently," Dr. Matthews said in her slow, empathetic voice. "Mikey's death was sudden and unexpected. In that way it may feel unfair, or unreal, for a while."

Sam nodded again.

"There is nothing you could have said or done to prevent his death," she continued.

Sam started. She glanced up in shock. How did she know—?

"In my experience, people often find that talking about loss is the first step in coping with death. Should you ever decide you want to talk about it, or if you ever feel overwhelmed, there are resources available to you. If not Ms. Spectra or myself, consider opening up to your friends or family." Dr. Matthews paused. "Do you understand?" she asked softly.

"Yes." Sam got the feeling that Dr. Matthews was talking about more than just Mikey's death. Her sharp eyes looked straight through her, like an x-ray, seeing her for all her darkness and meanness and overall shittiness, and yet... Sam didn't feel judged or pitied. This lady was a shrink, but she made Sam feel a little less crazy, a little more safe.

"Good." Dr. Matthews smiled. Her eyes and cheeks wrinkled. "Do you have any other questions for me before you return to class?"

Sam shook her head, then paused. "Can I have your card?"

Lunch was a sullen affair.

Sam peered around the half-empty cafeteria. Many students had left, their parents pulling them out of class after word got around about Mikey. Sam noted that Star, Paulina, Dash, and Kwan were seated at their usual table. None of them had left. Not that Sam had expected them to. Only Kwan looked visibly upset.

Tucker plopped down across from her and let his tray clatter to the table. He picked up an apple and turned it around in his hand, nose wrinkling. With a hollow thud, he dropped it back to his tray and sighed.

Sam didn't have much of an appetite either. She was eating her food mechanically. Not knowing what to say in a situation like this, she said, "Man, at this rate the whole school will be on antidepressants."

"Not those," Tucker noted, his eyes glancing over to the A-Listers.

"Nah, they wouldn't know empathy if it smacked them in the face," Sam said around a tofu bite.

Tucker snorted, picking at his lasagna. It was in one of those little pre-packaged cardboard boxes,
plastic foil halfway ripped off, still damp with steam. Sam eyed it distrustfully. Yep, her appetite was gone. If it wasn't before, that sweaty food just ruined it for her.

She got up to toss the rest out. As she did, she noted the hushed whispers and the pale faces. Everyone seemed on edge. "How do people know it was a suicide?" Sam asked as she sat back down at the table. "They haven't released the cause of death."

"I heard he jumped off the roof of his apartment complex," Tucker whispered. "Seems pretty suicidal. Why else would he be up on a roof?"

Sam shivered at the mental image, then shook her head, unconvinced. She had seen enough tricks in this town. The thought of something duping Mikey into climbing up onto the roof wasn't far-fetched to her. Not when she remembered the very real-looking detour sign she had run into a few nights ago. They had tried to summon a ghost last night. The candle had gone out. Had they succeeded? Had Phantom shadowed him home only to lure him up and off the roof?

"He was bullied a lot. Used to be Dash's favorite victim," Tucker muttered under his breath. His eyes flashed behind his glasses. "Anyways, I'm not hungry," Tucker said. "Let's just go to history early."

He got up and slung his backpack over one shoulder, tossing the lasagna as they left through the double doors. He spoke over his shoulder as they walked. "Three years ago some people died or went missing. People of all ages, not just kids. Lots of them were ruled suicides but some never were found."

Sam nodded. She already knew this, but she wasn't about to tell Tucker she had attended a Spirit Club meeting. "That's awful," she mumbled. "So… Everyone thinks it's going to happen again?"

Tucker grimaced. "Two suicides in less than a month? Definitely suspicious. Back then there were reports of weird happenings. You saw that dog… we saw that guy at the junkyard and… and that Danny kid." Tucker paused, shooting her a look. "I think people have good reason to be scared. The ghosts are back at it again. Something has woken them all up."

According to Valerie, her house was the reason all the ghosts were back. Sam considered telling Tucker this, but was suddenly afraid he would abandon her once he found where she lived. Instead she said, "Danny isn't a ghost."

"Sam." Tucker frowned. "That kid is for sure a ghost."

"Maybe not. I tested him last night. He passed," Sam said as they rounded the corner towards Lancer's class.

Curiosity shimmered in his eye. "How'd you test him?"

"Salt line," she stated proudly. "He didn't even notice. Crossed it and everything."

"Salt line," Tucker repeated. He stopped in his tracks and stared at her for a long second, before he cracked a wide grin. "Where'd you get that idea? America's Most Haunted or something? Don't tell me, you're catching up on the X-Files. Salt lines! Oh man."

"Okay, fine," Sam grated. She tapped her foot a few times until Tucker got ahold of himself. "So salt doesn't work?"

"I mean, maybe on weaker ghosts. But a ghost as powerful as the kid we saw in the junkyard? He
wouldn't even notice. Where'd you get the idea to use salt?"

Sam mumbled underneath her breath.

"What?"

"Paulina," Sam admitted.

Tucker tried to keep his lips tightly shut, but a *pffftttttsp* escaped and soon enough he was cackling again.

Sam's lip twitched. She couldn't help it. She laughed softly. Now that she thought about it, believing anything Paulina said was idiotic. "Well, what *does* work against a ghost?" Sam asked after a minute of chortling.

Tucker sobered. "Their relic," he told her. "Each ghost has an item they treasured in life. Something important to them. Could be a diary, a medal, even a teddy bear. They're repelled by it. Maybe seeing it stirs up emotions they shouldn't have. Maybe they forget they were ever alive in the first place, and the relic reminds them of what they lost."

"What about holy water? Crosses?"

"Those things don't really work. All ghosts are different," Tucker said. "More powerful ghosts can break any rule. It's all a matter of interpretation." They started walking down the hall again. "Like, for example: ghosts can't enter someone's property without permission. But, what does it mean to give permission?"

Sam shrugged. She grabbed the handle for the door and opened it, gesturing for Tucker to go in first. "Like this?" She elaborated the gesture.

"That's one way," Tucker agreed, walking through the threshold of the door. The pair of them slid into their seats near the back of the class. There were hardly any people in there yet.

"What's another way?" Sam asked. "Saying it aloud?"

Tucker nodded. "But what about leaving a window open? What if you invited them inside once? Does that mean they can come back? What about if you told someone that" —he made quotation marks with his fingers— "You should drop by sometime."

"That's an invitation to come over, but not an invitation to come inside," Sam reasoned.

"See that's the thing. Ghosts, especially powerful ghosts, can reinterpret the rules. Break them even, if they feel like it."

Sam's eyes narrowed. "How do you know so much about ghosts?"

Tucker glanced down at his desk, at the US history book atop his papers. He scanned the front of it a few times, brow furrowed, silent. "Three years ago Valerie and I hunted them. More like Valerie hunted them, and I made her equipment. Until... her mom..." Tucker trailed off.

"You?" Sam asked incredulously. For some reason Tucker didn't seem like the type to hunt anything, much less the paranormal. Then again, she was finding out a lot of people in Amity Park led strange double lives. She thought of her graveyard oasis and knew she was included in that.

"Don't talk about it to anyone."
Who would she tell? Sam had no one else. "Why not?"

"Valerie asked me to keep it quiet. Last time, people found out about her ghost hunting they said she pissed them off, made it worse. Lots of people blamed her for what happened. She… she doesn't want anything to do with ghosts anymore. She doesn't want anything to do with anything anymore."

Sam knew that all too well. She paused and appraised Tucker in a new light. "What kind of equipment did you help her with?"

Tucker straightened up in his chair and took in a huge breath. Sam already knew she was going to regret this. "Do you want to see them? I still have them in my room. Wanna come over to my place? Maybe tomorrow? I can show you a few things—"

"Are you hitting on me?" Sam asked dryly.

"—got one detector that picks up electromagnetic disturbances. Ghosts warp the earth's magnetic field. Their energy creates an anomaly—" Tucker continued, not hearing her. "You should use that on your ghost friend. I bet he'd light it up like a Christmas tree. It'd practically scream 'I Am a Ghost, Fear Me!'"

"*Please* tell me you don't actually have something that says that," Sam deadpanned.

"No, but I should make one," Tucker mused, tapping a finger against his chin.

Sam realized he was being serious. "Alright. I'll come check out your ghost inventions," she said, despite herself. "Friday."

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After grabbing dinner with Tucker after school, Sam walked back home, reaching the front door just past nightfall.

Sam glanced around the empty hall as she quietly closed and locked the door behind her. She shrugged her backpack off and plopped it next to the door. Her parents didn't sound like they were home. Sam smiled. Good. She didn't have to deal with them.

As she walked past the double staircases and meandered down the hallway leading towards the kitchen, she remembered vaguely her mother saying she was going to some kind of fundraiser over at town hall. Something about cleaning up that park. Sam hadn't really paid attention. Her parents swapped causes like they swapped cars. Always onto the newest, shiniest toys. Sam doubted this Amity Park cleanup was going to last much longer. Already, she was surprised it had lasted as long as it had.

Lost in thought, she navigated her way around the boxes and different slabs of marble. Her mother was finishing renovating the kitchen. A new refrigerator hummed softly in the corner, plastic wrap still wrapped to the handle.

Sam yanked it open with a pop, a cold blast pelting her in the face, and reached to grab the orange juice. As she placed the carton on the counter and grabbed a nearby cup, she saw a flurry of movement out of the corner of her eye and whipped her head around. The motion light mounted to the porch was on. Sam's grip tightened on her glass. A shadow crawled along the floor near the windows, as if someone was walking along the side of the house, before a face appeared at the back door.
That woman from before—Evelyn—waved chipperly back. "Knock, knock, neighbor," she greeted, voice clear through the thin pane of glass. "Can I come in?"

"No," Sam blurted.

Evelyn's smile fell a notch. "Honey, is everything alright? You look terrified. Are your parents home?"


"Oh perfect," Evelyn said. "I need to have a word with them."

"They're busy." It was the only thing Sam could think to say. She wasn't sure why she was so freaked out by this woman. Today had been freaky, what with news of Mikey's death. Lot's of weird shit had happened and Sam was beginning to take everyone's warnings to heart. Besides, something about this woman was fishy. Why had she been in their backyard? Why not knock on the front door? What was going on?

"I bet they are, with all this remodeling," Evelyn said sourly. Something flashed in her eyes. Her face was half-shrouded, bathed in the harsh motion light beaming down from atop the door.

Sam realized with a jolt who Evelyn reminded her of. That hot anger, that sadness and tenacity. It reminded her of Valerie Gray. It was the same look that Valerie had given her before she had punched her.

"Anyway, are you going to let me in?" Evelyn asked.

Sam stared at her. Was this a ghost? Was she talking to Mrs. Gray? What did she want? Why was she hanging around the kitchen? Sam's stomach churned. Tucker had said ghosts needed permission to come inside. A lump formed somewhere in her throat. She cleared it. "I can't. I'm sorry," she said more calmly than she felt. "Now isn't a good time."

Evelyn paused. "Oh. I see."

What did she see? Sam took a step backwards, unconsciously.

Evelyn leaned forward until her nose was almost touching the glass. Her sharp green eyes narrowed. For a second Sam was certain she would walk right through that door, permission be damned. But, instead, she sighed and her face softened. "You're a good girl, Samantha."

Sam opened her mouth and closed it wordlessly, struck mute by the compliment. It was one she had never received before.

"Have you seen Danny recently?" Evelyn asked.

Sam thought of the little stars in his eyes; the scent of dirt and the salt line poured. "No," she lied. She liked to believe he wasn't dead. There was no way she'd would intentionally lead a ghost to him.

Evelyn inspected her curiously. "It's just, I haven't seen him in days. It's so unlike him. He's been acting... not himself. I need to know where he is."

"I haven't seen him," Sam answered stiffly. "Sorry. Wish I could help."

"Okay," Evelyn said. She leaned away from the window. "Until you're a mother, you can't possibly understand... If you see him, please let me know. Can you ask your parents if they've seen him
around when they're... less busy?"

"I will," Sam promised, twisting her fingers behind her back.

Evelyn's eyes gazed around the interior of the kitchen. She wrinkled her nose in distaste, presumably at all the changes Sam's mother was making, before she gave Sam a polite 'goodnight' and paced off towards the forest.

Sam shivered and relocked the door, over and over. She checked all the windows and closed all the blinds, half expecting to see Evelyn's face peering back at her, nose pressed against the pane, eyes huge and a crazed, demonic smile.

For a half hour she paced the kitchen, taking small sips directly from the orange juice carton. She considered calling her parents and telling them what had happened, but thought better of it. Some part of her was certain her mother would have been mad at her for not letting Evelyn inside. Her mother was all about etiquette. Besides, Sam didn't like calling her parents for help. She didn't like asking anyone for help.

She thought about the gravekeeper and how Evelyn had directed him around the last time they had been in the house. She had kept a hand on his shoulder almost the entire time. Sam knew that she was being hunted by someone, or something. What if he was too?

---Diary Entry, IV---

Tuesday August 11th, 1962

Dear Diary,

Danny and I got in a huge fight. I know, I know, you must be thinking: Really, she's going to waste precious paper ranting about her brother again? I can't stand being mad at him. He pouts even worse than Dad. But this time I can't bring myself to apologize. He's being super immature and hasn't talked to me in days, so I guess he must still think he's right.

Anyway, I'm sure you're wondering what this big fight was all about. Well, Johnny proposed, and I said yes. We're moving in together into his parent's place. Which means, of course, that after I graduate High School I'm not going to college.

Danny flipped when he found out. Really it's none of his business how I live my life. I love Johnny. Sure he's a little rough around the edges, but he'll take care of me. We'll have a nice family, a comfortable life. I don't need to go to college anymore. Danny doesn't understand that. He's a boy.

Wednesday August 12th, 1962

Dear Diary,

Danny's still off fuming from our fight. Mom and Dad are getting worried though because he hasn't been back all day and he hasn't called. I'm sure he's just off riding around in his new car. He's had his permit for all of five months. He probably went to Shelly's or something.

In other news, Johnny got me a bike just like his. It's red and absolutely beautiful. He started to teach me how to ride it. I'm going to wait to tell Dad and Danny about the bike. It'll be yet another thing for them to try and control.
Thursday August 13th, 1962

Dear Diary,

Still no sign of Danny. He skipped supper and didn't come home at all last night. It's been almost a whole day. He's taking this temper tantrum thing to the next level. You'd think he'd grow up. He's fifteen, for crying out loud.

Friday August 14th, 1962

It's been two days since anyone last saw Danny.

Mom and Dad called the police, but they just think Danny ran away from home because of our fight. Something about this feels really wrong. Danny wouldn't run. Sure, he likes to be alone when he's mad, but he always comes back. He's never done this before.

My parents have been all around the neighborhood, but no one's seen him since Monday night. I've called his friends. Nothing.

Mom and Dad are beside themselves. This better not be one of his dumb pranks. I keep expecting Danny to just waltz through the door, but what if something actually happened to him? What if he's hurt? What if he crashed his car? He's always driving that car way too fast. The last thing I said to him was that he was an overprotective asshole.
Honey, Don't!

Sam stared at the second hand as it slowly wound its way around the clock. The rest of the week had gone by quietly. Everyone at school seemed tired and withdrawn. Class went on and Mikey's death was scarcely mentioned except in whispered passing. Yesterday it had been ruled, officially, a suicide. His empty chair spoke in volumes. Sam kept finding herself staring at it, as if her gaze was magnetically seeking out his absence.

In exactly thirteen minutes it would be officially the weekend, which Sam dreaded. The weekend meant time spent trapped with her parents. Already she was plotting how to maximize her time away from them. She made a list of different chores she could do to justify being alone. It was bad when you started looking forward to writing a research paper that wasn't even due for another three months. Or cleaning your room, doing your laundry by hand, sneaking out at night and wandering until some sort of purpose presented itself. Sam's eyes glazed over as she thought of going back to the graveyard to warn the gravekeeper about Evelyn. She hoped he'd still let her sit and talk with him, which then led her to wondering what he was doing right now, at that exact second. She pictured his laugh and the new minty scent of his breath. A little too late she realized she was pining over a boy who had— with all the politeness in the world—rejected her. Her eyes refocused and she realized they had made their way to Mikey's empty desk without her permission. She frowned.

The school bell erupted and students clamored out of their seats for the door.

Sam glanced down at her notebook, finding it blank. In her hand her pen sat poised atop the first line where she had written *Sam Manson, Period 6, US History, Friday October 23rd*, across it. So much for taking notes. She shoved her notebook into her backpack and made for the door.

Tucker came up behind her, chattering. That's right. She had told him she'd come over and look at his ghost hunting MacGyver stuff. After everything that had happened this week, she had forgotten.

"Foley. Manson. A word please?"

Tucker shot her a confused look, hand on the doorknob. Together they walked back over to Lancer's desk. Sam frowned. Was this about what she had said last week, when she had tried to get the project changed?

"What's up?" Tucker asked lightly, although his tone had a nervous edge to it. He slumped into a chair, his sneaker bouncing up and down, knee bobbing.

Lancer rubbed at his eyes for a moment, tiredly. "Given what happened this week, I wanted to take a moment and ask… are you two okay?"

"Fine," Sam deflected, before really thinking about it.

Her eyes flicked to Mikey's desk. Her gaze softened. For all his quirks, he was a good kid. Anger coursed through her at the thought that ghosts could have led Mikey astray and that they could do this to someone else if she didn't figure out a way to stop them.

"It's sad. It's definitely weird not seeing him around," Tucker said solemnly.

Lancer sighed. He looked exhausted, and… uneasy. His hair was frazzled and his eyes had dark circles. "Manson brought up a good point last week. And after… well, now that you two are down a partner I think it's unfair to be assigned a time period that has little information."
Tucker's head whipped in her direction.

"I thought you wanted us to try," Sam said in confusion.

Last week he had all but goaded her to keep looking for clues. But now he was staring at her tiredly, wrinkles adorning the crinkles in his eyes. "That being said, I want you two to focus on the 90's instead for your final report."

"But we already found out some stuff, stuff you even said you didn't know," Sam argued. "You're the one that talked me into it."

"Sam," Tucker interrupted. "This is good. The 90's have a ton more information." He gazed at her pleadingly, begging her to shut up and just take the easy A, but Sam couldn't.

Lancer's grip tightened on his pen. "This is not a debate, Ms. Manson."

Sam opened her mouth angrily, thought better of it, and closed it. Her eyes narrowed. "I don't care. I'm still doing the 50's," she told him. She yanked her backpack on and catapulted out of her chair, fleeing the room, slamming the door behind her.

"Sam! Wait up!"

Sam whirled around the corner and nearly ran right into Valerie Gray, who ducked out of the way at the last second, glared at her, and continued down the hallway. Sam watched her go, noting how the rest of the students stumbled back until their backs hit the lockers to avoid her. Ever since Mikey's death Valerie was the new target of everyone's attention. It seemed the school had already forgotten about Sam and her imaginary dog.

A hand grabbed her on the wrist. Sam flinched and wrenched it free.

"Sorry," Tucker said sheepishly. "Jeez you're jumpy."

"Am not," Sam denied immediately.

Tucker rolled his eyes. "No, of course not. And I'm the mayor of Amity Park."

Sam took off for the front doors and Tucker trailed along beside. Sam knew better than to think she could shake him off.

"Why don't you want to do the 90's?" Tucker asked after a moment.

"Because that's giving up," Sam grated. "That's opting for the easy way out just because something's hard."

"Try impossible," Tucker muttered. "I think we should just do what Lancer said."

"It's not impossible. Someone has got to know something. The 50's weren't that long ago—" Sam stopped herself. Of course.

"Sam?" Tucker questioned.

"We've been going about this the wrong way," Sam explained. "We need to get eyewitness testimony, not the archives. People can clean out papers, but they can't erase memories." She thought of her grandmother, who had lived in the area for years. She was so stupid. So selfish. They had moved almost two months ago and she had only visited her grandmother once.
Tucker hesitated. "We're not going to old people homes, right? I don't do hospitals."

"It's assisted living, Tucker," Sam told him as she took off back down the road towards Tucker's house.

He shivered as he caught up to her. "How about we just do the 90's, look up some stuff on Wikipedia, fake some sources, and call it a day? You can dress up like Britney Spears, I'll be—"

"First of all, Britney Spears was in the 2000's. Second of all, before he died, Mikey wanted to tell me something, but he never got the chance. What if he found something while researching our project? Something the ghosts didn't like?" Sam thought of the way Danny kept asking her to stop looking into the past, kept warning her it was dangerous.

Tucker stumbled to a halt. "What? When? Why didn't you tell me?" Tucker accused.

Sam paused and glanced at him, seeing his hurt expression, guilt curling in her stomach. She tore her gaze away and looked down at the ground. "The day before he died. After class."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Tucker repeated.

"Because I didn't want anyone to know!" Sam blurted. "If I had listened, maybe he'd still be around."

Tucker paused. His scowl softened. "It's not your fault, Sam. You had no way of knowing."

Sam wasn't so sure. "Don't you think it's a bit odd that Lancer suddenly doesn't want us to do the 50's? Is it really just because we have two people now instead of three? It's almost like he's freaked out after what happened with Mikey."

"Good. He should be," Tucker gritted. "You should be! How can you not be freaked out?"

That gave her pause. Sam frowned. The idea that Mikey would never occupy that chair in her history class was... strange. But, maybe it was because she didn't witness it, or maybe it was because she hadn't known him for very long, or maybe she was still recovering from Amanda Scully's death, and Joy Nguyen before her... but mortality as a concept was bothering her less and less with each passing day. This numbness... was this normal?

The one thing that kept sticking in her mind was Mikey's last words to her. *After this I have something to tell you.* What was it?

Sam adjusted her backpack and looked down. "I'm sad Mikey's gone. I am. But don't you want to know what happened? If the ghosts are really back, and they're to blame, then who's to say this won't happen again? Don't you think it's coincidental that there's hardly any information on the 50's? And as soon Mikey might have found something, he dies and Lancer wants us to stop digging? Obviously something happened back then and we're close to figuring it out."

Tucker laughed humorlessly. "Close? All we have is a circus accident and a Mayor. And we've been looking for a month."

"Soon we'll have more," Sam stated confidently.

"Why do you care so much?" Tucker grumbled. "Everyone else will wait until the last week to write this stupid report. It's just a grade."

"Because I have a feeling it's important," Sam said, frustrated.
Tucker sighed. "Ok. Say we are close. Say Mikey did find out something he wasn't supposed to. Say the ghosts did have something to do with Mikey's death. What's to stop them from doing the same to us?"

Sam fell silent for a moment. Truthfully, nothing. Nothing would stop them. "I don't know," she admitted, "But if we don't try, who will?"

Tucker stared at her for a long second. "My place is this way," Tucker said, and hooked a right at the next intersection. He tossed her a curious look. Sam could tell he was exasperated. He didn't understand.

Truth be told, Sam wasn't sure herself. It was hard to explain. More of a gut feeling. "I just feel like there's something bigger going on," she said quietly.

Tucker merely shook his head.

"Your family's into Halloween, huh?" Sam asked dryly as she climbed up the stoop of Tucker's small two-story brownstone. The wrought-iron banisters were covered in fake cobwebs and plastic spiders. Little light up pumpkins littered the front yard and a hand-sewn skeleton was hanging from the front door, so large that it's head touched the crest of the door and it's bony feet dragged along the doormat.

Tucker had to lift the ghoul's wrist to get to the doorknob. "My mom's obsessed," Tucker grumbled. He pushed the door open, revealing a dark hallway and a narrow set of steps and glanced back at her. "In Amity Park, Halloween is a bigger deal than Christmas."

"I've noticed." As soon as October hit, the Halloween frenzy had ignited. It was all she overheard anyone talking about. Enormous costume stores had popped up on every corner. Pumpkins adorned each lawn. At the high school, someone had stuck little plastic black cats in the lawn, their backs raised, ears flat, tail spiked.

"This way," Tucker said, galloping up the steps.

Sam had already known that Tucker was a huge nerd, but standing in his bedroom, she wasn't sure if the term 'huge' quite encompassed the severity. Posters of different superheros covered almost every inch of Tucker's room. Sam noted that many of them were female, scantily dressed in tight jumpsuits, fighting crime in unrealistic battle gear. On his desk sat stacks of comic books and manga, along with a three-screen computer setup that was humming along. He had one of those ergonomic desk chairs that swiveled and adjusted in each and every way. Tucker spun around in it.

"So?" Tucker asked. "Nice, isn't it?"

Sam unhooked her backpack from her shoulder and dropped it at the door, then crossed the room with some trepidation and took a seat on the edge of his unmade bed. "Nice isn't the first word I thought of. More like… something else..." she offered.

Tucker unlocked the drawer to his file cabinet and yanked it open. He fished inside for a minute before withdrawing what looked like a tube of lipstick.

"Ok, this is getting super weird," Sam stated. She was into weird stuff, but this was a bit much. "Are you going to tell me you regularly cosplay as Batwoman?"
Tucker paused. "What? How'd you know?" He tossed her the lipstick container with a grin. "Just kidding. That's the ghost detector. Most of the stuff I made for Valerie was some sort of accessory. Ghosts are smart. You can't just point a gun at them and have them not notice. Besides, it's not like a gun would work."

Sam raised an eyebrow, unconvinced. She twisted the steel top off and saw that the inside resembled more of a flash drive. There was no tube of lipstick. Instead a small, round wand-like apparatus with three lights blinked lazily. The lights were green and each one slightly delayed from the other so it looked like they were radiating out from her.

"You just have to uncap it to turn it on," Tucker explained. "That's the beauty of it. It's super convenient. Valerie used to be able to pretend she was touching up her makeup and no one was the wiser."

"It's pretty smart," Sam admitted. She had to give it to him. "But does it actually work?"

Tucker snatched it back from her. "Of course!" He scowled grumpily at her, looking much like an offended cat. "Don't listen to her, darling," he told the lipstick. "She's a cynic."

Sam looked up to the ceiling for inspiration and let out a slow breath. Not for the first time, she wondered what she was doing. Why had she been dumped in this bizarre story where ghosts existed, against all logic and all scientific reasoning? "Okay, fine. So tell me what it's supposed to do," Sam cut.

"Well, you and I aren't ghosts, or else it would be lit up right now." Tucker turned the device back around and tapped at the three tiny LED lights. "If you're close to a ghost— and I mean close, because I haven't worked out the range on these things. The battery alone took an impressive amount of engineering…"

"Tucker..." Sam warned.

"Right. If you're within ten feet of a ghost the three lights all light up at once and stop blinking."

"That's it?" Sam asked.

Tucker capped the device and held it to his chest, hurt. "What do you mean? You want more? Let me tell you, in this town, being able to identify a ghost could save your life." His face faltered, then saddened. Sam guessed he was thinking of Mikey.

"Say you find out you're right next to a ghost. Then what?" Sam asked, kicking out her boots as she settled herself at the foot of his bed. "It's one thing to know, but another to do something about it. Don't you have any nets? Any shields?"

Tucker tossed back the lipstick and Sam snatched it from the air. She watched him continue to rummage around in his filing cabinet. He pulled out what looked like—

"Really? A thermos?" Sam asked blankly. Although, after the lipstick container she wouldn't be surprised.

Tucker tossed it over one shoulder. It collided with the back wall and fell to the floor to join the rest of this dirty laundry and burger wrappers. "That's not it," he mumbled. "I was wondering where that went. Mom's gonna be pissed. I should probably wash that…"

Sam wrinkled her nose.
"Ah-ha!" He held up what looked like a pendant. It was a circular disc attached to a long silver chain. He pressed it and it clicked, like it was one giant button. "Still working on this baby, but it *should* emit a high frequency wave that repels ghosts."

"Is it doing anything?" Sam asked.

"It only does it for a few seconds after you press it. Like a pulse or two. Humans can't hear it. Hopefully that's enough to stall a ghost long enough for you to get away. We never got to test it out. Valerie… Well, the ghosts stopped before we got to use it. Theoretically it *should* work. I just have maybe a week more to finish it."

Right. Valerie's mom had happened. Evelyn Gray. At least, Sam was *pretty* sure that had been Evelyn Gray creeping around her back door. Suddenly lipstick-shaped ghost detectors were a hot commodity.

"How did Valerie hunt ghosts?" Sam asked.

"She tracked down their relics," Tucker said, leaning back in his desk chair. He propped his feet up against his desk and wrapped the pendant around his neck. "Ghosts *really* don't like their relics. She probably still has a few of them."

"So… destroying the relics destroys the ghost?" Sam guessed.

"No," Tucker frowned. "Relics are like a shield. Ghosts don't like seeing them, so they'll stay away. If you destroyed the relic, you'd have nothing to ward the ghost off."

"So relics only keep ghosts at a distance," Sam summarized.

Tucker nodded.

"Have you ever thought of instead helping them?" Sam asked lightly.

Tucker froze mid-nod. "What? *Help* a ghost?"

"I mean, they're here for a reason, right? Once that reason is fulfilled, they'll go away. For good." Sam didn't mention that it was the gravekeeper that had suggested this. She didn't think Tucker would be amused to know that she had— yet again— visited him.

Tucker frowned. "Ghosts are nothing but the spirits of bad people. Their reason for being here is to wreak havoc. To lure people to their death."

Sam opened her mouth to argue, but thought better of it. "Thanks for the lipstick," she said, instead. "Are you sure I can have it? What about you?"

Tucker patted his cargo pants, his hand resting atop one of the pockets. "I have another one I've been carrying around ever since that night at the junkyard. You should get going." Tucker nodded his head out the window. "It's getting dark."

Sam slipped the lipstick into her jeans pocket and hopped off of Tucker's bed. As she walked out his front door into the brisk October wind, she pointed back to him. "1950's, Tucker," she said. "We're in this together, right?"

"Fine, fine," he grumbled. "I'll think about it."

She gave him a curt nod and stepped out onto the street.
The spectacular sunset turned the pavement a deep indigo and outlined the dense pine trees that surrounded Amity Park. As winter approached the days had been growing shorter and shorter. Sam yanked her jacket closer and buttoned it up. Soon it would be snowing. She wasn't looking forward to it. Riding around on her bike would prove nearly impossible.

Tucker thought that all ghosts were the spirits of evil people, but that didn't make sense. She never knew Valerie's mother before her death, but she doubted that the women had been evil enough to warrant an eternity watching over a kitchen. And what about that dog? What had the dog done to deserve being a ghost? Surely a dog couldn't have committed a crime worthy enough of eternal hell. Finding a relic would only be like putting a picture over a hole in the wall. It didn't truly solve the problem. The ghosts would always come back.

"Boo," said a playful voice right behind her, yanking her from her thoughts.

Sam whipped around.

Danny tilted his head. He looked impeccable as always, this time in a red sweater with white trim and blue jeans. The amber light from the sunset caught atop his cheeks, making it look like he was blushing. "So, did I finally succeed in scaring you?" he laughed, pulling an innocent face.

"No," Sam stated flatly. "What are you doing here?"

"Just walking by," he whistled.

"Yeah right. Were you following me?"

"Maybe," he admitted. "Don't like you walking around alone at night."

Sam faked a gasp and batted her eyelashes. "Oh gee whiz, my hero. I was so gosh darn terrified that I'd have to walk through this big scary town all alone, with no man to protect me. Afterall, I'm just a defenseless girl. I can hardly—"

"Anyway," he interrupted, clearly not listening. Sam could hear the ping as her sarcasm bounced right off him. "I have something to show you. Take a walk with me?"

Unease hit her. Every time she had been followed, some weird stuff had happened. The dog, the detour route, the ghost of Evelyn Gray at her kitchen door... but this was the gravekeeper. He had been only ever been nice to her. Even so, Tucker's words rang through her head. Her hand drifted near her pant pocket to the ghost detector. It'd be easy. Just one tug and she'd know once and for all. But... did she really want to? Was she ready for the answer?

"Sam? Do I have something on my face?" He pawed comically at his nose.

Her lips twitched into a grin. Her hand deviated. She couldn't bring herself to be afraid of this dork. "Alright. What is it?"

He smiled, his teeth forming a dazzling crescent. "You'll find out," he promised. "Follow me." He trotted off the side of the road.

Sam hesitated for only a moment before she steeled herself, squared her shoulders, and followed him through the brush.
Sam whacked away a branch with the back of her hand. Ahead of her, Danny's bright sweater seemed to shine underneath the ever-darkening night sky. They hadn't spoken a word in over ten minutes. Where was he taking her? How long would they be walking? ...Where were they?

As if sensing her thoughts, he glanced back and tossed an, "Almost there," over his shoulder as he picked his way through the underbrush.

"I hate surprises. Where are we going?" Sam ground out. In the dusk it was difficult to tell where she was going, much less where she came from. Every direction looked the same.

"A place I think you'll find interesting," came the reply.

Sam felt the hairs on her scalp tense. An intense pang of doubt stemmed from somewhere in her guts. Her body nearly spun around and walked away right then and there, but his blue eyes affixed to hers and he smiled."It's okay," he promised. He pointed ahead. "See that?"

Sam closed the distance to stand at his shoulder, peering through the thickets, eyes straining to see. A faint outline of what looked like a shanty was visible through the fog. "A cabin?" she whispered. Her voice dipped low, unsure if they were suddenly treading on someone else's property.

Danny nodded. He started out towards it again.

Sam stayed behind for maybe a second before she realized that she needed him to find her way out of here. Besides, her curiosity was piqued.

The cabin was decrepit. It looked as if no one had touched it in years, decades even. Plants were in the process of reclaiming it. Most notably, part of the roof was gnawed through, leaving a gaping hole where branches had already started to worm their way inside. It was a tiny house—probably one room. At one point it had been made of different logs that had been knitted together, although the logs were now rotten and falling apart. There was two windows, one on either side of the door, cracked from the strain of the sagging roof. Brick from what had probably been a chimney lay at her feet.

Sam relaxed. Clearly no one lived here.

Danny's head peeked from around the side. "This way," he urged.

Sam picked her way through the brush around the left side of the house. She followed him around a log and into the middle of the room. "Wow," she mumbled to herself.

The interior was covered in skulls: cougar, bear, bird, wolf, and what looked like even a snake. Rusty shotguns still hung off hinges. Sam counted five. The remains of an armchair and table sat near the front door facing a brick fireplace.

Danny crossed the room in three strides and plopped into the armchair. It must have been sturdier than it looked, because it didn't even creak under his weight.

"That'll probably break," Sam warned.

He merely laughed.
"So what is this place?" she asked. Her hands drifted along the closest shotgun, knocking some dust free.

"An old hunter's cabin," he replied. He leaned back in the chair and watched her poke through various things. "Been vacant for years. No one else knows it's here."

"How'd you find it?"

"Stumbled upon it," he answered vaguely.

Sam shot him a look before moving over to a shelf where ten books sat in various stages of decay. She yanked one out by the spine. It fell apart on the floor in chunks of paper fused together through exposure. She bent down and picked up the cover, spinning it around in her hands, rubbing some dirt away from an old Amity Public Library card. "This book was last checked out in... February, 1958," she breathed. She straightened and held the card out accusingly at him. "Are you finally helping me with my report?"

He shrugged, suddenly finding the ceiling extremely interesting. A blush crept on his cheeks.

Sam tilted her head. "Why the change of heart?"

"I figured you weren't gonna listen to me and stop nosing around." He scowled. "If that's the case, I might as well help."

"Damn straight," Sam grumbled. Her finger tapped along the name which was messily scrawled next to the date. "Guess this Benjamin Skulker guy has one hell of a debt to pay." She flipped the cover around. "A Hunter's Guide to Butchering Wild Game," Sam read.

She pocketed the library card and dropped the title back to the floor. Following Danny's pensive gaze, her eyes landed upon a skull that was different than all the others. "Is that from some kind of gorilla?" she asked. A quick attempt to tug at it revealed it was nailed firmly to the wall.

"Lots of wild gorillas out here," Danny said sarcastically.

Sam yanked her hand away from it as if burned. "It's human?"

"Told you you'd find this place interesting."

She gaped at him. *How come he hadn't called the police? How come he hadn't—?*

"I'm kidding, Sam. I'm kidding. Calm down before your eyes bug right out of your head," he laughed, raising his palms up as he slumped back into the chair. "It's probably just a monkey of some sort."

For some reason, Sam didn't completely buy it. She eyed the skull sidelong and wiped her hand on her pants. She wondered if she could nab some DNA from it and give it to Officer Gray. She doubted it. Sam had watched enough CSI to know DNA came from tissue samples. All tissue rotted off this thing decades ago. She frowned, forced her gaze off it, and found Danny watching her with his chin in his palm and a hint of a smile on his lips, as if he could guess her train of thought.

From around them, Sam could hear the rustle of leaves as a breeze rippled through the forest. A particularly strong gust whipped through the cabin, whistling through the shattered glass windows.

"Mikey Voss, one of my partners for my history project, died," Sam blurted.
Danny's smile dropped a notch, although he looked unsurprised. "I heard. I'm sorry. Were you good friends?"

Sam shook her head. "No. I don't have many friends."

He stared at her for a long moment, eyes deep in contemplation. "Am I your friend?"

Sam flushed. "Maybe," she admitted. Maybe her friend, her best friend, and maybe something more, something she had been keen on pushing aside ever since he had rejected her that night in the graveyard.

Danny leaned back, hand on his chest, mock shock on his face. "Oh gee whiz," he lilted, in mimicry of her from earlier, "Golly I just can't believe it. Me. Having the rare honor of Samantha Manson’s friendship——”

"Yeah, yeah. You done?" Sam cut, rolling her eyes.

Danny sobered. He let out a slow breathless chuckle, ducked his head to catch her gaze, and sent her a timid smile. "For what it’s worth, you’re my best friend,” he said.

Sam swallowed a lump in her throat at his brutal honesty. She didn't want to admit just how much that meant to her. Instead she toed the book lying at her feet and swiftly changed the subject. "Evelyn came by the house last night," Sam mentioned, taking in his reaction.

He froze. "Really. What did she want?"

"She wanted to know if I’d seen you around. She was looking for you." She leaned back until her shoulder blades hit the wall. "I told her I hadn't seen you. She's Mrs. Gray, isn't she? She's a ghost."

"Yes," Danny confirmed. "You didn't let her in, right?"

Sam shook her head.

"Smart," he mused. He shifted in the chair and plopped his chin in his hand, elbow to his knee, as he peered at her from across the room.

"What does she want with you?" Sam wondered.

"You don't need to worry about my wellbeing, Boots," he chuckled.

"Why not?" Sam breathed. She stuck her hand in her pocket and felt the lipstick detector, fingernail trailing along the groove of the cap.

Danny's eyes darted to her hand before shooting her a suspicious look. He straightened and leaned back a bit. "Because," he stated slowly, "I know what I'm doing. I'm a gravekeeper, remember? Ghosts don't scare me." He winked at her cheekily.

Sam felt her resolve melt. She let go of the lipstick and pulled her hand free of her pocket. Here she was, with all the means to reveal him, yet she couldn't do it. She didn't want to know, because then it would ruin whatever this was between them. Call it selfish, call it stupid, but she really liked him. Liked him enough to follow him blindly into the woods without caution, enough to willingly hold out on finding the truth about him. She would rather keep on believing they had a chance.

He slowly got up from the chair as if to avoid spooking her. He didn't scare her. Not one bit.

Sam leaned back as he drew close, peering up at the dust of freckles on his cheeks. She sucked in her
breath. He held this air that he might not be real.

His eyes scanned her face for a moment. "I should take you home," he uttered, although he made no move to do so.

"You should," she breathed out.

A sharp howl from what sounded like a group of dogs resounded outside. Danny pulled back, a flicker of annoyance crossing his face. "Let's go."

Sam silently mourned the moment as she picked her way out from the ruins of the hunting cabin. She drew close to his side as he led the way, noting that they were leaving a different way than they came. From all around them the forest was alive with noise. She could hear the yipping of dogs and the rustle of leaves. Dark movements kept catching the corner of her eye, yet when she looked she saw nothing but shadows.

A branch snapped.

She turned to see a disfigured face staring back, then it was gone, leaving only an imprint behind. She blinked several times. It could have almost been mistaken for another shadow, had it not been so defined. She remembered a pulpy burned face, jaw missing, eyes melted shut.

"Stick close," Danny mentioned unnecessarily.

"What was that?" she whispered, horrified.

"Ghosts," he stated. "This forest is full of them."

Sam shot him a look. "You don't seem too concerned," she noted. He was still picking his way through the woods at his own leisure. She relaxed a touch. If he wasn't freaking out, why should she?

"I told you. I know what I'm doing. As long as you know the way, you can't be tricked." He paused and shot her a glance. "You can't let them taste fear."

"What happens when you do?"

"Then you're no longer interesting enough to let live," he stated with such knowing and finality that Sam shivered. She pulled her coat closer and forced away the unease. No fear. Fine. She could do that. She was Samantha friggin' Manson. She ate fear for breakfast.

He seemed to sense her steel and grinned. "Good."

As they started walking again, pale faces flicked out from behind trees. Twisted children's faces. Some were blind, others had birthmarks of puckered skin that ran like a knife wound across their entire face. Lips were missing, teeth were crooked or gone, heads were beaten in. They all looked starved and mad. Each time one made eye contact they skittered back and disappeared. Sam knew deep down these were her stalkers. That breathy giggle was unmistakable. These were the things that had tried to lead her into the woods, that had conjured up the dog, that had probably planted the same lure that had befallen Mikey. Their eyeballs hovered in the dark, trained on Sam and Danny as they moved through the forest, following no particular path.

Wind brushed past her, carrying along whisperings.

"...I know he's a wolf, said Riding Hood..."
"...Are you lost?...

Sam jumped as someone brushed her cheek.

"...Follow us. We know the way...

A hand tugged her own. She ripped it away and held it to her chest, stumbling until she nearly
clipped Danny's shoulder.

"...So pretty. Come with us. We'll protect you...

"...He's bad luck...

"...suicide on the corner of Truth and...

She could feel them all encroaching upon them. The faces grew closer and closer until they were
merely feet away.

"...You're going the wrong way!...

"...Listen!...

"...He's gonna—"

The gravekeeper came to a sudden halt in front of her and bristled. The forest darkened at the edges,
the moon dimmed. His lips drew back as he bared his teeth. "Back!"

Or at least, that's what Sam interpreted it as. It was more of a bark from the back of his throat. Either
way, the order was clear and punched Sam in the chest like the crack of a whip. Her feet took a step
back without her permission.

The children scattered. The forest went still. A soft breeze rustled the branches overhead. From
somewhere in the distance, a horn honked.

He let out a slow breath, rolled his shoulders, then kept moving.

Sam stayed behind for only a second before she lurched forward to join him. Her mouth opened and
closed soundlessly. Each time she formed a question it died on her tongue. What was that? What had
he done? Why had they obeyed him? Why had she obeyed him? She bit her lip and kept her
questions to herself.

After only a few more minutes they popped out of the woods and found themselves in a backyard.
The grass was manicured and familiar. Sam frowned, seeing the house, realizing with a flood of
relief— "We're home!"

He shot her an amused look. "Duh. Where else?"

She scowled. "Shut up. I just didn't know you could go through the woods and end up so close to
school. What a shortcut."

His gaze grew serious, "Don't go back in there without me. Not even during the day."

"Wasn't planning on it." Sam shuddered. She had seen enough mutilated kids for a lifetime. The
forest was definitely a place to avoid, especially at night. Although.... her thoughts slowly drifted
back to the cabin. To the skull. She wondered just how far away it was from her house. Not far.
Although she hadn't been paying attention to which direction they had walked from...
Her face must have given her away. Either that, or Danny sensed her meandering train of thought, and which way it was headed. He crossed his arms. "Don't."

She felt it in her chest. It wasn't as powerful, but he was trying to order her like he had ordered those kids, which only made her pissed. She glared and pointed a finger at him. "Don't try that on me," she warned caustically.

He blinked, surprised.

"Whatever that is, it won't work on me," she continued.

He raised his hands palm up in surrender and switched tactics. "Okay, okay. Please don't go back in there without telling me. Please?" His enormous bluest-of-blue eyes grew watery and pleading.

"Alright," Sam stated.

Placated, he nodded and took a step back. "Night, then," he murmured.

"Night." Sam watched as he walked straight into the treeline. She swore the yard was a little less misty without him there, but maybe it was just her imagination.

Sam stood alone for some time and couldn't help but feel sad. She didn't want him to go. Already, she missed him. Maybe next time he could come inside, up to her room, and they could hang out and talk and listen to music or watch a movie or... whatever normal teenagers did.

She snorted to herself as she spun and walked through the grass towards the kitchen door. Normal teenage stuff was beyond her.

She unlocked the back door and slipped inside, locking it behind her. She only realized she had a stupid dreamy grin on her face when it was wiped off, as her mother rounded the corner brandishing a bat and a glass of wine.

"Samantha Jean!" her mother screeched. Some wine sloshed out of her glass and dribbled to the floor. "Where have you been?"

"Out." Sam shrugged.

"Out? OUT?" Pamela's face contorted. "I've been calling you all night. Do you know what time it is?"

"Like, 7:30?" Sam guessed, although she wasn't so sure. Time had a tendency to slip away when she was with the gravekeeper. The sunset had been only about an hour ago. She was sure of that.

"It's 11:00! Where have you been?!" Her mother dropped the bat with a clunk and took a long sip of her wine. She leaned against the wall and closed her eyes, tightly, as if Sam was giving her some kind of stroke. "You know what? Don't tell me. I can't deal with this right now. We'll talk in the morning," she muttered, almost to herself.

Sam blinked in surprise. The microwave clock said it was, indeed, 11:03pm. How—? She looked at her mother, at her flushed face and unkempt hair. "Are you drunk?" she asked, incredulously.

"Go to your room." Pamela picked the bat back up and pointed it at her. "Now."

Sam eyed it. "Gladly."

Knowing she was already pushing her luck, Sam sidled up the staircase and made for her room. She
shut the door and strode over to her desk, sitting down with a decisive *thud*.

Her thoughts churned. She wasn't tired at all. With the intent to do some research, she booted up her computer and dug her hand into her pocket, yanking out the library card and the lipstick container. She set them both down on her desk, pulled up Google, and typed in "Benjamin Skulker".

Nothing useful. Only a handful of Norwegian-speaking Twitter users named Benjamin, a speech by 23rd President Benjamin Harrison, and a fan page for a pug named Skulker which was run by her owner, Benjamin Prewett.

Using the Library of Congress database, she ran a search for Benjamin Skulker again, between 1950 and 1965. Again, nothing of use. Of course. Sam sighed and yanked a piece of paper from her notebook. With a pen she wrote down, in purple ink:

Circus accident, 11 dead, 1964
Mayor Masters, served 1960 - 1964
Benjamin Skulker, late library book, 1958
Benjamin Skulker, creepy hunter's cabin, 1950's
Amity renamed Amity Park, 1966

She tacked the paper up on the wall, punching right through the wallpaper and glared at it. All she knew about Amity Park fit on five measly lines. Her eyes drifted and she turned back to her computer, plotting 'Masters, Amity Park' into the search engine.

It spat back thousands of results.

"What," she breathed, clicking on a website labelled The Amityville Horror Hunt. The page was black with animated little bats that flapped in a loop. Sam resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Old black and white photos of the mansion adorned the top of the page, along with the line, in dripping neon green letters: *The Horror Hunt is delighted to introduce to you Amity Park's most notorious ghosts at 7pm every weeknight. Something unexplainable happens on every Horror Hunt. Have an unearthly amount of fun touring local haunts such as the chilling 'No Mercy' hospital and infamous Victorian villa of eccentric billionaire Vladimir Masters. Tickets are $20 dollars per person. Must be 16+ years old. No children allowed.*

"Interesting." Sam grinned, scribbling the name Vladimir next to Masters on her list. With a few taps she bought a ticket for the Monday night tour, leaned back in her chair, and cracked her knuckles in satisfaction.

—The Cincinnati Star—

Sunday, August 16th, 1962

AMITY OHIO— Part-time gas attendant and hobbyist hunter Benjamin Skulker was taken into custody by the Amity PD late last night as a suspect in the disappearance of a Cincinnati teen.

The fifteen-year-old was last spotted at Lucky Strike gas station in Amity, where the suspect works. Skulker (39) has been previously convicted of physical assault and animal cruelty in connection to his brief occupation as an animal care specialist for the Booker & Banker Traveling Circus. This arrest follows an intensive three-day-long search for Daniel Fenton, who has been missing since
Wednesday night. Police have reason to believe he was taken against his will and may be in danger.

Daniel is a white male, standing around 5' 11' and weighing about 130 lbs. Black hair, blue eyes. He has freckles and a crescent-shaped scar on the back of his right hand. He was last seen Wednesday August 12th at 4:45pm. There is a $50,000 dollar reward for any information that aids in his return.

If anyone has any information regarding the whereabouts of Daniel Fenton, please call the Amity PD sheriff: 513 329 4927, or the Amity PD tip line: 1 513 329 4922.

-fin Part I: Shadow People-
I Hear You Knocking

Part II: Murphy's Law

Sam felt as if ‘it’ was about to happen. ‘It’ manifested as the dreadful, looming feeling that something important was approaching.

She had this feeling moments before a semi collided with her car, sending it pinwheeling violently across a median in a spray of twisted metal and shattered glass. She had felt ‘it’ a few seconds before she had ripped out a girl’s earring in a fit of rage. Most recently, she had felt ‘it’ before an imaginary dog had jumped out of a bush and killed a woman.

She was feeling ‘it’ now, as her mother and her drove towards Sycamore Heights—a sprawling, resort-like assisted living facility where her grandmother resided.

Sam kept her headphones on full blast and her eyes glued resolutely out the car window, ignoring her mother for the entire drive. They had been sidestepping each other ever since what happened last night. Her, coming home late and not answering her phone; her mother, with one too many glasses of red wine. So far her mother hadn’t brought it up, but Sam knew it was only a matter of time. Her mother hadn’t figured out the right punishment.

Sam tore her way out of those thoughts as a building with twinkling lights appeared ahead. It was nestled within a thick forest which, combined with the raw wood siding and the amber lanterns that dotted the driveway, made it feel like some sort of holiday getaway. The main building resembled a log cabin. It’s roof jutted out to form a covered carport like a hotel lobby. On either side of the main building were long rows of apartments. Each door had little white cartoon ghosts and skulls.

Sam’s thoughts drifted to the skull in the hunter’s cabin. They had been doing that all day. She shook her head and followed her mother into the lobby.

In Sam’s opinion, the inside just as revolting. It looked like a Halloween sprite had vomited up black and orange glitter everywhere. As Sam and her mother entered, their movement triggered an animated witch with a pointed black hat, bobbing her head up and down, cackling, “I’ll get you my pretty, and your little dog too!”

“You go ahead,” Pamela said. She adjusted her sunglasses, no doubt hungover from last night. “I need to have a word with someone about next month’s payment. You remember which apartment, right? 205B.”

Any other time and Sam would have waited until her mother could go with her— her grandmother made her uncomfortable— but she had some questions better asked without Pamela. She took off out of the main lobby and down one of the foyers, went up to the second floor, and followed the signs until she found 205B. It was the only door without decor.

Sam knocked.

“It ain’t time yet!” came a loud reply, followed by what sounded like something whacking drywall.

“It’s Sam,” she said awkwardly, leaning towards the door in hopes her voice would carry.
“What? I can’t hear— Oh— come in already,” the voice griped.

Sam tested the doorknob and found it wasn’t locked. Inside was dark, made up of a living room with an attached kitchen and a hallway that had two doors— one to a bathroom, one to a bedroom. It was musty and smelled of lavender Febreze. Deep maroon curtains blocked sunlight. Underneath Sam’s boots lay plushy non-offensive beige carpeting, and equally bland plushy furniture marked each corner of the small living room. Only one stood out from the rest—a deep emerald velvet armchair with regal mahogany legs where, shrouded in a black crochet shawl, a tiny old woman with a bun of white hair sat perched like some sort of absurd crow.

“Don’t just stand there. Close the door. You’re letting light in,” the crow complained.

Sam shut the door with the back of her heel and walked down the hallway. “Hi, Grandma,” she greeted.

Ida Mendel peered through inch-thick lenses and squinted. Sam could see the gears twirling in her head, before she gave a huge smile. The force of her grin wrinkled her face unrecognizable.

“Sammy. What a surprise. How nice of you to come visit your only Bubbe.”

Sam winced at the barb. Her grandmother was known for her wit, sharp tongue, and tendencies to call you out. “How are you?”

“Peachy.” She craned her neck around, which looked difficult as she had a permanent hunch. “Where’s your mother?” she asked after a second.

Sam tapped her fingertips along the back of the couch. “She had to talk to someone about paperwork or something.”

Her grandmother’s eyes weren’t clouded with age. They were bright, with a mischievous spark that made Sam wary. “Sit, why don’t you.” Her wrinkled hand waved at the adjacent couch. “Tell me things. What are young people into nowadays?”

Sam noted the black nail polish and the overabundance of rings. Ida had at least two rings per finger. All different types. Some plain silver, some giant rectangular slabs of jade set in gold. On her right hand sat a gold jewish star; on her left pointer finger a silver crocodile. Sam walked around the end of the couch and sat.

“Last time I saw you, you were about to move into that house and start school,” Ida continued.

A shrug. “School’s fine. The house is…” She stopped herself. The house was alive. Each night it creaked and rocked as if stretching. More and more often Sam woke to the sound of slamming doors, or her bedroom window wide open. She had been living there only a few months and already knew it was something else entirely. “...It’s a house,” she finished.

Ida hummed with a look that said she knew Sam was hiding something, but didn’t press it. “So who’s the lucky boy? Or girl?”


“Honey, you usually walk around like you’ve got superglue on the bottom of those boots and your own personal raincloud to keep you company. These past two years you’ve barely said one word to me, much less come visit. But here you are, all bright eyed and full of vowels.” Ida leaned forward conspiratorially and raised a heavily penciled eyebrow. “Give me some credit, honey. I’m old, not senile.”
“We’re friends,” Sam muttered. She kicked her boots out and looked at the bottoms of them, half expecting to find evidence of glue. There was only dirt.

Ida merely nodded a few times, then stared at her. “So?”

“So, what?”

“Why are you here? I know it isn’t to swoon at my beauty.”

Sam couldn’t help but smile as she peered around at the dark curtains, the velvet chair, the black shawl, the no-bullshit coarseness and the too-sharp lavender eyes. Her and Ida were one in the same. They were too alike. To everyone else Sam was unreadable, yet to Ida she was transparent. “I wanted to talk about your childhood,” Sam said.

“My childhood?”

“It’s for a report,” Sam continued. “For school.”

Ida barked a laugh. “Heavens. Am I finally at the age where kids interview me for history class?” she asked, her eyes scrunching up in mirth. “Alright, fine. Shoot.”

“I’m doing a report about what Amity Park was like in the 50’s, and how it pertains to American History,” Sam explained. “You grew up here, right?”

“Born and raised. But I’ll be barely any help. I was born in—” With a wagging a finger and a twinkle in her eye, Ida caught herself. “Let’s just say I was very young during the 50’s.”

“Do you remember anything about the town?” Sam asked.

“That was so long ago,” Ida said in a faraway voice. Eyes dimmed, she glanced out the window. “I remember the fireflies. This town had a bunch of fireflies. There’s not so many anymore, some years back something wiped ‘em out, probably the drought, but I remember them in the summertime.”

Sam dug in her backpack and pulled out a pad and a pencil. While she sketched a firefly in the corner, she asked, “Do you remember if anything big happened? Anything noteworthy?”

Ida merely shook her head. “I wish I could help you out. As you get older, your memory only tells you what you want to hear. Hell, this town was so small back then about the most noteworthy thing was the summer Mac Driscal got first place in the State Fair for his ugly overgrown gourds. The old coot never let anyone forget.”

Sam wrote Mac Driscal—Gourds. “Do you remember who was mayor back then?” she probed.

Ida shrugged.

Did her grandmother remember anything important at all, or was there anything important to remember? “Ever heard of Vladimir Masters?” she asked hopefully.

Ida blinked, startled. “Yes. Yes I have. He was the mayor when I was a senior in high school. Rich. Mysterious. Lived in that big mansion over on Pine. I remember he had long white hair pulled back in a ponytail. He was a doctor of some kind, I think. A lot of the girls in my class had a crush on him,” Ida rolled her eyes a little and made a gagging motion. “All they cared about was finding a rich husband, getting a white picket fence, and popping out two kids.”

Sam refrained from mentioning that that was exactly what Ida had done. Instead she scribbled some
notes. Rich. Doctor. White hair. None of these attributes surprised her. Someone with the name Vladimir Masters had to own an extensive vodka collection and an Ivy League doctorate degree. She paused and considered her grandma. “How come you remember him so well?” she wondered aloud. After all, Ida had been evasive on everything else until this point.

“Oh, I remember everything about that summer vividly,” Ida stated flatly. Her eyes darkened, grew distant, and flicked away to the window; her hands tightened around her shawl. “Anyone that lived here during the summer of ’62 remembers. Some things stick with you. But your report is on the 50’s. Won’t do any good.”

Sam’s stomach flopped and writhed. There was something in her grandmother’s look that told her whatever this was was serious. This could be the break she had been looking for. “Project aside, what happened?” she asked, fighting to keep the excitement from her voice.

Ida sighed a slow steady sigh. “That was the summer that boy went missing.” Adjusting her glasses, she turned her attention back to Sam. “White kid, from a nice family. Everyone tore Amity apart looking for him. It really shook everyone up, that a kid could go missing without a trace in this town where everyone knew everyone. I remember the father coming to our house looking for him. The look on his face...” Ida shuddered. “Desperation is an ugly thing, Sammy. It changes people, and not for the better.”

Ice spread through her Sam’s veins.

Ida adjusted her shawl and dusted off a few white hairs with a sniff. “Anyway, once they started digging around they found out he wasn’t the only one missing. Lots of kids were missing, from as far back as ’53. Only, no one ever bothered to notice, ’cause they were all kids with no families. Orphans.” Ida darted a look at Sam for a second. “And black.”

“1953?” Sam echoed, well aware of the righteous anger in her tone. “How did nobody notice until almost a decade later?”

“Try to understand, Sam. I’m not saying it’s right, but things were different back then. In a worse way. One white boy went missing and the entire town went into an uproar, but a bunch of black kids went missing right under everyone’s noses and no one says a word...” Ida tutted softly and slowly unwound herself from her chair. Grabbing her ebony cane, she took off unsteadily for the kitchen. “This is some heavy stuff. You want tea?”

“Oh— no thank you,” Sam mumbled. She watched her grandmother move with the speed of a tortoise towards her kitchen just when they were getting to the good stuff. Unsure of how much more time she had alone with her grandmother before her mom showed up, Sam’s eyes darted towards the door. Sam leaned back in her chair and let out a slow breath, trying to channel whatever small amounts of patience she had.

From behind her, a teacup clattered and water began to hiss in a kettle.

Sam glanced down at her scribbled note taking. Finally. Something significant.

Ida shuffled back to her chair. She slowly eased her way into it, cradling her teacup to her chest. Steam fogged her glasses as she took a small sip. “Now. Where were we?”

“Missing kids,” Sam prompted.

“Right.” A nod. “So, after people found out about the other missing kids, naturally, everyone thought we had some sort of serial killer out and about. My parents never let me out of their sight that year. I
always had to walk with a friend to school and back. I had to call to check in with them if I went
over to someone else’s house. Everyone was on edge.”

Sam leaned forward in her chair. “Then what?”

Her grandmother took a sip of her tea. “Nothing.”

“..... What?” Sam frowned.

“Never found who did it, never found the bodies, and the kidnappings stopped.” Ida pointed a finger
at Sam. “I tell you what, this town has been weird ever since. A string of bad luck. First the draught,
then the crops died, the forest fires, that circus burning down, the suicides... It’s no wonder people
started to move away.”

A question stirred and burned within her. “The missing boy. What was his name?”

Ida opened her mouth, paused, then closed it. She leaned back in her chair and eyed Sam
appraisingly. “Oh, some common name. I don’t know. It was so long ago... I can’t recall,” she said,
lip twitching into a coy smile. “I’m sure I’ll remember sometime next week. Probably on
Wednesday, after 7pm checkers. Guess you’ll just have to come back and visit me.”

With a wink, Ida went back to sipping her tea.

Two hours later, Sam was pacing the upstairs hallway of her house.

Missing children, a serial killer, and a coverup... Sam smirked. Was this ‘it’? Finally! She was
getting somewhere. Her nose itched that this was something big.

Her first instinct was to call Tucker and tell him everything— about the kids, about the cabin in the
woods, about the—the skull. Sam froze mid-stride. What if that skull was human? Shouldn’t she do
something? Tell someone? It could be one of those missing kids. Guilt gnawed through her. She
grabbed her phone to call Tucker, then paused. Tucker would ask her how she had found the cabin,
she would have to tell him about Danny, and he would get mad. When Danny had become more
important than Tucker’s friendship she didn’t know. He had just crept into her life when she hadn’t
been looking and made a little nest.

Sam slipped her phone back in her pocket. No. She wouldn’t tell Tucker. Not yet anyway. It wasn’t
time. She had a feeling Tucker wouldn’t understand.

With a shake of her head, Sam began pacing again.

What else? She should call the police. But, after everything that had happened with the dog... would they
take her seriously? And if they did, she was sending them deep into the woods—a place Danny
had explicitly warned her was dangerous.

What were her other options? She could go into the woods and retrieve it herself, but she didn’t
know the way and she would have to take it to the police to run analysis on it anyway. Besides, if
she walked into the station with a human skull and dropped it on Officer Gray’s desk, he’d think she
had something to do with it. Or, barring that, he’d ask her where she found it, and he’d go into the
woods anyway to search for more evidence.
She could keep her lips shut and let it rot there in the forest until it turned to dust… Never find out if it was a gorilla… never find out if it was one of those missing kids…

No. Her dark hair fluttered as she shook her head, hard. The not knowing was unacceptable. She couldn’t sit around and do nothing. Couldn’t pretend she hadn’t seen that skull.

“God dammit,” Sam groaned aloud. She strode down the hallway into her room. Fine. She’d go to the police. The thought of never knowing if that skull was real or not was unbearable. She snatched her jacket off the back of her chair and slung it on, wound a scarf around her neck, and made for the stairs. She had one hand on the doorknob when a voice rang out behind her.

“Get back here.”

Sam screeched to a halt and whirled around. “Mom,” she greeted. She tried to arrange her face into something innocent. Oh who was she kidding? That was a lost cause.

Pamela scowled at her and crossed her arms. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Wanted to go for a walk. Get some fresh air.”

“Not so fast,” her mother growled. “We need to have a little chat about last night.”

Sam shut the door and rolled her eyes where her mother couldn’t see. With a sigh, she took her hand off the door handle and spun back around. “Okay,” she said tiredly. “Let’s chat.”

“You’re lucky you’re not grounded until next year, young lady,” Pamela snapped.

Sam stared at her for a beat. The idea of her mother having any control over her behavior was downright hilarious. It took all of her willpower to keep a straight face. “Ground me, then. I’ll just sneak out while you’re passed out drunk,” Sam countered.

Pamela froze and sucked in a quick breath. Uncertainty flashed across her features.

Sam winced. It had been a low blow and she knew it. Her gaze darted to the floor, ashamed.

“I— I need to know where you are,” Pamela forced out. “I’m your mother. Regardless of what you believe, I love you and I worry about you.” Her voice cracked and Sam felt lower than a piece of shit. “All the time, I worry.”

Her mother’s eyes had taken a glassy look that could only mean she was two seconds away from crying, which was not good. Sam edged away and kicked at the entry rug. Grinding her teeth, Sam realized—with a flash of irritation—that Pamela’s guilt trip was actually working. “Look, I’m sorry I came home late and didn’t answer my phone,” Sam murmured. “I was hanging out with a friend and lost track of time. I’ll pay more attention.”

Her mother scanned her face. “Your father and I are glad you’re going out and making new friends. That you’re showing interest in something, even you won’t tell us what it is. It’s better than… well… before…” Pamela trailed off, struggling fruitlessly.

This was the sticking point; the reason why she was so angry with her mother all the time. “Why can’t you talk about it like a normal person?” Sam burst out. “It’s like you don’t want to acknowledge what happened. It drives me crazy. Just say it. Joy Nguyen. She’s dead and I loved her.” Sam stared defiantly at her mother, daring her to comment. “Say her name,” she demanded.

“Sam, that’s not fair.” Taking a step forward, Pamela raised a hand like she wanted to run it through
her hair, but paused and thought better of it. “I don’t like dwelling on it the way you do.”

Anger bled out until she felt hollow. “Say her name.” This time a whisper.

Her mother hesitated and Sam turned her back, disgusted.

“I— I love you so much, Sam. You know that right?” Pamela pleaded.

Sam paused, one hand on the doorway. “Whatever,” she scathed, and left.

Samantha Manson
US History
Period 4

1950’s History Paper (Rough Draft)

The 1950’s time period was dominated by fear of communism. The “Red Scare” —what historians use to describe this fear— heavily influenced the politics and propaganda of the era. To Americans, communism was in direct opposition to capitalism and therefore evil.

On October 4th 1957, Soviet Russia launched the Sputnik 1 satellite, shattering the notion that America was the most technologically advanced nation (Zohair, 10). Not one to come in second, the United States launched NASA in 1958 in direct response (Clemmons, 49). The frenzied Space Race began. The American public became swept up in the blind chase to win over Russian Totalitarianism, and seduced by the thought of space travel.

The Space Race is attributed to America’s desire to exert technological superiority. Basically, we wanted Stalin to take communism and stick it up his ass. The Cold War was more of a political tactic than anything else. It’s like the government wanted everyone looking up at the moon instead of taking a look around at how shitty minorities were being treated. Segregation was still a thing. And let’s not forget sexism. Let me quote an advertisement: “Men are better than women! Indoors, women are useful—even pleasant. On a mountain they are something of a drag. So don’t go hauling them up a cliff to show off your new Drummond climbing sweaters! (Drummond)” This is an actual advertisement from 1957. I bet a panel of probably at least ten different white misogynistic dicks looked at this, took a puff of a cigarette (because people were in denial back then that tobacco causes lung cancer), took a swig of bourbon (because people back then were functioning alcoholics), and said, “Perfect. Yes. This ad is perfect———
Let Me In

Sam was dismayed at the fact that she was a regular at the Amity Park Police Department. It was the same as last time. Same uncomfortable rows of waiting chairs, same distant sound of printers printing, same buzzing energy-efficient fluorescent lights.

She stood awkwardly in the lobby, unsure of who to talk to or where to go now that she wasn't being brought here against her will. For some reason she felt guilty just standing here.

"Can I help you?" a voice rang out.

Sam glanced up at a female officer—a stately woman in her mid thirties with brown hair pulled back in a severe bun, perfect posture, and an overly starched uniform. "Uh, I need to meet with Officer Gray," Sam said.

Maybe this was a bad idea. The skull could very well be a gorilla or a monkey or whatever else Danny said. She didn't even know if it was human. If it wasn't, she would be sending Officer Gray on a wild goose chase, right into the heart of a haunted forest... But she couldn't get it out of her thoughts. It meant something. She had a strong suspicion Danny wouldn't have shown it to her if it hadn't.

The officer tilted her head and eyed her up and down with interest. This was a tiny rural police station. It probably wasn't very often a teenage punk meandered in on their own volition. "Maybe I can help you?"

"I have a—" —What do you call it?— "a tip."

With an intrigued gleam in her eye, the woman gestured behind her towards the cubicles. "Okay… You can follow me and we can discuss—"

"I'll only talk to him."

The lady raised an eyebrow. "Okay… Take a seat and I'll go let him know. What's your name?"

"Samantha Manson." Sam kicked out her feet and gazed down at her boots, sitting in the same chair she waited for her mother in only a few weeks prior. This was the right thing to do… right? Not so sure anymore, Sam oozed a bit further down in the seat, nose stuck in her scarf.

Time stretched. Ten minutes passed. Her knee bobbed up and down impatiently. Just when she was about to change her mind, Officer Gray showed up. His mustache looked even more aggressive than she remembered and his uniform was pressed in a way that suggested he ironed it every morning. Despite the crisp uniform, he had bags under his eyes, as if he hadn't been sleeping well.

"Ms. Manson. We meet again. Follow me."

Sam got up and slung her purse over her shoulder, following Gray through the maze of cubicles.

Officer Gray yanked open a glass door that hadChief Inspector, Damon Gray etched into it. Inside was a small office with a heavy-looking walnut desk covered in unorganized papers, an older PC computer, two plastic chairs, and a black leather office chair. Light filtered through the window between cheap plastic venetian blinds with slats bent at odd angles from overuse.
Sam took a seat in one of the plastic chairs as Gray settled behind his desk. Her gaze traveled to a framed photograph. Him and his wife—Evelyn, Sam recognized—sitting on a couch. In between the two of them sat a pre-teen Valerie. They were all looking up at the camera, posed, smiling. In the background twinkled a Christmas tree. A bundle of red and white striped wrapping paper sat in Valerie’s lap as she held up a professional hair straightener. Sam thought she looked like a completely different person with that big toothy grin.

Officer Gray cleared his throat and Sam looked up. "Officer Ramon said you had a tip for me?" he prompted.

"Yeah." She placed her hands in her lap. "The other night I was…" Sam struggled. She hadn't thought very far ahead about how to describe how she found the cabin without sounding like a loon. With a wince, she finished, "…taking a walk through the woods behind my house."

At mention of the mansion, Damon's face paled a notch. He fished around on his desk for a blank piece of paper. Finding none, he grabbed and flipped over a random piece of paper to write on the backside. He uncapped a pen. "Why?" he asked.

Sam thought of Danny, then of the possibility that he was a ghost, and decided to keep him out of it. "Wanted to take a walk. Get in touch with nature. Anyways, I found something that could be important. An old log cabin. No one's lived there in decades. Inside there was a lot of stuff. Old stuff. Like rifles and animal skulls. One skull looked different from the others. More human-like. It could be a monkey or something, but just in case, you know, it isn't…"

Officer Gray stiffened. The grip on his pen tightened and he stopped writing. He eyed her suspiciously. After a moment of consideration, he asked, "Where's this cabin?"

Sam tried to recall the path. She had been pretty close to Tucker's house when they walked off the side of the road. They had trudged through the forest for a while, maybe fifteen or twenty minutes? Time was funny around Danny, so she couldn't be sure. What she was sure of was there had been no path. The walk had felt like forever because she climbed over and under things, wrestling her way through thick underbrush. Although, she remembered certain landmarks. "It's directly south from my house. There's a really big clearing. The cabin is past that and to the left of a downed tree."

Gray wrote that down. "How has this cabin been sitting there and no one's discovered it?"

"It's not on any path and it's pretty deep in the woods," Sam admitted. "Besides, I'm guessing no one has really been back there in a while. The house has been vacant, ever since…" Her gaze flashed to the picture, to Evelyn's face. "Ever since your family moved out."

"Uh-huh," Gray said, disbelief sparking in his eyes. He didn't buy her story. Sam could practically hear his thoughts. As a detective, it was natural for him to be distrustful. He was probably thinking something around the lines of: On a whim, this girl decides to walk into the deepest, darkest, densest, part of the woods for a leisurely nighttime stroll? Doesn't add up. Someone must have shown her; someone who knew the woods well, who knew the cabin was there...

Sam sat in a chair, alone, in a sparsely furnished room. She recognized it as the mansion's study. Although it was darker, there were deep violet curtains draped across the windows, and the enchanting sound of Duke Ellington swirled in the air. A lime green light flashed over and over, harshly. Directly across from her was a bookshelf. Underneath her palms lay chiseled wolf heads.
"You're running out of time," said a girl in a red dress. Her long dark ponytail bounced as she crossed the room in three bounding strides before sitting atop a desk, face round and youthful, maybe thirteen.

A nagging feeling tugged incessantly in Sam's brain. This girl looked so much like someone she knew.

"He's almost here," the girl warned.

"Who?" Sam asked.

"Not that it's any of my business," the girl continued, as if she hadn't heard, teenage petulance bleeding into her tone. "It's not like he'd stay. It's too quiet where he's from. Too many fishes. Trout." Getting up from the desk, she spun across the carpet in lazy semi-graceful twirls. Her ponytail spiralled out behind her in soft ringlets; her red skirt billowed, heels digging in as she danced across the room, humming, eyes shut.

Sam watched for ages and thought she was very beautiful and that jazz music was also very beautiful.

The girl eventually danced her way back to the desk and slowed, bending over deliberately, pulling up a loose floorboard to reveal a hidden compartment containing a brass lever and—with her light blue eyes locked with Sam's—shot the other a slow one-eyed wink and pulled.

The bookshelf trembled and popped. It swung outward to reveal a dark tunnel and a set of descending stone stairs. A man without a head walked out of the opening, accompanied by a boy.

"Doesn't my cousin look just like me?" the girl asked.

Sam gazed at the boy as he crossed the room. Drawing closer, she could see the freckles on his cheeks, his dark hair and blue eyes, the gentle curving slope of his nose and had to admit that, yes, they looked identical.

"Who are you?" Sam asked, although she thought she already knew.

He bent at the waist until his face was near, lips brushing hers in a gentle kiss. Cool mint danced across her mouth. Duke Ellington erupted—a galloping, cajoling commotion of trumpets. The girl took to dancing again. The man without a head somehow watched from the opening behind the trick door.

As the fanfare sped towards it's finale, the boy tilted his head, his cheek to her cheek, and whispered a name in her ear—

-Sah jolted upright, nearly vaulting from her bed. Jazz rang distantly in her ears. Throwing back her covers, Sam scrambled for her desk and grabbed a pen. She wrote Daniel James and paused. She wrote Jazz. Again, she paused. Her dream melted away like heated wax. She blinked furiously, but couldn't remember anything except that it had been important.

. . .

On Wednesday afternoon, Sam found herself in Penelope Spectra's office, spending her hour long counselling session pondering if it was possible to cause spontaneous combustion through the heat of her gaze, if only she glared hard enough.
"So, Samantha… How have you been sleeping? Any nightmares?" Spectra stared at her through her tacky cat-eye glasses. Her tone made Sam's teeth rattle. "Do you want to talk about Mikey's death?" Spectra asked pleasantly.

No, Sam thought. She was done talking about Mikey's supposed 'suicide'. She was over sitting around lamenting his death. What Mikey needed was for someone to stop his killer—stop the ghosts—before it happened to someone else.

"I know you were friends," Spectra continued, as if Sam had answered.

We weren't friends, Sam thought. She had barely known him. She turned her head away pointedly, teeth grinding.

"Not feeling like talking today?"

This was her third session with Penelope Spectra. Sam had given up on cooperation after figuring out the more she talked, the angrier she became. Instead, Sam zeroed in on a browning cactus, sympathizing. Poor thing never had a chance. Spectra delighted in sucking all the light from this room.

"How is your relationship with your parents?" Spectra probed. "Last time I spoke with your mother she seemed very concerned about you."

Sam said nothing. Not for the first time, her thoughts wandered longingly to the other shrink—the one that had given her a business card: Doctor Matthews. Her stony expression softened as she remembered that feeling of security and warmth. Even sitting with Matthews for ten minutes… it had felt like being swaddled in a baby blanket. Maybe she should call her… That business card was still in her wallet...

"—you refuse to open up," Spectra was saying.

Sam fantasized about shoving that cactus down Spectra's throat. Maybe that'd shut her up.

"If you keep pushing away people that care about you—"

The bell rang. Thank God. Sam leapt out of the chair and slung her backpack over one shoulder, breaking for the door.

"Samantha," Spectra called.

Sam paused, hand on the door handle.

"You might not see it, but you need help."

Sam rolled her eyes, shoved the door open with her shoulder, and took off down the hallway. Slinking into the crowd, she kept her head down. "Need help, please. As if you could help. You can't even keep a cactus alive," she hissed darkly under her breath. As she turned the corner she ran straight into Tucker.

"Whoa!" He grappled for his books, catching them. "You seem... happy?" He chuckled nervously.

"Spectra," Sam muttered with a shake of her head. "Just wasted an hour of my life. I doubt that woman is even a professional therapist." If she was, she was the worst therapist Sam had encountered, and Sam had seen a lot of therapists.
Tucker grinned and leaned in. "I could run a background check. Research her credentials."

Sam didn't doubt his ability or gumption. Turned out Tucker was quite the digital anarchist. She liked that part of him. Once she got past the bright patterned sweaters and overwhelming optimism, she had to admit... he was growing on her. "Nah. Not worth it," she sighed, walking down the hallway.

Tucker fell in line as they moved towards US History. "So, what happened this weekend? I thought you were gonna go see your grandma."

The cabin had happened. And the skull. Sam pursed her lips and told him neither. "I did. She told me some pretty interesting stuff." Her lips curved into a smirk.

Tucker grabbed her arm, pulling her away from most of the students until they were huddled against a stretch of lockers. "What'd you find out?" he whispered.

Sam took off her backpack and fished around. The Horror Hunt ticket for tonight peeked out of one of the pockets. She stuffed it back in, pulling her notebook out instead. "Summer of 1962 a boy goes missing. He was never found. Then, the police found out that more kids went missing as far back as 1953. My grandmother said that everyone thought they had a serial killer in their midst."

With wide eyes, Tucker grabbed the notebook and flipped through it. He pushed his glasses up further on the bridge of his nose as he scanned her notes hungrily. "Missing kids. Creepy. So how come no one missed them for, like, ten years? Wouldn't someone have noticed they were gone?"

Sam tapped at a scribbled line in the notebook. "They were all orphans. Bastard children with no homes and no one to miss them. And all black." She winced after she said it and kicked herself for not handling that more delicately.

"Holy shit." Color drained from his face.

"No way," someone else drawled.

Whipping around, Sam found Star leaning against a locker, arms crossed, smiling vapidly at them. Star drew her leg up and crossed it over the other, her pale thigh poking through the slit in her cheerleading uniform. Pointing between the pair of them, she tilted her head. "You two are cute. Super Nancy Drew. Tell me more. I'm dying to know all about these orphans."

Tucker snapped the notebook shut and tucked it underneath his arm, looking guilty. His shoulders pulled up, slinking backwards the way he always did when faced with the A-List.

Sam detected a hint of genuine curiosity in Star. Weird.

When it was clear neither Sam nor Tucker planned on indulging her, Star sighed. "FYI, that's my locker you two are flirting against. Don't blame me for eavesdropping when you're in my way."

Tucker reddened, sputtered, "We're not—"

"Is this pipsqueak botherin' you, Star?" Dash sidled up next to Star. He shot a glare at Tucker and cracked his knuckles.

Sam tensed. In a rush of clarity, she realized that if Dash tried anything on Tucker, she'd do something. She had grown fond of the kid and tired of the A-List.

Star looked as if she was debating whether or not to sic Dash upon them. After deliberating, she
shrugged and batted her hair behind her ear. "There's no problem. I was just asking Sam if she was coming to Spirit Club again this week," Star said pleasantly.

Tucker's eyes widened in shock. He swiveled his head at Sam in disbelief.

Sam winced internally. Great. "I said I'd think about," she clipped, then walked away as quickly as possible. She unclenched her hands and tried to relax her jaw.

Tucker sped behind. "You went to a Spirit Club meeting?" he hissed, rounding on her as soon as they turned the corner. "Sam, you know that those meetings are bad news, especially with the ghosts out and about again."

"Just once. To talk to Paulina," Sam admitted. She really had been hoping to avoid this conversation.

Tucker's brows furrowed. "Why?"

Her gaze studiously avoided his. "Because Paulina was the only person I knew at the time that would tell me what happened to Valerie."

Tucker stared in confusion. Sam had never told him about Valerie's death threat. Of course he wouldn't understand. He blinked furiously as if trying to compute what she was saying. "...Why do you care?"

Her shield slammed down. Irritation raked at her. "I don't have to ask your permission to do things, Tucker." The words were out of her before she could reign them back in.

"I didn't say you had to ask. It just seems like it is something you should, you know, tell your friend."

"You'd tell me not to go! I knew we would get in a fight."

"I guess you were right!" Tucker snapped. His expression steeled. "Why did you want to know about Valerie?"

Sam's mouth clicked shut. She couldn't tell him. Valerie and him had been close, therefore he had to know about the house. If she told him that Valerie had it out for her because she lived in the mansion, he might react the same way. He might want nothing to do with her. She couldn't have that. Tucker was one of her only friends... She blinked in realization. Tucker was her friend.

Tucker's features darkened. His eyes narrowed behind his thick-rimmed glasses, arms crossing. "What else aren't you telling me, Sam?"

Mouth suddenly dry, her grip tightened around her backpack straps. The Horror Hunt ticket, her address, the cabin, the skull, Evelyn Gray, Joy Nguyen, Danny… "Everyone has secrets," she whispered hoarsely.

"Great." Tucker threw his arms up in exasperation. He shook his head, his eyes trailing up to the ceiling. Then, his gaze flicked back down and caught hers, expression hardening.

"Let me know when you wanna loop me in." He turned and walked away.

Sam felt her face crumble and the air whoosh out her lungs as she watched his retreating back. Everyone had secrets, and her own personal collection was steadfastly growing everyday. It felt heavy. As Tucker whipped out of sight, a sensation festered in her chest—a tingly achy feeling. Sam knew it well: Loss.
Tuesday August 14th, 1962

Still no Danny. We've searched the neighborhood and all of his usual hideouts. Nothing.

The police won't launch an official investigation until tomorrow. They keep saying that Danny probably ran away from home and that he'll come back, eventually. We have to give him time.

Danny didn't take anything with him. I checked his room. No money. No coat. No pictures.

He didn't run away. I know my brother. Sure, he can be immature, but he wouldn't run away. It just doesn't make sense.

.

Wednesday August 15th, 1962

This morning the police officially listed Danny as a missing person. They combed through his room and our entire house, interviewed our family and Danny's close friends.

This whole situation is surreal. I'm waiting for the punchline.

.

Thursday August 16th, 1962

Police found Danny's car five miles outside Amity sitting along the road. I'm relieved and terrified. Relieved that we found some evidence of where Danny went; terrified because he'd never abandon that car. Something bad happened to him.

The officers called in support from the neighboring precincts. Detective Leroy Gray is heading the investigation. He's young. Maybe late twenties. Black. He seems nervous and inexperienced. This is likely the first and only missing person case to ever happen in Amity. My parents don't trust him to handle the investigation properly.

Police won't answer our questions anymore. Mom and Dad are terrified. The way they're acting… it's like they know something we don't.

We've been driving up and down the highway where Danny's car was found. I hate how I keep looking in ditches. Everytime I see a piece of trash that looks like one of his sweaters it steals my breath.

.

Thursday August 16th, 1962

The police told us there was a napkin from the Nasty Burger wedged in the driver's seat of Danny's car. A waitress remembers him there on Sunday around 3pm. He played the jukebox. The Sensations.

The last time I was at the Nasty Burger was when we were moving to Cincinnati. Danny must have been five. They had the best strawberry milkshakes.
Thursday August 16th, 1962

A task force with bloodhounds is searching the woods near where Danny's car was found. The dogs took the scent of Danny's comb.

In the meantime, Vlad is letting us stay at his place in Amity. He's posted a generous reward for any information on Danny's whereabouts.

My parents can't sit still. They're out asking people if they've seen Danny. They're showing everyone that old school photo of him from 8th grade with the cowlick hair. He always hated that one.

Johnny keeps telling me that it'll be okay. I'm not sure. I can't help but think if Danny and I hadn't fought he'd still be here.

Thursday August 16th, 1962

It's midnight. Mom and Dad came back ten minutes ago and woke me with their yelling. I can hear them arguing right now in the living room.

Dad: This is my son. If that man knows anything, I'll make him tell us.

Mom: He's my son too, Jack. But that man has no motive to take Danny.

Dad: We don't know that. You saw how he reacted when we told him who we were. You know Danny. He could've joked about something and set that psycho off.

Mom: Everyone knows us by now. We're all over the news.

Dad: He knows something.

Mom: What are you going to do then, Jack? What? Beat the man up? Torture him? Get yourself arrested?

Dad: Of course not. I just can't just sit here and do nothing.

Mom: We told the police.

Dad: The police will need a warrant to search that place. In order to get a warrant they'll need evidence. And in order to get evidence, they need to search that place. By the time they get inside, it will be too late.

Mom: That does not give you permission to break and enter.

Dad: What if Danny's there this very second? What if that man is some kind of pervert? Why else would someone take a boy?

Mom: Jack, STOP! Don't do that, you can't— you can't think like that.

I've never heard our parents fight. This has to be some kind of nightmare. Any minute now I'll wake up. I'll race downstairs and find Danny already at the table loading an ungodly amount of pancakes on his plate— he'll have never left— and life will go back to normal. Any minute now.
The Horror Hunt Ghost Tour consisted of around thirty people, all bundled up in thick coats, huddled together and chatting nervously with one another. Most were from out of town. A few of them had UC sweaters on.

Sam tried melting into the middle of the crowd. She couldn't help but feel slightly embarrassed for being here. Not in a million years would she have thought of herself as someone that not only believed in ghosts, but paid twenty dollars to attend something so touristy. She hoped no one she knew saw her on this. She thought of Danny and miserably wound her scarf around the bottom portion of her face. God, if that kid caught her, she'd never hear the end of it.

The man leading the charge was old and cloaked in a billowing black cape. He had on a top hat and held an oil lantern. Sam recognized him as the man she had seen outside her house when they had first moved in.

"Greetings, minions," the man said theatrically. He waggled his lantern and his imposing eyebrows, the lighting illuminating all the wrinkles in his face. "My name is Frederick. Tonight we will explore the darkest corners of Amity Park. Safety first, everyone take a look around."

The crowd glanced sidelong at one another. It was a lot of couples, a few middle-aged women, and college students.

"Remember these faces, should anyone new and unwelcome decide to tag along," the man chuckled, before taking off down the street with long strides. He was nimble for how old he looked. The group hurried along behind him. One of the boys in a UC sweatshirt made a ghoulish noise and wrapped his arm playfully around his friend, who flinched, before shoving him away.

It was something Tucker would have done, had he still been talking to her. Sam swallowed regretfully at that thought and quickened her stride to fall in line with the others.

When they rounded the block, Sam knew where they were headed before she saw the Victorian facade. Her house rose up out of the mist, looming and regal. The lights were off. Her parents weren't home and wouldn't be home for another couple hours, which gave her plenty of time to attend this tour and get back before they noticed she was missing. Sam had to admit, with the windows looking back at her like black beady eyes, the house was pretty creepy.

Frederick paused to the right of the driveway near the gate. He held up his lantern with a mischievous grin. "Our first stop— the Master's Villa. Erected in 1892 by a wealthy arms dealer, this house is one of the oldest landmarks in Amity Park. Over the course of it's existence, it's had over forty different owners, all lasting only a few years or so. It's named after its longest resident, Vladimir Masters, who lived here for thirty-eight years."

Sam was itching to write this down, but had to settle for memorization. She let out a soft breath in a plume of condensation and craned her neck up at the steeples.

Frederick gestured to the sides of the house, towards the backyard. "The house rests atop two square miles of land containing a pond and an expanse of forest—a forest rumored to contain the spirits of those that fell prey to the house." He raised a brow, voice lowering. "The Masters Villa has had a long string of natural and accidental deaths. Just three years ago, the last owner of this house was
found hanging from the chandelier..."

Sam shivered. Her gaze tore from Frederick's serious expression to the house. Wait—the light to her bedroom was on and the curtains were parted. *What the?* No one was supposed to be home.

A dark outline of a person walked in front of the window. It slowly turned to face the street. Sam couldn't see it's face, but she knew without a doubt it was looking right at her. Her heart hammered in her throat. The figure held her gaze confrontingly as if to say: this is *my* room. Then, it waved.

Sam looked around wildly to see if anyone else was noticing this, but the tour was preoccupied with the veranda.

"...a man was found right here, in a chair..." Frederick was saying.

Sam peered back up at the house. Her bedroom was dark again.

"I know why you're here. You've see him and think you've got something to fix," a voice announced.

Sam whipped her head around. Her scalp tingled; her breath caught in her chest.

Frederick stared at her coldly. "The instant I saw you I said to myself 'here's another one of them: another lamb awaiting slaughter, another meddlesome, arrogant, idiotic *child...*" His eyes gleamed, catching the fire from his lantern. "Poking your nose around in everyone else's business only attracts the worst kind of luck and the most loathsome of creatures."

"Excuse me?" Sam breathed, looking around, but no one else was paying attention. It was like time slowed and the tour group was stuck ogling at the house's veranda, oblivious.

Frederick kept talking like a man possessed, voice low and gravelly. "Let me tell you a story. I was driving in the middle of a violent May windstorm. I used to run a traveling circus. Opie—my African elephant—was ill, and the medicine I needed was in Cleveland. A tree had fallen across the freeway, blocking the left two lanes. The detour route took me down a small winding two lane highway only frequented by loggers..."

Not taking her eyes off the man, Sam reached into her jacket pocket and found the lipstick ghost detector. She popped the cap off.

"...Sequoias loomed on either side of my car. Rain came down in sheets so hard the droplets collided against my windshield in a deafening roar. The mist from the downpour created a haze that made it hard to see more than five yards ahead..."

Sam chanced a glance into her coat pocket, a faint green emitting from inside. Ghost.

"...I didn't see him until I nearly ran him over. He didn't even flinch. Just slammed his hands on the hood of my car. A boy, sixteen, maybe seventeen, in a thin t-shirt, no shoes, and pants ripped and bloodied at the knees. He looked dirty, starved, and sedated. He was mumbling something and although I couldn't hear him above the rain and my car radio, I could read his lips..."

Sam knew she should run, her brain kept telling her feet to run, but her limbs were stuck. Frederick's voice was so loud it sounded like it was coming from inside her own head.

"...He was begging for me to help him. So I did. I got out of my car and asked him where he had come from, who had done this to him, and where his parents were." Frederick's eyes bore into Sam's. "It was the last thing I ever did."
"Sam? You're on a ghost tour?" a perky, obnoxious voice cried out.

Sam glanced to her right and spotted Paulina bounding up to her, the scent of her perfume a powerful intoxicant, breaking whatever witchcraft had just transpired.

Sound returned and pressure eased off her ears. Wind whipped and rustled the leaves, the gate squeaked softly, and the tour group chattered amongst each other, moving, fidgeting to keep warm. Frederick chatted with one of the tour group's attendees, as if that whole exchange had never happened. Dazedly, Sam felt like she had fallen into an alternate reality before popping out the other end.

"Yes, it's been remodeled several times..." the guide was saying.

Sam shuddered, heart pounding, suddenly afraid of ghosts and all that they could do. She forced her expression to remain neutral. Danny had said something about not letting ghosts taste fear.

"Hellooo?"

Sam edged away from the group.

"Are you ignoring me?"

"No, no. I just" —the absurdity that Paulina was here finally hit her— "what are you doing here?"

Paulina huffed and crossed her arms. She spent a few seconds looking annoyed, before shooting Sam a bright smile. "I always walk by here, silly. After all, this was close to where I met Phantom."

She peered out at the empty street and sighed.

Sam really wasn't in the mood to chat with Paulina. She listened distractedly, her mind still looping around what had just transpired. The tour group started to move off down the street towards their next destination and Sam found herself in a dilemma. Follow, despite what just happened in order to gather more information, or stay behind and as far away from that ghost as possible.

"I know Phantom's around," Paulina chimed in a sing-song voice. "Several people say they've seen him."

"Good for you. Go find him, get married, and have little half ghost offspring," Sam mumbled under her breath. She clenched her hand around the lipstick detector in her pocket, then slumped, too freaked out to finish the tour. Part of her felt like a massive wimp for chickening out. She started to head back towards her house before realizing what she was doing. Shit. Maybe Paulina was too dumb to notice.

"Phantom's been hanging out with some other girl," Paulina continued. "You wouldn't happen to know who this puta is? Because I don't share."

"Why would I know?" Sam exploded in exasperation, wanting nothing more than for Paulina to shut up and leave. "I have no clue where your ghost friend is or who he hangs out with. I've never even met him. Nor do I want to."

Paulina approached her with the deliberate gait of a tigress. Her gaze was hooded, her fingernails filed into claws as she pointed at Sam accusingly. "Good. Because I like you. You and I are friends. You're the only person around here that tells the truth."

Sam blinked, buffeted by the sudden emotional swing. She had thought of Paulina as some shallow harpy. Paulina was deeply serious about Phantom.
"Anyway, night night," Paulina called as she started walking down the street. "You might want to catch up with your tour."

Sam watched her go, then a question bubbled up out of her. "Why call him Phantom? Why name him at all?"

Paulina paused. She tilted her head. "I didn't. That's what he asked me to call him when we first met. He said his name was Danny Phantom."

Danny. Danny. Manners and nice shoes. Her gravekeeper. Phantom, a ghost. A young boy—sixteen, maybe seventeen. Common name. White kid. Nice family. Missing? Sam sucked in a sharp breath. She felt like the world was shrinking around her, slamming together. There was a ringing in her ears like a timer— an upbeat DING! It couldn't be coincidence. There were too many complex pieces fitting nicely together for it to be happenstance.

Paulina's eyes flicked up at the mansion. "Nice house, by the way. We should have our Spirit Club Halloween Gala at your place." She sent Sam a conniving wink before ambling down the street, triumphant pep in her step.

Sam entered the house and closed the front door behind her silently. She flicked the lock, her hand resting on the metal as she let out a slow breath. Her gaze refocused on her hand, which was trembling against the door. Frowning, she held it out in front of her and willed it to steady, yet it wouldn't cease its shaking.

She grimaced and curled her hand into a fist instead. There. That was better.

Her thoughts flew to the figure in her bedroom. Quickly, her eyes did a sweep of the landing, lingering on the chandelier dangling overhead. She should call the police, she really really should... But the police wouldn't be able to do anything against a ghostly home invasion. Sam instead darted down the hallway and grabbed a knife from the kitchen, as if a knife would fair any better.

Back pressed against the wall, she edged her way towards one of the staircases and stepped lightly along the stairs, managing to make her way up with minimal squeaking.

Her bedroom door was closed. She checked the crack underneath; no light spilled forth. Dark, then.

Her grip tightened on the knife as she cranked the doorknob and pushed the door open, reaching out swiftly for the lightswitch. The light popped on. A quick glance around the room confirmed it was empty. Sam checked her closet and underneath her bed. Empty.

She checked her parents' room and the guest bedroom, yet nothing seemed out of place. Relaxing, she closed the door to the guest bedroom and looked down the hallway again. As she made her way for the stairs, intent on putting away the knife, she noticed something off.

The chain used to yank down the stairs to the attic swayed.

Sam tightened her hand around the knife. That chain had been pinned to the ceiling ever since they had moved in. Her parents had stuffed the attic full of boxes of things they would never use and never get rid of, then promptly forgot about ever going back up there.

Sam eyed it. This felt like another test, similar to the detour route and the tour. Run, or play? The
chain slowed its swinging and stilled.

Sam pointed the tip of the knife at it accusingly. "I know you want me to go up there," she told the house, feeling crazy.

Maybe she was crazy. Maybe this was what happened to everyone that lived in this house… Valerie, Evelyn, they all went nuts. She thought of the girl with dark hair that haunted her dreams, who Sam was convinced liked to open up her bedroom window, and wondered if she was the one that had waved to her.

With her free hand, she pulled out her lipstick detector and fumbled it open. Green. Sam shivered and edged along the wall, passing underneath the attic door. "I know you're there," she breathed. "Tell you what. I'm going to go in our room. And you're going to stay in that attic. Deal?"

No answer.

Sam nodded, put the lipstick back in her pocket, felt behind her for her doorknob, and backed slowly into her room. She shut the door and locked it, knowing locks did little to keep out the dead. It made her feel a little better, though.

Staring at the door, half expecting that shrouded figure to walk through it, she slowly walked backwards until her legs hit her desk chair and she fell into it. Nothing happened. Her room was still, besides a soft breeze that ruffled her drapes and whistled the pane of her window.

Sam scowled, getting up, slamming the window shut for what felt like the millionth time. As she closed it she realized her hands were no longer shaking.

She crawled into her bed, thoughts whirling. Danny was Phantom? The same Phantom that Paulina infatuated with. Worse—Sam now suspected that she really was the girl Paulina was hunting since Danny and her had done nothing but hang out, for months.

Did she even want to hang out with him anymore?

He was a ghost. He was everything she should avoid. Sam clutched her pillow close, breath shallow pants. He was her ghost. He was everything she needed. Her feelings tripped, tangled. She found she wasn't too surprised and, if she was being completely honest, she had always known he had been dark, ghostly, something… else. She'd just ignored it because she really really liked him.

Sam scrunched her eyes shut and tried to control her breath. Sucking in a huge lungful, she pressed her face into her bedding. How come he hadn't hurt her? How come he had been helping her? Was he the missing boy her grandmother told her about?

… How did he die?
The next couple of days passed in a blur.

Sam sat by herself in the cafeteria. All around her students chattered with humming energy. A group of students played Egyptian Ratscrew a table away, hands slapping loudly onto the formica, exploding into shouts and jeers whenever one of them was quick enough to snag a pair.

Sam gazed around her table at the empty chairs, then down at her lunch: tofu, rice, steamed vegetables, and water.

Tucker had been ignoring her all week. Sam knew she had to talk to him eventually. She grimaced, realizing Tucker was the only living friend she had and that he had been right about Danny. She wasn't very good at admitting that, or apologies.

So she deflected. She was getting pretty pro at it. She'd dodged Paulina, the rest of the A-List, and Spirit Club. Avoided looking Tucker in the eye. Put off writing her paper. Evaded her mother, who had been trying to corner her every chance she got into talking about her sessions with Spectra. Most painfully of all, she had ignored Danny, and tried not to think too hard about the fact that he was dead and how she felt about that. Truth was, she didn't know how she felt about it.

Sam sniffed and scooped up some tofu pieces, plopping them in her mouth. Everything was fine. It was fine. She was fine. She chewed mechanically, swallowed. Chewed mechanically, swallowed. Reached out for her glass water bottle, and that's when she noticed her: Valerie Gray, wild hair and hard eyes, sitting directly across from her, glaring. "You."

The cafeteria got quiet. At the Egyptian Ratscrew table, the students froze with hands still outstretched mid-slap, watching.

"You told my dad about something in the woods, and now he's been going in there. They're going to get him too," Valerie accused. She bared her teeth, leaning over the table, hands gripping the edge until her knuckles turned white. "I told you to stay away!"

"He's all I've got left." Her face cracked, eyes wandering, lost.

It was obvious that a lot of this anger was bravado. Sam let go of her water bottle and forced her shoulders to relax.

"All I've got left," Valerie echoed, voice calmer.

"Look." Sam tried to pluck her words as delicately as possible. "I know what happened to you. It was horrible—"

"You don't," Valerie cut. Her tone rose a few levels. "How could you? You don't get it at all. Nothing has happened to you. Not yet."
Not good. Retreat. Sam backpedaled. "You're right. I don't get it. I have no idea what it's like." That seemed to appease her. Valerie paused, mouth still open. Her gaze refocused. She hesitated and Sam took it as a good sign, so she continued, softly, "You can hate me. But I promise you, I'm going to stop them."

"The only way to make them leave is to move out of the house. I already told you— They can only haunt Amity Park when someone lives in the mansion." Valerie muttered, yanking her backpack close to her chest. "You can't stop them. You will never stop them. The more you try the more fun they will have destroying you."

"But ghosts aren't all evil people," Sam said.

Hugging her backpack to her chest, Valerie seemed to shrink into herself. "Yes they are. They made me see what happened in that house—" she cut off, head twitching to the side, eyes screwed shut.

Sam extended her palms flat against the table and leaned in. "You know how I know that all ghosts aren't bad people?"

Valerie stilled. Her closed eyes scrunched tighter.

"Because I've seen your mother."

All color drained from Valerie's face and she snapped her eyes back open wide. "No," she whispered. A hand shot up to her neck, to a necklace—a golden heart-shaped locket. Was that Valerie's mother's? Was that a relic? "You're wrong. Mom can't be...Can't be..."

"I saw her," Sam stated. "If all ghosts are evil, how come I saw your mom?"

"No!" Valerie hissed, although she looked more heartbroken than angry. "You're wrong." For a split second Sam thought Valerie would flee. Just up and take off like she normally did, but instead she wound her arms on the table and pressed her face into them, hair spilling forward.

Most of the cafeteria watching them. Catching Sam's glare, student's turned back to their food, talking in nervous hushed whispers. They kept darting little glances at Valerie like she was a time bomb ready to go off.

Guilt trickled through Sam despite the fact that Valerie had threatened her. Sam had caused this breakdown and, even though they weren't friends, she found herself empathizing. Valerie was sad and unpredictable, which made people afraid of her. An outcast. Not so different from Sam.

With a scowl, Sam picked up her fork and turned back to her meal. Well Valerie wasn't something to ogle at. She deserved better. Sam continued eating, as if Valerie sitting there was normal. "Tucker told me how brave you are."

Valerie's hitching shoulders paused. She was listening.

"Hunting them, confronting them, all by yourself. You're braver than I am. All I do is run away..." Sam trailed off, her fork pausing. She frowned and set it down. The tour guide, the ghost in the attic, Evelyn at her back door, even the detour route—all Sam had been doing had been running from ghosts.

How was she going to find out what unfinished business they had if she kept avoiding them? For that matter, how was she ever going to solve anything at all, if she kept avoiding all her problems? Sam grimaced, realizing that's all she did, avoid and deflect.
She turned her head and found Tucker sitting a few tables away. His glare softened and turned curious, like he was wondering what Sam had said to Valerie. Sam tried a small smile, but he looked away.

Valerie was sitting up again and peeking at her through the thick tresses of her hair.

"You just helped me realize something," Sam breathed, getting up from her chair. "Thank you."

Thursday night, a small rock pinged off her window.

Underneath a star-freckled sky, Sam caught sight of a pair of blue eyes peeking from within a tangle of bushes. Sam leaned away, heart hammering in her throat. Danny— ghost Danny.

Another rock pinged.

Sam wondered if he'd just go away if she ignored him. But she didn't want to ignore him; she missed him. She sighed and hefted the window up, sticking her head out. "Doing a little nighttime gardening?"

In the darkness she could only see his eyes and his teeth, the latter of which reflected the light from her room, revealing a row of perfect pearly tombstones. "Come down," he coaxed.

For the first time, Sam hesitated.

He batted a leaf out of his face and frowned. "I haven't seen you around. Are you… are you mad at me?" he asked hesitantly. His tone was so lonesome it made Sam's chest ache.

"I'm grounded." A half-lie. "My mom and I are in a fight. Ever since the night we went in the forest she's been checking my room to make sure I'm in here. I can't sneak away."

His eyes scrunched in confusion and darted about her face. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing… I just…"

Silence. Crickets chirped. Off in the distance, a car's engine rumbled.

"...Is this about the other night? I'll let you in on a little secret. You do not want to kiss me. I've heard it's awful," he joked. He paused, and when Sam said nothing, he tittered on nervously, "You should be thanking me. It's the nicest thing I've never done."

Sam laughed breathlessly. This hurt. Sam leaned away from the window and grasped at her chest with her hand, throat aching with emotion. Why couldn't he be more like that tour guide? Why did he have to be so likeable? He was dead goddamnit. She shouldn't be hanging out with dead people.

"Sam?" his voice drifted up, serious now, even concerned. "Hell, Sam. I'm... I'm sorry."

Her face crumpled. Danny was the only person she felt okay being herself around anymore. Being that he was a ghost, she should really shut her window and never talk to him again. That would be the smart thing to do. Run, and keep running, forever. Live another day. Always alone and afraid and exhausted— oh to hell with it. Sam leaned back out the window. "You're a real creep, you know that? Stalking around under my window."
Danny sent her a timid smile. "Had to make sure nothing else was." He put his hands on his hips and looked around dramatically, parting the bushes to look inside, making a show of stomping around in the dirt. Shadows cascaded across his back as he ducked in and out of the light from her window as the soft light from the half-shrouded moon glimmered in his hair. His movement startled the crickets into silence. "Nope. All clear."

"Oh? And what would you do if something was down there?"

Danny's eyes flashed. "You don't wanna find out."

"Oooh, so scary," Sam snorted. Her nervousness faded away with their banter. It was too easy to fall back into their routine. She rested her elbow on her windowsill, her head in her chin, and stuck out her tongue. "Adorkable."

"Hey—I can be scary," Danny argued with an indignant pout. He leaned forward, smirking in a villainous way that was more cute than freaky. "I can be really scary. I just haven't been trying."

Sam couldn't take him seriously. Heinousness didn't suit him. "I'm so sure," she drolled.

Danny sighed a loud, impatient sigh. Blue eyes rolled. "You coming down or what?"

Sam bit her lip. Leaving her room was out of the question; her mother would notice. As for inviting him in... She wasn't completely averse to the idea. She was bumbling along in the dark trying to solve this mystery of what had happened to all these ghosts, and here was one begging to hang out with her. She needed to get close; to immerse herself. With that investigative spirit, Sam hoisted her window fully open. The cold night breeze whipped her heart into a nervous flutter. Spending only a second wondering if this was a bad idea, she said, "Come inside."

She turned away from the window and went for the desk, plopping down in her chair. Sam listened for any indication that he had taken her up on her offer. As she tucked away her research and organized her pens, her eyes drifted to the lipstick ghost detector. It was a little too late for that now. She picked it up and put it in her pocket anyway.

Sam felt him enter the room. A cool wind gusted through her room, her lights flickered and dimmed, goosebumps up her arms and legs, as she was hit with unshakable foreboding feeling. She twisted and found him near her window.

The bedroom lamp lit him up clearly. Sam realized she had rarely seen his face lit up like this. Usually he was obscured by night. He was dressed in a pale blue sweater over a white collared shirt, dirt on the elbows, black and white wingtip shoes, and dark gray pants. His skin had a blurry sheen to it.

"Letting a strange boy into your room? What would your mother say?" Danny teased.

"You're pretty strange, alright," Sam breathed, trying not to let it spook her that she hadn't heard him climb up the fire escape.

Eyes wide with childlike curiosity, Danny bounced from one thing to the next, taking in her black curtains and black bedding, her Doom metal posters with skulls, dripping blood, and gothic type. "Your room is very you." He paused at the nightstand where her phone was plugged into her charger, picking it up. Dark brows furrowed, as if he was trying to figure out what to make of it.

"It's an iPhone," she explained, feeling silly. It was easier to talk about her phone than to confront Danny about his... deadness. "Like, a telephone."
"Huh," he stated, grew disinterested, and put it back. He leaned over and pointed at a photo— Sam and an Asian girl with a bright smile and thick straight hair yanked back into a ponytail. "Who's that?"

Sam clicked a pen nervously, rotating in her desk chair. "Good friend of mine. Her name was Joy."

Danny's gaze flicked up and met hers as he caught the past tense.

"She's dead." She rubbed along her neck, along her collarbone, fingertips skimming along the bump where the bone had broken and punctured through her skin only a year previous.

Danny picked up the photo and peered down at it. "What was she like?"

Sam blinked, caught off guard. Usually when people found out about Joy they said something along the lines of I'm so sorry and then changed the subject to avoid awkwardness. Then again, Danny had never shied away from mortality. Now that Sam knew that he was a ghost, his attitude made a lot more sense. If anyone would understand death, it would be him.

Her eyes drifted to the photo. What was Joy like? "She was optimistic. Quiet around people she didn't know, loud with people she did… Made friends with just about anyone."

There was more of course. That she always smelled like vanilla cupcakes, because she insisted on using cheap drugstore lotion simply for the fact that it contained glitter. She had permanent dimples from how much she smiled. She had a crooked front tooth, her hands were always cold, and she had a habit of speaking faster and higher the more excited she got. When she laughed she always covered her mouth with her hand, like it was impolite. Sam thought of all these attributes and felt a dull ache instead of the usual harrowing grief.

She glanced away from the photo and found Danny staring at her. "How did she die?"

"In a car accident. We were on our way to lunch when a semi truck drifted into our lane; the driver had fallen asleep. I tried to swerve, but I lost control. The car flipped. Her airbag never went off. The doctors said she died fast and painless. I was pinned to her body for an hour before they pried me out..." Sam trailed off, sucking in a breath. This was the first time she had openly discussed this with...anyone.

"That's a horrible thing to go through," Danny said solemnly.

"Everyone tells me it wasn't my fault," Sam ranted, unable to stop talking now that she started. "They all treat me like I'm broken." She glanced up. "Not you."

He put the photo back. "So that's where that scar is from...?" He gestured at his neck, mirroring the spot where a pink scar peeked out from her beneath her tee.

Her hand flew up to cover it.

Danny held up his hand, a small scar in the shape of a crescent moon running along the back. "Got this when one of my rockets got caught in the wind and ended up on the roof. Parents weren't around, so I decided to get it myself. It had just rained and the shingles were wet. I slipped; fell into a woodpile. I tried to catch myself, but my hand came down on a branch. Some of it went clean through. Really messed up the ligaments." He barked a laugh. "You should have seen my sister's face when I showed her. She hates blood."

"You have a sister?" Sam was suddenly struck with how little she knew him. He endlessly asked her questions. Maybe it was time she asked some of her own.

Sam waited for him to elaborate.

"C-Can you stop doing that?" he asked instead, voice pained.

Sam blinked. "Stop asking you questions?"

"Stop with that pen," Danny hissed.

Sam glanced down, bewildered, and found she had been snapping her pen over and over without meaning to. She stopped and tossed it over her shoulder where it clattered on her desk. "Sorry," she said sheepishly. Right. He was a ghost. For a moment there, she had forgotten. "You okay?"

"The police were in the woods yesterday," he blurted, changing the subject. He glided over to her vintage record player and fiddled with the needle, shooting her an accusing look. "You told them about the cabin."

Sam tried to judge whether he was angry, but all she could detect was hurt. "I had to tell," she murmured, getting up from her chair and crossing the room. As she approached him he took a few steps back. The needle rrrrpsh’d as he dropped it back onto the record in his retreat.

She scanned his face, mere feet away. He looked real, yet had an almost dusty quality, like a thin film had accumulated across his features. He hesitated. "Did you… did you tell them about me?"

Sam's gaze softened. "No."

"They'll come back with more questions," Danny pressed, anxious. His fingertips traveled along his lips, tapping there— a tick he had picked up since quitting smoking. "How are you going to explain how you found it?"

"Why are you so freaked out about the police?" she wondered, breath catching. Her heart suddenly gave a heavy thud. It was on the tip of her tongue. She wanted to say it. Had to say it! Had to confront him about his ghostliness, but how would he react? Her stomach churned. Courage. A hand delved into her pocket and found the detector, gripping it tightly like an anchor, like it would save her from the consequences of what she was about to do.

She looked him directly in the eye. "Afraid they'll find out that skull is yours?"

He balked. "What?" Fear was written plain on his face, etched in his too-wide eyes and the way his hand drew up to protect a spot near his heart much in the same way Sam's hand would find her collarbone. He had been hurt there before. Perhaps fatally hurt.

So she was right. She exhaled like she got punched in the gut. "So it's true, then." Sam stared him down as she slowly drew the lipstick detector out and flipped it open. "No point in hiding it anymore, right Phantom?"

Danny met her gaze—his terrified, her determined— before they both looked down at the device.
Don't You Worry, My Little Pet

The lights flared green damningly.

"Wait—" Danny stammered, thrown.

Sam capped the device and gazed at the boy she had spent countless nights with since moving here, who she had spilled her soul to, had trusted, still trusted— and decided in that moment, "I don't care."

"It's not—" He froze and did a triple take, jaw mouthing soundlessly before he found some syllables and strung them together. "I'm— wait, what? You don't... You don't care?"

"I don't care," she repeated. "Tucker told me you were dead, but I didn't want to believe it because you were my best friend and I didn't want to lose some part of you. Now I know that part was never really there to begin with."

A hand ran through his hair several times, mussing it up, before running down the back of his neck. "How can you not care?"

Sam waited, well aware she might have broke his brain.

His eyes flashed neon. "You knew about me and you still invited me in. You are actually insane."

Sam shrugged. "If you wanted to kill me you would have done it. We've been hanging out alone for months." He had plenty of opportunity. The graveyard, the forest, even the junkyard.

Indignant air blew out of him. "You don't know that," he whispered. "How could you know that?"

Again, Sam shrugged. "I didn't know. I hoped. I gambled."

He took a step back to lean against the wall near her record player. "Haven't I taught you anything?" he asked weakly. "Ghosts can't be trusted. Not even me."

Sam sighed and turned back to her desk. She placed the lipstick detector atop it with a soft click. Her finger pressed on the cap as she stared down, collecting her thoughts. He was right. It made no sense for her to trust him. She tried, for a second, to put herself in his shoes. He existed on a different plane of reality than her. She would grow old and he would remain here, always the same. Time held no meaning at that point. She would live and die in what may very well feel to him like a day in comparison to the boundless eternity of his existence. He shouldn't care about the mundane goings on of her everyday life. And yet, Sam knew he did.

"When we first met you said you knew me, maybe, a little," Sam murmured softly. She straightened and found his gaze. "Well, I know you a little bit too. You're a good person."

Danny's expression twisted, darkened. He opened his mouth to say something, then froze, eyes flicking towards Sam's door.

Her mother's head poked through the crack of the door. "Sam? Who are you talking to?"

Sam's insides turned icy. She whipped towards the record player, finding the spot where Danny had been empty. Instead her record player sang Elvis's *Heartbreak Hotel* and the window was wide open. Relief pummelled through her. Sam turned back to her mom. "Just listening to music. I didn't
know you were awake. Sorry."

Pamela opened the door and stepped fully inside. Her eyes were red rimmed.

Realizing it was one in the morning, Sam's stomach sank. Her mother was never up at this hour unless something bad had happened. She went to stop her record player. Shock fizzled through her when she couldn't find a record in it. Elvis crooned on inexplicably, before, with a trembling hand, Sam docked the needle and silence filled her room. Mouth dry, she turned to her mother. "What's wrong?"

Pamela let out a small sob. "It's Grandma."

Ida Mendel's funeral was held on a brisk October day. The air smelt of grass and rain that had yet to fall—sky a blinding white-grey, full of clouds, without sun. Birds chirped pleasantly from the trees. In the distance, across the hill, a squirrel chased another squirrel up a tree. Sam watched and realized that it was her tree those squirrels had raced up. She had hardly recognized it. Her graveyard was a lot less foggy during the day.

She looked for some sign that Danny was here. Had he dug this grave?

Her father nudged her with his elbow and Sam glanced back down at her laced black boots, mournfully. She was dressed in a loose black dress, hair tamed and shoved beneath a wide brim hat with black netting. She had forgone her usual thick black eyeliner and now felt vulnerable and naked without it. Dirt spread out underneath her feet. She curled her hands together and placed them near her lap, twisted them so she could take another look at the ring upon her pointer finger. An alligator with emerald eyes that glinted up at her: Ida's.

She glanced back up just in time to see the pine box containing her grandmother get lowered. Ida's rabbi stood near the grave, dressed in a black suit and a black hat, chanting softly in Hebrew—a language Sam had never felt the need or desire to learn.

As her parents shuffled over to the grave and dusted dirt onto Ida's coffin, her mother began to sob, leaning heavily with grief into her father's shoulder.

Sam waited until her parents left the grave, before bending down and grabbing some dirt in her fists. She wasn't Jewish but figured that she could follow along today. With a soft exhale she walked over to the hole and knelt, crouching atop her heels. She peered underneath the brim of her hat into the grave.

"I should have visited you more often. Should have got to know you better," she whispered. Her eyebrows furrowing, knocking the black netting around as her nose scrunched. Her throat grew thick and her vision swam as tears welled in her eyes. They caught her off guard.

A heart attack had killed Ida. A heart attack in a woman who had never shown any previous signs of heart disease.

Sam released the dirt and sprinkled it over the wooden box. Then, she twisted the alligator ring off, cupping it in her palm. "Or maybe I shouldn't have visited you at all. Shouldn't have started asking you questions ghosts don't like being asked. Maybe then you'd still be alive." She dropped the ring. It landed with a hollow thump and bounced off the side of the casket, disappearing.
Her parents insisted on holeing up in the mansion for shiva, a Jewish mourning period, out of respect for her grandmother's passing. Sam quickly learned that shiva consisted of sitting and thinking—a lot. Or, in her mother's case, drinking wine and sleeping—a lot.

All that sitting and thinking had led her to one conclusion: she was running out of time. Ida's death only confirmed that the ghosts wouldn't stop, and the longer Sam failed to solve whatever unfinished business they had, the more people would get hurt. The only other option was moving, but moving only delayed the ghosts until someone new bought the house. It wasn't a real solution.

Sam crossed her arms and tilted her head, her bangs falling to one side as she looked up at the door leading to the attic. She sighed before she reached up and yanked on the chain. The door popped open. With some delicacy, she unfolded the ladder. It was old and, like most things in this house, squeaked.

Sam got atop the first step and bounced a bit, testing its strength. Seemed sturdy enough.

This was quite possibly the dumbest thing she had ever done. Well, that was a lie, she had done a lot of idiotic things in her life (like letting a dead boy into her bedroom), but willingly going into an attic after a ghostly invitation was high on the list of Dumbest Ideas Ever.

Sam climbed the rest of the ladder and took in the heavy musk of the mansion's attic. Her heart hammering in her throat as she fumbled around, blind, for a light. Her fingertips hit the beaded metal string of a pull-light. She yanked it. With a grating noise, light flooded the attic.

The first thing Sam noticed was how big it was. Huge. Then, other details trickled in. Wide beams held up the pitched roof above her head, spider webs nestled in the dark crevices in between the boards. The walls were unfinished, made up of rows of wooden planks. Dust ambled in the air without direction. A large, circular, green glass window marked the far end of the attic. It protruded outwards towards the front yard. As the afternoon light filtered through it, it turned the floor green as well. Boxes with her mother's handwriting lined the eastern wall. Christmas, Easter, Art Supplies… The rest of the attic was barren.

Sam shivered. As winter approached the house got colder, despite how hard her parents cranked the heat. Up here, away from any vents, the attic was chilly and uninsulated. Beneath her feet, Sam could hear the muffled noises of her mother fumbling around in the kitchen. She sounded miles away.

It was… nice up here. Quiet, secluded, spacious, private. Sam relaxed and padded deeper, feeling like this attic had been created personally for her.

Leaving the ladder behind, she reached the green window and craned forward to see the street. Because of the warped glass, the world outside stretched at the edges, like a fisheye lens. A soft smile flitted across her lips as she watched a woman walk a dog down the sidewalk. The weiner dog grew impossible in length as it reached the edge of the window. Sam reached out and ran her finger along the glass, removing a thin film of dust. As she pressed, the window flew open, sending a gust of wind past her face. "Cool," she whispered aloud.

Something moved behind her in the reflection. Sam stiffened and turned.

A girl stood a few feet away. She wore jeans, a red cable sweater, and white socks— dark hair tied
back with a thin red ribbon. "That's my spot," she said softly, gesturing.

Sam's breath caught in her throat. This was the ghost that shared her room. Pieces of her dream flooded back to her, visions of this girl dancing and spinning around an old study. How she had circumvented the whole 'permission' thing to enter the house, Sam didn't know. She took an unconscious step back, her heel hitting the molding, tripping. Her hand flew back to catch herself, meeting air as it sailed through the open window. For a heart-stopping moment she thought she would fall right through it. Then her other hand found the window ledge.

The girl raised an eyebrow. "That would've been fun," she drawled.

Dread pooled in Sam's stomach. The wind from outside whipped across her back, reminding her that she was trapped. For some reason— and she had no idea why— she found herself whispering under her breath, calling, summoning, "Danny. Danny." After all, he made a habit of showing up when she needed him most.

The girl paused. Her youthful face pinched in confusion and her ponytail swayed as she tilted her head. "It's Danielle."

Sam edged along the wall away from the window as she regained her bearings. Her hands felt behind her, threading through cobwebs. "This is your spot?"

"I've seen the way your parents treat you," Danielle murmured. She kicked out at the ground, tracing circles in the floor with her toe. "They lock you up in your room all the time because they don't know how to deal with you. It isn't fair." She glanced up, shooting Sam a bright grin. "My dad does the same thing, so I climb out of the windows."

That smile was familiar. Sam blinked. This girl had to be related to Danny. Something nagged at her, like she had already had this epiphany, but couldn't remember where or when. "Who's your dad?" she asked.

Danielle's grin fell into a sullen glower.

Sam took a wild stab. "Vladimir Masters is your father."

Blue eyes narrowed. "I don't want to talk about him."

Sam's mind raced. Were Danny and Masters related as well? Was this his sister? Afterall, they could be twins. Had Masters locked away his only remaining child in fear after his son went missing? No— Danny had said he had an older sister. Danielle had to be barely thirteen. Besides, what parent in good conscious named their kids Daniel and Danielle?

Sam straightened. "Ok, what do you want to talk about?" she wondered. Sam felt around behind her for something useful, even though she knew full well that nothing could protect her from this ghost, except maybe one of Tucker's inventions, or a relic. Her fingers hit something. She yanked at it and held it out like a gun, finding a rusty screwdriver instead.

Danielle stiffened. Her blue gaze widened, locked on the object. She backed away suddenly. Maybe it was Sam's imagination, but the screwdriver felt like it was vibrating, humming, in her palm. She tilted the handle. Wooden, no name inscribed. "Is this yours—?" Sam trailed off, finding the attic empty.

Her shoulders hunched in anticipation, thinking the girl was lurking, but Danielle was truly gone. Sam could taste it in the air.
"You dead people could be more helpful," she griped aloud.

The attic had nothing to say in return.

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Sam had forgotten about Halloween until she climbed the steps leading up to Tucker's front door. She stared up at a ghoul, having to lift its hand to find the doorbell. Sam blinked. That's right. Halloween was in less than a week. With a quick glance around the neighborhood, Sam pressed it, and heard the resounding ba-dunggg! echo from inside. It sounded a lot more cheerful than her mansion's doorbell.

Locks clattered, the door cracked open. "Yes?" A slice of face peered at her, one violet eye appraising her up and down on the stoop.

Sam fiddled with her gloves. "Is Tucker home?"

The door opened all the way, revealing a curvy middle-aged woman in a black apron with orange trim. In curly type, the apron proclaimed: World's Okay-est Cook. She placed her hand on her hip and smiled. Her skin was tan, mixed ethnicity, although Sam couldn't determine of what, exactly. "You're a friend of Tucker's?" she asked. "Come in, come in. I'm Angela, Tucker's mom."

"Sam," Sam introduced, stepping into the house.

"Tucker's playing video games in his room. You can go on up. He's been at it all morning." Angela waved a hand at the stairs before she moved towards the kitchen. "I'm making sandwiches. You want one?"

This woman was so warm and likeable, Sam couldn't help but smile. "I'm okay, but thank you."

Angela nodded. "Well, let me know if you change your mind."

Sam hauled herself up the steps with trepidation. The stairway was brightly lit. Family photographs hung along the wall. Tucker as a baby. Tucker with his parents. Tucker with what looked like his... grandparents. Sam's gut wrenched. When she got to his door she let out a small breath and straightened. She dusted off her jacket, tucking her gloves in her back pocket before rapping three times.

From inside, Sam could hear the sound of a game controller rattling, like Tucker was pressing a button repeatedly. "Come in!" Tucker called.

Sam curled her hand around the doorknob and stepped inside.

Tucker didn't even glance up from his computer. He was hunched over his desk, controller in hand, headset on, playing Fallout. "No no no!" Tucker muttered under his breath, before his character got sniped and the screen darkened. With a sigh he spun in his chair and knocked his headset off. His eyes widened in surprise. "Sam?" His expression darkened. "What are you doing here?"

Sam looked at the floor. She really wasn't good at apologies, but Tucker had been right this whole time and she had done nothing but ignore him. "I came to talk."

"Okay…" he said suspiciously. With a clatter, he placed his controller down on his desk and gave Sam his undivided attention.
Sam sucked in a sharp breath, before just going out and saying it. "I don't want to fight anymore. You were right. I miss talking to you and hanging out in the library and eating lunch with you at school, and I'm sorry that I lied," she blurted, quickly. "So I'm going to tell you my secrets," —well, most of them anyway.

Tucker clicked his mouth shut and nodded, eyes wide.

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Friday August 17th, 1962

108 hours missing. Our family is suspended, waiting, stuck counting time in ADL: After Danny Left. Each hour we don't find him feels like a massive failure.

I've been doing research. Time is a critical factor in search and recovery efforts. Most missing children are found within the first couple days. After that, the chances decrease significantly. I don't know what that means for Danny.

It's 3AM. Can't sleep. I can hear someone crying in the house. When we were little I remember Danny waking me up, saying he heard crying in this place. I think it's just Mom, though.

Saturday August 18th, 1962

127 hours missing. This morning Detectives Leroy Gray and David Wilson of the Amity PD came by and took Dad in to give a statement. Dad was furious. Said they were wasting their time on him when they could be looking for who really took Danny. He kicked one of Vlad's chairs over on the way out.

Officer Gray said it's standard procedure. They need to get statements from all family members in order to rule them out as suspects.

He asked me if Dad's ever been violent. If Danny and him fought a lot. If Danny ever felt afraid of him. I know Dad kicking that chair looks bad, but our father isn't abusive.

He asked if Danny is involved in anything unsavory. Drugs? Gambling? Gangs? (No, no, and no.) If Danny has a girlfriend. (He wouldn't tell me, even if he did.) If he was picked on in school. (Not that I know of.) He asked if Danny has any enemies. I told him that when Danny comes home and he meets him he'll understand— he's impossible to hate.

Saturday August 18th, 1962

I told Officer Gray about the fight Danny and I had. I don't think I should have told him, because they took Johnny in too. I know what it must look like. Danny and Johnny never got along. Johnny's a biker. He has past convictions. But he's straight now.

We can't afford to question and suspect each other. It'll only rip us further apart. Mom's in the living room with Vlad's arm around her shoulder just sitting there. She didn't even say anything when they took Dad away. I can tell she doesn't know what to think or what to do. She's shutting down.
Saturday August 18th, 1962

Police released Dad and Johnny. Dad said the police found evidence that someone meticulously wiped Danny's car clean before dumping it. That's why they think someone took him. They have divers looking along the docks of Lake Erie. Officer Gray told Dad they're looking for Danny's things, but I know they're looking for his body.
Where to begin? Where to begin? Sam supposed, at the beginning.

"I live in the Master's Villa."

Tucker grimaced. "Paulina kind of told everyone on Friday when you weren't in school."

Sam crossed the room and sank down onto the edge of Tucker's bed, her legs wobbly at the thought that everyone now knew where she lived. "Great."

"Did you think I'd freak out and not want to hang out with you if I knew?" Tucker frowned.

Bile roiled in Sam's gut.

Her face must have fallen, because Tucker winced. "Ok, strike that— that's exactly what you thought," he amended. "Well, I mean, it makes a lot of sense now why the ghosts are following you around. It always focuses on whoever's living there. You've had more ghostly run-ins than everyone, except maybe Valerie."

She tucked her legs underneath her and sighed. "Valerie knows that I live in the house. She threatened me. I didn't know anything about her at the time."

"So you went to Paulina," Tucker finished.

Sam nodded. She told him everything. She hardly stopped to take a breath. She told him about Evelyn Gray and Danielle Masters. How she had gone on the Horror Hunt and had met yet another ghost. About finding a human skull in an abandon hunter's cabin in the woods. About how she had told Damon Gray, and was once again at the top of Valerie's shit list. She showed him the library card with Benjamin Skulker's name on it, and the screwdriver. It flowed out of her. "—and now to make matters worse, Paulina is leading a headhunt for whoever is hanging out with Phantom."

Tucker's eyebrows pinched. "Wait, who?"

Sam exhaled slowly. She dragged her fingers down her face, across her lips, and down her neck, resting atop her scar. "Phantom," she repeated softly. "Danny. Danny is Phantom."

Tucker stared at her in shock, then his grip tightened around the arms of his desk chair and he leaned forward. "So you admit you've been hanging out with him," Tucker accused. "I knew it. What did it take for you to finally believe he's dead?" He paled and shot her a fearful look. "What did he do to you?"

Sam gritted her teeth. "What? ...What are you doing?"

Tucker had gotten up from his chair and edged away from her until his back hit his closet door. He reached into his cargo pants, whipping out a tube of lipstick.

Outrage coursed through her. He thought she was a ghost? And what? That Danny had killed her without her even knowing? Then, a thread of doubt nagged at her. There's no way she was dead. Right? She would know. Was it even possible to be dead and not know it?

Tucker glanced at the device. His shoulders relaxed and he tossed it onto his desk. "You're not dead," he told her, lopsided grin on his face. "Congratulations."
Sam rolled her eyes. "Yippee."

"C’mon, put a little more optimism in there," Tucker goaded. "You're not dead, yippee!" He punched his fist enthusiastically into the air, his yippee coming out more cowboyish than anything else.

"Optimism means you lack information," Sam drawled.

Tucker stared at her for a hard second, then seemed to realize who he was talking to. His arm dropped back to his side. "So, why would a ghost hang out with you and not kill you?" he asked, poising the question more to himself than to Sam.

Sam answered it anyway. "Because we're friends?"

"I mean, I know you're fun to hang out with and all— ‘cause you're such a happy shiny person— but what does he really want?" Tucker paced back and forth in front of his closet door.

Sam blew out a breath in exasperation. "I don't know. He's lonely. He wants someone to talk to. Maybe he wants someone to notice him—" Words stuck in her throat. Her thoughts flew the missing boy, who in all likelihood was Danny. Her face fell. It was too obvious. "He wants to be found," she whispered.

Tucker sat back down in his desk chair heavily, shoving his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "You mean he wants you to find his body."

Sam shook her head. "There's more to it than that." Sam reached for her backpack and yanked out her notebook. Her fingers trembled as she was struck with a pang of grief at the thought of Ida, grip tightening, wrinkling the paper. Her vision clouded as tears sprang, raw, unbidden.

"Sam?" Tucker stilled his fidgeting.

"My grandma died. That's why I wasn't at school." With that, Sam flipped to the correct page, refusing to meet his gaze. She worked at unwrinkling the page.

"Sam, I'm sorry..."

Sam pressed on quickly, not wanting to linger on it. "She told me that a boy went missing in the summer of 1962. I don't know for sure— she never got the chance to tell me his name— but I think that boy was Danny. He matches the description."

"The boy in connection with all the other missing children?" Tucker asked, getting up from his chair to sit next to her, leaning over her shoulder to look at the notebook.

"If I'm right, he knows who the killer is. He says he's a gravekeeper. Maybe that's his way of saying he knows where the all the bodies are buried," Sam mused aloud, catching Tucker's eye.

"You think that's what he really wants," Tucker concluded. A queasy look passed across his face. "For someone to dig up the bodies and catch the killer. And that someone is you."

Sam shut her notebook. "It used to be Valerie. I think it might've been Paulina, too." A wry smile flitted across her face. "He probably realized pretty quickly Paulina wasn't interested in digging up dead bodies."

Tucker snorted at that. "Ok. So why not just say: 'Hey Sam, this douchebag did it. The bodies are at this specific location, mind giving mine to my mom? Thanks. Owe you one. Hit me up after you die and we'll get some chicken and waffles.'"
Sam stared. "Chicken and waffles?"

"They gotta have that in Heaven. Like, the biggest juiciest plate of chicken and waffles..." He caught her disgust. "Hey, don't give me that snobby little vegan look. Don't knock it 'til you try it."

Sam laughed. It used a lot of muscles that had atrophied. As soon as she did it, she felt like crying. She had missed Tucker's silliness so much it physically ached.

"Ghosts can't just tell you things like that. They're cursed," she sobered, flipping to another page in her notebook. "But, I'm pretty sure he's been leaving clues. I just haven't been paying attention."

She ran down the list:

Amity Park Graveyard - Tree
Junkyard - Corvette, Circus Accident?
Woods - Hunters Cabin, Skull, Benjamin Skulker
Dream - Bookshelf, Jazz, Danielle Masters

Sam tapped the fourth item, the dream, which was coming back in blurry pieces. Almost like seeing Danielle while awake had dislodged it, jarring it loose.

"These are all the places I've seen him. I don't think they're random. The first step is finding his last name. If we find that, we might find news reports, or family members. I think I should retrace my steps. Can you run a VIN on a car to find the previous owners...?" Sam trailed off. Tucker hadn't said a word. She tore her gaze off the notebook, finding him looking resolutely away. "What's the matter?"

Tucker's shoulders hunched up until they almost touched his ears.

Sam leaned back slowly in realization. It felt like someone dumped ice water down her back. "You don't want to help," she breathed.

Tucker ducked his head. "No one's solved this in over fifty years, Sam. Anyone that's tried has wound up dead or mentally disturbed. Something doesn't want this case solved. Guess who."

Sam shivered. "The killer's ghost."

Her thoughts churned. Danny had kept her alive in order to use her, yet somewhere along the way he'd grown attached to her. Sam knew that wasn't normal ghostly behavior. Why else would Evelyn be wandering around her back porch saying that he wasn't acting like his usual self? When Sam had first met Danny, he had been darker, less caring, more like the other ghosts Sam had encountered. Now, around her, he was warmer, sillier... more vulnerable. Sam thought of the whispering kids—ghosts that found amusement in toying with people, lying to them, luring them, hurting them, like it was a form of entertainment. She didn't want to find out what a serial killer's ghost was capable of.

Then she thought of the Grays. Damon. Valerie. Evelyn. Amanda Scully. Mikey. Her grandmother. All people that had been affected by this house, by these ghosts, and this case.

It would never end; not unless they ended it.

"We have to," she said, hoarsely.

Tucker glanced up.
"We have to," Sam repeated, more conviction this time. "People will keep dying until the case is closed."

"But why do we have to close it?" Tucker grated.

Sam’s face flushed with indignant rage. The activist part of her, the part that she had inherited from her meddling, nosy, entitled parents, reared its head. "Because if we don’t, someone else will sit here asking themselves the same thing, and if they don’t someone else will, and someone else, and each time no one does anything more people die."

Sam found herself on her feet, unable to remain sitting as her emotion welled. "No one is coming to save the day, Tucker. We can’t wait around for a hand of God or some superhero to swoop in and fix everything. And we can’t just hope that whoever’s next has the guts." Sam clenched her hands into fists. "We have no choice."

"We do have a choice. That’s the thing." Tucker threw his arms up in exasperation. "I did this before. Remember? With Valerie and in case you didn’t notice, it didn’t end well…" He gazed down at his carpet, at his shoes. "I’m not keen on… on repeating that."

Sam slumped. Her voice softened. "Look around." Sam gestured around at his bedroom walls, at the different posters—Superman, The Flash, Ironman, The Green Lantern, Spiderman, Batman, Wonderwoman… "All your life you’ve idolized these people that don’t exist, but you don’t need powers to make a difference. This right here— this is your chance, Tucker. Don’t you want to be the hero?"

Tucker grimaced. Sam could see the gears whirling around in his head. His gaze flitted around the room, pausing on each poster.

"So," Sam sucked in a breath. "If we go to the junkyard again and find a VIN, can you run it for the previous owner?"

"Can I?" Derisive snort. "Please." Slow smirk; pop-pop-pop cracked knuckles. "I mean, most people would just run it through Carfax. But Carfax won’t give you the names of previous owners. You’d need access to the DMV database. Good thing I’m not most people."

The rusted Corvette was exactly where Sam had last seen it. In the daytime it looked even more decrepit than it had in the dark. Maybe Danny had distracted her from looking too closely at it before. Sam thought back to her record player. Maybe Danny could influence his environment. Make the car seem new, even though it wasn’t. Either way, it was a demure orange, with only tiny spots of baby blue peeking through the caked rust to hint at its original color.

Sam glanced around the junkyard. It looked a lot less menacing and a lot more depressing in the daylight.

"It has single headlights, which rules out 1958-1962," Tucker intoned, from her left. He bounced up and down a few times in his sneakers to keep warm, his breath pluming in front of his face, scanning through rows of Google images of different Corvette models on his phone. It was weird to have him alongside her again. Weird, in a good way.

He glanced around the junkyard nervously, before further inspecting the car, lapping around it.
"Convertible. Wider chasse. And..." Tucker leaned over the driver's side door, looking down into the eroded interior. "No factory seatbelts. I think this is a 1957." He tilted his phone, showing Sam a photo of a gleaming 1957 Corvette.

Sam tried to imagine this heap of junk looking as beautiful as the one in the picture.

"There's no way to be sure unless you get a peek at the engine," Tucker continued. He scrolled down on the page, pointing at a paragraph underneath the photo. "Says here that 1957's were the first model to use fuel-injection engines."

"Doubt this thing still has an engine," Sam muttered. She kicked down at the flat rubber tire, rims either stolen or sold. Most pieces were missing. Even the vintage circular Chevy ornament had been torn off, leaving behind a gaping jagged wound in the hood.

Sam ran a gloved hand along the side of the car. Underneath the rust she could feel the gentle sloping roundness of the original fender shape. The form of it was friendly. "Ok, so where do we find the VIN?"

Tucker frowned in contemplation. "Dunno. Let me search." He pulled his phone back up to his face and set to Googling.

As he did that, Sam cleared off dirt and leaves off the top of the trunk. Carefully she found the handle and tried yanking. The metal screeched. With a grunt, she struggled— it was heavy and rust had nearly fused the door shut— but she managed to hoist it up a crack. She fished for her flashlight, shining it down into the trunk. It was empty. Then, a flurry of movement in the darkest part of the trunk, near the back. Sam jumped, nearly dropping her light, before she saw three sets of shiny red eyes. Rats. They scurried out through a hole.

Sam shivered and pulled her parka closer, zipping it up all the way.

"The VIN should be on the driver's side door," Tucker announced.

Sam shot one last look at the trunk, before she walked around the car to where Tucker was tugging at the door.

"It won't... give..." Tucker panted.

Sam leaned over and pounded the door from the inside. There was a noise like something breaking, then the door popped open with a slow steady creak. The entire car shifted. Sam thought the door would break right off, but it came to rest, crooked.

Tucker peered around nervously. "Think anyone heard that?"

Sam crouched and turned her attention to the inside of the door. "If they did, there's nothing we can do except hurry up and get out of here." She shot the flashlight beam down along the cracked sheet metal, along the rusted metal window crank, and the handle to a storage pocket. Curious, she yanked that, peering inside. Nothing but leaves. Whoever had dumped the car had made sure to get rid of everything. Some giddy, silly part of her hoped to find a photo, a receipt, a napkin, loose change... something to prove this had been Danny's car.

—You own a Corvette?—

—Well... This one's mine.—

"Sam," Tucker prodded, yanking her out of her thoughts. "Find the VIN."
Sam leaned back. "Sorry," she whispered. "I can't… I don't see it..." Using her teeth, she tugged her glove off her free hand and ran her fingertips along the inside of the door, feeling for any indication of a plate or a stamp. "You sure it's the driver's side door?"

"Yeah, hang on." Pause. "Ok. It says post. Like… the edge?"

Sam swiveled on her heels and pulled the door closer, looking at the edge. There was a little metal plate, attached with two screws. She dropped the flashlight and rooted around in her pack, getting out the screwdriver she had found in the attic. It wasn't a perfect match, but it did the job. The screws were already loose and brittle. At first crank they snapped off.

She palmed the metal piece and raised it up to show Tucker. "Got it."

"Great." He put it in a ziplock bag. "Let's go."

Sam grabbed her flashlight and put her glove back on, placing her hands on her knees to propel up, when something caught her eye. Something shiny. "Wait." She shone the beam down along the bottom edge of the car, near where the driver's door bolted to the floor. There was something stuck down there. With delicacy, Sam eased it out.

"What is it?" Tucker asked.

She stood and held out the object— a small tin box, two inches wide, five inches tall, embossed with a Lucky Strike logo. "It's a cigarette tin," she whispered. Her heart pounded as she pried it open. Inside: molded cigarettes and two pieces of emerald paper. "And these..." Sam held the papers out, scanning them, "Are two tickets to an Alice and Wonderland themed prom."

Tucker grabbed one of them, wincing as it broke apart in his hand. "Sorry…"

Sam delicately turned her ticket over. The crest of the high school was pressed into upper right-hand corner— a wolf. Underneath, in script font, was the line "Fall through the looking glass... Woodward High School's Annual Gala, 8pm, Saturday, May 3rd, 1962" Underneath was an illustration of Alice, tumbling mid-fall, her blue skirt whipping around her figure. Sam looked around for a name, but the ticket only had the number 0082 printed in gold foil. It was fragile from sixty years of neglect. Sam was certain the only thing that had saved it from complete disintegration was the cigarette tin and the waxy coat of the paper itself.

Tucker wordlessly held out two more ziplock bags. Sam placed the remaining ticket in one, and the tin in the other.
Bike tires crunched over frosted grass as Sam cut a corner. As the bike jolted back onto the sidewalk Sam's backpack bounced, rattled. She hunched her shoulders to get her scarf up around her ears, which were burning from the cold gale whipping past her face. School had just let out and she was headed home.

Tucker had been attempting to hack his way into the DMV server, but he had at least another couple days before he got close. Something about needing to steal an employee ID number and a password. Sam only really understood hacking as someone typing frantically on a keyboard with a screen of little green 1's and 0's, followed by a blinking 'Access Granted!'. When she had said something along those lines, Tucker had placed his hands atop her shoulders, looked her dead in the eye, and said, "Honey. Hacking doesn't work like that."

It was still light out, which meant no Danny. Sam felt a little wave of disappointment at that. Maybe he'd show up later. Not that she'd be able to sneak out to the graveyard; her mother was still making a point to check her room in the middle of the night.

She glanced over her shoulder, preparing to cross the street, and caught sight of a police car tailing her. Underneath her scarf she frowned. She slowed her pedaling until her bike came to a rest and put a foot down to balance it.

The car pulled over to the side of the road and the window rolled down. Officer Gray leaned an arm out the window, shooting her a look. "Ms. Manson," he greeted politely. He knocked on the side of the car door like he was knocking on a door.

Sam eyed him warily. "Officer." Why did she feel so guilty? It wasn't like she did anything.

"I have some information regarding your tip. I swung by the school to try and catch you before it let out, but you were already gone."

Curious, Sam twisted her handlebars towards the police car and rolled forward a few inches. "What did you find out?"

Damon Gray hesitated, then shrugged. "It will be on the news in a few hours anyway. The skull came back from forensics. We think it belongs to a middle-aged caucasian male that died about fifty years ago."

"Oh." Sam frowned, feeling both disappointed and relieved that it didn't belong to Danny.

"We think he was beheaded," Gray said conspiratorially. His eyes seemed to be alight with interest.

Beheaded, huh? Sam shivered. "Do you know who's head it is?" she asked.

Gray's eyes dimmed. He shook his head. "Not yet. But we're working on it."

Sam shifted a bit on her bike seat. She thought of the library card, of Benjamin Skulker, wondered if the skull was his, then felt a thread of guilt at removing it from the scene. "Do you think he was murdered?" she asked.

Gray fell silent. His mustache furrowed, looking very much like he had a hunch, but wasn't allowed
to tell her. "We don't know yet."

Sam got back atop her bike, putting her feet to her pedals. "Well, thanks for letting me know."

Gray leaned further out of the window as Sam began to peel away. "I'm curious how you found that cabin!" he called out after her.

"Stay curious," Sam whispered under her breath.

Sam flicked a baby carrot from one end of her plate to the other.

"Quit playing with your food," her mother chided, barely looking up, as she loaded more salad onto her plate. "It's bad manners."

Sam glanced up, deliberately stabbing the carrot with her fork and slowly putting it in her mouth. She made a big show of baring her teeth and yanking the carrot off the fork, chewing loudly.

"Elbows," her mother continued, unaffected.

Sam swallowed the carrot and begrudgingly tucked her elbows off the table to her sides.

A tense silence overtook the dinner table. The loud ticking of the grandfather clock echoed throughout, audible even though it was a room and a half away. The dining room was a large lavish room adjacent to the study. The walls were a deep dark victorian wallpaper, vines overlapping and interweaving, with white flowers. Above them a frescoed ceiling with a chandelier—smaller than the one hanging above the entryway. This one had clear drop crystals and was every inch as tacky as the entryway one.

Her father glanced between the them, then cleared his throat. "So," he began. "The park cleanup effort had its first major milestone today."

Pamela swirled her soup. "Yes. We recruited a good number of volunteers."

Sam wanted to roll her eyes, but she was impressed that they had actually done something. "Why do you guys even care about the park?" she asked.

"This town is our home now, sweetheart," her father said. "Shouldn't we take care of our home?"

Sam's eyes darted around the dining room. "I suppose," she said, thinking of all the ghosts and the mystery that she was intent on solving. She realized that, in her own way, she was doing her part to clean up this town too.

Her father sliced through a slab of ham, gingerly placing a piece of meat on his plate. He paused, glancing at the knife. "By the way. Why was this in your bedroom?"

The tip tilted at her. Jeremy twisted it around, light from the chandelier catching and whipping across in harsh gleams. Maybe Sam was imagining it, but there was a weird look in her father's eye— one that made her uneasy.

"I was trying to open a CD and couldn't find my scissors," she lied. "Besides, why were you poking around my room?"
"What?" Sam grated, catching her mother's look. "A girl can't open a CD without everyone freaking out? I'm not stupid. If I was cutting myself, I wouldn't just leave the knife out in the open for you guys to find." She turned her attention back to her plate, cheeks burning, knowing that little outburst had done little to convince her parents she was okay.

Her father lowered the knife back onto the platter. He shot her mother a worried look.

Sam thought grumpily that they should stop worrying so much about her and start worrying about themselves. Despite the fact that they never brought it up, Sam knew that the house was affecting them. They didn't like the unexplainable. Things moving on their own, windows opening on their own…

Her mother sighed, taking a long sip of her wine.

Sam's eyes trailed along the wine glass.

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Later that night, around ten, a rock pinged off her bedroom window.

Sam spun in her desk chair, away from her computer where she had been struggling to write the introduction to her paper for the past hour. She got up and crossed her room, a small smile flitting across her face. Without looking, she hoisted the window open.

The instant she turned around and head back to her desk, she felt him gust into the room.

"You didn't even know it was me," he sputtered.

"Who else throws rocks at my window?" Sam shrugged. She glared down at her computer screen, trying to remember her train of thought, before Danny had interrupted.

"What are you up to?" he asked.

Sam motioned to her laptop. "Researching for a paper. Attempting to write it, but..." She sighed and eyed him sidelong. "It's been a struggle."

Danny's gait was light and bouncy as he crossed the room. "Are you being sentenced to death?" He leaned over her shoulder and she caught a whiff of cologne and smoke.

"Just because I know you're dead doesn't give you permission to joke about it all the time," Sam said.

A laugh. "No? You don't think I'm funny? Not even a little bit?"

Sam spun in her chair and leveled him with a Look, although her lip was struggling not to smile.

"Fine. I'll decease and desist." True to his word, he retreated and settled into the armchair near her record player, shutting up.

Still feeling his eyes on the back of her head, Sam tried to go back to her paper. What had she been writing again? With a groan, she gave up. Danny's presence really didn't promote getting things done. She studied him, then threw her pen back down on her desk. "The skull in the woods isn't yours."
He raised a brow. "Hmm," he murmured, picking up a book off her bedside table— Dracula—flipping through it idly.

"It belongs to some forty-year-old dude," Sam continued.

Danny's eyes flickered. "Really?"

"Really. But you already knew that." Sam kicked her feet out and crossed them at the ankles, elbow on her desk, chin in her palm. "You want to know what I think?"

An amused smile touched his lips. His eyes swept up from the book, catching hers. "I always want to know what you're thinking."

Sam couldn't help but smile at that. She drummed her fingers along her lips and leaned forward in her desk chair conspiratorily. "I think it's Skulker's," she whispered.

Danny returned his attentions to her book. "You're only halfway there," he teased. "You haven't even gotten to the good parts yet." He plucked out her bookmark and waggled it at her.

"That's all you have to say for yourself?"

"I had to read this in high school. It was either Dracula or Pride & Prejudice. Not a great choice, you know?"

Sam jutted her chin. "Woodward High School?"

He let out a surprised gust of air. "Go Wolves. Not that I graduated," he admitted, eyeing her appraisingly. A genuine smile tugged at his lips. "You have been digging. Didn't I warn you against digging up stuff you can't put back? Some things don't like being buried again."

"Like you?" Sam quipped.

He pulled a face.

Sam's eyes did such an enormous eye roll they almost sprained themselves. "Don't lie. I can tell you're happy I figured out your high school." She gestured at him with a flick of her fingers.

He snapped the book shut and put it back where he found it. "So. What's your paper about?"

Even though she knew that there were certain things Danny couldn't talk about— ghost curse and all — it didn't make it any less frustrating. At least she knew she was marching down the right path. He wouldn't have clammed up otherwise. If it was Skulker's skull, it made his death all that more humiliating. The hunter, hunted, his own severed head nailed above his fireplace mantle next to those of his animal victims. A rather poetic end, Sam thought darkly.

Realizing Danny wasn't about to give her any more clues, she blew out a breath, ruffling her bangs, then turned back to her desk to consider her laptop.

"I'm writing about racism in the 1950's," Sam explained, avoiding his gaze. Truthfully, she was writing about him, and the other missing children— race being just one of the many themes. "Did you know that Elvis borrowed his style from black musicians? And yet, none of the artists he was inspired by made nearly as much as him?" she asked. "Big Mama Thorton, Muddy Waters, Billie Holiday, Jackie Wilson, Sam Cooke… Anyway, I've been listening to them."

Sam tapped 'Play' on a YouTube video. With a slow lumbering piano riff, Sam Cooke's Bring It On
A stunned look crossed Danny's face. "It sounds like he's right here. How is that possible?"

Sam gestured to her expensive speakers. "Gift for my sixteenth birthday."

He took a step towards one and tilted his head as if he had never seen something quite like it before. He'd had a similar reaction to her iPhone and her laptop. "I haven't heard this song in forever," he mentioned.

"I hadn't really heard it until— No. Don't," Sam warned, seeing as Danny had started to sing along. Horribly. She crossed her arms and glowered at him.

He shot her a grin and picked her hairbrush off her desk, holding it out in front of her lips like a microphone.

"I don't sing," she drawled, having to raise her voice to be heard over the music. She got up and tried to yank her brush out of his hand, but he danced away.

He held the brush to his lips. "If you ever change your mind, about leaving, leaving me behind," he crooned into it.

"You're so dumb."

Danny raised his eyebrows at her, but didn't stop. If anything his grin widened the more he realized how annoyed she was. He danced circles around her, intentionally clipping her shoulder each time he passed, until Sam felt the corners of her mouth twitch. His good mood was infectious.

"Everybody sings and dances, Boots. Even you," Danny told her in between refrains. "I know you, remember? You can't fool me."

"Yeah? Well I don't dance," Sam maintained. "Punks headbang. Preferably to metal." She gripped her elbows hard as Danny tossed her brush onto her bed and tried to grab her hands. He tugged her back and forth, rotating her upper body, yet Sam planted her feet obstinately.

He lugged her around the floor like hauling around a wet cat. "Work with me here. I feel like I'm moving furniture," he complained.

"Let go," Sam hissed. She glanced once around the room, not sure what she was looking for.

"No one's here but us and I'm easily the most embarrassing," Danny pouted. "Don't be such a square."

Sam's arms loosened. She flushed.

He looped his arm around her waist and his hand enveloped hers, and she was rocking, eyes widening, room spinning. She stumbled along, but each time she went the wrong way or nearly fell his hand was there, scooping her up, guiding her. Sam stopped thinking so hard about it and just let him lead. He wasn't great, but he wasn't bad. Someone had taught him the basics of how to… whatever this was. Waltz? Swing? Slow dance? Her thoughts floated to the prom ticket. She wondered if he had gotten the chance to go; if he had danced like this, and who he had danced with. Had she been pretty? Had she liked to dance? Had she been his girlfriend?

His face was inches from hers— freckles moon dust, blue eyes crystalline and playful. There was a ring of green in them that she had never noticed before, which undulated and flickered like solar
flares of a sun. The world lazily orbited around them. Like were the center of their own universe. Sam wanted to know what he had been like however-many years ago— before death had sucked the warmth from him. She could only assume he had been kind and vibrant. The more she hung out with him, the more she saw this sillier, carefree person peeking through. Someone who had childlike curiosity for the world, who genuinely liked people, who didn't mind making of fool of themselves for a bit of fun.

Was he— as she suspected— that missing boy her grandmother told her of? Did he have a lot of friends who missed him? Had his parents ever stopped looking for him? His sister? What had been his plans before his life had been cut short? His dreams?

Sam found him staring at her curiously. She swallowed all those questions and got back to enjoying this moment for what it was— ephemeral, beautiful.

Danny's hands were cold, skin smooth and strange to the touch. He twirled her once and brought her back, singing in her ear. "You know I'll always be your slave, till I'm buried, buried in my grave."

"Bring it to me," Sam begrudgingly sang along. "Bring your sweet loving, bring it on home to me."

"Yeah," Danny called.

"Yeah," Sam answered.

The green ring in Danny's eyes twinkled mischievously. He probably thought he had won. Sam guessed he had.

In a sudden bold movement, Danny dipped her.

Having never been dipped before, Sam yelped and flailed, one arm windmilling out, nearly hitting him in the face. The momentum toppled them and they fell in a sprawled heap.

"Whoops," he laughed somewhere near her ear.

"You could have warned me."

He pulled back and looked down at her, grinning. "No offense, but you're not the best dancer."

Sam swallowed as she realized he was practically on top of her. Her stomach traveled up her throat. She thought idly to herself that this must be what being seventeen should feel like. To laugh and dance and sing and not care; to smile until soreness.

Then her bedroom door slammed open.
Her mother stood in the doorway, rigid, face reddened and splotched from one too many glasses of wine. "What are you doing in my daughter's room?"

Sam flushed. This looked really bad. Danny was sprawled on top of her, on her bedroom floor, music going full blast as if to drown out any incriminating noise... Not to mention they were out of breath from dancing. They both scrambled to their feet. "Mom. Stop. This isn't what it looks like." She held up a hand.

Pamela stormed into the room and yanked out the speaker by the wall chord, music sputtering out. She pointed an accusing finger at Danny. "Let me tell you what it looks like, Samantha Jean," she raged. "This boy has been sneaking around without our permission, into your room, in the middle of the night, and you two are doing god knows what—"

Oh hell. "Mom— we're friends."

Danny edged away. His face rearranged from shock to wariness then settled on embarrassment. A blush crept across the back of his neck and the apple of his cheeks. "It's not like that, Mrs. Manson," he reassured.

"Aren't you the neighbor boy?" Pamela continued. Sam could smell the sour scent of wine rolling off her as she puffed her way into Danny's personal space, face inches from his. She was roughly the same height in her heels. "Obviously Evelyn doesn't keep a close enough eye on you."

Danny blinked. He leaned back. "I should leave," he said.

"I'm not through with you yet," Pamela growled.


When neither of them moved, Sam attempted to grab her mom's arm to yank her back. Pamela swatted it away. It was nothing, just a small swipe, and a clumsy one at that, but Danny's eyes narrowed.

"Don't touch her." His order was a hot prod of protectiveness inside Sam's head, and although Sam couldn't see his lips, she suspected they hadn't moved. It was like that bark he had emitted in the forest; more telepathic than anything else.

Her mother paused, and Sam thought she must have noticed something was off about him by now, but no— she was laughing. "You presume to tell me what I can and can't do? After you sneak into my house?" Her eyes hardened and she leaned forward.

Danny gaze darted to the floor as he muttered mutinously under his breath. Sam thought he said something like: It's not your house. Then he glanced over at the window, no doubt plotting his escape.

Her mother must have taken that glance as Danny ignoring her, which was the one thing Pamela Manson could not stand. She snapped in the air to get his attention like snapping at a waiter.
Danny flinched, hard, at the noise.

"Are you ignoring me?" Pamela sputtered. "What kind of savages raised you?"

Danny's eyes eclipsed. He was no longer eyeing her mother like an annoyance. More like a mountain lion methodically tracking his prey. That ring of green was bright and still, unwavering, locked and trained to Pamela's face. "My mom and dad were great parents," he bristled.

"They must not have taught you any manners," Pamela slurred. Which Sam knew was ludicrous. Danny came from a time of old-fashioned ideals and chivalry. He was, if anything, too polite.

Pamela reached out and poked Danny in the chest. "You disrespectful brat."

"Mom," Sam warned. This was not a fight her mother could win.

The air hummed low. Danny took a swift step forward and Pamela stumbled back. The lights dimmed, then flickered. With each discharge a resounding pop followed like the bulb was blowing out.

Sam breathed out slowly. Her heart drummed in her chest. Danny had that tense coyote stance again, and while Sam knew to hold her ground against him, her mother did not. "Mom, whatever you do, don't act afraid," Sam stated as calmly as she could. She edged her way between the two of them.

Pamela blinked rapidly, face slack. She looked like she had just taken a cold shower. Her head swiveled up at ceiling, at the failing light, and she shivered.

"You are not allowed to judge my parents. You have no idea what my family went through," the gravekeeper—because Sam refused to believe this was her Danny—declared.

Pamela backpedaled. "Leave, just, please leave... whatever you are... Please... " Her voice warbled in fear.

The gravekeeper's cataract-filled eyes took on a curious, hungry gleam. His head twitched to the side at an inhuman speed.

"Danny?" Sam pushed against his chest. "Don't."

Too late.

The lights went out and Sam was blind.

HOW SHOULD I SCARE YOU? a voice spoke, coming from everywhere all at once. It even came from inside Sam's head. LIKE THIS?

The sweater beneath Sam's palm disappeared like smoke. She gasped, feeling around in the dark, and found her desk, holding onto it like a life raft. Gales of wind ripped through her hair and smarted her cheeks. Intermittent flashes of green light strobed over and over. Each flash left an imprint behind. Sound was still there though. A thunderous whip cracked at each flash of light, mixing with her mother's screams.

Sam ducked her head and crouched onto her hands and knees. Heart thumping in her ribcage, she crawled blindly along the floor. The booming noise started slow in pace, but quickened, until it was the only thing she could hear. She wanted to scream too. Anything to drown out that god awful noise. Metallic ionized air filled her nose. Her searching hands hit a wall and she spun around and pressed her back to it, staring wide-eyed into her room, watching a series of image unfold like a damaged movie reel, frame by frame, flicking disjointedly.
SHOULD I SHOW YOU WHAT HE DID TO ME?

Flash. Her mother, wailing, one hand out to protect her face, one hand for the door. A shadowed creature scuttling up the wall growing impossibly tall, impossibly...

Flash. A vision assaulted her. She was in a dark, damp room. It smelled strongly of chemicals. Directly across from her lay over six naked bodies, piled one atop the other as if tossed aside. Their limbs were stunted. Their faces were deformed. As if sensing an audience, their heads swiveled towards her and their bloated mouths wrenched open in unison, flies crawling out. A buzz hummed in her ears.

Flash. Her room again. Papers everywhere. Her mother, halfway out the door. Chemicals still stung her nose. A twisted voice screamed inside her head, teasing, in a sing-song tone, AM I SCARY NOW?

Yes, Sam thought, but she didn't scream.

Flash. A desk chair, upturned.

Flash. Something— glowing green eyes, white smoke, demonic smile, bounding through the door, giving chase, as if playing tag.

Flash. Empty room.

Sam was frozen. The floor underneath her palms shuddered as something heavy thudded, several times. The lights popped back on and the noise abruptly stopped. Sam breathed shallowly, eyes wide, staring dazedly around at her room. She felt like she had just experienced something akin to whiplash.

"Mom?" she called. She found her feet and got up, rushing into the hallway. "Mom?"

Danny was at the top of the staircase. He was looking at his hands as if he couldn't quite believe they were his. He glanced up as she approached, face wracked with guilt. "Sam. I'm so sorry—"

A groan resounded from downstairs.

Sam tore her gaze off Danny to the bottom of the stairs where her mother was sprawled in a heap. One leg bent, the other still on the last step. With another pained moan, Pamela attempted to roll over, before giving up and collapsing back onto her back.

Rage consumed her. "What did you do?"

He reeled back, like he was afraid of her. "I didn't mean to. Didn't want to. I couldn't— I can't—" Words failed him for a moment, before he let out a shaky breath. "I didn't know she'd run for the stairs, Sam. Honest."

"Get out," Sam croaked.

"Sam—"

"Get OUT!" Sam charged at him, prepared to do whatever to get to her mother, to protect her.

She didn't have to.

His face twisted, like something inside him shattered at her words, and he vanished, beginning at his toes, ending at his eyes.
Sam flew through the cold air pocket he left behind, down the stairs, taking them two at a time, landing heavily next to her mother's prone form. She knelt down beside her and reached out a hesitant hand on her mother's shoulder.

Pamela's eyes were glazed and wide, face deathly pale. Her hair was swiveled about her head, half falling out of rollers. Her thin shoulders looked waif-like in her nightgown. Her palm pressed down against the boards, knuckles white, as if to get her bearings.

Sam threw a panicked look around the landing. "Dad?" she called up the staircase. "DAD!?"

"He's out running an errand," Pamela said.

"You're…okay?" Sam exhaled, releasing some of her tension.

Her mother sat up fully and stared at Sam. She clutched at her chest, above her heart. "What happened?" she asked faintly.

"You don't remember…?" Sam cut herself off, seeing her mother's blank look, realizing that her mother honestly had no idea. She felt a flood of relief. "You fell down the stairs," Sam supplied. "Are you okay?"

Pamela blinked several times before getting her hands underneath her, then her feet. She stood woozily and used the wall to support her for a second, then straightened. "I'm fine," she muttered, waving at Sam's concerned hands drunkenly. "Too much wine. Must have been... It's all… fuzzy... I'm going to bed."

Pamela made her way up the stairs.

Sam remained long after her mother had gone. She stayed there for god knows how long, staring at the spot Pamela had fallen.

Hot, rampant emotions started to creep through her shock as she tried to digest all she had just seen. She knew she had just been witness to a sliver of Danny's darker half— that hellish creature that had chased her mother in a carefree, cavalier way.

Sam shivered. When the lights had gone out she had been scared. Really, truly, scared.

The front door unlocked behind her and Sam jumped. A soft yelp flew out of her mouth before she could stop it. She whipped around, but it was just her dad.

"You're still up?" Jeremy queried, kicking off his shoes and shrugging out of his coat. He hung the jacket up on the wrought-iron coat rack and paused, eyeing Sam. "What's wrong?"

Sam blew out a breath and tried to get a hold of herself. She had faced plenty of freaky things since moving into this mansion, but none of it had felt like this. Nothing had shaken her up quite like this. She had thought Danny was different— good, silly, caring.

"Sam?" her father puzzled. His face grew concerned. "What happened?"

Sam mouthed wordlessly, feeling like she had tossed her stomach down that black hole of her dreams, and could feel it dropping, tumbling, spinning, seemingly infinitely. The force of its fall sucked the air from her lungs.

"Mom fell down the stairs. You should check on her," was all she could manage.
She spent the night staring at her ceiling, dark thoughts whirling around in her head. She knew that Danny had been telling the truth about not meaning to hurt her mother, but she couldn't decide if what he did was forgivable or not. She had done her own fair share of unforgivable things to people, but this was her mother, and even though they had been on pretty poor terms for the past week, it was her mother Danny had essentially chased down. What if he did that to her? Had she been wrong all along to trust him?

When her alarm clock went off, Sam was already dressed. She shot a hand out, smacked it, grabbed her backpack, and took to the stairs. Landing on the last step, Pamela's voice drifted from the kitchen. "This is all too much!" she was saying. "You didn't need to do this."

Sam's hand relaxed on the banister. Relief soothed away some of the her tension. Her mother was up and seemingly okay. She could hear the drone of the morning news murmuring from the kitchen TV and the crackle of eggs cooking. The scent of breakfast spiraled through the air.

"It's the least I could do," a different voice intoned silkily. "The boy is troubled and confused."

Sam stiffened. She stumbled to a halt, her heart jolting right up her throat. That voice was familiar. Sam pressed her back against the wall and edged along it until she hit the doorframe leading into the kitchen. As discreetly as possible, Sam peeked around the corner.

"I don't even remember what happened," her mother laughed to someone, apron on, spatula waving wildly in one hand. Her hair was back into its perfect curled bob.

Near her mother, in a vase on the counter by the stove, sat a bouquet of enormous lilies. Their petals were so white they shone and refracted light, pearly and otherworldly.

"I promise to keep a tighter leash on him," the other woman joked.

Sam caught a slice of a dark-skinned woman with rambunctious curly hair. Evelyn Gray. In their kitchen.

Sam leaned away from the door and pressed the back of her head against the wall, glancing up at the ceiling, breathing shallowly. Now that she had seen what a ghost could do, her gut reaction was to run. She turned and started to creep back down the hallway away from the kitchen. At the front door, she lay her palm on the handle, and realized she couldn't just leave her mother in the house alone with a ghost. Not that Sam could do much to protect her—that much was evident from last night—but still, Sam couldn't just walk away.

With gritted teeth, she turned on her heel and marched straight into the kitchen.

"—Thanks, Lance. the mood in Amity Park is tense as news spreads about a severed head—" the TV chattered.

"Sammy!" her mother beamed. "Just in time for breakfast."

Sam eyed her mother suspiciously. She was being way too friendly after breathing down Sam's neck all week. She almost said something about it, but faced Evelyn instead. "Why are you here?" she blurted.

Evelyn's almond-shaped eyes blinked. She raised her hands up to her maroon scarf, readjusting it
against her neck.

Sam's eyes trailed along it uneasily.

"I just came by to deliver some flowers," Evelyn stated. She sent Sam a lovely smile, her cheeks dimpling right underneath the hollows of her cheeks.

In the photo on Officer Gray's desk, Evelyn had been so full of warmth her skin practically sizzled. This woman was drawn and pale, her movements eccentric and... quirky. The jerky mannerisms were inherently not right. Like Evelyn had no actual body, so she was fabricating this illusion from memory; only, she had spent so much time away from a physical body she had forgotten how they moved. Now she moved alien.

Sam broke into an exaggerated smile. "Well, you delivered them." Sam gestured to the vase. "You can leave now." She gestured to the door.

"Samantha!" Pamela admonished. She brandished her spatula, bits of egg flicking across the counter. "Apologize."

Evelyn's smile wobbled at Sam's crassness. She straightened, expression pinched, and raised her hand up to soothe Pamela. "It's fine, dear." Her gaze narrowed on Sam. "I found Danny, thanks to you."

"Don't you mean 'no thanks to you'?" Sam retorted.

Evelyn paused. Then, she pushed off the countertop with her elbow and made her way leisurely to the kitchen door leading to the back porch. Her fingertips trailed along the counter in threatening way. The door was unlocked and ajar. Sam guessed her mother had seen the flowers and had let Evelyn in without a second thought.

"I knew I could count on you to break his heart," Evelyn said. She smiled again and no matter how much Sam dissected it, she could only find genuine warmth.

Sam's breath stuttered and caught in her chest. "What do you mean?"

Evelyn was already out the door.

"—excuse me Detective, do we know yet if the man in the woods was murdered?—" Tiffany Snow, of Q13 Amity Park News asked upon the TV.

"What do you mean?" Sam yelled after Evelyn.

"—No comment—"

"Why are you shouting?" her mother asked, nonplussed. "Beautiful flowers, don't you think?"

— Diary Entry VII—

Saturday August 18th, 1962

Someone came forward with information, hoping to collect Vlad's reward money. They said they saw a boy matching Danny's description in their neighbor's window. Police showed up. Wasn't Danny. Another dead end.
Saturday August 18th, 1962

Vlad was taken in for questioning. The only reason Danny would drive to Amity is to see him and revisit childhood haunts, but Vlad says Danny never called or stopped by. Samples of Vlad's door handle and the doorbell were taken. Danny's fingerprints weren't found. Police let Vlad go.

Search continues.

.

Sunday August 19th, 1962

Johnny went home. He has school on Monday. I should go to school too, but I can't leave my family. Vlad said we can stay with him for as long as we need.

.

Sunday August 19th, 1962

Officer Gray took a man into custody. They won't tell us his name. He's the gas attendant that last saw Danny—a recreational hunter, previously convicted for assault and animal abuse. He left work early the day Danny disappeared to hunt, and has no alibi for that night.

My parents are just excited the police have arrested someone. I don't think they care who.

.

Monday August 20th, 1962

Dreamt that Danny was hiding underneath my bed this entire time. Woke up and checked. He wasn't there. Sometimes I wake up and think I hear his voice. Stress is getting to me.

.

Monday August 20th, 1962

They let him go.

Dad found out the guy's name is Benjamin Skulker through the local paper. Skulker took a polygraph test. Said he saw Danny but didn't kill him, and it came back the truth.

Dad doesn't believe it and fought with Detective Gray. He's not endearing himself to the police.

I think Dad might do something terrible to Skulker. He thinks Skulker has Danny and he won't let it go. I'm scared I'll lose more than a brother by the end of this.
Four days passed without Danny - a stretch that made her notice how often they used to hang out. Despite her still simmering anger at the ghost, her chest ached in his absence.

Halloween was tomorrow. Sam had missed the memo about wearing a costume to school. Milling about on the cement school steps were a host of different ghouls and monsters. A ladybug chatted with a black cat to the left of the entrance. To her right a group of girls, all dressed as different Fanta flavors, strolled by, laughing, arm in arm. Sam stared.

"Spirit Club Halloween Gala, tomorrow night," someone called, loudly, from behind her. "Eight PM, at the abandoned hospital."

Sam found Star handing out leaflets. The girl shot her a glance and then held out one of the flyers. "You're coming," she stated. "Right?"

Sam thought of Tucker's aversion to Spirit Club and tried to edge her way out of this. They had just gotten back on the right foot. "Actually, I'm pretty grounded right now," Sam said, seeing as grounding was her best excuse. It wasn't a total lie. "I don't think I'll be able to go out..."

Star's eyebrows raised. She waved the paper at Sam, like, 'take the thing already.'

Sam grabbed it grudgingly.

"Great," Star said. She sent Sam a small smile, then meandered away in search of potential party-goers.

Sam looked at the paper in her hands. It was on plain white printer paper. In bold dripping black type, the name of the party was written, along with the address, the date, and the time. Costumes required. There was a photo of the abandoned hospital. The printer had smudged some of the details in the fence, making the stark building appear to be surrounded by some kind of forcefield.

Sam tucked the paper into her bag, locked her bike up, and walked inside. As she walked past, students sent skirted glances her way. They had been doing this ever since Paulina had spilled her address. Most of the glances were curious.

Sam ignored them and shoved her books in her locker.

Tucker sidled up next to her. He had on an eyepatch with a mechanical eye glued onto it, which roved around independent of his other eye. His left arm was covered in cardboard that he had spray painted silver to make it resemble a robotic arm. "Guess what I am," he challenged, chest puffed out.

Sam eyed him, noting he had even drawn little screws into each of the fake metal plates. "A cross between Mad Eye Moody and Ironman?" she guessed.


Sam shrugged, unfamiliar.

Tucker sighed.

"I'm wearing a costume too." Sam leaned against the locker, a spark in her eye.
"Oh yeah?" Tucker raised an eyebrow and crossed his arms. His lone eye darted around her outfit, which was the same outfit she wore everyday. "Fine. I'll bite. What are you?"

Sam slammed her locker shut and turned her head to the side. Her lip curled into a dark smirk. "I'm an advanced Artificial Intelligence unit from the future. I've been sent back in time to ensure that humanity invents my robotic ancestors," Sam told him, voice low and serious like she was telling him some sort of Matrix-level conspiracy. "I am SAAM. Self Aware AutoMatron. I'm not the only one of my kind at this school. Although, trying to identify another SAAM unit is impossible." Sam leaned in and winked slowly. "We look just like everybody else."

Tucker's one eye expanded, bug-like. "That was the sexiest thing I've ever heard."

Sam pulled a face. "Ew, Tucker. Just— Ew."

Tucker chuckled.

They took off down the hallway together. Tucker paused when he reached the door to his first period class. "I heard on the news this morning that that skull you found belongs to an older guy," he said, robotic eye quivering. "Guess it doesn't belong to your ghost kid."

Sam's smile fell at the mention of Danny. Her thoughts cascaded, swirling around the image of her mother at the base of the stairs, and of Evelyn all peppy and triumphant. Sam didn't like how bold Evelyn was getting, nor how happy she was that Sam and Danny were no longer on speaking terms. Now that she was reminded of what happened, she felt all the mirth and humor drain from her. Her shoulders slumped.

Tucker misinterpreted her sudden bad mood. "Don't worry. I'm super close to cracking into the DMV. I wouldn't be surprised if we land Phantom's real name this week," Tucker said in an attempt to cheer her up.

"That's great." She opened her mouth, intent on spilling what happened between Danny and her mother, but Tucker had already yanked open the door to his class and walked through.

Sam was halfway to the cafeteria with her bag lunch in hand, when she heard the voices arguing. She paused. The hallway was devoid of students. The muffled voices rose up again, coming from the door to her left.

Cautiously, she snuck over and peered through the glass window. It was the band room. Rows of metal stands and plastic chairs lined the carpeting. In the space where the conductor stood was Valerie, without costume, arguing red-faced with a tall curvy girl in a witch outfit. The girl had her back to her, but Sam knew by the perfect hair and figure that it was Paulina.

"Give it back," Valerie spat. She lunged for Paulina, reaching her hands out for something, but Paulina did a hop-skip backwards, narrowly avoiding her. The maneuver made Paulina's pointed hat droop.

"What's in here that's so important to you?" Paulina provoked. She held up Valerie's backpack and flicked the zipper cattishly. Sam didn't have to see her face to know that Paulina was smirking.

"Give it back," Valerie repeated, angrier this time, voice wavering like she was three seconds away from ruining Paulina.
Sam's went for the door handle—she stopped herself. This is what had gotten her in trouble at her last school. Did she really want to see that look of disappointment on her parent's faces? That expression her mother had worn—the sad-lost one that quietly said, 'I don't know what to do with you anymore. I don't even know you.'—Sam had told herself a million times that look hadn't mattered to her. Never changed the fact that it did.

In the band room, Valerie let out a frustrated growl and lunged again, this time grabbing hair.

Paulina shrieked, her hat pitching off her head. She flailed, but kept her grip on the backpack, holding it backwards away from Valerie's clawing fingers.

A large brutish shape stepped forward: Baxter. He grabbed the hand entangled in Paulina's hair and twisted it, making Valerie cry out and let go.

Valerie stumbled back, tucking her arm into her chest.

"Crazy bitch!" Paulina hissed unzipping the backpack.

Sam scowled, unable to see what was inside the bag from her angle outside the door.

"Don't try that again, Gray. Or else," Dash ordered. He took a menacing step forward, muscles bulging in full male bravado.

Valerie ignored Dash, her gaze stuck on the backpack, lip twitching, eyes wild. Sam could tell she was scared and a little desperate.

That's it. Sam couldn't bear to sit by any longer. Valerie and her had their own issues, and what Valerie had done was by no means forgiven, but the way Paulina was mocking her was wrong. Even though Sam was certain that Valerie hated anyone taking pity on her, the fact of the matter was this kind of bullying was cruelty. Besides, the sight of Baxter laying a hand on anyone was enough to make Sam's blood boil. She stepped into the room, letting the door close loudly behind her. "Why don't you give Valerie her backpack back?"

Paulina held a dirty toy rocket in one hand, the backpack in the other. Her smile curled predatorily. "Do you know what this is, Goth Girl?" She waved the rocket.

Sam's eyes flicked from the rocket to Valerie, who had gone deathly pale. "A toy?" Wasn't Valerie supposed to be the deranged person here? Why was Paulina giving her that look?

Paulina stared at her, then released a single breathless 'ha!'. "It's a relic," she said emphatically, twisting the rocket around in the light.

With more attention, Sam appraised it again. It was a small metal cylinder with three wings attached near the base, it's nose curved into a point. A piece of tape on it was adhered on the side with an address scribbled in Sharpie, but beyond 'IF FOUND', the letters were unreadable from a distance. It didn't look like much… no glowing, no humming, nothing remotely magical.

"It's mine," Valerie cut.

Paulina ignored her. She waggled the backpack at Sam. "There are others in here. Valerie has been hoarding them. Been toting them around this whole time to keep the ghosties away." Paulina shot Valerie a sideways glare. "Rude, much? Friends are supposed to share."

"We stopped being friends years ago," Valerie retorted.
Paulina held the rocket higher. "I think you and I both know who this really belongs to."

Flinching, Valerie lurched for Paulina like a cornered animal.

Dash grabbed Valerie by the shoulder and flung her backwards into a music stand. As her shoulder clipped it, the legs flipped out, tangling her feet, making her fall. With a resounding CLANG, the stand toppled to the floor.

Dash loomed over Valerie.

No. Sam saw red and moved. In three strides she was on Dash’s back, arms wrapped around his neck and hanging behind him. She forced him to stumble a few steps away from Valerie.

"Guh—" he muttered stupidly. "Get off!"

Sam realized belatedly how tiny she was in comparison to Dash and that attacking him had been a bad idea. His muscles shifted underneath her grip. Her eyes widened as he whipped around, attempting to shake her off like a dog shook off water.

Blindly, Dash threw a punch backwards that connected with the side of her head.

Her ear popped and her head exploded in pain. With a cry, she let go and tumbled into a plastic chair, toppling it over and sprawling to the floor.

Stars danced in front of her eyes. She shook her head, trying to clear it. Preparing to launch herself back up and defend herself, Sam grunted and slammed her hand to the ground. Quick, before Dash could get on top of her—she paused at the sight before her.

Valerie was up again, her body in between Sam and Dash, looking murderous. She planted her feet and swung her arm out fast as a cobra strike.

There was a loud crunch, followed by a howl, ending with a voice yelling incredulously, "Fight Club! What is going on here?!"

Dash crumpled onto the ground, clutching at his nose. Blood seeped between his fingers.

Valerie blinked, her fists still raised. Blood smeared across her right knuckles.

Mr. Lancer glowered at the three of them from the door and flipped the lightswitch. With a low hum the fluorescents popped on and Sam felt exposed and immature.

"Lancer, sir— she hit me!" Dash whined. "You saw it!"


Where was Paulina? Sam looked around for the girl, but she was missing. Missing just like Valerie's backpack full of relics.

I didn't need your help," Valerie harped underneath her breath. The girl slumped in her chair, her knee bobbing up and down nervously, arms crossed, dark glower about her face. "I had it handled. Why can't you stay away?"
Sam crossed her arms as well, situated across from Valerie in her own chair. There was about three feet of hallway separating them. She eyed Valerie and shrugged. "Believe it or not, getting involved in one of your fights wasn't on my to do list," she snarked. The last place Sam wanted to be was in a chair across from Valerie Gray, outside the principal's office, awaiting her punishment.

Valerie's knee stopped bouncing for a second. Her eyes narrowed. "Why did you, then?" she questioned.

Sam glanced down at her boots, then towards the door to the principal's office. She ground her teeth together and pulled her shoulders up to her ears, shrugging again. She couldn't very well say that defending people was knit into her DNA. Or that it had tipped her over the edge seeing Paulina and Dash torment Valerie like that. Instead she said, "I abhor Dash Baxter." Sam glanced over and caught Valerie's eye.

Valerie's stoic face broke into a sly grin and she snorted, nodding appreciatively. "I feel that."

Sam sighed and pressed her head to the wall. "So, is it true? What Paulina said? About you hoarding relics?"

Valerie tensed. She blinked, as if remembering she was without her backpack, then her face crumbled. All that strength and tenacity faded away, leaving behind the broken Valerie that skulked around hallways. "I need that backpack," she said, more to herself. "They'll find me without it." Her hand clutched at the locket around her neck.

Sam fell silent, watching as Valerie tucked her knees closer to herself and pressed her face into them, cutting herself off. A thread of hate pulsed through her at the thought that Paulina had stolen the one thing that kept Valerie's terror at bay.

Sam frowned. Why would Paulina steal the backpack in the first place? Paulina loved ghosts. Her personal vendetta centered around finding one, so why would she be after relics?

"Manson?"

Sam was yanked from her thoughts. She peered up at Principal Ishiyama, a small plump Japanese woman with a severe bun, who was looking at her in a guarded way that made it impossible to know if she was mad. "Follow me," she clipped.

Her father sent a stern look her way via the rearview mirror. "You're lucky you only got detention," he muttered. "I know kids that've gotten suspended for less. What happened?"

Sam ducked her gaze, knowing full well she deserved this lecture. "Dash attacked Valerie, another girl at school."

Her father's gaze darkened, lingering on her reddened cheek. His grip strained against the steering wheel. "I should have a word with this Dash kid," he growled protectively.

"Baxter is a complete asshat," she muttered. "Having words with him won't change that. If anything it'll make it worse."

"Language, young lady."
Sam rolled her eyes.

Her father rolled his right back and Sam couldn't help but laugh at how ridiculous it looked. It hurt to smile or open her mouth too wide. Her head pounded from Dash's punch; her cheek sore and swollen. It would probably turn into a fat bruise by tomorrow morning.

"This isn't funny, Samantha," he scolded, although Sam could tell he was struggling not to smile. "Someone broke that boy's nose."

Sam gazed out the window distractedly. She plopped her chin in her palm. While Sam had scraped by with detention, Valerie and Dash had both gotten two day suspensions.

Her father glanced up at her. "No more fights," he ordered, "and you're grounded."

"I'm already grounded," Sam stated blithely.

"Yeah? Well, then I'll just have to..." Jeremy rapped his fingers along the steering wheel, then slumped. Sam guessed he had come to the conclusion that none of their punishments worked. "Look," he said, voice soft. "Your mother is going through a rough patch. We all are. I'd really appreciate it if you'd at least try to avoid fights? At least pretend to follow curfew?"

Sam ran her tongue along the back of her teeth. She sighed, "Alright."

Her phone buzzed.

Sam dug around in the front of her backpack. She didn't have many friends that she texted besides Tucker. Maybe he noticed her absence after third period or heard rumors of the fight.

[Valerie Gray wants to be your friend.]

Sam stared down at the line of text hard enough that the letters blurred together. Valerie, the girl that had threatened her, was friending her? In a daze, Sam unlocked her phone and accepted the request. Immediately a new message popped up.

[V] I couldn't find your phone number. I know what Paulina is going to do with the relics.

Sam blinked. Slowly, deliberately, feeling like this whole exchange was happening in one of her kaleidoscopic dreams, she typed,

[S] What?

[V] She's going to burn them at her Halloween party.

Another message slotted in underneath the last.

[V] She wants to get rid of anything that will stop the ghosts. We can't let her do that.

Sam scowled. We? We? Since when were they a team?

Valerie must have read her mind.

[V] I mean *YOU* can't let her do that.

[S] Why me?

[V] You're invited to the party.
Sam leaned back in her seat in realization. Valerie wanted her to sneak into the party and… what? Stop Paulina from performing some kind of weird half-assed summoning ritual? Or, avoiding that, go the party, find the backpack full of relics, and somehow smuggle it out without getting caught? Sam thought of what would happen should Paulina or one of the A-List catch her. She pulled at her seatbelt, feeling claustrophobic.

"Who are you texting?" her father asked, genuinely curious. It wasn't often that Sam held a conversation on the phone.

"Tucker," Sam deflected. She crafted another message.

[S] Why should I help you?

Pause. A lot of typing.

[V] Because 1. Between the two of us, you're the one that needs those relics most.
[V] 3. You have the guts to pull it off. And
[V] 4. It's your fault the ghosts are back at it again in the first place.

Sam thought she made some good points. Especially now that Danny and her were on shaky ground, seeing as he had been shielding her from the brunt of the ghosts antics, getting her hands on those relics sounded like a great plan. She didn't know if he was protecting her anymore.

[S] Fine. I'll help you get your relics back. Does this make us frenemies?

Three little dots bounced as Valerie typed out her response. They disappeared and reappeared like Valerie was trying to figure out what to say. Then, with a whoooosh, her message delivered.

[V] Yes.
Tonight You Belong To Me

Sam waited until the sun dipped completely, casting her room in shadows, before she slung her bag over her shoulder and hoisted her window open. She leaned out, gazing down at the garden. She expected a pair of blue eyes waiting for her. They weren't.

Her grip tightened around the cool steel of her fire escape. She sent a glance back into her room, thoughts traveling to her parents who were getting ready for their own Halloween party. She had promised she wouldn't sneak out. Her stomach roiled guiltily as she recalled the way her father had pleaded with her in the car. With a sigh, Sam stepped back into her room and shut her window.

She left in search of her mother, finding her in her bedroom, hunched over her mirror applying fake eyelashes. Her hair was teased straight up into a beehive. It looked heavy with hairspray. She had on a long black fitted dress, black fishnet tights, and red high heels. She spotted Sam in the mirror and smiled, turning, arms outstretched. "Like it?" She grinned wide, displaying a set of realistic-looking fangs.

"You're a vampire?" Sam guessed.

Her mother hummed in reply and turned her attention back to her eyelashes.

"I got invited to a Halloween party," Sam blurted. "I want to go."

Pamela paused. "You want to go," she repeated, as if Sam had just told her she was craving a steak. "You mean you want have fun with your peers? At a party?" She finished putting on a lash and leaned back, fanning the glue with her hand. Then a smile broke across her face. "Of course you can go."

"You'll..." Sam hesitated. "What? Really?"

"It's Halloween. Go have fun." She crossed her arms and wrinkled her nose, gesturing at Sam's outfit. "You're not going like that, though. I've got just the thing."

Pamela disappeared into her walk in closet, then came back toting a pink dress with ruffles and bows. It was tea length and had layers of taffeta that gave the skirt volume. The sweetheart neckline was lined with ruffled, layered chiffon. She held it up and gave it a good shake, the skirt bouncing merrily.

Sam paled.

"You can be a dolly!"

"No," Sam hissed, petrified. She edged away. "Never."

Pamela's eyes flashed strangely. Humor drained from her face and her grip tightened around the hanger.

Sam could hear the bass from the road. Ahead of her, the old hospital was lit up. The windows glowed and flickered eerily as if the inside was on fire. A cool mist settled around the base of the
building, making it feel as if it was rising up out of a cloud. The crematorium-like building didn't fit with the upbeat club music that drifted down the hill. The electronic thudding sounded like a heartbeat. Scantily costumed teens stumbling their way around the barbed-wire fence.

Sam got off her bike and cursed when her god awful dress caught on the pedal. Her mother had insisted on painting her face all up too, smearing bright pink circles on her cheeks and yanking her hair into pigtails. No matter how much foundation her mother had lathered onto her eye and cheekbone, the red spot from Dash's punch peeked through. It was tender to the touch. In a day or so it would no doubt blossom into a lovely bruise.

Sam kept telling herself that Halloween was the one occasion to dress like something you're not. It was the only way she could keep herself from tearing out of this outfit.

As she locked her bike up, her phone buzzed.

[V] You there?

[S] Unfortunately.

[V] Don't get caught.

"Thanks for that," she muttered to herself, before shoving her phone in her purse— an oversized lilac shoulder bag with pink trim and an enormous bow atop the flap. She hobbled on her mother's pink high heels— that were a half size too big— up the cement driveway. Briefly, she wondered how Paulina had managed to rent out this entire hospital, then remembered that Paulina was gorgeous and rich. She probably didn't rent this place at all. She probably got whatever she wanted. Sam thought of Danny. Well, maybe not whatever she wanted.

As she neared the building she came across a pair of wide doors. Two men in suits were checking a list of invitees.

Sam fished in her purse, pulled out the invitation, and was ushered inside.

This was not her scene. Her brain matter rattled as bass thudded uncomfortably in her ribs. Directly ahead of her, maybe fifty feet away, was a stage. A girl DJ dressed as a bee was situated in front of the crowd at a glowing laptop. Besides the blinding strobe lights coming from the stage, the rest of the party was so dark that it was hard to see anyone's faces clearly, and most of the faces Sam saw were obscured by masks or face paint. There were easily over a hundred people in this area alone, crowded, all dancing, yelling, and commingling.

Sam scowled. If given the choice, she didn't comingle. Too bad she didn't have a choice.

There were two doorways on either side of the dance floor that lead to separate hallways. The only way was directly through the dance floor. Sam picked the left doorway and inhaled deeply, preparing to dive into this ocean of sweaty, obnoxious students. Head hunkered, she shouldered her way forward. Arms and limbs flew everywhere. An elbow narrowly grazed her face. Someone spilled their drink on her high heels, staining them. Another student almost stepped on her foot. Panic welled in her and her shoving got desperate until, gasping for air, she popped out at the other end. Feeling somehow violated, Sam skittered down the less populated hallway. She slunk into the wall to regain her bearings. She tilted her head to the side and spotted Star and Paulina walking towards her. The pair were linked at the elbow, both in their cheerleading uniforms. Sam quickly averted her face. Hopefully they hadn't seen her.

Paulina shot Sam a curious look, then continued to skip past.
Sam blew out a slow breath. Silently, she thanked her mother. This frilly costume had most likely rendered her unrecognizable.

She crept down the hallway Star and Paulina had come from. The loud music and chattering faded behind her. Sam squinted, as the lights from the main stage didn't illuminate the hallway fully. Coming to a fork, Sam glanced left and right. To her right: a couple making out, pressed up against the run down hospital wall. Sam adverted her gaze and hurried left.

Ahead there was a door with a window that glowed a soft flickering amber light, like some kind of candle lay beyond it. Sam rested her palm over the handle and glanced inside. Empty.

She shoved the door open and slipped inside. The door swung shut behind her with a solid click.

On the peeling linoleum floor someone had painted a pentagram out of red paint and placed twelve slow burning candles around the symbol, which were melting and leaving behind piles of lumpy wax. Only a few of them were still lit. Sam gazed at the diagram on the floor and assumed it was red paint. Or… Or chicken blood. Sam shivered. Tearing her attention away from the circle, she pulled her flashlight out of her purse, sweeping it along the room.

It looked like it used to be a patient's room. There was a shattered window facing the street, and a door that led into an attached bathroom. Hanging from the ceiling was a curved metal rod, where a curtain had probably used to encircle a sick bed. Sam spotted a pile of party-goer's belongings.

She crossed the room, wincing at the echoing clicks of her high heels.

Sam tore through the pile, flinging away coats and backpacks that were of no interest to her. Then, underneath a thick white fur coat— no doubt Paulina’s— Sam found Valerie's backpack. She paused and glanced around, making sure no one was coming, before she yanked the zipper and shone her flashlight inside.

She fished out a pair of glasses— Mikey's. A dilapidated Dr. Seuss book, a leather dog collar with the name *Cujo*, a curious red stone, and a purple plastic toy dragon. She shoved them all in her purse. With a furrowed brow, she tore through the backpack again for the rocket, opening all the zippered pockets, digging her hand inside, but came up empty.

She dropped the backpack and sat back on her heels, stumped. The beam of her flashlight danced across the other twenty-something backpacks. There was no way she'd have time to search them all.

Sam closed her purse. Despite how full it was, it felt light and airy. The flap hummed against her palm. She recognized it— it was like when she had found the screwdriver in the attic. Five relics out of six was solid. That meant there was five ghosts that couldn't come near her right now. It had almost been too simple. Too lucky. It made her uneasy.

She decided it was best not to test her good fortune. With a quiet click, she put her flashlight away and headed for the door, intent on high-tailing it out of the party before Paulina noticed the relics were missing. She had her hand outstretched when a slice of someone's face flashed past the window. Sam gasped and whirled, melding into the wall right next to the door at the exact moment it flung open. It swung around and obscured her from view.

"Hang on. It's in my purse," a girl's voice said.

Sam held her breath, head ducked just enough to hide from the window in the door. She wondered if her high heels were visible underneath the crack. Slowly she twisted her pointer and middle finger together, making a silent wish that these girls would hurry up and grab whatever it was they needed
and leave, quickly, without noticing her. 

Rustling. A light darted about the floor. "Found it!"

"Let's go," the other girl complained. "This place is creepy. What's with all the candles?"

"I told you Paulina goes all out with decor," her friend said. 

Footsteps, walking delicately around the candles.

"Yeah but this looks, like, real or something," the other girl said, voice shaky. 

Her friend made a fake moaning sound. "Oh what— scared? I'm sure this is all just to freak people out."

"I don't know… Ever since Paulina and Star broke into that mansion they've been weird..." The pair of them walked out of the room, closing the door behind them. Their conversation faded.

Once she was certain they weren't coming back, Sam yanked the door open and darted into the hallway. Blood roared in her ears as she retraced her steps. She turned right at the fork and sped down the hall, the electronic music from the dance floor straight ahead pumping through her veins—then she jerked to a stop.

The spotlight onstage swiveled and pointed directly down the hallway over and over, illuminating it with flashes of vivid light. Different students in costumes stumbled about, dancing, laughing, but one person stood still amidst the chaos, watching her.

Sam's grip tightened on her purse, holding it close to her hip for safekeeping. She understood how Valerie felt in that moment. It did make her feel safer knowing the relics were close. Despite her best efforts to remain calm, Sam took a step backwards as the figure walked towards her. Her body screamed to run.

The spotlight swung around again, catching his hair and the shape of his shoulders, casting rim light on his cheekbones and neck. He was wearing a mask.

Sam caught the strange scent of burned cigarettes and something and frowned. "Danny," she announced, knowing that smell. The flashing strobe light brought back memories of him in her room, crawling up the walls, chasing her mother down a flight of stairs. Sam eyed him cautiously; she doubted he was here to spread good news.

He came to a halt a few feet from her. He had on an oversized purple and pink striped sweater and dark jeans. His blue eyes peered out from behind two ovals in a black velvet mask. Attached to a headband, two felt triangle ears.

He scoured her outfit up and down. Sam could tell he was trying hard not to laugh. She glared, daring him to say something.

"You're very… pink," he managed, having to raise his voice to be heard over the blaring music. "I barely recognized you."

"Wish you hadn't," Sam retorted coolly.

A muscle in Danny's cheek flinched. He nodded, like he knew he deserved that, which only made Sam more annoyed. "I know you might never forgive me, and that's fair, but I am sorry. Is... Is your mom okay?" he asked.
Weirdly enough, yes. Sam would have thought that fall would have broken a bone or two, maybe given her mother a concussion, but Pamela had been bouncing around on cloud nine. She was back to her old cheery optimistic self. It was almost like that fall had cured her mom of her funk. Sam didn't tell Danny that. "Why are you here? I thought I made it clear I don't want to see you."

"Got a bad feeling about tonight," Danny admitted. "Had to check in. You ok?"

"I'm fine," she grated. Had it been anyone else, Sam would have stomped away and called it a night, but something in his tone gave her pause. "What kind of bad feeling?"

Danny hesitated, then said something, but his voice got swallowed by the roar of the party.

"What?" Sam yelled.

His eyes trailed along her cheekbone, distracted. "Did someone hit you?"

Sam rolled her eyes. She shoved past him and began to work her way through the dance floor, pointedly ignoring the fact that she could feel Danny shadowing her through the crowd. An icy hand grabbed her forearm. "Sam."

"What?" she shot, glancing back, pausing to take in the sight. Danny looked disconcertingly out of place amongst the DJ, strobe lights, scantily costumed girls, and artless grinding dance moves. He had never looked more dated. Even his costume, made primarily out of felt and velvet, looked old. He didn't pay attention to his surroundings, though. He bent at the waist and drew his lips to her ear, the edge of his mask brushed her cheek. A memory slammed into her—a dream—of her sitting in a chair across from a trick door. Only this time Danny didn't whisper a name in her ear. He asked, "The people you care about... Are they safe?"

Sam reeled back, peering into his eyes to see if he was joking, but there was no humor in them. They were dead. She gripped his sweater, yanking him along, until they were out of the throng of people. With her high heels her face was only a few inches below his. She leaned forward until her nose was an inch away. "What do you mean?" she hissed.

"You should check," Danny continued. His eyes darted back and forth across her face. "The dead are restless. Someone must have—" He cut off, attention diverting to something behind Sam.

Sam glanced back.

"Ghost boy. You think that mask would trick me?" Paulina purred. "How do you like my party?"

Danny blinked. He looked confused, like he hadn't realized where he was. Sam wondered what it was like being a ghost, and whether ghosts saw things in the same detail or if their view of the world was warped and fuzzy. Danny's eyes flicked around at the rowdy teenagers, the dance floor, and the over-the-top decor. His expression shifted to one of feigned shock. "I had no idea this was your scene, Polly."

Sam watched Danny's joke bounce off Paulina's forehead, ricocheting, spiralling off in a merry rubberband trajectory towards the punch bowl.

"Of course it is, silly," Paulina beamed. Her goo-goo eyes finally tore off Danny and took stock of Sam. Her smile faltered, gaze darting between the two of them, calculating, multiplying, subtracting, long dividing, and... her face suddenly cleared, then darkened. "How long have you two lovebirds been hanging out?" she asked acidly.

"We're not lovebirds," Danny and Sam chorused. They paused, looking at each other. Sam shot him
a glare to say this whole predicament was his fault.

Paulina sent Sam a murderous look.

Sam genuinely dreaded the revenge Paulina was thinking up. It was bound to be publicly humiliating.

Then Paulina grinned, her eyes softening. "Well, if you two aren't together," Paulina began, cozing up to Danny, who looked dumbstruck by her cheerleading uniform and her baby giraffe eyelashes, "maybe you'd like to dance with me?" She reached out and grabbed his hand.

Danny reared, ripping his hand away with a snarl. His eyes a burned a brittle green.

Sam blinked at the way Danny had physically recoiled— almost like Paulina's touch had been painful.

Paulina's eyes grew huge and she breathed out a soft 'oh', then pulled out a rocket from her purse. "Is it this?"

From up close, Sam could read the charred label: IF LOST RETURN TO 3765 Hyde Park Ave, Cincinnati, OH. Sam chanted the address in her head in hopes of retaining it. She weighed the pros and cons of trying to snatch the thing out of Paulina's hand, but she probably didn't have a good chance of escaping unscathed. Sam gritted her teeth and instead turned to Danny, but he was gone.

Paulina was more than disappointed. Her glare could bezel a diamond. Storming within each eye was a supernova, exploding and collapsing, writhing in the mass of her emotion.

Paulina pointed the rocket directly at Sam like a gun. "Do you know what this is made of?"

Sam shook her head, pig tails waggling.

"Papa looked it up. This toy is made out of a titanium alloy. What NASA uses to build jet engines. He told me it can withstand heat up to 5,000 degrees, meaning it is pretty indestructible. I've been trying to destroy it. It's Phantom's relic. As long as it exists it could be used to keep him away and I don't want that, but it just… won't… die…"

"You could always just mail it to China or something," Sam muttered under her breath, eyeing the rocket sidelong, thinking that it would be a good thing to have.

Paulina either ignored her or didn't hear. She raised the rocket up over her shoulder and sailed it past, mimicking the way it would arc in flight. "Do you know what isn't indestructible?" she asked sweetly.

Sam gritted her teeth. Her balled fists twitched at her side, itching to reach out and steal the rocket while Paulina was taunting her with it.

"I know what isn't indestructible," Paulina whistled, eyes trained on the model, as she flew it straight at Sam's heart. Sam flinched as the pointed nose pressed hard into her chest. Paulina caught her gaze and twisted it.

You would be a fool not to understand the threat, and Sam didn't consider herself a fool.
Sam hobbled down the hill away from the party as quickly and as dignified as her mother's high heels would allow. Sweat gathered on the nape of her neck, making her shiver. Glancing down, she made sure she had her purse, and that it was still full of relics. All but one—Paulina still had Danny's rocket.

Sam yanked her hair out of the pigtails and rubbed at her scalp to rid herself of pins and needles. She scrubbed her face to wipe off the makeup, but only succeeded in smearing it.

When she reached the fence she saw a familiar face awaiting her on the other side.

"You really didn't like that rocket, huh?" Sam commented darkly as she walked past, aiming for the gate.

Danny scowled and took a long inhale from a cigarette, trailing along on the other side of the fence. "I was never much into parties," he deflected, smoke curling through the chain link. "Not really my bag."

Sam's gaze followed the hand holding the cigarette—the one with the crescent scar. She huffed, wrinkling her nose at the smell. "You're smoking again."

"I don't hang out with you anymore, remember?" Danny countered. He crossed his arms.

"Then why are you following me?" She reached the gate, slipping through it. Her heels stuck in the gravel.

Danny followed her as she crouched to unlock her bike. He leaned against the fence and crossed his legs at his ankles. His foot fidgeted nervously, knee bouncing. "I still have that off feeling," he mused aloud. He took another anxious puff, as if to calm his nerves.

Sam paused, key in the lock. She shot him a look over her shoulder. "You dead people have some sort of grim reaper power? What is this Final Destination?" she sniffed.

"Think, Sam." Danny flicked the butt of his cigarette in irritation. "Who's about to find out something they're not supposed to?"

Realization seared like lightning through her body, stiffening her limbs. Sam gasped. She dove for her phone.
Two missed calls. One voicemail. Two unread text messages.

The voicemail was from an unknown number. The calls and texts— Tucker.

[Tucker, 7:45pm] Found a DMV employee that used her daughter's birthday for a password. Rookie mistake. The last owner of the car was Jack Fenton. Maybe a relative? Looking into it...

[Tucker, 8:21pm] Meet me at the archives asap. I found your ghost. I know why there was no information on him. Mikey found it first and put it on hold. It's been sitting in the reserve bin this whole time.

Sam stared down at the texts, then, with trembling fingers, played the voicemail.

9:42 pm: A rustle of paper, the sound of a pen scratching. A deep rumble voice spoke: 'Hello Ms. Manson, this is Detective Damon Gray of the APPD. I'm calling you regarding information that's come from your tip. We have reason to believe that the owner of the skull you found is linked to a 1962 cold case, which we are now re-opening. Give me a call back so we can arrange a meeting to discuss more. I would like to know how you found that cabin. My direct line is 513-329-4922 extension 34.'

The world roiled underneath her feet. Her grip tightened around her phone until her hand ached. She looked up and found Danny gazing at her expectantly, expression grave.

He looked unsurprised. And why would he be? He had been leaving behind bread crumbs. It was only a matter of time until someone followed, and like Hansel and Gretel, the trail led them straight into an oven. "Who?" Danny asked.


Tucker had texted her an hour ago, Gray less than fifteen minutes ago. There might still be time to get to them before the ghosts did.

Danny's eyes widened at the mention of Officer Gray. He pushed off the chain link fence. "You have time to save one. Not both."

Ignoring him, Sam punched in Tucker's number. It rang itself hoarse until the voicemail pick up. She hung up; she dialed again. "I can get to them both," she muttered, more to herself.

Danny shrugged and tailed her as she headed towards her bike. His expression said he didn't believe her, but wasn't willing to argue. "But you'll have to start with one. Who will you save first?"

Tucker didn't pick up. Sam frowned slightly and dialed Officer Gray. More voicemail. Panic started to creep in her chest, making her breath flutter. "Why isn't this working?" She resisted the urge to throw her phone in frustration.

"You think ghosts are going to make it easy?"

Sam ignored him and dialed Gray again. It rang endlessly. Again. Nothing. She paced in a tight circle, mind racing, trying to come up with a plan in which there would be a happy ending.

"You have to choose," Danny reminded her. "Time's ticking."
"This isn't fair," Sam said, rounding on him, voice cracking. None of it was fair. *Amanda, Mikey, Ida, Officer Gray, Tucker—*

"Choices are rarely fair," Danny breathed out, smoke spilling from his mouth, vanishing his form from his feet up. 'They make up for it by being easy.'

Sam picked up her bike lock key from where she had dropped it, turning her back on the ghost. "Easy!?!" she repeated, voice thick with emotion. Scowling, she knelt down next to her bike and struggled with the lock. "It's a Sophie's choice."

He tilted his head. "The moment you understood your choice, you made it."

He was right, of course. Sam hated that he was right. Hated how Danny discussed imminent death with the same aloofness he discussed the weather. Like it happened so often that it was blasé.

Sam unlocked her bike, climbed atop, and glared at him. "What's your choice, then?"

Danny's bright eyes blinked behind his velvet mask. "My choice?"

"Will you help me save them? Or will you do nothing?" Which was it? The boy that had danced with her in her room or the boy that chased her mother down the stairs? Which was Danny? "This is your chance to show me. To make up for what you did. Are you good or evil?"

He broke into a heartbreakingly sad smile. "C'mon, Boots. Aren't we all a bit of each?"

"This isn't a joke, Danny." She gripped her handlebars resolutely.

Understanding dawned across his features. That grin faltered, grew stale. "You're really going to try and stop a ghost all on your own?"

"I have to."

Sam felt like an exotic specimen, with the way Danny was studying her in that moment. Like he didn't quite know what to make of her. Like he had never met anyone quite like her. His lips parted in awe, hands limp at his sides, staring like she was rare finery. Two milky green cataracts formed a glowing film over his wide eyes. He dropped his cigarette and stomped on it.

"Alright," he decided, "I'll help."

.

.

Sam's side complained as she rode as fast as humanly possible towards the library. Somewhere along the way she kicked her high heels off, opting to go barefoot in order to get a better grip on her pedals.

She held her phone to her ear.

*This is Tucker! Don't bother leaving a voicemail.*

The sky began to drizzle as she skidded into the Amity Park Public Library parking lot. The raindrops stained the pavement black. The windows were dark. Nothing stirred inside. That, coupled with the enormous Greek columns, made the library feel like a mausoleum.

Sam threw her bike onto the ground in a clatter, wrenched her purse off, and ran for the front
entrance, bare feet scuffing along the cement steps two at a time.

She tugged at the door. Locked. She let out a frustrated scream and kicked at it, ignoring the ache in her foot. After the third kick proved ineffective, she turned away and peered at the windows for another way inside.

Her pause was long enough to allow thoughts of Officer Gray to surface— No. She couldn't think about him right now. She made her choice. Tucker. Focus on Tucker. From what little she knew of Officer Gray, she thought he would have agreed with her.

Footsteps approached from behind and Danny was suddenly at her side. He had lost the costume. "When you enter you'll be in the ghost realm. We're late. Who knows what's in there by now."

"Your killer?" she asked.

Danny shook his head, once, like, 'I'm not allowed to say.'

"Tucker's in there," Sam said. "I have to go in."

"They will try to trick you. Promise you'll listen to me, no matter what you see."

Sam hesitated, throat suddenly very dry. Did she trust him enough to make that promise? After everything that had happened? Her eyes darted towards the door, where Tucker could very well be fighting for his life. She realized it didn't matter. Danny was her best chance at saving Tucker and they had wasted enough time debating. They had to work together. She had to trust him, for Tucker's sake.

"I promise," Sam vowed.

Danny placed his hands on her shoulders. The strong scent of cigarette smoke and cologne washed over her. "Whatever happens…” he trailed off, let go, and stepped directly through the door.

Sam stared.

The lock clicked and the door opened. Quickly, she hurried inside. A small chink of light from outside traveled across her feet, disappearing, as Danny shut the door.

It was nearly pitch black inside the library. Sound was muffled like right after a blanketing of snow, only less peaceful; more dreadful. The floor was freezing against Sam's bare feet. She let out a shaky breath, seeing it condense in front of her face. The library was so dark that Sam could barely make out Danny's outline next to her. From the sides of her vision she could see him faintly, but if Sam stared straight at him the glow went away. She caught a slice of his face. It was blurry, distorted. She held up her hand an inch from her face, finding that it looked the same.

Danny grabbed her outstretched hand and tugged her along. He crept slowly, cautiously. His hand felt more substantial than normal. There was even some semblance of warmth in it.

"Which way?" Danny whispered.

"Basement. Archives. Take a right."

As her eyes adjusted, she could begin to see her surroundings. The library was warped. Objects were the wrong size. Bookshelves towered infinitely upwards, while tables were only as tall as Sam's knees. To her left, a book about the same size as a small car rested against a bookshelf— a blatant sign that she had entered a new plane of reality. Uncanniness spread like ice down Sam's spine.
Something moved up ahead. Sam jumped.

Danny stiffened.

Peeking around his shoulder, she saw... she blinked rapidly.

No. That couldn't be right.

Danny walked towards them, light from the archive's entrance etching his outline in a fiery halo.

*Has to be a mirror,* Sam told herself, in order to keep some trace of sanity. But something about his face was off and Sam couldn't pinpoint what.

"Predictable," the reflection said and crossed his arms.

*Her* Danny didn't have his arms crossed and he hadn't spoken.

Sam couldn't believe what she was seeing. "Danny?"

"That's not me," he replied.

"You'd think after fifty-two years you'd give up," the doppelgänger tutted. "I have to give you some credit. Although now I know who your new sleuth is." Other-Danny's eyes flicked to hers. Sam felt like he was x-raying her with his gaze.

"What is it talking about?" Sam whispered. "What'd it do with Tucker?"

"Quiet," Danny shushed, grip turning painful. He shifted and pressed his back protectively against her, effectively making himself into a shield.

"I'm curious. What does it feel like to fail over and over?" other-Danny taunted.

Sam shivered. Danny was right. That wasn't him.

"It isn't over yet," the real Danny countered. "Move."

At the order, green rings crackled from Danny's lips through the air, washing over his doppelgänger, who obeyed and took a step to the side, like he was about to let them walk right past. Then his frame jerked and a pained expression fought across his features. "You— You think that'll work on me?" he spat. His eyes flared crimson.

"I had hoped," Danny joked wryly. He gave Sam's hand a brief squeeze and was gone.

Sam remained rooted to the spot. Green lightning whirred around her in circles. A thunderous booming noise ripped through the library, echoing infinitely—a repetitive *bzzzzaaaaaaap* of discharging electricity. At the sound she ducked instinctively and covered her head with her arms as bits of exploded book rained down. Her heart galloped in her throat, each beat pleading with her brain to ba-dum *leave*, bad-dum *run now* and bad-dum *never come back.* *Forget about Tucker, save yourself. No human could fight this; it's as hopeless as trying to fight a tornado with a gun...*

Wind buffeted her from every direction and screamed in her ear. Something toppled the bookshelf behind her in a loud commotion. She caught a glimpse of Danny sprawled on the floor amidst a pile of giant books, lightning sparking in his eyes, another Danny stalking towards him. She couldn't tell which was which.

Sam pried her legs from up off the floor and ran for the unguarded archive entrance. The warm light
called to her. She had to find Tucker and get him out of here. Nothing else mattered. Not even the fact that she was jumping over a pencil the size of a small log.

She took the stairs three at a time. As she barreled down, the stairway shrank until she was wiggling her way towards a small prick of white light. She used the heels of her hands to propel her way forward, pushing aside her claustrophobia, until she was crawling on her belly through a tiny opening into the archives. She toppled onto a hard white marble floor. Lights shook above her head. She could hear the faint sound of Danny and other-Danny battling on the floor above.

Sam blinked rapidly and got to her feet. She knew that she was standing in the archives, but it looked nothing like the last time she'd been here. The room was overly bright compared to the upstairs. Everything was white. Even the spines of the books were white, titles erased. But, most notably, the aisles stretched outwards infinitely. It felt stepping between two facing mirrors, seeing yourself repeated, forever, until dissolving into a white oblivion.

Sam stopped trying to rationalize what she was seeing. She was convinced that at any moment she'd wake in her bed.

Raising her hand to her eyes to try and shield them from the bright white, Sam picked an aisle, and started to run down it. Loose papers fluttered in her wake.

"Tucker?" she called, starting soft. "Tucker?"

She ran down a few more hallways. Pretty soon she was lost. Everything blurred into a field of white nothingness. "TUCKER?!" she whisper-screamed. A whine of panic tore through her composure. She yanked some books and boxes off the shelves, dumping them onto the floor, in order to mark aisles she had already searched.

"TUCKER?!" she full on screamed.

The noise of ripping paper drew her attention. She raced towards it and rounded the corner of a bookshelf.

Tucker sat on the floor amongst a pile of newspapers. His face was deathly pale. Black stained his lips and drew smeared ink lines down his cheeks and neck. His glasses were cracked and crooked upon his nose. With a chill, Sam noticed he had two pupils in each eye. Staring blankly at nothing, his hands ripped a chunk of paper off the stack before him, crumpled it, and shoved it in his mouth. He chewed methodically, swallowed, ripped a new piece. The papers around him formed the angular shape of a coffin.

Her mouth went dry. "Stop!" She lurched forward and yanked the wadded paper out of Tucker's hands. She wondered how much he had already ingested, then wondered if you could die from eating paper or poison yourself from ink.

Tucker ripped another piece of paper.

She grabbed it before it could get near his mouth. A headline caught her eye and she looked down at the newspaper in her hands, uncrumpling it. In bold, large type it read: WHERE IS HE? Underneath was a black and white photo of Danny, donning a sweater vest with a white collared shirt. His face was soft, lip quirked in the hint of a smile, like he was party to some joke they were all missing.

Her eyes tore around the floor. There were more headlines, scattered.

STILL MISSING. BRING HIM HOME. AMITY SEARCH CALLED OFF.
Tucker's hands crumpled another piece of newspaper in Sam's negligence. Sam saw the title briefly, before it was shoved in his mouth.

**NATIONWIDE SEARCH FOR DANIEL FENTON CONTINUES.**

Daniel Fenton. A name. Her brain jolted, supplying: Jack Fenton, Madeline Fenton. Two names she had seen before, numerous times. A vision assaulted her—her tree, with two tombstones beside it and Danny always sitting pointedly atop one of them. Sam glanced at Tucker. This didn't feel like a victory.

"Tucker? We need to go. Get up," Sam pleaded. She went to grab his arm.

Someone snatched her from around the waist and flung her back. Breath got knocked from her stomach. She tumbled, twisting around to find Danny—or was it other-Danny?

"You can't touch him. Or you could get possessed too," he explained breathlessly.

"Who's possessing—? Wait Tucker's possessed?" Sam struggled at the idea. "Then you do something!" She gestured at Tucker who was steadily eating his way through evidence.

Danny's eyes were wide. "Yeah I would but you know it's not that easy to force out a possession. It's a slow, delicate process," he tittered, "Things could go wrong. I can't just…" he broke off helplessly.

Sam caught the waver of fear in his voice. She had never seen him scared before. Even in the woods he had kept his cool. Goosebumps broke out across her arms and legs.

Danny paced back and forth. His hands ran through his hair, lacing behind the back of his neck. "Ok, ok," he muttered to himself darkly, eyes darting back and forth across the floor, like he was pumping himself up for something.

"Danny," Sam yelled. "We're running out of time." She didn't know how she knew that, but a primal part of her knew the longer they stayed in the library the lower their chances of getting out.

"Time!" Danny laughed, like she had told the punchline to some giant cosmic joke. He caught her eye, face growing serious and resolute, then dug in his heels and bolted straight at Tucker.

Sam only had a split second to be concerned before Danny flew into Tucker and Tucker's face contorted. His body began to shake and his head tossed from side to side. Each time an after image of two other bodies lingered, like two other people were inside Tucker and Tucker was trying to shake them out.

Sam shivered, stumbling back.

"No!" Tucker screamed, voice shrill. He coughed and hunched over, back spasming painfully as he retched. Slimy wads of blue and black newspaper splattered around his hands. He choked. He retched again.

It physically hurt to stand there and not comfort Tucker in some way. A whine fought behind her taut lips. She got onto her hands and knees and crawled towards him, keeping a safe distance.

"It's quiet where we're from. Full of fishes..." he cried. His eyes blew wide, bugged—three pupils swimming in them now. One red, one brown, one blue. "They're always hungry. Sometimes the ground falls out. Stop. Struggling."

"What?" Sam breathed. Tucker was clearly out of his mind. Was this even Tucker speaking?
"It's your responsibility to do something about it! Tell them. Tell them who did it. TELL THEM," Tucker bellowed. He dissolved into mutterings and sickly groans, calming somewhat. Besides Tucker's heavy breathing everything turned eerily silent.

Sam sat back on her haunches, eyes darting from one aisle to the next. It felt too still, too peaceful, compared to everything that has just happened. Her hair stood up along her arms and legs. It felt like they were being watched. We are not alone.

No sooner than she thought that then two blurs burst from Tucker and chaos returned. The lights above exploded, glass raining into her hair and down her neck. Sam winced as glass filleted tiny cuts down her back.

Green lightning bounced around, pinging off bookshelves and metal filing cabinets, leaving behind charred bits of paper. The deafening hum of it vibrated the floor. Sam ducked as it arced. She could feel the heat of it as it narrowly past her.

Danny manifested three yards to her left in a whirl of smoke, hand raised in the air, condensing the unruly lightening into a ball, before flinging it at a shadow near the back of the archive. It collided with a clap of thunder that shook the remaining lights.

A figure stumbled into existence. An enormous man, dressed in a heavy long coat, jeans, and thick hiking boots. Along his waist hung a shotgun and an array of hunting knives. Most notably, he had no head. The headless man grabbed his gun and aimed it at Danny, cocking the trigger with a cruel snap.

Danny stumbled a step back, alarmed.

Sam was frozen in shock.

"Get Tucker and run," Danny yelled. It didn't have the leadened weight of one of his orders, but it launched Sam into action anyway.

She suppressed her terror, got her feet underneath her, and made for Tucker. Glass gnawed into the soles of her bare feet, burrowing deep into her skin. Pain lanced up her legs. Behind her, a shot rang out, incredibly loud. The echo of it rattled the entire room, making her stumble and nearly slip in her own blood. Sam didn't look back, didn't stop. Danny was already dead. It wasn't like a gunshot to the face was going to do much.

On the other hand, Tucker was still very much alive and Sam wanted to keep it that way. He was in a heap on the ground, clutching his stomach. His face contorted in agony. Sam hooked her arms and tried to hoist him up by the armpits but it was impossible with how much his limbs were shaking.

"Sam," Tucker gasped, more lucid. "They asked me if I'd let them in. I didn't mean to— didn't know. Dying... Gotta be... Hurts."

He gagged and doubled over, ripping out of Sam's grasp. His stomach spasmed and he threw up another batch of pulp. In between heaves a scream tore from his white lips.

Sam felt another flash of heat bolt past her face as Danny continued to hold off the headless man. Paper whirled through the air like frenzied ash. The last remaining lights blew out and Sam was blind except for the flashes of green lightning that intermittently lit the hallways.

"No one's going to die," Sam declared, although she wasn't so sure anymore. No. Focus on the here and now. One thing at a time: Get Tucker out.
She roped her arms back underneath Tucker's armpits, yanked him upright again. This time they got their balance. Adrenaline lent her the extra strength needed to drag Tucker back the way she came. Quickly, she realized they were lost. The aisles all looked the same and wound haphazardly like a maze. Sam was half convinced they had moved.

"...Saw an office with a trick doorway..." Tucker muttered deliriously. "...found a basement full of dead people..."

Sam blinked as her eyes adjusted to the absence of light. She hooked a right on a whim and stumbled upon a small study space that had two wooden chairs facing one another. Like spokes on a wheel, over ten hallways branched off away from the clearing. Her eyes darted down each.

There! A small black hole at the end of a hallway. The exit! It wasn't that far away! She ran three steps towards it before noticing something off.

Peeking out from all the ends of the aisles were those kids. They ducked their mutilated faces as soon as they noticed Sam looking, but Sam could hear the noise of scuffling feet and giggling. She could hear their whisperings.

"...Don't look at us..."

"...We're hideous..."

A soft whining noise filled the air and pairs of animalistic eyes glowed, catching and reflecting the green light. Hounds. Like the one Amanda Scully had seen.

Sam ignored them, pressing forward. All that mattered was that exit.

Suddenly, Mikey Voss appeared, blocking the path.

Sam's grip tightened around Tucker in surprise.

Mikey looked just like he had while alive. Same gelled red hair, mousy posture, gangly frame, and thick glasses. He noticed her attention and sent her a vivid glare. There was accusation in it. Like 'you did this to me'. One hand moved slowly up to his face, cupping his lips, as he mouthed a sarcastic 'Good luck.'

Light raced away and Sam was blind again.

Confusion.

A thud resounded behind her, followed by a distinct choking sound.

Oh wait. No— was that Tucker?

Which way was the exit? She was spun around.

She knew she couldn't just stand still in the middle of the aisle like bait— she had to move— but her knees were wobbly and threatening to give out under Tucker's weight. His head lolled on her shoulder as he groaned sickly.

Another green flash. Sam could see.

Mikey held a silver object aloft. Sam recognized it as a lighter and her heart stopped. "Danny," she rasped, then screamed, "Danny!" But Danny was gone, probably still battling the hunter.
Mikey flicked it open, gaze flitting from flame, to Sam, to flame, which grew enormous in size. It lapped the air like a rabid animal; shadowed claws tore up the walls behind him. The light reflected a mad glint in his glasses. Every inch of the archive glowed red.

Hounds yipped. Children's faces peeked out of the aisleways with cattish curiosity, their eyes hovering, glowing, silent, like they were all holding a collective breath.

Then, in one sinuous motion, Mikey flung the lighter and the archive exploded in flame.
So, Bye Bye Love

With a loud *whoosh* the flame became an inferno. It moved quicker than regular fire, engulfing the outermost reaches of the archive first. Then, it slithered down the aisleways, gobbling up fuel as it crept.

"No!" Sam yelled. Her fear dissolved into outrage. She shook her head, hair sticking to her sweat. 

No. This was not how this was going to end. This was not how she died. They hadn't come this far just to... to lose.

The ghosts lurked like shadows behind storage bins and bookcases. They cowered, yet watched with morbid curiosity, as a wave of heat bore down on Sam and Tucker.

Tucker's body shook violently until Sam could barely hold them both upright.

"Go without me," Tucker wheezed. "Tell everyone what happened."

"I'm not leaving you so shut up," Sam hissed. Something whipped past her and Tucker stiffened in her grasp. Abruptly, he straightened and quieted. His limbs stopped shaking, eyes glazed, mouth slack.

Sam blinked. "...Tucker?"

A pair of hands gripped her tightly, yanking her away from him. They phased her into the next aisle. She tumbled behind a filing cabinet.

Danny peered down at her. Despite the growing heat of the fire, his body was cool.

"Tucker—" Sam garbled.

"Skulker has him again," Danny gusted, huddling close. He crooked his head to listen as they hid behind the cabinet. His visage was flickering. Face taut and pale, hair unkempt, eyes dimmed. He looked... defeated. Resigned. Like this had happened before— many times.

Like he was giving up.

"Don't give me that look," Sam choked. Soot flooded her mouth, hot, burning. Smoke darkened the room. Coughing, she attempted to cover her mouth with her arm, trying to keep out the worst of the ash.

Light from the fire danced across Danny's face. "We're too late."

"Don't. You're not allowed to say that." She twisted in his grasp— yet he didn't let her go. "It isn't over yet, remember? You said that. You haven't given up for over fifty years—" A sob wrestled it's way out of her throat. "You can't give up now!"

Sweat trickled down her neck. It was stifling. Sam could barely breathe. Waves of intense heat battered into her, making the air feel as thick as water. Sam peered beyond Danny's shoulder and saw an enormous wall of fire blocking the way out.

"There's too many of them," Danny wrenched.

"You said you'd help!" Sam screamed, her voice raw and breaking. Her fingernails dug desperately into his sweater, tearing it. With a start, Sam discovered that Danny's entire chest was littered with
"Listen," Danny ordered. Sam snapped to attention.

His blue eyes were enormous; so bright they appeared to float without his body. They were filled with tears.

The flames crackled closer with a deafening roar. Danny leaned in, wrapping his cold arms around her like he was trying to protect her from the heat. His mouth was right near her ear, his cool cheek pressed against hers. "I'm not giving up, Sam. I'm giving in, for now. I know when something's over. When it's inescapable," he murmured, "Believe me, Sam. I know better than anyone when I've lost."

"Don't." Her head spun as she gasped for air. "Try again."

"Boots," Danny said, and it sounded like an apology.

"Don't." She didn't need ghost powers for her voice carrying the same weight as one of his orders. She pushed at Danny's chest and pointed towards where she had last seen Tucker. "Try again."

Danny's grip around her loosened. "Okay," he said and was gone in a blur of movement.

He never made it to Tucker. Another ghost intercepted him mid-air and they tumbled into the bookshelves. The shelves fell, exploding in a shower of embers and debris.

Sam shielded her face and pressed her back up against the filing cabinet. The metal seared through her jacket. All the taffeta in her mother's pink dress crinkled under the heat. Pain brought things back to brittle clarity. She chanced taking her hand away from her eyes to try and peer out through the thick haze of ash.

Find Tucker. She had to find Tucker.

Bunching up the dress as best she could, Sam crawled on her hands and knees. She inched towards the direction she saw Tucker last, until she found a spot where the bookshelves had collapsed and, through the smoke, she saw him. He was standing right where she had left him. Her limbs nearly went out in relief— until she noticed the flames licking up Tucker's pants, engulfing his arms and torso. He never moved or shrieked. Just stood there and allowed the fire to eat him.

The world might as well have stopped turning.

Sam's brain went silent. Her vision tunneled. Sound was irrelevant. She was only distantly aware that she was screaming incoherently. She found her feet and wrenched herself up. Heat tripled in intensity the higher she stood. She got a lungful of carbon monoxide. Vertigo slammed into her. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. Couldn't see. Couldn't speak. Falling. Backwards. Down a dark hole, wind whistling past her ears.

She hit the floor, hard, sputtering, tears streaming down her face. All she could think was: Tucker's dead Tucker's dead Tucker's dead...

"Wake up," she rasped. This couldn't be real. "Wake up."

Ash and charred paper got stuck between her fingers as she clawed at the ground. Fire jumped in her periphery. Only a few minutes left before it devoured her too.
A pair of nice shoes entered her blurry vision. Her tear-filled eyes shot up.

Danny crouched low, brows knitted in concern. He held out his hand. "I've got you, Sam. Let's go," he yelled over the din of the fire.

Sam grappled for him like an infant. At least Danny would be here while she died. That would be a small comfort. As she outstretched her arms for him to pick her up, facts began to trickle through the neurons in her shock-rattled brain.

Danny's sweater was no longer ripped. His right hand didn't have a crescent scar.

A trick. This was a trick.

"No," Sam breathed. A stone sank in her stomach. What happened to the real Danny?

The doppelgänger dropped the hand. His face flicked from comforting to murderous, before he lunged, fingers wrapping around her throat.

Sam's eyes widened. His cold hands pressed near her collarbone, near where the car accident had snapped it, and she felt bugs crawl underneath her skin. She scrapped, clawing at his face, kicking, bucking, but nothing slowed him down. He shoved her back against the cabinet with enough force that her head clanged off the metal. Ice-fire spread down her back. Sam tried to scream, but her mouth gaped wordlessly.

Other-Danny's face hovered inches away. Blue eyes narrowed into thin slivers of ice.

Then, his face melted clean off as he took a bolt of green electricity directly to the temple and Sam was free.

She flopped on the ground, gasping for breath, grinding her face into the miserably hot marble floor. Distantly, she felt her cheek alight with pain. An intense smell assaulted her: burned hair, burned skin. Her hands fluttered to her throat. *Can't breathe— Can't— Suffocation* had her crawling blindly, trying to get away from everything all at once. Darkness stole her vision away.

When she came to, rain pelted her face and she was outside. Her eyesight was a fuzzy mirage. She could barely make out a ball of light that she could only assume was the library aflame.

Sam knew that if she had to look at a visual representation of her life, this was it: a bright red smear and a long black empty parking lot in a town where no one knew her and she didn't know them.

Her head lying against someone. She could feel his voice rumble around in his chest as he spoke, "Easy, Sam. Breathe. You have to keep breathing."

Hands shook her tenderly back and forth. They pawed rain and soot from her face and brushed her wet bangs out of her eyes. Sam didn't flinch when her melted hair stuck to the side of her face.

"It isn't over yet, remember? Don't do it. Don't you dare..."

Fire tore into her throat. Her lungs were bellows and each breath only stoked pain. Pain everywhere. Sam had no idea where it was all coming from. Her vision slowly darkened again.

"...I'm sorry," the voice continued, brokenly, "I wish you never moved here. I wish this never
happened to you. I wish *I'd* never happened to you..."

.

Sam woke laying on her stomach, bandaged and attached to machines. She jolted in terror and immediately looked for Tucker.

To her left, a door. To her right, a window and an unfamiliar cityscape. A multitude of buildings twinkled in the late-afternoon sun. She was on maybe the fortieth floor in a very tall hospital. This wasn't Amity Park.

The stillness in the room was horrible.

Sam breathed shallowly and pressed her cheek into the pillow, realizing a little late that half of her face was bandaged and completely numb. Where was Tucker? Surely he wasn't really dead? Right? Right...? It had all been dream. Right?! Panic welled. Her body shook. She tried to push herself upright, but got tangled in wires and tubes, which only made her mounting anxiety worse.

Reality clapped her across the head. Grisly images flashed, and she remembered. Tucker was gone. Dead. Her fault. *Entirely* her fault.

Guilt crushed her into a feeble ball. Every organ in her body suddenly wanted to escape. She clutched her bandaged throat, whimpering. It felt like someone was stabbing a knife repeatedly into her back. She couldn't shake the feeling that she was being watched, being chased, even in this empty hospital room.

'RElax,' she rasped, trying to will her hands to stop trembling. All that came out of her mouth was a mouse-like squeak. 'Relax— I can't— *I can't—*'

The door cracked open. Her father took up the chair next to her while her mother ran her fingers through what was left of her hair, over and over.

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Sam was ripped from her fitful sleep hours later, when nurses woke her to change her bandages. As they peeled them away, Sam's back spasmed. She tried to yelp, but nothing came out. She wondered if she would ever speak again.

"I know. I know it hurts. Almost done, sweetie," a nurse murmured soothingly while she scraped off Sam's skin.

Sam thrashed. Her vision blackened and she *was* pain. She had to be, because no matter where she squirmed she couldn't get away from it. Through it all one thought broke through — the giddy, hilarious thought that she finally understood what Danny had meant by inescapable; what he felt when he had given up. She felt it now, too.

Fresh bandages.

Morphine.

This time, Sam dove into that pitch black rabbithole.
On the third day, the police came to question her.

Why had she been in the archives after the library was closed? How did she and Tucker break in? Did she know the entire library burned to the ground along with everything it contained? Did she care? The matter of her escape is highly suspect. How had she done it in the condition she was in? How come she hadn't called 911? The lighter—the incendiary device—was it hers?

Sam still had no voice. Though, she wouldn't have answered their questions anyway. It's not like they'd believe her.

In the end, her father interrupted, demanding her lawyer be present. The officers left, but not without the threat that they'd be back. And Sam couldn't help but notice Officer Gray was never amongst them.

When she woke again it was light outside and her room was empty. Unusual. Her parents were always around.

Her eyes trailed over the table and visitor chair next to her bed. Several bouquets of flowers sat on the table near her head. Sunflowers, roses, and white lilies. Her father's coat was hanging off the back of the adjacent chair. On the seat was the pink bag Sam had stuffed the relics in. Sam blinked, dumbfounded, that she still had it after all that had happened.

With a grimace, Sam leaned over, carefully pulled the bag onto her bed and, minding the IV, she took a look inside. All the relics were still there. Also, the invite to Paulina's party, her phone, her wallet, a compact mirror...

Sam opened the mirror with a soft *pop* and got her first look at herself since the fire.

The entire left side of her face was swathed in gauze. Propping herself up on her elbows, she used her free hand to peel away the bandages. Her face throbbed, but Sam knew the cocktail she was hooked up to dulled the brunt of the pain. It also had the added effect of making her dreamy and weird, which was why, when she found shiny skin and a distorted, swollen, eyelid underneath her gauze, her only reaction was to poke at it in disbelief. Her left ear was gone completely, along with half of her hair. A veiny choleic burn puckered along the side of her head, across her cheek, and down the side of her neck, continuing until it disappeared underneath the neckline of her thin hospital gown. She knew it traveled down her back. There were stitches around her eye like doctors had already tried, and failed, to piece her back together. Surely this wasn't *her*. No. This Frankenstein woman was someone else. A complete stranger.

The woman in the mirror quivered. Feeling far away from her own body, Sam was slow to realize her hand was shaking. She slammed her eyes shut and dropped the mirror onto her bed. After a few deep breathes, she regained her composure, then glared accusingly at that awful pink bag. A tube of lipstick peeked out. Her throat constricted. She couldn't swallow.

With trembling fingers, she pulled Tucker's invention out. She memorized the feel of it with her fingertips and pressed it to her lips. This was the last piece of Tucker that she had left. The rest of him...
Sam forced the images away. She wrestled and chained them someplace deep inside where she kept dark, miserable, dangerous creatures. The colors in her head reddened at the fringes. She opened the ghost detector. The lights remained off. Sam no longer felt relief, only numb indifference.

"Sammy? You up?" Her mother shouldered her way through the door, grinning. She held aloft two pieces of fruit. "Apple, or peach?" she asked cheerily.

The detector lit green centimeters from Sam's face. Sam stared at it.

"Fine. I'll take the peach, you take the apple." Pamela glided to the chair and plopped down into it. Juice dribbled down her chin. She noticed Sam staring and raised an eyebrow. "What did you do with your bandages?"

Sam tucked the detector underneath her sheets, pressing it close against her thigh so the green light didn't make the sheets glow. Her lungs squeezed. Each loss was getting less and less surprising. 'I love you,' she mouthed to her mother. She should have said so sooner.

"Oh honey, I love you too," the ghost sighed.

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Sam waited until visiting hours ended. Once her parents had left for the night, she fished her phone from it's charger and her wallet from the pink bag. She pulled out that psychiatrist's crumpled business card, dialing.

It rang four times, then picked up.

"Dr. Jasmine Matthews," greeted a tired-calm voice.

That voice was a mouthful of warm honey. It slid down Sam's throat and soothed deep inside her. But instead of calming, her stomach upturned. Her phone rattled against her unburned ear. When she tried to speak, to explain, she choked. How could she even begin to explain what had happened?

"Hello?... Who is this?"

A tear meandered down her cheek. She tried to speak again and this time something came out, a tiny frail whisper, "Someone who needs your help."

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—Diary Entry, VIII—

Wednesday February 5th, 1970

Dear Danny,

Happy 23rd birthday. Are you out there, somewhere, alive? Are you eating birthday cake right now? Do you think of me sometimes? Where did you go? How come you never came back?

You've missed a lot. An astronaut walked on the moon last year. I bet you'd be both angry and excited to find out. You always said you'd be the first.

I took your advice and went to college. You were right about a lot of things. I was never a great listener, but I'm getting better.
Johnny dumped me after you left. I found out he had been cheating with a girl named Kitty. At first I was angry, but now I think it was for the best. That boy was empty.

The missing little brother thing kind of put a damper on my dating life (thanks for that), but I found somebody else and, unlike Johnny, I think you'd like him. His name is Evan Matthews. His cousin was one of the other kids that went missing. He's one of the few people that can empathize with what happened to my family, because it happened to his too.

Mom is okay. She's started inventing again. She still flinches whenever someone mentions you, but I think she wants to move on.

Dad is still struggling. I got a call from Detective Gray last week that Dad's looking for you in Amity again. Banging on people's doors. Bothering everyone, claiming he found a new piece of evidence. He won't let anyone forget and he won't give up. His search has taken over every aspect of his life. The investigation stole something from him. All the horrible things people said about Dad... The police insinuating he had something to do with your disappearance... Even though everyone knows it's not true, it hurt him and our family in a way that can't be undone.

You're still technically alive. No funeral. No grave. No body to fill it. There's this enormous wound that will never heal, and the not knowing of where you went just makes it fester and sour. Mom and Dad barely talk anymore and I don't know how to fix it. It's why I've enrolled in psychology, to understand grief and loss. Maybe I can try and help other people that have been through the same thing.

This letter is my goodbye. I can't keep lingering on you. It isn't healthy. I've accepted that I may never know what really happened on August 12, 1962. Maybe that seems like defeat, but, knowing you, I suspect you wouldn't want me moping about on your behalf.

So goodbye, Danny. Until we meet again. Whenever that is, wherever that is. I'm sorry we failed you. I'm sorry we couldn't find you.

I will love you always,

Jazz

fin Part II: Murphy's Law
The interrogation room Sam was held in was small, cold, and dimly lit. Besides a square of newer security glass embedded in the wood door and a one way mirror, the room had no other windows. The soft tapping of her father's shoe against the tiled linoleum floor came from behind her, mixing with the occasional bzzz as a fly flew too close to her good ear, and the slow, yet audible, breathing of her lawyer. Light glanced off the metal table where her hands lay clasped.

Her lawyer was perched on the edge of her seat with the rigidity of a violinist. She had dark straight long hair and a wardrobe of black clothing. She never got too excited about anything. This suited Sam just fine. It meant she didn't expect any warmth in return.

"What's taking so long?" her father spoke up from his seat in the corner of the room.

He sounded like he was talking more to himself. His usually crisp collared shirt was wrinkled and misaligned where he had skipped a button. Sam had often seen him with his head in his hands when he thought she wasn't looking. Still alive, though. Sam had been religious about checking. She was tired of being tricked.

Directly in front of Sam was a one-way mirror. It's dark glass gave everyone olive pits for eyes. A jolt ran through her as she caught a glimpse of herself in it. Pale. Head half-shaved. Right pupil milky, purple mottled beneath. What was left of her hair hung like a limp corpse. Her right cheek was covered in thin flesh-colored bandages. They itched.

The click of the door handle shot through the room like a gunshot.

A detective strode into the room, shutting the door behind her with her heel. Sam recognized her. It was the officer that had helped her the last time she had visited the station. Apparently, not an officer — a detective. Although Sam didn't know police rankings, this woman had more badges on her uniform than Officer Gray had.

If the detective remembered her, she didn't let it show. "Ms. Manson. Mr. Manson. Ms. Sundarray," she addressed. "Thank you for waiting." She crossed the room and pulled out the chair facing Sam, opening a folder and pulled out a sheet of paper, spinning it around with her pointer finger, and pushing it across the table.

Along the top, it read: Waiver of Rights.

Hazel eyes caught Sam's. Curiosity sparkled deep within them. "My name is Detective Olivia Ramón. I have a few questions for you about the night of October 31st. However, before we begin I am legally obligated to read you these rights." She leaned forward and removed a pen from the breast pocket of her crisp uniform, uncapped it, and pointed at the first line on the waiver. "Samantha Jean Manson. You have the right to remain silent. Do you understand this right?"

Sam stared down at the line, which parroted what the detective said in twelve point Times New
"I need a verbal response. Yes or no? Do you understand this right?"

Sniffing an opportunity, her lawyer swooped. "Unless you charge my client, we are leaving."

The police had not arrested her. Not yet. Sam knew from TV that being arrested included fingerprints and photos. Still, that didn't mean she was free to go without consequences. Not without an explanation as to what happened on Halloween. When the police had visited the hospital, she had told them she couldn't remember anything. That strategy had worked before. Better to fake amnesia than try and explain an alternate dimension. If she ran the police would find something to charge her with and it would only get worse.

Not wanting to appear guilty, Sam blurted, "No." Metal flooded her mouth as she clamped down on her own tongue and screwed her eyes shut. Tucker's face flashed across her the backs of her eyelids.

When Sam reopened her eyes she found Detective Ramón staring, hard.

"Painkillers make me spacey, sorry. I understand," Sam amended, rearranging her expression carefully. It was important to nail this interview— to trick Ramón. "I want the same things as you. I want to stop whoever is responsible for what happened." And she would. She would just go about it differently.

A penciled eyebrow raised minutely with grudging respect, if not a bit of disbelief. "Good."

Detective Ramón moved her pen down to the next line and said, this time with a touch more warmth, "Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. Do you understand this right?"

Sam didn't hesitate. "Yes."

"You have the right to speak with an attorney, and to have them present with you while you are being questioned. Even though you have already done so, you must still answer: Do you understand this right?"

"Yes." The words blurred together. This was all part of an elaborate dream, just like Halloween night. Yes. Yes she understood. That she was in way over her head; that she had no idea what she was doing. That she was up against a serial killer.

"... Having these rights in mind. Do you still wish to talk to me?"

Sam put on what felt like an appropriate response. She sucked in a long breath, clasped hands wringing. "Yes. I want to help in whatever way I can.

"I would like to note that my client still doesn't remember much of that night," her lawyer interjected, tone clipped.

Detective Ramón offered Sam a smile. "Dr. Matthews mentioned you two are working on your memory. She didn't elaborate any further. Patient confidentiality." Ramón said the last part a little grudgingly.

They had talked to her Dr. Matthews? She shouldn't be surprised. They probably interviewed everyone already. The amount of analysis devoted to her after Halloween night was exhaustive. The scrutiny of her life made her paranoia spike. She spent every waking second acting. The real Sam hid behind the facade of an innocent Sam. One who, blissfully, couldn't remember. That, along with the glazed effect of her painkillers, made real life seem like a play.
"Just tell us what you do remember and we'll get you out of here in no time. Let's start with something simple. Try and be as precise as possible with your answers. What did you eat for dinner the night of October 31st?"

"Dunno. Probably vegan sausages. Glass of orange juice."

"Vegan, huh? I tried that for a few months," Detective Ramón commented. "Got worried about eating enough protein…"

In the mirror, her father watched the questioning in silence. His knee bobbed up and down. His fingers drummed against his crossed arms, eyes darting between Sam, her lawyer, and the detective in uncertainty. When he noticed Sam watching, he tried to send her an encouraging fatherly smile. In contrast, her lawyer perched statue-still, eyes sharp, guarded.

"Where did you have dinner?" Detective Ramón asked.

Sam tore her gaze off the mirror. "At home."

"And that is?"

"120 Pine Street."

Detective Ramón must have already known that, because she wasn't surprised and she didn't write it down. "And how long have you lived in there?"

"Four months."

"You're new to Amity Park," Ramón observed. "This city must have seemed small and quiet to you. Not much going on. Kids get bored pretty quick. You knew Tucker Foley for what, two months? Or three?"

At the mention of Tucker, Sam's stomach squirmed, but she forced to keep her composure. "Three months."

"The two of you got along?"

Sam thought of their constant bickering and wondered if it was true, as she said, "We're friends."

"'We're?'" Ramón repeated.

Sam's fingertips pressed into the steel armrests of her chair.

"Mr. Foley sent two text messages before the fire." Ramón shuffled through her manila folder and drew out a piece of paper. "'Found a DMV employee that used her daughter's birthday for a password. Rookie mistake. The last owner of the car was Jack Fenton. Maybe a relative? Looking into it…'" Ramón's gaze darted up from the paper, before continuing, "Meet me at the archives ASAP. I found your ghost. I know why there was no information on him. Mikey found it first and put it on hold. It's been sitting in the reserve bin this whole time." Ramón ran a finger along her lips a few times in contemplation. "What was he talking about? Hacking into DMV servers… tracking down this… Ghost?"

"We're working on a school project. Researching what this town was like in the 1950's."

"Does school research usually involve illegally hacking into government databases?" Ramón clipped.
"Excuse me, where is the line of questioning going?" Sam's lawyer huffed, laying a hand flat onto the table.

Ramón's eyes never strayed off Sam's.

Sam fell silent. It was a good point. An obvious one that, had she not been souped up on opioids and navigating grief, she might have anticipated. "I guess we didn't think it was a big deal," she mumbled.

Ramón wrote something down. "Where were you when you received Tucker's texts?"

No use lying. There was one cheerleader who could attest to her whereabouts. "North Mercy Hospital, at a Halloween party."

"So while you were at a Halloween party, Mr. Foley was...?"

From the detective's perspective, she looked undeniably guilty. Were they really so far off? After all, if she hadn't convinced Tucker to help her they wouldn't be in this mess in the first place.

Detective Ramón appraised her. "What do you remember of that night?"

Unfortunately, Sam could remember every single detail of that night same as watching a film. If she closed her eyes too long, she'd find herself back there— ash flying around like angered bees, heat boring down from all directions. Behind eyelids, she could leisurely take a walk through piles of browning paper and collapsed shelving, until she was standing in front of Tucker aflame. The smell of him would seep back into her nostrils. Her throat would ache from ash. She would remember the feeling of screaming as hard as she could, yet hearing nothing but a high pitch ring. Like a bell that had been struck. That ring had never ended- a single falsetto in an angel choir, holding a somber high note. Nerve damage. Doctors said it may never go away.

Ramón's posture stiffened. Her gaze glittered; a cobra about to strike. "Do you like fire, Samantha?"

Out of the corner of her eye, Sam's lawyer tensed. "Don't answer that."

The detective's eyes narrowed; a quick glare in the lawyer's direction. "You assaulted a fellow classmate three days before the arson, correct? Dashiel Baxter? Before that you were expelled from your last school for a similar thing."

"I... yes," Sam admitted.

The detective leaned forwards, her eyes fixed on Sam's. "I know you lied to the police about details surrounding Amanda Scully's suicide. And what of Michael Lewis?"

"I don't understand," Sam said, leaning back in her chair, thrown by wild swing from mundane background information to the murders.

Her lawyer leaned, putting herself in between Sam and the detective. "Are you going to ask my client any useful questions? Both Scully and Lewis have been ruled suicides and are unrelated to the arson investigation."

"Because she has a known pattern of lying to the police and omitting details," The detective snapped back, her gaze flicked from her notes to Sam's lawyer. She uncoiled a bit and let out a breath, her gaze drifting back to Sam's. "I'm just trying to figure out what happened. If this was just boredom, or a drunken mistake, an accident. Been there, done that. If this was all just some prank gone wrong, tell the truth and be done with it. The consequences only grow the longer you lie about it."
"I don't remember," Sam repeated. She threw a lot of fake frustration into her voice for good measure. "I wish I did, but I don't."

"Sam, I make a living out of knowing the truth when I hear it. I'm very good." The detective rapped her midnight blue nails along the metal table. "There's something you're not to telling anyone."

Sam schooled her expression to keep from swallowing. There was something more tangible in the detective's gaze. For the first time during this interrogation, Sam felt a thread of trepidation.

Ramón pulled papers from her folder. In a soft detached voice, as if reading an ad in the paper, she read, "At 10:51PM Samantha Manson was found unconscious in the parking lot of the Amity Park Public Library thirty-seven feet away from the entrance, alone. Thirty percent of her clothing melted to her skin. Smoke inhalation. Unresponsive. Second and third degree burns. Prolonged exposure to carbon dioxide." With the finishing air of fluffing a pillow, the detective flicked the report closed. "According to the EMT that first treated you, it was medically impossible for you to escape that fire on your own. Someone carried you out. Left you in a place where first responders were certain to find you. It wasn't Mr. Foley. So who was it? Who was in the archive with the two of you?"

Sam ran her tongue across the back of her teeth. Unbidden, the archive flashed across her eyes-Danny's tearful gaze, the cellophane crinkle of her dress melting to her skin...

Detective Ramón shifted in her chair. The soft scuff of it tugged Sam's medicated brain, like a lost dog on a leash, back from where it had been wandering. Refocusing, she found the detective gaze softened. "Just give me a name," she coaxed. "There's no need to serve a sentence for someone else. Even a friend. I can't help until you tell the truth."

The truth? The truth was Daniel James Fenton IF LOST RETURN TO 3765 HYDE PARK AVENUE, CINCINNATI OHIO. White kid from a nice family. Common name. Forgotten by everyone. Not that Sam would ever forget. She also knew that she couldn't tell anyone, so it would be really nice if people stopped asking.

Her lawyer blew out a short breath, crossing her arms. "My client has already made it clear several times that she does not remember."

The look on the detective's face said she didn't believe a word of it. The woman's gaze drifted over to the lawyer, then to Sam's father. Then a small smile drifted onto her face. She leaned forwards just as the door swung open.

Detective Ramon's face froze as she glanced towards the door. Her body was tense, her fingers curled white-knuckled around the pen she'd been taking notes with. "Can I help you?" Her tone waspish.

Office Gray stepped into the room. He gave her a small nod of deference. "Detective Ramon. Sorry to interrupt."

Sam stared in shock. He had survived. How? Impossible. Too good to be true? Had he really survived? Or was this another ghost? Her fingers twitched, itching to fish out her lipstick ghost detector, but it was in her purse which was hanging off the back of her chair. She had no way of getting it without looking suspicious.

Gray was speaking, his voice sounding like it came from underwater, probably answering a question Sam hadn't caught. He gave her an encouraging smile. It did nothing to quell her dread. Sam clamped her mouth shut and settled on trying to pick apart his humanity by eyesight alone. He wore his mustache bushier than Sam remembered. His uniform was still just as wrinkly as before. He
looked no more ghostly than the last time she had seen him. Not that that meant much. What was
this? The good cop part of the routine?

Ramón swept the papers into a folder, tucked it beneath her arm, stood, and spun on her heel. She
still looked furious. She cast one last lingering gaze at Sam before exiting the room, her heels
clicking loudly on the concrete floor.

Gray settled into the vacated seat. He placed his own folder onto the table and without a word, pulled
out a photo and slid it across the table.

A man stared back from a black and white photograph, gaze sparking with calculative intensity. Mid-
forties. His hair was light, pulled back in a ponytail. His cream-colored eyes were deep set. Nose
straight and pointy, centered upon a thin, long face. He wore a suit with a leather bolo. But, his most
defining feature was his smile. His canines were longer than normal.

"Have you seen this man?" Gray asked.

This man had to have died long before she would have been old enough to meet him. This
photograph looked really old.

Taking her silence as a no, Gray placed another photo next to the first. "What about him?"

Dark hair. Dark eyes. Medium complexion. Thick eyebrows. The tour guide Frederick. Sam decided
she wouldn't tell him. What if this was some sort of test? Would she be sent straight to a psych ward
if she admitted to seeing these people? Was that what had happened to Valerie? His own daughter?
She passed the photo back.

Gray was determined. He exchanged the photo for another. "Him?"

This time it was a burly man with a thick curly beard that obscured the bottom portion of his face. He
was large with broad shoulders and a mean glare. He donned a heavy leather coat and was standing
in the middle of a forest, shotgun at his side. His bear-like demeanor was familiar. Sam squinted,
trying to picture him without a head.

—A man without a head emerged from the shadows of the archives. He hoisted a shotgun up,
somehow aiming the barrel—

Sam's eyes flicked up, only to find Gray surveying her. She shoved the photo back.

Gray plopped down another. Sam recognized that boyish grin immediately. His name thudded
frantically around in her chest like a bird in a cage, threatening to burst out, causing her ribs and
throat to itch. It tickled at the tip of her tongue. "Was I even born when these photos were taken?"
she asked instead, voice thick.

Gray leaned back in his chair. He stroked his mustache several times in thought, arms crossed over
his belly. "That's all for today. You may go. The department will be in touch if there are any further
questions."

She was... She was free to leave? After all that? She had gotten away with it? She felt…
disappointed. From their stunned silence, her lawyer and her father were just as surprised.

Gray got up and made for the door.

Sam noticed he had left Danny's photo. She plucked it off the table. "You forgot this."
Gray paused. His heavy gaze locked on the photo meaningfully, and Sam realized Gray knew all about Danny already. "Keep it."

tbc...

Chapter End Notes

Almost two years later and I'm back! Thank you to everyone who reviewed and sent me messages and never gave up hope. You guys reminded me that this story was worth something to someone. Thank you Cordria for being there for me and for helping me get through this last little push. For those of you that don't know Cordria donated hours and hours of her own personal time to help me with this story. I am so grateful. I really needed the help, but more than anything I really needed a friend. During the writing of Part III I was in the grip of depression. I had self isolated. I was abusing drugs and alcohol as a way to cope with life. I never set out to write a murder mystery where the protagonist destroys herself along the way, but here we are. I was doing the same thing to myself so its no surprise I find it reflected here. This last part is darker than the previous two, but it is honest, raw, true, and real. I can read it now and have compassion for how much pain I was in; how truly lost I was.

I shared my full story, my struggle with alcohol, and how I've been receiving help on my tumblr (leda-x) in the hopes that someone may read and realize they are not alone. I am so happy and life is so full. I've found company in a higher power and in AA and for the first time in my life I can feel inner strength peeking out, shining.

No plans on when the next chapter will be posted. I'm moving one day at a time, but today felt like the right day for a new chapter. I hope someone out there finds meaning in what my diseased mind made.
Tires crunched over gravel as her father pulled the car up the mansion’s driveway and rolled to a stop. Rain pattered off the windshield. The motion lights popped on, revealing dozens of eggshells littering the pavement. Her father made a small noise of dismay.

Getting out of the car, Sam eyed the front yard. Pieces of toilet paper hung from the trees near the house, the eaves, and the storm drain; wet and matted.

Her father rested his hand on the small of Sam’s back and lead her quickly towards the front door. “Give it time. People will come around. These kind of things always get better,” he mentioned.

Sam doubted it. Everyone in Amity Park had ignored what had happened here fifty-something years ago until she had come along and picked the scab.

Her father unlocked the front door and, for the first time since Halloween night, Sam stepped inside. Red glints—cast from the rubies in the foyer chandelier—danced across the tops of her shoes like blood. A weird smell hit her nose— not the usual musk. This was more like dead rat. Sam scanned, finding her mother gliding out of the study.

The ghost shut the door behind her and locked it, depositing a key in her robe. Turning, she caught sight of them and skipped down the hallway with both arms outstretched. “Sammy!” Her bare feet barely skimmed the floor and her pink chemise robe glimmered weirdly in the light. Snakey shadows writhed at her feet. “You’re home. Finally. How did it go?”

This saccharine version of her mother was more terrifying than anything Sam had faced so far.

“It went as well as it could.” Her father turned and shrugged his coat off.

With a relieved noise, Pamela moved to hug her.

Dead, Sam’s mind trumpeted. This woman is dead. She stumbled backwards. The constant ring in her ear grew into a roar.

Her mother froze. Instead of looking hurt or confused, her expression shifted into a warning glare. Her jaw set.

With his back still to them, her father asked, “Did you hear or see anything weird while we were gone? Like kids out front?”

As he turned, her mother flipped back into a bright smile. “A bunch of kids? No. Haven’t seen any.” Her smile spread like butter. “I’ve been making peach cobbler.” And with that, she headed back towards the kitchen.

Sam’s heart raged in her chest.

Her father leaned, lips an inch from her good ear, and whispered, “Let’s not tell your mother about outside. I don’t want to ruin this mood.” He made a neck slicing motion, as if to say ‘don’t tell her I said that’, then followed down the hall.
Sam sank onto the edge of her bed and surveyed her room. Besides a small layer of dust, nothing had been moved or messed with. There was nothing to say anything had changed. Yet Sam felt far away. Like beyond these four walls she and the rest of the world were thousands of miles apart. Whenever she had a moment of peace from the parade of nurses, doctors, psychologists, parents, and police—whenever there was nothing between Sam and herself—creatures of her own making would come out to play.

Determined to move before they got the chance, Sam got up from her bed and ripped the list of clues from the wall. As she did, something flickered out of the corner of her eye.

A shadow skated beneath the crack of her bedroom door. It settled directly in the middle of the slat.

Her fingers automatically found Tucker’s ghost detector. Green. Danielle, probably.

Sam’s skin crawled. Being this close to ghosts again was enough to make her body go full flight-mode. Without thinking, she grabbed a coat and her backpack and wrenched her window open. Freezing air poured through. She scaled the fire escape and made for her bike.

Sam rode as fast as possible. The still healing burns across her neck and back stung as she bent over handlebars; back bike tire flinging up puddles.

The rain had let up, but the pavement was still black. With the dark clouds breaking, patches of stars began to twinkle down, dulled by street lamps and the Christmas lights lining the eaves of the houses.

Sam took in deep gulps of winter air. She hadn’t felt like this in forever. Free to go wherever, do whatever.

The past month she had occupied different hospital beds with the same agency as a caterpillar occupying a cocoon. Right after the fire, with her burns still raw and in process of scabbing, she had been unable to do much as sit up. And if the stillness for days on end wasn’t enough to make her feel inhuman, she was unable to even go to the bathroom without help.

Coming up on the park entrance, she released her feet from the pedals, gliding off the curb and onto the park’s winding path. The bike slowed to a complete stop. She got off and walked it along until she met a playground.

Ivy and trees had invaded the fence. One of her parent’s flyers for the Amity Park cleanup fluttered on the gate. Inside the yard was a metal swing set with three swings, a slide next to a set of monkey bars, and—on the side closest to her—a merry-go-round. Also metal, it was rusted. A pipe rail lined the edge for children to grip as it spun around.

Leaning her bike on the gate, Sam climbed on the merry-go-round. She put her back against one of the pipes and sat with her legs pointing towards the center. The rubber soles of her boots scraped off some chipping green paint. Blowing out a long breath, which plumed in the December air, she let her head fall back heavily behind her. It hit the pipe with a hollow thud.

The sound of the city was muted. Cars engines faded away. If she closed her eyes she could almost trick herself into believing she was in the wilderness. Almost. The wind kept knocking the swings forward, causing them to let out a soft squeak. The air smelled fresh. Of pine needles and…cigarettes.
Sam reopened her eyes and found Danny sitting across from her. He was dressed in black this time. A heavy wool coat obscured most of his body. When he noticed her attention, his face rearranged, eyes saddening. “Hey,” he greeted.

“Hey,” Sam murmured. A confused mess of emotions, impossible to sort, writhed.

The last memory she had of him was the library parking lot. Since then, Sam had memorized what she wanted to say. She had agonized over this conversation while lying in her hospital bed. But now that he was here she needed one more minute of peace. Her eyes slipped shut again. Her skull fell back until it rested against the pipe.

She could still sense him there without looking and felt safe. She knew that didn’t make a lot of sense, seeing as he was one of the things that had done this to her in the first place, but none of that seemed to matter anymore. His presence felt like an empty void. What had Tucker said about ghosts? They disrupted the Earth’s magnetic field. They disproved a lot of scientific constants of the universe. More proof that Danny and her were two different creatures living alongside two different, parallel, realities.

For however long, she listened to the intermittent squeaks of the swings and the rolling hiss of the wind weaving through the park. For the first time since the fire, her body allowed itself to relax fully. God, she was so tired…

She jerked awake and caught herself right before she could pitch off the merry-go-round. A quick glance confirmed Danny was still there.

Sam sat upright. “My mom’s dead.”

Danny straightened and looked at her like he was trying to gauge if she was okay or not. His silence said plenty.

“So you knew and you didn’t tell me,” Sam stated.

Blue eyes darted to the ground. “I knew,” he admitted. “And I was going to tell you, but there was never a good time.”

“Or you didn’t want to tell me.”

“Of course I didn’t want to.” His eyes flicked up and at Sam’s expression, he explained, quickly, “I knew telling you would hurt you.”

Of course he knew. It only made sense. She couldn’t get it out of her head. Feeling nothing, Sam asked, “Did you kill her?”

Danny froze at the accusation. His lips parted just a fraction and his eyes widened. To his credit, Danny had warned her. Sometimes Sam thought he had been right all along. He was the worst of all. Because deep down, none of this was part of his DNA. “No,” Danny finally breathed, the word punched from his lungs.

And that made this whole situation worse, because something in his reaction told her he was telling the truth, which meant Sam had no idea who actually killed her mother. “Who?” she whispered, trying to keep the suddenly welling emotion out of her tone.

Danny’s hand flew to his throat and he tapped there.

“Was she murdered?”
“Yes.”

“Do you know who did it?”

“Yes. It—” The curse stole Danny’s voice so suddenly it was as if someone had reached down his throat and taken it.

The wind stopped blowing and the trees stopped rustling to pay attention. Even the swings paused their whining.

“How?” Sam breathed. Her nails bit into her palms. Anger, frustration, boiled around inside. Pressure ballooned in her ears. Her ears roared. “How could you not tell me she was dead?”

Danny held up his palms. “I scared her and I regret it, but I didn’t kill her. It was stupid.” He released a strangled, self-deprecating bark. “I was stupid.”

Sam stared. Stupid? It was stupid? How could he sit there and laugh? How could he still hold his head upright? Smile? Did he not realize? Did he not understand she had lost everything? Something inside of her, something held together lately with nothing but Scotch tape and a prayer, snapped.

“MY MOTHER IS DEAD!” she screamed.

Her voice echoed across the yard. Admitting it felt like scraping off another layer of skin. Her hands whipped out and clenched the merry-go-round. “Everyone is DEAD! Do you even care!?”

Danny’s grimace faded. “I care,” he said tiredly, looking like he had been accused of this before, many times, by many other people.

Fuck that all-knowing look. Fuck his dead person apathy. In a flash of heat, she was up and charging across the merry-go-round.

Danny twisted off the edge.

Sam jumped off in pursuit, wood chips spewing through the air. Words exploded out of her like peppered gunshots, so fast she had barely thought them up before they were spewed from her mouth. “I hate all your cryptic bullshit! I should have never listened to you! Maybe then I wouldn’t have gotten Tucker caught up in this—this—” Her voice cracked and she stumbled.

Slamming back into her body, she found herself puffed up, face inches away from his. Her vision was watery. Behind her, the merry-go-round groaned over and over, knocked loose. The complaints eventually faded. The silence that followed was underlined by Sam’s gasps for air.

Danny could’ve been a statue. The only thing that gave him away was the corners of his mouth, which twitched. “You think I don’t know that? ” he breathed. “It’s all I think about. How everything is my fault. I do nothing else.”

Sam felt both slapped and transfixed.

“You think I don’t know how many people have died because of me and that house? I’m the one burying them all.”

Sam flooded with icy regret. Her insides felt like a mess of tangled yarn, writhing until she could only breathe shallowly. “Where’s my mom’s body?” She needed to know. Had to.

“I can’t say,” Danny gritted.
A gust of wind sent the swings squeaking again. Sam figured he’d leave. That’s what she would’ve done, because deep in her veins she was mean, and no matter how hard she tried to be good, she slipped back into mean like a pair of old jeans.

Danny stared for minutes, hours, could have been either. Then, he kicked out at a rock and let loose a long sigh which ended in a huff. His head tipped down like his neck was made of rubber. “You’ve just lost two people you care about,” he told the ground. “You should feel angry.”

She tried to find a trace of resentment, but even dead, Danny was the bigger human being. Her limbs weighed heavy. “It’s not your fault. I’m just mad…” She trailed off. Mad didn’t even begin to cover it. “I’m sorry.” Sorry didn’t cover it either.

Danny turned to face the merry-go-round, his back to her. “If I could just let go none of this would keep happening, but I can’t. I can’t let it go.”

“It’s not like you asked to get murdered.”

He tucked his hands into his pockets and spun back around, eyeing her for a long moment. The moon lit his silhouette in a fiery glow. Slowly, mirth dared to seep back into his eyes. “Didn’t you hear?” He stage-whispered, “I spent my life wandering dark alleys, asking people to murder me.”

With a wet snort, Sam batted away tears before they dared to form.

Eyeing her like she might snap at him again, Danny nudged her. A ghostly freezer draft washed across her cheeks. “I didn’t think anyone would go through with it,” he confided.

Sam shook her head in amazement, tilting it towards the night sky. Emotion caught in the back of her throat. No matter how hard she pushed it down, it rioted back.

Danny wrapped one arm around and pulled her in.

Sam gripped the sleeves of his coat and buried her nose in the lapels with a dry sob. The smell of smoke was dizzyingly strong and the fabric of his jacket was textureless. The hand that awkwardly patted her back had no warmth. The breath that filtered across the top of her head held no moisture. He was nothing but space where a boy once lived.

Danny dropped his chin on top of her head, like he was tired.

Gaining control of her hitching breath, Sam wondered, “Does it hurt to die?”

Giving it some thought, Danny said, “Not for me.”

She could feel his entire form hum and vibrate as he spoke. It felt the same as that night, back in the parking lot. “Do you—” Sam sucked in a quivering breath, afraid to ask, asking anyway, “Do you think it hurt for Tucker?”

“I think it’s not worth thinking about.”

Her face was starting to grow numb. “What’s it like to be a ghost?”

Silence. The distant roar of a car passed by. She assumed he wasn’t going to answer. Maybe he didn’t know how or maybe he couldn’t. She could never tell the boundaries of his curse. Then he said, almost to himself, “It’s being stripped until you’re only a concept of who you once were. Like a sketch. Or a memory.”
Sam absorbed that and thought it sounded pretty sad. Some of the fear she had of her mother ebbed away. She was suddenly struck with a horrible thought—“If I solve this whole thing, find all the bodies, and catch the murderer… Will you leave for good?”

“Sam…” Danny sighed, shifting uncomfortably.

“What about me?” she argued, voice cracking. She pulled away. “Who will I have left?”

Danny said nothing, but Sam could feel his torn sadness.

“I’m sorry,” Sam repeated, voice choked. She had been saying that a lot lately. So much that she didn’t know what she was apologizing for at this point, but Danny seemed to understand.

Cold fingers breezed across her burn, gusted over the eyelashes of her damaged eye, and lingered above the stub of her ear. “I’m sorry too. Sorry that you got hurt.”

Not trusting herself to speak without crying, Sam nodded.

Danny shut his eyes. “There’s still time. I get it if you don’t want to help me anymore.” His tone would have been convincingly nonchalant, if not for the small waver.

Sam sucked in a breath. He was suggesting she leave? After all this? And go where? There was nowhere left for her to go.

Danny began making his way back towards the paved path. Sam trailed beside to make the stubborn point that she was staying. He dug in his pocket and withdrew a cigarette. With a flash, he lit it.

“I know, I know,” Danny said, catching her look. Quickly, like he was afraid she would make him stamp it out at any moment, Danny took another puff. He turned his head away and cupped his mouth, as if to sneak the smoke out without her seeing. It lazily rolled over his shoulder down towards the ground.

Sam let out a sigh. “I thought your whole business hinged on seeing this case solved. Why are you hoping I’ll leave?”

Danny blew through his lips, letting them motorboat. He turned, gaze dropping to the cigarette in his hand. “I’m getting tired of burying people I like.” And although he had said he liked her before, it felt heavier this time. There was a layer of pain in his tone that made her pause.

Sam’s pulse thudded in her neck. Did he mean he liked—liked her? “Well I have no plans of getting buried,” she assured.

Danny resumed walking. She had flustered him, if the speed of his strides was any indication. “Well good, ’cause you can’t afford me. I have over fifty years gravedigging experience,” he bragged.

As they passed by the gate to the playground a church clock rang out, its somber chimes followed them as Sam plucked her bike by its handlebars and led it alongside. She watched Danny joke his way out of whatever that was and decided to let him. She had missed this banter. “I’ve never seen you do any digging in the three months I’ve known you,” she teased.

“That’s because I’m a professional.”

“If I got buried, seeing as I’d be dead, I wouldn’t really care about paying you,” Sam reasoned.
Danny’s grin faded as they walked past the park entrance out onto the sidewalk. He tossed his cigarette. It evaporated before it ever hit the ground. “He’d let you go, you know. So long as you stopped digging.”

She could sniff the sour air and guessed he was stewing on the past. “Your murderer?”

Danny’s eyes flicked up at the stars. “Not just mine.”

Having no good response to that, Sam fell silent for the rest of the walk back. As they left the park sporadic rain drops began to come down, so rare that Sam was surprised every time she felt one tap the crown of her head.

Just like the first time Danny had accompanied her home, Sam could feel eyes following her every move. Whispers wove in and out of wind. No giggling this time, just subdued murmurs. The faceless kids no longer scared her. Now that she knew they were the other murdered, their lurking felt more like a cry for help.

And she would. Help them, that is. Or, at the very least, she would try. It was the only way she could make this whole mess mean something in the end. She knew if Tucker were still here he’d tell her to skip town, just like Danny did, and never come back. But Tucker wasn’t here anymore.

Her bike click-click-clicked alongside her as they pulled up to the mansion’s driveway.

“Night,” Danny murmured, eyeing the mansion with the reluctance of a parent sending a kid off to college.

Sam twisted the handlebars of her bike towards the front door. As she got halfway up the drive, he called her name and she craned to look back.

Moon huge and directly behind him, Danny was nothing more than a thin silhouette. His eyes gave a dull greenish glow. He hesitated. For a moment Sam thought he was going to say nevermind. Then, he blurted, “Your mom… She’s closer than you think.”

Case Notes I

A month into this case and it plagues me.

What I know for certain:


08/12. 13:53. Mother spots vic get into car through kitchen window.


08/12. 17:15. Cincinnati. Father comes home from work.

08/12. 22:00. Parents drive around neighborhood and high school.

08/12. 01:30. Parents call local police. Vic hasn’t been missing long enough to file a missing person’s report.

8/13. 8:02. Parents call local police.

8/13. 8:12. Local police arrive at residence. Conduct initial interviews and preliminary search of house and grounds.

8/13. 11:32. Police determine the case a runaway due to vic’s age and tendency to wander. File missing person’s report. The runaway status limits case resources. Investigation moves slowly.

8/14. 5:00-10:00. Parents comb Hyde Park, Oakley, and Pleasant Hill by foot. Distribute missing posters. Sister stays at house with boyfriend in case vic comes home.

8/15. 8:00. Due to lack of progress, case bumps in severity. Florence, Hamilton, and Dayton precincts alerted. Highway patrol performs sweep of major highways. Going down the list of places vic had ever visited, Amity, Columbus, Grand Rapids, and Milwaukee precincts are alerted.

8/15. 8:00. Amity. I am awarded this case.

Chapter End Notes

I was not expecting the overwhelming flood of warm wishes for my recovery. I'm overwhelmed. Thank you. Thank you.
Sam shoved open Dr. Matthew’s door and stumbled inside. Her heart pattered in her chest. It wasn’t like this was her first session, but for some reason her psychologist made her nervous.

Dr. Matthews stood at a small desk next to a well-stocked bookshelf, steeping tea in a steaming mug. She offered a smile and gestured for Sam to sit in one of the chairs. “Tea?” She pointed at her own mug.

Sam cleared her throat. “Uh. No thanks.” She unhooked her backpack, swinging it around by the strap, placing it onto the plush rug beneath the couch, before plopping down. The couch was incredibly soft. Her body wanted to lie down completely, but out of pride she refused to let it.

“Those hospital chairs were not exactly ergonomic on these old bones.” Dr. Matthews hummed as she settled into the opposite armchair. With a soft click, she placed a mug of tea onto a side table, then spent a few seconds aligning it to a folder lying on top.

“This couch is comfortable,” Sam offered, then winced at how lame that sounded.

Dr. Matthews didn’t seem to mind. Blue eyes flicked up, a soft light dancing inside. “It is, isn’t it? I’ve taken my fair share of naps on that thing. Don’t tell Patricia.”

Sam guessed Patricia was the name of Dr. Matthews’ receptionist. The woman had been warm, although a little disapproving of Sam’s five minute tardiness. It was weird actually going to Dr. Matthews’ office. Their weekly sessions so far had taken place in the hospital. Procrastinating talking, Sam gaze drifted about, taking in the space.

Dr. Matthews’ office was unlike any she had been sent to in the past— which were styled so inoffensively bland they felt more depressing. This office was modern, bright, and flecked with color. The tan couch Sam sat on wound like a smile around a circular glass coffee table. Two armchairs dotted eyes. A banana plant preened in the corner. On top of a desk sat a marigold glass sculpture and two photos. The first was a school photo of a dark skinned young man of mixed ethnicity. His flattop haircut and patterned sweater screamed the 80’s. The other photo was more recent. It had three little girls of similar mixed ethnicity, sitting with their feet dangling off the edge of a dock. Sam supposed these were Dr. Matthew’s granddaughters. Unable to help it, she was surprised at their race, then immediately felt like a jerk.

“What do you have planned for today?” Dr. Matthews asked. She batted some of her snow-white hair from her oversized glasses. The colorful beaded necklace which dangled off her glasses and around her neck glittered.

Sam shrugged, scowling. “Talking with you, then… I have to go back to school, which I’m not looking forward to. Have a meeting with the principal. I hope they kick me out.”

Dr. Matthews rested her chin in her palm, blue eyes calm. “Why do you want kicked out?”

Sam focused on a painting that hung behind Dr. Matthew’s desk, words tumbling out— always honest, always a healthy distance from the truth, “I don’t want to be around anyone, let alone a
bunch of kids that probably think I burned down a library—” she leaned forward, pointed a finger—“which I didn’t, but they have no idea what I’ve been through.”

“They’re not Tucker,” Dr. Matthews said.

Sam was appalled at how immediately her eyes welled, but Dr. Matthews was right. Sam didn’t try to deny it. The thought crossed her mind that maybe she didn’t hate everyone so much as she was afraid of them. “I went home yesterday,” she said after a long pause, desperate for a topic that didn’t smart.

“That’s right. How long had it been?”

Sam doubted Dr. Matthews had forgot, but still, she answered. “Twenty-seven days.”

Dr. Matthews leaned her elbows onto the arms of her chair. “I imagine your mother was relieved to have you home.”

“...Yeah,” Sam said.

“You don’t sound very happy about that,” Dr. Matthews noted.

Being dead, her mother flirted the line of what Sam should and should not talk about. One slip up and Dr. Matthew’s life could be at stake.

Thinking of her mom led to thinking about her dad. That lead to thinking about the mansion. Then to the police, who wanted to charge her for arson. How she had to go back to school today and face her peers. They would see her burns. They would think she was guilty. That she had killed Tucker and maybe they were right, maybe she had killed him, maybe she deserved to be locked away... maybe she deserved to die... maybe that was the only end to all of this... and then what? Where do you go when you die?

“... serenity devoid of troubling or depressing matter— a soothing, calming influence on the mind. I don’t know. What do you think, Sam?” Matthews was saying, in a lazy, meandering sort of voice.

The sound of her own name broke her from her thoughts. Sam blinked.

Dr. Matthews was smiling. “That’s a reproduction of the Blue Nude. Matisse said that his work is devoid of troubling matters, but between you and me, he’s full of it. Look at the way she’s contorted. It looks rather painful.” Dr. Matthews attempted to loop her own arm over her head, but the hunch of her shoulders made it impossible.

Sam eyed it. “Isn’t it a bit... counterproductive to hang something like that in here?” she judged.

“Better to acknowledge pain than ignore it. Grief has a way of being heard,” Dr. Matthews mused. She let her arm fall back onto her lap and sat up straighter. “Does it bother you?”

“No.” A knee jerk reaction.

Silence descended. From somewhere beyond the bright windows a plane’s turbines quietly roared. Muffled chatter came from another room down the hall. Sam was struck with how millions of human beings lived without issue.

Dr. Matthews quietly watched and made no further movement.

After the silence swelled too large and mounting, Sam gave in and said, “My mother acts like now
that I’m home everything can go back to the way it was.” Gazing at her nails, she picked at a hangnail until it began to bleed. “Like what happened didn’t happen. She keeps doing things that we used to do before. My dad treats me like I’m going to fall apart. I don’t know which is worse.”

“Sam,” Dr. Matthews interrupted.

The sound rang through her temple like a gong. Mouth still open, Sam glanced up to find Dr. Matthews’ eyes calm and strangely determined.

The older woman folded her hands into her lap, slowly, and with great deliberation. “The last month and a half since we began these sessions we’ve talked in length about your relationship with your parents, the ongoing police investigation, and your stay at the hospital. Through it all, not once have you talked about that night.”

Alarms sounded. Sam’s shoulders inched up to her ears. “Because it doesn’t matter,” she argued. “I won’t remember, so what’s the point?”

“Something’s holding you back from making progress. I can’t help until I know what it is. You’ve been incredibly honest about everything else, everything except this,” Dr. Matthews stated and, even though it was partly a compliment, Sam couldn’t help but feel attacked.

“I can’t remember that night,” Sam stated flatly.

“Ok,” Dr. Matthews said. Something in the way she said it made Sam convinced Dr. Matthews knew she was being lied to. The therapist paused, her red lips scrunching for a moment in contemplation. “This is beyond my expertise, but there are therapists that specialize in recovering repressed memory. I can refer you to a hypno-therapist...”

Before Sam made a conscious choice, she was standing, glaring. The horrible steak smelly smell Tucker’s burning body lit in her nose again, so strong it was almost a taste. She had to breath rapidly to keep from gagging. She pretended she was so angry she was panting. It was better than Dr. Matthews thinking she was two seconds from puking.

“Ok, Sam. I won’t mention it again,” Dr. Matthews promised, unfazed by the hostility.

All tension flooded out of her. She felt rather silly. Sam slumped back into onto the couch, cheeks burning. Feeling somehow like she was failing, she blurted, “I have tried talking about it.”

Dr. Matthews blinked. “To who?”

“A friend.”

“What’s their name?”

Seeing as it didn’t hurt— his first name was common and all— Sam said, “His name is Danny.”

“Danny?” Dr. Matthews repeated, voice tight.

Sam’s first day back at Casper High began with an hour long meeting between Principal Ishiyama, Spectra, and her parents to discuss whether or not Sam was fit to return. Sam spent most of that hour feeling conflicted that her mother’s ghost was defending her mental health. No one else seemed to
notice. In fact, the ghost’s optimism was what— despite the ongoing arson investigation— persuaded Ishiyama to permit Sam back.

There were stipulations. Violence of any kind would result in expulsion. Threatening a student or faculty member? Expulsion. Missing class without a signed note? Expulsion. So much as a sneeze? Expulsion. The thought of school made Sam want to drill her brains through her eye sockets. She had really hoped Ishiyama would have refused.

The heavy plod of her shoes echoed through the empty hallway as Sam made her way to her locker. From inside a nearby classroom, a teacher’s voice rose and fell in a continuous stream of information. Second period was already in full swing.

Feeling like she was navigating her own personal hell, Sam began the tedious act of transferring her books. As she placed her US History book a folded bit of lined paper made her pause. It was crumpled from being stuffed between the vents in her locker door. It didn’t make her feel good. Feeling dread, Sam opened it.

*We need to talk. You have something of mine. Photography room. Lunch period. -V*

Valerie. The girl who broken Baxter’s nose with the same nonchalance as a whack-a-mole to get her relics back the first time. Who had also agreed to a shaky truce the same night Tucker had... had... well... and just what did Valerie think about all that?

Slowly, Sam’s gaze traveled from the note to the relics inside her bag, to the inside of her locker.

Sam stood in front of the classroom door. She adjusted her jacket and fixed her bangs, making sure her bandages covered up the worst of it, before opening it and striding in.

Faluca, at his desk, had to squint in the low light to make out her face. Even afterwards, it took him a moment to recognize her. He paused the movie. “Ms. Manson!” he exclaimed, voice overly chipper in an attempt to cover up the palpable awkwardness. “Welcome back.”

Students pivoted in their seats, eyes wide. One kid kicked another’s chair to wake them up.

As Sam walked towards her desk, the student’s eyes stuck on her mangled face, before darting to the floor. Whispers hissed across seats.

She had riled up more than just the dead. These students. The faculty. Her parents. The police. An entire community was alert. She could hear the frenetic hum buzzing in the air.

Slipping into her desk, Sam glanced up and found twenty-seven faces lingering on her. Most of them were outright fearful. She glared right back at each and every one of them. Instead of fellow classmates, she saw twenty-seven people who failed to help. Cowards who just lived their lives trying to ignore this town’s past. Maybe the rational side of Sam’s brain would have piped in that Danny and the other victims had died so long ago that the kids of Amity Park couldn’t be expected to know who they were, or care much what happened, but her rational side hadn’t made it out of the fire.

Faluca cleared his throat. “Alright, where were we? Right. *Electrons.*” The TV started up again.

One by one, the faces flicked back to the front of the room, all except for one. The sunshine-colored
hair and the designer jeans gave her away. Star crossed one long leg over the other, spinning in her chair to better confront.

Sam couldn’t help the grin that unfurled across her lips. Paulina and Star had never seemed so hilariously insignificant.

“Atomic electron transition is a change of an electron from one quantum state to another within an atom or artificial atom. It appears discontinuous as the electron "jumps" from one energy level to another in a few nanoseconds or less. It is also known as atomic transition, quantum jump, or quantum leap,” the TV droned. A three replica of atom and its electrons vibrated with potential energy. One jumped ship, popping into a new orbit.

Seated at a ten-top lunch table by herself, surrounded by students who chattered and laughed, Sam picked at her tofu and tried not to lay her head onto the surface and go to sleep.

A group of students brushed past carrying full lunch trays. Recognizing her a half second late, they shuffled back, as if in recoil. A milk carton fell off a tray, hit the ground, rolled, and bumped against her shoe.

By the time Sam picked it up and looked back, the group was halfway across the cafeteria. Their eyes flicked nervously her direction, mouths moving as they whispered to each other. Sam couldn’t hear what they were saying, but she doubted any of it was about how awesome she was.

She missed Tucker. He would have found the one thing funny in this whole ordeal, but Tucker wasn’t here and she needed to stop sitting around wishing he’d show up.

A quick glance around the lunchroom turned up no Valerie. So she had been right about the note all along. No doubt Valerie was just as hostile as before. It was totally possible she wanted to land that punch. And what? She thought Sam would just walk into her fist willingly?

Her fork drooped. Guilt solidified, heavy in her stomach. The relics weren’t hers. Valerie had found them fair and square. Besides, Tucker wouldn’t have wanted this. He and Valerie had been friends. After everything she’d done to him, she owed it to him to hear Valerie out. Give her a chance. Let her say whatever she felt she needed to get off her chest.

Letting out a long sigh, Sam got up and dumped her lunch into the trash. She pulled out Valerie’s note from her sweatshirt pocket. “Fine,” she told the crumpled thing. “You win.”

The photography dark room was in a separate underground building down a long, narrow, set of concrete steps. Sam had never been to it—had never had the chance to take any electives, seeing as she was behind, but now that she was here, grasping around for the door in the dark, she decided she wouldn’t have wanted to take this class anyway. Not being able to see put her on edge. It didn’t help that she was already primed for a fight.

Sam stepped into a dark room bathed in the light from a single red bulb hanging from a rope attached
to the ceiling. Running a quick hand along the wall beside the door for a lightswitch, she felt a handle of a fire alarm. The place stank of chemicals and damp soil. It was quiet. Too quiet.

Someone giggled. “I knew it. To think we welcomed her into our club.”

Sam learned two things in that moment. First, Valerie hadn’t written the note. That wasn’t Valerie’s raspy argumentative tone. Second, there was more than one person in the room with her. According to her slowly-adjusting vision, there were two people at the opposite end of the room. One girl, and one extremely bulky boy.

*Paulina and Dash*, her brain supplied. “Where’s Valerie?” she asked, more to bide time than for any real answer.

Paulina strode forward, somehow managing to both saunter and skip all at once. Red light bled over tennis shoes and long legs. Baxter’s letterman jacket swallowed her up. She came to a sudden halt and her ponytail crashed over her shoulder. “I wasn’t sure if it was you or Valerie, so I planted the note in your locker. You *totally* took the bait!” Paulina puffed with pride.

As she should. Sam hadn’t given her enough credit. This plan was more clever than Paulina seemed capable of. It was simple; it was devious. Lure her to a place where nobody would interrupt, much less hear, and have Dash be the dumb muscle in case Sam tried to fight back.

Paulina was examining her fingernails. “I, like, really hate when people take my things.”

“Funny. Danny never mentioned you,” Sam retorted.

Paulina sucked in a sharp breath of air, as if physically punched. Her eyes ripped away from her nails. Something in them squirmed and for a second Sam thought she was going to cry. Then, she bared her teeth and pointed. “Get her bag,” she ordered.

Sam grasped both straps of her backpack tight.

Dash strode forward, weaving through the metal tables holding rows of plastic bins, which glowed faintly like skin through a flashlight. He stalked until he stood directly underneath the red bulb. There was still a splint taped across his nose. Despite cracking all his knuckles, he peered at Sam with the same amount of fear as the students in the cafeteria. He was likely only here because Paulina had asked.

*Good.* Sam lunged, drawing her fist like she meant to punch him in his newly-healed nose.

Dash flinched.

Sam couldn’t help the smirk that unfurled. *That’s right. Come any closer and I’ll summon my ghostly friends. That’s what everyone thinks anyway. Might as well play the part.*

Paulina let out a frustrated growl. “If you don’t have the balls, I’ll do it myself.” She grabbed something white off a table. Sam had two seconds to try and make out what it was before a blast from an air horn slammed her inner ear.

Her world bolted. Her damaged ear exploded in pain. She clenched her eyes shut in an attempt to make the room stop swirling, before, unable to get her balance, she collapsed and pressed her head to the floor. Waves of nausea rose up and crashed down. The merry-go-round sensation stretched for what felt like forever until, slowly, the feeling faded into a dull rocking.

“—louder than I thought it would be,” Paulina was saying, voice excited. Her tennis shoes landed
next to Sam’s nose.

Too afraid to move and retrigger the vertigo, Sam allowed Paulina to strip her of her backpack.

Giant green eyes peered down in morbid fascination. “They were right. Your face is gross.”

*rude* . Sam slammed her palms onto the cement and launched herself up with the same deadly intent of a juggernaut. Red encroached on the edges of her vision, having nothing to do with the light of the dark room.

*Shoulders pressed against cold tile. Hoop earrings glinted in fluorescent light. A baseball bat cracked off the tile near her cheek. In the muff of her sweatshirt, her fingers curled around a ballpoint pen.*

“You thought Joy liked you like that? You?” a voice burst. “She just felt sorry for you and that’s it.”

Sam blacked back in holding a jug of photo chemicals labeled ‘Acid’. The cap was clenched in her other hand. These chemical would eat away at least one layer of that creamy marrón skin. It was only fair. It was only right.

“What are you doing?” Paulina was saying, her tough facade wavering with uncertainty. Things were not going as planned. Sam’s backpack hung inside out in her hands, the contents having been torn and scattered across the floor, relics missing.

“It’s acid!” Dash warned, although he made no real effort to stop her.

Sam had almost forgotten about him. Shadows whispered and giggled, pressing closer, making the area lit by the red bulb shrink and the darkness grow. Was it real or just imagination?

Paulina’s gaze darted to the jug. Sam could pinpoint the exact moment she figured out what Sam’s intentions were. Her eyes widened, then she burst into laughter. “Oh, please,” she gasped, dismissing with a wave of her hand. “You touch me and my father will make sure you and your entire family lands in prison.”

Sam’s inner eye was busy picturing pouring the acid all over Paulina, watching as she melted into a puddle at her feet. At the mental image, it cackled internally in satisfaction.

Danny’s photo had fallen out of her backpack onto the floor next to her feet. He smiled widely up at her. ‘You’re not a monster,’ he seemed to say.

The jug wavered. A hiss echoed through the room, almost a physical force that pushed the jug back as Sam hesitated. One fragile thread of sanity returned as she realized this acid wouldn’t do anything more than irritate Paulina’s skin for an hour or so.

When Sam made no further move, Paulina took a step forward. Red light reflected off each of her eyes like a cat’s in the night. “My relics. Go get them. Or else.”

“Else,” Sam decided, plugging her damaged ear while reaching behind, yanking the fire alarm. Whooping noise pierced the bunker. In the same movement, Sam chucked the acid at Paulina.

Paulina ducked. The jug collided with her shoulder and knocked her backwards. Liquid sprayed across the floor.

Sam yanked her backpack out of Paulina’s loosened grasp, plucked Danny’s picture off the ground before it soaked through, and took off out the door.
As it swung closed, Sam knew she had only a few seconds before Paulina would get over her shock. Hopefully it would be enough of a head start to gain distance. As she passed classrooms she could hear whooping alarms and see the strobes in each room flash, asynchronously. The result was a dizzying cacophony of random blares, rings, and flashes.

Students began to pour out of the classrooms into the hallways. Sam slipped past, ignoring the way they cringed away the minute she got close. Reaching her locker, she transferred the relics back inside her backpack, and made for the school yard.

Sam tore across the lawn towards the soccer field, breaking for the fence at the very end of the yard. Beyond was a thick forest— one that Danny had showed her led to the mansion’s backyard. It was also the one direction no one would dare chase her. Frosted grass crunched underfoot, her backpack bouncing, as she sprinted.

From somewhere far behind, someone shouted her name, but she ignored them.

Reaching the fence, she jumped. The chain link was numbingly cold and rattled as she clamoured up. When she reached the top of the fence and spun, she saw students pouring out of the school’s exits. A few were pointing in her direction. Lancer caught her gaze and crossed his arms across his chest, frowning.

She dropped to the ground on the other side of the fence. Straightening out of the bush, scanning the yard, she found Valerie Gray staring back.

The girl’s eyebrows raised and she gave Sam a look like, Well? Why aren’t you running? It was in that moment Sam knew the two of them weren’t really all that different.

Sam gave one last glance at Casper High, thought fuck it, then headed into the woods.

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**Behavior Analysis Interview, Jack Fenton**

August 15, 2:13pm

L. Gray: Please state your name, age, occupation and relation to the missing person, for our records.

J. Fenton: Jack Fenton. I’m 35 and a scientist. I’m… I’m Danny’s dad.

L. Gray: Thank you Mr. Fenton. I am Detective Leroy Gray. I am the lead detective on your son’s case as of 8:00am this morning. To my right is Detective David Wilson He will be assisting me in the investigation. Miss Claudia Owens is taking notes. The transcript will not be made public. It is for the police to use in aid of their investigation. Do you understand?

J. Fenton: Yes.

L. Gray: Before we begin, is it alright if Officer Wilson takes a look at your arms and hands?


D. Wilson: Bruise on heel of left palm. Laceration on left palm. Right index finger bent at second joint. Arms are clear. Neck is clear. Small nick on chin.
L. Gray: What happened to your left hand?
J. Fenton: Slipped opening a tough can of pickles.

L. Gray: Chin?
J. Fenton: Shaving.

L. Gray: And what about your right index finger?
J. Fenton: Broke it in the war. Healed that way.

L. Gray: First or second?

L. Gray: Thank you for your service.
J. Fenton: Where’s my son? Where’s Danny?
L. Gray: I don’t know, but that’s what I mean to find out.

Chapter End Notes

Go, Sam, go! Out of all the chapters in this story, this one was the hardest to write and I'm not quite sure why. Thank you to everyone that commented. :)
Ten minutes of half-running, half-hacking her way through tree branches, and Sam was lost. The initial rush of energy was fading and she was starting to realize the implications of what she had just done. She had likely insured her own expulsion—then headed into a place Danny had warned her never to go.

Paranoia crept. Her ear throbbed. Nerves prickled the side of her neck. Overhead, a raven cawed. Leaves whispered from behind. She glanced back and found nothing.

The forest seemed less menacing in the daytime. Warm light dappled through the canopy, dotting the ground. Birds chirped overhead. Winter had cleared away most of the underbrush through constant freezes, making it easier to find a path through than last time.

She reached inside her backpack, fingertips skimming over the different relics, just to make sure they were all still there. Her hands found her painkillers and, not thinking too hard about it, she opened the orange cap and dry-swallowed one pill. As she stuffed the rest into her backpack, her hand caught the edge of a crumpled piece of paper.

She pulled it out, taking time to scrutinize it. Danny’s picture—different than the stiff school photo she had seen in the newspaper. Even though it was black and white, Sam could tell it was taken during a summer day. She could feel the heat in the way Danny had rolled up the sleeves of his tee, in the brown patches in the grass, and the abundance of freckles on his cheeks. Behind him was a small mid-century rambler. He was lounging in a cheap rusted lawn chair, long legs crossed at the ankles. A folded pair of sunglasses hung from the collar of his t-shirt. He squinted against the sun, wide smile across his lips.

Whenever she saw pictures like this it made her queasy. It got her wondering… Had she ever met the real Danny? Conflicted, Sam flipped the photo so he couldn’t smile at her like that.

A twig snapped.

Sam clutched the photo close to her chest and glanced back. Although there was nothing visibly there, Sam could taste something’s attention on her. She had lingered long enough in these woods to be noticed.

Figuring that any direction was better than staying still, Sam picked a path and hurried along. This time as she crunched through the leaves she could hear something else crunching along behind her. It had the bouncy gait of an animal. Each time she paused to listen, it paused too. Though it kept a distance, Sam got the feeling that it was trailing until an opportunity arrived.

Stumbling, she found herself in a clearing. It immediately struck her as unusual—a stretch of land fifty meters in diameter, sloped downwards, nothing but dirt. Her memory jolted. This was the same clearing Danny had lead her past the night she found the skull.

The cabin was close.

So was the hot-wet breath panting from behind.
Sam broke into more of a trot, slinging her backpack off, rummaging through it for anything that would help. Trembling fingers traced different relics. Her sudden movement inspired a bark from behind her.

Sam whipped around and found herself face to face with a hound.

The dog bared teeth and wrinkled its nose. Spittle dribbled from its jaw. Back hunched, its dark brown eyes locked on. One paw raised in a trembling point.

Cold rushed Sam’s veins. If it came down to her or this dog, she’d choose her. It was only survival, she told herself, but a small part of her was looking forward to it.

The dog’s ears swivelled flat. From up close Sam could see it’s ribs and hear it’s haggard breathing. Sam noted the markings— same as the dog that Amanda Scully had hit. “You,” she growled. She had almost gotten tricked by this thing before.

Without breaking her gaze from the ghost, she backed up a step.

Sensing her intentions, the hound took a half step forward and barked a low warning that rumbled in Sam’s chest.

Sam froze, refraining from moving. The relics hummed against her fingertips where she still had her hand stuck in her backpack. Her mind turned. Maybe... She felt the rough leather of a dog collar. Grabbing ahold, she yanked it out, brandishing it in front of her like a weapon.

The effect was immediate. The ghost yelped, skittering back, tail curling between its legs, before fading completely out of sight.

The forest’s chirping and fluttering came back. Only when the sound returned did Sam realized it had left in the first place.

Her breath plumed out in front of her. It took a whole ten seconds for her to trust that the dog was really gone; to relax her shoulders away from her ears. Still unnerved, she wrapped the dog collar around her wrist, just in case it tried anything again. She flicked the rusty nametag. Cujo, huh?

The cabin was barely visible behind trees at the far end of the clearing. Another spot Danny had marked. Just like the graveyard, and the junkyard. Skulker’s book still sat on her desk in her room. She had poured over it, but other than finding a few highlighted passages, she hadn’t found any clues. Was it just the skull Danny had been hoping she’d find?

Making sure the rest of the relics were strapped securely across her back, Sam made for the run down shack. As she drew closer she saw that the police had ran yellow tape around the trees, effectively cutting it off. There were mounds of fresh dirt all around the base, like someone had been digging. Probably looking for a body to go along with that head. They hadn’t found it. This town would have already heard and gossiped if they had.

Sam ducked around the tape and, instead of going inside like before, circled the entire cabin. It was a lot easier to make out stuff in the daylight. A stump sat decomposing where Sam assumed an ax had been previously kept. There was a rusted wheelbarrow on it’s side and a strange carriage-like contraption. Like a wagon. Although there were also long metal beams that jutted out, tucked just above the wheels, like it could just as easily be converted into a sled. It had no real discernible purpose other than hauling wood, and it was clearly something handmade.

The wagon-thing made her skin crawl. The longer she tried to figure out its purpose, the more its purpose was called into question. At first glance, she supposed it was for hauling wood, but it was
too small and short to really be effective. Maybe it was for moving dirt. For gardening. Although that
didn’t seem like the type of thing Skulker was into. And why not just use a wheelbarrow?

Wind picked up, rattling the windows. Sam felt eyes on her again. Maybe it was Cujo watching from
a safe distance. Maybe it was the kids. She didn’t know, but she couldn’t do much about it. Inside
the cabin felt safer than out so, ignoring the eyes, Sam entered through the front door.

Inside the whistling was even louder. A gust howled through, angry, slamming the front door shut
behind her. With the painkiller kicking in, and with her own sheer willpower, she refused to let it
rattle her.

The police had removed anything noteworthy. Taxidermy heads were gone from the walls as well as
the shotguns. The shelf where she had found Skulker’s book was empty. The only things left were
the rickety old chair, table, and a few odds and ends scattered across the floor. A old tin can and
what looked like a fishing pole, both covered in a thick, fuzzy, layer of rust.

She couldn’t help the disappointment. There had to be something bigger here. This was the only
place Danny had *purposefully* shown her. No one else had known about its existence. The police
had never heard of it. And the way Danny said he had ‘stumbled upon it’ had stuck with her. It had
sounded like a euphemism, not an idiom.

Another lonely whistle drifted through the windows, softer than before.

Sam kicked the can on the ground, spinning it with the toe of her boot. Canned corn. Pretty
unremarkable stuff. She crouched and tapped at the floor in a few places, testing to see if it was
hollow. Using her screwdriver, she pried open one of the floorboards and found a collection of bugs
underneath. They scampered a million directions, burrowing deeper into the soil. No evil basement,
then. Sam sighed and dropped the board.

The whistle hadn’t let up. She paused, frowning. And now that she was paying attention, even
though her hearing wasn’t as good as it used to be, she could tell that the whistling was human.
Someone, right outside this cabin, was whistling.

Her eyes trained on the small windows on either side of the door. Her heart thumped sickly beneath
her ribs. Judging by the sound, the whistler was walking around the entire cabin.

Skulker? After all, this was *his* cabin. A hunting dog like Cujo had likely been his. Had Cujo alerted
him of Sam snooping around? Wait, no— Skulker had no head. No lips, no whistling. Also,
conveniently, no talking.

The whistler moved at a maddeningly slow pace. Not too long now before they were at the front
doors... Would they need permission to enter or was she safe as long as she stayed inside? Did this
place even count as a private residence anymore?

Was she about to meet a serial killer?

The thought made her breath catch in her chest. Twisting the screwdriver in her palm, she steadied
herself. Her grip grew calm. She let out a long breath.

The whistler stopped and everything went still and deathly quiet.

Tendons stretched as she gripped the screwdriver tight, grip slick with sweat. Her eyes darted
between each window and the door. God, this silence was so much worse. She’d rather just be done
with it. “Well?” she yelled. “I don’t have all day.”
A figure sidestepped into the left window, giving her a cheeky wave.

Sam threw the screwdriver. It flew through the open space in the shattered window and passed harmlessly right through Danny’s head. “Why would you do that?” she hissed.

Danny let out another whistle, this time stuttering with laughter. “Why are you wandering these spooky spooky woods?” The teasing lilt was tempered by the stern edge in his eye. When she didn’t look guilty enough, he tacked on, “Alone?”

Sam glared. She shoved cabin door open and, as she passed Danny, she couldn’t help but give him a light shove. “What? So you thought you’d try and scare a lesson into me?”

“You’re not scared enough. It isn’t normal,” Danny complained. “It stresses me out.”

She was scared. She was scared all the time, so constantly it was just a part of her. But instead of ruining the mood, she huffed, “Oh I’m stressing you out? You know” —stalking away from the cabin into the clearing, she spun around to face him, crossing her arms— “There’s only so much creeping around you people can do before it starts to lose its effect.”

“You people?” His arms mirrored hers and he leaned in close, lip quirking. “Just what do you mean by ‘you people’?” he teased.

Any irritation she had for that whistling stunt he just pulled faded away. Her chest thrummed, body light. She realized too late she was staring. Leaning away, Sam cleared her throat and forced herself to look somewhere—anywhere—other than his face. She settled for her nails. “I have no prejudice against dead people.” She raised her chin. “I’ll have you know some of my best friends are dead.”

An unreadable expression flickered across his face. Sam was trying to decipher exactly why he was looking at her in that way, when she noticed a pair of eyes watching them from the shadowed edge of the clearing.

Danny followed her gaze. “Cujo. He’s been following you for awhile now. He won’t hurt you.”

Sam eyed the dog suspiciously. Cujo had been plenty menacing before Danny had showed up and she still wasn’t over what had happened with Amanda Scully.

Although right now Cujo was lapping at his wound, docile as a puppy. The hound was in no hurry to leave. After deeming the wound clean enough, he flopped all his gangly dog limbs onto the forest floor, panting in the content, lolling way dogs got around their masters.

“He likes you. It’s almost like he’s yours or something,” Sam observed.

“Or something,” Danny agreed. His smile faded.

Cujo pressed his chin against his forepaws and gave a lonesome whine.

Sam immediately regretted teasing him. Her gaze drifted from the hunter’s cabin, to the hunter’s prized hound, to Danny. Dot, dot, dot.

Danny bent and plucked up a rock, tossing it a few times from palm to palm. “I spend a lot of time here. Did you know this used to be a pond?”

Sam reassessed the strange clearing. The ground glittered like rippling water in a soft breeze. Algae stung her nostrils. Chirping frogs and the drone of cicadas filled the air. Lightning bugs swirled in the suddenly hot, heavy, warm summer night. A memory—Danny’s. Just like her record player. Sam
blinked furiously, yet the illusion persisted. The blurring effect of it over the top of the clearing made
her vertigo rock again.

He chucked the rock like he was skipping it over water. It veered towards Cujo, who skittered into
the forest and didn’t come back. Danny dropped his arms to his sides. The clearing wavered and
resumed it’s barren, desolate form. The temperature turned frigid once more. A strange, almost
unspeakably sad look crossed his face and Sam didn’t dare say anything to break him out of it. After
a full minute, sheepishly, as if berating himself, Danny ducked his hands into his pockets and let out
a sigh. “Shouldn’t you be in school?”

Sam shrugged. “Probably expelled by now.”

Danny raised an eyebrow.

Instead of elaborating, Sam sniffed and rubbed her nose with the sleeve of her jacket.

“So you decided some haunted woods was a better place to be?” Danny joked. “Where are we going
next, then? A basement? A tunnel? A shallow grave?”

Sam scowled. Shouldn’t he be the one telling her what to do? He knew everything, after all. Even if
he couldn’t outright tell her.

“...You have no plan,” Danny surmised. He didn’t sound put-out, but it still struck a chord.

“How am I supposed to know?” she nearly exploded. It came out more of a strangled gasp. She
could barely keep herself together, much less put together a case that no one had ever solved.
Anxiety stirred and raked its claws down her throat. “Everything about you burned up in that library!
Everything! There’s nothing left!”

Danny grabbed both of her arms and gave her a squeeze.

Sam realized she was really light-headed. The clearing was overly bright. Her breathing came and
went, shallow and quick, in her ears.

“Sam.”

She stilled and glanced up, meeting his gaze.

“You are the most stubborn person I’ve ever met. You are going to figure this out. And I’ll help. I’m
not going anywhere.”

Sam searched for the lie, but the more she scanned his face the more she found, deep within Danny’s
unblinking stare, an emotion she had never seen him wear before: Hope. She sucked in a breath. No
one had ever looked at her like that. Like she had the power to do something; change something. No
one had ever believed in her like that.

Danny squeezed her arms again. “Okay?” he ventured.

Sam swallowed. “Okay.” She took in a few breathes and refocused. “Okay…” Quickly, she ran an
inventory of all the things she knew for certain.

Danny’s name was Daniel Fenton. He had an older sister. He had lived in Cincinnati and had
attended Woodward High School. She memorized his address from his relic—a homemade rocket.
She could visit the house, but it was over two hours away and she had no way to get there besides
taking a bus.
What else?

Both of Danny’s parents were dead and buried in Amity Park.

There was the cabin. The severed head she had found inside belonged to Benjamin Skulker—a hunter and the most likely owner of Cujo. In Sam’s opinion, suspect number one.

There were eleven missing children. Sam didn’t know their names or where they went missing. There had to be files on them, though, just like there should be files on Danny.

Then, there was the circus accident. Frederick—the tour guide ghost—had mentioned being part of a circus. And of course there was the fact that the mansion was named after Vladimir Masters—a wealthy doctor who happened to be mayor during the circus incident.

Her brain stuck, trying to fit together the pieces. If only she had more information. Even just the names of the other kids could be the break she needed.

Danny began to roll up the sleeves of his shirt, as if in preparation of getting his hands dirty. Sam was suddenly hit with the picture of Danny in that lawn chair.

“The police,” she blurted.

Danny blinked. “The police?”

“The police still have your case file. They interrogated me with it last week. You’ll help me steal it.”

Chapter End Notes

You know when you're on a rollercoaster and you get to the very tippity top?
Sam stumbled out of the woods and onto the street, catching sight of the mansion. The sun hovered just above the highest gable, it’s light bathed everything in the orangey film of late afternoon. A police car was reversing out of her driveway.

Danny caught up to her, head swivelling from the police car to Sam. His eyebrows inched up his face. “Exactly how did you get expelled?” he asked.

“I pulled the fire alarm. They can’t arrest me for that.” She frowned, suddenly unsure. “Right?”

Danny’s eyes focused on something beyond her shoulder. He stiffened, grabbing her by the arms, forcing them both out of the street. In the same motion he spun her towards him and straight into his chest.

He—

Wait.

Why?

Shocked, Sam opened her mouth to protest— even though she didn’t really mind.

Her body fizzled and grew tingly. Specifically, around her nose and cheeks. Danny’s jacket felt like cold silk. He smelled like a campfire. Smokey and cozy... and while she was noticing things, she also noticed that Danny was tense. It was almost like he was trying to shield her from the road...

A car rumbled down the street. The tires made a grinding noise along cement. Her excitement fizzled out like flattened soda. Of course. It’s not like he would have held her for real.

Danny pulled away as the car turned right and puttered off. Sam caught the gleam of the blue and red lights right as it turned off the street. A glance back at the empty driveway confirmed it had been the police car.

“Sorry.” Danny winced in guilt. “Couldn’t let them see you.”

“So you manhandle me?!” Sam whisper-yelled, lungs still wobbly in shock.

“It was the first thing I thought of,” Danny rushed.

“I can not believe you.” Mortified, Sam strode off for the woods before Danny could see just how brightly she was blushing.

The first thing Danny thinks is to protect her? Deep down, something she didn’t know she even had left after the fire, something squishy and sappy, gave a little sigh. A cruel voice from inside her own head whispered, ‘You really think he likes you like that?’ Just as quick, all those sensations iced over and grew heavy. Externally, Sam made a big show of crashing through dead leaves and foliage.

“Sam! Wait up.” Danny tagged along behind her. He sounded actually guilty this time.

She whipped around and gestured at the road. “Why couldn’t they see me?”

The shade of the tree dappled across Danny’s face, half shrouding it. The exposed cheek glowed with freckles. Sam felt a little redeemed to find a blush on his cheeks too. Although, at her question it
faded just as quickly as his face fell. “Because they could have been puppets,” he muttered.

Sam paused, a little thrown by the answer. It hadn’t been one she had been expecting. “Puppets,” she repeated. As if in response, a breeze shivered the branches above, light licking flame-like across her boots. “What’s a puppet?”

A shrug. Blue eyes trained towards the ground. Hands dove into pockets. “You won’t like it.”

“Could it get any worse?” At Danny’s lopsided smile, she faltered. “Really?”

“Possession is tricky. Impossible to get in and out without leaving something behind.”

Sam knew this. The only time she had seen Danny scared had been right before he had possessed Tucker. He had said something similar then. She eyed him, not liking wherever this was going. Her silence eventually drew those blue eyes back up from the forest floor.

“Oh. Say I possessed you. A piece of me would get left behind, making it easy to manipulate you from a distance; even see remotely through your eyes.” Danny withdrew one hand from his coat pocket and tapped at the very corner of his eye. “You would become my puppet.”

“Puppets are people a ghost has possessed?” Her spine grew cold. “How many puppets do you have?”

Danny face turned stony. “Just one. Tucker doesn’t count. Only the living can be puppets. He has eyes everywhere. Anyone that’s ever been inside the house could be one of his.”

Sam didn’t need to ask who ‘he’ was. That glint in Danny’s eye was reserved for his murderer alone. “That’s… a lot of people.” A good portion of Amity Park. Her father, the Grays, any repairmen that had worked on the mansion before they moved in, anyone that had ever visited the mansion while they had lived there, their realtor… “Has anyone ever told you you’re paranoid?” Sam joked.

Danny didn’t smile. “If I had been more paranoid, I wouldn't be dead.”

Good point. Hard to argue, but wait... “I’ve been inside. Am I...?”

“No.” Danny shook his head, looking at the mansion. “He won’t do anything directly until he has to. He’ll draw this out for as long as he can. Right now, he’s having fun.”

Sam eyed Danny, with that lost-dark look on his face, and swallowed hard. Logically, she knew they were up against a serial killer. Serial killers were, by definition, remorseless, cunning, and sadistic. But the way Danny talked about his killer sometimes, like he truly understood him, like they were close... it made her question just how long he had been imprisoned.

“Also, you’ve had this.” Danny dusted his hands off, and reached for his back pocket. Wordlessly, he held out the screwdriver.

She took it back and turned it over in her palm, feeling the wooden handle vibrating with warmth. What was so special about Danielle’s relic?

“C’mon,” Danny said, taking off along the side of the road. “I know a different way.”

Crouched behind a wall across the street, possible warrant out for her arrest, the Amity Park police station had never seemed more impenetrable. Security cameras were perched every few feet. There
was only one visible entrance. Sam also knew from experience that, once they were inside, it would be extremely difficult to sneak around undetected. The station had an open floor plan of desks and even more security cameras. Not to mention police.

Maybe this was a bad idea.

Crouched down next to her, Danny shot her a grin. He had had the entire walk here to perk back up. Now he was looking far too enthusiastic. Sam would even hazard as far as to say Danny’s killer wasn't the only one having fun in all this.

“Hey. I just thought of what we can call that hug move back there,” he whispered. “A fakeout-make __”

“Danny!” Sam exploded, cheeks burning. “Let’s figure out a plan.”

Danny made a face. “What? Sneak into that? No sweat.”

“What are you going to do?” Sam asked warily, not liking the green lightening that was building in his irises.

“Nothing bad,” Danny promised. He held out his hand.

Sam yanked the hood of her sweatshirt up over her head, then grabbed his outstretched hand. Danny’s cool fingers wrapped around her wrist and her entire arm went numb. Then her shoulder, torso, all the way down to her feet.

Starting out in a brisk trot, Danny made for the station.

Sam clumsily followed. It felt as though her entire body had fallen asleep. Wondering what Danny had done to her, she peered at her other hand. It looked the same. She was still herself. And they were just going to walk inside?

Sweat gathered at the nape of her neck. Nearing the front entrance, Sam tugged backwards until Danny stopped. “What are we doing?” she hissed.

The door flung open and an officer hurried out. A short blond man. Bulky upper body, scrawny legs. His blue eyes shot straight towards them.

Sam stiffened. That’s it. They were caught. Her mind fumbled for why she was waltzing into a police station with her hood drawn up, mouth falling open to babble an excuse. She went to raise her hands up in front of her, but Danny’s grip on her wrist tightened.

The officer breezed past, muttering to himself about personnel reports.

Sam’s mouth continued to hang open. This time out of pure shock.

Danny tapped his pointer finger to lips. Then he grabbed the doorknob, cracked it open. Sam entered first. With her heel, she held the door open. The gesture was enough to give Danny permission to enter.

As the door shut behind them, the sun was setting. Amber light poured in from the windows behind them, basking the entire building in a lazy orange haze.

Directly in front of them was the receptionist at her desk. The gust from the door closing caught her hair and her eyes languidly drifted away from her computer. Again, Sam felt her heart thumping in
her ribcage, but the woman merely frowned and returned to her monitor.

Whatever Danny was doing made them undetectable. Amazing. Popcorn-like giddiness pinged around in her stomach. She should stop being so surprised. Invisibility was par for the course, but her mind couldn’t help but get a bit blown apart.

Twisting her hand around to grab Danny’s, she took off towards the cubicles. Danny silently followed her lead.

They tiptoed along the wall through the main floor. Keeping to the edge of the room, Sam scanned each plaque as they passed by doors, but all of them led to offices. She had no idea where the police kept their files. Would the file be in Gray’s office? Or would it be in some locker somewhere? They couldn’t open every door and peek inside. Someone would eventually notice doors opening and closing on their own.

“Are you smoking again?” a voice accused right behind them.

They froze. Sam held her breath. Danny shared a guilty look.

At the cubicle nearest them a woman with brown cropped hair stiffened. Coffee spilled out of her mug and she immediately began dabbing her blouse with a napkin. “No. I threw them away.” Her entire face, neck, and chest flooded red.

“Marsha... I can smell it.”

Danny gave Sam a light, urgent, push.

They fast-walked down the hallway until it hit a T. Numb as her hand was, Sam barely noticed when Danny’s began to shake. She glanced at their hands, then up to his face. He was paler than usual, which was a feat; mouth and lip tight in concentration.

Danny pointed.

At the far end of the hall, to the right of a men’s restroom, was a door labelled *Evidence Locker*.

Quick-shuffling to the door, Danny stuck his hand through and turned the lock from the inside. Sam yanked it open. They stumbled inside.

Light from the outside hallway travelled across her shoes as the door swung shut. The evidence locker was dark. Sam blinked rapidly to try and adjust her eyes, sweeping out for the lightswitch.

Danny dropped her hand as she flicked it on.

With a *bzzz* light flooded the room, revealing five or so rows of bookshelves. They were about fifteen feet deep. The first two were stuffed with bulging manila-colored envelopes and plastic baggies. The others held white cardboard boxes, each with a lid and a white paper label adhesed to the front.

Danny was slumped against the door, eyes shut. His body was see-through. Clearly his version of ‘no sweat’ involved sweat.

Sam frowned. “You okay?”

He waved her concern away with a half-hearted bat of his hand, then pressed his ear to the door. “I’ll keep lookout.”
Not believing him, but having no time to question it, Sam went for the boxes. She scanned the first section until she understood the filing system. Each box was a crime, arranged by last name. Each label had a name, or multiple names, a date, a location, and a detailed chain of custody.

She skimmed past the alphabet until she hit her first “F”. Ferris, Eric; Drug Trafficking. Filbert, Erin; Domestic Abuse. Foley, Tucker— Sam froze. Her hands trembled.

Should she open it? What she would find inside? Her fingertips brushed across the lid.

“By all means, take your time,” Danny intoned, voice drifting down the aisleway.

Sam ripped her hands off Tucker’s box. She shook her head and refocused, scanning the section over again. “Fenton… Fenton…” Nothing. “It’s not here,” she breathed. “Of course it’s not here. Why would it be?” This time incredulous, on the verge of hysterical. A scream built up in the back of her throat. The urge to punch something was overwhelming.

Danny’s head poked around the edge of the aisle, filmy look upon his face. “You know my name?”

Sam was too busy resisting the urge to flick the world off to answer. Gulping a few calming breaths she scanned around the room again. Ok. Think. Don’t panic. Where else could it be? An office? A desk? A drawer? Still in the interrogation room?—

A glinty thing, nested high in the corner of the room, caught her attention. Her limbs turned to ice as she saw her own warped reflection in the black mirror of a security camera.

Danny— still dazed— craned his neck around. “What’s that?”


She sprinted for the door.

Detective Damon Gray was blocking it.

“Shoot,” Danny cursed from behind her.

It was hard to make out if Gray was scowling or not behind his mustache. He was dressed in uniform — gun heavy in a holster around his waist. “I thought the camera was wrong,” he marvelled.

Every muscle in Sam’s body lit with energy. Fingernails bit into her palms and her boots let out a soft scuff against the cement floor as she widened her stance. Thinking of the possibility that Gray could be a ghost or a puppet, her eyes swivelled between Gray and the evidence bags. High chance there was a weapon in one of those bags... Something she could use to defend herself... A knife... Or better yet a gun...

A cool hand fell on her shoulder. “It’s okay.”

Yeah, right. Danny had also called Max harmless and Cujo a puppy. Being dead, his staying-alive-sense wasn’t well practiced. Sam was starting to doubt it had been any better during his brief life. Despite all that, she couldn’t help but relax at Danny’s confidence.

“Suppose you’re here for his case,” Gray said, sounding unsurprised.

Sam allowed her hood to fall off her head. The hacked remains of her hair spilled out in disarray. “Where is it?” she demanded.
“I have it.” Gray laughed a quiet, disbelieving, kind of laugh. “Both of you are coming with me.”

Sam stepped out of Gray’s police car into the Nasty Burger’s parking lot. The bar’s roadsign pole got swallowed by thick nighttime fog, which hung ten feet above their heads. It boasted 32 BEERS ON TAP. COCKTAILS. POOL. DARTS. FOOD. Sam suspected the bar’s priorities went in that order. Neon light from the sign above colored the fog layer a skeezy red-light red.

Officer Gray began walking towards the entrance.

Giving her a look like, *I guess we’re stuck doing this,* Danny tapped the hood of the police cruiser, then followed, his retreating outline stark black against the Nasty Burger’s windows. Multi-colored Christmas lights lined the bar’s flat eave. Big, old, bulbs that flicked on and off.

The bar was surrounded by enormous trees, which in the night looked like still people encircling the lot. Intermittently, the soft roar of a car could be heard from the two-lane freeway they had just come from. Otherwise, quiet. It felt like the buzzing light from this establishment was the only light around for miles. Like this was the last outpost of human civilization. It made Sam nervous.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket. Dad. No doubt waiting to chew her out for the fire alarm escape. She’d have to explain herself... eventually. Later. Catching up with Danny, she opened the door for him and followed him inside.

Sam was instantly pelted with warm air, the tinkling of silverware, and the mouth-watering scent of caramelized onions. Country music twanged. A stuffed elk peered at her from directly above a dartboard— stray dart stuck in it’s milky left eye.

Danny was shrugging his coat off. He picked one of a row of antlers nailed into the wood panelled wall and hung his coat. Sam copied him.

Following Gray to a booth halfway through the bar, Sam took up the window seat.

Danny scooted in next to her.

Sam glanced around. The place was hallway-like. Felt like being cramped inside a train car. At the very far end was a jukebox that looked as if it hadn’t been replaced in decades. Four person booths hugged the windows directly across from the bar, which was dotted with more red vinyl swivel stools.

Behind the bar was the kitchen. A man in an off-color tee and apron tended to a deep fryer. Above his head were photos of the Casper High football team. A photo for State Football Champions, 1957, 1964, 1977 and 2013.

She turned her attention back to Gray. “Why take us here?”

“This place is a slice of history. Opened up in 1941. Hasn’t changed much since. I’ve always had a soft spot for history,” Gray said. “They also make a decent burger.”

Sam thought he was acting pretty cool, considering Danny was dead and sitting directly across from him. She got the feeling they’d already met.

Danny flicked up his laminated menu, eyes bright, scanning his options. The few patrons in this bar paid him no mind. He looked right at home here in his marled sweater vest. Even the lighting was dark and fuzzy, making the place look like an old movie.
“Do you remember the last time you were here?” Gray asked.

It took Sam a moment to realize Gray was asking Danny.

Danny lowered his menu and frowned. He cast another, more thoughtful, look around, slow realization crossing his face. It reminded Sam of the way he looked at the Halloween party. “...Yeah. I sat in that booth. The one closest to the door. Ordered—”

Their waitress interrupted him, swooshing up to their table, out of breath. She young enough to still be in high school. “Now. What can I get ya’ll?” she asked. She fished around in her apron and pulled out crumpled sheets of lined paper. She glanced up. “Oh hey, Mr. Gray.”

“Hey, Allie.”

Sam’s mind was still cartwheeling over the fact that Danny, while alive, had been to this restaurant and that Gray had known about it. She really didn’t like this feeling of not being in on something.

“And you?”

Sam blinked, realizing the waitress had been waiting for her to order.

“I get that you don’t trust me, but at least hear me out and let me buy you dinner,” Gray reasoned, taking her silence for rebellion.

Sam found the only vegan item on the menu. “A basket of fries.”

The waitress’s eyes flicked over Sam’s face, sticking to her burns and her nub of an ear. Her face turned bloodless.

How was it that Danny, a ghost, was seated beside her and yet _she_ was the scary one?

“Strawberry milkshake,” Danny decided with a wide grin, slapping his menu down like a period.

Jumping, she scribbled their orders down, filled their plastic cups with water, hand shaky, and hurried off for refuge behind the bar.

As the waitress left, Sam leaned across the table, eyes narrowing. “Where’s Danny’s file?”

Gray reached into his pant pocket. He pulled out a tiny red notebook. The cloth cover was darkened and stained from years of handling. It’s pages were yellowed. Gray flipped it open, shuffling through pages. Sam saw flashes of entries of neat handwriting, date and time stamped, running down the pages. Gray found the page he was looking for. He spun it around and pointed about one third of the way down it.

15:00-15:45. visits Nasty Burger, alone. Orders a strawberry milkshake. Has conversation with waitress about an altercation with sister. (see interviews: Barbara Ellis, Shelly McClain, Jasmine)

“The lead detective’s notes,” Officer Gray explained, gauging Danny’s reaction, but Danny seemed more interested in watching Sam’s. He was leaning deep onto the table, chin in his palm, eyes sparking.

Sam’s finger ran over where black Sharpie had redacted what she could only assume was Danny’s name. This treatment extended to all family members as well.

“ Weird, huh?” Gray said. “It was like this when I got it.”

Sam frowned. Why was Danny’s name such a precious secret? Immediately after Mikey and Tucker had learned it, they had been hunted down. Ida had died days after promising to divulge it. Sam was starting to get the feeling that knowing Danny’s name was tantamount to having some sort of secret weapon. Shoving that mystery aside, Sam drew her attention back to the book and began to skim read.

—Got the faxes of the original statements concerning the [redacted] family from Cincinnati police as of 08:00 this morning. Reviewed transcripts. Struck by how out-of-touch parents, and particularly the father, is—

—Found [redacted]’s car along Highway 52. Unlocked. Nasty Burger napkin in middle console. It’s been wiped. Too clean. Especially compared to his room. Looking at possible kidnapping or homicide—

—Reevaluating father’s whereabouts the day of the disappearance—

—Meeting with prosecutor today to set up a media strategy—

The words blurred as Gray closed the book. Sam opened her mouth in protest just as Gray handed it over. “You can have it. Maybe you’ll find it more helpful than I did.”

It wasn’t as heavy as she thought it would be. For some reason she had always assumed Danny’s case notes would feel just as heavy as his secrets. Full of suspects, dead ends, and no answers. The photos Gray had shown her during her interrogation were all here, paperclipped to different pages. There was others, too. A photo of a receipt for one strawberry milkshake, crumpled as if sat on. A boy with long blond hair, acne, and a black leather jacket. The name Jonathan Ryder (AKA: “Johnny 13”) scrawled beneath. A cigarette tin with two prom tickets— the same she had found in Danny’s car. A shoeprint next to what looked like the base of a toilet...

Sam paused on a photo of a young girl. Her hair was lighter in color— cut right above her shoulders, side parted, combed delicately into a bob. Her jawline and emerging cheekbones said she was in her late teens. Facing the camera directly, her light-colored eyes were turmoil with loss. Underneath, the annotation: Jasmine Angeline [redacted], August 13th 1960.

Sam was suddenly aware of Danny peering over her shoulder. “That’s my sister,” he said, voice thick. “Can I see?”

So this was his sister. She seemed really familiar, but that was probably because she looked like Danny. Wondering if it felt weird to look through your own murder, Sam handed it over to Danny and turned to Officer Gray. “How do you two know each other?”

“His dad wrote these notes,” Danny said. “And for a while he tried to solve it too.”

A bunch of pieces clicked together. Sam had thought Valerie was her predecessor, but it was Officer Gray who had been in the same position as Sam three years ago. Or perhaps it had been both of them.


“Is that why you moved into the mansion?” Sam asked.

“Thought I could prove something, solving the case my father couldn’t,” Officer Gray said, almost to himself. “Don’t know why. He’s dead so it’s all pointless, really.”
Their waitress plunked three mugs of coffee onto their table, sensed their tense mood, and hurried away.

“He was proud of you,” Danny argued quietly. “He just didn’t know how to express it.”

Officer Gray said nothing. He busied himself with pouring packets of sugar into his mug of coffee. The grim look on his face said he didn’t believe it.

Sam eyed the pair of them back and forth, trying to judge the exact moment it was ok to break this silence. A writhing knot of questions tumbled around in her mouth. Eventually, she couldn’t keep them to herself any longer. “Is that why you won’t arrested me? Because you’ve lived in that house too, so you know how—”

Gray cut her off with by raising a hand. “Don’t say anything that’ll force me take you in. I don’t know what happened in that library, but I can only keep Detective Ramón at bay for so long.”

“She’s innocent,” Danny stated, as if it were that simple.

“Sam’s innocent to you and me, but not to the rest of Amity Park. A ghost can’t exactly testify on her behalf,” Gray rebuked. He crossed his arms atop his stomach, tone gruff. “Let’s all just remind ourselves that the Foleys deserve some answers.”

Danny fell silent. He went back to thumbing through the notebook.

Sam wondered if Tucker’s parents would believe the truth, even if she told them.

Gray pointed at the book. “Anyway, when Danny went missing it made national news. The Civil Rights movement had just begun. My father just got promoted and found himself leading one of the biggest investigations this country had ever seen. One of the nation’s first black detectives, taking down a serial killer who targeted black orphans. My dad often said the case was too poetic to have not been handed to him by God.”

Danny scowled, suddenly flicking through the next few pages with unnecessary force. Green flint spit deep inside his eyes. “Some God,” he spat.

Looking a little taken aback by that, Gray cleared his throat and rested his hands, clasped, onto the table. “I’m sorry. That was insensitive.”

Danny merely shrugged, not looking up. Sam could tell that the more he flipped through the notes, the hotter his frustration, until he tossed the book onto the table and got up, stalking towards the jukebox at the end of the diner.

Gray’s face paled, probably afraid he’d set Danny off. But, by the petulant way Danny was punching jukebox buttons, Sam could tell he was more sad than anything else.

Sam plucked the notebook off the counter and stuck it in her bag. “So... Your dad have any idea who did it?”

Officer Gray’s eyes went steely. His mustache stilled as his lips drew into a tense line. He took a long sip of his coffee, before putting the mug down with a click. “Oh he knew, but could never find the evidence for a trial,” Gray stated, gravely. “The real mystery is where the bodies are.”
Sam’s eyes found Danny, who was still flipping through the jukebox. His button mashing had slowed and he seemed to be actually reading through the options. Sam figured she had maybe another five minutes alone with Gray.

“Who did it?” she pressed, heart hammering in her neck.

“There were a handful of suspects,” Gray admitted. “At first the father. Lots of cases end up that way. Then, when the other kids came out, Skulker. He had a history of animal cruelty and had been abused as a child. It made sense, but my dad thought Skulker was too dumb. Pretty quickly he turned his attentions to Vladimir Masters.”

A weight settled in her stomach. “The mayor?”

“Mayor, doctor, and most importantly— Danny’s godfather,” Gray said, grim.

“How did he know for sure?” Sam asked, tucking the notebook into her backpack. She would read through it later.

“He didn’t. It’s all circumstantial. Masters’ alibi for that night came from one of his patients, Frederick Showenhower, someone who could have been persuaded to lie on Masters’ behalf for his own medical treatment.” Gray held his hand out, ticking off one, then two fingers. “Danny visited the mansion as a child every summer. It only made sense he would stop by the house if he was in the area.” A third finger. “There was an unexplained showprint in the bathroom matching Danny’s size and”—a fourth finger—“Masters was a surgeon. Performed some of the first organ transplants in this country. Skulker’s spine was severed with a surgical saw.” Gray motioned at his neck, a clean slice.

Sam swallowed. Masters also owned the house and the house was tied to everything, but it didn’t explain why Danny had led her to Skulker’s cabin. And it didn’t explain any motive as to, “Why kill his godson?”

Gray huffed and crossed his arms over his belly, although camaraderie hummed deep in his hazel eyes. “Come on, kid. That one’s easy.”

And just like that, suddenly, she knew the answer. “If Danny did visit that day, he visited unannounced,” Sam thought aloud. “He surprised Masters. Saw something he shouldn’t have. And Masters couldn’t let him leave.”

Gray tapped his nose.

Sam felt sick. “Where was he finding the other kids? And how come he was taking them in the first place? What did Danny see?”

Gray’s face darkened and he went very still, very quiet. Sam could feel the waves of righteous anger as thick as a storm cloud, built up through years and generations of working this case. “I don’t know yet,” he said finally, the admission heavy with guilt.

Their waitress swung by— plopping her basket of fries, Gray’s burger, and Danny’s pink milkshake
in a tall curved glass onto the table. Sam had a million more questions, but Danny had been at the jukebox long enough, so —after squirting a good deal of ketchup across her fries— Sam stuffed one in her mouth and asked, “How did you survive Halloween?”

“Ah, that.” Gray busied himself with spreading more ketchup on his burger. “That night I was at the precinct late. When I locked up, Evelyn was waiting for me outside and… I should have known. Shouldn’t have been surprised to see her like… like that…” He cleared his throat. “Anyway, Valerie showed up. Her locket worked like a shield.”

Sam pictured Valerie’s heart-shaped locket— the one she always clutched whenever spooked. She should have recognized it as one of Tucker’s inventions. Her heart clenched. A fresh bout of grief came out of nowhere. “I thought the necklace was still a prototype,” Sam croaked, because if she didn’t say something she was gonna burst into tears again.

Gray paused and appraised her. “Tucker was a good kid… Val’s taking it hard. Although I suspect someone warned her. Otherwise she would have never gotten to me in time.”

Sam’s gaze found Danny at the jukebox still. That night he had told her to choose. Officer Gray or Tucker. Danny had convinced her that saving both was impossible, yet he had gone off and tried anyway without even telling her.

Danny slapped the top of the jukebox with his palm and the bar’s country music switched to a distinctly punky guitar riff. The Ramones. She doubted Danny had ever heard of them. He had never heard the Beatles. Never known of Martin Luther King Jr’s assassination or 9/11…

Clueless to Sam’s ponderings, Danny slipped back into the booth and took a sip of his milkshake. “I like it,” he announced.

It was unclear if he meant the music or the milkshake. If Sam had to hazard a guess, the music, since how Danny could eat anything anymore was beyond her.

“Now that you have Daniel’s case notes, what will you do?” Gray asked before taking another huge bite out of his burger. Juice dripped in slow motion down the side of his hand, rounding around his wrist bone, before oozing down, down, disappearing beneath his sleeve.

Sam suddenly felt really heavy.

The Nasty Burger blurred. Music stretched until one agonizingly high note rang, suspended, in the air. Gray’s eyes flicked up. Teeth still sunk into his burger, the corners of his lips pulled into a grimace. In fast forward, the burger in his grasp blackened and fuzzed over with mold. The brown in Gray’s pupils wobbled and split into two. Through the jukebox, Joey Ramone screamed his next note. Glass shattered. Sam watched a piece spiral through the air, trailing a rainbow as it reflected the Christmas lights outside, before it glanced off top of the salt shaker and landed on the windowsill...

Time came back with a rush and a war beat of drums from the jukebox. Sam was slow to realize there was strawberry milkshake pooled in her lap.

Their waitress was suddenly there, scooping up the glass shards with a rag. “I’ll get you another one, hon,” she was soothing.

Sam blinked, trying to piece together exactly when Danny’s glass had broke in the first place.

“I’m a total klutz,” Danny was apologizing, yet Sam could tell something was very wrong by how tightly he was holding onto her hand underneath the table. “Must have dropped fifteen beakers in school…”
All four of Gray’s pupils stayed locked on her as he chewed.

Sam shivered. Instinctual told her this wasn’t Gray anymore. At least, not entirely.

The restaurant felt different. The mirror behind the counter was pitch black. Darkness smothered the corners, making the whole place fuzzy and inescapable. Even though Danny’s song still played on the jukebox, it sounded like each chord was slower and off-key.

“Besides the shake, you need anything else?” Still scooping the spill, the waitress turned expectantly to who, two seconds ago, had been Officer Gray. “Sir?”

Gray’s eyes flicked up.

Under the gaze of a man with four pupils, the waitress hesitated, hand drawing into her chest in fear.

“Go,” Danny ordered.

The air around them wavered rings. Sam felt a tug in her stomach for the door. It was late. Her father was probably worried. What was she doing having dinner here with strangers when she had a warm meal awaiting at home...

The waitress’ shoulders fell, before she breathed, “I’m real overdue for a break.” With a slap, she dropped the cloth and headed out the door. One by one, she was followed by the cook and the rest of the regulars. They lumbered out on their own, at different times, strides purposeful, faces determined. Each time the door closed a puff of cold wind and and the chime of a bell echoed hollowly throughout the restaurant, until only one man remained draped across the bar, passed out with a beer inches from his limp hand.

“Well,” Gray admonished, eyes alight. He sniffed and placed the burger back on his plate, before plucking at the cloth the waitress had left on the table. “I see you’re still as fun as this wet rag,” he noted.

“You’re still wearing other faces,” Danny said. “If I was you, I’d hide too.”

Gray hummed in response, as if already bored. His attention flicked to Sam. The glitter drained from his eyes. What was leftover set off all her instincts to run. There was the click of a gun, barely noticeable over the noise from the jukebox, although Sam heard it plainly. It didn’t scare her as much as it should have. By the way his left arm dipped below the tabletop, Sam guessed he had Gray’s pistol pointed at her.

“I could shoot her in the stomach,” Gray mused. “I’ve heard it’s a slow and painful way to go. Although, I’m sure we could think of more creative ways to kill this one. Right, Danno?” With the hand not holding the gun, Gray snapped.

Sam felt more than saw Danny shrink away. All the strength in his arm, the one pinning her to the seat, flooded out. She shot a quick glance at his face. His head was ducked, eyes trained at the tabletop. Back when she used to volunteer at animal shelters Sam had seen the same look on abused dogs.

Enough. Sam twisted her leg so her knee pressed against the steel of the gun. “Go on, then. I’m ready.”

Gray’s lip twitched in surprise.

Danny’s hand tightened around her own.
Peace descended upon her like a thick cloak. The thought of the end filled her with a sense of relief. Death didn’t scare her enough to stop her. Pain didn’t scare her enough to stop her. Certainly, then, this monster wouldn’t scare her enough to stop her.

When no shot rang out, Sam smiled. “I forgot. You need me. If I die, show’s over.”

The cold press of the gun relented as Gray’s lips pulled into thoughtful line. The way he barely moved was creepy. It was as if Gray’s body had gone stiff while this thing occupied it. Like it was taking so much effort just to make Gray talk that moving his body in any substantial way was entirely was out of the question. “Ok, Detective Samantha Manson. What happens next?”

No idea. She was making everything up as she went. All this time she had considered it a bad thing, but when pitted against a sociopath, her lack of a plan probably made her frustrating.

Those four pupils scoured her with fascination. “You really have no clue, do you?”

Maybe it was the fact that the killer was talking through Gray’s face, but Sam found herself more calm than afraid. She plucked a steak knife off the table and leaned in, aiming the tip towards the middle of his left eye, to the creature lurking beneath. “You may feel superior to me, cleverer than me... more cunning and more terrible... but one day soon, you’ll be afraid of me. When that day comes I promise to give you the same mercy you gave your victims.”

Something in her threat pulled Danny back out again. “Yeah,” he chimed, a spark of defiance relit in his voice.

Gray’s lips cracked wide. A laugh bubbled out. He pointed a finger between them, back and forth. “You two are perfect for each other.”

Sensing an opportunity, Sam guessed where Gray’s arm was positioned underneath the table and kicked, pinning it to the seat with her boot. The gun clattered to the floor. A shot rang out, rattling the windows and jolting all the bones in her body. Dust sprayed up from the wood behind the bar. Her damaged ear screamed; the sound like a whip through Sam’s head.

Danny’s hand, still tight in hers, yanked her for the exit. Sam didn’t pause to look back or to question him.

They ran silently around the side of the bar and into the woods. The trees quickly gobbled up the light from the parking lot. Once in awhile a slice of moonlight illuminated where her feet should go.

Danny ran beside her, his hand hovering protectively over the small of her back.

Sam jumped over logs and ducked around bushes. Her side complained and her harsh breathing plumed out in front of her. Meanwhile, her heart slammed in her throat, blood hot and coursing, feet and hands frigid with shock. Low hanging bugs pinged off her cheeks and neck as she ran.

Tugging on her wrist, Danny stopped her and grabbed her shoulders. His eyes were two blazing electric blue fires. “You’re crazy, Sam. You’re mad!” he burst. His gaze widened. “You’re... shot?”

“I’ll stop him,” she vowed, out of breath not only from running, but from the sheer emotion lurching through her in that moment.

“Sam… this… this is a lot of blood,” Danny was saying.
Sam glanced down and saw a large stain across her stomach and lap. Strawberry milkshake. “I’m fine.” She batted his hands away.

Danny sniffed his hand and blew out a breath, running his hands through his hair a couple of times vigorously in relief.

She caught his gaze. “I’ll end him.”

“I know,” Danny breathed. There was something in the way he looked at her. She would catch it from time to time. He was doing it right now. After a moment, he cleared his throat and tossed her what looked like a giant inky lump. “Think fast.”

She grabbed it out of the air. Her backpack. The zipper was half zipped. Inside peeked Danny’s case notes and the relics. The warmth from her outrage simmered away as Sam’s brain started to piece together what had just took place. “Could he do that to anyone that’s been inside the mansion?” she asked.

“We should be safe for now,” Danny mused.

She shivered; the ice from Danny’s milkshake seeped through her skin. Without her jacket her arms began to shake. “What’s going to happen to Officer Gray?”

In the darkness, Danny’s expression was unreadable. “He’ll be alright. Damon was just the mouth. He’ll probably wake up soon with no memory of us ever being there. That whole stunt was more to rattle me back in line.”

She gripped her backpack tighter to her chest. “Did it work?”

Danny started picking a path towards the highway. “No,” he said, flatly, over his shoulder, but he couldn’t look at her and he kept walking like he wanted to be rid of the conversation.

Sam watched him walk away and couldn’t help but feel useless. She had no idea what to say to help him feel better. Consoling a friend about their murderer was not something she had ever prepared for. After a full minute of almost jogging to keep up, Sam broke the silence. “Must be tough, being stuck here with him.”

No answer. Although, Danny’s shoulders hiked up an inch.

A clear sign to leave it alone. But, Sam reckoned that after everything she just went through she deserved some honesty. “I don’t know what he did, but—”

Danny whirled on her.

The trees around them popped and snapped like the earth itself was moved by his anger. At the noise Danny flinched, screwing his eyes shut and slamming his hands over his ears. His form wavered, illusion unravelling for a second, stripping bits of him away until the moon illuminated only half of his face, creating deep pockets beneath his cheekbone and his eye-socket.

Sam was never more acutely aware of how thin he was. Her imagination didn’t hesitate to provide awful, horrible thoughts. Images of Danny starved and beaten, tied up, tortured in some creative brutal way flooded her. Before she knew it she was crying.

Danny’s face fell. “Sam… Shoot. I’m sorry.”

Sam’s breath sawed out, damp with tears. She huffed. “I’m not crying because you glared at me!” At
Danny’s lost expression she wrangled control and wiped the snot from her nose with her bare arm. “I’m crying because of what it must have been like being alone with that monster.”

Danny’s face cleared then turned contrite. “It wasn’t bad all of the time, Sam. Really.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “He wasn’t too terrible to me.”

“What are you saying—? What are you—?” Sam ran out of air, feeling a bit punched out hearing Danny defend his killer. But then, Danny had been taken by someone he had known his whole life. He had been kept long enough to submit to a snap. Sam tried, but she couldn’t understand what kind of sick bond had formed. She honestly hoped she never would.

Sam swallowed her judgement with several actual, thick, gulps. Working hard to keep the edge out of her tone, she asked, “How long?”

Looking distinctly uncomfortable at that question, Danny said, “How long what?”

“How long were you kept alive?”

“How long were you kept alive?”

“Dunno.” Danny shrugged the question off like a coat. He paused, then shot her a glance. Looking a bit guilty at getting so mad, Danny drew a hand to his lips—a cigarette materializing between his pale fingers. His brows furrowed. “It was summer. Then, the first escape, it was raining. The second, there was snow. A year?”

He had tried to escape twice? Sam tried not to let it show, just how freaky all of this was. It would have been more humane—hell it would have been easier—if he had just killed Danny and dumped the body.

Danny sucked in a quick drag, releasing it just as fast. “After that, he randomized his schedule. That way I couldn’t predict what he’d do,” he continued, matter-of-factly. “Drugged me too. Made it hard to keep track of things.”

The way time bent around Danny suddenly made a lot of sense. He had been trapped, sedated, in a room somewhere outside time. Already the moon was lower than it should be. They had left the police station around four in the afternoon. But, Sam knew from experience it was true. This was a peculiarity of Danny that she had decided long ago wasn’t worth worrying over.

Danny’s face had gone blank. His gaze slid, empty, across the forest floor.

The tugging sensation in her chest was almost unbearable. Her arms twitched to wrap around him, but she wrapped her arms around herself instead. “Did you? Escape that second time?” she had to ask, even though she already knew the answer.

The tendons in Danny’s jaw tensed and refused to let him open.

Any other time and Sam would have blamed it on the curse, but she had a feeling this time Danny had simply reached the limits of what wanted to share.

Her pocket buzzed. Probably her dad.

Danny looked relieved at the interruption. He had been hanging around long enough to learn the basics of how things like cell phones, computers, and the internet worked. “You should answer it.”

Not before she could make one thing perfectly clear: “It doesn’t matter how he treated you. You were still his captive.”
Danny huffed, eyes darkening. “You don’t get it.” A flare of green lit in the ring of his irises, tone wrought with frustration at Sam for not dropping the subject. “At one point in time we were friends.”

“No. I’m your friend,” Sam insisted. “Friends don’t drug each other.”

Danny shook his head as if to dislodge the words from his ears. He glared at the ground and took several long, harried, puffs of his cigarette. Slowly, his expression changed— turned cross to turbulent, pained to unspeakably sad. “You’re right. I know that,” Danny croaked finally, face crumpling. “I know. I know he’s evil. But... he’s the only family I have left.”

“Yeah, well fuck him,” Sam said. “Pick a new family.”

Danny coughed a laugh. After a moment, he cleared his throat. “Anyway, what I feel doesn’t matter.” His cigarette hovered near his lips in deep thought. “He’s hurt a lot of people. This is much bigger than me.” With that, he took a long drag and closed his eyes.

Sam scowled. Her pocket buzzed again. This time, with a sigh, she answered it.

“Sam?!” her dad rushed, breathy in panic. “Where are you? Are you okay?”

Sam winced. Oh yeah. She had a family, too. “I’m fine, Dad.”

“The police came by. They said you pulled the fire alarm. That you ran. They wanted to make sure you made it home.” The initial panic in her father’s voice wore away into exhaustion. He sounded as if he already known she had done it and, while not approving, had come to terms. There was something else, though. Something was weird about how relieved he sounded...

“It’s true,” Sam admitted.

“Where are you?”

Meeting Danny’s gaze, she said, “Highway 52. Exit for the Nasty Burger.”

Static crinkled on the other end. A drawn-out pause where Sam could practically feel her dad weighing if it was worth asking how she got there, before he said, “I’m on my way. Don’t move.”

Case Notes III

Interview, Madeline Fenton

L. Gray: And what is your relation to Mr. Masters?

M. Fenton: He is a close family friend.

L. Gray: When did you two meet?

M. Fenton: The day I met my husband. Masters was never far behind. Back in those days, he followed Jack around like a puppy.

L. Gray: What did you think of him?

M. Fenton: I thought he was strange. My husband is very kind.

L. Gray: Kind? What makes you say that?
M. Fenton: You know when you meet some people and you can smell it? Their tragedy? Rolling off them like a thick cloak?

L. Gray: I suppose.

M. Fenton: If my husband smells that, he won’t leave it alone. He’ll feel the need to fix it. That’s my Jack. Always taking in strays. The first time I met Masters his eyes looked punched out. ..Do I.. Do I look like that now?

L. Gray: You are remarkably put together, considering the circumstances.

M. Fenton: What does that mean?

L. Gray: I mean only that you are a rather remarkable woman.

M. Fenton: Which is it? That I should be wailing and pounding on walls? Or that I should be bedridden? Rendered mute and lame by grief? Do not flatter me, Detective. Do your job. Get my boy back.

L. Gray: I assure you, Mrs. Fenton. I am doing everything I can.

M. Fenton: You do everything. And then you do more. Do you understand?

L. Gray: Your husband and Masters. They were close?

M. Fenton: Of course. The war chewed them up and spat them back. All the blood on those fields got mixed about. Afterwards those men might as well have been brothers.

L. Gray: Where did your husband serve?

M. Fenton: The third army.

L. Gray: And Vladimir Masters?


Chapter End Notes

Wheeee! Things are getting fun. Fun, as in, I find this sort of thing fun to write. The fact that I didn't think I have any mental health issues while writing something like this still makes me chuckle. Thank you to everyone who commented on the last chapter. Love you guys. Thanks for the support.
Tears On My Pillow

Sam took up the passenger seat of her father’s car. Rain plunked off the windshield. Not a frenzied flood of a rain. Heavy, sad, sparse rain. Every so often a lone snowflake swirled past the headlights.

Next to her, her dad’s quiet resignation made it difficult to figure out what he was thinking. Sam wished he’d yell or, at the very least, break this tension-filled silence. She was too exhausted to break it herself.

It was 11:42pm. She had been missing for over twelve hours. No wonder her father had been worried.

Gray’s bi-pupiled eyes, sparking in the gloom of the Nasty Burger, flashed through her mind. That gaze had been vacuous except for a machiavellian glint—a silvery fish gleam that darted around, marking every possible angle, every weakness to use against her later. Masters had found her entertaining. He wanted her to catch him, if only for the chase of it all.

Sam knew she would face him again. Nowhere was safe, even with relics. All the energy spent worrying over how to solve this case, how to stay alive, how to beat him, how to outsmart him, how to win—wasted. There was no avoiding the eventual harm.

A voice from inside her head, asked, “Who would you be if you weren’t afraid?”

The question seeped through her, settling into her soul. The sound of tires suddenly became more defined; rain drops sharper. A weight she didn’t know she had been holding evaporated. The lights on the dash danced. Had color and sound always been so vibrant?

Her father reached over and cranked up the heat. Warmth flooded her goosebumped arms. He rubbed a hand up and down her bare arm a few times, before he cleared his throat. “When the police came by, I assumed the worst, what with everything that’s happened… I know it’s been a tough couple of months…” Her dad’s gaze wavered on the road, as if saying whatever he was thinking aloud would make it true.

Sam let out a slow breath and at the same time said, “I’m not suicidal.”

“That’s not the impression you’ve been giving off,” her father reasoned, words fast, tense. “The police were worried. Dr. Matthews is worried. I’ve… I’ve been worried.”

“And Mom?”

“Her too.” All the tendons in her dad’s hands popped out as he strangled the steering wheel.

Sam watched him. She considered not saying anything and letting it drop; let it build all awkward and unhealthy the way only a Manson could. But— no— the past hour had snapped life into clarity. Her parents may not communicate, but they weren’t murderous sociopaths. Sam knew comparing her family to Danny’s was illogical, yet she did it all the same. It was time to let them in.

“Pull over,” Sam decided. “I need to talk to you.”

Flicking a glance her way, her father pulled to the side of the highway, put the car in park, and released a long breath.

Wind hushed against the windows. The engine pulsed beneath Sam’s boots. She looked out the
window and saw an old sign, covered in ivy, that read: ‘I know.’ It was the same sign she had rode her bicycle past what felt like years ago. A street lamp flickered and suddenly brightened, flooding the interior of the car with light—as if the universe was tuned to this very moment. Sam was struck with the possibility that maybe, just maybe, it was.

With a note of dread, her father asked, “What?”

Sam’s heart thrashed inside her ribcage, but her soul was calm. “I’ve noticed Mom’s been acting strange.”

“Haven’t we all?” her dad shot back, although his eyes swirled with uncertainty.

Sam paused, trying to think of how best—how delicately—to say this... “Something’s changed in her ever since she fell down the stairs.”

A huff, a laugh. Her dad shook his head, looking anywhere but at her. His eyes darkened and swiveled back and forth across the empty stretch of highway. “You’re mother is fine, Sam. It’s you I’m worried about.”

“She’s behaving like nothing is wrong,” Sam pointed out.

“She’s been preoccupied with the park cleanup,” he admitted. His large warm hand reached out and landed on top of her head. He rustled her hair, like she was a child again. “Just because she’s interested in something doesn’t mean there’s anything up with her. And it doesn’t mean she loves you any less.”

“So it’s just the clean up?” Sam asked, unconvinced.

His hand drew back. “What else could it be?”

The moment was now. She was out of moves. Worst case scenario he just thought she was crazy, which he already did. “Mom’s dead. Ghosts are real. We’ve been living with Mom’s ghost for the past month.” As soon as the truth ripped out of her mouth she sucked in a bit of air and froze.

Whatever her dad had been hoping she would say, that hadn’t been it. He stared at her for a long minute. The car rumbled. Her looked like he was hanging on for a punchline. Then, abruptly, he glared. “That’s not funny, Samantha.” He shook his head, preparing to whip back out onto the street.

It was a reaction Sam had expected, but it still stung. She pressed both palms on the dash to get him to stop. He jumped. His edginess only confirmed her hunches. Something had happened while she had been missing, something that her dad was trying to convince himself didn’t happen. “What did she do?” she demanded.

“You’re sick,” her dad was saying, voice shaky. “That’s what this is.”

“I’m telling the truth,” Sam insisted. “You won’t hear it.”

“Your mother is not dead!” he shouted.

Ignoring the outburst, Sam rushed, “How did she react when I went missing?”

His grip tightened on the gear shaft, gaze looking resolutely out the window. It looked like that had hit a bit too close to home. After a long beat, he yanked the car into drive and pulled back onto the road.
The silence the rest of the drive back was a definitive one. Broken only by the thump-hiss of the windshield wipers and the quiet roar of tires over asphalt. Sam had no idea if anything she had said had gotten through to him, but it didn’t really matter.

As soon as they walked back inside the mansion, her dad gave her a light push on the back to hurry upstairs to her bedroom. Halfway up she glanced back over her shoulder and found her father’s gaze trained, turbulent, at the hallway that led to the kitchen.

Sam found herself lying in cool grass along the edge of a glittering lake, something heavy atop her. Sitting up, she found Danny with his head draped across her legs, eyes open and clouded over with death. The freckles on his cheeks got up— tiny black ants that crawled under his eyelashes and down his neck, disappearing beneath his collared shirt.

With a gasp, she woke to her bedroom. Her heart thudded wildly in her chest.

The hallway light was off. Her parents were probably in bed. The house had that stillness that only existed in the early morning. Outside, a waxing moon hung watchful, the rain having subsided.

The case notes were heavy in her lap, still open. She must had fallen asleep while reading. Her flashlight was still on and blazing a fiery glow into her comforter. Blinking heavily a few times, Sam grabbed her flashlight and trained it to the page she had left off.

L. Gray: Where were you the evening of August 12th?

V. Masters: North Mercy Hospital, working.

L. Gray: Do you have anyone who can verify that?

V. Masters: Frederick Showenhower— a patient of mine.

The detective must have found this interesting, because he had circled Showenhower’s name. Next to it he had written organ transplant nominee.

Sam flipped forward a few pages, past the preliminary questions.

L Gray: Do you have any children?

V. Masters: Two godchildren are enough.

L. Gray: Not a fan of kids?

V. Masters: Too busy for kids. Although Daniel always entertained himself. When he was twelve he built a homemade rocket. He’s smarter than his father ever gives him credit for.

Masters never missed an opportunity to rip into Danny’s dad. His testimony made it obvious why Danny’s father had been a primary suspect.

Sam had sat down and read through most of Masters’ first statements, determined to find a lurking psychopath. The more she read, the more she sensed that, while Masters was cunning, hurting Danny was never part of his plan. The parts of the transcript where he spoke nostalgically about their summers together seemed genuine. He considered Danny at worst, a pet project, at best a pseudo-son.

Her thoughts flitted to that vacant look Danny had worn in the woods— the soulless one he had
worn as he had spoken about his multiple escape attempts. A profound sadness weighed her down. The book in her hands drooped. Her head pulled forward as tears stung at the corners of her eyes. Not for the first time Sam wearily considered just closing the case and giving up.

Frowning, Sam flipped through the pages of the notebook, trying to get a sense for how long this interrogation went. A slip of loose yellowed paper fell out onto her bedspread.

Sam delicately unfolded it and held it up to the light. Blueprints. Two pages paperclipped together, one for each floor of the villa.

The date written at the top was November 13, 1954. Gray had noted on the bottom-right corner of the top paper: *Neighbors testify seeing B. Skulker (see interviews, pages 39-45, 68-81) on grounds hauling bags of cement and other construction materials off and on. 1946 - 1949. No new additions to home during this time.*

No new additions. A small thrill raced through her. So what had they been building?

Her flashlight scanned across the pages, noting where Detective Leroy Gray had circled two eccentricities of the mansion. The first was in the kitchen marked *cellar*. A page number was written next to it.

Flipping to that section in the notebook, Sam found the brief, uninteresting blip: *Hidden cellar underneath kitchen floor. 2ft x 5ft x 6ft. Storage of canned goods.* She would have found this weird, had she not read enough on the Cold War for her history project research to know this was standard practice. With a house this old, that cellar had probably predated Masters anyway.

The second eccentricity was more interesting, because it was in *her* room. According to the blueprints, there was a spiral staircase hidden behind the wall where her desk was. Walker had scoured it as well and had this to say: *Small circular wooden staircase behind wall. Leads to observation window with built-in telescope. Built prior to 1930. Telescope purchased by V. Masters for victim in 1954. Hand drawn stars etched into wall next to window match those drawn on wall in victim’s room.*

Sam ran her finger along that line again. *Hand drawn stars etched into wall next to window match those drawn on wall in victim’s room.*

“No way,” she spoke aloud. Her room said nothing back.

With a *whoosh*, Sam yanked back her covers and crossed the room. She folded up the blueprints and tucked them into the waistband of her pajamas. Running her hands along the wallpaper, she searched for some kind of misalignment, some kind of groove that would give the hidden door away. An image of a preteen Danny flashed through her mind, doing the same thing, standing in this exact spot, decades before her. The image filled her with a flurry of energy and determination.

She grabbed ahold of her desk and gave it a hard yank away from the wall. The resulting noise echoed down the hallway. Wincing, she froze and held her breath. After no parents interrupted and the house remained still, she went back to poking around.

Rapping her knuckles along the wall, she hit an area where the sound opened into a satisfying yawn. She paused, breath catching. This was real. The blueprints weren’t lying. There was a room hidden behind this wall. It had been waiting for her the entire time.

Her eyes marched along the molding which lined the bottom edge of the wall. Two identical, vertical cracks split through the wood. Sam’s pulse thudded. She crouched low and got her fingernails in
there. The moulding popped off without fanfare. Underneath a tiny brass handle sat deep in the recesses of the wall, inside a hole which had been cut specifically for it.

Sam spent about a minute weighing the pros and cons of pulling it, before she grabbed ahold and tugged.

From behind the wall a soft prelude of mechanical noises clicked and churned, as if the house was grinding its teeth. With a quiet click, a small door-sized chunk of the wall shifted back. A wash of cold air spilled into her room. On its heels came the smell of must and dust particles which danced in her flashlight beam. Then, the wall rolled away on tracks leaving behind a black hole.

Shivering, Sam straightened and aimed her flashlight in to the recess, revealing a circular wooden staircase. She took that staircase up. It complained and creaked enough to make her nervous at its integrity, but not nervous enough to stop her.

It wasn’t long before she came across the cramped room Detective Gray had described. It was bare except for a tiny window and a telescope. Her shoulders brushed walls on either side and she had to crouch to her knees to avoid hitting her head on the ceiling, although a child might sit here comfortably.

A brass telescope was nailed into the wall, coated by an inch of dust. There was a small hatch cut out of a glass window that overlooked the backyard. The hatch allowed the scope to swing through and view the night sky unhampered. And, just like Walker had detailed in his notes, there were five-pointed stars etched in the walls. At first they seemed random, but then, even with limited knowledge, Sam found the Big Dipper.

Sam ran her fingertips along the stars, feeling dips and grooves in amazement. Danny had sat here alive. This was proof. The blueprints had been right. What else were they right about? ...What other hidden secrets did this mansion hold?

Sam yanked the blueprints from her pocket and unfolded them, training her flashlight to the study. Her finger traced the four walls on the blueprint. She slowed. She frowned.

The dining room Sam had dinner in every night was a different shape than the one in this blueprint. The blueprint showed a perfectly square room, but her dining room was rectangular. Sam knew this because when they had moved in she had directed movers to place a buffet table along one side versus the other because one wall was longer. Either there had been renovations since, or there was an unaccounted for space behind a wall in the study.

Maybe she was wrong. She hoped she was wrong. Maybe the dining room actually was square. Wouldn’t someone has detail-oriented as Gray have caught this? But Detective Leroy Walker Gray had never lived in this house... He didn’t know it as intimately as she did...

Her flashlight brightened. Outside, the moon broke through clouds and filled the cramped room with light. It glinted off the uneven chipped surface of the wood making the stars seem to twinkle. At the same time something in her gut woke and, in satisfaction, nodded.

Case Notes IV

Interview, Madeline Fenton

L. Gray: How would you describe Danny?

Interview, Shelly McClain

L. Gray: How would you describe Danny?

S. McClain: Loud. Reckless. One time our high school class went to the river. There was a cat drowning in the currents and Danny jumped in to save it. Only, Danny doesn’t know how to swim, so we ended up having to dive in and save them both. He was always doing stuff like that. Rarely bothered with thinking ahead.

Interview, Jack Fenton

L. Gray: How would you describe Danny?


Interview, Jasmine Fenton

L. Gray: How would you describe Danny?

J. Fenton: Optimistic.

L. Gray: How so?

J. Fenton: He operates under the assumption that the world, and most people in it, are inherently good. For the most part, Danny trusts a stranger as much as he trusts you or me.
Shhh-click!

Ten feet, four inches.

Shhhhhhh-click!

Twelve feet, two inches.

Lilac eyes narrowed and scanned from where Sam was crouched low, tape measure in hand. She had measured the dimensions of the dining room three times. It was not square.

Her father appeared at the doorway, sipping at a steaming mug of coffee. He licked on the light switch and the crystal chandelier dazzled into life. Arcs and stars were thrown across the dining room walls. He paused in surprise.

Ignoring him, Sam got up from her crouch and placed her hands on her hips. Either the blueprints were out of date or she was on to something. She knocked along the wall like she had last night. The sounds all came back solid.

Her father cleared his throat. “You’re up early,” he greeted as he seated himself at the table. His expression said he was too unnerved by her behavior to say anything about it. Probably thought she was completely nuts by now and was at a loss.

“Morning,” she muttered, distracted. She felt at a loss when it came to her parents, too.

“What are you doing?” her father asked, slowly, like he was afraid of the answer.

Sam considered lying and saying she was finding a good place to hang something, but what was the point anymore really? She shrugged. It close enough to the truth.

Maybe the hidden door wasn’t in the dining room. Maybe it was in the study. A shock ripped through her at the thought. Hadn’t Tucker said something about an office with a trick door? A basement full of dead people? Skulker and Masters had been working on a project that required cement. That sounded a whole lot like a basement.

Sam bolted out of the dining room into the hallway.

The door to the study had a brass handle, which gleamed in the amber light. Reflections of curling ivy wallpaper made it appear to dance… or writhe.

As she took a few steps towards the door a weird smell hit her. Dead rat, with the same kind of perfume-y sweetness that she sometimes got from Danny. The hairs on her arms stood up. A metallic taste filled her mouth.

Swallowing hard, Sam wrapped her fingers around the knob and she yanked.

Locked.

Sam blinked. When did the study door get locked? She wracked her brain. Sure, she hadn’t been inside since they first moved, but—
“What are you doing?” a voice hissed, fast and angry, like a rattled cobra.

Sam heart jolted up her throat. Her hand flew off the handle as she whirled around.

Her mother’s ghost approached, hands balled into fists at her sides. Her face was drawn and pale. There was a tinge of fear in her eyes and her form wavered like she was two seconds from transforming into something a whole lot worse.

Shaken, but determined not to let it show, Sam asked, “Why is it locked?”

“Yes,” the ghost rushed. Her shadow stretched across the floor, loomed up the wall, and pressed up against the ceiling.

“Why?” Sam pressed.

“Because I said so and I am your mother.”

Her father stepped into the hallway, eyes shifting warily between Sam, Pamela’s ghost, and the study door. “What’s going on?”

The inflating shadow snapped back. The ghost let out a tiny breath and straightened, fixing her apron back from where it had swiveled around her hips in her haste. “Nothing.” Her smile strained. Deep behind her eyes there was still a thrumming torment. “Nothing. Come. Let’s get you both some breakfast.”

Sam swirled her fork in her hand, eyes flicking to her mother who guarded the dining room door, arms crossed, silently watching them eat.

Something bad was definitely in the study. Danny could have been straightforward, for once, about her mother’s body being close. Suddenly Sam was glad her ghost had locked it. She wasn’t sure if seeing her mother’s body was something she could take.

If her body was in there, it explained why her ghost flitted in and out of the mansion without permission. Did that mean Danielle’s body was also somewhere in the mansion? That maybe Masters had hidden all the bodies away inside somewhere? Could it be so simple?

Sam pushed her vegan sausages from one side of her plate to the other. There was no way she was getting into that study as long as her mother’s ghost haunted the house. What she needed was a relic… but her mother’s relic could be any number of objects. Only picking it up and feeling the hum would give it away...

Only two people could help. One was dead; the other hated her. It was worth a try.

Sam fished her phone out of her pocket. Halfway through crafting a message, her father dropped his knife onto his plate with a loud clatter.

Sam glanced up.

Her father’s adams apple bobbed up and down nauseously, gazing at the oozing mess of egg yolk on his plate. He shot Pamela a sideways glance.

Maybe now, Sam thought, he believed.
Frozen puddles cracked beneath her shoes as she trudged along the sidewalk. Reaching the gas station, Sam paused. Across the street the graveyard gate was open. Beyond the trees Sam could see groundskeepers clipping bushes and revving lawnmowers. Her grip tightened around her backpack straps, hands numb in the morning air.

It had been over a month since Tucker’s death. Part of her grew queasy at the idea of standing six feet above whatever was left of him, but she needed to see with her own eyes that he was actually dead.

Her phone chimed.

*New Message from Valerie Gray: Ok*

Sam let out a breath which hung in a tiny cloud, then crossed the street. Quickly, to avoid being seen, she sped along the fence towards the open gate. Slipping inside the graveyard, she found herself reflexively headed towards her spot. As she ducked behind the trees she relaxed a little and took the time to peek at the names on the gravestones. The rows and rows of stones had no flowers on them, or molding silk ones all tattered up and left for dead in rusted wire holders. None of these could be his. Tucker’s loss was as fresh as the flowers that would decorate his tombstone.

Deep in thought, she didn’t notice the sound of another person’s shoes scattering gravel until it was too late and they were upon her.

“...Sam?”

Assuming the worst, Sam clenched her fists and spun. When she found Dr. Matthews staring at her through thick glasses, she faltered. “What are you doing here?” she blurted. There was something deeply disconcerting about seeing your psychiatrist out and about, like an actual person, with an actual life.

Dr. Matthews raised a pencilled eyebrow. She was wearing a robin’s egg blue silk shirt which tied in a bow at her neck, tucked into cream pants and a thick cream wool overcoat. There was the crinkling of cellophane and Sam suddenly noticed that Dr. Matthews was carrying a fresh bouquet of sunflowers. Shit. Of course. Sam almost slapped herself. Why else would someone be in a graveyard with a bunch of flowers?

“Staying a few nights over at the Holiday Inn and I thought I’d visit some family while passing through. What about you? It’s a pretty early to be out and about.”

Too ashamed to admit she was really doing in this graveyard, as if saying Tucker’s name was an admission of guilt, she muttered, “Just taking a walk.”

Dr. Matthews untangled one sunflower from the rest and held it out, her bony wrist peeking from underneath the peach wool.

Just for five minutes it would be great if people could stop trying to analyze her. She shoved her hands in her pockets and hoisted her shoulders up until they nearly covered her ears. “I’m just taking a walk.”

Dr. Matthew’s gaze grew heavy. “My brother disappeared when I was eighteen. For a long time I blamed myself.”
Sam wrenched her head back up from where it had been pointed, determinedly, down at the ground.

Dr. Matthews was surveying the yard like she was looking for something important. Silence stretched, punctuated only by the rumbling noise of lawnmowers and the sleepy chorus of birds chirping. Insects buzzed in the air.

Inside, Sam buzzed a million other questions, but she didn’t dare voice them.

“When the police came I couldn’t answer any of their questions. I had been too wrapped up in my own life to get to know him.” Matthews smiled. “For years I obsessed over that day. Picked it apart. If I had been a better sister, could I have seen it coming? If we hadn’t fought; if I hadn’t spent the entire day with my boyfriend; if I had been home the moment he left... Would he have stayed?”

Sam’s heart squeezed in her chest. “But you couldn’t have known. It would happen the way it happened, because the past is done.”

Dr. Matthews gaze swiveled from the grave markers back to Sam. “The past is done,” she repeated. With a hum, she offered the sunflower again. “That’s sound advice, Sam. Anyway, Tucker Foley’s grave is that way. Have a nice walk.”

Sam took the flower and watched Dr. Matthews amble up the hill. Even though time had bowed her spine, Sam couldn’t help but feel like she was made of metal. Spinning the sunflower by it’s fuzzy talk between her thumb and pointer finger, Sam smiled.

Her smile turned thoughtful.

Dr. Matthews was around the same age Danny’s sister would be, if she was still alive. They shared the same first name. She said she was visiting family. She had walked towards the Fenton’s graves.

A chime interrupted her train of thought. She fished her phone out of her pocket.

New Message from Valerie Gray: Here

Sam slipped her phone back in her pocket and hesitated, torn. She gritted her teeth, then sighed. She could always swing by the Fentons afterwards. If Dr. Jasmine Matthews was Jasmine Fenton she would find a bouquet of fresh sunflowers atop two graves.

Finding Tucker’s grave wasn’t too hard. Valerie was in a fiery red puffer coat and crouched in front of it. Her hair sprayed a million directions in the morning sunlight. The way the light splayed through made her look aflame.

As Sam approached, Valerie straightened and turned. Her eyes were steely, but strangely empty of any hatred or fear. A golden chain twinkled across her bare collarbone, necklace tucked inside of her jacket.

Behind her was a small rectangular stone made out of white marble. New and not yet dulled from weather, it shimmered in a way that was somehow both warm and cool. Piles of fresh flowers decorated the base. The epitaph engraved into the face beneath his name was plain and short: Beloved son. It’s brevity and lack of wit made Sam feel a whole lot worse.

Grief bloomed, fresh, as if her heart was just now catching up to her mind. Sam waited for the feeling to level her completely. She wanted to feel, but she just felt hollow. Like a great empty pit had taken the place of all her organs.
Valerie broke the silence. “I was beginning to think you were never going to talk to me again.”

“You said you’d kill me,” Sam pointed out. She glanced down to the sunflower in her grasp. Crouching low, she tucked the flower in amongst the others. She tried not to think too hard about how many people had mourned Tucker’s death; how many people she was responsible for hurting. She had to keep it together.

Valerie suddenly had her by the collar of her jacket, yanking her up until they were inches apart. “Maybe I should have killed you.”

Sam flinched, turning her head and screwing her eyes shut. She could feel Valerie’s hot breath panting across her cheek. That punch Valerie had been saving was finally going to land. Sam found herself looking forward to it. She certainly deserved it.

Seconds passed by. It never came.

With a strong shove that had her stumbling backwards, Valerie let her go. “I should hate you,” she rushed, out of breath. She looked torn between changing her mind about that punch, but something held her back.

“Why don’t you?” Sam didn’t get it. Valerie didn’t seem like the person who shied away from confrontation, or who made idle threats. If Valerie truly hated her she never would have agreed to meet in the first place.

Valerie’s gaze grew exhausted, staring down at Tucker’s grave, her shoulders dropping. She shook her head, eyes darting up towards the sky. “I’m no hypocrite,” she said after a long moment. Something in her face grew stoic, all the barely starved off insanity faded, and without it Valerie looked like she could take on anything.

Curling her jacket tighter around her, Sam said, “Before he died, Tucker said to tell everyone what happened. But I have to find the bodies. Without them, I’ll sound crazy.”

Valerie’s gaze remained stony, green eyes roving along the burns on Sam’s face. “Is that really the reason why you asked to meet? Tucker wasn’t enough? You want to get me killed?”

Sam unhooked her backpack and tossed it.

Valerie flinched as if Sam had thrown a knife. The backpack hit soil. Dirt sprayed. For a long beat Valerie stared down at it, expression twisted and carved with loss. “Tucker’s dead. Do you even care?” she accused.

Sam had to stop the laugh bubbling up her throat. Her gaze flicked to Tucker’s stone. The hilarity of it all faded. It felt like a cold wet blanket settled in her stomach. “I care,” she said.

After a pause, Valerie grabbed the bag, unzipped the top, and glanced inside. “You’re gonna give them back?” she asked in disbelief.

Truth was, all her nerves were singing at the thought of not having relics. Being without her backpack filled her with deep seated panic, but… she stuck her hand down into the muff of her hoodie, feeling the humming wooden handle of Danielle’s screwdriver. Valerie wouldn’t miss a relic she never had. “I said I’d help you get them back. I’m not a liar.”

“So that’s it? You want a pat on the back?” Valerie shot.

Irritation flashed. Sam had to pry her jaw open from where it had clenched. “I want information.”
“Ok,” Valerie said slowly, suspicion twisting into curiosity. Some of her anger softened as she began transferring the relics from Sam’s backpack into her own. “What information? And make it fast. School starts soon.”

“How did you find them?” Sam pointed at the dog collar Valerie had in her hand, mid-transfer.

Valerie frowned. Clearly, she had been bracing for something more involved. “Why?”

“There’s a ghost I need to keep away.”

Valerie laughed, slinging her backpack back over her shoulder. “You and everybody else in this hellhole.”

Sam ground her teeth. If Valerie wasn’t going to help, she had better things to do than try and convince her. “Nevermind. Forget I asked.” With one last look at Tucker’s grave, Sam stalked away.

She was almost to the path when Valerie called out, “Wait!”

Valerie jogged to catch up, hair bouncing in wild strands around her face. Her gaze dropped and her lips pulled into a grimace. “Relics are easy to find when you know what a ghost has lost.”

Sam frowned. Tucker said something like that. “Relics remind ghosts of what they’ve lost. That’s why they don’t like them.”

“Ghosts always lose something.” Valerie’s eyes darkened. “It’s why they’re twisted creepy versions of who they used to be,” she spat.

“So what did Danny lose?” Sam prompted.

At the mention of his name, Valerie’s eyes narrowed. “I read my grandfather’s notes. He wanted to be the first person on the moon. The rocket was following that train of thought.”

Sam’s head swirled. When Tucker had told her Valerie hunted ghosts, Sam had assumed Valerie had waged some sort of war, but the only way Valerie found all the relics is if she had spent quality time with each ghost. Pretended to be friends with them, maybe even grown to like them, or at the very least had manipulated them into giving her what she needed. It had Sam questioning every interaction she had with Valerie up to this point. Was Valerie truly crazy or was it all an act?

“There’s so many relics in that backpack,” Sam uttered, before she could stop herself.

Any warmth Sam had earned suddenly grew frigid. “I gotta go.” Valerie stalked away and Sam didn’t try and stop her.

Leaving Tucker, Sam headed over the hill towards her tree, towards the Fentons. At the base of each stone was a bouquet of sunflowers. One for Madeline Fenton, one for Jack Fenton and a third which
sat in a small metal ring spiked into the empty grass just to the right of both headstones. One for someone who was never given a proper grave.
Because it's October, and because the next chapter is one of my favorites, I'm posting two at once. Enjoy!

Dr. Jasmine Angeline Matthews.

Jasmine Angeline Fenton.

Jasmine Fenton.

Jasmine.

Jazz.

Shit.

Sam’s breath was really loud in her ears. Along with it came a ringing noise; an alarm or a siren, leaving little room for doubt. She stared down at the sunflowers laying to the side, carefully draped beside Madeleine Fenton’s grave.

Nothing had changed, and yet everything had.

Sam’s brain made half-hearted attempts of denial (maybe it was coincidence— there was no way she was that lucky— who knew if Jasmine Fenton was even alive?—) but the connection was too vivid, too real. Memories neatly clicked into place. Dr. Matthew’s mannerisms— so Danny-like Sam felt absolutely stupid. The way she crossed her legs and put her chin in her palm. How she tilted her head whenever she wanted more out of Sam. Her eyes, while greener than Danny’s pure blue, still had that spark of playfulness that was a Fenton trait.

Adrenaline pumping, Sam turned heel and ran down the path towards the entrance to the graveyard. She didn’t stop to think maybe Dr. Matthews had gotten in a car, and was therefore miles away, or what she would do if she actually caught up with her. She just ran.

Hooking her arm around the steel gate, she skidded the corner.

A white blob bobbed maybe five blocks down the street following the park.

Sam’s shoes scuffed asphalt and her backpack banged off her shoulder blades. As she grew closer she could make out the woman’s pearly hair and a slow-moving hobble crossing the street and walking up a small driveway, past the reception of a hotel.

Across the street, Sam stumbled to a stop. She peered up at the sign. Holiday Inn.

Her psychologist climbed stairs. Upon reaching the second floor, she unlocked a room and slipped inside.
Sam wobbled over to a nearby bench and dropped her weight into it.

Danny was still around. Sam had just seen him last night. Other people could see him too.

Hope rose, along with the beat of her own heart. Here was a reunion fifty years in the making. Something good that Sam could make right. She could show Danny there was still some of his family—his real family—left. Emotion swelled in her throat and she released a slow shaky breath. Her fingers curled around the edge of the bench. All her muscles tensed to launch over to Dr. Matthew’s hotel door, to tell her, to tell the truth! — a cold thought stopped her.

Without Danny, Dr. Matthews might think she was being cruel.

Worse, maybe Dr. Matthews would think Sam was having some kind of mental break and hospitalize her. Sam thought of Valerie. Wouldn’t be the first time something like that had happened.

Hell, anyone who knew Danny had a knack of dying. If she barged into that hotel room and told his sister about him, would she end up just like Mikey? Tucker? Ida? Could Sam really shoulder the weight of yet another murder rooted in something she had started?

No. Better to wait until she had Danny. That way Dr. Matthews would see him with her own eyes. That way Dr. Matthews had a greater chance of surviving.

Sam zipped her coat all the way up until it covered her neck, and, with one last lingering glance at Dr. Matthew’s shadow moving around behind the drapes of her hotel room, left.

With a thud Sam dropped her bag on the mansion’s doormat, eyes darting suspiciously from the hall to the two staircases, to the second story landing. It was too quiet.

The entry felt super bright, like the exposure had been cranked up three levels. Sunlight poured in thick streams, scorching across the wood floor.

Carefully, she pulled out the screwdriver from her bag and tucked it into the small of her back, underneath the hem of her jeans. It hummed against her skin.

“Dad?” she called. When there was no answer, she reluctantly added on, “Mom?”

Nothing.

She jogged up one of the staircases and did a sweep of the first floor. All the bedroom and bathrooms were empty. She could smell the vacancy in the undisturbed air. By the time she jogged back down the steps and skated through the downstairs, she knew in her gut that her parents weren’t home. It wasn’t until she was doing a sweep of the kitchen when she found a note and her hunch was confirmed.

Sam—

*Your mother and I are at the park cleanup. If you’re feeling up to it, you should join us. If not, we’ll be back around dinner.*

*Love, Dad*

Lying across the upper left corner, weighing the note down to the countertop, was a little brass key about an inch-and-a-half long.
Sam plucked the key up in shock. It was cool to the touch.

Rereading the note, she could decipher the message hidden between his words:

Your mother and I are at the park cleanup. (*I’m keeping her away from you.*)

If you’re feeling up to it, you should join us. (*Don’t join us.*)

If not, we’ll be back around dinner. (*You have five hours.*)

Love, Dad. (*I believe you.*)

And a key, a key that could only fit in the study door. So her dad *had* been paying attention. He was on her side— he trusted her. She was hit with a rush of affection and determination to not let him down.

Sam leaned away from the island and peered through the kitchen doorway down the hall, gaze landing heavy on study’s gold doorknob.

Fuck needing to find her mother’s relic. She now had a way in and ample time to investigate.

She strode over to the fridge and ripped off a piece of paper from the magnetic pad. With shaking hands, she uncapped the pen still sitting from where her dad had used it hours before.

*Dad—*

She hesitated.

It struck her in that moment. This might be goodbye. Something in that study was important to the ghosts of Amity Park. Sam couldn’t stop dreaming about it. When Danny had gone all ghost and chased her mom down the stairs, Sam had glimpsed some kind of underground room. Tucker had seen it too. It sounded like her mother had been shown it.

Maybe she really was nuts at this point, but it almost felt like everything was *pulling* her there. The ink bled a little with the amount of force she was pressing down with and she closed her eyes, taking in a long deep breath. When she reopened them, tears welled up in the corners, making ‘*Dad—*’ swim.

*If you’re reading this, I’m still in the study. Don’t tell her where I am and most importantly— don’t try to come get me.*

Sam fished the blueprints out of her backpack, after snapping a photo of it with her phone, tucked it underneath the note. She circled the small slice of unaccounted for space between the dining room and the study. Staring at the blank area beneath her scribbled last line, she gritted her teeth, then wrote.

*I love you. I loved Mom.*

*Sam*

She pressed her lips against the paper. Had she still enough energy for makeup, black lipstick would have smeared across, but seeing as she hadn’t worn any since Halloween, there was nothing to say she had kissed it at all.
Squinting, Sam peeked through the keyhole into the study. It was too dark in there to make out anything.

The key fit into the lock loosely. The lock grumbled and rolled over. Sam let out a breath she didn’t know she was holding. She grasped ahold of the knob, yanked it, and threw the door open before her courage fled. She prepared to shut her eyes at the first sight of a body, but a cursory glance of the study found it empty of anything gruesome. Relaxing a touch, Sam stepped fully inside, shutting the door quietly behind her.

The smell was a stronger here, but still distant, as if whatever was causing it was in another room, or within the walls itself.

The last time Sam had been in here had been the day the realtor had given them the tour. Besides her grandfather’s oak desk, which her father had inherited and never used, the study was empty of any furniture. The bookshelf along the right wall was devoid of books. An old Chinese carpet, original, still covered a great portion of the wood herringbone floorboards. Thick green drapes covered two large windows, casting the room entirely in shadow.

This was the room from her dreams. It felt like running into an old friend. The intimacy made a lump of dread swell in her throat.

Sam peered at the ceiling for a light, but found none. This room had never been fully renovated. No electrical outlets. The only light came from an enormous paned window right behind the desk.

Sam eyed the bookshelf. How obvious. She snorted. “Could you be any more cliche, Vladimir?” she whispered aloud.

The shelves had been built specifically for this wall. The wood was some sort of oak and dull from age, with intricate carved details. At the very top the wood curved into a peak where the chiseled heads of different beasts stared out at him with beady eyes.

Standing before it, she felt a gust of wind caress her cheek. That rotten smell hit her. The urge to run was strong and came from someplace instinctual.

Don’t think about it. Don’t think about it.

She unwound her scarf from around her neck and affixed it to the bottom portion of her face, tying it tightly behind her head so that it blocked some of the scent. It helped a little.

Sam ran her fingernails along the edge where the wood met the wall. There was a seam that she could feel, yet couldn’t see because of the lighting. She was certain this wall pivoted or something, like the wall in her bedroom. If the draft hadn’t convinced her of it, the smell certainly had. In old movies a book usually triggered the doorway, but there were no books to yank.

If it wasn’t in the bookcase itself, then maybe it was hidden in the walls or something.

Sam stepped back and took a second to reassess the room. That was when she found Danielle watching from the corner. A bright stream of light carved across her red tennis shoes and bare legs. The rest of her lurked in shadow.

Sam reached back and touched the wooden handle of the screwdriver. The relic hummed at her touch.

“Well….?” Danielle asked. “What will you do now?” She was in the same short red dress from Sam’s dreams. Her dark hair was tied back into a long ponytail by one thin red ribbon.
This ghost had resided inside this place for who knows how long. She probably knew every single hidden room and how to access it. With Danielle’s relic warm against her palm, Sam asked, “How do you open it?”

“Couldn’t say.” Danielle made a lip-zipping motion, lips locked in a smile.

Sam almost rolled her eyes. Since when had a ghost ever been helpful? Choosing to ignore the tween, Sam walked around the room, tapping at the walls and the moulding. She was crouched low when, out of the corner of her eye, she saw Danielle move.

The ghost tilted her head, towards the window, shaking it as if to say: No.

Sam frowned, then moved further along the wall.

Danielle swiveled her head to the other side, her ponytail flipping over one shoulder.

Not the walls? Sam sat on her heels and peered around at the drapes and the windows, then down to the carpet beneath her shoes. Maybe… She brought the heel of her boot down, once, on the floor. It resounded with a dull thud.

Danielle crouched down low, mimicking her. Her grin turned toothy. There was madness in it that made Sam suddenly question if she was really helping. Pushing that aside, Sam had been around ghosts long enough to understand the message: The trigger was in the floor.

With that in mind, Sam began tapping with her boots along the floorboards. She eyed the old rug and figured it would make the most sense to hide something underneath it. Probably not right in the middle, if the lever was accessed frequently, but maybe somewhere along the fringe-laced edges. Sam tugged and whipped the rug over on its side. In the low light dust ball tumbleweeds sprayed the air.

Danielle sneezed and disappeared all at once. Sam took it as a sign that she was onto something.

The flooring beneath the rug was darker in color, resin not worn away by feet or sunlight. Sam slowly scooted along the perimeter of where the rug had lain, knocking. A few times she had to flip the rug out of the way. It was almost halfway around, near the windows and the desk, that her knock met a board that felt soft against her knuckles. She rapped again. A deeper, muted noise resounded. She ran her fingernails along the edges of the board, feeling a small indent where part of the wood had been chipped or pressed away. It was impossible to get a good grip with just her nails.

Stumped, Sam sat fully onto the floor. The screwdriver pressed against her lower back. Blinking, Sam drew it from her waistband, holding it up in front, before sticking the flat head into the groove. Perfect fit. As if it had made this groove.

With a soft noise, the floorboard flipped on itself— attached from the inside by two hinges. Underneath was a large brass lever. It looked more like leather, the way the brass had oxidized.

Hot breath plumed against the inside of her scarf. Everything untangled. Her ears sung. “This is it,” she whispered, even though there was no one around to hear her.

The initial flush of excitement at finding this lever muddled into dread. Pulling could only trigger bad things. Without the other relics, and without Danny, she was ill prepared to face whatever was about to come out. Then again, was there any preparing for something like this? You just had to build up the courage, do it, and face whatever happens. Any second and her parents could come home, her mother’s ghost would find her, and this opportunity would be lost. It was now or maybe never.
Now, Sam decided, and she yanked.
For a blissful second nothing happened. Then, the bookcase gave a drawn-out moan. Creepy fast, the middle portion of the wall swung open like a door. Wind blustered through the study. On the heels came a smell that went beyond words, so thick and near, it was like two cotton balls soaked in it had been shoved up her nostrils.

Sam felt clobbered in the face. Before she could untie her scarf from her face she was puking. Her nose burned; her eyes streamed. Sam ripped off her scarf and her jacket. The wet smell of her own vomit mixing with the dead smell was enough to make her throat rise again and she coughed.

With the hem of her shirt, she wiped her face off as best she could. Ripping a sleeve, she stuffed pieces of fabric up each nostril and fastened the rest around her face and nose as a mask. She tried only breathing through her mouth, although the slight tangy taste in the air made her wonder if she was inhaling particles of her mother’s rot, and that train of thought nearly made her puke again.

Behind the bookcase was an extremely narrow opening. Holding her nose with one hand, she got to her feet and stood on the first step. She would barely fit without turning her shoulders sideways. The inside was the back of the dining room wall, lined with two-by-fours. The smell was somehow wetter. No doubt it would grow even more horrible as she descended. With a snap, she turned on her flashlight and shone it outwards, revealing more steps sinking down into a black hole.

The hand holding the flashlight wavered. She should tell Danny what she was about to do. She doubted he would try to persuade her not to. Likely whatever was down this tunnel was what he had been trying to lead her to all along. It’d be good to let him in the mansion for when things would, undoubtedly, go wrong… but she had no idea how to get ahold of him.

And things would go wrong. There was no way this led to an innocent wine cellar. Nothing mundane was down there.

A fire smoldered deep inside, spitting embers that warmed her stomach. No more Mikeys. No more Tuckers. She had to try.

She took her first step cautiously. The second step a little braver than the first. She jogged the third through the fifteenth with the same frantic speediness one jogs into a freezing lake. The rubber soles of her boots barely made any noise. Claustrophobia began to press against the back of her head as her shoulders scraped against cold stone walls. Pretty soon she was deep. The staircase performed a sharp one-hundred and eighty degree turn and the view of the entrance winked out. It was suddenly hard to believe the mansion would still be there when she came back up. It felt same as the archives on Halloween. Like she had descended into a place not meant to be seen by the living; a place hidden underneath the world as she knew it.

Was this little staircase the ‘something’ Danny had found? Had he been brave enough to take it
down? Probably. He had dreamed of being the first person to entrust a tube of metal to rocket him through uninhabitable kill-you-instantly-if-exposed conditions. He must have had been brave. Sam knew now brave was just a form of crazy.

As she took her last step, she stepped back into that bizarre ghost world. It hung in the air and made her feel displaced in all directions. The dead smell was most intense here and it was taking all of her self control not to heave. Whatever it was coming from shared this room.

So was a presence. She had felt it lightly in the staircase, and now felt it like a heavy shroud. Whatever it was watched her. It felt like someone evil was standing less than a foot behind her. Like their head was inches away from hers. Sam forced herself not to look back. Freaking out would only make it worse.

She reached along the stone walls for a light switch, found one, and flipped it. Nothing. Part of her was relieved at not having to see what was fouling up this room yet.

Jaw clenched, Sam began sweeping her flashlight around the room. The light penetrated only a foot ahead. The whole time, that presence followed her like a tattoo.

The room was wholly cement. Not reassuring, considering Skulker and Vlad had been seen hauling around bags of the stuff. It also felt heavy; less of a basement, more a bunker.

Her beam flashed over an empty metal shelf on wheels. It could have stored canned goods, but to Sam it felt more science-y. Her imagination had supplied her with plenty of horrible possibilities why Vladimir Masters would kidnap children— ranging from violent to sexual in nature— but experimentation had never made it high on that list. A shiver wracked down her spine.

Still sweeping, she found another, smaller door. She shoved it, deemed it locked tight, and moved on quickly.

Her flashlight beam whipped across the floor and caught the base of something metal. Following that up, she found an enormous domed light. It hovered a few feet above her head. Behind it lurked another one. She aimed her light towards where both lights pointed and found the end of a table that was positioned between them.

A black bloated face stared back, mouth agape.

Sam ripped the light away.

An intense shock ran from the crown of her head down her spine to her toes. Cold gripped her. A choked noise cracked and between her lips. With her eyes clenched shut, the image of that swollen face flashed over and over. Blistered sausage lips. Fingers numb… Flames dancing on Tucker’s head. No. Don’t think about it. Hands clamped around her throat. Hard to breathe… A fish-limp body across cement. Twin headlights of a truck… coming straight for her...

She… She was shivering.

Sam opened her eyes and saw only black. Her cheek pressed against something hard and cold. Awareness began to trickle in. All of her limbs tingled, as if recovering from sleeper’s leg. She was laying on her side on a cement floor. A horrible rotten trash smell hit her and she remembered. She was underneath the mansion. That smell was a decaying corpse.

She must have fainted. Stupid. That was stupid.
Forcing measured breathes, Sam pressed her palms down into the ground. She could see her flashlight, still on, pointed towards the opposite end of the room. Scooting on her hands and knees, she grabbed it and shone it around, listening. She couldn’t get a sense if anything had changed while she was out of it.

That gaze was still watching. Sam could tell there was just one person. The fact that whoever it was hadn’t done anything to her, even when she was completely unconscious, freaked her out. She considered provoking it, if only to establish an upper hand, but decided against it. She still had the rest of the bunker to scour.

She stood, swaying for a split second, before forcing herself closer to the body.

The corpse was laying on it’s back atop a surgical bed, it’s head cranked unnaturally. Blackened hands were folded in it’s lap, and it’s legs were bent and tucked so that they fit. No hair. Skin blotchy and swollen like a balloon. The wooden handle of a knife stuck out of it’s chest cavity. It was so weird looking that Sam told herself it wasn’t actually a body, and that calmed her down enough to take a closer look.

She had never seen a dead human before. Well, not a corpse. Some of her horror drained into curiosity. She took a half step closer. Gross, but decomposition was a natural process. Nothing to be afraid of.

The face was too swollen to recognize, but the fact that it wasn’t a skeleton meant their death had to have been recent. Couldn’t be Danny’s, the hunter’s, or any of the kids.

Upon closer look, the dark splotches on the body’s chest was actually clothing that had soaked into the dissolving tissue—a black nightgown, tangled underneath their armpits, as if the body had been drug by the ankles. Sam’s grip tightened on the flashlight. She waited for a sense of peace, or grief, or both, to grip her, but she just felt empty.

Leaving her mother behind, Sam quickly searched the rest of the room, finding it empty except for a weird mini-room within a room. It jutted out of the wall and had a door with a glass window, also padlocked shut. Sam shone her flashlight inside, but couldn’t make out anything through the thick fog. The cement walls cutting the room off looked as if they had been constructed after the floor, almost as an afterthought or, worse, a sudden necessity. The cement fanned out at the edges.

She tugged the padlock once in a half-hearted attempt to get inside, but when it didn’t give immediately, she took it as a sign to leave.

Making for the staircase, Sam took the stairs as fast as she could without bruising her shoulders. As the exit rose up out of her flashlight’s beam, Sam realized the room beyond the trick door was different than the one she had came from. Green light strobed. A saxophone diddled through the air. Sam could see the top of a desk— old typewriter sitting atop. The trick bookshelf jolted.

A breathless gasp escaped her. She tore up the remaining steps.

Like a drape drawing, the bookcase swung closed and left her completely in the dark. A decisive click echoed down the staircases’ winding intestine.

Her fingers scrambled around the surface. No handle or switch. Not even a groove to pry into. Her knock barely echoed back. She kicked. She punched it. “DAD!” she screamed.

“Maybe I can help you,” a young voice said from right behind her.

The beam of Sam’s flashlight whipped around, illuminating Danielle’s head looking up at her from
six steps down. The pre-teen had never seemed threatening before. She looked too much like Danny — like a child victim— but something about Danielle showing up here and now had Sam questioning everything.

She reached underneath her jacket for the screwdriver and found an empty lower back.

Danielle smiled knowingly.

“You took it,” Sam accused.

“It’s just you and me now,” the ghost said.

Sam suddenly knew she was speaking to a serial killer.

Danielle’s face winked out as Sam’s flashlight went dark. Blind, for a horrible minute all Sam could perceive was her own heavy breathing and the ringing in her ear.

A nose brushed her unburned earlobe, rustling against her makeshift facemask. “I’ve been patient,” a deep voice hushed in her ear.

Sam scrambled down a few steps, away from the voice, and forced herself to remain calm. She didn’t have relics, so she had no way of fighting back. The only way out of this was bargaining. She had to keep the ghost talking as long as she could.

Starting from deep behind Sam, lights began to pop on. Within seconds bulbs lit the passageway down into the bunker with amber light. The stone steps grew more defined and Sam could make out the ceiling, which was about a foot overhead. Her flashlight popped back on. She swung it around, finding Danielle standing at the entrance.

“Still possessing your victims?” Sam shot. She wanted to sound calm, but the waver in her tone betrayed her.

Danielle’s ghost began to creep down the stairs. As she neared, Sam couldn’t help but stagger backwards to keep away. Her eyes were bright. Each iris contained only one pupil. “Danielle never existed. I made her up.”

Sam blinked, feeling punched in the stomach.

The ghost tilted her head. “I thought to myself: how do I get a teenage girl to follow me down here? Then I realized. You trust the boy” — Danielle pointed a finger up to her face, pressing her freckled cheek— “But I couldn’t pretend to be him. Eventually you’d bring up something we’d done to the real Danny and game over. So I created the next best thing: the cousin. A mixture of Danny and some of the children I’ve met.”

Danielle’s form wavered like ripples in a pond, grew taller, then solidified into a very convincing Danny Fenton. “Is this face better?” he asked.

His eyes were an icier blue. Sam remembered them, two inches from her own, when he had choked her against a metal filing cabinet in the archives. Fury slammed through her. “Don’t wear his fucking face,” she growled.

He broke into an exasperated sigh. It looked so Danny-like that Sam’s throat caught. After it cleared, his expression grew curious, thoughtful. Eyes combed her up and down in search of something.

“Back at the library. How did you figure it out?”
Thrown off guard, Sam whispered, “What do you mean?”

“That I wasn’t him.”

“Danny stinks.” No way was she going to tell him about the scar. Not if that was the only thing that she could count on to tell these two apart. That and the vacuous look in this Danny’s eyes.

“I’m surprised you could smell anything, what with all that smoke,” he mused, eyes flashing suspiciously.

Smart. This monster was really smart. There was no conflict in those eyes. He would absolutely kill her. Silently, she crossed ‘guilt’, and ‘barter’ off of her list of escape options. That only left ‘out run’, or ‘get help.’ And while she was crossing things off, running wasn’t really going to work against a ghost, might as well toss that scrap of hope.

“It’s always fascinating” —his head tilted, brows furrowing— “watching someone weigh their options.”

“I have options?” Sam asked.

He chuckled. “Not many.” With that, he strode towards her, face blank.

Sam turned and bolted down the stairs back into the bunker, sprinting for the locked door at the far end of the room. The metal of her flashlight barely made a dent in the padlock. After two good swings she knew she had no hope of breaking it.

Sam tried the second door. With the lights on she got a good look at the actual room through the glass pane.

It was about two-hundred square feet. Tiny. An old cot sprawled across the ground. It was almost completely disintegrated. Holes where rats had nested littered it. A naked metal toilet was tucked in the corner. Along the walls and on the ceiling were hand-etched stars, drawn in charcoal, just like the ones in the constellation room.

“Police always blame the father. They rarely think it’s more complicated than that,” Masters was saying through Danny’s own voice. He moved at a leisurely pace, strolling over to her mother’s body. The smell didn’t seem to bother him. Reaching out, he hovered his hand just above the knife’s handle where it protruded from the rib cage. “Your dad really likes this knife,” he mused, almost to himself. “Bet he killed her.”

Sam glared. “Is that what you did to Danny’s dad?”

Masters leaned onto his elbows on the head of the table near the pillow, smile on his lips. Sam realized that, serial killer or not, he obeyed the same rules that Danny obeyed. Even amongst ghosts, this man wasn’t special. It wasn’t much, but it was enough to fill Sam with strength. “How did you decide which kids to take?” she demanded.

Ice blue eyes watched her. Sam began to feel like some kind of animal in a zoo. He knew he had her trapped and he was biding his time. Playing with her.

Her blood boiled. “Why didn’t you just kill Danny?”

That smile widened. “With the whole town searching, a body would have been found no matter where it was dumped. No. Safer to—” The curse stole his voice. For a second he choked, as if unable to get any air, before shaking his head roughly a few times. “—not deviate from... the plan,”
he continued, out of breath. “No exceptions. He would have to be like everybody else.”

He was lying. Why else would the curse allowed it to slip through? “You couldn’t kill him,” Sam guessed, hand flexing around the handle of her flashlight. “He was the only family you had.”

The face Masters wore didn’t flinch, although blue eyes flickered. “I adopted that kid,” he said in a low, dangerous tone. “I chose him. That bond that runs deeper than blood. If I could do it all again, I would make sure he never had to find out.”

Sam couldn’t help the crawly feeling marching up and down her spine.

“The whole ordeal was a waste. To make matters worse, he was too rare a—” Masters choked again. He seemed unable to help himself but talk, despite the curse. Probably because he had no plans of letting her escape alive. Even though he hadn’t outrightly said it, Sam knew that, in his mind, this was the end of the road.

“A waste,” Masters settled on.

Pieces clicked together. Sam saw exactly what Masters had been trying to say. Danny was too rare a blood type. Masters was a surgeon. One of the first to perform successful organ transplants. There was ragged breathing in her ears. Sam realized it was her. “You were taking them for their organs,” she uttered. “Holding them hostage until the right donor aligned.”

Masters said nothing and Sam knew she was right.

“How did nobody see through you?” she wondered.

Masters leaned back, smiling. “I’ve been told I’m very charming. People see what they wish. After all, until today, you had no idea Danielle was me.”

More and more bits were coming together. Sam’s head swirled. “Of course Showenhower gave you an alibi,” she continued, breathless. “Did he know what you were doing? Or did you keep him in the dark about where his liver was coming from?”

Masters’ smile widened. The more Sam got right, the more she could almost detect a sense of joy emanating from the man.

Masters pushed away from the bed, coming closer, one arm outstretched. His hand was deadly steady. Not even the slightest tremor. “Since you were my favorite, I’ll make this quick and painless.”

“Wait—” Reaching behind her, Sam gripped the doorknob and yanked. The door barely rattled. Her mind raced for a way to stall. “What about what happens next? Don’t you still want to know?”

“This is what happens next,” Masters decided.

To hell with that. She wasn’t about to let this monster best her. Not without a fight. The strongest urge to somehow murder this man struck her. Stupid. He was already dead. A ghost... Only another ghost could help her now.

“Danny—!” Sam blurted, knowing it was useless even as she called for him.

“The tricky thing with summoning ghosts…” Masters leaned in close, eyes aflame with victory. A cold hand delicately cupped her cheek, stroking it. “You have to call for them by their full name. First and last. Anything less and it doesn’t work.”
Sam’s cheek ached. The coldness from his touch froze her entire body. Something dark and foreign was suddenly unfurling inside her head, blooming, expanding until pressing against the backs of her eyeballs. It hurt; like an axe cleaving her head in two. That presence poked around. Her vision split. She saw a blurry outline of the killer’s smug face, but also somehow saw herself, face pale and eyes glazed, pupils squirming.

She had to stop him from touching her. “But I know his name,” she said. Gathering the rest of her dwindling strength and, feeling like she was swinging through sludge, she whipped the flashlight across his forehead.

To both of their surprise, it connected. He fell.

As his hand ripped off her cheek, she felt a hundred pounds lighter, stronger, more clear-headed. A burst of adrenaline zapped down her limbs, jump starting her heart. Her vision sharpened back to singular. She drew the flashlight up again—this time it felt as light as a tennis racket. “It’s Daniel James Fenton, you sick FUCK!”

As soon as the name passed her lips, a great noise thundered down the staircase and vibrated deep in Sam’s bones. In its wake, the lights swayed, glancing strobes around the bunker. It was suddenly ice cold. Below-zero Philadelphia winter cold.

Her hand ached and she was forced to drop the metal flashlight. Lights fluttered overhead. The air hummed. Sam had never been happier to smell the faint burn of cigarettes cutting through the dead smell.

The ground shifted beneath her feet. Cracks snaking across the floor, splitting the cement in front of her abandoned flashlight’s beam. The third crack was followed by an ominous multi-layered groan. Sam’s relief faded and she stumbled back a step. She glanced out of the corner of her eye for Masters, but he was gone.

Near the end of the medical bed, a hand shot out from the ground and frantically clawed around for purchase. The skin looked dipped in oil. Knuckles dragged across cement, smearing black mud. A wet, shaking, elbow pulled up a pair of thin shoulders and the back of a head. The ink-dark boy writhed and twisted as he bore his body from the ground. It looked painful. The air screamed the whole time and Sam thought they must be his.

After getting free, he slid along his belly in exhaustion. The air died down as he laid motionless. Then, he placed his palms flat against the ground, braced his body, found his feet, and unsteadily pulled himself upright.

The only thing he was wearing was an oversized t-shirt that stuck to his body and hung past his knees. It did little to hide his nakedness. Black mud streaked across porcelain skin. Water dripped from his limbs. Frost molded over long unkempt hair. Deep crevices hollowed his cheekbones and the knobs of his knees. The famished sharpness of his collarbone and shoulders made his shirt look like it was hanging from a wire hanger.

If Sam hadn’t called on Danny by name she would have never recognized him.

Blue lips parted. He let out a shaky breath in an enormous plume of smoke, which curled around, blurring him from sight. The mist only grew thicker until the entire room became hazy. Frozen eyes cracked open with difficulty and found her.

And just like that, Sam knew where the bodies were. The realization came upon her so suddenly, so violently, that tears sprang in her eyes. Meeting his gaze, she felt sorry. Sorry for summoning him like this. She knew that, short of finding his skeleton, this was as close to the truth as she was going
to get from him. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she whispered, “Danny?”

His eyes were two chips of sea glass; cloudy and sandworn. “Did you call me?” he asked, tone strange, child-like.

Sam opened her mouth to answer. Then the left side of her face exploded.

Her vision went black as her body skidded across cement. In shock, Sam reached up to feel her face, which was still there, thankfully, and completely numb. Her fingertips came back, shaking and stained red with her own blood. “S-shit—” Reeling, she peered up and found the Masters-Danny smiling down.

Sam used her elbow to drag herself away. She was distantly aware of Danny still standing where she had last seen him, waiting, and she realized that he needed some kind of answer. The summoning wasn’t complete yet. He would have helped her already.

She went to yell that yes she had called him, right at the same time Masters crouched low and hushed, “Quiet.”

The order tightened around her throat like a noose. She choked. Unlike Danny’s orders, which, while persuasive, always felt open to interpretation, Masters’ orders were cold steel.

A gust brushed past her neck as he leaned close and Sam got an intense whiff of bleach. “That was a pretty good trick.”

Icicle fingers raked through her hair, yanking the face scarf down around her neck. She had no clue where her beanie went. Must have flown off when she had been struck. The feeling of his nails scraping along her burns made her skin want to pack up and leave. His eyes glittered red and Sam knew any mercy he had been about to bestow was now off the table. Pale lips twisted into a serene smile. “I let you live for as long as I could. Now it’s my turn to live a little.”

Rendered mute, Sam resorted to punching and clawing her way out.

He got ahold of both her wrists, pinning her arms to her sides, straddling her. “Keep fighting,” he goaded, leaning in close to her ear, whispering, “I like it.”

Sam’s body flooded ice. Dread muddled into true fear. She realized, with horrible clarity, that this demon was going to hurt her, badly, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. Her heart thundered in her ears. She tried to get her knees up, to keep her legs clamped together—to get him off of her. Desperate, she flung as much energy as she could into screaming. The order in her throat loosened, barely, but no sound came out.

One swift yank was all it took to splay her legs apart. A knee pressed hard against her crotch, making her stiffen. With his other hand still around her wrist, he twisted her arm up above her head until she felt horribly vulnerable. Sam knew he was doing this all without powers just to make a point that he could.

With his other hand on her chin, Masters tilted her head so the bloodied and burned side faced away and hummed. His expression quieted. Stolen blue eyes swirled intoxicated at the scent of her terror. A thumb slowly painted across her quivering lower lip, forcing it apart. “You remind me of a woman I used to love. She thought she was smarter than me, too.”

Sam clenched her eyes shut and screamed again, with all her might, until it felt like her brain was going to burst inside her head. Pressure built in her chest. The order popped. Air whooshed out of her lungs.
She didn’t even know if Danny was still there. Was he stuck, just like her? Watching, but unable to help? “I called you!” she yelled, voice strangled, “I called—”

The hand on her chin reared and slapped her with enough force her head cracked off the ground. Her damaged ear screamed. Dizzily, she began to laugh. He slapped her again, which only made her laugh harder.

But the lights had gone out. Ice water was soaking into the back of her skull, inking between her fingers, and soaking through her jeans and the back of her jacket. Danny had heard her. She wasn’t alone.

The weight pinning her to the ground evaporated and she was free.

Gulping air, Sam spun and pressed her hands beneath her. Her head felt like it was on fire. A groan hissed between her lips. Her hands fumbled through black water, hitting the metal handle of her discarded flashlight. She grabbed it and flicked it on, shining it out in front of her.

Nothing but black.

She pointed it at the floor.

Black water.

A hand suddenly reached out of the fog, clamping around the end of the light.

Sam flinched away.

Easy, Boots. It’s me, a voice soothed inside her throbbing head. The fingers spread a crack, allowing the beam split between and illuminate a slice of face.

Sam stared.

One glowing green eye— framed by a muddied cheek and snow encrusted hair— stared back. Every inch of his skin, except right around his eyelids, was caked in something dark. His body melted into the fog. He probably smeared it on for that very reason.

“Get me out of here,” Sam croaked.

Why? You don’t like it down here? he joked.

A wheezy, hysterical laugh blew out of her through her chattering teeth. She suddenly felt a whole lot better.

Yeah, me either. Mud-caked lips smiled. Fingers closed around the light and Danny’s face winked out. He’s still here. Stay quiet. Keep this off.

Sam clicked the light off and felt the pressure lift as Danny let it go. The intense cold lessened. Wide eyes scanned around, seeing nothing but black. After nothing immediately tried to kill her, she wrestled back her composure, getting control of her breathing, so she could listen.

She could hear something dripping from the other side of the room. A soft echo-ey ker-plunk, like water dropping into a metal pail. Then she heard faint, frenzied ticking. Like a clock moving along at warp speed. The drone made her nervous. It sounded like a countdown.

The dead smell was somehow muted. Mixing in was the earthy husk of wet soil and cleaning chemicals.
There was half an inch of freezing water on the floor now. It was rising. Enough that it covered her numb fingers. She let out the breath she had been holding, slowly, shakily. Using the ripped shirt still tied around her neck, she wiped blood from her face. An intense wave of pain bloomed, originating at her cheekbone, travelling behind her eye and down her spine. Not good. Biting back a moan, she decided not to try that again.

She had no idea where Masters had gone or if he was coming back. No clue where Danny was, either. All she knew was she had to get out of here. Based on memory alone, she crept towards where she had last seen the staircase. Hitting a wall, she had no choice but to pick a direction and follow it.

A new sound drifted past her ears: low voices murmuring. She couldn’t make out what they were saying. It sounded like one of her mother’s soap operas, coming from directly above her.

Following the noise, her fingers hit the first step. Slowly, to not make any noise, Sam stood and used the wall to steady herself. Wet hair stuck to her cheek. She ignored the soreness coming from everywhere, she began to climb out.

The fog grew thin until Sam could make out the fuzzy outlines of the stairs in front of her. At the very top, she reached out a hand feeling the back of the bookcase.

Sam considered screaming for help, but restrained herself. So far staying quiet was working. At that moment the bookcase jolted under her ear and swung outwards. With all her weight leaning on the wall, Sam nearly fell. Instead, her hand caught the edge of the opening.

The study’s carpet was still flung aside where Sam had left it. But beyond that nothing else about this study was the same. Not the deep green curtains or the typewriter, nor Valerie Gray, who slowly rose from a crouch, hand trailing off the lever and back to a pistol. Looking like a phoenix reincarnate in a red jumpsuit, huge tumbling hair, and puffy red coat tattered and ripped to shreds—she pointed the nose of it directly at Sam.

Her jaw clenched, eyes darting from Sam’s face to the dark tunnel. “You.” She motioned with the gun. “Out.”

Sam stared.
“Now.”
The mansion Sam was stumbling through was entirely different than the one she lived in. There was furniture that shouldn't be there and portraits of people she had never met. Outside, the yard was a strange dark, as if the entire town been blanketed in shade.

A dark shape crawled behind ornate floral tapestry.

Valerie shoved her shoulder. "Hurry!" she hissed. The paleness in her face said she had seen it too, but was pretending otherwise. "Driveway!"

"How?—" Sam asked, before she realized now wasn't the time to question how Valerie had known, or how Valerie had even broken in.

As they ran down the hallway the frescoes arching over her head peered down, colorful and new. Animals with prey hanging from their mouths watched her as she passed underfoot. Her boots squelched on the hardwood, leaving puddles of muddy water behind. The blare of an old rotary phone rang from the kitchen.

Still speaking only in one word orders, Valerie hissed, "Go! Go!"

One of the enormous dual windows facing the front lawn was blown apart. Blue and red police light whirled and glinted off a sea of broken glass littering the ground. Outside was dim and dark, like night had already descended, but that made no sense.

Crunching through the glass, Valerie used one hand to unlock the front door deadbolt and kick it open, the other hand kept the gun up and trained at the hallway over Sam's shoulder.

A police car sat in the driveway, running, headlights on and sizzling into the front door. It's lights performed flips through the air.

Overhead, the sun was in a total eclipse—a black hole with a fiery glow. It made the everything a reddish hue and circular-shaped shadows scatter around her feet. Birds were chattering and cawing in panic. Just how much of Amity Park looked like this?

Danny was suddenly standing at the side of the police car looking exactly how he looked when Sam first met him. He opened the back door, hand extended, a strange glow about him.

Sam's brain shot off a warning flare.

Her eyes darted to his outstretched hand. Seeing the scar, she relaxed, but Danny had seen her flinch. His face fell. Sam could tell the glare wasn't directed at her. Just as quickly, his expression turned heartbroken. "It's me, without the mud facial," he promised.

And forty pounds healthier, Sam thought, as she ducked into the backseat.

Valerie flew into the driver's seat. She tossed the gun and her backpack onto the dash and wrenched the door shut with a bang, yanking the gear shaft into reverse. The engine roared. They didn't move.

Outside the car, each window glittered as if the mansion was blinking, looking around for them.

The back of Danny's head materialized in the passenger seat.
Valerie jumped.

Danny ignored her. "Let me drive."

"Trust a ghost?" Valerie spat. "Never again."

Through the grate, Danny shot Sam a worried glance. He put one hand on the dash, the other against the wire separator. The stance was protective. He turned to Valerie. "He can still get to her," he urged, threads of panic in his tone. "Punch it, now."

Valerie hit the gas harder, as if to make a point. The scent of burned clutch filled the air.

Danny reached across the car, ignoring how Valerie clutched at her backpack. "The e-brake's on," he said, before releasing it with a pointed thud.

They lurched backwards.

Sam's head almost crashed against the pane as they reversed wildly out of the driveway. The high-beams bounced, gravel pinging in the wheel wells like lottery balls. They made it out onto the street when Valerie shifted into drive, the car lurched, and the motor quieted.

Danny turned in his seat. "So, when you told me you could drive—"

"I know how to drive automatic. I've only driven stick once. In a Costco parking lot. Without the added stress of imminent death," Valerie hissed as she turned the motor over and over. On the third try, she had the car up and bolting down Pine street.

As they drove away, Sam watched the mansion grow smaller in the rearview mirror. Soon it was completely out of view, the street behind them silent and empty. Sam turned back around and watched the back of Valerie's head as she drove. The sound of their harsh breathing mingled in with a song from the radio—a crooning, crackling tune.

"We're out," Valerie announced. Her shoulders slumped.

Sam glanced up at the sun. It was still fully shrouded, staring down like a fiery, all-seeing eyeball. She realized that ticking noise was still there. It had followed her.

As Valerie turned off Pine street she turned up the volume on the radio, just a notch, triumphant gleam in her eye. "God," she exclaimed, "What was that shit-piss smell?"

"My mother," Sam said.

Valerie's mouth clicked shut in surprise. Something like regret wavered in her gaze and she went back to staring determinedly out the window.

Danny turned in his seat to look at Sam. A complicated wash of expressions passed through his eyes. Relief at getting her out. Guilt for getting her in. Anger at himself, fury at Masters. Horror and full knowledge of what Masters done to her. Helplessness in having no idea what to say to make anything better.

Sam was suddenly struck with an epiphany: She had grown closer to this boy than she had with any other human being. "I'm ok," she said, because seeing all that in him made everything well up in her, and if he kept looking at her like that she was going to break apart.

As Valerie hit a red light, Danny's gaze flicked past Sam's shoulder and widened.
Sam peered into the rear window. Another set of headlights grew closer. "Puppet?" she whispered. The grim look on Danny's face said yes. "Might want to go," he warned Valerie. Sam could tell he was purposefully staying calm to avoid freaking Valerie out. Phrasing an order as a suggestion. He knew her well. They had worked together before.

Valerie glanced back. The fast approaching headlights hit the mirror, reflecting bright light onto her cheek. Face paling, Valerie went for the gear shift. The car gave a high-pitched revving sound and lurched. With an apologetic putter, the motor stilled and the volume of the radio never sounded more inappropriate.

Danny reached over and stole the keys from the ignition.

For a split second it looked like Valerie was about to claw his face off.

"Let me," he pleaded.

Sam could hear the other car now, loud and close. She ducked. Her head complained at the quick move. The police car roared to life, motor stampeding underneath them, thundering against the chassis. Wheels screamed. They shot forward with enough force to press Sam's body deep into the seat back. Sam felt the smooth rock of a switching gear once, twice, and they were off down the street at maybe sixty miles an hour.

"How do you turn those lights off?" Danny was saying from the driver's seat. He began pressing random buttons on the dash, slapping the side of the mounted computer monitor, like a static-ridden TV. Instead of lights, the windshield wipers thumped back and forth.

Old houses flanked either side. Sam recognized the street—this was the street Tucker had lived on. Her stomach sank. "This road's a dead end," she warned, eyes flicking to the other car. The driver was obscured by their headlights. "They're gaining on us, in the other lane."

Valerie grabbed the gun off the dash and rolled her window down. Freezing wind whipped through the car. Her ponytail thrashed and Sam's ears ached. They were tossed against the side of the car as Danny swerved around a slower-moving vehicle.

Sam watched Valerie thread her fingers through the gun, flicking the safety off, and doubt exploded. Were they going to shoot whoever was possessed? They were okay with killing someone innocent?

Approaching the dead end at full speed— a wooden fence encircling a neighborhood playground—Danny braked hard, cranking the wheel. He reached down and pulled the emergency brake too, sending the car into a tailwhip. Tires squealed. Windshield wipers thumped.

For a horrible ten seconds, Sam gritted her teeth against the G-force. Having nothing to grab onto, she pressed her feet against the back of Danny's seat to try and stay in place as the car performed a squealing one-eighty.

Through the console, Sam watched as, in all one motion, Danny released the e-brake, shifted around the turn, straightened the wheel, and opened the throttle again. "Ha!" he gloated.

Out of the window, Valerie trained her gun at the other car as they whizzed by the opposite direction.

Sam caught a glimpse of the other driver: Penelope Spectra. She let out a short breath in shock. Spectra. A puppet.
"Put the gun away and turn off these lights," Danny grumbled.

Valerie sat back, fingertips hovering over the buttons as she scanned back and forth. She flicked a metal switch and the red and blue strobes faded.

Looking back, Sam saw the other car begin to perform a slow three point turn at the end of the drive, as Danny shot them onto the main street and trees blocked her view.

Their cemetery flew past, headstones flicking by like rows of corn. Outside the world was dusky and orange. The neon glow from the 7-11 sign tinged the dash of the car green.

Danny’s gaze darted from the speedometer, to the 7-11, to behind them, where Spectra had yet to turn onto the same street. His grip clenched and unclenched the gear shaft, before he seemed to make a decision and veered into the parking lot. He maneuvered the car around the back of the building, whipping it into a parking spot hidden from the road and turned the key. The radio and the windshield wipers quieted. The motor died. He reached over and flicked the headlamps off, too.

Dead silence reigned.

"What are you doing?" Valerie hissed.

Sam got it. Her heart hammered in her chest and she got onto her knees, gaze locked at the corner of the building where they had come from.

Valerie quieted and leaned back.

For a long minute the three of them sat there, still, eyes trained forward. Peering around the parking lot, Sam caught sight of faded lettering along the dirty wall of the 7-11. A script font, that said Lucky Strike.

Light poured out from around the building.

Dread curdled in Sam's stomach. She closed her eyes, briefly, and let out a slow breath. When she reopened them she found Danny looking for another way out, but they were surrounded by a chain link fence and a row of metal dumpsters.

Through the side mirror Sam watched a determined look shadow Valerie’s face. Her jaw set and her eyes darkened, grew cold. Slowly, she aimed the gun through the crack in her window and trained one eye down the nozzle. Her finger curled around the trigger.

There was another option.

Sam rattled the divider right behind Danny's head.

Danny nodded. His grip tightened around the steering wheel and Sam felt the same tingly numbness spread through her limbs as before, back when he had hugged her on the side of the road, back when they had been in the police station.

The other car turned fully around the corner and stopped, idling. Light blazed through the interior, highlighting all three of their pale faces.

The door popped open and a person crawled out, walking towards them. It was impossible to see their features, but Sam could tell based off their curves they were a woman. Silhouetted by the headlights, they walked close, head swiveling around the parking lot, looking.
Danny's neon green eyes narrowed into slivers. His fingers tightened around the steering wheel. That weird ticking was still there, and Sam thought there was no way Spectra couldn't hear it at this range.

"C'mon," Valerie growled under her breath. "Leave already."

Spectra crossed their arms and turned, facing them fully, body wavering and growing like a much taller shadow was yearning to break free. Red eyes gleamed. Sam could swear Spectra was staring straight at her. She felt the strongest urge to duck behind the headrest.

A loud static-ey noise pierced the silence. 10-15 near Main. Folks saying there was a car chase down twenty-second. Proceed with caution. Gray, what's your position?

Hey Ramón... What's up with the sun? another, younger male and nervous, broke in.

Valerie reached out and yanked the knob of the police transmitter, switching the radio off, but it was too late— they had heard.

"Hold on," Danny said, ripping one hand off the wheel towards the gear shaft. The tingling sensation withdrew as Danny dropped the illusion.

Underneath Sam's body, which she had pinned to the uncomfortable plastic seat, the engine roared and they were flying backwards.

She chanced a glance up.

Danny's eyes locked on the rear view mirror, foot on the gas, reversing them out of the parking lot. With the headlights still off, it was hard to see, but Sam could make out the dark shape of a tall fence about to hit them. Danny let out a pained noise right when Sam braced for impact. It never came. The car continued to sail backwards.

The fence was in front of them now. They were rocketing through trees and homes. People yelled and cowered when the sound and sight of an intangible car crashed through their dinner.

Sam felt weightless and giddy, like she was on her painkillers. For the first time since being in the 'basement' Masters and Skulker had created, her body didn't feel numb from the cold. By the look on Valerie's face, she wasn't alone in the feeling. Sam couldn't see the other car anymore, but it was doubtful that they could keep up now that solid objects weren't an issue.

Hitting a parking lot, Danny finally eased the car to a stop. The hot engine clicked with exhaustion. Ghost powers faded, along with the giddy feeling.

For a long minute they sat there breathing hard.

Sam was the first to break the silence by reaching up and placing her palm on the grate. The metal made a soft rattle.

Danny threw his head back, bouncing it off the headrest before letting it rest there. A long, exhausted sigh blew from his lips and Sam wondered just how much energy it took to pull off something like that. It didn't look without effort. She could see through his body, like he was nothing more than stained glass.

"What now?" Valerie asked wryly. "Our plans never had us get this far."

Danny drew up shaking hands. It took him several attempts to light a cigarette, but after he took a long, deep inhale. As he blew the smoke out, Sam watched it curl around the rearview mirror. The
top of Danny's head was looking a little more solid. A road sign for the Quality Inn buzzed in the reflection next to it.

It was the safest place they could go.

With the headlights still off, Danny rolled the car silently in neutral into a Quality Inn parking spot and parked. Rain began pinging off the windshield.

Valerie gave an uneasy noise, peering up at the row of doors and the way the strange eclipse shadows that darted around the hotel's sidewalks. "We just ran from a shrink. Can we really trust this one?" she questioned. "In my experience, shrinks don't take to ghosts very well."

Danny peered out the windshield with the same amount of trepidation.

"If you two have any better ideas, feel free to share," Sam huffed.

Valerie freed herself of her seatbelt and got out of the car. "I can't believe I got roped back into this," she muttered, slamming it shut.

The car rocked and Sam winced at the noise.

Danny was suddenly outside of the car, helping her out. Her muddy clothing squelched a bit, sticking to the seat as she tried to stand. With his elbow, he shut the back door a lot gentler than Valerie, who was standing up on the curb, underneath the awning, arms crossed, tossing anxious looks over her shoulders.

"Room 208," Sam said. Nerves fluttered in her stomach. She hesitated.

"Sam?" Danny questioned.

She should warn him. But she was exhausted beyond belief. The smell of her mother's corpse hung off her skin and nested in her hair. The whole left side of her face felt like knives. Her clothes were drenched and she couldn't stop shivering. It was about all she could do to stand.

"You coming?" Valerie whispered, already halfway up the stairs.

Sam gripped the railing. It wasn't until she stumbled on the fifth step that she realized just how hurt she really was. Without a word, Valerie hooked her arm underneath Sam's armpit, hauling her upright. At the top of the stairs Sam murmured, "Thanks."

Valerie ignored her. Letting go, she pointed. "Room 208."

The curtains were drawn. Light fluctuated like a movie was playing. Muffled, through the sound of wind and rain and that strange ticking noise, Sam could make out the tune of *Jingle Bells*.

Valerie shot her a look, but widened her stance and nodded at the door. A cold gust told her Danny was behind them.

Sam reached up and knocked three times.

A dark shape flickered through the curtains. Sam saw the flash of a blue eye through the peephole and the door cracked open a few inches, safety chain still in place. "Sam?" Dr. Matthews breathed. "Your face. What happened?"
"I need your help," Sam said, feeling an intense sense of *deja vu*.

The door shut.

"Well, we tried," Danny said. He didn't sound very disappointed.

Sam turned to glare at him, finding him already moving for the stairs, almost completely shrouded in darkness. He paused at the sound of the safety chain sliding off.

The door swung wide open. Wrapped in a robe with a thick coat on, Dr. Matthews reached out, as if to cup Sam's cheek. Behind her, *A Christmas Story* played on a small flat-screen TV. "Oh, Sam," Matthews murmured sadly. Her sharp eyes found Valerie. "Who are you?"

"Valerie Gray, ma'am. I was the one that found her like this," Valerie said, suddenly a model of politeness.

"And you?" Matthews accused, peering over Sam's shoulder towards the dark stairwell.

Sam took the older woman's outstretched hand in both of her own. Blood smeared across Matthew's marquise diamond ring. "This is the friend I told you about. This is Danny."

Danny reluctantly stepped out of the shadow and into the light. He looked uncomfortable. Sam realized he rarely met new people. At a lack of what to do, he rubbed the back of his neck and said, "Hey."

Dr. Matthew's grip grew painful. Her nails dug into Sam's skin. There was a loud clatter as the TV remote slipped from her hand and skidded across the cement. A choked noise escaped her and Sam thought maybe she had given the elderly woman a heart attack. Then, she whispered, "How?"

Danny frowned. "We've met?"

"Yes," Sam rushed, stepping between. She couldn't help the large smile on her face, probably making her look deranged. "You were asking how we could trust her. This is Dr. Jasmine Matthews. Before she married, her maiden name was Fenton. This is Jazz, Danny. This is your sister."

But Danny had already started shaking his head halfway through. "No," he stated, tone sharp.

Sam froze, blindsided at the genuine anger.

"How is this possible?" Dr. Matthews asked, blinking over and over, as if she was dreaming. "Danny died. He *died*."

The light above flickered and Sam felt a warning wash through Dr. Matthew's hotel room in the form of an ominous chill. "She's too old to be my sister," Danny hissed.

"Wait." Sam took a step, reaching out to grab him by the arm, but he was already gone.
She Cried

Blood and dirt mixed, plopping down into the tub in clumps, swirling through water, marbling as it twisted down the drain. Hot water hissed from the showerhead. A few streams of water shot off in frayed directions. Steam billowed.

Sam had cranked it up as hot as it could go. The water scalded her skin. With a Quality Inn washcloth that had been bleached so often it was as stiff as a brillo pad, she scraped every inch of her skin, removing a good layer or two until it was an angry shiny pink.

She dunked her head back into the stream, watching water drip off the few strands of hair she had left. She had already washed her hair five times, but she could still smell corpse no matter how many times she shampooed. She even tried washing out her nostrils out with soap, but the dead smell had seeped into her skin, deep where no soap could get.

Whatever divine entity had been keeping her together so she could get out of the mansion and survive that car chase, was washing away with the blood. Pretty soon her hands were shaking so hard she could barely hold the washcloth.

With a shudder, she began scrubbing her body over again, but it did little to remove the feeling of unwanted hands touching her, pinning her, strangling her. Her scrubs grew more violent. Harsh breaths sawed out as desperation filled her, her throat welling in preparation of a good, long cry. The washcloth banged against her crotch and it twinged, sore. The bone there was for sure bruised.

“Fuck,” she croaked, throwing the bloodstained washcloth into the tub. It landed with a slap.

She stood directly in the showers beam, staring down, shaking. As long as the faucet ran, she didn’t have to face the world beyond this cheap shower curtain. She considered lying down. She considered giving up. If she showered forever, she’d never have to actually face what happened.

No. She had to do better than that. A mystery still needed solving. Danny was right. This was bigger than him, bigger than her, bigger than the both of them combined. She had to move forward.

She sucked in a deep, long breath, and cranked the faucet off.

The silence, punctuated by the steady drip-drip-drip from the faucet was way worse. Sam had taken thousands of showers. She had never felt this naked.

A soft knock pinged off the bathroom door. “Sam?” Matthews’s soft voice questioned. “I’m going out for supplies. I’ll be back in an hour, ok?”

Sam cleared the lump in throat several times, before managing an, “Ok.”

There was a pause on the other side. For a second Sam thought Matthews was going to change her mind, but the shadow underneath the bathroom doors crack shifted and she was gone.

Sam let out a breath she didn’t know she had been holding.

As she climbed out of the tub and toweled herself off, she could hear Valerie and Matthews talking in the bedroom. The TV was still on, and the murmur of it made it impossible to make out what they were saying. Probably talking about her. Sam couldn’t bring herself to care.

She wrapped the towel around herself and felt a little bit less frail. Using her fist, she wiped
condensation from the mirror and blinked at her own reflection.

Blood infiltrated the whites of her left eye. A reddish splot decorated just below. Her bottom lip was blistered and split, still oozing blood and swollen. Drawing up trembling fingers, she prodded at her cheekbone, which was an angry red color. A sharp pain shot through her and she hissed. With the patches of bruising and the burn scars, the left side of her face looked like a completely different person than the right.

Gingerly, she unwrapped the towel, turning her arms over and getting a good look at what was sure to turn into enormous bruises. Some around her wrists, and one on her hipbone where she had fallen.

Sam rewrapped the towel and leaned both palms against the sink for a moment to process. Wet strands of her hair flicked up and got stuck underneath her nose. An intense whiff of her mother’s body slammed through her and Sam let out a small scream, yanking at her hair, hard, in frustration. It had to go.

She fumbled around the bathroom for anything she could use. Little plastic cups dressed in more plastic scattered across the floor. Toilettes flew into the tub. Extra toilet paper scattered around her feet. With only a split second of hesitation, Sam began to rummage through Matthew’s toiletries. She found a travel toothbrush, a comb, a teal razor, a tube of lipstick—not the ghost detecting kind—and a seven day pill box with four of the days still full.

She opened Thursday. Most of the pills didn’t have a stamp or a name on them, and most she had never seen before, but one she recognized. It was a painkiller. Commonly used for arthritis, although Sam had been given it in the hospital for cramping. A stronger version of ibuprofen, it would help with the pain in her cheek and the swelling, but it wouldn’t keep her hands from shaking. It wasn’t the brain-numbing Endocet she had been given after the fire. The amount of disappointment she felt worried her.

Sam dropped the painkiller back into Thursday’s spot and closed it, carefully putting it back in Matthew’s bag. Matthews probably needed it just as much as her. She tucked away her toothbrush, comb, and lipstick, until she was left holding Matthew’s razor.

Studying her reflection in the mirror, she brought up the razor and did an experimental pass at her hair. Because of the guard, barely any of her hair got shaved. Frowning, Sam pried the guard off and popped the razor out.

“You alive?” Valerie asked, grudgingly, from on the other side of the door.

Why was Valerie even still here? She had never wanted to help in the first place. Sam thought she would have bailed the moment she was turned over to Matthews.

Sam’s eyes narrowed in the mirror in concentration, pulling her hair backwards, away from her hairline, and brought the razor down again. A clump of wet black hair fell into the sink.

Valerie banged once. “Open it.”

Sam’s limbs jumped and the razor slipped, biting into her hairline. Blood welled. “Shit,” she wavered, struggling to get her shaking fingers to rip off a piece of toilet paper to staunch the cut. The razor slipped from her grasp, clattering into the sink. A fat drop of blood landed next to the drain. She swayed.

“I’ll break it down,” Valerie was saying, “It’s not hard. I’ve done it before.”
Dizzily, Sam reached out and unlocked the door, then lowered herself onto the floor before she could faint.

Valerie stepped inside, a bundle of clothes underneath one arm. All the hot steam escaped the room. Green eyes roved around the scattered toiletries, the hair and blood in the sink, and landed on Sam, whose teeth had begun to chatter.

Sam didn’t have enough energy to cover herself up or give a shit about what Valerie thought of her in that moment.

The water from the showerhead dripped and the TV murmured. Valerie crossed the bathroom and knelt down, depositing the clothes on the floor. She unhooked the towel from around Sam’s torso. Sam lifted her arms and allowed Valerie to pat dry any spots she had missed with the same hurried detachment as a nurse.

Valerie helped her into a scratchy mint green sweater. She rolled the arms twice until Sam’s hands poked out. Then, with arms interlinked, Valerie got her standing and into a pair of cotton drawstring pajama pants. Sam’s shaking hands struggled with cinching the string before Valerie batted them away and tied her in with a few rough yanks.

The clothes smelled like laundry detergent and Matthew’s perfume. They were about two sizes too large and served as a reminder that this all was wrong and she was a refugee of her own home.

“Stand straight,” Valerie ordered, tone gruff. “Head up.”

Sam almost told her to fuck off, but considering Valerie brought her clean clothes, she obeyed. Chin up, she shot the other girl a glare in the hopes she looked less pathetic than she felt.

Valerie glared right back. Something dark and worried swam in her gaze. Her eyes flicked back towards the sink. “What’s up with the blood and the razor?”

Sam leaned onto the wall, resting her elbow on the towel rack. “I can still smell my mom in my hair.”

Valerie’s face softened. She plucked up the razor and shook her head. “Are you for real? This is not how you shave a head of hair,” she lectured.

Eyeing the girl’s massive ponytail, Sam said, “And how do you know anything about cutting hair?”

“Shut up,” Valerie groused. She pointed with the razor to the mirror. “Well?”

Shrugging, Sam settled in front of the sink, with a clean towel draped over her shoulders, sitting atop Matthew’s suitcase so she was a good foot shorter.

Valerie started by grabbing handfuls of what was left of Sam’s hair, shaving large chunks off nowhere near the roots, before going back in close to the scalp. She worked in silence. The gentle pulling and yanking lulled Sam into a trance-like state as she watched layers of her hair shed around her shoulders, into her lap, and onto the floor. The strands dusted the bridge of her nose, and caught on her eyelashes.

“You seem… different,” Sam managed to say after a long moment. She watched Valerie in the mirror, but the girl never looked up, so Sam didn’t comment.

“My mom taught me. She used to cut my dad’s hair,” Valerie murmured, almost to herself, as she worked. “I cut it now that she’s gone.”
Sam glanced back down at her palms in her lap and ran some of her hair between her thumb and pointer finger.

After some time, Valerie leaned in close, eyeing her critically. “Done,” she announced.

A totally different person stared back at her in the mirror. All of her injuries and scars were displayed, no longer hidden behind a tangled mess of bangs or shoved in a beanie. The side of her head that used to have hair had maybe an eighth-of-an-inch left. The shave was admirable even for Valerie only having a small razor blade to work with.

Her frame shivered uncontrollably, despite the sweater.

Valerie set the razor next to the sink and grasped both her shoulders. “I thought I did a pretty good job,” she protested, shooting Sam a glare through the mirror. It was lacking her usual hostility. Sam was learning more and more that this was just her normal face. Valerie’s lip quirked and Sam couldn’t help but smile back.

The hotel lock buzzed and Sam froze, relaxing when Matthews came in carrying plastic bags full of what looked like medical supplies, clothing, and Chinese takeout. She placed them on a small wooden table, using her heel to kick the door closed. Water poured off Matthews’ black raincoat.

Valerie squeezed Sam’s shoulders. It felt like her version of giving a hug. Whipping the dirtied towel off Sam’s shoulders, like a hairdresser whipped off an apron, Valerie said, with a straight face, “That’ll be twenty bucks. Hard cash. You can pay me after this is all over.”

Sam let out a huffing laugh. “Deal.”

Sam watched a silent dance of hands and arms perform in front of her as Valerie and Dr. Matthews undid the takeout, passing napkins and soy sauce, distributing chopsticks, and cracking open containers. The smell of grease wafted through the air. It was the best thing Sam had smelled in a while.

She leaned forward in her chair, blanket wrapped around her shoulders slipping. Her cheekbone twinged, gauze covering the cut in her head and ointment mixed with antiseptic spread over her bruises. Dr. Matthews had performed the first aid. She had barely said four sentences.

“Veggie chow mein?” Dr. Matthews asked her, holding up the container. Five sentences.

“I can do it,” Sam said hoarsely. She was beat up, but not so beat up she couldn’t serve herself. Dr. Matthews passed it to her and she put all her focus onto making her paper plate.

The three of them ate in relative silence. The distant roar of rain pattered outside. Once in awhile a car passed by on the road. It was when Sam decided she wanted seconds of the chow mein, that Valerie shifted in her chair and said, slowly, “Sooo…”

“So,” Dr. Matthews echoed. “I’m guessing, by the fact that there is a police car belonging to your”—she pointed her chopsticks at Valerie—“father in the parking lot, you two don’t want me to call the police?”

“No,” Valerie agreed. Her eyes flicked to Sam in confusion, as if she had been expecting Matthews to bring up the elephant sitting in the empty fourth chair.
Maybe Dr. Matthews didn’t believe she had seen him. Maybe she thought she was dreaming. Sam knew the feeling. It felt like she had been operating inside one labyrinthian nightmare ever since Halloween.

“Can you tell me who did that to your face, Sam?” Matthews prodded.

Valerie kicked Sam’s leg underneath the table right as Sam, unthinkingly, said, “Masters.”

Noodles fell out of Dr. Matthew’s chopsticks. “What?” she said, tone flat.

Valerie threw her chopsticks down in frustration. “Let’s just add more people to his list.”

Dr. Matthew’s face had gotten really pale and Sam felt like a complete idiot. This wasn’t just her psychologist. This was also Jasmine Fenton. Jazz. Her family had been damaged when she was in her teens and Sam had just answered over fifty years of unexplained tragedy in less than two seconds. She hadn’t even asked Danny if he would be okay with it. She had just gone ahead and done it. “I’m sorry,” she blurted. “I’m so sorry.”

Dr. Matthews’ eyes stuck to her food, a nauseous look crossing her wrinkled features. Wordlessly, she she began the process of refolding her paper napkin. Her eyes scanned the table.

“Danny should be here for this,” Valerie muttered. The dark expression on her face said this was yet another strike against the ghost.

“He’ll come back,” Sam defended, even though secretly she agreed.

Dr. Matthews flinched.

Shit. The hotel room was suddenly claustrophobic. The chow mein now writhed around in her stomach. Valerie disapproving glower coming from the corner of the room was unbearable. Intent on going somewhere nearby, somewhere she could think, somewhere where she couldn’t mess anything up any worse than she already had, Sam grabbed the keycard off the table and made for the door.

Valerie scrambled up, palm slapping on the door, forcing it back closed. “Where do you think you’re going? There’s still that weird eclipse outside.”

Sam frowned. When Valerie didn’t move her hand, Sam asked, bitingly, “What? You going to hold me captive now, too?”

The hand slipped off the door. Valerie looked like Sam had slapped her.

“Sam,” Dr. Matthews said tiredly. “Wait.”

Sam shouldered her way past and took the stairs two at a time, ignoring the way her cheekbone complained at each jolting step.

Not going very far, Sam used her keycard to get into the hotel pool room. It was completely empty. The pool’s glossy smooth surface reflected the hanging neon lights, which buzzed softly overhead. It smelled intensely like chlorine, which was preferable to the faint dead smell Sam kept getting still. Steam rose from the pool, coating the walls and the ceiling in a thick mask of condensation that made all light from outside fuzzy and muted. It was no graveyard, but it would have to do.

Sam’s bare footsteps echoed. She chose one of the many pool chairs and leaned back, adjusting the
backrest so she was laying flat looking up at the clear plastic ceiling.

Everything had turned to shit.

A sob ripped from her lungs. She clamped a hand over her mouth to stifle the noise. Tears flooded her eyes, spilling out of the corners of her eyes and pooling in her ear. Her left eye stung from the salt in her own tears and Sam cried harder.

She cried so hard, she didn’t notice she had an audience until she heard a creak erupt from her right. Lurching up, Sam found Danny sitting on the chair right beside her, looking both helpless and contrite.

She wiped the uninjured side of her face with the sleeve of Jazz’s sweater. “Nice of you to show up,” she commented, body still trembling, voice choked through sobs.

“I never left,” Danny admitted. His stare was wide and unblinking, like the first time they had talked in the graveyard, and Sam knew now it was because of the sheer amount of emotion she was displaying. If he was still mad at her for dropping his sister on him like that, he didn’t show it.

That noise was back. It was definitely coming from Danny and it didn’t sound particularly reassuring. “What does that sound mean?” Sam asked.

“You can hear it, too? I guess that makes sense...” Danny muttered, almost to himself. He glanced at her. “It’s a timer.” He turned his hands over, peering at them. They glowed warmth like a nightlight. “A summoned ghost gets to bend the rules for exactly twenty-four hours. Which means, for a short amount of time, we have a small advantage.”

Break the rules… Did that mean Danny had no curse to stop him from telling her the truth? Was this all finally coming to an end?

“This could be the last nice moment we spend alone,” Danny realized.

Her heart have a hard yank. Sam shook her head, face crumpling, tears beginning to form again. “What happens after? Where will you go?” she wondered.

“I don’t know,” Danny admitted. “No one’s ever solved it. I guess we’ll all leave... somewhere.” Out of the corner of her eye, Danny got up, pushing her gently over so he could lay down next to her in her chair. As he settled he asked, “Is this okay?”

Sam adjusted so she was on her side, so they were laying face to face, and tucked her hand underneath her good cheek.

“Badass haircut,” Danny breezed with a small smile.

A snort escaped her. She began committing his face to memory, charting the freckles across his cheeks and the flecks of green in his pool-blue eyes. His lips were fuller than most of the boys she had met. They were always curved in a hint of a smile. As she stared, they spread apart into a wider grin. Sam refocused and found him studying her with a similar intensity.

“Did you ever go to prom?” Sam wondered.

Danny blinked in surprise, before shaking his head. When he resettled, he rested it closer to hers. She could count eyelashes from this distance. “No. To tell the truth, I never liked anyone enough to ask.”

“Would you have asked me?”
A blush crept across his cheeks. Then, mischievously, “Would you have said yes?”

Sam scrunched her nose, pretending to think about it.

Danny made a wounded noise. “You’re maddening,” he grumbled. Reaching out, he lightly touched the tip of his pointer finger her cheek just underneath her eye and traced it around the curve.

Sam’s breath caught in her chest.

Danny pulled back, resting his head back down onto the chair.

Contentment radiated in her stomach, before she remembered this was actually a goodbye. For a second there it had felt like the beginnings of something great.

“Remember that first night?” Danny asked, voice a warm murmur. “Back in the graveyard, when you didn’t know I was a ghost? Back when we were just two kids, goofing off all night? That was... nice. Is it wrong to want to go back?”

Sam shook her head. Things had been simpler back when Danny had only been the neighbor boy. It must have been nice for him to pretend, even for the short amount of time it lasted, that he was normal and that he could have all the normal things that had been stolen from him. Sam found herself wanting some of that back too. Back when she still thought he was alive and they had a chance.

Danny’s gaze flicked away from her, towards the door. “Was that really her?”

“You mean your sister?” Sam couldn’t read his expression.

In one swift move, Danny pushed himself up and swung his legs off, sitting on the edge of the chair with his back to her. His shoulders hunched. “How can you be sure?”

“I’m sure,” Sam assured. “I think you’re sure too.”

“How long have you known she was alive?” he asked, before, with a shake of his head he said, “Nevermind. Doesn’t matter.”

Sam propped her elbows beneath her, sitting up. “Only a few hours and right now she’s hurting.” When Danny gave no answer, Sam rested her hand on the chair next to his. “I know this is... a lot... but you have to try and explain.”

“That would only hurt her more,” Danny dismissed.

“She deserves to know,” Sam argued. “She’s had to live with this mystery her whole life.”

“So? She can live with it a little longer,” Danny hissed, mood suddenly dark; his entire body rigid and tense, arms tight by his sides. “Knowing the truth is a whole lot worse than knowing nothing at all.”

“Worse for her or for you?” A flare of impatience rose up in her. “You’re not heartless, Danny. Besides, you’re just as old as her. Maybe you should act like it.”

Danny flinched. He spun around to stare at her in disbelief that she would have the gall to insult him instead of baby him.

Sam crossed her arms and held her ground.

Instead of being mad, Danny broke into a soft laugh. “Alright, fine,” he chuckled. “I’ll velcro on my
orthopedic adult shoes and talk to her, but only if you get a few hours of sleep.”

Her arms loosened in relief at the promise. A nap didn’t sound like a bad idea. But… “What about the timer? We don’t have a lot left. We should plan.”

Danny got up from the chair and offered her an arm. “We’ve got enough time to do both.”

Taking his offered arm, Sam allowed Danny to pull her back on her feet. She caught their reflection in the pool and had to admit that Danny was right. She wasn’t fooling anyone.

Danny gently tugged her into him and Sam got a noseful of cigarettes. His head rested briefly against hers. When he pulled back he had this look on his face that told Sam immediately he was thinking about what had happened down in the basement.

“I can’t talk about it,” Sam said tiredly. Talking about it wouldn’t change the fact that it had happened. It would just make them both miserable. She was pretty sure Masters had done it to hurt her as much as possible, and while it had worked, she wasn’t about to let that stop her. “A really smart person once told me the past is done.”

“Well, I’m not done,” Danny said, voice gravelly with hate. “Not with him.”
Darkness stretched out, eternally, in all directions. On her hands and knees, Sam groped around in the black, feeling nothing but ice cold water. Her hands hit what felt like shoes connected to ankles connected to… Two red eyes glared down. “Gotcha,” a cruel voice whispered.

Sam woke drenched in sweat and unable to breathe. For a split second she was afraid it hadn’t really been a dream, when she heard low murmuring voices and the hum of a cheap mini fridge and remembered she was in Dr. Matthews’ hotel room.

A soft snore came from next to her. Valerie, asleep. In the corner of the room, near the curtains, two dark shapes moved. Danny and Dr. Matthews, sitting across from each other at the table. No way they heard Sam wake up over the rain continuing to pour. By their inky silhouettes, Sam figured night had officially descended. She wondered how much time they had left.

“...at do you think?” Danny was asking.

“She’s in shock,” Dr. Matthews murmured. “I think I am too. This is all very strange.”

“You’ve been helping her? With counselling?” Danny asked and Sam could feel how awkward this conversation was for them.

“She doesn’t talk to me much.”

Danny’s shadow shifted. He barely taller than his sister, although without the slight hunch, Dr. Matthews probably would have had a good inch on him. “So you ended up going to college?”

A pause. “Got a doctorate in psychology.”

“I’m sure Mom and Dad loved that.”

“They were skeptical, for sure,” Dr. Matthews admitted, suddenly amused. “I think they were just glad I wasn’t with that Johnny guy anymore.”

“That guy was a skeezy asshole,” Danny burst. Based off the shadowed movements, Sam guessed that he had crossed his arms. Sam guessed this was an old fight, if Danny’s too-strong reaction was anything to go by.

Dr. Matthews laughed. “Yeah... Not one of my smarter moments.”

They both lapsed into silence again. Dr. Matthews turned slightly, her voice almost too soft for Sam to hear as she asked, “What really happened that day, Danny? August 12th, 1962?”

Sam’s heart thumped as Danny didn’t react. Tell her, she urged silently, pressing her head deep into the pillow in frustration.

There was the glow of an igniting cigarette and Danny let out a long sigh. Sam could see the smoke in the air in the way it dampened the light coming from the outside hallway. “It doesn’t really matter anymore.”
“Of course it does.” Dr. Matthews’ voice cracked. “What would Mom and Dad say if they saw us like this?”

“They’d probably just think they were dreaming. And they’d make a dumb comment about my smoking.”

“Danny,” Dr. Matthews pleaded. “Be serious.”

Danny flicked the butt of it and stared down. He heaved an exhausted sigh. For a full minute he stared at the ground, and Sam could tell he was trying to figure out how to begin. “After we fought, I was so mad at you. I drove miles away, back to where we used to live. I dunno why. Maybe I thought going back to where we used to play as kids would help me figure out what to say to adult-you when I got back.”

The shadow to the left of Danny had gone very still.

“I took a break at that place Mom and Dad stopped at when we moved to Cincinnati.”

“You ordered a strawberry milkshake,” Dr. Matthews broke in. At Danny’s stunned pause, she explained, hurriedly, “We found the receipt in your car.”

“You did?” There was a weird hitch in his voice, like he had thought no one had tried all that hard to find him. Like he had thought everyone had just forgotten him and gone on with their lives.

Dr. Matthews must have heard it too, because she said, voice vehement and shaky with tears, “We looked for you everywhere. We showed your picture to everyone. You were on the news. We had three police districts, dogs, the entire state looking. For years we searched for you.”

“That’s…” Danny trailed off, silent for a long moment. He took another drag, blew it out, and cleared his choked throat. “Anyway, I needed gas to get back home.”

“So you went to Lucky Strike. Saw Skulker. That’s what the police thought,” Dr. Matthews pieced together.

“Yes. That’s right.” There was almost humor in Danny’s tone as he continued, “But it was more like he saw me. He came up to me, started asking me all these questions. I didn’t even know who he was at first, but when he mentioned Vlad it clicked. He had worked the grounds back when we were kids.”

Dr. Matthews nodded. With her one good ear pressed on her pillow, Sam strained to hear.

“He was being really weird. Like… Nervous. Nervous for whatever reason about me being there. He really didn’t want me going by Vlad’s.”

“So you went,” Dr. Matthews guessed, unimpressed. “Idiot.”

Danny snorted. “I mean at this point I was more worried about Vlad. So I was going to just go up and ring the doorbell, but something about how Skulker had acted stopped me. I decided I would sneak up and scare Vlad instead, like I used to. So I snuck in through the bathroom window.”

“The footprint.”

“...What?”

“Police found a footprint in the bathroom… matched your size and… oh God…” Dr. Matthews’
shadow hunched even more than it already did and wobbled like she was about to be sick. She seemed to connect all the dots in that moment, and even though Sam knew she had already blabbed about Masters, she doubted that it had really sunk in yet. Maybe it was Danny being the one to tell her that made it ring true.

Sam felt the impending doom one feels right when an elderly person trips.

Danny reached one hand out to steady his sister. “I can stop. We don’t have to keep going,” he said, voice barely above a murmur.

Dr. Matthews straightened. “No. I have to hear this. From you.”

Reluctantly, Danny let go and ran a hand through his hair. “Ok…” He didn’t seem convinced. “So I looked around, but nothing was out of the ordinary. Vlad wasn’t home. I figured I’d just leave a note under his door saying I was there and be on my way, so I went into the study to find his typewriter. When I got there I heard this weird snapping sound coming from behind the bookshelf,” Danny was speeding along now, breathless, like if he stopped or got interrupted he wouldn’t be able to get going again. “I knew it had to be some sort of secret passage. Remember when we stayed there in the summers? The star room attached to our bedroom?” —Dr. Matthews nodded solemnly— “The thought that there was another secret room I hadn’t found yet was… exciting.”

“You found it,” Dr. Matthews guessed again. This time, her tone was tight and strained.

Ambers exploded as Danny flicked the butt of his cigarette. “I found Vlad. He had a kid strapped down, cut open.” Danny made a gesture as if to say from here to there, but Sam couldn’t make it out.

Her blood ran ice cold. None of these details she had heard before. It was doubtful Danny had told anyone this, what with the curse normally in place.

“At first I just stood there kinda frozen. I couldn’t believe it. Then Vlad turned and saw me and I knew I had to run. Almost made it back up the stairs too, before he got me from behind. Stuck some kind of tranq in my leg and... that was that.”

The beads hanging off Dr. Matthews’ glasses swayed and caught in the dim light from right outside the door as she shook her head. “He let us stay with him during the search. He put up reward money for you. He…” It was as if she no longer had words to fathom what kind of a person could do something like that.


Dr. Matthews stilled. “You did?”

Valerie shifted, her snoring abruptly ending. The hum of the mini fridge suddenly kicked off and Sam could hear their voices crystal clear.

“I heard Dad. At least, I’m pretty sure it was him. I could hear people every once in awhile if they talked loud enough from the study.” He sounded exhausted. “The first few days I screamed a lot. Vlad started drugging me. After that I just kinda laid there.”

Dr. Matthews moaned. Her shadow moved behind the curtain and it looked like she had her head buried in her hands. “You were right under our feet. I’m so sorry. I’m so so so sorry...”

“Don’t be. It was a long time ago. I’ve come to terms with it,” Danny said.
“Then why are you still here?” Dr. Matthews pointed out.

“Yeah, well,” Danny tossed his cigarette and stomped on it. “Just because I’m over what he did to me doesn’t mean I’m okay with what he did to all those kids. What he did to Sam.”

At the mention of her own name, Sam pressed her head down into the pillow, closing her eyes. She was hit with a pang of guilt. She shouldn’t be eavesdropping like this. She should try to go back to sleep, for real, and leave the siblings to their reunion, but she dreaded the thought of enduring another nightmare.

“That’s a big ring,” Danny said, switching topics.

“That’s right. I have a husband, a son, and three granddaughters.”

“You have grandkids?” Danny groused. “Man, you really are old.”

“That means you have grand-nieces, you know,” Dr. Matthews countered.

“Grand-nieces,” Danny echoed, sounding dizzy at the very idea.

Sam’s pretend sleep started to turn into the real deal. Danny’s voice was soothing. Now that he was back around, she felt a bit safer. Safe to relax back into this bed that smelled like off-brand fabric softener…

“I bet they don’t even know about me,” Danny was saying.

A huff. There was a sound like Dr. Matthews had reached out and whacked Danny’s arm. “Stop. Everyone in our family knows about you. My son was obsessed. When he was ten he was convinced he’d find you and bring you back home to Mom and Dad.” Dr. Matthews voice turned giddy. “Wait until I tell him I found you.”

“That’s an inventive way to tell him you have alzheimer's.”

“I’m not that old.”

Sam’s body grew heavy.

“...What’s your son’s name?”

“Isaiah. Isaiah Daniel Matthews…”

Sam woke to pain. While she had been asleep, all the muscles in her neck had seized. Moving her head hurt enough to cause tears to spring in her eyes. Her hipbone throbbed and her entire body ached like she had been in a car accident, which wasn’t too far from the truth. A whimper fell out of her lips.

Underneath her shoulder, the bed dipped a fraction, and Sam couldn’t help the cry that flew out of her as her head screamed in pain.

“Can you sit up?” Danny’s voice asked, soft and close to her ear.

Sam felt the cold press of his arm hook beneath her back and try to haul her upright. The arm
retreated. Sam let out a breath of relief.

A cool hand pressed down on her forehead, wiping away the sweat. It traveled down, spreading ice-cold numbness to her neck and her shoulders. It felt amazingly good on her hot skin. The other hand reached around and found hers, coaxing it open from where she had balled up the comforter in a death grip, weaving icy fingers through hers.

Sam opened one eye.

Danny smiled. The ticking was strong this close. He let go and she instantly missed the contact. “Water and painkillers,” he said, brandishing the two.

Sam managed to swallow them down. “How long was I out?” she croaked.

Valerie glanced over at her from the small table, where she was pouring herself a bowl of cereal, towel wrapped around her head as if she had just taken a shower. She was wearing an ill-fitting black t-shirt and jeans. Most likely part of the supplies Dr. Matthews had gotten. Her backpack was still strapped to her back. “Two hours,” she said, shoveling some of the cereal into her mouth.

Outside was still dark. Sam calculated inside her head.

“Nineteen hours left,” Danny confirmed.

Sam let Danny help her into a seated position. “Where’s Dr… Jasmine—Jazz?” She stumbled over the name. It felt wrong to call her psychologist anything other than Dr. Matthews, but it felt even more wrong calling her something as formal as Dr. Matthews to her brother. Sam’s brain flipped, trying to reconcile that bit of information. Even now she found herself stunned.

Danny’s gaze flitted to the door. “Outside, processing. Left a few minutes ago. Hopefully she doesn’t run into any trouble.” He moved to leave her side and Sam reached out, grabbing him by the wrist. He turned, blinking.

“Thank you,” Sam said.

Danny shrugged. “The pills were Jazz’s.”

Sam let go with a sigh. They both knew she wasn’t thanking him for the painkillers, but whatever, she’d let him avoid talking about it if he wanted. She supposed he had talked enough.

“So what do we do now?” Valerie muttered around Cheerios.

How she could eat anything, Sam had no clue. Her stomach was one giant ball of stress. She glanced at Danny. “How do we beat him?”

His gaze darkened. “We don’t. We focus on the one thing he’s doing everything in his power to distract us from. Nothing else matters.”

“And what’s that?” Valerie growled.

Dawning realization bloomed in the back of Sam’s head. Everything else in her life had changed, grown more abysmal and complicated, except this one fact. “We find the bodies and we tell everyone where they are. Then it will all be over.”

As if in agreement, Danny produced a cigarette. Just for a moment, with a quick flick of a lighter, his entire face glowed. He sighed out a plume of smoke. It drifted around his shoulders like a scarf.
Valerie waved her hand through the air a few times. “That’s got to be your third one in the last, what, hour?”

“He has the whole town at his disposal. At this point, anyone could be a puppet,” Danny said, ignoring her. “All it takes it one touch.”

Sam eyed Danny’s cigarette, having half a mind to ask for one at this point. She needed a stiff drink. Maybe an Ambien. Definitely her prescription painkillers that were back at the mansion... “Can’t you do the same thing?” she asked.

Valerie rolled a plastic cup of water along her forehead, eyes closed. “No.”

“Why not?” Sam turned to Danny. “Can’t you trick people too? Possess them?”

A soft thud resounded. Sam whipped in shock, finding Valerie had thrown her plastic cup at the wall. Being plastic, it had done nothing more than spray water across the carpet and make a sad crinkling sound. “No,” she snarled. “No possessions.” With that, she got up and stormed into the bathroom, slamming the door shut.

Danny sighed in her wake. “No possessions,” he agreed, even though she was gone. His gaze meandered, sticking on the bathroom door.

Following his gaze, Sam leaned back against the pillow. Suddenly it all seemed to make sense. Valerie’s stint in a mental institution. The quirks in her personality that, at times, felt like they were somebody else’s and the anger that always wavered on a knife’s edge. “So, Valerie...? Did you...?”

“Not Valerie, no, although it’s happened to her before,” Danny cut, quickly, looking distinctly uncomfortable. He moved into a vacant chair at the small table, using an empty sweet-and-sour sauce container as an ashtray. “I possessed her friend. Didn’t really work out.”

Sam ran a mental list of all of Valerie’s friends. It was a short list, consisting of only her, Valerie’s father, and— it was a huge stretch— Danny. Brow furrowing, she expanded the list a bit more. Tucker? Star? ...Paulina’s face flashed across her mind. “Ah,” she said. “No wonder Paulina is obsessed with you.”

Danny almost dropped his cigarette in shock. He let out a disbelieving snort. “Damn,” he breathed, hand pausing halfway to his mouth in thought, before taking another drag.

She crossed her arms and watched him, knowing if she glared at him long enough he’d break down and elaborate. The painkillers were already doing work behind her eyes.

Just like she predicted, Danny shrank a little. “Alright, fine, jeez,” he muttered. “Paulina broke into the mansion as a joke after the Grays moved out. She woke everyone up, got into trouble. I knew Paulina was a friend of Valerie’s and... and after everything that happened... I dunno... I guess I felt like I owed her a favor—”

“Mr. Hero decided to butt in and make matters worse,” a gruff voice muttered from behind the bathroom door.

“He had her walking right into oncoming traffic,” Danny argued. “I saved her life.”

The bathroom door cracked open. One green eye glared through the dim light. “You could have saved her without possessing her,” Valerie shot back.

“He would have made her try again until it worked and you know it.”
Sam made a face, ignoring the bickering pair. She stared at the cup on the floor. Her brows furrowed, thoughts spiraling. If possession was out of the question, then they were going to have to figure out another way...

“How did you escape?” she asked, loudly. At the ringing silence, she looked up and found both Danny and Valerie staring at her, mouths hung open in mid-argument. Valerie was back in the room, towel off her head, pointing an accusatory finger at the ghost.

Danny frowned. “What do you mean?”

“You outsmarted Masters before. Twice,” Sam prompted.

The anger faded from Valerie’s face. It must have been the first she had heard of Danny’s near-escape attempts. Sam wondered just how much the other knew about the bunker and what Masters had been doing down there.

Danny leaned back in his chair and shrugged. “First time was dumb luck. Sawed through the chain. Made it to the highway when the dogs caught up.” He swallowed a few times and, with a frustrated shake of his head, took another drag.

“And the second time?” Sam pressed.

“Second time was a lot harder,” Danny admitted, going quiet. He put out the cigarette and, with a glazed look in his eye, used the butt to push around the ashes. “I had to become someone else.”

Valerie crossed the room and sat on the end of the bed.

Blue eyes dark, Danny continued, “I had already figured out how to escape my room, but I couldn’t just run. After the first time, Vlad always locked the doors out of the bunker. So I waited a long time, maybe months, until he brought down a kid that was around the same height and build as me. Until after he had… you know.”

Valerie made a noise in the back of her throat. Sam couldn’t tell if she was angry or disgusted. Probably both. “Isaiah Moore,” she blurted.

Danny blinked.

“The boy. His name was Isaiah Moore. He was fourteen when he disappeared while attending a circus. He was 5’ 10” and skinny. The timing makes sense. My family worked this for three generations. I know about every kid that went missing. Not just him.” She pinned Sam in an accusatory look.

Sam swallowed. She didn’t try to defend herself. Valerie was right, and it stung.

Danny cleared his throat and, after a long pause, continued, “After he left I switched with the body. I dragged him into my room, pulled my blanket over his head. Then I rubbed dark surgical disinfectant all over my skin and waited. I knew eventually Skulker would have to get rid of the body. He always wheeled them out in a cart through the back entrance in the dark. He didn’t like to look at them long.”

Sam thought of the locked door, the one in the basement facing away from the study entrance. That must have been how they got the bodies out without anyone seeing. Wherever that tunnel led was sure to be close to the dump site. Skulker knew how to dismantle and dispose of animal carcasses. Not much of a stretch to do the same thing to a human.

Danny shot her a look, a little edge from their fighting still in his gaze. “No. But I would have.”

With a grimace, Sam swung her legs out of the bed and got to her feet. She crossed the room gingerly. Her body complained the whole way. With a grunt, she deposited herself in the chair Valerie had vacated.

“Eventually he left, so I pried the top off to look around.” Danny was grinning now, which made him look a little off. He had probably never had an audience for this story. “It was snowing. I cried like a baby.”

“Because you were free?” Sam asked.

Danny’s smile faltered. “No. Because I was outside.”

After a beat, Valerie asked, “No offense, but how does knowing this help?”

Sam reached over and grabbed her own paper bowl, loading it up with Cheerios that she would try and force herself to eat. “Because, what Danny did worked.” At Danny’s skeptical expression, she winced. “Well, sorta worked,” she amended. “What I mean is, we need to do something completely out of character. Become someone new. What’s the last thing Masters would expect us to do?”

With a derisive noise, Valerie got up from the bed and sat back down at the table, grabbing her bowl of now soggy cereal back. “Go to the police. Off ourselves. Off someone else…” she muttered, pouring a fresh bowl.

“He expects Sam to run for help,” Danny stated.

Leaning back in her chair, Sam ran a tongue over her split lip, mind racing. She didn’t bother entertaining the idea that Danny might be wrong. Danny knew Masters better than anyone. Besides, Master had been right. The first thing they had done was run to Dr. Matthews; it was only luck that they’d run to someone with no real ties to Amity, and hadn’t been in town long enough to become Master’s puppet. Sam felt a little nauseous at the idea they were still playing his game.

“Right now, he’s probably searching with every puppet he has, trying to figure out who she went to for help. Sam knowing my name wasn’t in his plan.” Danny sounded entirely pleased about it.

If Masters was running around town trying to find her, what could she do to disarm him? Where was the one place he’d never think to look for her?

Valerie shoved her spoon around her bowl with more force than necessary, knocking Sam out of her thoughts. “We’ve already stayed here too long, then,” she grumbled. “We need to go.”

“Go where?” Danny challenged, grin flipping into a scowl.

“We stay here, we’re sitting ducks,” Valerie argued. Heat bloomed in her voice. “We shouldn’t have even slept here for as long as we did.”

Danny bristled. Them sleeping had been his idea and that was probably the only reason Valerie was questioning it. “I’m starting to think you want to shoot people,” he accused, tone quiet.

Valerie stiffened and Sam could tell that whatever Danny was dredging back up went further back than the car chase. “Have you been outside lately? We’re at the end of the world,” Valerie spat, leaning over the table until she was up in his face. “Might as well say what you really mean. You
think he’s still in my head? Is that it?”

Sam had never seen anyone besides herself talk to a Danny with such idiotic lack of fear. Valerie had her spoon almost poking his chest.

Sam eyed him cautiously. Rile up any ghost enough—even Danny—and anything was possible. Although, based off the stricken look on his face, Danny looked more likely to apologize than he was to crawl up any walls. She pointed between them, breaking up what was sure to be another pointless continuation of Valerie and Danny’s fight. An idea had come to her. A crazy idea. Which, at this point, meant it might be a good one. “What if we went back?”

The pair paused.

Seeing their blank looks, Sam clarified, “I mean, back to the mansion.”

Still leaning over the table, Valerie froze. “What?”

Danny’s expression twisted, turned thoughtful. He leaned back in his chair.

**BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM!**

Right behind her, the hotel door rattled in its frame. The noise was so loud Sam’s head lurched. For a heart-stopping moment she was back in that bunker two seconds away from Master’s filleting her skin with her father’s knife.

“Police! Open up!” a woman’s voice announced. Ramón.

Bright light spilled through the window, shedding across the rumpled bed and the far wall of the hotel room. From this angle, it couldn’t reach where they were seated, tucked in the corner almost directly behind the door.

Danny reached out, grabbing their shoulders in his icy grip, dropping them through the floor into the room below just as the there was a loud crash.

Chapter End Notes

Lots of talkin’ and plottin’ in this one. They're not out of the woods just yet. Things have been going good over here. Beginning to get my feet back on the ground, I think.
The three of them tumbled onto the maroon carpet of the hotel room below Dr. Matthews’ room. Valerie’s weight collided into Sam, knocking her to the ground. She landed on her injured hip, but was too busy panicking to feel the brunt of the pain. Bits of plaster rained from the ceiling as police officers stormed the room above.

There was the bang of a door. “Clear!” someone yelled.

A balding man not wearing a shirt jerked awake, sitting up in the bed. He blinked furiously at them, as if he was still dreaming.

“Sleep,” Danny ordered, voice faint and disembodied, like speaking through a tin can.

The man wavered a few times drunkenly, fighting. For one harrowing moment Sam thought he was going to break free of Danny’s mesmeric hold, but then his eyes rolled back and he fell onto his pillow, snoring.

Sam felt Danny’s hand slip out of her own like he was nothing but vapor. Eyes closed, his form wavered, like a candle subjected to a gust of wind. His skin shriveled in fast-forward, eyes sinking. What teeth were poking out of his grimacing mouth blackened. Worry exploded in Sam’s gut. It was the third time he had extended his ghost powers to her, the third time it had caused him to go see through, but the first time his limbs had started to wither.

Valerie groaned. Her wet hair was flopped over her face, backpack of relics strapped to her back. She was still brandishing her spoon.

Solidifying again into his usual visage, Danny put his finger to his lips and pointed up to the ceiling, where Ramón had moved on to searching the top row of hotel rooms.

Sam peeled back the curtain and looked outside. At some point in the night the rain had turned into snow. Flakes flurried, fast and frantic, shooting through the streetlights and light from the hotel hallway. A cop car idled in the parking lot. Another officer was standing next to Gray’s borrowed car keeping watch in case someone tried to make a run for it. Going out the front way was not an option.

Valerie strode to the back of the room, where a large window overlooked the back parking lot. With a frustrated growl she threw it open and kicked out the screen. It fell into a bush, thankfully without much noise.

Sam’s body complained, but she managed to slip out the window, avoiding the bush. Her feet landed in an inch of snow. It immediately soaked through Dr. Matthew’s faux fur lined slippers. Snowflakes tapped her cheeks and her eyelashes. With the reddish hue in the night sky, the flakes could have been mistaken for ash if not for their moisture. Somewhere behind the purple mottled storm clouds Sam was certain the moon and sun were still colliding.

Valerie wordlessly ran to the back of the parking lot, towards a gate in the fence.

Sam hesitated. What about Dr. Matthews? They couldn’t just leave her behind. Although, Sam had no idea how they were going to help her now without getting caught themselves. She didn’t even
know if the police had already gotten her, and if that was how they had known which door to knock down.

Danny appeared beside her. He pushed the small of her back until she broke into a run for the fence.

This wasn’t Amity Park.

Pieces of it were, and pieces of it weren’t. There were playgrounds where Sam knew no playgrounds existed and rows of abandoned storefronts with sale signs hanging in the windows. A sign advertised a dozen eggs for 33 cents. Stuck into the browned lawn of someone’s squat, modest mid-century home was a sign yelling, “PRAY FOR RAIN”, the painted letters washing away. They passed a dark green Chevy, whose truck bed of beets was getting a thin layer of white. The older, plainer, license plate told Sam it didn’t belong.

Whatever dimension she had stepped into had followed her back up that crooked staircase and spread. It was a town trapped between past and present. Amity and Amity Park; a double exposure on a negative.

There was no indication that anyone living was around. The barrenness felt profound. Like beyond Amity Park, the entire world may look and feel this just this desolate and lonely. It felt as if Sam’s insides finally matched the outsides of the world. While that didn’t lessen the crushing weight pressing in on her from all sides, it was somehow comforting.

Puffs of condensed air plumed out in front of Sam’s face as she ran. She could hear Valerie racing along next to her, although she paid her no mind. Inside, her thoughts were wild, firing in all directions. Even if she found the bodies, Masters could still cover it all back up. They needed to expose the information. Tell everyone. They could find a radio station or a TV station, but Masters could be waiting for her to do something like that. How can she get all the information out when she finds the bodies?

Unable to run any longer, Sam picked a driveway to stumble down and wound around the side of a house until she was hidden from the street behind a row of bushes. She clutched at her side, panting. Valerie followed, tucking close. Snow covered her now frozen hair. She was shivering uncontrollably, her elbows knocking against Sam’s sides. “What the fuck is going on?” she whispered, eyes huge and glassy with panic.

Danny came last. His eyes glowed in the dark like two floating orbs and he made a motion with his hand towards the ground, lips taut in concentration. Their footprints faded from the snow.

An illusion. Sam was certain they were still there. “How long will that last?” she whispered, teeth chattering.

Danny didn’t answer.

His blank expression broke her heart. “She’ll be ok. She’s really smart,” Sam whispered. She reached out and barely brushed her fingertips against the sleeve of his dark sweater.

“W-We have to get somewhere warm,” Valerie stammered, breath catching and fluttering.

Sam swiveled on her slippers and glanced up at the house they were crouched against. A string of white Christmas lights ran underneath the eave, illuminating a kitchen window. She raised an eyebrow and rapped her knuckles on the siding, pointing up at it.
The kitchen was dark. The house was silent. Pools of water collected at her feet.

It was a nice modern kitchen. Country style, with floral wallpaper. There was an island with pots and pans hanging off hooks directly above. The streetlight from outside shone yellow gleams off the handles. A dirty plate in the sink. A knife rack next to a pepper grinder. All in all, a kitchen of someone who loved cooking.

Sam almost felt bad for breaking in and dripping all over it. She plucked a knife from the rack and weighed it in her hands. The blade shone like oil in the dark.

Valerie began investigating cupboards. She made little disappointed noises after rummaging through a good portion of them, although Sam had no idea what she was searching for.

*Tick tick tick tick tick...*

Danny appeared in the doorway. His skin was glowing again from within. “No one home,” he reported. “Also, I found this.” He placed a flashlight on the counter.

Safe, for now. Her body sagged in relief.

Valerie snatched the flashlight, before brushing past them down the hall. The orb of light danced across the walls as she looked around.

Sam caught a slice of a photo. Shock rattled through her.

Through the gloom, Mr. Lancer smiled, his arm around a thin woman with curly red hair in a wedding dress. They had broken into her history teacher’s house. It was probably just her own desperation, but she could swear that Lancer was looking down at her in that photo like he was saying: *Ficciones! Mi casa es su casa.*

Feeling a little light-headed, she leaned her weight into the wall. Without warning, tears flooded her eyes, spilling down her cheeks.

Valerie strode back into the hall, flashlight in her mouth, arms full of something. She tipped a laundry basket and clothing splayed lifelessly across the floor.

Unbeknownst to Lancer, three teenagers raided his laundry and took up temporary residence in his living room.

Danny peeked between wooden blinds towards the front lawn. To his right, a Christmas tree sat, dark and demure, wooden ornaments hanging off its branches. “Sixteen hours left,” he announced.

“Yes, thank you. Can you *slow* down time as much as you seem to be speeding it up?” Valerie grumbled. She kicked her feet up onto the coffee table, patting a paisley hand towel she had snagged from the bathroom through her hair. Oversize sweatshirt sleeves were rolled five times. She rolled the towel hard across her temple, green eyes flicked over to Sam. “What are you doing?”

Sam’s fingertips tapped along a digital keyboard. Her hands had stopped shaking long enough to grip her phone.

Sam could practically *feel* the discomfiting glance Danny and Valerie shared behind her back. It
prickled through the air. Tapping the faintly glowing period key with a little more flair than necessary, she looked up. “So, back to the mansion,” she prompted.

“No,” Valerie shot. When Danny didn’t immediately jump in with something similar, she uncrossed her legs, swinging them down from where they were hanging over the arm of the chair, and pointed the towel between the two of them. A dry laugh fell out. “No way.”

Danny dropped the blinds and crossed his arms. “That reaction is exactly why it’s a good idea,” he said.

The towel dropped. “It’s a death trap,” Valerie pleaded, like she knew that she was two seconds away from being outvoted. Peering between them, she said, “Really?”

“Dying here, dying there...” Danny was muttering to himself. “What’s the big deal?”

“I can’t go back. Once was enough,” Valerie whispered.

Something in her tone made Sam pause. Last time she had heard that near-meltdown waver, Valerie had tried to punch her in the face. Valerie’s head had dropped and she was swaying slightly. “You won’t have to go back,” Sam promised.

Danny blinked in surprise. “No?”

There was three of them. Masters used his puppets to his advantage. Sam would have to do the same. Although this had been part of the basic sketch of a plan she’d come up with back at the hotel, she winced at having to actually say it aloud. “I go back alone,” she decided.

_That_ idea finally struck a nerve in Danny. He abandoned the window. “Sam...” he protested, “You don’t have to do this on your—”

“You’ll pretend to be me,” Sam interrupted, “You and Valerie will go back to the hotel. Get the car. Lure Ramón and her team away from the villa.”

Danny had gone still; a film reel of thoughts flickered behind his eyes.

“You mean a diversion?” Valerie asked, sounding a little more herself. “Ramón’s a puppet?”

Sam nodded. It was a strong possibility. The day Danny and her had broken into the police station, she had seen a cop car in the mansion’s driveway. Officer Gray had been at the station. There were only so many cops in a small town like Amity. “Besides. Even if she’s not, you’ll make enough noise to catch his attention,” she reasoned.

“Won’t he find it weird Danny’s not with us?” Valerie pointed out.

“No. He’d probably think I was invisible, and he’d have to get close to sniff out I’m not,” Danny spoke up. That myriad of thoughts had solidified into one— apprehension. “He knows I’d never leave Sam’s side. Especially not right now.”

Sam believed him. She was closer to solving this case than anyone who came before her. If Danny’s priorities had ever been in question, him leaving his sister behind had put them to rest. Keeping her alive was his first concern. Sam also knew if this was the Danny she had read about in Walker’s notes, he wouldn’t have even entertained this plan. He would have barrelled right back for his sister without care to consequences, but Danny had said it himself— he’d had to become a different person.
“Which is what makes this a great plan. When you go back there, you can’t go looking for Jazz,” Sam whispered. “I know you want to, but you know that if he’s got her, he’ll keep her alive. Killing your sister wouldn’t make for good leverage.”

“He probably thinks I’ll come for her no matter what,” Danny conceded. “And going for her would only prove I’m not really you.” He fell quiet, lost in thought, hand curled beneath his chin.

Valerie was staring down at her towel, tracing the pattern with her fingers.

Taking their silence as implicit—and on Danny’s end more like grudging—agreement on that part of the plan, Sam said, “While he’s chasing you two, I’ll go back to the bunker, alone. Follow the tunnel Skulker took the bodies.”

Valerie sat back in the armchair. Approval spread across her lips in the form of a smile.

“I don’t like it,” Danny muttered. He waved his hand back and forth like, *but you both already knew that.*

“That reaction is exactly why it’s a good idea,” Valerie quoted. She raised an eyebrow.

Looking a little annoyed at having his words thrown back at him, Danny sighed and ran both hands down his face. “Vlad’s brain works opposite of normal people. For all we know we’re playing into his hands,” he admitted through his fingers.

Sam felt her chest ache at the torment still lingering in there. Danny was right. They could be about to walk into another trap, but it was better than running, or doing nothing at all. Her breath caught in her throat as Danny ripped his hands away and studied her intensely. She could hear the questions in his combing gaze, asking her if she was really okay doing this, if he was making a mistake, if going against all his first instincts was the right choice.

She smiled. Ticking clicked back and forth between them.

The turbulence in his eyes calmed. Blue bled into violet, his body wobbled, and Sam found herself staring at a mirrored version of herself, shaved hair, Lancer’s coat, burns, bruises, and all.

The effect was vertiginous. There was something uncanny about seeing yourself, but not. She swallowed, eyeing him up and down for any inconsistencies, and tried not to let her skin inch away. It was creepily accurate. Down to the slight pigment discoloration in her damaged right eye. “How long will that last?”

In a voice that sounded a lot like her own, only without her drawling monotone, he said, “Two, maybe three hours.”

Sam straightened her phone between her hands, thumbs poised to over the ‘send’ button. “Let’s finish your story, Danny.”

As Sam drew closer to the mansion, less and less of modern day Amity Park existed. The Pine street she jogged down was lined with older one-story houses with flat roofs and vintage-new cars parked in driveways.

The mansion loomed above them all, dazzling in a fresh coat of white paint.

Borrowed boots two sizes too big crunched over broken glass as Sam passed through the front door.
Over one shoulder she balanced a shovel she had taken from Lancer’s.

The lights were still on. Glass still scattered across floor. From the kitchen, Sam could hear the metallic rattling shrill of an old phone over and over. She knew her hands should be shaking and she should be panicking, but a sense of calm had overtaken her.

She felt outside of herself. The fact that the house she was walking through was familiar, and yet totally foreign, didn’t help that feeling of… what had Jazz called it? Disassociation?

She could navigate this house’s layout blindfolded, and yet the wallpaper was a different color. There were tables where there should be mirrors. Chair where there should be coat racks.

Tiptoeing down the hallway, Sam spotted the phone. It was gold. Drilled into the wall right beside the entrance to the kitchen. The wallpaper around it was more detailed, and had embossing. Sam guessed by the outrageous display of wealth, this is what the mansion had looked like while Masters had owned it.

Comparing this to Lancer’s kitchen— which, while she had never been there until tonight, had felt innately familiar— Sam was finally able to pinpoint exactly what it was about this place that set her senses off.

It was a house that appeared to have built itself. It lacked hope or love. Despite the fact that it paraded beds and tables and fireplaces and sofas, it was still a house wearing a costume of a home. Not hers. It had never been her home. Her family had simply been tolerated to walk up and down it’s spines and stuff their things between it’s ribs.

It had her wondering… to what end was this house not a reflection, but an extension, of it’s owner’s perverted brain? Not alive; not dead. Like most things in Amity Park it was somehow stuck right in between.

Past the phone, all the way down the hall, standing absolutely still near the kitchen island, was a man. His back was to her. Sam recognized his hair and the tan color of his car coat. Her eyes flicked down and she froze.

His feet hovered one inch above the ground.

Dread filled her chest with ice. Slowly, as if he could hear her, Sam reached for the study door. The shovel’s wooden handle grew slick in her other hand. Something instinctual told her she did not want whatever was left of her father to notice her and she needed to hide, quick.

A noise came from inside the study, soft and muffled against the ringing. Someone sobbing on the other side of the door.

Sam’s hand froze, hovering an inch over the doorknob, torn.

Her father tilted his head and began to slowly rotate in place.

Sam inhaled sharply, whipping the study door open, spinning inside, and closing it as softly as possible. Not pausing to listen if he had heard her or not, she raised the shovel ready to strike and took in the room.

A woman was lying curled on her side in the middle the rug. Her thin shoulders shuddered with each cry and for a wild second Sam thought it might be Madeline Fenton. Then, she took in the pale blonde hair and the chemise robe.
“...Mom?” Her shovel lowered slightly.

The woman quieted. Her head swiveled drunkenly, eyes swollen from crying, hair mussed on one side. A wineglass lay next to her right hand, red spilling across the rug; the knife and blood that the ghost of her murdered mother no longer had. A strand of pearls rested delicately atop her collarbones. They glowed strange in the amber light pouring from outside.

“Are you going to make me leave?” Sam ventured cautiously.

Her mother hiccuped and laughed, head wobbling in a negative. “No point. Everything’s all out in the open now!” She flopped an arm out at the door, as if to say, see?

Sam realized this was as close to her Mom as she was going to get. Her throat tightened and the room suddenly got blurry. She ran the few steps between them. Ignoring the cold-wrong feeling ghosts always had, she pressed her face into her mother’s shoulder with a shuddering breath.

“My brave girl,” Pamela soothed. “It’s okay. It’s okay…” A hand stroked the top of her head like iced velvet.

Sam could feel the waves of cold gust down the back of her neck like air falling out of a freezer door. “I’m sorry,” she choked. Sorry that she had no time left to atone for all those years she spent pushing her mom away.

Her mother gripped her into a tighter hug, as if to convey she had never blamed her in the first place. Sam’s face pressed into her shoulder, her mother’s solidness growing softer, like a pillow of snow, until her form began to fade completely.

A thread of dead smell wafted off the ghost’s hair and hit Sam like a bucket of ice. She flinched. Even though she couldn’t outrightly hear it anymore— time was still ticking. Danny and Valerie had given her maybe three hours to find the bodies. As much as Sam wanted to stay in her mother’s embrace, she forced herself to let go.

She grabbed the fringe of the rug and ripped it away from the floor. Dust sprayed through the air and her mother ducked as if it would hit her, but it just fell right through. Using the pointed tip of the shovel, Sam pried open the floorboard and yanked the lever. The bookcase swung open. This time it was full of books and swung silently, as if silence was the whole point of it, and the hinges were well greased and used often.

The dead smell didn’t come this time. It’s absence was worse. It told the story of a bunker that had changed while she had been away.

Still sitting on the floor, now with part of the rug lying over her sprawled legs, her mother stared into the narrow passageway. Embers of recognition lit in her eyes and her body wavered in fear, like a thick vapor against a closing door.

“This will all be over soon,” Sam promised. With that goal fresh in her mind, she slung her shovel over her back and began her descent through the cramped little staircase.

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This time, the evil presence from before didn’t stick on her back. Masters wasn’t paying attention.

The lights were already on, making it easy to see the steps out in front of her. Behind her, the study winked out of view and the sound of the kitchen phone muffled until it faded completely.
A snapping sound took its place. It started loud and broke into multiple echoes as it galloped and bounced up the staircase. It was whatever Danny had heard that had alerted him to the secret room in the first place.

The Nasty Burger, Lucky Strike gas station, back to the mansion, and now the bunker... Sam was retracing his last steps. Which meant that at the end of this tunnel was the same thing that Danny had found all those years ago.

As she neared the end, she grasped the handle of her shovel, grip slick with sweat. Even though she didn’t feel the serial killer’s oppressive eye, she prepared for him to be in the bunker, cutting someone open on a surgical table. He wasn’t.

The room was brightly lit this time and very clean. The surgical bed had a crisp linen sheet tucked around it and an unused pillow. The two enormous lamps were switched off.

Under her boots, the ground was a waxed cement. Hardly any dust.

Another snap resounded, the lights flickered, and Sam pinpointed the source: a generator, built into the far wall. A blinking red light suggested it was malfunctioning in some way, although apparently not malfunctioning enough for Masters to replace it. It was no doubt powering the entire basement, from the surgical equipment, to the overhead lighting. The exhaust was being pumped out of the bunker via a silver tube, which snaked along the wall, and exited the bunker through a vent above the padlocked door.

Only it wasn’t padlocked. It was open.

Crossing the room, Sam grabbed the handle of it and glanced back. She couldn’t help the feeling that this whole thing was a set up. It reeked like the second before that dog jumped out of the bush. Too late to switch plans now.

Sam pulled back the metal bar lock. Expecting images of gory murder to await her on the other side, she couldn’t help the flutter in her chest as she yanked open the door. Behind it she found another room, smaller, like a storage closet. She could make out the butt of a wooden trolley, like one people used to haul tools on railways, and followed it down to the floor where two parallel silver tracks began and faded off into the dark.

Reaching around inside the door, she found a light, and switched it on.

A loud snap whipped through the room and for a second the light flickered in mayhem, dancing like lightning, before it grew steadily, flooding the closet.

The ceiling was barely above her head, and the metal exhaust pipe for the generator took up a lot of that space as it continued its meandering journey across the ceiling, down the opposite wall, and through a small opening. The same opening the tracks led out, and the same opening the wooden trolley that sat atop those tracks faced.

Sam couldn’t stop shivering. Even if Danny hadn’t already told her what this room was used for, it would have still elicited the same feeling of wrongness that was marching up and down her spine. It was just too small to be normal; just too sparse to be used for anything good.

To the right of the portal was another flip-switch, facing down. And, as Sam walked inside the tiny room, she realized the trolley was attached to a chain that suspended, taut, deep into the cavernous tunnel.

She knew what she had to do. Didn’t make it any better climbing in.
The trolley was just too short to fit an adult comfortably. She doubted any of the taller kids had laid flat along its bottom either. She had to curl her legs, tucking them up towards her chest and over to the side. Her shoulders pressed up against the top edge, and she had to crane her neck to keep her head ducked down inside. She fit the shovel in sideways and pinned to her chest, arms crossed. Not comfortable. And Danny, who was a good bit taller than her, had contorted himself here, pretending to be a corpse, for how long?

The thought made her breath hitch and she remembered that a dozen other bodies had pressed against the constraints of this thing. There was no stains, no discolorations, no scratches in the wood to say they had been there. Sam could still feel them.

Not wanting to think about it any longer, Sam reached out and hit the switch.

A snap hit her ear like a gunshot, ricocheting down the tunnel and down her spine. The pipe that was now mere inches from her face hissed. For a horrible second she thought the generator would explode. The trolley jolted backwards. The chain rattled, grew taught. She could feel the wheels grind like shifting muscles of person’s back, then the trolley crept backwards into black.
The Twist—!

The cart rolled at glacial speed. The chain slipped ever so often. It would go slack, then pull taut, with a rattle and a tug. The tunnel was pitch black. Even though she couldn’t see the walls, based off the intense earthy smell, Sam guessed the opening was just wide and just tall enough to house the trolley. She wouldn’t be surprised if the ceiling was hovering just an inch or two above her nose. In contrast, the echo of the rattles made the tunnel stretch infinitely. The result was somehow just as claustrophobic and it was endless. She reached the handle of her shovel out to confirm. She only had to point it a few inches up before it scraped across the ceiling.

Something small and weighty landed on her cheek. It moved, tiny legs scampering towards her neck. Sam flicked the bug off and shuddered, withdrawing her hands, weaving her arms through the crooks of her knees. Her forehead pressed against the wooden trolley siding and she closed her eyes.

Five months ago Sam would have told you she didn’t believe in anything anymore. Not demons or angels. Not the Devil, and least of all God. After the car accident, Sam found people who accepted random tragedy as a part of God’s plan personally insulting. It shelved responsibility. Responsibility to do what, exactly, Sam didn’t know.

Just when it felt like the trolley ride was never going to end, air began to grow lighter, fresher, crisper. The chain stopped and the trolley quietly rolled the last foot or so, before hitting a bumper with a hollow thud.

Still unable to see anything, Sam listened. The echo of the thud faded deep into the cavernous tunnel into silence. The air wasn’t pressing down on her face anymore. It wasn’t stale. She could tell she was closer to the surface.

Extracting her already sore body out of the cramped car was a task. There was a golf-ball size knot in her neck and a similar crick in her back. After she made it out of this, she was going to need a chiropractor… among other things.

She fished out her phone from her pocket and shone the light across the ground.

The floor was, unsurprisingly, cement. She felt along, hitting a wall. Also cement. She followed it and determined the room was about the same size as the one she had just come from. The one remarkable difference was it lacked a door. In its stead, there was a metal ladder.

Eager to get out, Sam hauled herself up it until the top of her head cracked off the ceiling. Wincing, she felt around above, palms making out a cold metal hatch that had a raised pattern, like stippled steel.

Using one palm she tried to push it open, but it barely budged. The sound of dirt rained down, pinging and rustling off the ladder’s steps, falling to the floor below. Sam pushed again, harder. The hatch shifted slightly— sideways, not up.

Sam sucked in a breath and stared. She could feel her eyes blowing wide as panic started to bubble up in her. Her grip around the ladder rung grew slick.

Why wasn’t it opening? Why wasn’t it opening? Would it ever open? Was it locked from the other side? Was it buried underneath so much dirt and forest that it was stuck fast? Was she going to be stuck here forever? Was she going to die—?

Focus.
Her tongue grazed her fattening lower lip. Panic wouldn’t get her very far. “You’re smart. Figure it out,” Sam reminded herself.

Back in that forest surrounding the Nasty Burger, back when she had promised Danny she would be the one to end Vladimir Masters, it had been coming from a place of fear and anger. She had said it, and she had meant it, but it had been a knee-jerk reaction. Somewhere along the way, somewhere in how he assaulted her that wild bravado had focused into icy determination.

With the hand not holding the shovel, Sam began to run her fingers around the outside edges of the metal. She hit a weird piece that jutted down, away from the ceiling, before hooking around the edge. Feeling around, she yanked and tugged, until she made out it was a latch without a padlock. Pulling at it, the latch gave way.

Sam tried the hatch again. Upon the first shove, the same resistance pushed back, which only made her shove harder in frustration until, with a ripping noise, the hatch released and light poured in. Glancing down, Sam could see steel rungs and just a small sliver of the wooden trolley. Dirt rained down into a dark abyss.

With the rather heavy hatch held above her head, Sam climbed the rest of the stairs, until it teetered on it’s hinges and fell. Snow and dirt sprayed, exploding across her coat.

She was in a small clearing in a forest. The nearest tree was about five feet away and, although the boughs of it blocked most of the flakes, there was still an inch of white covering patches in of soil. Big fat flakes swirled through the air before quietly reclining across branches. Between them, the sky was still a dark ambery gray. Slate clouds hid the eclipse from sight, but the electric fizzling through the air still filled her with the same amount of dread.

She hoisted herself up out of the hole.

Some snow tumbled to the ground, falling off a branch high above her head. Sam whipped her head up. A person with inky dark skin and a blurred face stared back, hanging crookedly up in the tree. As their eyes locked, they scampered away, ducking between branches. A rolling hiss blew through the forest, on it’s back the faint hush of excited whispering.

Sam shivered and pulled her shovel closer.

She had no idea where this section of the forest was in relation to the villa or the cabin. If she was to believe the tunnel had no twists or turns, the villa was at her back, but who knew if it had been dug in a straight line? She doubted it. The roots of some of these fir trees had to go deep, deep beneath the earth, making digging of any kind pretty much impossible without chopping them out of the way…

Sam smiled.

When she had summoned Danny in the basement he had shown up as if coming from a large body of water. She knew through Walker’s interviews that he had never learned how to swim. The cabin Danny had led her to had a fishing pole inside. It would have made no sense, had Danny himself not shown her the pond that had glittered nearby. The constant draughts that had plagued Amity Park must have dried it up completely. Even mother nature had a bad habit of trying to erase away this town’s past.

What had Tucker said? The fish? They’re always hungry? Had he been trying to tell her, even while possessed, where to look?
Even expertly trained dogs would have trouble sniffing through algae-infested pond water. And if it was anything like the ponds Sam had swam in as a kid, the sediment at the bottom was probably thick and muddy and just looking for something to swallow up whole.

Burying all the bodies in one place seemed too naive for a serial killer to do. But *he* hadn’t buried them. The task had been too beneath him. He had enlisted Skulker who, on top of being not the brightest, also had a small amount of repulsion in what they were doing. He moved the bodies always at night, always in the dark.

Skulker had likely wanted to rid himself of the bodies as quickly as possible; wash it from his memory, so he could go back to hunting deer. Maybe Masters had found out how improperly his accomplice had been disposing of corpses. Or maybe that same spark of morality that had spurred him to turn Danny’s head had grown enough to spur Skulker to try and walk away from the whole business. Either way, Skulker had lost his own head, in the end.

A rustle drew her attention. A dark shape ducked behind the trunk of a tree. In the brief moment she had seen it, she had seen a smaller being than the one in the tree. Younger, maybe a girl. Her dirtied, rotten fingers twitched around the sides of the tree, hiding, yet making sure it was seen. Like a kid playing hide and seek.

Sam let out a small breath. This could easily be another trick, but, unlike Danielle, this spirit’s playfulness felt genuine. She felt the same mischief she felt the night of the detour route. A detour that had taken her into the woods. These were the same spirits that had begged her to follow. Had they been inviting her to play this whole time?

Eyes narrowing, jaw setting, Sam followed.

The cabin was just as run down— and thankfully vacant— as the last time she had seen it, and the clearing peeking through the treeline beyond was just as empty. In over fifty years, no trees had wanted to call it home. No bushes, no ferns. And, even though there a one-inch blanket of snow had formed an unnaturally smooth bowl along the clearings’ gentle curve. It was one giant, untouched, blemish; a circular ‘X’ in the middle of town.

Her footsteps made no sound as she padded across snow into the middle of the clearing. The air condensing around her face hung, as if on the verge of something. This clearing had been waiting for her. Out of the corner of her eyes, the ring of trees fencing the clearing quivered.

Her heart began to sink at the size of the clearing. Where to begin shovelling? She wouldn’t have time to campus the entire area.

A dark rock stood out against the snow, resting atop of it, as if it had been placed there especially for her. Sam sucked in a quick breath and glanced around, then walked over. Snow melted the instant it fell on the rock. Some part of Sam recognized the rock as the one Danny had skipped, what felt like ages ago.

She raised and struck the tip of her shovel into the ground. The dirt beneath, while having a frozen shell on top, was crumbly and moist below from constant rain. As she threw the first chunk away, slick black mud spattered across snow.

Sam blocked out everything else as she shovelled quick, deep, efficient blows to the earth. Her breaths soon devolved into determined pants. Her fingers quickly began to ache with cold and exertion.
The blade of the shovel hit something hard and the handle jolted, biting through her hand. Sam winced and dropped it, turning her palm over to find blood welling up beneath torn skin.

Wiping the blood on her leg, Sam crouched and pushed away the dirt. Her fingers drew along a smooth, round, surface. A rock. Not a skull. A rock. Her disappointment lasted only half a second, before her gaze caught an unnaturally blue thing peeking out of the dirt.

Both awe and revulsion tore through her as she pulled and uncovered the remains of a blue plastic tarp. Rocks and a tarp. That only meant…

Getting up, Sam grabbed her shovel back and started digging again, working the dirt loose from around the sliver of tarp. The soil fell away in large chunks, which she flung over her shoulder. It was during one of these shovels that something lighter than a rock, but still just as solid, spiraled out of her toss and spun through the air.

Sam froze. Her grip went slack. She fell to her knees and frantically used her hands to grab another one of those strange pearly rocks, but they were stuck fast into the soil. Her shovel had merely cracked through one and had sent the pieces flying. Pieces… these were bones.

Using the sleeve of her coat, she wiped dirt away from a row of little bones, lined up in a smile, just like little molars. She had done it. Ringing filled her ears, awe and adrenaline flooded her limbs. She had found them. It was over.

A bark made her look up.

Somewhere, across town, Valerie Gray was probably running the police ragged, all with peace of mind in the form of five relics strapped to her back.

Sam didn’t have that luxury. All she had was a shovel and her bones.

Compared to the shotgun held in Skulker’s hands, her shovel might as well be a toothpick. Unwavering, the barrel pointed straight at her. Skulker stood in the clearing, maybe ten feet from her, flanked on either side by bare-teeth, quivering hounds.

Without a head, Sam had no idea what this ghost was thinking. He didn’t seem like an actual person. Did he have thoughts anymore? Was he just like Danny in that he could form opinions and emotions, but lacked a way to voice it?

Sam recognized Cujo based on the markings. At her accusatory glare, his ears swiveled as if batted and his growl turned into a whine.

“You don’t have to do this,” she whispered. “You don’t work for him anymore.”

Skulker made no motion to say he heard her. Maybe, without ears, he couldn’t.

It didn’t stop her from trying to reason with him. Sam slowly pulled herself into standing and raised her hands out in front of her, dropping the shovel like it was a knife. “You can still make this right,” she offered. “There’s still time.”

Cujo’s stance shifted uncertainly, before he licked trembling jowls and released a low, warning bark. The muscles in his flank vibrated with energy but, without Skulker’s permission, the dog remained obediently still.
Sam took a step forward. “Let me go,” she ordered. “Walk away.”

For a long moment nothing moved except the dizzying myriad of thick snow.

The shotgun wavered, then lowered, until it hung defeated at the ground. The dogs’ heads whipped up for instruction, before they sensed Skulker’s change of heart. They snuffled and went docile, sitting.

“What are you waiting for?” a voice complained from deep between the trees. “Like, kill her already.”

Paulina slipped between two trees. Her petite frame looked frail compared to their thick trunks, although her smile was anything but weak. She was in her cheerleading uniform, with Baxter’s oversized letterman jacket still over the top. Bare legs stuck into two white socks with equally white sneakers. She tilted her head left and her ponytail tilted right, like the shuffle of a piston. She blew out a large bubble between her lips, which popped. With a gnash of teeth, she captured the gum back in again.

The hounds kneeling at Skulker’s side had gone horribly still, as if Paulina was not only their true master, but was also a whole lot stricter.

Sam searched for any Danny in each of Paulina’s eyes, finding four pupils containing none of Danny’s warmth. They read Skulker’s inaction as rebellion, and hollowed.

“Leave,” Paulina scathed.

Skulker vanished. The dog to his left followed. However, right before Cujo could wink out, Paulina snapped, and the dog jolted to her side.

Sam’s mind was just now catching up to what was going on. It had spent the last thirty seconds flatlining. Her body felt light and tingly. Blinking her way out of shock, she reached down and grabbed the shovel. When she stood back up she found Paulina suddenly inches away from her. The girl ripped the handle out of her grasp and threw it far away. It cartwheeled to rest somewhere behind Paulina’s whipping ponytail.

The urge to strike had Sam’s fists curling before, with a flood of ice, she remembered that with one touch Paulina could spread the possession. She stumbled back.

Paulina seemed to read those thoughts. She grinned wickedly. With a pretend cat yowl, she clawed her fingers at her. “Careful.”

This was a girl that had been possessed multiple times. Pieces of three people were fused together into some ram-shack taxidermy soul. This wasn’t who Paulina was. Sam knew that. Still, she couldn’t help but hate her.

There was a sucking feeling to her right, then a whoosh of freezing cold air, which sent a pocket of snow explode outward. Ticking… Cigarettes… “He knows,” Danny warned, as his body materialized out of thin air beside her.

Sam didn’t bother replying. She had already figured that one out.

Out of the corner of her eye, Danny finally took in the scene and stiffened. “Paulina?” he ventured, voice toeing the line between caution and familiarity.
At Danny’s voice, Paulina’s face contorted. “You. You...” The murderous gaze faded from her eyes. “Get out,” she groaned weakly. Her arms crossed and then uncrossed, fidgeting up and down her sides, as if she couldn’t find anything comfortable and she wanted to escape her own body. “Danny,” she sobbed. “Please.”

The entreaty tugged at Sam’s heartstrings. Just as fast as she had hated Paulina, she pitied her. Sam’s hand reached out and sought Danny’s shoulder. He had to help her. Or, failing that, he had to put her out of her misery.

Danny took careful step forward. “You’ve told him no before, remember?” Danny reminded, voice low and gentle, “Sure I helped, but you made the choice. That was all you, Polly.”

Paulina’s teeth stopped chattering and she sucked in a breath. Her eyes stuck on Danny who had both hands up in front of him like Paulina was holding a gun. Inside, her four pupils pulled, stretched...

Cujo’s tail began to thump, riveted by Danny’s voice...

Danny stepped over the bones, as if to protect both them and Sam, just as Paulina’s eyes began to cloud with infatuation. Cujo’s tongue lolled out of his mouth, drool dropping in a thin line. Sam’s muscles went weak as the smell of victory christened the air.

“I can help you again,” Danny offered.

“Shut up you freak!” Paulina shrieked, taking an aggressive stamp at Danny.

Sam flinched. A barb of fear shot from her gut up her spine. Cujo’s tail froze mid-thump and a growl rumbled in his throat. Sam tore her gaze away to find her shovel. Too far away, and it required going near Paulina. No. Her best bet would be to make a run for it, try and get back to the road, now, while Paulina was distracted.

Getting the brunt of Paulina’s venom, Danny ducked his head into something of a bow. The act of humility caused Paulina’s anxiety to fizzle into confusion. “This isn’t you, Polls. You hate forests, remember?”

Paulina was listening again. Her eyes dulled, like she was trying to figure out where Danny had learned that fact about her. It was the first clear sign to Sam that Danny was, somehow, inside Paulina’s head.

Sam didn’t dare move, in case she broke the spell. She knew this approach to possession, presented as partnership, wasn’t how ghosts usually exerted control. In the archives Danny had, reluctantly, dove into Tucker. Back in the basement, for whatever brief amount of time, Sam remembered that horrible exploding feeling inside her skull, of Masters stapling his own thoughts on top of hers. It had felt like him against her.

Paulina heaved a wrenching sob and shook her head, guilt crumpling all her prettier features. Mascara poured down her cheeks and painted dark shadows in her sockets, until she looked she had been eaten away from the inside. “I’m sorry,” she cried, burrowing her face into her hands. The confession ripped out of her and echoed through the clearing.

Danny froze, like he didn’t know what, exactly, she was apologizing for.

Suddenly everything felt really wrong. Doubt tapped it’s fingertips along the base of Sam’s spine.

Danny’s outstretched hand, only a foot away from touching the crown of Paulina’s ducked head,
flipped, becoming one half of a handshake, fingers splaying for Paulina to weave hers into his. “I know you are,” he choked. Some of Paulina’s distress and guilt reflected in him. “I can forget it all. We can move on. All you have to do is let me.”

Paulina sucked in a long shaky breath behind her hands. Then, with one hand she wiped snot from her nose. With the other hand, she reached into the pocket of Baxter’s letterman jacket and pulled out a little toy rocket.

For a wild second, Sam hoped the summoning had also granted Danny immunity to relics, but no sooner had she hoped when he jerked like he had been shot in the chest. “No—!” he gasped. He lunged. His body evaporated before he could take a second step.

“I’m sorry, Daniel,” Paulina whispered. Her heartbroken expression clinked into a smirk. Eels whipped behind her eyes. “One of these days you will learn to forgive me.”
a/n: This story means so much to me. It documents my depression over the last four years. So much of myself and my own struggle is in here. I dedicate it to my husband and to all the amazing women who loved me before I could love at all. Thank you again to Cordria for unwavering support. Thank you so much to everyone who followed along and encouraged me. From the bottom of my heart, thank you. You have no idea how much of a difference a review can make in someone's life. Speaking from experience- I reread reviews in some of my darkest moments to remind myself of my strengths. A little humankindness grows and spreads and lasts forever. I am bittersweet that this story has reached it's end, but it feels right as my own path towards healing has taken a different route than Sam's.

I will be publishing this story along with artwork. Please message me on my tumblr if you are interested in buying a copy. My tumblr is leda-x.

Love, light, healing to all.

Shayne (Leda)

Sam could feel Danny vanish in more than just the air. Brightness and color seemed to flee with him. The snowflakes poured harder. The ticking faded and, besides the hammering of her heart in her ears, the awful, damning silence he left behind stretched. After a ringing moment, Cujo broke it with a lonesome whine.

Paulina pretended to fly the rocket above her shoulder and took a slow step forward. Her slivers of eyes carved the hole Sam had dug in the ground. There was no Paulina or Danny in them anymore. That heavy, evil presence was pressing on her again from all sides of the crater. “You’ve really made a mess of things,” Paulina noted.

Still recovering from the sharp turn of events, Sam took a few steps backwards and nearly tripped into the hole itself. She stumbled, and the near-fall shocked her system out of paralysis. “You’re going to kill me?” she asked in disbelief.

Paulina pressed the tip of the rocket to her smiling red lips, and nodded.

Making a split-second decision, Sam sprinted as hard as she could, straight at the cheerleader. Snow and dirt sprayed up. Ice cold air ballooned in her lungs. She dove for the rocket—

Paulina ducked out of the way. Her leg shot out, knocking Sam’s out from under her.

Air punched out of her lungs as Sam landed on her stomach. Snow shot up her nose and down her mouth.

Paulina stumbled away, still clutching the rocket, only now she had stopped antagonizing Sam with it and had it pressed tight to her chest. “You crazy bitch,” she hissed.

Sam quickly got her legs underneath her, curling into a crouch. Paulina was quick, but this wasn’t
over. Her eyes flicked from the rocket to Paulina’s face. All she had to do was get the relic away from Paulina without touching her and bury it out of sight. Get Danny back. Right now he was probably with Valerie across town, telling her what was going on and where Sam was. The pair was probably trying to figure out another way to get to her before the timer ran out.

The irony didn’t escape her. Here she was— needing to kill time, having no time left to kill. “Murder me yourself,” she goaded. “You owe me at least that much.”

Paulina let out a bark of a laugh. It was gravelly and male. Her eyes glowed red, like the ends of two cigarette butts as, in a strange voice, she said, “I never understood the concept. I mean, I know how to use it— how to get people to owe me—” her small frame shivered and grew taller, broader— “but I’ve never felt as if I owed anyone anything.”

Cujo let out a bark from right behind her where he sat, blocking off a good portion of escape routes.

Sam didn’t believe it. There was one person’s death that this monster felt remorse— a twisted, almost unrecognizable version, of remorse. “What about your godson? Don’t you owe him?”

Paulina’s shadow boiled in anger. “You thought you could trick me with a diversion?— she spat the word like an insult— “Like I don’t have you figured out already?”

A dark cloud boiled out of Paulina, smudging her out. The humanoid stain grew absurdly tall until it was towering over her.

Sam couldn’t help but freeze. Waves of evil thundered down on her head until her muscles shook and threatened to give out. Vivid flashes of hands grabbing at her, of a knee to her crotch, a cruel voice in her ear, painfully bubbled up in her mind. For just a split second it was fresh and real and fear gripped her. Her arms wrapped protectively around her heart.

“You thought you could outsmart me!?” Vladimir Masters bellowed.

The outburst was so ridiculous, she couldn’t help the weak laugh that blew out her mouth. Battling the heavy presence, Sam stood and raised her chin until she stared right into the killer’s dark fog. Fear faded away. She still knew something he didn’t...

A long, pale, disembodied face loomed down from the fog. Thin straight nose, thick eyebrows, and a twisted lip. Crow’s feet marred the edges of his eyes, cut not from smiling, but from smirking. Two empty red holes bore down, his face less than an inch away from hers. A pale hand whipped out and grabbed her wrist. Cold burst through, clogging her veins and twisting her muscles, ballooning behind her eyes.

Out of her control, her arms uncurled away from her organs. A terrible pain exploded in her chest. It was suddenly impossible to breathe.

Die, a deep voice ordered from inside her own head.

Her vision wobbled, stretched, and, with the feeling of a rubber band reaching its limit, split. She could see both his face and her own, rapidly bloodless, one. Sticking out of her chest was the end of Danny’s rocket. It didn’t seem real. No. It wasn’t actually there. It was just another trick. Which reminded her…

I tricked you.

The presence froze. An amused laugh rattled inside her head until it burst out of her lips, choking on something wet. “Did you, now?” she asked herself, voice dripping.
Sam nodded internally. *I've known where the bodies are.* She had known ever since witnessing Danny’s muddy corpse climb out of the basement floor. In that instant she had drawn the connection to the fishing pole in the cabin, Danny’s lack of swimming skills, the seemingly meaningless warning Tucker had given her about fish, and the illusion of a pond that had long since dried up. *I wrote it all down. It's over.*

“Paper can be destroyed,” she dismissed herself.

*Yes,* Sam agreed, as one half of her fractured vision began to blacken at the edges. *But good luck destroying the internet.*

Cujo’s outraged howl rattled through her, close now, almost on top of her.

The too-big presence inside her shrank, leaving a quiet space for doubt. *The internet?* a voice whispered back, nonplussed.

*You're done,* Sam thought.

Shock— not her own— ricocheted through her bones. Masters began darting around inside her head, kicking over things, rummaging. Like watching a film reel, her own memories ticked by in warp speed. Visions of her typing on her phone in Lancer’s living room... of attaching a picture she had taken of the blueprints to an email that explained exactly where she was about to embark... her thumb hitting send to thousands of her classmates, friends, and family. Knowledge of smartphones and how the internet actually worked rose up. Shock melted into understanding melted into anger, which spread through her body like a chill.

There was a sudden roaring noise as Masters fled her body.

Sam teetered, limbs suddenly free, vision becoming singular again. Her head felt a million pounds lighter, but her limbs felt weak and not actually hers. She could feel something still twitching around in her head, a piece of Masters left behind in his hasty retreat. Along with clarity came agony.

Her body crumpled. She fell flat on her back, looking up.

Seeing the expression on Master’s face, she laughed. The movement caused the freezing cold rocket to shift, the pressure of it inside her all wrong. “You afraid of me, Vlad?”

Looking stricken, the monster hovering above her winked out. The clearing went silent. Snow licked her cheeks and blotted her eyes. For a long moment her gaze drifted as she smiled. No doubt Masters was off somewhere trying to figure a way out. Maybe he would try and stop people from opening that message, and maybe with a few of them he would succeed, but it didn’t matter. No way he could stop everyone all at the same time. She had him. She won.

Her breath hitched as her lung caught fire. Blood filled her throat. For a horrible beat she choked, until she let her head fall to the side and coughed the clot out.

Cujo approached, gait slow and dreading.

The dirty feet of a dozen or so people clustered around. Whispers darted back and forth above her; kids squabbling over what to do. One boy knelt, peering down. His distorted face swirled into a friend; glasses framed distraught green eyes.

Everyone was here. Almost.

Her arm twitched, fingers dragging through dirt and snow, until, with the last of her strength, Sam
grasped the rocket in both of her hands and pulled.

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