



**A** VOICE STARTLES ME AWAKE. It's a female voice with a menacing tone, and it whispers into my ear.

And tells me that I should die.

I sit up in bed and click on my night-table lamp. It's 4:10 a.m. My bedroom door is closed. The window is locked. The curtains are drawn. And I'm alone.

*I'm alone.*

So, then, why can't I shake this feeling—this sensation that I'm being watched?

I draw up the covers and tell myself that the voice was part of a dream. I remember my dream distinctly. I dreamt that I was in my pottery studio, using a spatula to perfect a sculpture I've been working on: a figure skater with her arms crossed over her chest and her leg extended back. I began the sculpture just a few days ago, but I haven't touched it since.

I look down at my hands, noticing how I can almost feel a lingering sensation of clay against my fingertips.

That's how real the dream felt.

I take a deep breath and lie back down. But the voice comes at me again—in my ear, rushing over my skin, and sending chills straight down my back.

Slowly, I climb out of bed and cross the room, wondering if maybe there's someone else here. Standing in front of my closet door, I can feel my heart pound. I take another step and move to turn the knob.

At the same moment, a voice cries out: a high-pitched squeal that cuts right through my bones. I steel myself and look around the room.

Finally, I find the source: two eyes stare up at me from a pile of clothes on the floor. I'd recognize those eyes anywhere. Wide and green, they belong to my old baby doll, from when I was six.

She has twisty long blond hair like mine and a quarter-inch-long gash in her rubber cheek.

I haven't seen the doll in at least ten years.

Ten years since I lost her.

Ten years since my dad scoured every inch of the house looking for her and, when he couldn't find her, offered to buy me a new one.

My arms shaking, I pick up the doll, noticing the black X's drawn on her ears. I squeeze her belly and she cries out again, reminding me of a wounded bird.

I rack my brain, desperate for some sort of logical explanation, wondering if maybe this isn't my doll at all.

If maybe it's just a creepy replica. I mean, how can a doll that's been missing for ten years suddenly just reappear? But when I flip her over to check her back, I see that logic doesn't have a place here.

Because this doll is definitely mine.

The star is still there—the one I inked above the hem of her shorts when I became fascinated by the idea of all things astrological.

I pinch my forearm so hard the skin turns red. I'm definitely awake. My backpack is still slumped at the foot of my bed where I left it last night. The snapshot of Dad and me in front of the tree this past Christmas is still pasted up on my dresser mirror.

Aside from the doll, everything appears as it should.

So, then, how is this happening?

In one quick motion, I whisk my closet door open and pull the cord that clicks on the light. My clothes look normal, my shoes are all there, my last year's Halloween costume (a giant doughnut, oozing with creamy filling—a lame attempt to rebel against my mother's vegan ways) is hanging on a back hook, just as it should be.

Meanwhile the voice continues. It whispers above my head, behind my neck, and into the inner recesses of my ear. And tells me that I'm worthless as a human being.

I open my bedroom door and start down the hallway, to go and find my parents. But with each step, the voice gets deeper, angrier, more menacing. It tells me how ugly I look, how talentless I am, and how I couldn't be more pathetic.

“You’re just one big, fat joke,” the voice hisses. The words echo inside my brain.

I cover my ears, but still the insults keep coming. And suddenly I’m six years old again with my doll clenched against my chest and a throbbing sensation at the back of my head.

I look toward my parents’ closed bedroom door, feeling my stomach churn. I reach out to open their door, but I can’t seem to find it now. There’s a swirl of colors behind my eyes, making me dizzy. I take another step, holding the wall to steady myself; the floor feels like it’s tilting beneath my feet.

On hands and knees now, I close my eyes to ease the ache in my head.

“Just do it,” the voice whispers. It’s followed by more voices, of different people. All trapped inside my head. The voices talk over one another and mingle together, producing one clear-cut message: that I’m a waste of a life. Finally, I find the knob and pull the door open, but my palms brush against a wad of fabric, and I realize that I haven’t found my parents’ bedroom after all.

It’s the hallway closet. A flannel sheet tumbles onto my face.

Instead of turning away, I crawl inside, and remain crouched on the floor, praying for the voices to stop.

But they only seem to get louder.

I rock back and forth, trying to remain in control. I smother my ears with the sheet. Press my forehead against my knees. Pound my heels into the floor, bracing

myself for whatever's coming next.

Meanwhile, there's a drilling sensation inside my head; it pushes through the bones of my skull and makes me feel like I'm going crazy.

"Please," I whisper. More tears sting my eyes. I shake my head, wondering if maybe I'm already dead, if maybe the voices are part of hell.

Finally, after what feels like forever, the words in my head start to change. A voice tells me that I'm not alone.

"I'm right here with you," the voice says in a tone that's soft and serene.

An icy sensation encircles my forearm and stops me from rocking. I open my eyes and pull the sheet from my face, and am confused by what I see.

The hallway light is on now. A stark white hand is wrapped around my wrist. It takes me a second to realize that the hand isn't my own. The fingers are soiled with a dark red color.

Aunt Alexia is crouching down in front of me. Her green eyes look darker than usual, the pupils dilated, and the irises filled with broken blood vessels. Her pale blond hair hangs down at the sides of her face, almost like a halo.

"Am I dead?" I ask, rubbing at my temples, wondering if the red on her hands is from a gash in my head.

"Shhh," she says, silencing the other voices completely.

"Am I dead?" I repeat. My throat feels like it's bleeding, too.

She shakes her head. A smear of red lingers on my forearm. I see now that it's paint. "Come with me," she whispers.

I blink a couple of times to make sure she's really here—that she's not some apparition straight out of my dream. Dressed in a paint-spattered T-shirt and a pair of torn jeans, Aunt Alexia leads me out of the closet and back into my room. She helps me into bed, taking care to tuck my doll in beside me. And then she starts humming a whimsical tune—something vaguely familiar, from childhood, maybe. Her lips are the color of dying red roses.

I pinch myself yet again to make sure I'm not dreaming. The time on my clock reads 4:43.

“Has it really only been a half hour?” I ask, thinking aloud.

Aunt Alexia doesn't answer. Instead she continues to hum to me. Her voice reminds me of flowing water, somehow easing me to sleep.

Dear Jill,

I'll bet you were flattered to learn that I'd had my eye on you long before I first stepped into the coffee shop where you worked. I'd sit in the parking lot during your shifts and watch you through the glass. Some days I'd park just down the street from your house. Other days, I'd watch you walk home from school.

When I finally did show my face, I noticed that you liked to watch me too. I'd see you checking me out as I pretended to do homework at one of the back tables of the coffee shop. One time I spotted you applying a fresh coat of lip gloss when you thought I wasn't looking. I'd never seen you wear any before, so I assumed it was to impress me.

For months your hair was always the same—in a long dark braid that went down your back—but after I'd started coming around, you wore it down and loose. Am I correct in thinking that wasn't a coincidence?

It was a while before we said anything more than coffee talk—a large mocha latte one day, a double-shot espresso the next—but I knew a lot about you. That you were sixteen and had never been kissed (cliché, but true). Are you wondering how I knew that? Or is it possible that you already know?

You remember, don't you? That time, in your room, when your father called you to the kitchen? When you left your diary out

on your bed? When your balcony door was left partially open? I fantasized that you'd left the diary there on purpose. That you knew I was lingering right outside. That you wanted me to read it.

Did you miss not having your diary for those days that I kept it? Or maybe you'd fantasized about me reading it too?

I also knew that you used to skate (I'd seen the trophies in your room). And that aside from the spray of freckles across your face, you couldn't have been more different from the rest of your family—especially your mother: the one who got away.

I'd never let you get away.

The first time I saw you was one day, right after your school had let out. I'd been sitting in my car, waiting for the final bell to ring, when you came stumbling up the sidewalk with a giant backpack over your shoulders. I watched you in my rearview mirror, noticing the defeated look in your eyes. Like a wounded dog, resigned to death.

It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

You were already dressed in your coffee shop attire: black pants, white blouse, and a long bib apron to cover it all. There were groups of kids walking in front of and behind you. One of them had shouted something out—something about the fact that you'd chosen to wear your work uniform before you'd even punched the clock. But you just kept moving

forward, sort of hunched over and looking down at your feet, failing to acknowledge that someone was making fun of you.

That's how I knew that people probably didn't understand you the way I would. And that's when I decided to make my move.

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Dear Jack:

I remember the first time I saw you. It was just after I'd gotten trained to work the front counter. You were sitting at a table at the back of the coffee shop, taking sips of the mocha latte I had made for you, with extra whipped cream and a smiley-face drizzle of chocolate syrup (I wonder if you noticed), and trying to do your homework.

I thought it was kind of peculiar that someone who was studying didn't mind being wedged in between a table of mothers with their food-throwing kids and a quarreling couple on the brink of breaking up.

But there you were in my direct line of vision, with sandy-brown hair and deep blue eyes, with dark-washed jeans and a sun-faded sweatshirt.

Beautiful.

Which is why I never questioned anything.

You were older than me, definitely in college. I knew because you made reference to a class you were taking: "I need the fuel to pull an all-nighter. I have a huge exam tomorrow." You gestured to your book entitled Romantics in Literature. It was exciting to imagine you reading love stories at night.

I wondered what your name was, and if you'd ever go out with someone still in high school. But

part of the beauty of it was the fact that I didn't know these things.

And that you didn't know me.

You had no idea who I was, or what the kids at school said about me behind my back.

or straight to my face.

I remember the day we made physical contact—when I handed you your coffee and your finger brushed against mine, but in a totally obvious way. You gazed into my eyes, causing my pulse to race.

"Sorry," you said, with a smile that didn't show any hint of remorse. "What's your name?"

I opened my mouth to tell you, half excited (the other half shocked) that someone like you would ever want to talk to someone like me, let alone ask my name.

"on second thought, don't tell me," you said with a grin. "It might be more interesting if we keep this game going for just a little while longer."

"This game?" I asked. My face was on fire.

You winked and told me that it was my turn. "I've already made my move. Now it's all you. As soon as you're ready, you know where I'll be." You motioned to your usual table at the back of the shop. And that's where you sat for the next several months straight.

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