

## Chapter 1

Sam stared out the window. She gazed past her own reflection, past the giant maple that flamed orange and yellow in the late-day sun. Her eyes moved past the almost deserted parking lot and up the steep slope of Tower Hill Cemetery. They continued their ascent until coming to rest upon the top of the hill, where yellow-gray headstones juttied up, a misshapen grin encircling the red brick giant that penetrated up into the darkening sky.

“Sam,” Dr. Denny spoke from behind her.

“Yes,” she responded without moving from her spot in front of the window, the customary post she took up at the beginning of their sessions.

“What are you thinking about?”

She shrugged. “Not sure. Nothing really.”

The wind kicked up and the branches of the maple reached out to her, tapping and scratching against the glass. A whirlwind of leaves rose around the headstones, giving them the appearance of motion. They danced about the tower, a Sabbath dance in honor of their master, an offering of the souls carved into their stone bodies. Sam let out a long sigh, her breath fogging the glass and blotting out the scene.

“Why don’t you come away from the window and have a seat,” the doctor coaxed.

“Okay.” She turned toward the mahogany desk. Behind its great expanse sat a fortyish-looking man, his short, wavy blonde hair framing a tanned face, his blue eyes sparkling even in the dim light of the desk lamp. She curled up on the oversized armchair across from the desk and wrapped herself in the wool throw blanket that had been draped over the back. A chill hung in the air of the drafty, high-ceilinged room. But despite the cold, she felt safe and warm, secure within the sphere of the desk lamp’s protective light.

Dr. Denny smiled at her. He always smiled. Not the same smile, but myriad variations on a smile. At the moment, he was exhibiting his patient, *take-your-time* smile. From anyone else, Sam would have found his perpetual pleasantness insincere—or at least incredibly annoying. But in the short time she’d been his patient, she had concluded he was genuine. Strange, no doubt, but genuine. And she couldn’t help but like him.

“Have a peppermint,” he said, sliding a candy dish across the desk toward her and

snatching one for himself.

Sam rolled her eyes at the ritual. “Today it’s peppermint,” she said as she grabbed one of the shiny pink and white sweets and popped it into her mouth.

He nodded. “I felt like Christmas today. Peppermint always transports me to Christmastime.” He examined the candy, gave it a sniff, smiled with childlike glee, and popped it into his mouth, cheeking it so he could continue talking. “Candy canes, red and green and gold wrapping paper, twinkling lights. I think I’m seven years old. My mum has just finished baking cookies—gingerbread. And my dad is snoring in his recliner by the tree.” His eyes gleamed at the memory, and for a moment, Sam almost believed he’d transported himself back in time. She observed his happy reverie until he came back to the present.

He let out a contented sigh and refocused his eyes on her. “So, what about you? Where does peppermint take you?”

Sam shrugged, her usual way of answering his questions, and crunched on the hard candy until it was gone.

“Try,” he said. “Close your eyes and use your imagination.”

She did what he asked, squeezing her eyes shut as if in deep thought.

“Good. Now, what time and place does peppermint take you to?”

“Hmm. I’m eight years old. My mouth is numb. The dentist is drilling into my tooth to fill the cavity I got from eating too much candy.”

“Okay.” The doctor appeared somewhat disappointed, but despite her negativity and lack of imagination, his perpetual enthusiasm was not diminished. “So, my friend, how’d you sleep last night?”

Sam winced and wriggled deeper into the chair cushions, attempting to get as far from the question as she could.

“Not good?”

She shook her head.

“Hmm,” was the doctor’s only response.

The wind howled outside the window, its view now a mirror of the room against the darkness. The ancient radiator, a giant, twisted monster along the wall, pinged and hissed, its warm, dusty breath mixing with the sweet scent of peppermint.

“Why Christmas?” Sam asked, desperate to leave behind the topic of sleep. “Why not

Halloween? Or even Thanksgiving? I mean, have you been outside today? For Christ's sake, it's a classic New England fall day out there!" She thrust her hand toward the darkened window, her movement abrupt and agitated.

Dr. Denny repositioned his candy to the other cheek and replied, "No reason. I just felt like Christmas when I woke up."

That didn't surprise her. At their last session, he felt like summer and handed her a grape popsicle when she walked through the door, despite the chill of the late October day. He had a cooler full of them. Just grape. He didn't *feel* like any other flavor. Sam accepted the treat, shivering as she ate it, the temperature outside having dropped below forty degrees.

No, Dr. Denny's oddities didn't surprise her anymore.

"What do *you* feel like today?" he asked, folding his hands on the desk and leaning more into the light.

Sam's eyes fell on the wrist brace poking out from his left sleeve. *How had he injured himself*, she wondered. *Did he play sports?* He appeared athletic and in good physical shape. *Very good*. She wouldn't bother asking him though. He never offered details about his current life. Only snippets of his past that came with his little sensory trips through time and space. His mum, his dad, his favorite boyhood things.

"What do I feel like today?" she repeated his question. She stared straight into his expectant eyes. He was very handsome. Tall and fit and all-around good-looking. A little old for her, but not so old that he couldn't feature in one of her harmless romantic fantasies. Yes, she would probably have a massive crush on him if she wasn't so damn tired and he wasn't . . . well . . . such a freak.

He waited for her response, a glimmer of anticipation in his eyes.

"I feel like shit," she said. "What flavor is that?"

Dr. Denny blinked and sat silent for a moment. Then, with an amused tilt of his head, he broke into one of his smiles. Rolling back his chair to stand, he slapped his desk, laughed, and pointed at her. "Samantha," he said, "you are a clever one. Even with no sleep. How long has it been?"

"This time?" She hesitated before answering, her stomach tightening and the panic rising in her chest. "About ten days," she said, her voice almost a whisper.

"Ten days?" he repeated. "Is that all? Oh, you've gone longer than that before." He

turned away from her and searched for something along the wall of shelves behind his desk. “Read any good books lately?”

“What?” she asked, confused by the sudden shift in topic.

He glanced over his shoulder with a mischievous grin. “Have I got an amazing book for you. Just what the doctor ordered.”

She groaned at his bad joke. “No, really, Dr. Denny. I can’t read a book right now.” The thought of looking at a page full of words made her temples throb and her bloodshot eyes sting.

He seemed to ignore her as he searched up and down the rows. “Now, where did you get to?” he mumbled.

“Maybe . . . maybe it’s time to give medication another try,” she suggested, her immediate need for sleep overpowering her resolve to avoid being drugged once again.

“Where did I put it?” He pulled a book from the top shelf. “*Eat, Pray, Love*? I keep forgetting to return this to Dr. Philbin.”

“I don’t think I can keep going through this.” She tried to keep the quiver out of her voice. She didn’t like to show too much emotion. It made her feel weak, and all the other doctors seemed to prey on that weakness. Especially Dr. Dilby. Her face burned at the thought of that pompous, condescending man. He’d given her so many medications, a rainbow of pills, the side effects from which she was only now recovering. But she had to sleep. Nothing else seemed to matter anymore. “Maybe we can try another benzo?”

“Aha! There you are.” He bent down and pulled a dusty, leather-bound book from the bottom shelf. With a triumphant smile, he held it out to her.

“Are you even listening to me!” she cried.

“Yes. No benzos. No meds. No more whining. Now, please take this book. Quick, it’s heavy.”

Ripping the blanket off, she stood and snatched the book from him, unprepared for the object’s weight. She gripped it tightly with both hands and glared at the doctor. “This won’t help me! You shrinks never listen,” she snapped and plopped back into the chair.

The doctor took his seat and chuckled. “It’s been a while since anyone called me a shrink. Very retro. Now open it,” he said gleefully as if he had just given her a present.

She set the book down on her lap. It seemed ancient, the leather cracked and musty smelling. There was no title, no writing, no markings of any kind on the covers or the

spine. She looked up at the doctor, who waited expectantly. “Fine,” she huffed, opened the book to the flyleaf, where she found a handwritten inscription, and read it out loud. “This is the Diary of Alfred D. Cummings, Master Builder and Architect, Waylingbrooke, New Hampshire, twenty-third of September, eighteen eighty-seven.” She frowned. “It’s just an old diary.”

Dr. Denny nodded his head enthusiastically.

Flipping through the pages, Sam found that the entire book was in the same old-fashioned longhand as the inscription.

“Why would I want to read this?”

“Because . . .” the doctor stood up and, keeping his eyes on her, crossed the office toward the window. “Mr. Alfred D. Cummings, Master Builder and Architect, was the guy who designed and built *that* tower.” He pointed out into the darkness in the direction of Tower Hill, the outline of the imposing structure just barely visible in the distance. His eyes seemed to radiate their own light, and Sam half expected him to giggle.

Frowning at the book in her lap, she repeated, still confused, “Okay . . . but why would I want to read it?”

He stepped toward her quickly. “Because Mr. Alfred D. Cummings’ tower is no ordinary tower.” Taking the book from her and placing it on the desk, he flipped through the pages until he found the passage he wanted. “Thirty-first of October,” he read. “My dearest Virginia, I must confess that I have resolved to put an end to this dreadful phantasmagoria. I can no longer deny the presence of a force that beckons me, nay, compels me to complete this tower with an inhuman rapidity; I cannot sleep, I cannot eat, I cannot think of anything but the completion of this brick-and-mortar abomination. Indeed, I find myself utterly consumed by its bewitchment, unable to break free from its unearthly grasp. It has ensnared me in its diabolical clutches and demands the very lifeblood from my veins.” The doctor stopped reading and eagerly awaited Sam’s response.

She rose from the chair and walked to the window. Icicles pricked at her spine and her cheeks burned red hot. No longer able to see past her reflection, she stared at the distorted face of her twin, who was evidently quite angry. “Are you CRAZY!” she shouted, turning on the overgrown child in whom she had put her last hopes.

Dr. Denny closed the diary and sat on the edge of his desk, apparently aware that a loud, lengthy rant had just begun.

“I can’t sleep! And I have night terrors when I do! Why would I want to read that?” She pointed accusingly at the diary. “How could you possibly . . . I mean . . . I thought you were supposed to be helping me, not driving me more insane!” She paced in front of him. “I might as well check myself back into the asylum and let them drug me into oblivion. At least then,” she jabbed a finger against her head, “my brain could get a rest from the constant thinking about sleep or not sleeping or . . .” Her voice trailed off as she dropped back into the chair and slumped forward.

The doctor remained silent.

The wind shrieked against the window and the radiator hissed.

“I thought you were going to help,” she murmured.

He held out the book to her once again. “Trust me.”

She wasn’t sure why—whether it was just her desperate need to trust *someone* or a genuine faith in the man—but for some reason, she did.

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Sam trudged down the steps of the Old Meeting Hall building with the diary of Alfred D. Cummings tucked under her arm. The wind thrashed the trees that lined the street and charged her already agitated nerves with a blast of chilling cold. A torrent of fallen leaves skittered across the sidewalk, accumulating in a mound at the bottom of the steps where Sam paused to zip her jacket up to her chin. She glanced back at the renovated, two-centuries-old building, wondering if Alfred Cummings had ever been inside.

Most of the building’s narrow windows were dark, but a solitary light shone from Dr. Denny’s office on the second floor. She pictured the doctor sitting at his desk, writing up the notes for their session: *Samantha Perez, 19, pathological whiner*. Her face flushed with embarrassment at her childish outburst. It wasn’t the first, of course, but each time it happened, she wanted to kick herself for behaving so in front of him.

The bell from St. Michael’s tolled the hour, and Sam set off on the short walk home, sticking to the diffused glow of the street lamps that hung from poles every twenty or so

feet. She looked up at the quaint reproductions made to resemble the old gas lamps from the turn of the century. “Damn historical society,” she grumbled. In her present agitated state, she would have preferred the former fluorescent lights that lit up the sky like a night game at a football stadium. Then there would be none of the shadows in which the monsters of her imagination now lurked.

She plunged ahead into the path of murky light and shadow, moving like a machine, her arms held rigidly at her sides, her strides even and rhythmic. The streets were deserted. All the businesses closed shop at five sharp, leaving the heart of the town empty and quiet. The sound of the church bell rang out through the lonely night, calling people into a community of prayer, a reminder that they were not alone. But for Sam, each echoing toll was a death knell, announcing the end of day and the beginning of a long, sleepless night.

The diary dug into her ribs, but she couldn’t stop to adjust it. She had to keep moving, sure that even the slightest hesitation would invite attention from whatever lingered in the shadows. The bell struck its sixth and final toll, and Sam’s nerves lurched into overdrive. She rushed forward, well aware that even in the warmth and safety of her childhood home, no relief was waiting for her. No comfort. No sleep. Yet still, she raced homeward, away from the anxiety and fear, attempting to escape the inescapable—the torment of her sleep-deprived mind.

She turned a corner and caught her breath. Halfway down the deserted road, a streetlight was out. Her determined pace slowed, and she stared wide-eyed into the dark chasm before her. Each step she took was now accented by a sharp surge of fear, her heart pounding in her chest as the silence pressed in around her.

Just yards from the gap in the lights, she came to a stop. She stared intently, unwilling to blink lest something in the shadow might take that instant of opportunity to make its move. The cold air stung at her eyes and tears rolled down her cheeks. The darkness wasn’t opaque. She could still see through it to the light on the other side. And the more she scrutinized its murkiness, the more she was sure there was something inside it. Yes, something was there, churning up the emptiness, skulking about, and waiting for her. She took a step back. Maybe she could find another way home. Her mind raced through the possibilities. She took another step back. But the only feasible route would send her by the entrance to Tower Hill Cemetery. She took a step forward.

Maybe if she hurried, held her breath, kept her eyes focused on the light, she could slip by—

*It* moved—a mass of amorphous black that undulated and roiled and slunk toward her from the shadows. Her mind ceased to analyze possible routes home. Instead, it shrieked for her to run, and she obeyed, sprinting back toward the center of town. She rounded the corner in a wide arc, nearly crashing into one of the street poles, hoping to see the light in Dr. Denny's office. But as she approached the Old Meeting Hall building, her heart sank. Except for a dim light in the lobby, the front of the building was completely dark.

*Maybe he's in the parking lot?* she prayed, stopping in front of the building and scanning the lot across the street. But it, too, was empty. Dejected, terrified, and unsure of where to turn next, Sam's eyes were drawn from the parking lot up to the top of the hill. The tower glared down upon her, and the words from Alfred D. Cummings' diary boomed in her head. *"I cannot sleep, I cannot eat, I cannot think of anything but the completion of this brick-and-mortar abomination."*

Mesmerized by its awfulness, its power to dominate the night sky, she stumbled toward it. And it seemed to grow before her, pushing itself upward and outward until it loomed overhead, crushing her into the ground, pushing her under the earth, a live burial, an eternity without air or light or warmth. She suppressed the primordial scream that rose from deep inside her. Her knees buckled, and as she crumbled to the street, the diary tumbled out in front of her, its pages flapping in the wind, shrieking up at their master.

"Samantha?"

The sound of her name was all it took for her strangled cry to be loosened upon the night, a throat-shredding wail of terror that echoed through the empty street.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" exclaimed the old man. "What is the matter?"

Sam looked up at the frightened priest, who shook with the aftershock of her scream. She glanced back up at the tower. Somehow, it had shrunk to its normal size and receded into the darkness upon its hill. The diary had settled down, its pages fluttering gently in the cold night breeze. She snatched it up and let Father Owen help her to her feet. As the elderly priest bent forward, a large gold crucifix dangled from around his neck, and Sam involuntarily averted her eyes.



“I . . . I guess I just got spooked.”

He glanced around the deserted street and up at the cemetery and tower. With a nervous laugh, he said, “I guess I can’t blame you. It’s one of those spooky nights when one wishes to be in the company of other people, preferably somewhere well-lit.” He raised his bushy eyebrows to emphasize the point and offered her his arm. “Why don’t I walk you home?”

She took his arm and nodded with relief. They stepped onto the sidewalk, and she tucked the diary close against her once again. If only he could come home with her, sit up all night keeping watch, and never leave her side. Then she might find the relief she so desperately sought. But she doubted Father Owen would be up for such a job.

He led her back in the direction from which she had just come.

“Can we take the long way?” she implored as she tugged him back.

“The long way?”

“By . . . by the cemetery,” she stuttered, now willing to endure the unpleasantness of that route.

“That’s three times the distance!” Father Owen protested in a high-pitched voice.

“Please,” Sam pleaded, her eyes darting past him toward the shadowy presence she feared still approached, almost certain she could hear the dull echo of footfalls moving toward them from inside the darkness.

“Well, okay,” he agreed, somewhat displeased, yet let her lead him on the longer route.

Trying to walk at the old priest’s excruciatingly slow pace, Sam caught him eyeing her. It seemed as if he wanted to say something but wasn’t sure if it would be okay.

“Is there something you want to ask me, Father?” She was somewhat surprised by his reticence. Being the family’s pastor since before her birth, he probably knew more about her than she knew about herself. He’d baptized her, given her first communion, confirmed her, and would most certainly officiate if she ever got married. He was there through both of her parents’ illnesses—and deaths. And she had vague recollections of him praying over her when she lay in a drug-induced stupor in the hospital. Not last rites, she thought as they walked along. No, the sacrament was really called the Anointing of the Sick. Not as hopeless-sounding a phrase.

Her memory flashed back to the worried priest leaning over her at the hospital, his

large gold cross dangling from his neck and glinting in the cold white light of the observation ward, the disturbing sounds of her fellow inmates rambling and groaning and giggling from all around. “May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up,” Father Owen had blessed her as he anointed her forehead with Holy Oil. The echoes of those words sent a wave of guilt through her as she waited for him to ask his question.

He paused their walk, cleared his throat, and, with a tinge of anxiety in his voice, asked, “Have you heard anything more about the investigation?”

Sam’s chest tightened at the mention of the investigation, but she tried to maintain a neutral expression. She shook her head. “No. I think that’s all over now. After the coroner’s report, there wasn’t much else for them to investigate. And Detective Foret has stopped contacting me.”

Anger distorted the priest’s usual calm demeanor. “That man! He should never have involved the coroner. Insufferable, sacrilegious bast—”

“He was just doing his job,” Sam interposed gently, trying to allay Father Owen’s protective indignation. “With both of them dying so close together, he had to do his job, Father.” Her heart ached at the memory of her parents’ illnesses, the long-suffering, and the inevitable outcome. But she didn’t blame the policeman’s suspicions. How could she after—

“To accuse you of such unspeakable acts!”

“He was just doing his job,” she repeated.

But Father Owen continued unabated, “I told him you were incapable of such a horrible sin. It’s against all the tenets of our Faith. And even suggesting that your parents, God bless them, would ask their child to do such a thing! But that heartless, selfish man kept pushing and pushing!” He had to stop for a moment, the force of his angry outburst leaving him winded.

“Father, it’s over now. Please don’t worry anymore.”

“But—”

Sam placed a hand on the priest’s hunched shoulder.

His eyes widened and his face softened as he realized he had lost himself in his own resentment for the policeman. He patted Sam’s reassuring hand. “You’re right. The investigation is over now,” he said, a hint of uncertainty still lingering in his voice.

She retook his arm and they walked on. “Besides,” she said with a half-hearted attempt to lighten the mood, “I *am* the sole heiress to their entire estate. That automatically makes me a suspect, doesn’t it?”

Father Owen looked up to the heavens wryly. “Oh, yes. A house in ill repair and a mountain of medical bills.”

Bittersweet sadness tugged at Sam’s heart. “Well, at least I still have the house. Let’s hope I can keep it.”

A flicker of concern crossed his face. “Any luck finding work? I could put in a word with some people I know?”

Sam shook her head. “No, no. I’ve got applications in at a bunch of places. I’m just waiting to hear back.” But that was a lie. She hadn’t been trying to find work. And she was far too embarrassed to tell him just how completely dysfunctional she had become.

As if reading her thoughts, he asked, “So you’re doing better now, aren’t you? The new doctor is working out?”

“Dr. Denny is a little . . . well . . . different. But I like him.”

“Yes, I’ve heard he’s a bit unorthodox, but if he is helping you . . .” He left the thought unfinished and patted her arm. “Your mother would be very proud of the progress you’ve made. I’m sure of it.”

Sam sniffed. “Yeah, Mom would be so happy her daughter escaped the nuthouse.”

“Now, Samantha,” Father Owen said sternly, “you shouldn’t think of it that way. It was a brief hospital stay, and you worked hard to get well enough to be discharged. Anyone put under the kind of pressure—well, a young girl shouldn’t have to bear so much responsibility all alone. Two sick parents, school, a job, and that damned investigation!” Sam could see him winding up for another tirade against Detective Foret, but he caught himself and cleared his throat. “You did a remarkable thing taking care of them the way you did. It’s no wonder you got sick afterward.” He ended his speech with a self-affirming huff.

They turned off Hideaway Lane, and Sam was relieved to see cars and people and fluorescent lights again.

“Maybe I should move to the city,” she said absently.

“Hmm. Better job prospects,” Father Owen responded. “But we’d miss you here.” He smiled at her kindly and patted her arm again.

She wasn't sure to whom *we* referred but was glad at least one person in the world would miss her.

They approached the entrance to the cemetery. Sam stayed at the side of Father Owen closest to the street, though she could still clearly read "Tower Hill Cemetery" arched in bold bronze letters over the gate. It was an old graveyard, and now that Dr. Denny had given her the diary, she had a better idea of just *how* old. But there was still ample room for new tenants, and she could almost pick out her parents' headstone about halfway up the long slope of the hill.

"You must miss them terribly," Father Owen said, and Sam realized she had stopped them right before the entrance.

"I can't believe it's already been two years," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. The day of her mother's funeral, almost exactly two months after her father's, was a cold fall day, much like this one. The shadow of the tower fell across those gathered for the interment as her mother was lowered into the earth. Few people attended. Sam had no time for friends, having to work and care for her long-sick parents while trying to keep up with school. With no extended family and her parents being housebound, Father Owen was the only person present who knew her. He stood by her at the wake the evening before to greet the strangers, mostly obituary watchers who showed up at every local wake and funeral as a matter of practice. And he had said such beautiful things about her mother at the Mass, unable to keep the emotion out of his voice.

She'd remained stoic throughout the ordeal, resolved to move forward in the world on her own, even though she was just seventeen at the time. It wasn't until a month later, when she was informed that her parents' bodies were to be exhumed, that her resolve had faltered. She watched the caskets being lifted out of the hard, cold ground, the smell of dirt, the tower looming above against the gray sky of the coming winter. That very night in her big empty house, imagining her parents' bodies lying side by side on the cold metal slabs of the coroner's autopsy room, that was when it all started.

She moved Father Owen and herself on their way again. "Sleep deprivation is a form of torture, you know," she said to him as they left the cemetery behind.

"Still having a lot of trouble with sleep?"

She nodded. "Have you ever had insomnia, Father?"

“Oh, I’ve had my troubles with sleep. In my line of work, you tend to hear a lot of people’s problems, and sometimes that sets the mind racing.”

“How do you deal with it?”

“Well, of course, prayer eases the mind, but if I’m still having trouble, a snifter of brandy helps,” he whispered conspiratorially. “But don’t tell anyone else.”

“Alcohol just makes me sick.”

“Pity. Well, after that scream you greeted me with, I will probably follow my own advice when I go to bed tonight.”

Her pulse quickened at the mention of bed, and she was sure Father Owen sensed her distress as the muscles in her arm tightened. They walked the rest of the route in silence until they came to her street.

Her house sat in the middle of a row of identical nineteenth-century Victorians. But hers stood out. Tall and intricately detailed, its clapboard siding was a dusty pink rose, the scrolling trim work purples, yellows, and greens of all shades. An oversized dollhouse, possessing the unburdened joy of a child, with the more serious adult houses around it looking on sternly.

The porch light spilled its warm glow over the front steps like a welcome mat, and she knew she had to let the priest go. St. Michael’s parish house was a few blocks back, and she didn’t want to make the elderly man go even more out of his way. “I’m okay to go the rest alone,” she told him, relinquishing his arm.

He looked relieved and gave her a peck on the cheek. “Goodnight, Samantha.”

“Thank you, Father.”

He started on his way, paused as if to say something, thought better of it, and commenced once again toward his home. Sam watched the priest, her only friend—her only family—amble away until he disappeared around a corner. Reluctantly, she walked toward her house and climbed the front steps, careful to avoid the loose board that needed fixing.

Her happy house was tired. The paint was peeling, the porch was leaning, and the yard was overgrown with weeds. It needed a lot of work, but she had neither the money nor the energy to do much about it. She peered into the night, and somewhere, a distant neighbor’s dog barked, probably enraged that someone dared to walk by its house. Her heart sank a bit. She knew she would eventually have to give the house up, that someone

else would call it home. The dog barked again and she understood its torment.