

TIME
WILL
TELL

BARRY LYGA



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
New York Boston

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2021 by Barry Lyga

Cover art © 2021 by Chris Koehler. Cover design by Jenny Kimura.

Cover copyright © 2021 by Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Hachette Book Group supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright.

The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact permissions@hbgusa.com.

Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Little, Brown and Company

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104

Visit us at LBYR.com

First Edition: September 2021

Little, Brown and Company is a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc. The Little, Brown name and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

"My Hometown" by Bruce Springsteen. Copyright © 1984 Bruce Springsteen (Global Music Rights). Reprinted by permission. International copyright secured. All rights reserved.

"Death To My Hometown" by Bruce Springsteen. Copyright © 2012 Bruce Springsteen (Global Music Rights). Reprinted by permission. International copyright secured. All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lyga, Barry, author.

Title: Time will tell / by Barry Lyga.

Description: First edition. | New York : Little, Brown and Company, 2021. | Audience: Ages 14 & up. | Summary: Relates the efforts of teens Elayah, Liam, Jorja, and Marcie to solve a 1986 murder, and the actions of their then-teenaged parents leading up to the crime.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020048675 | ISBN 9780316537780 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780316537803 (ebook) | ISBN 9780316537841 (ebook other)

Subjects: CYAC: Criminal investigation—Fiction. | Murder—Fiction. | Bigotry—Fiction. | Mystery and detective stories.

Classification: LCC PZ7.L97967 Tim 2021 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

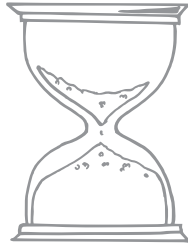
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020048675>

ISBNs: 978-0-316-53778-0 (hardcover), 978-0-316-53780-3 (ebook)

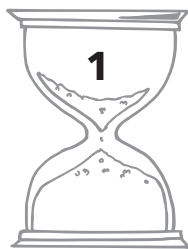
Printed in the United States of America

LSC-C

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



I'm sorry



THE PRESENT: ELAYAH

Bearing shovels and a pickax, they made their way up the hill that morning. Liam started whining about the climb halfway up, pleading exhaustion already, to the annoyance of the others. Elayah rolled her eyes.

Marcie did more than roll her eyes—she turned to Liam and held out her shovel, stopping him in his tracks.

“Are you in or are you out?”

“I only had a grande this morning,” Liam said with a wretched pout.

“Grow up,” Marcie told him, tossing her hair back. “Stop being a pussy.”

“Microaggression!” Liam cried. “Hashtag me too!”

The last of their foursome, Jorja, snorted. She had the pickax, which somehow imbued her with additional gravitas. Everyone turned to look at her.

“Girls are *allowed* to say *pussy*,” she informed Liam. “We’re reclaiming it from the patriarchy.”

“Sucks to be you,” Marcie added with a healthy dose of snark.

“Wait, wait!” Liam made an almost mechanical sound deep in his chest.

“I think...I think I know what the problem is.” He gagged up a wad of something thick and yellowish, then spat it into the grass at his feet.

Elayah was the only one to react. “Gross!” she exclaimed.

Liam chuckled under his breath. Tall and dirty blond and crinkly-grinned, he was pretty much every aftershave and men’s deodorant

commercial come to life. He had a face made for YouTube and a body made for making girls swoon. Straight girls, at least. Elayah had done her fair share of swooning, and even knowing that he was playing her for the reaction to his phlegmy, male raunch, she was still frozen by those blue eyes and that saucy quirk of his lips.

“You’re disgusting,” she said, just a moment too late. Liam laughed. He took a bizarre pleasure in tricking her, then pulling back the curtain. Always had.

“It’s up there.” Jorja pointed to a spot just atop the hill.

“The lady hath spoken!” Liam shouldered his shovel and—grande or not—dashed up the hill at a pace that made Elayah feel like a slug. “First one up is ruler of the world!”

Jorja reacted instantly, her long legs carrying her up the hill only a foot or two behind Liam. “No fair!” she screamed, racing.

Just then, Liam crested the hill. He spun around and lofted his shovel like a medieval knight’s sword, striking a legs-akimbo pose. “I have conquered the mountain!” he bellowed.

“Not a mountain!” Jorja yelled back, just a few feet from him.

Marcie sighed and shook her head, adjusting her glasses. She raised an eyebrow at Elayah. “Are we going to race like those idiots?”

“Please, no.”

Marcie laughed. “I’m glad.”

Together they made a steady but unhurried trek up the hill. The incline rolled over into a broad, wide expanse of grass and trees. It would have been a mesa if it had been higher and drier. And in the Southwest. From here, they could see the dinky “sprawl” of town to the north, the Wantzler factory—still chugging along, barely—to the west, and the high school to the south, down the slope. Elayah allowed herself a moment to enjoy the view, then hustled over to where the others had gathered.

“I think it’s this tree,” Liam said, now all serious. “It is, right?”

Everyone glanced over at Elayah, who had already dug into her pocket for her phone. She consulted a document, pinching it wider. It was a scan of the yellowing sheet of paper she’d found in one of the old yearbooks in the school library. There was a map of sorts there, with a scraggle of lines to

indicate the copse of trees they faced right now, then a hasty circle to indicate the sun. Some ruled lines formed a right triangle between the sun, one tree in particular, and a spot on the ground.

The tree on the map had a callout to it, showing a capital *B*. The tree Liam had indicated had a rough, scraggly *B* carved into its bark, nearly overgrown but still distinct enough to identify.

“Looks right,” Elayah said. It had been more than thirty years since the makeshift map was drawn. They were damn lucky that the tree was still there. Hell, they were lucky the *hill* was still there.

When she’d told her dad about the “treasure hunt,” he’d laughed and said, “Honey, are you sure there’s even a place to look anymore?”

Fortunately, there was. The hill and the trees were older, slightly eroded, more than a little weary looking, but still in the same places they’d occupied in 1986.

“Time to measure,” she told them.

The lines forming the right angle had foot demarcations on them, meaning that figuring out the location of the spot on the ground should have been as simple as facing the right direction, watching the shadow of the tree, and judiciously applying old man Pythagoras’s theorem about a^2 and b^2 equaling c^2 . But the tree had grown over the past few decades, so they had to fake it, using the measurement on the old paper to calculate where the shadow would have fallen back in 1986 and then going from there.

Elayah had aced trig, so she got to do the math while Liam and Marcie used their shovels to measure off the appropriate distances.

“Why didn’t they just write down the longitude and latitude?” Liam grumbled.

“Because no one had GPS back then,” Jorja told him gently. Physically, Liam was almost always a step ahead of the three women; mentally, he was almost always a step behind.

It was simple enough to find the spot. Now they just had to hope that, for example, the tree hadn’t shifted because of erosion or ground movement in the preceding thirty-plus years. Or that the slope of the ground hadn’t changed too much. Or any of a million other little things that could throw them off.

She kept those fears to herself. No point stressing anyone out. This was supposed to be fun. *A lark*, Jorja had called it when Elayah first suggested they dig the damn thing up.

“How far down do you think they buried it?” Marcie asked as the four of them clustered around the spot.

Elayah shrugged. “I don’t know. They didn’t write that down.”

“Six feet?” Liam said with a mix of confidence and inquisitiveness.

“That’s dead bodies,” Jorja informed him.

“Just how many dead bodies *have* you dug up?” Liam asked.

“Only the three,” Jorja deadpanned, then shoved Liam lightly. He nudged her back with his shoulder.

They could have been brother and sister. Both of them tall, both of them blondish—though it was tough to tell with Jorja, ever since she’d started buzzing her hair. Their easy repartee infuriated Elayah, which she never let show; she didn’t want Liam to know she cared.

But . . . damn, sometimes she wished she were Jorja instead of herself. To be so relaxed and at ease around Liam . . .

“So, six feet, right?” Liam said, jostling Elayah from a world in which she, not Jorja, lived next door to Liam and got to joke around with him and even touch him on occasion.

“Not technically,” she said, going on autopilot. “That used to be the law for graves, but that was hundreds of years ago, in Europe, when they had to bury victims of the plague deep enough that the bodies couldn’t contaminate the living. In the US, the only relevant law is that there has to be eighteen inches of dirt between the body and the open air.”

There was a moment of silence during which they all regarded her. Jorja seemed to be absorbing this information, filing it away in her personal data vault. Marcie just grinned.

“Geek Girl rides again!” Liam sang out. Elayah pursed her lips in mock anger. It was the easiest way to keep herself from blushing. Why did she crave his attention, even when it was negative?

Oh, right, because she was madly—

“For definitions of *geek* meaning anyone smarter than you,” Marcie snapped at him.

“So . . . everyone, then,” Jorja chimed in brightly, ignoring Liam’s looked of feigned outrage. “Let’s get started.”

Liam was a bit taller and stronger, but Jorja had an almost poetic sense of movement. She briefly struck a Rosie the Riveter “We can do it!” pose before applying the pickax to the ground, breaking up the turf so that the shovels could find easier purchase.

She leaned back, slid the pickax’s handle through her threaded fingers almost to its end, and then skip-stepped forward, bringing the ax up and around and then down in a perfect arc, biting the earth with its steel tooth.

Ch-chm!

A devotee of a brutally exhausting form of yoga and a regular in the school’s weight lifting room, Jorja had the lithe shape of a dancer, wedded to a swimmer’s muscles. She seemed to enjoy attacking the innocent turf.

She and Liam swapped pickax duty until there was a wide, ragged oval of broken earth. Then the foursome took turns with the shovels, one of them digging the hole, one keeping its edges from collapsing, while the other two rested. It was deeper than eighteen inches, but fortunately nothing like six feet—an hour later Liam’s shovel sang a sour, metallic note and shivered so strongly in his hands that he nearly dropped it.

“Rock?” he said, arming sweat off his forehead.

“Didn’t sound like it,” Jorja replied, and crouched to peer into the hole. She’d stripped off her overshirt, and sweat soaked through her ribbed white sleeveless tee. “Looks shiny. Step back.”

For once, Liam obeyed, scrambling out of the hole. Sunlight glimmered off something that was most definitely not made of stone.

“Hells yeah,” Liam whispered. “Time capsule, baby.”

“Time capsule . . .” Mr. Hindon, the high school’s long-serving media specialist, had drawn out the words as though remembering the lyrics to a song, then executed a very brief series of eye spasms. He had Tourette syndrome (*not Tourette’s*, he’d been explaining to generations of students; there was no

possessive), and when he focused hard, sometimes his eye muscles did a little involuntary dance.

“Time capsule,” he’d said again, musing over the yellowing sheet of paper they’d handed him. “Yeah, I remember that now that you mention it. Some kids from the class of eighty-seven buried a time capsule.”

“But I found this in the yearbook from 1984,” Elayah told him.

He shrugged almost extravagantly. “Who knows? It’s a mystery!”

Turned out it wasn’t the only one.

Liam and Jorja were slick with sweat, their bare arms streaked with dirt, their faces smeared. They’d been in the hole for only ten minutes, trying to wrestle the thing out, but it was proving difficult.

“This thing feels like a greased pig.”

“Really, Farmer Brown?” Jorja asked, chuckling. “Have a lot of experience with greased pigs, do you?”

“You don’t know everything about me,” Liam told her.

“Oh yeah, you’re large. You contain multitudes.”

Liam stared blankly. Walt Whitman was not his forte. In fact, anything before, say, the year 2000 might as well be dinosaurs.

“We’ll explain it later,” Marcie promised him.

Elayah couldn’t help it—her brain flashed pieces of the poem, whether she wanted it to or not.

The past and present wilt—I have fill’d them, emptied them.

And proceed to fill my next fold of the future.

After some more bickering, Liam and Jorja finally set themselves up in new positions, but to no avail. The thing didn’t budge. “What were they thinking?” Liam demanded.

“It lasted all this time,” Marcie said. “So I guess they were thinking right.”

“Let me try this myself,” Liam said.

“Ooh,” Jorja said, deepening her voice and slackening her jaw. “Me big man. Me lift heavy thing for dainty ladies.”

“I’m just thinking, y’know, too many cooks—”

“Can you guys work *together* for once?” Elayah’s exasperation finally overcame her attraction.

Jorja and Liam pulled wounded expressions and looked at each other. “Wow, that hurt.”

“No need to go all Mom on us,” Jorja added. “We’re working through it.”

“Just . . . do something!” Elayah erupted. The damn thing was *right there!* “Sheesh.”

“Who died and made her boss?” Jorja asked.

Liam shrugged. “I don’t know, but I guess we better get serious before she, like, gives us demerits or something.”

Jorja crouched and worked her hands under the time capsule. “I’ll try to tilt it toward you,” she said to Liam. “See if you can get it into your arms.”

“And then what? Use my superpowers to fly out of here?”

Elayah nudged Marcie with her elbow and gestured. They took up a position just behind Liam at the edge of the hole. “Try to shift it toward us and we’ll roll it out.”

Liam considered, shrugged, nodded. He whipped off his shirt and dabbed his forehead before tossing the garment a few feet away. Elayah took in his crisp shoulder blades and the hard ridges of muscle in his back. She exchanged a look with Marcie, who mouthed, *Keep it in your pants.*

Elayah shot back a death glare. Her lust for Liam was a secret between just the two of them.

Marcie shrugged as though to say, *He’s not even looking this way.*

True. But Jorja was facing them. And Jorja and Liam were tight. *Tell-you-everything-I-see* tight.

“Let’s do this shizz,” Liam said. “My dad said we’d never find this thing, and I really want to prove him wrong.”

He hunched down. Sweat gleamed on his skin. For the moment, Elayah had nothing to do, so she watched the beads meander.

Jorja groaned with effort. The time capsule was much bigger than they’d expected. The sheet of paper they’d found in the old yearbook was titled *Contents of Time Capsule* and had listed maybe two dozen things, most of which were small. Elayah had figured that the entire thing would be the size of two or three shoeboxes.

What they’d unearthed was more like the size of a small filing cabinet. Cylindrical and made of stainless steel, it had the words PRESERVATION INC. stamped in an arc on one end, with STORAGE VAULT rounding out the other

arc. It lay diagonal in the dirt, so that they'd had to dig a deeper, wider hole than they'd anticipated in order to reveal the entirety of its length.

"I hate our parents!" Jorja cried in anguish as she strained with all her might. Miraculously, the thing moved, shifting enough that it collided with Liam, who was ready for it. He backed up against the side of the hole for stability and flexed, managing to lift the capsule by rolling it up his body. Elayah and Marcie leaned over the rim of the hole and stabilized the cylinder until Jorja could come over and help push it out onto the higher ground. Somewhere during all this, Elayah's hands ended up on Liam's back and shoulders, but she was too focused to realize it and wasn't even embarrassed until they had the capsule out of the hole and Liam mock-shouted, "El's coping a feel!"

"You should be so lucky." Marcie always had Elayah's back.

Liam climbed out of the hole. "How does it open?" he asked, nudging the time capsule with his toe.

The cylinder was about three feet long and a foot in diameter. Elayah crouched and wiped dirt away from both ends, figuring one of them would unscrew like a jar lid. Sure enough, there was a seam at one end, with an inset groove where her hand fit perfectly. She twisted and turned, eventually grunting with effort, but the thing wouldn't budge.

Liam slid up behind her, put his arms around, and captured her hand with his own. "Let me help," he said, and winked when she glanced over her shoulder at him.

Liam knew how she felt. He had to know. And here he was, practically *bugging* her—

"On three," he said, almost softly, into her ear.

They twisted at the same time. For a too-long moment, nothing happened. Her fingers tightened and strained, and then she felt Liam's hand press with a near-crushing force on her own and the lid slowly ground to the right.

There was a slight popping sound, like a Coke bottle that's been opened too suddenly. Air pressure stabilizing, Elayah knew. Gases finding equilibrium between the hermetically sealed cylinder and the outside world. There were formulas and equations that explained it, but she was too lost in the

twin thrills of the opening time capsule and the nearness of Liam, the tang of his sweat in the air, the husk of his breath at her ear.

“Nice,” he murmured.

She cleared her throat, suddenly highly aware of his closeness, of Jorja’s and Marcie’s attention. With a shimmy of her shoulders, she shook him off and applied herself to the lid, twisting it farther until it came off entirely in her hand.

With Marcie, she spread out a blanket they’d brought along, and then—before she could react—Liam upended the canister.

“Welcome to prehistory,” he joked.

Elyah suppressed a yelp of horror and outrage. She’d hoped for a little pause, a moment to reflect. It had been more than thirty years since the air in the canister had mingled with the air of the world. Decades since these things had been touched or even seen. She’d wanted to pull each one out, compare it to the list, maybe record the moment. . . .

“We were supposed to take it slow!” Jorja admonished him.

“It’s not an unboxing video,” Liam told her, then began pawing through the spilled contents. “I mean, look at this crap.”

“It’s the ultimate unboxing video,” Jorja fumed. “Or would have been.”

There was nothing for it, though. Liam had already dumped everything out, so Elyah settled for shooting some video for Insta as Jorja and Marcie got down on their knees with him and raked through the stuff.

“Look at this.” Jorja held up a rectangular plastic box. It was transparent, with a paper insert tucked into the front, on which some words were scribbled in black ink. She opened it and clucked her tongue. “My dad has a box of these in the garage.”

“It’s a mixtape,” Elyah said. “It’s like a playlist.” In preparation for the dig, she’d done a ton of research on the 1980s. She spied a Walkman in the sprawl of artifacts and picked it up. “We can play it later.”

Jorja shrugged and moved on. Elyah surrendered her fantasy of doing this in an orderly fashion and instead started looking for one specific item. The one her dad had mentioned when she’d first told him about the time capsule.

At first he’d had no reaction at all. . . . and then his eyes lit up, as though

remembering a long-forgotten dream. “The time capsule! Oh my God, I forgot all about that!”

Elayah had been surprised that her father remembered it at all. What were the odds that she and her friends would stumble upon this thing *and* that her own father would remember it?

“We came up with it in a social studies class,” he recalled, closing his eyes, straining to revisit the past. “Mr. Ormond? Mr. Almond? I can’t remember his name. There was a project we did where he gave us a bunch of old junk and we were supposed to try to figure out what kind of society had made it.

“So then one of us had the idea of burying our own time capsule and then digging it up. . . .” He trailed off, eyes now open, staring up at nothing. “Oh, right. . . .”

His voice had gone soft.

“What?” Elayah asked.

“We buried it in the fall of eighty-six, before the ground got too hard. We figured we’d dig it up fifteen years later,” he told her. “We agreed to meet again on September twelfth.”

He spoke as though the date had significance. She did the math. “Oh.”

“Yeah, we had other things on our minds. We all forgot about it, I guess.” He grinned at her. “If you guys are really going to dig it up, make sure you grab something for me, okay?”

She spied it quickly. Her father’s description had been spot-on. Long time ago or not, he remembered.

She snatched it up. It was a small rectangle lined with a faded burgundy felt, hinged on one side. When she opened it, it revealed a set of glassed-in photographs, still as bright and crisp as though printed yesterday.

On the left side were two teen boys, not much older than her. Wisps of mustache. One in Jheri curl, the other a high-top fade. Otherwise identical in their blue-and-green Canterstown High varsity jackets.

It was the last photo taken of her father and his twin brother. Before Uncle Antoine, whom she’d never met, ran off to Mexico and other points south. He’d sent a few postcards early on, then nothing. Her father’s eyes, usually so wide and joyous, always narrowed when he spoke or thought of his brother. In this photo, they looked both boisterous and radiant, in that way

teen boys apparently always had. The smiles killed her. Her father was generally a happy man, but she knew his joy had a corroded center.

The other photo was the Jheri-curl boy (the twin whom she now knew to be her dad . . . and he would definitely get some ribbing about that hair) and a beautiful girl about Elayah's age. She wore a floor-length lavender gown with matching lipstick and heels, her shoulders bare, her hair a slick cap of finger waves. He was decked out in a shiny monstrosity of a tuxedo that looked to have been made out of stamped tin, his tie and cummerbund matching the dress.

Her parents. At homecoming. Wow.

She was lost in the moment. Why had her father chosen this item for the time capsule? It was significant to no one but her and her family. It had nothing to do with the state of the world in 1986.

"Hey, El, is this on the list we found?" Marcie was holding up a raggedy old doll, its fabric a tattered mess. The vinyl head lolled atop the body, which was partly rotted away. "And shouldn't it have been better preserved?"

Elayah contemplated. "Maybe it was already in bad shape when it went in," she said.

Marcie nodded, looking at the thing quizzically. Elayah called up the contents document again and skimmed it. "Nope. Nothing about a doll."

"Huh," said Marcie.

Elayah scanned over the cluster of items again. There seemed to be too many.

She took charge. Liam was goofing around with a couple of action figures he'd found (*M.A.S.K. toys*, according to the inventory list). She stopped him and had him join her, Jorja, and Marcie in dividing the items into categories—paper, plastic, cloth, metal, other.

At her direction (and with only minimal "Buzzkill" grumbling from Liam), they started out by identifying the thirty-one items on the inventory. A *Time* magazine cover sporting a portrait of a reader delving into Stephen King's *It*. A vinyl record sleeve that looked like a smear of colors abutting a severe black-and-white portrait. *True Colors*, it said. *Cyndi Lauper*.

More. Another cassette, this one with an insert as blank as the day it'd been bought. Three plastic squares that looked vaguely familiar. She read

their labels: *400k floppy diskette*. Oh, right—they looked like the Save icon in Word. Floppy disks. They were like old-fashioned USB keys.

There were more pictures. Newspaper clippings. All of which were on the list.

But after they separated out the stuff on the list, there was still more. A *lot* more.

There were several pins. One read, *We'll get along fine as soon as you realize I'm God*. The rest were along the same allegedly humorous lines. There was a US Mint proof set of coins from 1985, the dime, nickel, penny, quarter, half-dollar, and dollar still gleaming. A stack of comic books bound together in a plastic sleeve, titled *Camelot 3000*. A stapler . . .

A stapler! What on earth?

"This makes no sense," Jorja said, running a hand over her fuzzy head. "It's like they used it as a trash can."

"What's the point of the inventory if you're just gonna throw in a bunch of old junk?" Marcie asked, fanning herself with one of the floppy disks.

"There might be interesting data on that disk," Elayah said. Why did she feel so defensive about the contents of the time capsule? Why was she so invested in it? It had been her idea to dig it up, yeah, but only because Liam had . . .

Oh.

Yeah. Because basically Liam had brought it up to his dad and his dad had laughed and said, "That old thing? You'll never find it." And then Liam had wanted to prove his dad wrong, so of course Elayah just *had* to make it happen for him.

They combed through the remaining items, taking pictures and tapping notes along the way. There was a total of thirty-four additional items, most of them junk (she admitted in the privacy of her own head), some of them quite large. No wonder the capsule had been so much heavier than they'd expected.

"Is that everything?" she asked.

"Let's check!" Liam exclaimed, and then made a show of sticking his face right up against the opening of the cylinder. "Hey, there's something in here!"

"Quit goofing around," Jorja said.

“I’m serious!” Liam pulled away from the cylinder, his face sweaty and red and impressed with an arc of the circumference of the tube. “It’s not a joke.”

As if to prove his seriousness, he tilted the time capsule and shook it. “It must be stuck,” he said, and shook harder, banging it against the ground a bit.

Something clattered down the length of the tube and spilled out onto the ground. It was a length of white cloth, wrapped around something roughly six inches long, fastened with what looked like masking tape.

“I thought you were kidding,” Marcie said.

Liam feigned horror. “I’ve never been so offended in my life! Hashtag puh-lease.”

Elayah picked up the object and hefted it. It wasn’t terribly heavy. The tape came loose easily.

She unwrapped it and nearly dropped it. They all stared.

It was a knife.

Not a butter knife or a steak knife. This was a pretty wicked-looking *knife* knife. Like the kind you used to go hunting. Or to . . . to . . .

She didn’t know what else. The kind of knife you see in action movies, strapped to the belts of tough ex-soldiers with serious PTSD. There were streaks of dark red along the base of it, where the blade met the handle, stuck in the little crevices there.

“Whoa,” Liam said without a trace of humor or goofiness.

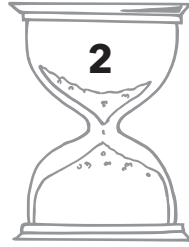
“What the hell?” Marcie asked.

That was when Elayah dragged her eyes from the blade in one hand to the fabric in the other. There was a slip of paper tangled up in the cloth. She unwound it.

There was a murrey blemish in one corner of the paper. And some printed words. It took her a moment to decipher them.

I’m sorry, it read.

And then: *I didn’t mean to kill anyone.*



THE PRESENT: LIAM

Liam couldn't conjure a joke or even a morsel of snark to puncture the uncomfortable silence that followed after El read the note aloud. Like the others, he just stared silently at the knife for a long time. Then Marcie cleared her throat.

"Looks like we need to call your dad," she said to Liam.

Liam blinked a few times. Finally, something he could blow up into a joke.

"My *dad*? What's *he* gonna do—cook this thing in a béarnaise sauce?"

Jorja sighed. "Your *other* dad, you moron."

Liam slapped his forehead, pretending to remember who his bio-dad was and what he did. "Duh. Right."

His japery had punctured the uncomfortable quiet, but not for long. Now they all stood around in silence again, staring at the knife El held in her hand.

"We messed up a crime scene," she said after a moment, and her anguish was so real and so potent that he immediately sought another needle with which to puncture it.

"I don't think anyone actually got killed *in* the time capsule," he said.

Jorja shrugged into her plaid overshirt. "Yeah, but still . . . we should take pictures of everything, just the way it is. To preserve as much of the initial scene as possible."

And then they all looked at Liam, as though being the son of the sheriff made him an expert in crime-scene forensics. Liam nodded gravely, thinking, and then whipped out his phone, crouched, and started snapping away, keeping up a running commentary as he did so:

“That’s right, old *Time* magazine—give me sexy! Pouty! Oh yeah, Walkman—you’re fierce! You go, girl!” And on and on, until they all surrendered and started taking their own pictures. Whew. Awkwardness avoided.

When they were done: “We need to get this to the cops,” El said very seriously, brandishing the knife.

“Come on,” Liam said. “Guys. Are we *really* saying that one of our parents killed someone and hid the murder weapon in a time capsule?”

They all went silent for an excruciatingly long time. He’d meant it as a joke, a way of knocking back El’s too-serious concern. But by the time the words left his mouth, he realized what he was actually saying, and the joke fell facedown, dead on arrival.

“Well, damn,” Jorja said, and produced her fidget spinner from a pocket. Light sparkled and arced from it, racing spots along the shadows cast by the trees. “Good point. This thing belonged to our parents. This is *their* stuff.”

They all exchanged a worried look.

“For real?” Marcie said in a low, almost feeble tone. “Like . . . our *parents*?”

None of them wanted to contemplate it, but here they were. Liam racked his brain for something incredibly stupid and inappropriate to say.

“Maybe . . .” El held her hands up helplessly, rescuing him. “Maybe someone else sneaked it in?”

Sneaked. She was the only person he knew who said *sneaked* instead of *snuck*.

“Well, I know my dad didn’t do it,” Liam said. “He’s one of the *good* cops. And my other dad didn’t grow up here. The rest of y’all . . . who knows?”

They all stared silently at the knife. He could feel each of them wondering if their parents had it in them to kill someone.

“We really, really need to go to the police,” El said quietly.

“But we can’t just leave this stuff here,” Marcie pointed out. “Two of us will go to the cops. Two of us will stay behind to watch this stuff. Liam, you drove. And, El, you unwrapped the knife. So . . .”

Liam pretended to be annoyed, but his heart hammered. He wanted to

be alone with El—he pretty much *always* wanted to be alone with El—and this time he swore to himself that he wouldn't blow it. He would actually say something real, not something stupid or snarky or just plain dumbass.

"Fine," he said in his best grumble. "We'll go bug my dad. C'mon."

He grabbed his shirt from the ground, turned, and walked back down the hill without even a glance at El. Hardest thing he'd ever done.

The Canterstown Sheriff's Department and Department of Public Safety occupied a building just off Founders Street, the main boulevard that cut through town, leading from the WELCOME TO CANTERSTOWN! sign to the east to the Wantzler factory in the west. The office lay at the end of a curl of road that wound through a series of dusty, undergrassed, unused lots. It was a plain brick building with beige-and-gray clapboard shingles, rising an imposing two! whole! stories! As a kid Liam had spent so much time here that he thought of it as a second home. He knew which of the prisoner cells were the best to play in, and in which ones lingered a permanent *parfum* of mingled vomit and piss.

He parked in the space marked FOR DAY-WATCH COMMANDER. There was no day-watch commander.

"You okay?" he asked, glancing over at El. She'd been quiet the whole way here—the whole fifteen minutes—and he'd managed to keep his joking to a minimum, which hadn't been easy. Now the sound of concern in his own voice caused a wellspring of hipster irony and bad taste to gush up from his gut. Against everything he held dear, he swallowed it down.

"Yeah," she said, not looking up. "This is just . . . super weird, you know?"

"I don't know about *super* weird," he said, hearing his own thoughts for the first time as they came out of his mouth. "Maybe, like, *ultra* weird, which is one step down."

She sighed something that was almost a laugh, papery and ephemeral.

Inside the office, half-height panels divided the room into six evenly sized areas. At the front was a high counter, behind which sat Loretta Blevins. Her official title was "sheriff's office assistant," but she knew for certain that this position was one step above the Lord God Himself on the org chart. She'd been sneaking Liam candies and cocoa since before he could remember, and

while she jealously guarded the sheriff and her other charges, she had a weak spot the size of Kansas for her boss's only child.

"Hi, Loretta!" he said brightly. "We have, like, a murder weapon for Dad. Is he in?"

She shook her head and chuckled. "Murder weapon, eh? Go on in. He's back there."

He pushed open the swinging half door at the counter and led El through the open floorplan, through the little hallway back by the watercooler. The place stank of stale coffee and cigarettes, even though smoking had been banned in municipal buildings a million years ago. Liam knew the odor was repellent, but he couldn't help it—it smelled like home to him.

At its end, the hallway T'd. One branch led to the holding cells and records room. The other led to the sheriff's office. Liam didn't bother knocking.

"Hey, Dad!"

And there sat the sheriff of Canterstown, a.k.a. Dad Number One, a.k.a. Bio-Dad. He was what old people called "a tall drink of water," topping out at around six two, which portended well for Liam, who was just a tad over six feet right now but still growing. Other than that, they had little in common physically—Dad was wiry and thin where Liam was solid and muscled. Dad's hair was black-going-gray, while Liam's was sun-kissed blond. Liam had always thought he looked more like Chef Wally, a.k.a. Dad Number Two, a.k.a. Adoptive Dad, a.k.a. Pop, which just proved that maybe genetics was a science, but it wasn't an exact one.

"Shouldn't you be in school?" Dad asked mildly, not even looking up from his computer screen. The office was dimly lit, save for a desk lamp and the light from the computer. This room had originally been for some kind of evidence processing, but Dad hated sitting in the big glassed-in office out front that the previous sheriff had used. So he'd knocked it down to make more space for the deputies and tucked himself away in his little dungeon.

"We were digging up the—"

"The time capsule, oh yeah, right." Dad pushed back from his desk and swiveled to face them, hands clasped behind his head as he leaned back. "Hi, Elayah. How'd it go?"

"A little murder-y." Liam stepped aside and gestured to El, who stepped

forward nervously, holding out the knife—rewrapped in its fabric—reverently, the way he kinda-sorta remembered priests holding out the host.

Dad arched an eyebrow. “I don’t have time for nonsense, Liam. Elayah, I expected better from you.”

“Sir, it’s not nonsense.” She placed the knife on his desk and stepped away, as though afraid of an eruption of some kind. “My fingerprints are on it. I’m really, really sorry.”

“I told her to burn them off with acid *weeks* ago,” Liam chimed in. “But did she listen? Nooooo . . .”

Dad frowned and leaned forward, scooting back to the desk. He hesitated a moment, hand outstretched toward the slender bundle, then thought better of it and plucked up his letter opener. He used the thin blade to pry the fabric apart, revealing the blade.

“Okay,” he said calmly. “Guys, this is a pretty standard-issue hunting knife. Or at least, it was back in the day. Everyone around here had one. Hell, *I* had one. Probably up in the attic right now. Someone tossed it into the time capsule. That’s not a crime.”

El was frozen, just standing there. Liam nudged her with his elbow because that seemed safe—if he touched her with his hand, he was afraid he’d never stop.

“Dude,” he forced himself to say, “the note.”

El nodded as though to herself. “Under the knife,” she said. “Paper.”

Dad gently pushed the knife to one side to reveal the piece of paper. It was turned perpendicular to the desk, so he stood up and craned his neck to read it without touching it. Then he sat gingerly in his chair.

“Kids, I doubt this means what you think it means.”

“What *does* it mean, then?” El said, with some steel in her voice. Liam wanted to pat her on the back and congratulate her. As long as he’d known her, she’d been cowed by anyone over the age of twenty-five.

“I’m saying . . .” Dad shook his head. “Look, let me . . .”

He wheeled up to the desk again and started tapping at his keyboard. “It can’t be a murder confession,” he said, “because . . .”

“Because there were no murders back in 1986?” El asked.

Liam hadn’t considered that. It was a different town then, a different era.

“On the contrary,” Dad said, and turned his monitor so they could see it.

“There were four killings in the eighteen months leading up to the day your dad and I and the others buried that time capsule. See here?”

Liam came around the other side of the desk so that he could see without interfering with El, who was practically diving into the computer screen. Four windows were open, each showing a scanned document that he recognized as a standard municipal D&R summary. *Disposition and recapitulation*. It was the form that summed up the contents of a police incident file. He’d seen them scattered around the kitchen table growing up and could recite portions of the municipal legal code by heart.

All of these cases were solved.

“Four unnatural deaths,” Dad said. “And there was a kid who drove his car into a ditch when he was driving drunk and died, so five if you count that one. We solved each one of them. Well, the guys in this office back then did. Three were by confession. Eyewitnesses to the other one. More importantly,” he went on, holding up a hand to forestall El’s interruption, “none of them involved a knife, so even if the cops messed up back in the dinosaur days, it still wouldn’t prove anything. Four bodies, no knifings.”

“Maybe they never found the body.” El straightened up, defiant. Liam licked his lips. Oh, Lord, determined El was even more awesome than shy, nerdy El. He ransacked his memory to conjure the name of the patron saint of hopelessly horny teen boys and came up empty.

Dad considered what she’d said. “Look, there *are* several still unclosed missing persons cases from that time. Including . . .” He hesitated a moment. “Including your own uncle.”

“He’s not missing,” El said. “He’s in Mexico. Or was.”

“Well, be that as it may, the case is still officially open.” Dad heaved out a prodigious and world-weary sigh. “Things were a lot different in those days, guys. Especially in small towns like this one. Nothing was connected. Nothing was computerized. People up and left all the time, never to be heard from again. Is it possible that one of them was actually murdered with this”—he tilted his head at the knife—“and we just never found the body? Sure. Anything’s possible.”

It was either a charming sign of brotherhood or an early indicator of dementia that Dad kept saying *we* when referring to the Canterstown cops of 1986.

“But,” he went on, “the overwhelming odds are that someone back in eighty-six thought it would be funny to put ‘evidence’ of a crime in the time capsule, figuring it would trigger some huge manhunt in the future when the thing was dug up.”

“Someone?” El raised her voice about as high as she was capable in the presence of an adult. “There were only five of you, right?”

Dad clucked his tongue nonchalantly. “That’s right.”

“So one of you put it in there. Shouldn’t we find out who?” Liam was surprised that the voice was his own. El must have been surprised, too—she turned to look at him, her brows knitted together, her mouth half-open, no doubt about to say the same thing.

Liam shrugged and gave her a lopsided grin, then worried that he looked like he was having a stroke.

Dad was usually easygoing, but he had his limits, and Liam could tell from the set of his father’s jaw that those limits were within view. “Of course we will, Liam. But this is what I do—let me handle it. The right way.”

“Of course!” El said, the words almost exploding from her.

“Sure.” Liam shrugged again.

“And I don’t want you mouthing off around town about murders and such,” he warned them both, but gazing more sternly at Liam. “Like I said, this is probably a prank. One that’s going to waste time and resources. I don’t want whoever did it getting their jollies off us running around to figure this thing out.”

“Did you actually say ‘getting their jollies?’” Liam asked. “How old *are* you?”

Dad shut his eyes for a moment and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Liam...”

El saved him from a mini lecture, probably a repeat of the one Liam had titled *Not Everything Is a Joke, Son*.

“Everyone knows we were digging the thing up,” she interjected at just the right moment. “The *Loco* was even going to do a little story.”

The Lowe County Times—both affectionately and not-so referred to as the *Loco*—was the local newspaper. *Paper* might have been a misnomer, as printing costs had driven it online years ago and it existed now in digital form only, as something between a blog and a fledgling social media network.

Given that its design was at least ten years out of date and its reportage tended toward local “news” everyone already knew—recapped with a surfeit of exclamation points—it was surprisingly popular and boasted a thriving message forum.

“That’s fine,” Dad told her. “They can do their story. Just don’t say anything about the knife or the note, okay?”

“And what about the rest of the stuff in the time capsule? Isn’t that technically evidence?”

Dad smiled a little too tightly. Liam recognized the look; it was the same look he had when he watched any cop show on TV.

“I’ll send someone over to photograph it and take statements from you guys, but there’s no sense impounding it. The relevant evidence is right here on my desk.”

Liam could tell that El had more to say, but he could also tell that Dad had reached his limit of what he no doubt considered absolute nonsense and a waste of time. He touched El lightly on the back of her hand; she jerked away as though prodded with a soldering iron, and his heart sank into his shoes, along with all his hopes and dreams.

Oh, hey, sorry to startle you, El, but remember how when we were in fifth grade Jorja came out and you and me and Marse formed the Queer/Straight Alliance to help her out and then we kept it going through middle school and high school, but the thing is for me it was really just an excuse to stick around you because you guys were headed off to the Ungodly Genius classes and I was destined for the Well, He Can Tie His Shoes classes and I was like, holy crap, Elayah is the most amazing human being on the planet and I’ve had a thing for you since, like, ever, but you were off being a genius and somehow the QSA kept us being friends and now it’s like a legacy thing, even though we never really get to hang out because you’d never actually be with an idiot like me, right, so why am I even saying any of this, oh, wait, I’m not saying it I’m just thinking it because I’m a gigantic coward.

“Overreact much?” he said instead, then immediately wished he could take it back. “C’mon.”

As they headed to the door, Dad called out to them. “Hey, kids?”

They turned back at the door. “Thanks for bringing this to my attention,” Dad told them, with a lot more earnestness than Liam would have expected.



1986: DEAN

He knew he looked good; he didn't even need to look in the full-length mirror mounted on the back of his bedroom door, but he went ahead and did it anyway, checking himself out. The new jeans were snug, but they were supposed to be. His pink T-shirt was set off perfectly by the new white sport coat, which was rumpled just right, the sleeves rolled up like Crockett's on TV.

The door swung open. Jenny, his sister, never knocked when she wanted to use his mirror.

"What do you think?" he asked, stepping back and opening the jacket so that she could get the full effect.

"Not *totally* grody," she said, sniffing as though it pained her to pay him a compliment. She fluffed her hair in the mirror. She'd gotten a blowout the day before, and her hair was permed around her head in a massive blond ball of frizz. She wore a short, flaring skirt with a purple halter top and matching headband, one bra strap exposed along her shoulder. She also wore an expression of bored contempt, her default since falling into the world of the Valley girls. Adjusting her bra strap a little farther along on her shoulder, she nodded in satisfaction to her reflection and left him alone with his own.

And yeah, man, he liked what he saw. His hair was too dark to be Don Johnson, so he'd just gone ahead and slicked it back with some Dep. You were supposed to use a little dab, but his hair was too thick for that, so he

used a palmful. By third period, his hair would be frozen solid, but at least he could be sure it wouldn't move out of place.

And he had to look good. As of today, he was vice president of the student government. He had to look the part, right?

Out in the kitchen, Mom and Dad were already eating breakfast when he and Jenny arrived.

"Bye, family," Jenny said. Dean immediately turned around to watch the fireworks.

"You're not leaving this house looking like that!" their father thundered from the table. "Jesus Christ! Look at you! I can see your, your, your *brassiere!*"

"Whatever, Daddy," Jenny said. "I'm, like, nineteen. You can't, like, tell me what to do."

"You live in *my* house!" he told her. "I didn't catch a bullet in my leg in Vietnam so that my daughter could dress like some kind of whore."

No, you got a bullet in your leg because you were too slow to turn around when your lieutenant shouted to retreat, Dean thought, but did not say, would never, ever, *ever* say.

Mom put a calming hand on Dad's shoulder. "Bob. She gets to make her own decisions." She shivered a little. "I just wish you would *decide* to dress a little nicer, Jenny."

Jenny shrugged indifferently and grabbed a piece of toast on her way out the door.

"What about your son?" Mom asked, nudging Dad, who grudgingly looked up from his paper again.

"Forget to wash your hair this morning?" Dad asked.

"It's slicked back."

Dad frowned, but then relented. "You want to look like a greaser, that's your lookout. What's with the pink shirt? Are you a girl now or something?"

"Guys can wear pink now, Dad."

"Did we forget something this morning?" Mom interrupted, stroking her own chin meaningfully.

"Mo-om!" He dragged the word out to more syllables than it needed, hating the whining note in his voice. He rubbed a hand over his carefully cultivated stubble. "It's the style."

"*Style's* not the word for it," Dad grumbled from the table. He had gone

back to reading the *Morning Gazette*, which he prided himself on plowing through before leaving for work. Then, when he got home, he would go through the *Evening Gazette*. They were a *Canterstown Gazette* family—none of that *Low County Times* nonsense for them. “I don’t trust a paper that only publishes one edition,” Dad would say to anyone who dared ask. More like he didn’t trust a paper that had endorsed Mondale.

“Anyway...” Dean had nothing else to say, but he knew he had to say *something*. He let the word trail off into infinity, then smiled thanks at his mom and rushed out the door with his toast.

At school, he immediately sought out Brian, Jay, and the twins. He was excited, not just about his first day as SGA VP, but also for the first Monday morning *Miami Vice* death pool check-in with the guys. He had guessed three in the pool last Friday afternoon, and there had been four killings on the show that night. As long as no one else had guessed four, he would win.

Marcus had agreed to hold the guesses and the money. He and his twin, Antoine, showed up a couple of minutes late. Brian, Jay, and Dean were clustered in the cafeteria, waiting for the homeroom bell to ring when the twins hustled in, out of breath.

“Sorry,” Marcus said. “We missed the bus. Had to run from the house.”

The Laird twins were known as the two fastest runners at the school, maybe even the county, depending on the outcome of the spring’s track season. Dean had nicknamed them Black Lightning, like the guy in the comic books, and the twins had really taken to it. Rarely did you see or think of one without seeing or thinking of the other. They routinely finished each other’s sentences and seemed to communicate telepathically.

Antoine was the quieter of the two. Yes, the Laird boys finished each other’s sentences, but usually Antoine had the shorter end of the communal utterance. What he lacked in verbosity he made up for with a wicked grin that spoke volumes.

“Open it!” Brian demanded. “We don’t have long! It’s almost first bell.”

Marcus fumbled for a moment with the envelope. It was a large manila affair, its flap gummed shut, five signatures overlapping the line of closure.

They’d come up with the idea while watching reruns over the summer:

Every Friday afternoon of the new season, the five of them wrote down their names and guesses on slips of paper, then deposited those slips and two bucks apiece into an envelope.

Antoine, silent, leaned over to right the envelope in his brother's hands. Marcus tilted his head in thanks—Dean imagined radiating concentric circles like Aquaman's telepathy on Saturday mornings, transferring a *Thanks* from twin to twin—and tore open the envelope.

Just then, a hand slapped out from nowhere and knocked the envelope out of Marcus's hands. Brad Gimble—football prodigy and overall tool—snickered. "Oops!"

"Knock it off, Gimbo!" Dean snapped.

"Bite me, loser!"

Before Dean could retort, Brad disappeared down the hall, flipping the group off as he went.

"How is he calling *me* a loser?" Dean marveled as the twins recovered the envelope.

"He's never going to get over you beating him," Brian said.

"Forget him." Jay gestured to Marcus. "Hurry up."

"Dean, three..." Marcus read quickly, shuffling the papers. "Jay, eight... Brian, fifteen... Come on, man!" An eye roll.

"It could happen!" Brian protested. "A big drug bust with lots of..." He mimed spraying lead all around the room with a machine gun.

"Uh-huh," Marcus said, ignoring him. "Antoine, five. And me... five..."

Dean grinned broadly. He'd won!

"Of course you two guessed the same number," Jay complained as Dean scooped up his winnings.

"It's a coincidence," Marcus said defensively.

"You share one brain," Jay told them. "Lame death count anyway."

Antoine shrugged as the bell rang and the boys dispersed to homeroom.

Third period was Dean's free period, which usually meant loitering in the cafeteria or goofing around in the library, but now meant he could hang out in the SGA office. There were two desks in there, and he looked forward to the empty space and the free time.

As long as Dean could remember, he'd wanted to be a writer. He spent his free time conjuring science fiction novels, fantasy epics, extended runs on the comic books he still loved. When not doing homework or chores at home, he spent his time at his desk, outlining and plotting. Now he had a free period every day and a space of his own to work in. He just knew something great would come of it.

The office was on the second floor, a tiny room crushed between the math and science departments. He experienced a minute thrill on opening the door with his key and was slightly disappointed to see Mr. Grimm there, sitting at one of the desks, grading papers.

"Oh, hi," Dean said, hoping that his displeasure didn't come through.

Despite his name, Mr. Grimm generally had a broad, friendly attitude and was well liked by the student body. Which, Dean realized, was probably why he had wound up as the faculty adviser to the student government.

"Good morning, Mr. Vice President," Mr. Grimm boomed. He couldn't help it—he *always* boomed. "I'm just wrapping up. I'll get out of your way."

It was weird to have an adult—and a teacher—defer to him, but Dean wasn't sure what to do about it. Besides, he liked the idea of having the office to himself.

"You know, I'm not supposed to say things like this, but I'm glad you won and not Brad Gimble," Mr. Grimm said. "I get the feeling he was just looking to pad his college applications."

Dean shrugged. He still wasn't 100 percent sure how he'd managed to eke out a victory over the more popular football player, but he wasn't going to question it.

Mr. Grimm gathered up his things, then paused at the door. "Did you guys hand out the teacher survey?"

One of Dean's first jobs as SGA vice president was to write up and distribute a survey to the school's teachers to see how they could work better with SGA. He had spent the weekend trying to type it up at home, then given up after a dozen typos. Mom had sat down with his handwritten version and produced a clean copy in five minutes.

"I have it," he told Mr. Grimm, "but just one."

"You can make copies now, during your free period, and put them in the teachers' mailboxes."

Dean's nose wrinkled. He didn't mind cranking the mimeograph machine, but he hated the smell of the toner.

"Do I have to?" He gestured to his pristine white jacket. "I don't want to get purple all over my new—"

"No mimeos for this," Mr. Grimm interrupted. "You can use the Xerox machine in the principal's office. Remember to let it warm up for a few minutes before you push any buttons."

Dean had used the photocopier once before—it was as big as a doghouse and coughed and chuckled like his dad's old Chevelle. Still, it was a million times better than hand-cranking the mimeograph and breathing in the Purple Death.

Mr. Grimm waved and headed out the door, then stopped once more. "Forgot—you're going to need to get some paper from the supply closet." He fished around in his pockets and produced a key ring with over a dozen keys. "It's one of these. I think the one labeled 2QR."

Mr. Grimm handed the keys over and disappeared down the hall. Dean hefted the key ring and then tucked it into his pocket. Time to get to work.

As the school day ended, Dean made his final locker stop. Jay caught up to him as they headed for the door and the buses. They were laughing about something on *The Cosby Show* when Mr. Grimm ran up to them.

"Dean, you forgot to give me my keys back."

Dean froze. He *had* forgotten. How? He sheepishly handed them over.

When Mr. Grimm was gone, Dean kept walking, then stopped when he realized Jay had fallen behind. Peering around, he saw his friend standing in the same spot as before, staring off into the middle distance.

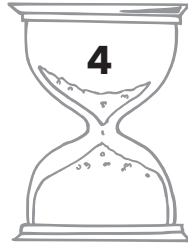
Dean knew that look. A good time usually followed. Or trouble. Sometimes both.

"I'm gonna miss the bus," he said, returning to Jay's side. "Come on."

"I'll drive you," Jay said with an almost vacant expression on his face; he was building something in his head. "He just . . . gave you his keys?" Jay asked slowly.

"I needed paper. For the copier. So I had to unlock the supply room."

A savage and utterly unrestrained grin split Jay's face. "I have an idea . . ."



THE PRESENT: ELAYAH

In her garage, Elayah stared at the relics laid out before her on an old garden tarp.

Relics was probably kind. Most of it was, she had to admit, junk.

There were postcards from such mundane places as Philadelphia and the Jersey Shore. A few sheets of paper containing what appeared to be emo poetry of the very worst, most high-schoolish sorts. A blue envelope containing a love letter from “L” to “M” that was alternately so overwrought and so dirty that she blushed in embarrassment for the writer and the recipient, then for herself for reading it. The word *girth* actually appeared more than once.

There were vinyl 45s and those cassette tapes. Ancient video game cartridges. A magazine called *Byte*. A collection of *Garfield* comic strips. (Wow, that cat was *old!*) A couple of old VHS tapes that she could identify only because her dad still had one of them and his brother crushing the hundred-meter relay their junior year, long before Uncle Antoine ran off to Mexico. Dad kept saying he was going to digitize it but never got around to it.

There was a VCR in the attic. Maybe she could watch the old tapes.

Maybe she could listen to the old cassettes and 45s. And find a way to access the data on the old disks.

And...

And she sighed, gazing at her empire of crap. After a deputy had photographed everything, a reporter from the *Loco* had—as promised—stopped

by and photographed everything again, then interviewed the four excavators. Afterward, Jorja had pointed out that they needed to do *something* with the capsule contents . . . and the three others had looked pointedly at her.

“This *was* your idea . . .” Marcie had said, then trailed off.

Gee, thanks, bestie.

So she had packed everything up and brought it home. Twenty-four hours ago, she would have been *thrilled* at the opportunity to paw through the remnants of her dad’s teen years, to sift through the late twentieth century and learn things that you couldn’t find on Wikipedia and in old movies.

But that was before she’d held a murder weapon in her hands.

It *was* a murder weapon. She was sure of it. Elayah didn’t believe in ESP or second sight or psychic powers, but she believed in gut instinct, and every part of her—including her gut, *especially* her gut—cried out that the knife was exactly what it seemed to be: the ender of a life. A cutter of the cords of Fate.

Yeah, okay, she was getting a little poetic in her excitement. Still. The point stood.

She left the tarp and its contents for another day and went inside, flicking open her phone as she did so. The *Loco* site had been updated, and the story about the time capsule was now the top link:

Local Teens Unearth a Piece of Our Past

With the byline Rachel Sagura. Rachel was not much older than Elayah, a comms major at the nearby community college with journalistic aspirations. Or at least a desire to end up on TV.

For more than thirty years, the piece began, it has lain beneath the ground, deposited there in years past by a group of high school friends who thought they themselves would dig it up someday. Instead, that task has fallen to their children.

Ronald Reagan was president when the time capsule went into the earth on the hill overlooking Canterstown High School in the fall of 1986. Cyndi Lauper, Bon Jovi, and Huey Lewis and the News made the music that had everyone in town dancing. The Berlin Wall still stood, and the Challenger disaster was still fresh in everyone’s mind. . . .

Elayah groaned a bit and skimmed down, eager to skip the part where Rachel proved that she possessed core competencies in both Wikipedia and copy-and-paste.

The capsule was unearthed by a quartet of current Canterstown seniors, led by Elayah Laird, who describes herself as “something of a polymath, I guess.”

Elayah winced. She’d said it wryly, with a healthy dose of self-deprecation, but that color didn’t come across in black-and-white text.

Rachel introduced the others and then went on:

Rising early, the foursome gathered at the school, having been given permission by the town to dig on municipal property. With the map they’d discovered already digitized for safekeeping, they puzzled out the location of the capsule and dug it up, uncovering a treasure trove of 1980s memorabilia sure to spark to life the nostalgia center of any self-respecting Gen Xer.

“We were kinda hoping for gold doubloons,” Liam said. “But I guess you can’t always get what you’re hoping for.”

Liam’s deadpan delivery fared about as well in text as had her own.

Rachel evenhandedly included some comments from Jorja and Marcie, then wrapped up with the information that “the four plan to examine their booty and perhaps present it as an exhibit at the Canterstown Public Library this winter.”

Examine their booty? Really? That was Rachel’s idea of wordsmithing? Elayah shivered in sheer repulsion and hoped for the sweet release of death. She would hear a *lot* of “Examine *this* booty!” tomorrow at school for sure. No doubt some of it from Liam.

There were photographs of the stuff currently laid out on the tarp—two wide shots of everything and then a gallery of close-ups. Below that, the usual comment section.

I remember those shoes! Best shoes I ever owned!

OMG—I had that exact same Walkman! My kids would never get it if I showed it to them.

That ALF lunch box could have been mine!

A bunch of oldsters reminiscing, going all nostalgic. What would they say if they knew, though? If they knew what else had been in the time capsule?

Still staring at the phone, she walked through the living room. Dad had gotten home from work and lay on the sofa, swiping through his iPad. “Eyes up!” he admonished her, and she juked her line of sight up just in time to avoid colliding with the coffee table.

“Sorry,” she said sheepishly.

“Kids these days,” Dad said, clucking his tongue for effect. He smiled as he said it.

“Adults these days,” she retorted. It was their usual back-and-forth.

“What’s got your head in the clouds, sweetheart?”

Elayah flopped down onto the sofa next to him. “The time capsule.”

“I saw the story.” He waved his iPad in the air a bit.

“I found your thing,” she said. “It’s out in the garage with the rest of the stuff. I’ll go—”

“Don’t worry about it,” he told her. “I’ll see it later. What’s bothering you?”

She hadn’t yet told him about the knife. Liam’s dad had seemed pretty serious about keeping it under wraps. “What was the point of doing an inventory if you didn’t actually keep it accurate?”

He pursed his lips and tilted his head back, time traveling. “Well, look, we were sloppy. What can I say? I guess we didn’t bother to inventory it all.”

Sloppy or not, though, one of them had put that knife in there. What did he know? What did he know that he wasn’t telling her?



“Honey?” he asked, sitting up straighter. “You’re doing that thing where you disappear into yourself. What’s bothering you?”

She considered telling him about the knife, right then and there. But she couldn’t do it. She had to give the sheriff time to start looking into it. And besides, there was nothing for her dad to do about it.

“Nothing, Dad. I just have to ask Liam some stuff.” She sidled away, slipping into the kitchen, tapping at her phone.

Elayah: **hey**

Liam: **yo**

Elayah: **has your dad said anything about the**  

Liam: **oh yeah he always shares case information with me** 😊

Elayah: **come on**

Liam: **I'll ask him when he gets** 🏠

Elayah: **promise?**

Liam: 🙌

After dinner, she went out into the garage and recovered the hinged photo frame from the tarp. She presented it to her parents with a little drumroll playing on her phone. Mom took it from her and stared at it for a long while, her eyes glistening.

“Look at you. Both of you.” She held it out to Dad, who nodded and said nothing, his lips pressed together.

“I’m sorry,” Elayah said. “Should I not have showed it to you?” She’d never known her uncle Antoine and probably never would. His last communication from Mexico had been something like fifteen years before she was even born.

“Baby,” her dad said softly, and stood to put his arm around her. “You did just the right thing.”

They squeezed each other for a moment. It was quiet for too long.

“I just don’t remember your hair being *so* greasy!” Mom said abruptly, and she and Elayah cracked up as Dad spluttered a nearly incoherent defense of his teen self.

Later, she sat in her room, staring at the ceiling. It was long past time to go to sleep. There was still no news from Liam, nothing at all about the police investigation.

And why would there be? The sheriff, she realized, didn’t really take this seriously. His first step should have been to call the other five people who’d contributed to the time capsule. Well, he definitely hadn’t called her dad, and a quick hop into her QSA group text told her that he hadn’t called anyone else’s parents, either.

He had obviously been humoring her when he’d promised to investigate. He thought the whole thing was just a joke, so he’d probably just handed

off the knife and the note and the cloth to a deputy who had it filed away in the evidence room in one of those dusty old cardboard boxes you see on cop shows all the time. And it would sit there for *another* thirty-five years, a different sort of time capsule, and no one would ever know what had actually happened.

But people needed to know. People *deserved* to know. Somewhere out there, a family was missing a piece of itself. She knew how that felt, vicariously if nothing else. Just from her dad's expressions, from the way her mom had said *Both of you*.

It had happened to another family, too. A loved one had disappeared thirty-five years ago, and they didn't know why or how. They had the right to know, didn't they?

Just don't say anything about the knife or the note, okay?

That was what the sheriff had said. Those were his exact words. Elayah had a very good memory for what people said—it made taking notes in class pretty much redundant—and she knew that Liam's dad had been very specific. She was allowed to talk to the paper, just as long as she didn't say anything about the knife or the note.

Her dad had a saying: *Sometimes you just gotta kick the mule if you want it to kick back*.

It was a pretty stupid saying. As far as she knew, her dad had never even *seen* a mule. And, like, why would you *want* a mule to kick? But whatever. The point still stood.

Liam's dad wasn't going to do anything about the murder unless he was compelled to.

So.

Elayah: **hey there I wanted to add something to the story. is that cool?**

It took a while for the response to come. She whiled away the minutes playing *Bold-or-Dash!* on her phone.

Rachel: **like what?**

She chose her words carefully.

Elayah: **we found something. I can't tell you what because the police are investigating.**

This time, the response was nearly instantaneous.

Rachel: **Police? What did you find? I can update the story.**

Elayah folded her lower lip in against her teeth and worried it back and forth a bit. She had already figured out exactly what to say. Had already written it, in fact, in her Notes app. She copied and pasted her response in and hesitated not even the slightest bit before pushing *Send*.

Rachel did not, in fact, update the story that night. She posted a new one instead.

Police Investigating Evidence Unearthed from Time Capsule!

The lede was as good as it could get in local news, she figured:

Four teens who dug up a thirty-five-year-old time capsule this morning found more than just the music and amusements of their parents' generation. They also found evidence of a crime.

Not bad.

From there, the article quickly summarized the earlier piece, along with a link back to it, then got to the nitty-gritty:

"I can't say much," says Elayah Laird, who led the group that excavated the capsule, "but there was evidence of something pretty horrible in there. We know what you did. And now the police know, too."

We know what you did. That hadn't been a part of her original text. Rachel had texted her back and asked, *What would you say to the person who put this evidence in there, if you could talk to them?*

And Elayah had thought about it and figured *We know what you did* was pretty neutral. But seeing it in black and white, it suddenly seemed threatening.

Furthermore, she hadn't expected Rachel to use her name—they hadn't discussed it—but oh well, there it was.

When pressed for more information, Laird demurred, stating that she had been asked to say nothing of the specifics of the evidence.

The Canterstown Sheriff's Department did not respond to our request for comment. We will update this story if that happens.

Elayah nodded to herself triumphantly. There. *Now* let Liam's dad ignore the knife. He would have no choice but to take it seriously.

Now she could sleep.

She thumbed off her phone, turned out her light, and rolled over, secure in the knowledge that things would be different in the morning.

And woke up in the dead of night, suddenly, completely.

There was the pressure of another body on her bed, the heat of someone behind her, a slender, sharp line of metal at her throat, and then a soft whisper in her ear:

"Don't scream."