

**JEFF WOOTEN**

# **KILL CALL**

**A YOUNG ADULT THRILLER**



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CALL**



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*For Martha, who never wavered, even when I did.*



Kill Call: In American football, a predetermined call the quarterback makes to “kill” the play at the line of scrimmage in order to run a previously determined call best suited for the defense being played.

*“Success isn’t measured by money or power or social rank.  
Success is measured by your discipline and inner peace.”*

—Mike Ditka

# CHAPTER 1



**O**n August twelfth at one thirty-two in the morning, Hanna Smith is going to die.

Nine days. That's all she has.

She stands less than a hundred yards from me, texting in front of Markle's, a designer jeans store. Two bags stuffed with clothes hang from the crook of her left arm, a huge purse on her right.

She's in workout clothes, and her long blond hair is pulled back in a ponytail. She's seventeen and goes to Miller's Chapel. I go to Bedford with the rest of the public school kids.

It's Thursday afternoon, and the mall is packed. People swarm around me as I sit on a bench in the middle of the promenade. Somewhere a baby is crying.

*I feel ya kid.*

I don't want to be here. It feels way too stalkerish. That's not what I am. This whole thing feels wrong, but Dad says it's important, so here I am, trying to be cool.

I don't feel cool. I feel like I have a huge spotlight on my head and everyone is staring. Only no one is actually staring at me. I'm not antisocial, but crowds put me on edge. I've always been like this, but I've wondered in the last few months if it isn't also, partly, because of what I am. Since the Dream, I've been second-guessing my entire life.

I lean back, trying and failing to be nonchalant. I'm bad at this. Hanna's in her own world, hammering away at her phone with her thumbs.

In nine short days, Hanna Smith will be dead.

But only if I'm not there to save her. A life for a life. It's the only way.



My phone vibrates in my hand and I jump, almost dropping it. I check the text, trying to be chill. Nothing to see here, just a dude sitting in the mall on his phone.

Party Sat—B thurrrr!!!

It's a huge group text from Jacoby Cole. My phone buzzes with replies before I manage to mute it. How do people type so fast?

"Hey, Jude."

I flinch at the sound of my name and look up.

Molly Goldman smiles down at me, her hazel eyes bright and warm. "Did you get Jacoby's text?"

I feel like I've been caught stealing as I glance over at Hanna, but she's gone. She was standing there for ten minutes, and I look away for a second—

"Jude? You okay?"

I look up at Molly. She's still smiling at me. So far, I haven't completely blown my cover. I return her smile. It's not hard. I'm actually happy to see her. Any other moment in time would have been preferable, but such has been my life lately. "Sorry. I was just— Yeah, Jacoby's text. Just got it. Guess you did too?"

"Yep. Bet you're dying to go, huh?"

I'm wound tight and the short bark of laughter that escapes me is a little much. "You bet, can't wait."

Molly raises her eyebrows and smiles. She knows me well enough to know I won't be attending Jacoby's little back-to-school get-together. I think she's about to say goodbye and move on, but she doesn't move. "Want some company for a minute?"

"Uh, *yeah*, absolutely." I make room for her on the bench, my mall experience suddenly much brighter, if not more complicated. "Have a seat."

She sits, pushing a lock of curly red hair out of her face. “Soooo, are you waiting for someone?”

“No, just chilling for a minute.” I try not to, but I can’t help but glance one more time to where Hanna was.

Still gone. I should go. Dad would certainly tell me to leave now that I’ve lost the Chosen. *But* Dad’s not my favorite person right now, and besides, I really want to talk to Molly.

“Back-to-school shopping then?” Molly thumps my leg. “I have to know why Jude *I don’t like people* Erickson is hanging out on a bench in his least favorite place.”

“I’ve decided to embrace my social side,” I say, gaining a grin from Molly.

“Unlikely story.”

I shrug. “Need new practice cleats.” It’s not a lie exactly. I do need new cleats, but I’ll probably order them online. Malls really aren’t necessary.

“Okay,” Molly says, nodding and smiling. “That is a believable story. You boys and your football.” She shakes her head, but she’s still smiling. She has a really nice smile. “You excited about the season?”

I sit up, on comfortable footing. I love football, always have. I’m good at it too. “Yep,” I say. “Coach thinks we can win state. How about Lucas? He excited?”

Molly looks down. “Last I heard.”

My Spidey-Senses tingle. All is not well in Munson–Molly land.

Lucas Munson is Molly’s boyfriend, my teammate, and a Grade A dick. Next year he’ll be playing college football somewhere big. I don’t even know if college is a possibility for me.

I lean back against the seat and watch the people. “Are things cool with you and Lucas?” I ask as casually as I can muster, hoping very much that things are not cool with her and Munson.

She places her hands on either side of her and pushes up slightly. Her voice is low and tinged with something close to regret. “No. No,

they aren't Jude. We aren't seeing each other anymore. It happened yesterday, actually."

I try not to smile. The mall is starting to grow on me. "Huh," I say. "So, what happened?"

"Stuff, you know," she says wistfully. "He wants to move away for college. I don't. Honestly, we've been headed this way for a while. But enough about that. What have you been up to this summer? You've been kind off the grid."

Molly's words are true. This summer has been a nightmare, literally.

"Eh. Football, mostly. Roofing some with Dad . . ." I tap my foot. *Planning my first kill*, I add to myself. I need to chill. I make my stupid leg stop bouncing and shrug. "You know, the usual." I make an involuntary noise halfway between a grunt and a laugh.

Molly elbows me. "What's so funny?"

"It's nothing," I say.

"It's something. And now you have to tell me."

For a fleeting few moments, I consider throwing it all away. Letting it all out, telling her everything. The Dreams, what they mean, what Dad is, what I am. It's ridiculous. Molly would think I was crazy. Sometimes, I think I might be.

All this goes through my head in seconds. I shake my head and shrug, trying and failing to think of what to say.

"Awkward silences are fun," Molly says, "but I want you to use your words, Jude."

"Well, awkward silences are kind of my thing, and I hear you're single now." I hesitate, not sure where that came from. "Uh, sorry."

Molly's laugh lets me know she's not offended. "Honestly, I appreciate you not giving me a pep talk about Lucas."

"Not a chance of that," I say, surprising myself again. Molly laughs harder this time. I'm on a roll and decide to take a leap. "Can I ask you something?"

“Oh, this sounds interesting. Asking permission. Go on.”

This whole conversation feels like a release, like all the weirdness in my life recently isn't real. There is freedom in being pushed to the edges of sanity. Mundane stuff, like Molly's love life, suddenly seems trivial. And I have questions. “Why Lucas?” I ask. “I never understood that at all.”

Molly grimaces, and I wonder if I crossed some unknowable social line. “You know your problem, Jude?”

“*My* problem? I thought we were talking about Lucas?”

“He asked, Jude.”

*He asked.*

“Uh,” I say. “That's it? He asked? It has to be more than that.”

Her eyes measure me. “Sure, but it has to start somewhere.”

I still have doubts, but I think newly single Molly Goldman might be flirting with me.

I swallow and force the next sentence out of my mouth. “You want to come . . . help me pick out some cleats? We can head over to the food court after. Mall pizza is, surprisingly, not horrible.”

Molly's eyes narrow like she's appraising me. “You're such a bad liar, Jude. I've had the pizza. Spoiler alert: It's horrible.”

“Not if you eat it fast.”

Molly belly laughs. “That makes absolutely no sense.”

“Sure it does. You'll see.”

“How about I get a salad?”

“So, yes, then.”

“Sure,” Molly says and stands. She reaches for her bags.

“Let me get those for you.” I stand up and grab the bags, turning, enjoying the mall for the first time since I was a kid . . . and Hanna *Freaking* Smith is right there.

An annoyed look crosses Hanna's face as she brushes past me. Her shoulder meets mine, the faintest of touches. It's instantaneous.

The light twists, time slows, and I'm not in the mall anymore. I'm in Hanna's house. Hanna's at my feet, blood pooling around her head. The hammer in my hand feels good, like truth and power. I feel . . . electric. Everything is right. I am at peace, finally. If only for a moment.

Then I'm back in the mall. No more than a second has passed, but my head reels, my stomach turns, and my feet falter as I watch Hanna walk away. Dad's words echo in my ear. *The first time will make you queasy.*

Molly stops, watching my gaze. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I just—"

"Was that Hanna Smith? Do you know her?"

"Uh, no," I manage. The world is still tilting, and I need a second. I ask the only question that comes to mind. "How do you know her?"

Molly shrugs. "I don't. She goes to Chapel, and I see her around." Her tone softens. "She always seems sad."

She walks on, and I fall in beside her. The euphoria and queasiness the vision brought are still warring in my body, but my feet are steady.

"Fall Happening auditions are next week," Molly says. "We're doing *The Crucible*."

"That's the one where the woman has to wear the red A, right?"

"That's *The Scarlet Letter*, Jude." Molly looks at me as we walk. "Did you really not know that?"

I give an exaggerated frown. "Sorry Molly, but no, I did not."

"Whatever," Molly says with a laugh. "You can't fool me. All these years you've been playing the part of the dumb jock, while harboring a love for classical literature. I think you've been hiding the real you all these years."

I almost trip but have a second to recover as a gang of middle school girls, all on their phones, nearly run us over, not a one of them ever looking up.

Molly's joking, but that comment hit a little close to home. "You see right through me, Molly Goldman."

“I do,” Molly agrees with a quick glance and a sharp grin. “So, never lie to me again.”

Molly has no clue. My whole life has been a lie.

I have a sudden urge to share, to share something real with Molly. I let out a wistful breath. “When I was a kid,” I say, “Mom would bring me here on the weekends. We’d go to a movie and eat in the food court. I loved that. It was, you know, good times.”

“That’s sweet. How is your mom?”

“Not sure. I haven’t seen her in three years.”

Molly slows her pace. She knew my folks were divorced, but she didn’t know about Mom. Hardly anyone does. It’s not something I talk about. “That’s horrible, Jude.”

“It is what it is,” I say, trying to sound casual. I’m positive I fail.

Molly moves closer until her arm brushes against mine. People flow around us, but we are an island in the flood. “You’re a different kind of guy. You know that, right?”

“Yeah,” I say. “I know.”

Molly elbows me playfully. “Don’t sound sad. It’s a compliment. Normal is boring.”

She’s not wrong. But it stings. Three months ago, before the Dream took over my life, I at least had the option of normality. I want that back.

I look over at Molly.

“What?” she asks.

Something warm simmers in my chest. Something normal. “You want, uh, you want to go to Jacoby’s party with me?”

As soon as the words are out, I wish they were back in, but it’s too late. Molly’s expression is unreadable, and I want to crawl away.

“Are you asking me out? I think you’re asking me out. Bold.”

“Just hanging,” I say. “No biggie.”

Her expression turns serious. “Don’t you hate parties?”

“I don’t know. It is our senior year. Maybe I need to live a little. Break out of my shell. If you were with me . . . it might not be so bad.”

“Might not be so bad, huh?” Molly asks playfully.

I know she’s going to say yes, even before she says yes, and I can hardly believe it. “Yeah, you know. Less than horrible anyway.”

She laughs. “Well, when you put it that way, sure.”

“Date then,” I ask, a part of me needing confirmation.

“Date,” Molly agrees.

We walk into the food court, the mix of a dozen different cuisines vying for dominance. I take it all in.

I think I’ve changed my mind about the mall.

I love it.



## CHAPTER 2

Dad's still up when I get home. He's got his feet up, watching the ten o'clock news. "You're out late," he says, still watching the TV. "Thought we agreed you'd only follow her to the mall?"

"I did, but I saw Molly Goldman and . . ." my words trail off. The truth is, we spent hours talking. It wasn't *what* we talked about at all, but rather *how* we talked. Spending time with someone I really click with hasn't been something that's happened a lot in my life.

But it isn't just that. I really like Molly, always have, and for the first time she's shown more than a passing interest. It's a new kind of experience for me, and I want more of it.

"We were talking," I say, the simple explanation not even close to what really happened.

Dad looks at me for the first time, and I see way too much knowing in the expression. "Molly Goldman?"

I don't respond. It's a test. Everything lately has been a test.

"How well do you know her?"

I shrug. "We go to school together. I've known her, like, forever."

Dad stares at me, waiting.

People hate lulls in conversations. Guilty people especially. A part of me wants to fill the void with something, anything, but I know better. Never give up what you don't have to. Dad's always been like this. When I was a kid, he'd make it a game. Since I Dreamed, it's been way more intense.

After a few seconds, Dad gives me a small smile. "I remember her now. Redhead, right? She seems nice."

"Yeah, she's nice. We, uh, might be going to a party together Saturday."



“A date?” Dad never encouraged me to date. Considering what he and Mom went through, I can understand why.

I shift uncomfortably. “I don’t know. Maybe. We’re friends. It’s a party. Back-to-school thing.”

“Party, huh? Not at the Bluehole, I hope.”

“The Bluehole?” I snort. *Once you go in, you never come out.* The sing-song refrain runs through my mind. The Bluehole is an abandoned bauxite mine, from when Rush Springs was a booming community. That was even before Dad’s time. When Dad was a kid, it was a place where they used to party. Until some kids died. They jumped or fell, I’m not sure, but they were never seen again, and an urban legend was born.

*Once you go in, you never come out.*

“No, Dad, nobody does that anymore. That’s—no.”

Dad pushes up from his chair and joins me in the kitchen. I’m as tall as my father, but he’s bigger. I see myself in him, so does everybody else. His black hair is salted with gray, and he carries some cushion around his gut, but he’s about the last person anyone wants to mess with. Like me, he was all-state football back in his day. Someday I’ll probably look just like him, and that’s cool. “So how did it go?” I have no question what we’re talking about now. “You kept your distance, right?”

I stare at my feet. According to Dad, physical proximity strengthens the bond. The closer you get, the tighter the connection. It makes the Dream more vivid. The more vivid the Dream, the better your chances of success. That’s why I was there in the first place.

But Dad also told me under no circumstances was I to touch Hanna. The whole vision thing could have gone way worse.

Way, way worse.

Hanna could have shared the vision. But that didn’t happen. No harm, no foul is how I see things. I doubt Dad will be as forgiving.

Dad senses my hesitation. “You got too close, didn’t you?”

He’s right, and that makes it worse. I snap my head up. “So that’s the first conclusion you jump to?”

He says nothing, just waits. How does he know? It’s hard keeping stuff from him. Impossible really.

I take his disapproving stare for a second or two, trying, and failing, to think of an explanation. Molly distracted me, but it wasn’t her fault. I shrug and walk to the kitchen. I get the milk out of the fridge and pour a glass of milk. Dad comes in and leans against the kitchen wall.

I pull out the ham and mayonnaise to make a sandwich. “I was with Molly. Hanna was going the other way, but she must have . . . I don’t know. She came back and ran into us. She brushed by me. We touched.”

Dad’s fist slams into the wall, crunching through the sheetrock. “Physical contact? You made physical contact with the Chosen?”

I look up at him, my face a mask.

It’s a test. He’s done stuff like this lately. It’s completely out of character. That’s the point. If I get caught, if I find myself having to answer difficult questions, I’ll have to keep my cool. He’s doing all this to help me. Still, I’m so done with this. All of this, from my first Dream until today. Why me? I don’t want this to be my life.

“Yes,” I say with no emotion. No hint of surprise, despite my racing heart.

His hand’s bleeding, but he pays it no mind. “Tell me what you saw.”

I start back on my sandwich. I spread the mayonnaise on the bread, finish up, and take a bite. I chew the bite and take a sip of milk before I answer. “I had a vision, just me. She kept on walking like nothing happened.”

His eyes study me coolly. “You’re sure?”

“Positive,” I say.

“Okay,” he says. “That’s possible. Likely, in fact. Go on.”

I take another sip of milk. “I was in her house. Standing over her body, a hammer in my hand. Just like the Dream.”

Dad glances at the cut on his hand and gets a towel from the drawer. He wraps it up, his eyes never leaving mine. “How did it . . . feel?”

“During the vision or after?”

He shakes his head, annoyed. “During?”

I hesitate. I think I’m tough. I know I’m tough, but the words don’t want to form. “It felt real. Like, not dreamlike at all. Real.” I hesitate. “It felt . . . It felt *right*. I was happy. No, not happy, thrilled. I felt like it wouldn’t last, but I knew I’d never be sorry. I felt good. Powerful.”

“And now?” I hear a hesitancy in my father’s voice I’ve never heard before. He’s scared. Scared of what I might be.

I take another bite of sandwich, but it might as well be cardboard for all the joy I get from it. “It makes me sick to think about it. To enjoy,” I sigh, “doing that.”

Dad nods. “Good. That’s good.”

“How’d you *think* I’d feel? Geez Dad, sometimes you’re worse than Mom.”

The words sting him. It’s plain on his face. It’s rare I can upset him. A part of me wants to twist the knife.

“Your mother,” he says slowly, “knows better than most what we are.” He flexes his bandaged hand.

“Does she?” I ask. “Does Mom know I’m like you?”

“You screwed up,” Dad says, not answering my question. “I told you not to get close. If the Chosen had shared the vision—” His face flashes with equal parts concern and anger. “In the mall? It would have been over. We’d have to pull back.”

I shake my head. Sometimes Dad contradicts himself. “A life for a life. Isn’t that what you taught me?”

“It is,” Dad says, softening his tone. “But *you* are what’s important.” He comes and puts his uninjured hand behind my head and pulls his forehead to mine. “I love you, Son. I’m trying so hard to make this better, easier for you. There will be others. Sometimes you won’t succeed. Sometimes . . . you have to let them go.” Dad’s hand falls from the back of my head and he turns his back to me.

Dad has told me about a few of his Dreams. Once the killer got away, and the Chosen was killed later, but this is different. He at least tried. “Let them go,” I say incredulously. “Did you ever do that? Did you ever walk away and let someone die?”

Dad turns back to me, and his eyes hold a lifetime of regret. “I know what it’s like. The call of the Dream. It feels like if you don’t answer it, it will destroy you. But you have a choice. It won’t be easy, but I’ll help.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” I say, my voice rising. “Did you *ever* walk away?”

Dad shifts on his feet. “What I did or didn’t do doesn’t matter.” He holds up his hand as angry words form on my lips. “Listen, Jude. It’s still on. You messed up, but nothing has changed.” He steps toward me. “I need you to focus. Stay as far away from that girl as you can. If you touch again, the vision will be shared, and we abort. We go on vacation.”

*Vacation* is the plan in the unlikely event we have to call it off. Dad even bringing it up makes me want to scream. “You’d do it, too, wouldn’t you? You’d let her die.”

“Of course I would. You are all that matters.” He looks away. “This is dangerous business. You want to end up in prison for the rest of your life, or worse, dead?” He looks at me and his expression hardens. “You’re my son. I won’t let that happen. If things go wrong, there can be nothing that ties you to the Chosen.”

*Chosen*. Not once has Dad said Hanna’s name.

“Her name is Hanna,” I say.

Dad grimaces. “I thought you were ready. Obviously not.”

“If I’m not ready, it’s your fault. You think I wanted this?”

“That’s enough,” Dad snaps, the hurt clear in his eyes. “Go get your workout clothes on. We have work to do.”

“It’s ten thirty. We’re finishing the Howards’ roof in the morning. Then I have football.”

“And I’m your boss. Lenny can run the crew fine without us for an hour or two.” He turns and stalks off to his room.

I take another bite of sandwich. Why does he have to be such a hard-ass all the time?

The half-eaten sandwich hits the bottom of the trash can, and I go get dressed and meet Dad in the garage. There are no cars, just a wrestling mat, a heavy bag in one corner, and a Wing Chun dummy in another.

We spend the next hour sparring. Dad pins me over and over. Once I manage to almost get him in an arm bar before he escapes it. It’s grueling work, and when I take my shower and finally get into bed, it’s close to midnight. I’m beat, but I can’t help reliving parts of my day. I think of Molly and how my life would be different if I weren’t what I am. Dad says daydreaming is a weakness. Things are how they are. Right now, I don’t care what Dad thinks. Nothing wrong with a little fantasy now and then.

When the time comes, I’ll do what’s right. I’ll make my first kill.

## CHAPTER 3



**H**anna's house is a smoky outline in the gathering fog and dense foliage. I pull out my phone and check the time. It's one-seventeen, Saturday, August the twelfth. The time and date are the only thing not distorted on the screen. I can't even tell what kind of phone it is. Likewise, my hands are smears of black and gray. I might be wearing gloves, but I might not be. The hammer, the murder weapon, too, is hazy and distorted, giving away its basic shape only.

I am a passenger, being carried by another, unable to do anything but watch as the future, unhindered, unfolds.

The moon cuts through the clouds and fog, sending rivulets of silver shining down through the leaves. Drops of water fall from the canopy far above, but it's not raining.

I move forward through the pine and oak, stumbling occasionally through the dark woods. Twigs and brambles snap under my feet, and I have to look down a few times to disentangle myself from the clutching greenbriers, but it's a short walk. Adrenaline pumps through my veins as I stand on the edge of the woods, watching the house.

The light haloing Hanna's home is from the streetlamps out front. The back porch light is off. My breath moistens the already damp air as I let out a deep breath. The hammer bounces in my hand, almost on its own.

I walk to the back door and quickly kneel next to the potted plant. I tilt the pot up and then fumble around with a gloved hand under the planter. It takes longer than I want, but I finally have what I need. The metal house key glints silver in the moonlight. Something warm and satisfied pulses through me with each heartbeat.

I stand, peering through the door's glass into the house. My reflection catches my eye. My ski mask covers my face all the way down to my neck. It's as black as my clothes that cover my arms and the gloves that cover my hands, amorphous things with no hint of design other than color. My eyes, the only thing visible of the person behind the clothes, are shadows, gray-black holes reflecting nothing but night.

The whole image is distorted, not from the glass, not from any natural process. One side of my head is large and bulbous, the other slim and elongated. My body is hazy and pulsating. I slip inside, no hesitation in my steps.

Purpose and excitement course through me as I slip through a kitchen, into a den, and up the stairs. Blood throbs in my ears as I come to stand before her door. For a second, I hesitate, gripping the hammer tight, and push the door open.

Hanna lies facing me in her bed, her eyes closed. I take a step forward, and a floorboard squeaks. Hanna stirs and pushes up on an elbow and looks at me with the blank stare of someone woken from deep sleep. I can hear my own heart beating now. It sounds like the beating of drums, and I tremble. Is it fear? Joy?

Yes, and yes.

I leap forward and raise the hammer. I bring the hammer down, but Hanna rolls, and it misses her head by the barest of margins. She's screaming at me from the other side of her bed, but the words are incoherent, and they only make my heart beat harder, louder, until it's the only thing I *can* hear.

I jump up on the bed, and she darts around the end, headed for the door. I jump back down and swing the hammer. It catches her in the arm, and she spins, screaming, in pain and terror this time.

Still, she manages to lunge toward the door, but the room is not big enough for her to get away. I bring the hammer down on the back of her head. With a sickening crack, Hanna's body crumbles and is still.

My chest heaves with deep inhalations as I look around me. The bed is large, heaped with blankets and comforters. An open MacBook sits on a desk next to a walk-in closet, the door open revealing lines of clothes and shoes.

The shades on two large windows are down, glowing white with the reflection of the streetlight out front. On Hanna's nightstand, the digital clock reads one thirty-two in neon red.

I look down.

Hanna's at my feet, blood pooling around her head. The hammer in my hand feels just so . . . like judgment come to the wicked. I sway on my feet like I'm on drugs. I feel so good. Everything is right. Everything is as it should be. I look at the body at my feet and feel no regret, no shame, no remorse. I am awash in satisfaction. Hanna deserved to die.

My eyes snap open, and I sit up in bed sucking in a lungful of air like a drowning man breaking the lake's surface. I'm soaked. Sweat evaporates from my skin under the ceiling fan even as my bed sheets cling to my damp skin.

Fear and revulsion churn my stomach. An invisible taint skims the surface of my soul like curdled milk. Slow at first, my body trembles but with gaining force until my whole body shakes. I shut my eyes, trying to ride out the nausea threatening to empty my stomach.

I don't know how long I sit there, shaking, willing myself not to vomit, but when I open my eyes, I see Dad is at my desk, and I have no doubt he's been there for a long time.

He leans back. "Tell me," he says.

A second or two passes as I clear my mind. This is what we do. I am a Dreamer, like my father. I see murders before they happen, through the eyes of the killer, in and around the places close to where I sleep, to where I Dream.

This is our calling. It is my job to stop the killer, to save the Chosen.



As far as Dad knows, we are alone in the world, Dreaming of future evil, given a righteous mission to save an innocent life. I often wonder about that. Where did this gift or curse come from? Dad says he's never met anyone like himself. Now that I've had the Dream, I can see how it works. How Dad came up with the rules. Once he told them to me, I felt the rightness of them. Dad had to work it all out on his own. I am so thankful for him.

He was alone. I am not.

Three months ago, I had my first Dream, and I knew the girl who died, kind of. Hanna Smith isn't my friend, but I did recognize her.

Dad called it a *lucky* break.

The Dream gives you what you need. Sometimes it gives you more, sometimes less. The fact that I knew Hanna made finding the murder scene easy, but *lucky*? No. Nothing about this has been lucky.

Dad was right about one thing, though. Being close to Hanna made the bond between us tighter. The dreams before were vaporous things, insubstantial. They were, well, dreams. Tonight was different. It was so *real*. I felt the killer's emotions like never before. The sicko enjoyed the murder, like a thrill kill. They wanted to do it so very bad, but it was also personal. One thing I am sure of now: the killer knows Hanna.

I take a slow, steady breath, not sick anymore, but on edge. I force myself to relax. Aching muscles reluctantly slacken.

I nod once at Dad, and I tell him about the Dream. I tell him everything.

## CHAPTER 4



**M**y car isn't the nicest. It's an old Cadillac my grandmother left Dad and me. We fixed it up some, replaced the spark plugs, redid the suspension, changed out the brake pads, rotors, and brake lines. The engine was in good condition since Grandma only took it to church and the grocery store. There is a lot of sentimental value in the car, but that's about it.

It's two-tone blue with a V6. We call it the Beast because it's a sled of a ride. Some girls wouldn't be caught dead in such a thing. Not Molly, though. Thankfully.

As soon as she got in, we were talking. Much like that afternoon and evening at the mall, the conversation is effortless and fun. Spending as much time with Molly is my goal. Once we get to the party, that won't be possible. So, I take the long way, while driving ten miles below the speed limit.

"Want to hear some good news?" Molly asks brightly.

"Sure. I love good news."

"I got the part of Abigail Williams."

"Really," I say. "The Big Bad? Think you can pull it off?"

"Not a problem." She says with a confidence that I have always admired. Molly believes in herself. She's one of those people who sees what they want and isn't afraid to go for it. "Oh, and she is so deliciously evil," Molly goes on. "Has an affair with John Proctor and then tries to have his wife hung. I'm going to love playing her. Mr. Sampson wanted me to audition for Elizabeth Proctor, but I told him I'm all about some Abigail Williams."

Neighborhoods turn into trees and old clear cuts as we head deep into the county toward Jacoby's grandmother's house.

"I don't know," I say, feigning sincerity. "You don't have a bad bone in your body."

"Acting, Jude. That's why they call it *acting*. Besides, we all have our dark side, Jude. Even you."

I laugh, but it comes out quick and loud, more like I'm choking. "Well, I can't wait to see you in the play," I say. "I'm glad you got the part you wanted."

Molly smiles, pleased, and for the first time in our little trip, the conversation lulls. I search for something else to say. We're getting close to Jacoby's, and I want to get a better idea of how she feels about me. She did just break up with Lucas, but she also said the breakup had been coming for a long time. Is she ready for a new relationship? The last thing I want is to make her feel uncomfortable. Besides, do I need this? It's kind of a complicated time for me, having to kill someone on August the twelfth and all.

What would a normal person on a normal date say to the girl he likes? Nothing comes to mind. *Nothing*.

"I'm glad you asked me to come," Molly says, saving me from my internal struggle.

I keep both hands on the wheel, watching the road as the sun sets and the Beast's headlights illuminate the country road. The next words out of my mouth are maybe the truest things I've ever said. "Me too." I glance over at Molly. Despite the low light—maybe even more so—Molly is lovely, her dark-red hair framing her face, a mischievous grin on her full lips.

"There are going to be a lot of people here," she says.

"I know," I say with a small laugh. I'm not even sure when I told Molly about my aversion to crowds. Ninth grade maybe. I do remember she thought it was funny. Even then, I was one of the most athletic

kids at school. Normally that means one of the more popular kids, too, but in my case, that wasn't true. It still isn't.

All day, the thought of so many kids together in one place has made me slightly ill. Molly is, literally, the only reason I'm here. "It's cool," I say, trying, and failing, to sound nonchalant.

Molly reaches over and pats my leg. "A lot of people, Jude. These parties are huge."

I glance over at her.

"So many people, Jude."

I take the turn to Jacoby's house, slowing down and looking at Molly. Her smile seems a little more predatory than before.

"You're enjoying yourself, aren't you?"

Her smile twists, turning sly. "You should see your face right now. I'm sorry Jude, but wow! You're like this football-playing tough guy, but more than three people get together and you're trying to find an escape route. You've got a lot going for you."

"Not really," I scoff, but I want to hear more.

Molly sighs dramatically. "Jude, Jude, Jude. My poor naive Jude. Let me tell you how it is."

I shake my head with a little laugh. "Okay. Tell me."

"Well, you're smart, athletic, not too bad on the eyes," Molly says with laughter in her voice, "and soooo polite. You're like a parent's dream. My mom barely knows you, but I bet she asks about you at least once a month.

"Yeah?" I ask.

"Yes," Molly says, matter-of-factly.

I don't know a ton about Molly's parents. I know they own a business, construction slash remodeling. They work a lot in Little Rock on office buildings, but they also do local stuff. I've only been around Mrs. Goldman a time or two. "Really," I say. "She asks about me."

"Absolutely. She thought you'd be a good influence on her little tomboy. She wanted a little princess. Someone different from me.

And you, you've always been, like, this nice kid with your *yes ma'ams* and *no ma'ams* and asking her how she's doing. *Thoughtful, charming*, I think are a couple adjectives she's used."

Her words carry a hint of something. Sadness? Resentment? I'm not sure, but I understand. I'd like to tell Molly just how very much I understand. How my mother feels like she got the short end of the stick, kidwise. Molly and I have a lot in common. But I'm not talking about that tonight. My anxiety is a low buzz now. Molly's Mom is Team Jude. That certainly can't hurt.

I make the last turn to Jacoby's. His place is back in the woods, down a dirt and gravel road. The Beast's wheels bump over the uneven drive as I avoid some of the larger potholes.

"Almost there. How you feeling, big guy?" Molly asks.

"I'm great. Never better. How many people can be here, anyway?"

My headlights light the field in front of Jacoby's house, and there are so many cars. Something small dies inside me as I groan.

Molly giggles, enjoying my discomfort way too much. "Relax, Jude. You probably know everyone here. Most everyone. Probably only a few hundred you don't," she says, still enjoying her game.

"I'm good," I say, swallowing. "As long as I'm here with you." I cringe at the cheesiness of the line and change the subject. "Where should I park?"

Molly points. "Over there by the tree." She whistles. "This is crazy. Half the school must be here."

"Uh-huh," I say, spiders crawling up my spine. I park the Beast and shut off the engine. The lack of its comforting hum is like an amputation.

Molly reaches over and squeezes my hand. I glance down at our interlocked hands and up into Molly's smiling face. My heart pounds. The spiders disappear, replaced by warmth. For once, the spreading heat in my cheeks is nice.

"Let's have fun tonight, okay?" Molly says.

“Yeah. Sure. It’s a party, right?”

Molly’s smile widens, and it amazes me how such a simple thing can make me so happy.

“It’s definitely a party.” Molly’s eyes twinkle. “Now let’s work on your social skills.” She lets my hand go and gets out of the car.

“Molly!” someone yells as soon as I step out of the Beast.

A small group of girls waves us over.

I take two steps, and someone yells my name. “Erickson. Oh, yeah.”

I turn. Rob Thomas, our starting fullback, comes over.

“I’ll be over here,” Molly says. “Have fun.”

She walks to her group of friends as Rob approaches. His walk is kind of off and as he gets closer, I understand why. He’s got a red Solo cup of beer in each hand. “Wooh! Jude Erickson at the par-tay. I salute you, captain of the football team!” He takes a drink from the beer in his left hand.

Rob is built like a tank, short and thick with a chest as big as a bull’s. We’ve played football together since third grade. He’s a friend, a good guy, hardworking, but, if I’m being honest, not the brightest bulb on the tree.

He cuts his eyes at Molly as she walks away. “You guys here, like, together, man?”

“Yep,” I say.

Rob hesitates. Takes a drink from the cup in his right hand. “That’s”—a smile splits his face—“awesome.” He offers me the left-handed beer. “Drink up, man.”

I don’t drink. The idea of being out of control, not in charge of my emotions and reactions, has never appealed to me.

“I’m good,” I say.

“Suit yourself.”

People stand in groups talking, some drinking, some not. Laughter and conversation fills the field, Jacoby’s house up the hill awash in

lights, the low thump of base rolling. A few football guys stand in a knot near the porch. There are plenty of people here I don't know. Andre Anderson, our starting tight end, comes over. We clasp hands and he pulls me in to slap my back. "My man, never seen you at one of these things."

I nod. Big Andre's cool. Kind of a straight-laced type of guy. Tall, broad, and genuine. His father's the pastor at the Methodist church, preaches fire and brimstone from the pulpit but one of the nicest guys ever. "Your pops know you're here?"

Andre gives me a broad smile. "The Lord detests lying lips. Proverbs twelve twenty-two."

"So, you didn't tell him?"

Andre nods. "Avoided him all day. But you? This is something. Never thought I'd see you here."

"What?" I ask. "Just trying to get my party on."

"Party on, huh? Okay." He laughs. "If you say so. Wish I wasn't here to be honest. Jess wanted to come." He nods at one of the girls chatting up Molly. She's petite, with dark hair and eyes. Jessica Brashear and Andre have been dating since . . . well, as long as I can remember.

Rob takes a sloppy drink of his right-handed beer and wipes his mouth with the back of his sleeve. "Both you guys here with dates, and me all alone. Makes me feel like the smart one! Have you guys seen how many ladies are up in here? Chapel girls too."

"You came with someone?" Andre asks me, but I ignore him.

"Chapel girls?" I ask. "Really?"

Rob nods. "Maybe, who knows? Lots of folks I don't know, for real. Jacoby sent up the Bat-Signal. Good thing he lives in the middle of nowhere or the po-po would already be here!" he screams the last part to prove his point. A few people outside cut glances his way, but most ignore him.

I search the faces. I recognize most from school, but there are people I either don't know or can't make out. If Hanna's here, I have to go. But she's not here. No way.

"So, who are you here with?" Andre asks again.

"Molly-freaking-Goldman," Rob answers for me.

"Really?" Andre sounds surprised. The music coming from Jacoby's house changes. The bass deepens, and the music takes on a slower, rhythmic quality. I can't make out what it is, but if the base gets any deeper, the house windows might explode.

Rob belches. It's long and loud, like a cartoon. "I saw it with my own eyes. Molly and our boy getting out of Jude's ride."

Andre shifts his body weight. "Molly, huh? Like a friend thing?"

"Here come the ladies," Rob interrupts, saving me from answering. In truth, that's all Molly and I are. For now. I follow Rob's gaze and indeed Molly and her friends are coming our way. "You think Jess could set me up with Payton?" Rob asks Andre.

"Uh. I'm not sure. Maybe," Andre says with a hint of *no way* in his tone.

"Sweet," Rob says, oblivious. He takes another swallow of beer. "She's so smart, man, uses words I gotta Google. I think we'd be cool together. You know, like opposites attract."

"Uh-huh," Andre says.

Rob takes another drink of his left-handed beer as Molly, Jess, and Payton join us.

"What's up, Payton?" Rob says. "You got Mrs. Alvarez for English second block? 'Cause I might need help in that class."

The conversations diverge. I'm not included in any of them, and that's okay. Molly's not participating either. She's frowning, glancing up at Jacoby's house, and I wonder what's happened in the last few minutes. She's different somehow. Different in some fundamental way from who she was a few minutes ago. She takes the beer from Rob's right hand.



“Hey,” Rob says. “I was drinking that.”

Molly takes a sip of beer. A little bigger sip than maybe is necessary.

“Oh yeah,” Rob hoots, “now it’s a party.”

Molly looks down at the cup like it materialized from thin air, and she takes another, longer, drink. When her head comes up, her eyes almost seem to sparkle in the low light, but not in a good way.

Of all the possibilities of tonight, Molly chugging beer wasn’t something I’d considered.

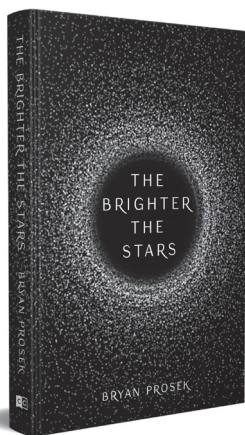
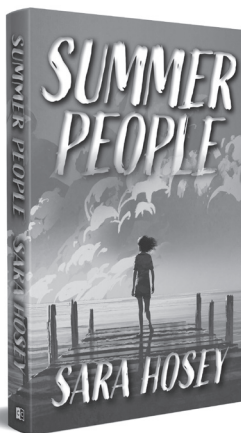
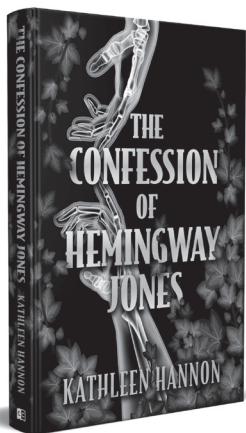
“Thanks, Rob,” Molly says. “Why don’t you go get me another?”

Rob nods like she’s just shared the most righteous tidbit, like how God makes rainbows. “Oh yeah. *Oh, yeah!*” he says. “Coming up.” He runs off toward the house.

“You okay?” I ask Molly. “Didn’t know you drank. Your mom might rethink her position on me if I bring you home tipsy.”

Molly never looks at me, doesn’t even acknowledge the joke. “It’s a party, Jude. Live a little.” She takes a slow breath. “I think I’m ready to go inside.”

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