

SAFE – Chapter 1

Day One: Monday

You know those life-changing moments? Everyone has them: getting married, having a baby, a promotion, winning the lottery, moving, you get the point. Though not all of them are good, they all affect you forevermore. Even if you wanted to, you could never go back. You are changed, permanently different, yet you are still you.

Everyone has had at least one life-changing moment, but I'd wager you that *no one* has had one like mine...

I was a naïve fifteen-year-old girl, way too much into myself and especially my problems. That was it, I had problems. Before I continue, I know everyone has problems, especially in this world, where we are continually on the move and always striving for more; but for me my troubles were far too big for me to see past them, and that became life-threatening.

My father had walked out on us when I was nine. He just packed his bags and left, no forwarding address and no backward glances. I was dumbfounded; it came as a complete shock. My mom didn't seem phased, and instead of mourning or getting upset, she just kept on going like he'd never been there in the first place.

"Why do you care?" She stood towering over me, dressed in a crisp business suit, her hands placed firmly on her hips. "He was a ghost of a man when he was here... Which, let's be honest, wasn't all that often in the first place! There is really no difference between that and just gone, so stop your crying and go to your room." *But it felt different to me!* Life seemed colder, darker and depressingly lonely.

My brother, on the other hand, raged. He was just over eleven at the time, and he got so angry that I was afraid to be anywhere near him. He stopped listening to our mother and started yelling at her instead. Then he began to stay out late and started getting into loads of trouble: punching holes in our walls, coming home with black eyes, new scars, or even worse, open wounds. The friends he hung out with were even more frightening than he was. I learned to live in my room and like it.

I felt lost. Mom was right in some ways: Dad had been preoccupied, and he never seemed to be around, *but he was my father.* I guess I missed the stability he brought, because with him gone, suddenly Mom was busier, had to work more and later, and when she wasn't doing that, she was dealing with my brother's problems. I just kept getting quieter and quieter; I didn't want to be a bother to her or anyone, so I stayed out of the way and made as little fuss as I could. It worked. She didn't have any problems with me, but the less of a pest I was, the less I felt like I was anything. If my father was a ghost dad, would that make me his ghost daughter?

My friends started to notice changes in me, but I couldn't tell them – how could I trust them with my problems? My troubles were so big, they were beyond me! How could any of my friends help? Instead, I shut them out, and they stopped hanging around me. I felt like I was becoming smaller and smaller and was going to disappear right out of existence, when in reality I actually started to get bigger. I started to eat my long afternoons away, and my lonely evenings, and my quiet mornings, and just about any time I could, I had something in my mouth, or in my hand ready to put in my mouth.

Not surprisingly, I gained weight, but this didn't help me to hide from my problems. *If anything, it made things get worse.* To add injury to insult, I was betrayed by my body. It started to develop in ways that I was seriously embarrassed about. This elicited teases and chants from everyone around me. *I wanted to die.* Just when I thought I couldn't handle it any more, my mom announced that we were moving. She was tired of hauling my brother out of trouble, so she thought that a new location would fix all our miseries. That's what she said, but there was a big promotion that went along with it – more pay for her, less time for me.

One day she turned to me and said, “And perhaps now you can make some friends. All you have to do is be happier and lose all that weight so people will like you more.” She fixed a smile on her face. “Now we can all have a fresh start.” As she was walking away, she added, “Mariah, darling, haven't you looked in the mirror lately? You've gotten REALLY fat.” And that was the end of any discussion. We moved three weeks later. That was the year I turned thirteen.

We were shipped halfway across the province to this new and improved neighborhood. I couldn't see the difference. My brother, Jake, who sworn he'd run away back to our old home, changed his mind, since it only took him a few weeks to find new friends to get into the same old

trouble with. As for me, I got all the tricks and tests of being the new girl, all of which I failed miserably. It was the same old story for me too.

I am shocked that I made it to my fifteenth birthday. I had planned to end it long before that, but I chickened out each time, or things would come up, and I wouldn't be able to complete the task. It was two weeks after my birthday, which had passed without a celebration. My mom said I had to have friends to have a party. I had no friends, so no party! She wouldn't even take me out to dinner with Jake when I asked. Instead I got a bag of extra large clothes, some too big even for me, and a handful of money that Jake took before I had a chance to go out and spend it.

But now the opportunity finally arose. I had it all planned out; it was Monday evening, so my favourite television shows would be on. It was the beginning of the fall show season, school had only started a month before, and all the cliffhangers from the last season were finally being worked out. My mom called to say she was working late again, then she'd have to find my brother and haul him home. He'd been gone for two nights, so I shouldn't expect her until very late. *Perfect!*

"Order a pizza if you have to," she said in parting. With what money, I wondered? Her stash of "emergency" funds had been depleted just before my brother took off – and I highly doubted she would have noticed. But I didn't need pizza, or any dinner. I had my last meal planned: pills and alcohol. She had a good stock of both, even though my brother liked to help himself on a regular basis. She seemed to keep a better eye on *them* and always replaced whatever was needed.

So that was that – I watched a drama and two sitcoms. The first I could have skipped, but I really enjoyed the second. Then I poured a sixteen ounce tumbler of vodka and gathered up the contents of three bottles from my mother's "over the counter" drug collection. *I found it odd how calm I felt.* I had thought that getting this close to the end, I'd be more sentimental, like looking through all our old photo albums to see the good old days one last time, or crying over how horrible things had become... but instead I just wanted to go to my room and get it over with.

As I passed back through the living room, the TV screen caught my eye for just a second. It was the ten o'clock news broadcasting a tragic scene from a local car crash; flames from the exploded vehicle were seven feet high. I hit the off switch and marveled at how quiet our house now seemed. "I am truly all alone in this world," I said to the empty house, with not a sound in reply, then headed down the stairs to my room.

But I stopped just as I was about to walk in. I stopped because someone was sitting on my bed. *A boy!* He sat there silently, looking down at his hands. He wore a black shirt with the name “The Fray” (the popular band) smeared across its front and washed-out black jeans. He had short brown hair jelled up in spikes. If the situation had been any different, I might have laughed at how out of place he looked against my pink floral bedspread.

I froze. I was so startled to see someone in my room, I almost spilled the vodka... *This was my room, my sanctuary—what was this stranger doing in MY space!* It wasn’t much; my single bed fit snugly against one wall, the desk and dresser opposite it only leaving two feet of space to walk. Beside my door, facing my bed, was a small closet. There was a window just above my desk. It was open, and my pink satin curtains were fluttering in the breeze. I could see the crabgrass growing in the dirt, just inches from my window sill.

I steadied myself, and my grip tightened around the pills. I was determined. *Nothing was going to sway me from my plan!*

“What are you doing here?” My voice shook. I was sure it was one of Jake’s friends (or “J-boy”, as my brother liked to be called). He continued to sit in silence, slowly looking up at me. “This is my room, not my brother’s!” I said, shocked to hear the cutting edge in my tone. He flinched as I raised my voice, but he didn’t budge. “Get out!” I hissed through clenched teeth with such rage that my glass shook. When he still didn’t respond, I finally said in defeat, “Who are you?”

His voice was so quiet, I wasn’t sure I’d heard it right. When I didn’t react immediately, he repeated himself, and though his voice was louder, it sounded hollow, as though he were speaking through a tunnel. “Toby.”

“Well, Toby,” I said, hardly restraining my contempt, “as I already said, this is my room. If you are looking for my brother, he’s not here, but his room is across the hall – you are welcome to wait there.” I didn’t feel like he was welcome, but I had always been terrified of Jake’s friends. They were not the kind of people you wanted to upset, though Toby looked very much less threatening than the ones I had met so far.

Regardless, he just sat there and stared at me. He had brown eyes the colour of chocolate milk that made him look dark and passionate. I was becoming unnerved and started to wonder if he knew what was in my glass or noticed how tightly I held on to the pills hidden in my other hand.

“What are you doing here?” I finally screamed out, irritated to have this disruption from an unwelcome guest. *I had a life to finish!*

After an eternity, during which he seemed to be taking notice of everything in my room, from the stuffed unicorns set up on the wall shelves above the desk; to the miniature glass figures my dad had given to me, displayed on top of my dresser; to the note I had left face down on the desk...he looked down at his hands and answered in that same faraway voice, “I’m not sure.”

“Then leave!” I demanded, and stood to one side of the door so he could get by. Instead he just sat looking down at the floor. *Why wouldn’t he leave!* I took several steps towards him and started to yell “Get out! Get out! Get out!” over and over again, but all he did was look up at me and shake his head.

“I don’t think I can,” he finally said, and this time his voice seemed to lose some of its hollowness. I took another step in his direction. Now I was only a foot from where he sat. His gaze was unblinking. “You see, I think I’m dead.”

I lost all my energy and resolve in that moment, like a balloon filled to the top then let go. The pills fell from my hand, and the cup of vodka tumbled to the floor, shattering and splashing my toes. Now it was me who didn’t move, not even to blink. I stood shocked to my core, staring at this strange vision that sat on my bed.

“What,” I stammered in a voice no louder than a whisper, “why? How?” Then the room began to swim, and for one short moment I was certain this was all a dream. *Had I actually taken the pills, washing them down with the alcohol, and was now hallucinating?* But I wasn’t, because as I fell forward, Toby himself caught me, then gently lowered me to my bed, where I lay staring up at him.

“Are you an angel?” I asked, ready to believe almost anything, **and** wanting with every fiber of my being for it to be true. Could this mean that God cared enough about me to send me my very own angel?

“Far from it,” he answered. With a hint of disdain, he stood up and backed away to my dresser. He looked like an animal trapped in a cage – *scared witless*.

My head reeled with possibilities, but the only thing that stood out clearly in all my thoughts was that there was life after death – suddenly I was very thankful I hadn’t ended mine so swiftly. Who knew what the consequences of taking my own life would have been? So I looked over to this unknown boy and said in a soft, tearful voice, “Thank you.”

He stared back, a half smile playing on his lips, "I didn't know if I could." Clearly he thought I was referring to him catching me. *Not stopping me from making the biggest mistake of my life.* "I've seen shows about ghosts," he continued, "and some can move things, but most go right through a living being..." He looked to be more relaxed now.

I nodded as I pulled myself to a sitting position at the head of my bed and leaned on my pillow. "Um," I scratched my head, "what makes you think you really *are* dead?"

He shrugged and went over to the foot of my bed, where he sat back down, his hand only an inch from my outstretched foot, and though I saw him sitting, there was no ruffle of the bed sheets under him, and no creases where his weight should have pulled them down. He shrugged. "I'm not sure. But I know I am."

"Don't you think that's a bit unbelievable?" I asked, starting to lose the wonder he had inspired with his initial claim.

Then a horrible thought entered my mind. *What if this was just one of Jake's friends playing a practical joke on me?*

"I can understand your distrust," he said, reaching out to place one finger lightly on my big toe. A quick chill ran up my spine, while a realization raced like lightning through my mind. When was the last time anyone had touched me? Tears welled up in my eyes, which I quickly blinked back. *It had been far too long.* He pulled his hand back. Did he notice? He wore an expression of concern. "Sorry," he muttered, looking away to my open doorway.

"You're not dead," I said, feeling certain I was yet again the victim of an elaborate prank. My curtains fluttered, as if to confirm my notion. I didn't remember leaving my window open...

"I assure you I am." I heard resentment behind his now fully realized voice, for any hollowness was completely gone, and he had a presence that couldn't be denied.

"Well, I don't believe you," I spat out, more certain than ever that this was a mean and malicious trick to make me miserable. Someone somewhere was at this moment enjoying himself or herself snickering over it. I wished harder than ever that I had the courage to have kicked Toby out before I even began to have this stupid time-consuming conversation with him.

Yet he continued to sit and look around my room. He looked at my blank walls and the closet with its door shut tight. My contempt grew, and I wanted more desperately to get him out and go on with my one and only plan of the night. *I was wrong, there was no life after death.*

There was no God! For if there was, how could he let these horrible things happen to me over and over again!

“Get out,” I said, sitting up and swinging my feet over the side of the bed. Toby stood up quickly and caught my legs before I could get them to the floor, which I now remembered was littered with shards from the glass I had dropped. As he held me, I was no longer worried about the glass, but I felt quite disturbed that he had his hands on me again, so I struggled and kicked out for him to let me go. My foot swung towards him, and I watched in amazement as it passed right through his chest, then fell to my bed.

Toby let my second foot drop beside my first. He cleared his throat, and though his voice shook and he looked paler than when I’d first set eyes on him, he said, “Now you have your proof that I must be dead.” His dark eyes flashed.

I couldn’t argue. We shared the silence that enveloped us, and as the tension evaporated from the room, he took a seat by my feet again. That’s when I realized he had been standing and stepping on the broken glass without a cut to show for it, even though he only wore a pair of thin white socks, *and no shoes*. As the time passed, I started to think the oddest thoughts; *Can others see him too? Where did he come from? Why is he here? Can I use him to spy on my enemies? Do I actually have enemies? No one likes me, but does anyone really hate me, or is it more like everyone agrees that I shouldn’t exist...*

Toby made a motion to stand once or twice but then he settled back on the bed again. Finally he turned and looked at me full on, not removing his gaze until I finally returned his gaze, and we found ourselves locked eye to eye.

“What?” I blurted as I felt the tension rising once more. The smell of vodka had permeated my room.

“I don’t know how this works,” he said, not looking away, “but I feel that we are stuck together, somehow.”

“You feel? You don’t know?” I was irritated, and I struggled to tear my eyes from him, which I eventually did.

“No, I don’t know, but I’m quite sure.” He took a deep breath. “Like I was saying...” he paused, and when I didn’t turn to look at him, he placed one hand around my foot. Again I felt a shiver; it was like my foot was touched by a slight draft, then it warmed as he held on. When I

finally looked back at him, he didn't take his hand away. "I am sure we are connected in some way."

"Why?" was all I could manage. I felt trapped and enraged. *Who was he! What gave him the right to infringe upon my privacy!* He let go, but even so, I still felt a whisper of his hand around my foot, and it stirred up all my feelings of loneliness and despair and made tears well in the corners of my eyes, like flood waters threatening to break the dam holding them in place. *I won't cry! I can't let him see me cry!*

"I'm sure of it, because twice I've tried to get up and leave, and I just couldn't. Also, I don't remember anything except being here; in fact, my memories only go back to the moment I saw you walking down the hall. Before then, everything seems black, as if there was nothing." He smiled. His teeth were white and perfectly aligned, and he wouldn't remove his piercing eyes from me...

He was quite breathtaking. "Maybe you *are* an angel," I said, a feeling of awe and wonder filling my chest once again as I thought of the idea of having my very own guardian angel. Then it sank, as I remembered his response: "Far from it". *What had that meant?*

"No, I know I'm not." His voice was completely flat. His smile faded, and he looked down at his lap.

"But why not!" I demanded. I was quite upset. I sat forward and grabbed his arm, confused, because this time I was able to hold on to him. "Why couldn't you be?" I wanted to believe he was, because it meant he could save me. If an angel had been sent to me, then that made me special beyond a doubt. Otherwise I felt worthless, like I did every day of my life!

"I'm sure I'm not, because I'm sure," he said, taking his free hand and removing my hand from his arm. His eyes were wide. I retreated onto my side of the bed and held myself as tightly as my oversized arms could. *I wasn't worth anything.* "But I am here to help," he said.

I could feel his eyes on me, but I didn't look. I was regretting ever going down to my room. Perhaps I should have taken my life in the kitchen. That would have showed my busy mom and...my brother.

"I want to help you," Toby said.

I hesitated then asked, gathering myself and wiping my bleary vision, "How?" Not a tear had managed to fall on my chubby cheeks, but they had left their presence in the corners of my eyes, and I now brushed them away, taking full stock of the mess I had made.

I thought of the broken glass on the floor. The smell of vodka was rising from where it had splashed. And the pills, over fifty of them, now just little gobs of melted mush, mere shadows of their former dangerous selves. How would I explain it to my mother, now that I hadn't gone through with it? *Would she even notice? Would she care?* Or was it just one more thing she'd have to handle before she would lock herself in her room and disappear into the cases and files that she always brought home from work?

It was nearing midnight. Surely she would be returning home, and I'd have to either hide what I'd done or be able to tell her something, truth or not. To me, the first option was looking like the easiest way out. I just felt so tired. *This was supposed to be over!*

"Well, I could help you clean."

He seemed to have read my mind, and I was unnerved by it, but I kept that thought to myself, and he didn't say anything more.

"I'll get some paper towels and a bag for the glass," I said, then I climbed past Toby over to the foot of the bed, where there was less glass, and picked my way out of the room before he could respond. I wanted to get away from him. When I got to the top of the stairs, I looked back and had to catch myself. He stood just a few steps behind me, silent and still. "What are you doing?" I asked, my shock a little too clear in my voice.

"We seem to be connected a little more than I thought," he said, looking just as put out and disturbed as I felt.

"Fine," I shrugged, though I didn't feel fine. Then I distracted myself by concentrating on cleaning. With adequate paper towels and a doubled plastic bag, we returned to my room. Without a word, I set to picking up the broken glass. Toby proved to be a bigger help than I would have thought. He was able to pick up most of the larger pieces of glass. He was also able to tell me if there were any under my bed or desk and even my dresser, without looking. I found that slightly irritating, especially because he was right every time.

Before long, we had the floor completely clean, with all the glass in the bag, all except one piece that had skidded into the hallway. That one I found with my foot. I recoiled so quickly that I lost balance and fell backwards, only to discover that Toby was again directly behind me. He caught me before I hit the floor, like he was waiting for me to fall. He guided me to a sitting position and raced around to my foot. He gently took it in his hands and started to doctor it

without uttering a word. I also said nothing. Who was this boy, dead but not, and why had he come to me? And why a boy? Boys made me feel very uncomfortable!

Finally, he had gotten the shard out, for that's all it was, smaller than a sliver, and stopped the bleeding with a spare paper towel. It was then that I was able to find my voice. "How come you could see all those other pieces, every last one in my room, even the dust finer than sand behind my laundry basket, but you couldn't see this one, and I ended up stepping on it instead?"

Hurt was clear in his eyes, but not in his voice. "I don't know. I was trying to figure that out myself. I would have loved nothing more than to save you from this latest misery, but the best I could do was catch you as you fell. I don't think I get to save you from everything, just certain things."

I was about to ask how he knew this, but he cut in, "I don't know how I know." He put my foot gently back on the floor and sat up on his knees. "I just do."

I could feel my heart sink. "Our 'first' evening together? Just how long do you think we are going to have to be 'sort of' stuck together?"

Toby rubbed his neck. "I don't know." He shrugged. "As long as it takes?"

"What takes?" I asked as I stood up, careful to keep my weight on my good foot.

Toby stood too. "I'm not sure." He took a deep breath. "Whatever stuck me here in the first place."

"Do you happen to know what that is?" I inquired angrily. *It didn't feel fair! No one asked me if I wanted this!* His only response was a shrug. Getting nowhere and feeling immensely annoyed by it, I limped upstairs.

We'd cleaned up every bit of evidence. I even took the garbage out, with Toby right behind me. Now we sat in my kitchen, not saying a word, and waited. It wasn't a large kitchen, by any means—it barely would fit my mom, brother and me, if we had ever eaten together. It was a U-shaped space, with an adequate window on the opposite side of the room and an archway into the hall. It had a small fridge and portable dishwasher along one wall, and the sink and stove along the other. The only place the small oval table fit was under the window, and as long as we kept the chairs tucked in, there was a little over two feet to navigate on all sides of it. The nice thing was that I could reach across from the stove that stood on one side to the fridge on the other without taking a step.

I sat and gazed out the window that dominated the outer wall. It didn't open, being made of a single pane of glass, and through it I could see the tops of the bushes that grew outside my mother's bedroom below. They grew beside the path that ran along our row of buildings. I took a moment to admire the huge planter boxes that lined the other side of the path, with their flowers still in full bloom. Beyond that and down an embankment lay the street that wove through my complex, and behind that was the low-rise building that housed an old folks' home. If I went up the hill, I would see nice family homes. The reason it was my favorite view was that our window wasn't obstructed by much, and I was able to gaze up into the night sky.

I didn't know what I was waiting for. Perhaps I wanted my mom to return so I could confront her? Or maybe I just wanted to see her, so I would feel like this was really happening. Since Toby's appearance, things seemed a bit like a dream. I also waited because I had never had a boy in my room, and though Toby was sure he wasn't alive, he still felt very real to me, and that made me nervous and self-conscious. So we just sat in the kitchen. For twenty minutes, nothing changed except the numbers on the microwave clock, and they simply marked off the passing time.

It was getting close to two a.m. when keys rattled in the front door, and in stomped my brother. He was madder than a hornet whose nest was being attacked; he swore and punched out at the wall. I shook a little where I sat. I'd forgotten that my mother had been out to get Jake. *Why hadn't I remembered that very important fact!* I desperately wished to not be so close, when he and my mother looked as if they were about to fight it out.

"Trafficking drugs!" Mom yelled from behind him. "I'm not going to be able to bail you out much longer, Jake!" The hurt was so clear in her voice, and I felt a pang of resentment. *When was the last time she had sounded that worried about me? When was the last time she had even thought of me?*

"How many times do I have to tell you, Ma! It's J-boy!" He kicked the closet door as he came up the hall to the kitchen. Then he stopped in his tracks as he caught sight of me. "Little sis," he said, the malicious joy all too clear on his face.

Toby stood up protectively, but if Jake could see him, he didn't acknowledge it. Instead Jake turned back to our mother, who was now just feet behind him, and watched her as she realized that I was sitting in the kitchen.

"Mariah? What are you still doing up?" She looked annoyed to see me.

“I couldn’t sleep,” I said, looking down at the ground, feeling guilty for being in my own kitchen.

“Well, you need to go to bed now. Do you really want to be tired for school tomorrow.” It was a statement, not a question. I felt like I was a small child again, instead of the fifteen-year-old I had just become. I started to shuffle my feet as I headed down the short hall that led from the kitchen past the front door and to the stairs that led to our bedrooms. Even though my foot stung, I tried hard not to limp or show any sign of weakness.

As I drew level with my brother, he threw out an arm, barring my way. “Let her stay up, Ma, she’s a big girl now.” He looked at our mother, baiting her for a response. Fear flooded my heart and rang out in my ears.

“Jake, you’re still high. Let her go to her room so you and I can discuss what I dragged you home to talk about in the first place.” She sounded tired, but she was clearly angry. *Angry because of me?* Toby let out a soft noise in my ear, but I was paralyzed and didn’t dare try to look his way.

“I’m not so easy to push around without the police to back you up!” Jake leaned towards me to punctuate his statement.

Mom was about to answer when Toby walked past me and pushed Jake’s arm away. It was unmistakable that Jake couldn’t see Toby, because he clearly wasn’t expecting anything, and that caused him to lose his balance and stumble back into our mom. She put up her hands to protect herself and Jake rebounded off her, staggering past me toward the kitchen. I took that opportunity to duck out of his way and raced down to my bedroom.

Toby was right behind me, and I knew that if I stopped, he would have to stop too. That gave me a strange sense of power for a fleeting moment. Once I got to my room, I slammed the door shut, hooked my chair under the knob and fell onto my bed, burying my face in my pillow, moaning and complaining about my mother, brother, my life, without a single tear falling. I hated my life, I hated my mom, and I really hated my brother. *I hated being so afraid!* But most of all I was furious that it wasn’t over, and I’d have to continue facing more days like these, or worse.

Toby didn’t say a word, but I felt him sitting at the foot of my bed, watching and waiting. As the pain subsided, my anger became a hard mass that I could either set aside or bury deep down inside myself like I always ended up doing. I turned my thoughts to this puzzle of a

boy/ghost sitting before me. *How was he truly going to help me, if that was his reason for being here?* He had helped me with my brother, but that seemed so trivial compared to all my troubles.

I wasn't happy with the way I looked on my best of days, so now, after having a fit like this, I knew that I looked worse. My hair was tangled, my face would be full of red blotches, and my eyes were guaranteed to be bloodshot. I knew I was even more disgusting than I usually found myself. I mean, I was really fat, with a plump, rounded face, and hair that frizzed more than curled and was a horrible black colour, just like a Halloween witch costume. My eyes were brown with some green, but there was nothing noteworthy about them. I turned towards Toby, knowing that what he was looking at was an ugly, wretched mess, and I really thought he would flinch or hide his face in horror. But he didn't; he just sat there, yet in his eyes I saw... *Sorrow? For me?*

"Do you really think you're here to help me?" He nodded. I felt self-consciousness, a hopelessness over my life, but I was curious... "How are you supposed to help me?"

"I'm not sure yet, but I think I can." He too looked like he doubted his own words. "I mean, I must be able to, otherwise why would I be here?"

"Maybe you are here for no other reason than the universe being a cruel and horrible place where there is no hope even in death!" I breathed hard and waited for Toby to respond in some way... Instead there was a pause, which seemed to stretch on for hours, during which my words kept reverberating in my head. Finally, I sighed and asked, "So what now?"

After a moments pause he said, "I don't know."

"You don't know!" *This was just too much.* "So you are just going to follow me around day and night, watching my life like it's an after school special to be viewed and judged, and I've just got to accept it! Should I make you some popcorn?" I stopped. Toby was trying not to laugh, and now that I thought it over, I *had* said something funny. I sighed. Then a horrifying thought hit me. "If we are **stuck** together, then what happens when I have to go to the bathroom?"

A small smile played on his lips, "I guess we'll just have to find out when the time comes." *Was he enjoying my misery?*

"I have to go now!" I said, feeling panicked, because once the thought had taken root, I couldn't get rid of it, and it pressed down on my bladder until I couldn't hold it a moment longer. His eyes danced. *I wanted to smack him.* Instead I crossed my arms.

“Then let’s find out.” He smiled widely, and for the first time I got a sense that he was a real teenaged boy, or at least the ghost of one. I braced myself. *A boy in the bathroom with me, what a complete invasion of my privacy!*

“If you get stuck following me into the bathroom, then you have to promise you won’t look.” I wasn’t afraid of him looking at me, thinking he’d like it. Somewhere inside, I actually wanted to be admired and desirable, but I knew I wasn’t anything of the sort. I was terrified that he’d look at my rounded belly, oversized chest, flabby arms and chubby legs, and laugh. I knew I was disgusting, but it would be unbearable having him know this too! Every time he’d look at me, I would see in his eyes just how putrid I really was.

“Mariah, I promise,” he said gently. “However, for your sake and mine, I really hope it doesn’t work that way.” Did he already see how detestable I was, or was he trying to be kind? I had no way of knowing...

“What?” I teased. “No insights on this one?” I stood up and waited for him to do the same. Hesitating one last moment, I muttered, “I really wish you had some kind of knowledge about how this works.”

He smiled widely, and I was taken aback by how handsome he really was. “Sorry, no helpful feelings on this.”

He *was* cute. His lips were a thin line of pink, his nose perfectly centered, his cheeks high-boned, his chin rounded, his ears didn’t stick out too far and were even. He had wavy brown hair spiked at the top and no sign of any facial hair. That made his olive skin look smooth and clear. He had broad shoulders and a muscular chest with a slightly bulky frame, and his deep brown eyes seemed seductive.

In everyday life, he’d be a boy that I would have a crush on, but I would never admit it or ever let it show to anyone! I had made the mistake of liking this boy or that, or letting it slip that I thought a certain boy looked nice, or sometimes without uttering a word, they’d just know... Yes, I had learned my lesson well, and the hard way that it always came back to haunt me in the end. I didn’t admire boys any more. I tried not to even look at them.

So now I made my way slowly to my door and listened for sounds. I could hear the far-off voices of my mom and brother screaming it out in the kitchen above, and feeling sure that they would be busy for quite a while, I rushed out of my room and into the bathroom. Our bathroom, the only one in the house, was fairly small; no room to really do more than a bathroom

was built for. If I wore makeup, I'd have applied it in my room like my mom did every day, because it was too small to even do that in the bathroom. I shut the door and scanned the room to be sure I hadn't been followed in. I had thought I might have to tell Toby to wait in the shower, but he was nowhere to be seen, so I did what I had come to do, as speedily as I possibly could.

As I stood looking at my reflection in the mirror and washing my hands, I slowly thought over the night's events. *Why is this happening? What can an invisible boy do that could ever possibly help me! People take their lives all the time, what is so different about me?* Deep in thought, I took longer than I had planned...

When I heard a voice in my ear, I jumped and hit my elbow on the towel rack. "You might want to move faster. I don't hear your mother's or your brother's voices any more, but I thought I heard steps in the hall above." Toby appeared so close to me, he was almost pushing me over. He turned and examined his reflection in the mirror. "Huh, I guess this means I'm not a vampire," he said, but he sounded shaken as he stared at himself.

Back in the safety of my room, I sat down at my desk. *What was I to do now?*

"Not tired?" Toby asked. He was sprawled across the end of the bed with his shoulders and head resting up against the wall.

"Too many questions." I found it hard to look at him too long.

He brought his hands up behind his head and said, "Shoot, but I may not have many answers."

"You're not an angel," I said, feeling sure of it now, though saying it made my heart sink.

"Sorry to disappoint you," he replied. "It means so much to you that I wish I was. Plus it would make this a whole lot easier. I might just know what I'm supposed to be doing here."

I shifted uncomfortably.

"I've upset you—I'm sorry." The compassion in his voice was unmistakable.

I don't ever remember a time when someone was this concerned for me. "Why do you care?"

He stared as if he could read my soul. "Our fates seem to be tied together right now."

"Oh, you care because you have to care," I said, feeling like I'd been slapped across the face. *He cared because he was stuck with me! How was that caring?*

"I wish that weren't so. But," he paused to sigh, "it is."

I felt so humiliated and ashamed that suddenly I knew he really had been alive once – **he** had been a real boy of about my age, for no one else could be quite so cruel and cutting! It took me a while to calm down, then I did what I always ended up doing. I decided to make the best of it. *I had no other choice...* I tried to change the subject. “Tell me about your life.”

He looked at his hands and seemed to search for answers there. Finally he looked up and replied, “It’s over.”

“That’s all?” Wasn’t he going to tell me anything about himself? He’d already gotten to see my life, every part of it, and he wouldn’t even give me a smidge about his! That didn’t feel fair.

“That’s all I get to know right now. Again, I don’t know why it is this way. I’m not making up the rules, they seem to have been set out for me, I just can’t...” He looked flustered for a moment while he scratched his neck, then his face cleared. “I don’t get to know anything I want, just what I need to know.”

Now I started to feel sad for him. “But your life! Your family! Your friends? You don’t get to remember a thing? Surely someone as good-looking as you had bunches and bunches of friends! And the most perfect life.” Toby blushed slightly at my words, and I felt shock for having said it. Yet I was sure it was true.

“My life, as important as it may feel to you to know about right now, is not. It’s over, and so whatever was is no longer, and that makes it unimportant, at least for now. Maybe later, who knows? All I get to know is that it is fully and completely ended.”

“I’d feel ripped,” I said, and then I stretched and yawned. “I think I am tired now.” I stood at my dresser and pulled out my pajamas. “Can you leave while I change?”

Toby looked longingly at my closed door. “Not even if I tried,” he said. But I’ll close my eyes and promise not to peek, like in the washroom. *He had been there!*

I was so shaken, I dropped my night shirt. “You were there!”

“You didn’t see me?” He ran his hand through his hair. “Oh, try this,” he said, then he just disappeared.

“Did you go?” I asked tentatively, not allowing myself to be relieved yet.

“No,” came a reply from so close, it felt like he was in my ear. He reappeared mere millimeters from my side, so close for a moment, I felt like he was attached to me.

“I just closed my eyes.”

“Why are you so close?” I asked, feeling claustrophobic and swallowing hard.

He took a step back. “Seems when I close my eyes, I lose all sense of space, I guess because I feel as if I’m tied to you like the moon is to the earth. When I have my eyes closed, you seem to affect me with a sort of gravitational pull.”

I felt sickened. I knew I was overweight, but to be referred to like a planet implied a new kind of largeness. I unconsciously pulled at my shirt and looked down.

“I’ve upset you.”

“What do you care? It’s only because you are stuck to me somehow.” I choked on my pain and anger.

“But that doesn’t make me care less,” he said in his defense. “I’m sorry for whatever I said. Do you want me to close my eyes now?”

“NO!” I yelled. The thought of him being a helpless object in my gravitational pull was more than I could take. “I’ll just change under the blankets.” Then I moved my desk chair back to my door, something I’d learned to do whenever my brother was home, and dove into bed.

Toby came to sit at the foot of my bed, and I kicked out, going right through him once more, making both of us flinch, but I remained upset. “You go sit on that chair,” I said, referring to the one I’d placed against my door. He nodded and went over to it.

I fought with my pajamas for only a moment, then huffed out all my frustration from the day’s events and rolled onto my side. I was convinced it would take a while to find sleep, but it came to me in an instant.