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L. Marshall James

March 1st

7:10 PM

Dear sweet Diary,

This is my first entry, so I don't know what to type. What sorts of things am I supposed to tell you? Should I speak in the first person or the third? Or the fourth? Do I reveal all of my secret musings? Tell you all about my latest celebrity crush and what Stacey said about Sally? I guess I probably should. After all, you're a diary and I'm supposed to tell you what's on my mind, so all that should be fair game. Then I'll relate it all to the psychologist ad nauseam, and he will frown about Stacey and Sally, fret over my musings, and write a case study on my crush. Yeah?

Yeah.

Okay, fine. I've never been a "diary person," but I'll say what's on my mind.

Dr. Brenner seems nice enough. From what I hear, he's a pretty good psychologist, so maybe this will actually do some good and help me figure out what's going on in my head. It won't be anything life changing, I hope. But we'll see. So far, it's just weird. And upsetting. I can't really explain it, which is why I went to Dr. Brenner in hopes that *he* could figure it out. But he pretty much shrugged and told me to start a diary, try and work it out with myself, and come back to talk about it. Very impressive.

Then again, what could I expect? It's not like he could magically divine what caused me to freak out like I did. But *I* must know, right? Deep down, something made me flip out and scare my little baby, Billy. Some part of me knows what caused it and why, so I should write it out.

But while it might seem weird, I don't *want* to write it out. The whole thing has been so strange, like a totally alien part of me woke up and took control. I was so *sure* and so *scared*. Looking back, it doesn't make any sense, and I would almost rather forget it ever happened. But I really should work it out, so enough stalling.

Here goes.

A few days ago, Billy had soccer practice, so I went to pick him up after school. The sun was shining, there was a nice breeze, and the birds were out. It was actually a pretty nice day! I held my hand out the window on the way to the school and let it fly in the wind. I felt good. I felt *normal*. I

parked and walked to the field, then waited for them to finish. Practice usually ends at 7. Sometimes they go over, but the coaches are pretty dependable. One of the other moms, Debra, was there. She's really nice. She's married to the hulk (Brandon) who used to be in the marines. Her son is Sean, a cute little guy. Not *quite* as adorable as Billy, but still. :) Anyway, we chatted until practice finished and Billy came over. Then, I said good-bye and we left. Bill and I talked during the short ride home, and he was his usual adorable self, telling me about his day. Normal. Then as I pulled in the driveway, he said the name of one of his new friends and my blood went cold. Even now, the name bothers me, and I don't know why.

"Farah."

At first, I felt a sort of panic. Then I was *so angry*. All of a sudden I knew *without a doubt* his friend's name wasn't Farah, like my son was lying to me about it. I screamed at Billy to repeat what he'd said, to tell me his friend's real name. I can't explain why I felt the way I did or how the feeling completely overrode me. I've never spanked Billy. I feel bad just putting him in time-out. But there in the van, I grabbed him by the shoulders and I shook him. I demanded that he tell me who his friend was, to describe him. I called him a liar. I think I slapped him. Not hard, but he started to cry. I caught myself only when Tommy came out and knocked on the window. He looked happy at first, but when he saw my face, his eyes grew wide. Afterward, he told me I looked "extremely upset," but when he talked to my dad on the phone later—he thought I was sleeping—he said I had "the crazy eyes."

My *husband* said that.

I don't know what happened, but I'm so scared it will happen again. What would that mean? Am I crazy? Am I losing it? Am I bipolar or schizoid or something? The more I think about it, the more freaked out I get. One of the worst parts about it is that I still feel what I felt in the van.

I'm sure Farah doesn't exist.

7:30PM

Okay, I'm back. I'll write out the rest of the details and then be done for the day.

After I overheard Tommy, I went to my room and cried. I feel so crazy because of what I did and because I don't understand *why* I did it. It's like I completely lost control. Tommy came in later and

L. Marshall James

held me. I fell asleep on his lap, and he stayed with me until I woke up. I don't know where I'd be without him.

Later we talked for a while. I didn't tell him I slapped Billy, but I think he might know. I said I didn't know what to tell Billy and needed him to know Mommy loves him and would never want to hurt him, and Tommy said not to worry. He had already told Billy I got scared and that we didn't know why, but that I love him just as much as ever. He's such a good father and such a good husband. I'm so lucky to have him. We talked about going to the psychologist, and I obviously agreed to go. Something is wrong, and it needs to be figured out, so I'm going to stick with it until it gets solved, one way or another. Here's to hoping this will help.

Doubtfully,

Bella Darnell-Thompson

March 2nd

9:40 PM

Tonight, Billy asked if I was mad at him. I almost cried. I told him that I would never be mad at him and that I loved him more than anyone, that Dad and Gramma and Grampa loved him a whole bunch, but that I still thought I loved him more. I said I was sorry about what happened in the van and I didn't know why I was mad but I was going to find out. I asked him if he could forgive me, and he didn't even hesitate to say yes. My beautiful baby boy. :')

L. Marshall James

March 4th

8:34 PM

Hey Diary.

It's me, Bella. I met the boy Billy was talking about. My dad came with me. He wasn't going to at first because he had an appointment, but he called before I left to say it was canceled and he was "bored as the dickens, anyway," so he needed to get out of the house. Plus, he figured he could tickle Billy if he was too tuckered out from soccer to run away. Good ol' Dad, he can always make me laugh.

He helped talk me down on the way to get Billy. I was so nervous. The whole way there, I was so tense... I *knew* I would freak out again. I *knew* it. We walked up, and Debra was there with Brandon, talking to another mother I hadn't met yet. I waited, and Dad rubbed my shoulders. It made me feel better, but I still had butterflies in my belly. Debra came over with Brandon and asked if I was all right. I said I was okay, just a little sick. Brandon offered me some TUMS, and I was so distracted I couldn't think of a simple excuse like "I already took some," so I took them and thanked him. They actually made me feel a little better for a few minutes, lol.

I felt nervous and nauseous again when the team finished practice and huddled together. It took *forever* for them to break huddle. I'm not sure what I felt as Billy started toward me or when I realized he had a friend with him. As he came over, I tried to search my mind for some hint of what had happened the other day so I could prevent it. The last thing I wanted was another mental breakdown. Then Billy stopped in front of us and said:

"This is my friend Farah!"

I don't know why, but I was instantly and completely relieved. I can't explain it. As soon as he introduced his friend—this skinny little boy with a huge, friendly grin—my anxiety disappeared. All the tension and fear was gone as if some unknown issue had been resolved, as if I was expecting a bogeyman when it was only a little Indian boy. He shook my hand like a perfect gentleman, and Billy beamed. Dad suggested that Billy go meet Farah's parents, and when they ran off, Dad smiled and grabbed my shoulder. He didn't need to say a word. I couldn't think of anything to say, so I just hugged him and waited. Once Billy came back, we headed home and had dinner. It was a really nice meal. We *all* sat around the table (for once!) and had a great time. Back to normal!? :D

I'm going to keep seeing Dr. Brenner for now at least, even though I'd rather not, to be honest. Dad said I should be fine, since I met Farah and nothing came of it. I kind of agree with him, but I guess I should at least let the doc give me the seal of approval first.

This could be my last entry!

L. Marshall James

March 5th

6:30 PM

I saw Dr. Brenner today, but not much came of it. When I told him what happened when I met Farah, he furrowed his brow and said he'd like to explore it more with me, so we talked about it for a bit. I told him I didn't recognize the name "Farah" from any time in the past and couldn't figure out why it upset me. He insisted there was a cause and doubted it was just a "freak thing," as I'd suggested. He recommended I come back so we could talk about it some more. Figures.

On the positive side, I think I kind of *like* this "diary" business. I've even started carrying a notepad in my purse to jot down my thoughts so I can type them out later! Is that weird?

It's weird, isn't it? You can tell me, Diary. I'll understand.

March 6th

7:16 PM

I'm not sure how to go about framing what happened, so I'll just write it down to the best of my recollection.

Mom called and we chatted for a bit. Apparently, Tommy told her I went to a psychologist but hadn't mentioned why. I didn't tell Mom because I didn't want to worry her, so I made a mental note to yell at Tommy when I got the chance. Then I told her about what happened with Billy and blah blah blah. She seemed to handle it pretty well, although that could have been partly because I didn't give her quite *all* the details. Anyway, we talked some more, and then she said she had to do some laundry so she'd talk to me later. Done and done.

Tommy and I were watching *Zoolander* later when Dad called. He asked what I had said to Mom earlier, and the way he said it made me think I had done something wrong. Not only did he say she was pretty upset, but he also said she looked like she was about to cry after I talked to her. When I told him about the conversation we'd had, he said:

"Honey, are you out of your damn mind?"

Dad *never* swears. I was so shocked I couldn't think of anything to say. He softened when I didn't respond, and he asked why I brought it up to her. I asked him what he meant, and he seemed confused, then he just told me not to worry about it but not to bring the subject up to my mother. But I couldn't just *let it go*, not after what had happened with Billy. I had to ask him what he meant three times before he caved and asked what I remembered about Farah. It's weird, but once he gave me the impression that Farah really did exist, I was *positive* I once knew someone named Farah. It was as if I *knew it the whole time*.

"Did I know her before Billy?" I asked.

"Well... yeah."

I tried to place the name, but I couldn't come up with anything solid, though I vaguely remembered someone asking me whom I was talking to when I was younger.

"Was it an imaginary friend?" I asked.

L. Marshall James

He sighed and said, "Tell you what. I need to go comfort your mother for now. Why don't we have dinner and we can talk about it then?"

I asked him why mentioning an imaginary friend would make Mom so upset, but all he said was that Mom would be out visiting a friend sometime next week and we would talk over dinner, just him and me. How's that for a cliff-hanger? I guess I'll find out next week why Mom got super upset, why Dad acted sketchy, and why I feel like I'm taking crazy-pills.

Fingers crossed.

March 8th

4:00 AM

Dream:

Walking through downtown and talking with someone named Farah, but I can't see her face. Then Farah disappears and starts screaming, but I can't find her. Her voice is so loud I hold my ears but it doesn't help. I look down and my legs are on fire. Then I wake up.

12:05 PM

Okay, so I've had the *exact same* nightmare three nights in a row. Every time, I wake up covered in sweat and terrified. At first I figured it was the result of being stressed out and having Mom and Dad act weird but... three nights in a row? This time, I wrote it down immediately so the details would be fresh.

I have an appointment scheduled with Dr. Brenner tomorrow, so we'll see what he thinks of it.

10:30 PM

Well, I guess dinner alone with Dad won't be necessary.

Mom and Dad invited Tommy and me over for dinner tonight. It was a bad idea to go, not just because of all the stuff going on with me, but mostly because of the way Mom reacted before. I told Tommy not to say *anything* about Farah or the nightmares, but since there wasn't much else to talk about as far as recent news, the tension was as thick as the elephant in the room. Mom asked how I've been, and I had to lie through my teeth. I was like, "Oh, I've been good, just working. Not much going on. Tee-hee-hee." She said I looked tired, and I had to play dumb, like, "Huh? No, I feel fine!" Like I said: bad idea. When she left the dining room to get the chicken out of the oven (it hadn't been quite ready when the meal started), Tommy and I breathed a very temporary sigh of relief until Dad leaned over and asked what was wrong. I whispered that it was nothing, that I'd been having nightmares and didn't want to tell Mom.

"*Nightmares?*" he asked. He seemed weirdly shocked.

L. Marshall James

“Yeah.”

“About what?”

“Nothing, just—”

Then Mom returned. I looked down and tried—poorly—to act like we weren’t talking about Farah.

“What?” he whispered.

I tried to act like the conversation was unrelated to Farah, so I shook my head and casually said, “Oh, nothing,” but Dad still didn’t realize Mom had returned with the chicken.

“Was it about Farah?” he asked.

I glanced at Mom and back at him but couldn’t think of anything to say. He realized what he had done, and Mom’s instant mood change confirmed it. She set the chicken on the table and left the dining room without a word. She already looked like she was on the verge of tears as she walked away, and I think she started crying when she closed the bedroom door behind her. Dad *swore*. I stood, but he motioned for me to sit. He got up, told us to stay and eat and he’d be back out once he talked to Mom. Tommy and I didn’t eat or talk much. There wasn’t much for us to say, and our appetites were spoiled. Dad came out after a bit and sighed as he sat. He took a few bites before he said anything. He looked stressed.

“Okay, honey. What are the nightmares about?” he asked.

I took a deep breath and said, “Farah.”

He nodded. “Okay. What else?”

I described the dream and waited for him to say something. He just nodded, so I decided to cut to the chase and ask who Farah was. He was quiet for a few seconds, then told me Farah was a childhood friend of mine who *died in a tragic accident*.

Can you believe that? Not only did I not even *remember* this girl, but Mom cries whenever her name is so much as uttered. I asked how Farah died, and he said he didn’t want to talk about the details but that it was pretty traumatizing to both me and my mother. He made me promise not to bring it up again to Mom. I said I wouldn’t, then I started to tell him I was going to see Dr. Brenner again when he interrupted me.

I'll fill you in on this since you're new here, Diary. There are two things my Dad has *never* done for as long as I can remember.

1. Dad *never* swears. (He's been doing a lot of this lately.)
2. Dad *never* interrupts.

I've seen him livid (or at least livid for *him*, since he's usually pretty placid) in arguments with people who are being completely unreasonable, and he always lets them speak their piece before he goes on to speak his. I can't think of a single time he hasn't done the same with me, but he interrupted me tonight, said, "Let me say this," and went on a rant. He said he thought the psychologist was causing more harm than good, that I should let sleeping dogs lie, that I should go back to the normal life I had before "the whole Farah thing." Then he said, "The nightmares will pass. They went away when you were a kid, and these nightmares will go away too. It will just take time."

Until he mentioned it, I hadn't remembered having nightmares as a child. But suddenly I knew without a doubt that I had. I remembered being terrified and hearing Farah scream even as Mom and Dad tried to wake me up. I remembered not being able to sleep for days at a time, meetings with teachers and counselors, people looking at me funny, and sitting alone at the lunch table...

I've heard people say memories come "rushing back," but that wasn't what happened. The memories were *already there*, as if I never forgot them in the first place. It was like someone turned on a light and all of a sudden I realized the room I'd been sitting in was completely different from what I'd thought—a different shape, a different color scheme, different furnishings, and a skeleton.

"Hey, what's up? I'm your old pal, Skelly. You might not remember me, but we go way back. We should hang out! It's probably best not to mention this to your mother, though. She thinks I'm a bad egg, heh heh heh."

I could barely speak. I managed to say I wanted to know the cause of the nightmares so I could stop them, and when Dad started to interject, I sort of freaked out on him a little. I told him it was *my* mind and I needed to figure it out. I didn't want to just bury it and forget about it. Neither of us said much about it after that. There wasn't much else to say, I guess. We had some small talk, and we managed to have a few laughs, so that was nice. I would have hated to leave on a sour note, but Dad's always been good about not letting that happen. I'm glad he's looking out for me even if I don't agree with the way he would handle it if he were in control.

L. Marshall James

I am going to get some sleep. My appointment with Dr. Brenner is tomorrow. I guess I'll let him know Scooby-Doo and the gang can now safely be taken off the case and placed back on ghost duty.

Love, Bella

March 9th

5:00 AM

Dream:

Walking behind Farah through a backyard. Then there is an explosion and we both start screaming. The explosion knocks us both down, but when I get up, she is gone. I call out to her, but I can't see her. Then when I look down, I'm on fire and an arm is reaching out of my stomach. Then I'm in the hospital, but I still can't see Farah. I keep asking the doctors and nurses, but they won't answer. Then Farah screams, and I wake up.

9:00 PM

The nightmare creeps me out so much. Still, I wanted to see what Dr. Brenner thought about what Dad said *sooner* rather than later, so I decided I would tell him the truth about Farah first and move on to the nightmares if he wanted. To say he was fascinated with my little story might be a bit of an understatement. He was literally on the edge of his seat when I said I'd had a childhood friend named Farah who passed away in an accident. When I asked how I could have completely forgotten a friend I'd had when I was younger, he seemed like he wanted me to tell him more before he answered! He said it's not uncommon for people to suppress memories of traumatic events and that I may have suppressed *any* memories of Farah simply because I was traumatized by what happened to her. He also said memory decay could be a factor since I was pretty young when it happened.

It must have been disappointing when I couldn't recall a single detail about our friendship or how she died. He didn't *act* very disappointed, of course. He just mellowed out a bit and asked some more questions. I tried to answer them as best as I could, but there wasn't much I knew other than what I'd already told him.

He thought the nightmare was very interesting and said it certainly indicated a significant amount of tension on my part, considering the frightening nature and frequent recurrence of the nightmares. He said he doesn't appeal to any generic interpretations of dreams, but he wondered if I might have some suppressed memories as to "the nature in which Farah died." He wondered if I was also injured in the accident, considering the personal injury experienced in the nightmares. I told him I

L. Marshall James

didn't think so, since I don't have any scars except an appendectomy scar. He just nodded and said I should continue to keep a log of the dreams for future reference.

Thinking of Dad, I asked Dr. Brenner if it might be better to let this go. He said it was possible but it was hard to say whether something like this might pop up again. I could very well go the rest of my life without further issue, but it could recur without warning. Then he started slinging metaphors and went on to profess his opinion that it is better to "properly treat all wounds, physical and psychological, so they can heal properly" and that it is best to "give the past a proper burial so as to avoid being 'haunted' by it, so to speak."

He states a pretty good case, and I agree with him. I don't ever want to feel like I did when Billy first said the name "Farah." I don't ever want to be scared I might freak out again, and I don't want to let "sleeping dogs lie," like Dad suggested. This isn't *just* a sleeping dog; it's a sleeping dog that could wake at any time and might bite someone unless it is properly taken care of. I have to see this through.

10:30 PM

It looks like I was wrong about not being injured! I told Tommy about my talk with Dr. Brenner and mentioned that my only scar was from an appendectomy. Tommy didn't say anything about it at the time, but he got to thinking about it later, so he Googled it and found out that not only is my scar too high on my torso, it's also on the wrong side of my body and much larger than an appendectomy scar would be. I'm *sure* Mom had told me the scar was from an appendectomy.

Well, now this is starting to make some sense. I mean, a friend of a daughter being killed is one thing, but can you imagine having your daughter injured in the same accident? That would be so terrible! Now I understand why Mom was so upset and wouldn't talk about it. I want to ask Dad for more details, but I'm kind of hesitant. It seems like talking about Farah makes him unusually upset, which explains why he didn't tell me about the accident in the *first* place, now that I think about it.

I'll sleep on it for now. Good night, Diary.

March 10th

3:41 AM

Dream:

"Farah is hurt, Daddy."

"I know, honey. We're going to try and make it stop, okay?"

"Okay."

"Can you tell me where you're hurt?"

"I'm *not* hurt."

"Can you tell me where Farah is hurt?"

"Right here."

12:41 PM

Got it! I've figured out a way to find out more about my scar without having to worry either Mom or Dad. I made an appointment to talk with Dr. Tate, the family doctor. He's been our doctor forever, so if anyone other than Mom and Dad would know what this scar came from, it would be him. I told the receptionist I had some questions for him about a scar and that it shouldn't take too long, so she scheduled me for this Thursday morning at 11:30. He's pretty old, and I'm sure he's treated a lot of people since I was a young girl, but hopefully he'll have some paperwork and can remember at least *something* about me being injured when I was little. I'm excited! It's fun to play the part of Nancy Drew even if it's my own awful past I'm trying to figure out! :P

X Fingers crossed! X

L. Marshall James

March 12th

12:20 PM

Okay, so I didn't get as much as I hoped, but I did get some good info from Dr. Tate. He definitely remembered the accident and confirmed it was the source of my scar. He said I was lucky enough to receive only a glancing blow from a piece of debris as a result of the explosion, so it looks worse than it was.

That's right: *explosion*. I guess Dr. Brenner's thoughts about suppressed memories were right on the button, because I don't remember a damn thing about an explosion! I asked Dr. Tate about it, and he said the cause was an old, leaking propane tank on the edge of town. Apparently, I walked by at the wrong time and it ruptured. Luckily, the tank was mostly empty when it happened, so "no one was seriously injured."

When he said that, I got confused. I asked him about Farah, and he looked baffled for a moment, then seemed kind of embarrassed he had forgotten her. I asked if he had treated her, and he just shook his head and said, "No, no." When I asked him how Farah died, he seemed to get kind of flustered and said he thought it had been a head injury. I really wonder what happened to Farah to make everyone so uncomfortable to talk about it, including my father, who is usually so stoic, and now Dr. Tate, a man who must have certainly seen some awful things in his profession.

Then again, maybe I *don't* want to know.

After that, we chatted about our family lives and he asked all sorts of questions about Tommy and Billy and that sort of thing (Dr. Tate has always been a sweetie), but then he said:

"My, you sure have come a long way from the troubled little girl I used to know so well!"

I remembered Dad saying Mom and I were traumatized by Farah's death, but something about the way Dr. Tate said it seemed to rouse some vague memories of sitting on Mom's lap in the waiting room before our appointments and being in the doctor's office constantly. But if what he said before was true, I hadn't been seriously injured. Dr. Tate said the "debris" only grazed me "more or less superficially," so why was I in the doctor's office? You don't take a girl to the doctor because she got a scratch or because she's sad her friend died. You give her a bandage and take her to church, talk to her, or take her to a shrink. I was skeptical of his story, so I went out on a limb and bluffed.

“Yeah, I sure am happy I don’t have to have any more tests done!”

He laughed and nodded, so I carried the bluff further before he could change the subject.

“What kinds of tests did you run, anyway? I guess I was too young to appreciate them back then.”

He started to answer, then stopped and rubbed his chin. Then he said (and this is a quote to the best of my ability), “Well, let’s see... you had at least one X-ray, a CAT scan, an... an MRI, and eventually... well, it sort of resolved itself, I guess. Your parents took you to a counselor, if I recall correctly.”

Notice the pauses. I mean, they could easily be written off by the fact that all this happened a long time ago and Dr. Tate is pretty old, but I think it’s *highly* suspect, especially considering how everyone has been acting about this subject.

“All that for one scratch?” I asked.

He seemed kind of flustered by my question but said they wanted to make absolutely sure I had sustained no serious injuries.

Then, he said, “You complained about your head hurting—or rather, *Farah’s* head hurting—and we interpreted that as a traumatized child trying to communicate pain to us. We tried to treat it as if you were telling us where *you* were hurting. The incident with the—”

He came up short and seemed startled.

“Incident?” I prompted.

“Yes,” he said. “You had some drastic mood swings. We thought you would get better with time, but you only seemed to get worse. And with frightening speed. It was all very troubling.”

He looked at the floor when he said this, and for a moment he seemed very fragile. Then he smiled his adorable old man smile.

“And now look at you!” He chuckled. “A beautiful woman and even happier than me!”

I tried to laugh with him, but my mind was racing. I wanted more information about the tests. I wanted to *know*. I tried to get more info out of him, but he wasn’t much help after that. He blamed a faulty memory and said he’d see if he could dig up some of his old records. I asked what happened to Farah’s family, and he said he wasn’t really sure and that they may have moved out of town. And that was pretty much it.

I keep poring over this and trying to make sense of it all, trying to piece together memories and clues. It’s possible that I’m overthinking it. I *am* beginning to feel pretty skeptical and paranoid about

L. Marshall James

the whole thing, but it seems like details are being intentionally hidden from me. It's like I've discovered a secret floor of the house but every room is dark and no one wants to turn on the lights. With every new room I discover, they tell me it's the last one—no, *really, it's the last one*. But there's more. I know there is.

I guess I need to talk to Dad about this some more. :-/

8:30 PM

I called Dad as soon as I got home. When I asked him if we could talk, he said he and Mom were out doing a little window-shopping but he could use an excuse to get out of it (what a guy, lol), so he suggested dinner. I had already eaten, so we met at their home instead. I got there a few minutes before him, and as he got out of the car, he seemed very concerned. I think he knew what was on my mind before I even said anything. Normally, he always checks his answering machine on the home phone as soon as he gets home (always!), but today he didn't bother. We made some small talk as he brewed a pot of tea, and then we sat on the couch together. I told him about the other dreams I'd been having, about my visit to Dr. Brenner, about his wondering aloud if I was injured in the accident, and then the realization that my scar wasn't from an appendectomy at all. He just kept nodding, so I asked if he knew why I thought it was an appendectomy scar in the first place.

He said the accident hit Mom especially hard and the whole thing was as traumatic for her as it was for me. The fact that I came so close to death was a big part of why it was such a tender spot for her and why she never wanted to talk about it. I might have asked her about the scar when I was a little older, and she was probably caught off guard, so she lied.

I told him I also visited Dr. Tate, and in his usual style as of late, Dad stopped me to ask why I didn't come to him first. He didn't seem angry at all, just worried, I guess. I told him I didn't want to worry him or Mom and just wanted to figure it all out. I explained that it was very strange and scary for me to have such a history that I somehow had *completely* forgotten and that I had to understand before I could let it go like he had. He seemed to understand, but he told me to come to him in the future before I did anything. I told him I would try. That seemed to placate him.

When I relayed what Dr. Tate had told me, his mood changed. He kept nodding and listening, but as I kept talking, he looked more and more worried. When I mentioned that Dr. Tate told me about “incidents,” I could tell he was getting really worked up, so I stopped.

I think he may have misinterpreted my pause and thought I was prompting him for answers, or maybe he just needed to finally get it off his chest, but he said he and Mom knew immediately after the accident that something was different about me because my usual happy, bubbly self was gone. No more talking to myself or singing, no more playing dolls or watching cartoons. It was as if a part of me vanished overnight. He told me I cried all the time, insisted Farah was hurting, and had wild mood swings that sometimes turned violent. I was different in a way, but it was something more than just being traumatized or upset. I was *totally* different. I was... darker.

Out of everything he said, what struck me the most was this: “You didn’t have a mark on you, but it was clear you were different afterward.”

Eventually, they took me to the doctor and got me checked out. They ran test after test, and eventually, they found a piece of metal lodged in me. On my left side, a few inches below my heart. Just a small thing, so small a mark that it went completely unnoticed. They removed it, and finally, I began to improve. I wasn’t immediately back to my old self, but I continued to improve and eventually became a normal kid again. And now here I am.

His cell phone rang in the background, and we both ignored it. We hugged and talked a little, but mostly we cried. I have never seen my dad cry before. Never. I can only imagine what it would be like to hold something in for so long, especially something like that. And it was all to protect me. I’ve had no idea how lucky I am and how lucky I’ve been to have parents like mine.

Good night, Diary.

Love, Bella

L. Marshall James

March 21st

12:29 PM

Flashback:

I'm sitting on the table in the doctor's office with Dr. Tate. He asks me where Farah hurts, and I tell him her head hurts.

"Where?"

"Here," I say and touch above my right eye.

He looks closely at where I'm pointing, then starts to inspect the rest of my head. As he moves to my side, I see Mom sitting by the door. She looks worried and starts talking to someone. I wake up.

8:10 PM

Another day, another hidden room. I've been so drained after all the recurring nightmares and thinking about this all day, every day that I haven't really wanted to think or write about it. But I know I should at least get it out now while it's fresh rather than waiting or burying it.

The nightmares are happening nightly, but with the flashback earlier today, I broke down crying. It wasn't so bad in and of itself. It's just that every step I take seems to only create more questions and leave me more confused. Everyone has tried to keep me from finding this out, and I've defied them as if they meant harm rather than good. I wish I never dug any of this up.

But I know I couldn't have let it go after I was set on the trail of something so profound and deeply personal. It's always possible I could have had another incident like when I first freaked out on Billy. Even worse, I might have freaked out on someone *else's* kid and suffered more severe repercussions than just traumatizing my own. Beyond all that, I simply need to know the *truth*. I can only hope that when I finally get to the bottom of this, the nightmares will stop and I can let go of everything I've found out. I'm choosing the more bearable of two evils, I hope.

After the emotions wore off from my talk with Dad, I couldn't help poring over what he'd said. There hadn't been a mark on me that they noticed at first, but upon closer inspection by the doctor, they found a piece of metal. Just a few inches below my heart. Where my scar is.

But Dr. Tate said I was *grazed*. He never mentioned anything being lodged in me and even told me the problem “sort of resolved itself.” There is more being hidden here, so I went and talked with him again. Tommy came up with the idea to record my conversation with him. I didn’t care for the idea at first, but the more I thought about it, the smarter it seemed. It would be so much better to have proof of *exactly* what he said so I wasn’t just relating it all from memory. *Plus*, if he paused again like he did before, I could show it to Tommy rather than just telling him it seemed suspicious.

Here is the meeting transcribed from the tape:

“Okay, so, uh... I guess I have some more questions for you about the accident.”

“Okay, heh heh. Shoot.”

“All right. Well, I wanted to ask you about the scar.”

“Ah, I thought you might ask me about that. After thinking some more about it, I realized I might have remembered wrong. It actually wasn’t a scratch, just a, uh... a small piece of metal we overlooked at first.”

“Oh, okay! Yes, I was wondering about that. After talking with my Dad, I wanted to double-check that with you. Okay. Um... this might be a weird question, but why is the scar so large?”

“Well, we had some problems retrieving the piece of metal. There were a few small pieces, actually, so we had to kind of poke around a bit, I suppose.”

“Is that something you have to do often?”

“Often?”

“Yes, it just seems like normally you would let little fragments work their way to the surface on their own.”

“Ah, yes, normally that would be the case.”

“So... why did you remove them this time?”

“Well, as I said before, you were very different after the accident so... we thought it was best to remove them.”

“What made you think it was caused by the small piece, or pieces, of metal?”

“Well, we were very worried about you. At that point, we didn’t have many options, so that’s what we decided to do. It was a bit of shot in the dark. A desperate whim. And thank God it worked.”

L. Marshall James

“But wouldn’t a psychologist or counselor have been an option before removing the metal? I’m sorry. I don’t mean to pry unnecessarily. I just don’t understand why you would—”

“Bella, do you trust me?”

“Yes, I trust you.”

“Then listen to me: *let this go*, sweetheart. I know you want to get to the bottom of this, but nothing good will come of it.”

—

As he said this, a memory flashed in my mind. Me, a sad little girl, sitting outside the doctor’s office, holding a stuffed cat. I was there for something, but I can’t remember what. Something serious. Dad was in the office with Dr. Tate, talking. He sounded upset.

Dr. Tate spoke behind the closed door.

“Look, Mr. Darnell. I’m telling you, there is nothing there—”

“There *is* something!” my dad roared.

It was so loud I jumped and so did the nurse at the front desk. She turned around and smiled at me, but her smile was different than usual. It didn’t seem like a happy smile.

“There *is* something!” my dad insisted. His voice was somewhat quieter, but I could hear him clearly. “And you will test her until you damn well find it! My little girl is out there outside your office, and if we don’t find out what is wrong, then what will happen next? We got lucky today. That was it. *Luck*. We can’t afford to let her get worse. There *is no room* for getting worse.”

“Mr. Darnell, we’ve *tested* her. We’ve run X-rays *and* CAT scans, and we’ve found *nothing*—”

“Then test her again! This is more than just a mood problem, Dr. Tate. Run more tests. If you won’t do it, so help me God...”

“They have to help me,” Farah whimpered.

“I know,” I said.

—

The memory was as fresh as if it had just happened. And I had a feeling, too vague to be a memory. Something bad happened after that visit. Something in the doctor’s office. I looked closely at Dr. Tate, and there was something in the way he looked back at me, something more than worry or concern. He looked scared, but was he scared for me or for him?

“What tests did you run on me, again?” I asked.

“Tests?”

“Yes. Did something go wrong with one of the tests?”

He sighed and didn’t answer for a long time.

“Yes,” he said. “There were some issues with the MRI.”

“The MRI? Magnetic...”

“Magnetic resonance imaging.”

I thought of the pieces of metal they tried to remove.

“But... that made it worse,” I prompted.

He hesitated, then nodded. “It aggravated the metal that was already in you, yes.”

“But... why did you do an MRI if there was metal in me? Wasn’t that unsafe? Aren’t there tests to run before an MRI to make sure that kind of thing doesn’t happen?”

He sighed again. “Yes, normally a full-body X-ray will detect such things before we do an MRI. But because of the symptoms you were reporting and the personality changes you were exhibiting, we only ran the X-ray and the CAT scan tests over your *head*, which is where you were reporting pain. We hadn’t tested the rest of your body. It was an unfortunate oversight—a stupid mistake—that we ran the MRI over your whole body before checking.”

I thought of what Dad had said in the doctor’s office while I’d been sitting outside.

“You ran the test after my father told you to continue testing,” I said.

I looked Dr. Tate in the eyes. He broke eye contact, stood, and walked to the door. I thought he was going to leave, but he turned around and started pacing back and forth across the room. He was silent for a full minute.

“You’re not going to let this go, are you, Bella?”

“I can’t,” I said.

He nodded and continued to pace. “What else do you want to know?” he asked.

I watched him as he moved across the room. He seemed to be in another place, lost in his thoughts.

“I remember my dad talking to you in your office. I think I remember him saying we got lucky. What did he mean by that?”

He nodded. After a few seconds, he started to speak, then stopped and looked intently at me before speaking again. “This goes no further than you and me,” he said. “Is that understood?”

I nodded, but he did not divert his gaze.

“Your parents, and *you*, were very traumatized by this ordeal when it happened. Bringing it back will certainly do them no good, and I’m of the opinion that telling *you* will do no good, either, so I’ll say it again: this stays between you and me. Yes?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Good. When I said you were troubled, I wasn’t lying. But your problems went beyond that. The moods swings, the dark imaginings about Farah, those were disconcerting, but they were not the worst of it. The straw that broke the camel’s back was something else.

“The day before your father came to talk to me, he woke up in the middle of the night. At first he thought nothing of it and almost went back to sleep, but then he heard crying. It was something he’d grown accustomed to after the accident, so he took his time getting up to go comfort you and put you back to sleep. But when he opened his bedroom door and stepped into the hall, he realized the crying wasn’t coming from your room. It was coming from the *bathroom*, and the water was running. He tried to open it, but it was locked. In a panic, he kicked the door in. And there you were.”

He paused, took a deep breath, and continued. “You were perched on the edge of a filled bathtub with a toaster in your hands. He barely got to you before...”

He paced again. There was something painfully familiar about the look on his face.

“Your parents were panicked, so they came to me, hoping I could help you. I knew—or *thought* I knew, at the time—that they were coming to the wrong person. I thought they were wrong in thinking your problems had some physical cause. I was certain, absolutely certain, that you were just traumatized. But we ran the MRI anyway. That’s how we found the pieces of metal, for better or worse. Don’t ask me why it solved the problem.”

“Is that unusual?”

“What?”

“For that kind of injury to cause those kinds of symptoms?”

“Well, the *entire incident* was unusual.”

As he stood there, he looked older than he did when I first asked him about the scar. But despite his weathered features, I saw the same face I looked up to over twenty years ago when I told him Farah was hurt and needed his help. A memory flashed through my mind of throwing the toaster in the tub—an idea I must have picked up from a conversation I shouldn't have heard or a movie I shouldn't have seen—but I'd neglected to plug the toaster in. I finally succeeded in reaching the power outlet, but Dad caught me before I could manage to finish what would have been my final act. I remember hearing Farah as clear as day, crying and telling me to make the pain stop. I promised her I would. I remember her voice clearly now, but as hard as I try, I can't remember her face.

I can't imagine how much it must have scared Mom and Dad to see their little girl so traumatized.

L. Marshall James

March 27th

8:00 PM

The last week has been really nice, comparatively speaking. The nightmares have lessened significantly, and Dr. Brenner seems to think my latest breakthrough with Dr. Tate had a huge effect on that. We talked a bit about what I could remember of the event, and it felt a bit better than before to talk through it all again. He says I shouldn't hide my feelings about it, that I should let them come and "allow them to flow through me" instead of trying to suppress them. Eventually, the feelings will fade and the old memories will be nothing more than events that transpired many years ago. Nothing more, nothing less.

Tommy, Billy, and I had dinner with Mom and Dad on Saturday night. It went well for the most part, though it was a little awkward at times. Mom fawned over Billy more than usual and seemed very tense when she heard him talking to the TV. Dad also seemed to get a little upset, but once we verified Billy was just talking to Dora the Explorer, they both seemed to relax. I guess they're both pretty emotional after the resurrection of the Farah incident, so what sounded like Billy talking to himself must have put them on edge. I can't blame them.

I don't intend to tell either of them what I know about what happened. Based on Dad's reaction when I brought it up and Mom's general reaction to anything even tangentially related, I think it's best to let this issue be laid to rest as far as they're concerned. I know what happened now. The secrets are revealed. The truth is settled, and aside from my family, that is all that matters to me.

Either because the anxiety of the last few weeks is fading or because my subconscious no longer has to hide the secret of what happened, I feel more free now than I ever have. Weird to feel free from something that just a month ago I hadn't known even happened, right? But I do, and I'm really happy. After the month from hell, all the lights are on, all the rooms have been discovered, and the skeleton is back in the closet. I am finally ready to let go of Farah.

Diary, despite my skepticism, you've helped a lot! I'll give Dr. Brenner the thumbs-up when I see him next, whenever that might be. :)

Love,

Bella Linn Darnell-Thompson

April 6th

6:30 PM

I'm worried about Mom. Dad won't acknowledge it, but something is definitely going on with her. She's been gone a *lot* lately. I hadn't thought about it much before, but ever since I brought up the accident, she's been sort of aloof. The last *several* times I've gone to the house to see Mom and Dad, she's been out. It's unusual, but Dad just tells me she's out "window-shopping" or "seeing a friend" or he "thinks she's in town." He never gives any details, either. Just vague explanations and a shrug. He tries to act casual as if nothing is wrong, but I can tell he's worried about it. Something is up.

Mom acts normal enough during conversation, but she seems strained, as if her mind is somewhere else. I don't know what to do! I can't *ask* her how she's doing without bringing up exactly what she doesn't want to talk about in the first place. I hate to think I might have been the cause of whatever is wrong. I mean, I understand I couldn't have known this would affect her like it did, but I feel responsible. I've decided to take them out to dinner later this week and try to coax something out of them or, at the very least, try to soothe Mom.

Wish me luck!

L. Marshall James

April 9th

10:30 PM

Sigh. Okay, so dinner was pretty much an utter failure. We met at Mancini's Italiano, the classy restaurant at Sixth and Penn. We got a babysitter for Billy so (a) Mom wouldn't become distracted or worried by him for any reason, and (b) if it came to serious conversation, Billy wouldn't be out of his element or a distraction to all of us. At first it seemed like it would be a nice and productive night.

As it turned out, Mom was more upset by Billy's absence, so she kept asking about him. How has he been doing? Is soccer going well? Why isn't he at dinner? And on and on. Dad tried to change the subject with limited success, but she kept bringing the conversation back around to Billy or, on one occasion, to *ghosts*. I shit you not, Diary. Mom started talking about how ghosts exist. Dad firmly shut down that topic of conversation. After a few seconds of awkward silence, we managed to keep it relatively comfortable for the rest of the night, but with no success as far as my goal to try and root out *whatever* is going on.

I'm so worried about her. I'm going to talk to Dad about having her see Dr. Brenner. It might be good for her to have a neutral party to vent to and explain herself to. I'm sort of hesitant to bring it up, but with the way she's been acting, it probably has to be done. Tommy agreed with this notion and said doing something and causing a fuss is better than doing nothing and letting things deteriorate further. I couldn't begin to disagree.

April 11th

7:10 PM

I saw Mom driving out of town. She didn't notice me, but I was getting gas when she drove past. Since it's for Mom, I decided to take the private detective thing a little further and see if Dad would tell me what she was up to. I called him on his cell and asked if he and Mom wanted to watch a movie. He said Mom was visiting June (an old friend of hers) in Saxonburg but I was welcome to come over. I asked if she might be back soon, as I wanted to spend some more time with her. He said he wasn't sure but he didn't think she would be back for a while. I played along, but I knew he was either lying or being lied to. When Mom drove past, she was headed in the *opposite* direction of Saxonburg. Where was she going?

Dad said he was sure Mom went to visit a friend in Saxonburg. I asked him how he knew, and he said that was what she'd told him. When I told him I saw Mom going in the opposite direction, he paused, then said he'd talk to her and see if he misheard or if she changed plans or something. I guess we'll see.

L. Marshall James

April 13th

3:20 AM

Dream:

"Mommy, I wanna talk to Farah."

"Stop talking about Farah, honey."

"But I *miss* her."

All of a sudden Mom spins me around and squeezes my shoulders so I can't move.

"Farah does not exist. Do you understand?"

"Yes she does! I want—"

"*Bella Linn!* Farah does not exist. Do you hear me? Say it!"

"No."

"*Say it* or go on time-out."

"Farah does not exist."

"Good. Now, let's go home."

7:00 PM

I talked to Dad again, which accomplished absolutely nothing. He told me he "must have misremembered" where Mom said she was headed. I asked if he thought she was actually visiting a friend, and he said, definitely, yes. I don't know what I can do if he's going to cover for her. I asked him if he thought Mom blamed herself for the accident or something, and he said, no, that was definitely not the case and not to worry so much. I don't know what she's doing or where she's doing it, but it started when I told her about my incident, so I can only assume it's related. Based solely on the way she's been acting, I am already scared it is serious, but with last night's dream... somehow it really set me off and I don't know why. The dream was so unlike Mom, but I feel 100 percent certain it happened.

If I see Mom out again, I'm going to follow her.

April 16th

8:03 PM

I've parked at the gas station after work for the last couple of days with no luck. Today I waited again. I was sitting there for a while when an old lady knocked on my window and asked if I was Bella Darnell. When I said yes, she smiled and said I probably didn't remember her but we used to go to the same church. I said I thought I remembered her, and she introduced herself as Mrs. Bonne. She said she saw me coming out of the doctor's office looking upset and wanted to make sure I was okay. I said I was, and that I had been talking to Dr. Tate about an accident my friend and I had been injured in when we were younger. She didn't remember my friend, but she remembered the accident. She said my parents were very worried and it must have been especially hard for them since I was an only child. She asked how they were, so I had to lie and tell her they were both doing very well. She asked me to tell them she said hello, then wished me a good day. She seemed really sweet. I hope I see her again.

As Mrs. Bonne walked away, Mom drove past. I tried to follow her in the car, but I was scared I would get too close, so I tried to hang a ways back and ended up losing her. Better luck next time. I'm going to try again soon.

L. Marshall James

April 21st

1:15 AM

I don't understand. I hate this so much.

I camped out in the car at the gas station again after work. I waited longer than yesterday and was about to go home when Mom drove past in the same direction as before. I didn't bother to call Dad this time because I knew it wouldn't have changed anything. I followed at a distance for a while, closer than before so I wouldn't lose her but far enough away that I didn't think she would see.

When she pulled into the cemetery, I knew. This was it. This was where she'd been going since Farah clawed her way out of the depths of our memories. She was visiting Farah's grave. I slowed to a crawl so she wouldn't see me pull in behind her, then I decided not to pull in at all. I parked next to the church next door, then walked along the road to the cemetery's entrance. After a lot of peeking around gravestones and hiding behind trees, I spotted her car.

I couldn't see her at first, so I walked toward her car and kept an eye out for her bright blue jacket. Eventually, I found her kneeling in front of a grave in a corner of the cemetery with her back to me. I braced myself and walked quietly toward her. I told myself then and there that this was it, that it had to end. I couldn't shrug my shoulders and pretend she was going off to see friends or window-shop. I couldn't let it be buried again without proper acknowledgment or due respect. For whatever reason, Mom was suffering and I had to stop it. I had to tell her it was all right, that the past was the past, long gone and never coming back. I expected her to be crying or talking, but even when I came within a few yards of her, all I could hear were my own footsteps. Despite the silence of the cemetery, she hadn't noticed me.

"Mom," I said quietly.

She didn't respond.

"Mom."

She turned to face me. For a moment, I thought she would be upset I'd followed her, but aside from what might have been confusion or concern, her face was completely devoid of emotion. Neither of us moved and neither of us said a word. I expected to know what to say when the time came, but as I stood there, seeing her at her weakest, my mind went totally blank.

Then her face contorted and she started crying. I ran to her, wrapped my arms around her, and held her as her cries grew into deep, body-racking sobs. I couldn't think of anything to say. I don't think there *was* anything to say. The only words running through my mind were those on the tombstone:

Bhasa Farah Darnell

April 13th, 1979 – July 23rd, 1986

I can't sleep. I'm not tired. I'm not excited. You might expect my mind to be racing, but there's nothing. Just a dead calm. I'm not going to talk to Mom or Dad about this anymore. I'm calling off work and going back to Dr. Tate.

L. Marshall James

FIN

10:00 PM

I didn't ask the secretary to transfer me to Dr. Tate; I *told* her. When he picked up, there was friendliness in his voice. There was only steel in mine. After I scheduled the appointment, I made sure the audio recorder was ready. There was nothing else to do but wait. Tommy knew something was wrong when he came in to ask me where the aluminum foil was. I answered him, but when he asked what was up, I told him to take Billy out, see a movie, or take a walk, and to say nothing to Mom or Dad about Farah, me, or Dr. Tate. He understood as much as it was possible for him to understand.

The appointment was scheduled for 5:30, after the office officially closed for the day. There would be no other patients or employees to bother with. It would be just Dr. Tate, me, and the truth about Bhasa Farah Darnell.

"Hello, Dr. Tate."

"Hello, dear."

"Why am I here?" I asked.

"Pardon?"

"Why am I here?"

"Well, when we talked on the phone... uh... you are here to talk about Bhasa Farah Darnell."

"I am here to get the *truth* about Bhasa Farah Darnell," I said. "Will I get that from you?"

"Yes, Bella."

"I will not have to come back?"

"There should be no reason to even if you wanted to."

"Good."

"Okay," he said. "What would you like to know?"

"I want to know who she was."

"I know you do." He sighed. "But I think this might be a more appropriate question for your mother and fa—"

“My mother and father have lied to me as much as you have. But whatever happened to Farah and me back then has hurt them and I don’t want to make it any worse. You are a doctor and you know what happened. I want to know who Bhasa was.”

“I see.”

“I want the truth,” I said. “No more lies and half-truths.”

“I understand.”

“Good. Who was Bhasa Farah Darnell?”

“Well, that’s a”—he took a breath—“a complicated answer.”

“Bullshit. I want—”

“Bella,” he interrupted. “*You don’t know*. Don’t act like you do. Now, may I answer the question or not?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Now, understand this: I say it is complicated for the same reason the answers concerning Bhasa, or Farah, as you knew her, have been shaded and hidden from you for as long as they have. It is complicated in part *because* it has been hidden for so long and in part because of the impact answers like these are bound to have. Answers like this are not meant to be simply blurted out.”

“I—” I bit my lip. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he said. “Now tell me, what do you remember about Bhasa?”

“I don’t remember that name.”

“I know you don’t,” he said.

“How do you know?”

“We’ll get to that. Just tell me what you remember. About Farah.”

“I’ve only been able to piece together bits and pieces from dreams and from what little I’ve learned from you or my dad. I know Farah and I were walking through an alley when a propane tank exploded. I was injured. Farah was killed.”

“Go on.”

“I was different afterward. I had ‘dark imaginings,’ as you put it. I claimed Farah was in pain, that she was hurt and she needed help. I had nightmares. Mood swings. When I was seven years old, I tried to commit suicide. My parents brought me in many times for testing, and you interpreted my report of

Farah's pain as a traumatized child's report of her own pain, which is why you performed X-rays and CAT scans only on my head. Later, when my father demanded you do further testing, you ran an MRI on my entire body, which aggravated the metal in my side. After that, the metal was removed, I talked with a counselor, and I eventually returned to normal."

"Okay. You've told me what you remember about the situation in general. Tell me what you remember about Farah."

"I remember her voice."

"Okay."

"I remember... I remember imagining hearing her scream. And I remember imagining her telling me she was in pain and needed help."

"Do you remember anything else about her?"

"No."

"All right," he said. "Well, in order for me to explain who Farah was, I think it would be best if you let me explain exactly what happened back then. Is that all right with you?"

I nodded.

He cleared his throat. "As a result of the explosion, you sustained minor injuries. Farah sustained very serious injuries, but she did not die as a direct result of the explosion. *Your* injuries were so minute they weren't detected by visual inspection. They were only discovered as a result of the MRI incident."

He sighed. "Farah's injuries, while serious, were not fatal... or rather, they *wouldn't* have been fatal if they had been treated promptly and appropriately. But..."

"How do you know this if you didn't treat her?"

"*Be quiet and listen,*" he said.

I was silent.

"Is that understood?"

"Yes."

"Good. I ran the testing that resulted in the discovery of Bhasa's injuries. But like I said—"

"But—" I said, then hesitated.

"Go ahead." He gestured.

"But you told me you didn't treat Bhasa."

“I didn’t.”

“Then what do you mean? How could you run the testing without treating her?”

“Farah suffered severe brain trauma. Metal shards were forced into her brain as a result of the explosion. It was pure luck she survived the initial incident at all. Had the shards impacted millimeters to the left or right, she would have died immediately.”

“So she survived the explosion. Why wasn’t she treated properly? You had all the equipment necessary to treat her.”

“She wasn’t treated appropriately because we weren’t aware of her symptoms until it was too late.”

“Why?”

Dr. Tate pursed his lips. “Do you remember telling me where Farah was hurting?”

“Yes, my... my head.”

He leaned forward and slowly, gently, brought a trembling finger to a spot above my right eye. “Here,” he said, and let the finger drop. “And that is where Farah was struck by the metal shards.”

“What are you saying?” I asked. “If you knew where she was hurt, why weren’t you able to detect—”

“The point of insertion for the pieces of metal was precisely where you said they were, above Farah’s right eye.”

“Right, but why were you not able to treat her?”

He sat back and eyed me with what seemed like a certain kind of sadness. “Because we didn’t know she existed.”

“Wha—what?”

“We only discovered the metal in her head when we discovered the metal in your side.”

“Why only then?”

“Because,” he sighed, “it was the same metal.”

I shook my head. “I don’t understand.”

“When you were walking through that alley and fell victim to the explosion, you were, as far as we knew, alone. When you told us Farah was hurting, we thought you were communicating to us through the medium of an imaginary friend. As a result, we only ran the X-rays and CAT scans over your head, where you reported the pain.”

“Are you—” I stopped.

L. Marshall James

“Go ahead,” he prompted.

“Are you telling me I was pregnant? That I had a child?”

“No, not pregnant,” he said. “Not a child. A *sister*. Your condition was what is called ‘fetus in fetu.’ Have you ever heard of it?”

I shook my head.

“One of the theories of how this occurs is that one normal fetus becomes engulfed by another fetus while in the mother’s womb. Normally, this refers to abnormal growths of tissue inside the body, parts of a fetus that sometimes also resemble a fetus. But in your case, it didn’t just resemble a fetus; it essentially *was* a fetus.

“We overlooked your condition with the X-rays and CAT scans on your head, where you reported Farah’s pain. We only discovered the truth by accident—as a result of the MRI, which aggravated the metal shards embedded in Farah’s brain and finally ended her life.”

I struggled to make sense of it but couldn’t. It didn’t fit.

“The tissues of a fetus in fetu, while considered ‘alive,’ cannot normally be considered conscious. However, the fetus inside of you was underdeveloped only in that it lacked the ability to support itself. Its body was that of a fetus, and an underdeveloped fetus, at that. There were hardly any bones to speak of aside from the skull. There were no functional organs aside from the brain, no independent vascular system, nothing. But the brain was developed to an unbelievable degree. It was as if the fetus not only survived but managed to adapt to living inside of your body. It didn’t require a form of locomotion or a means to acquire food or even air. In that regard, it—*she*—was entirely dependent on you. But she was entirely capable of thought, I am sure of that.”

I didn’t want to ask him to explain and I didn’t need to. I already knew what he was going to say, but somehow I felt compelled to see it through.

“You knew her as Farah,” he continued. “After we discovered and removed her from your body, your parents buried her as Bhasa Farah Darnell.”

I knew every word he spoke was truth, and I trusted him completely. I reached out and held his hand. The door was open to the last hidden room in my mind. All I had to do was walk into that old, dark room, and turn on the lights. But more than that, I needed him to guide me inside. Some part of

me needed that vindication. I was that hurt little girl from so many years ago, desperate for someone to understand my pain and acknowledge what I had lost.

“How do you know?” I asked.

“How do I know *what*?”

“That she was real.”

He looked at the ground.

“Bella, I try not to make assumptions or wild claims, but when it comes to this incident, I find myself at a loss. In every medical situation I have ever experienced or heard of, there have been perfectly valid and rational explanations for what others might attribute to supernatural or fantastical causes. In every other situation, I have found that a leap of faith or a denial of perfectly good evidence is required to believe in otherworldly explanations. But not this. I know the facts of what happened. I was there. It still haunts me.

“We were there when the MRI incident occurred. We were in the room when the machine turned on and the three of us heard you scream. But there was something else... *before* we heard you. Not a sound, not a sensation. It was unlike anything I have ever experienced. It was like a single thought reached directly from her mind to ours, and it evoked more emotion and agony than I ever felt before or since. It was a message, as immeasurable and irrefutable as God: it was the words ‘I want to live.’ And then it was gone.

“In that flash of thought, I felt as if I experienced all of what her life was and what it had become, as if with one resonating thought, she willed *her* life to flash before *our* eyes. Her one strength—her brain—was compromised, and though she was able to communicate with you, she couldn’t communicate with those who could help her until it was too late. I *felt* that in the core of my being. I experienced her frustration and fear. For a fleeting moment, I lived her life. I have never been the same.

“You never saw the fetus. We never told you of its existence. But you talked to Farah before the incident as children often talk to imaginary friends, and you talked to Farah after the explosion when you reported her pain to us. The fetus was injured precisely where you told us Farah was hurt.”

He focused briefly on the spot above my right eye, then continued. “But after the MRI incident—after she died—you asked us where Farah went and why she wouldn’t talk to you. You never talked to Farah or reported her pain again.”

L. Marshall James

Dr. Tate sat forward and held my hands in his. His eyes were red.

“Before today, I hid the truth from you and I am sorry. I chose to honor your parents’ wishes that what happened never be revisited. I thought they were right, and I still do. As great a pain as I personally felt the day Farah died, I cannot begin to imagine their pain, or yours, in that final moment. The loss of a child is as devastating a thing as can happen to anyone, but the way Farah died was especially tragic. Your parents lost a child they never knew existed until she was already gone. Your mother was hit very hard by what happened, and while it may be outside my pay grade to say so, I don’t think she ever fully recovered from it. As for you... you lost the best friend you ever had.”

He squeezed my hands. “I’m so sorry, Bella.”

I touched the scar below my heart. The light is on in the last hidden room in my mind, but there is nothing inside, no color and no skeleton, only the space where Farah lived and the emptiness her death left behind. As oblivious as I was before and as desperate as I was to know the truth, it hurts so much more to know what I have lost and will never recover. Farah, my sister, my friend, I will remember you now and always. I will forever be darker without you.

Love,

Bella Linn Darnell-Thompson

April 21st, 2015