

This book was written by a group of ITE College Central students during the month of November 2018, as part of a three-part workshop on '*An Exquisite Corpse*' supported by the Speak Good English Movement and organised by Sing Lit Station. The students were guided throughout their writing journey by best-selling author Neil Humphreys.

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FOREWORD

I can still remember the first email from the team at Sing Lit Station. ITE Central have been in touch and the staff there were wondering if you could help their students to write a novel - in three weeks!

To say I was sceptical was an understatement. I follow Stephen King's mantra that the first draft of any novel should be completed in around three months (about a thousand words a day). But that's a general rule of thumb for experienced writers. So the idea of conceptualising, writing, editing and designing an entire novel, right down to illustrating the cover and providing a back cover synopsis - in three weeks - seemed rather optimistic, perhaps even a little crazy!

And yet, somehow, we did it.

The students at ITE Central went above and beyond. Considering most of the participants didn't even know each other at first and were studying and revising for completely different subjects only makes the achievement all the more remarkable.

From the first class, they committed, some more than others, obviously, depending on workload and time constraints, but every student has their fingerprints across this novel, in one way or another.

I have warm memories of the group 'discussing' the novel's plot, theme and central characters, with all ideas welcomed, no matter how outlandish. I loved the creativity, the spontaneity and the brainstorming from everyone involved, invaluable skills in any workplace. Most of all, I really appreciated their commitment. Three workshops was always going to provide just a framework, a skeletal structure for this novel, much of the writing needed to be done independently.

That meant social media groups, weekly - sometimes daily - catch-ups to check on plot developments and a constant sharing and exchanging of ideas, again, wonderful skills in any creative workplace.

And, remarkably, with time always against us, we managed to pull this novel together and produce an original gothic horror story that I think everyone should be proud of. There's no point making the deadline if the end product is substandard. But Lucy is a fun, engaging and entertaining read. And I think every ITE Central student, teacher and librarian should read it!

And finally, I want to thank my fellow writers for their efforts. Being one of Singapore's few, full-time writers can sometimes be a dispiriting experience. It's a tough, often lonely, job. But I found the novel-writing process with such enthusiastic writers to be an uplifting experience. Honestly, they gave me hope and I look forward to hearing about their creative endeavours in the future.

So to my fellow novelists at ITE Central, I say, thank YOU for inspiring me.

Keep scribbling. Keep dreaming.

Neil Humphreys
Author of 21 books
Proud editor of Lucy

LUCY

A JACK MARDOFF THRILLER

By The Central Novelists
Edited by Neil Humphreys

Chapter 1

Blinking blearily, he squinted at the light that shone brightly in his eyes. He covered his face with his elbow and sat up, knocking a few stray bottles over with his feet. Jack Mardoff pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to get rid of his pounding headache.

His mouth tasted evil. His back ached from sleeping on the couch. He opened his eyes and thought to himself: "How long has it been? How long have I lived like this?"

As he looked around his living room, the place was strewn with rubbish, and there were beer bottles lying around and dishes piled up.

"It's been months since the incident and yet I can still hear their voices calling out to me, waking me up for breakfast," he shook his head.

The blaring sound of his phone ringing broke the silence in the room, making him jump.

"Ouch," he grumbled.

Jack fell back onto the couch, the nausea hitting him hard and fast. He shut his eyes as white spots floated across his vision.

"Oh God."

He felt as if lightning had struck him. He stretched out across the couch and waited for his phone to stop ringing. The phone stopped ringing and for a brief moment, silence overtook the room. Before long, the phone rang again and Jack realised the silence was not meant to last. Learning his lesson, he got up and slowly stumbled his way through to the dining table, kicking old bottles and takeaway boxes across the living room.

"Aye Mardoff, you just got your lazy arse out of bed, didn't ya!"

The loud voice of his former partner, Chris, pierced through.

"What do you want, Marshall?" Jack replied crankily.

"I need your help in a case. It's a tough nut to crack and this new partner is not working out for me," Chris said.

"I am not going back, Chris, you know that. I can't do it anymore," Jack replied.

"I know, Mardoff," Chris sighed. "Just had to try my luck. You know you'll always be welcome here if you ever want to come back."

"Thanks man. I'll invite you over to the new place when I've settled in."

"You better. I'll bring the whole station to visit you there," Chris replied cheerfully.

After they said their goodbyes, Jack went for a shower and then started to clear out his house, throwing everything away except the bare necessities and too many photo frames holding pictures of his family. They were his only connection back to a past life - a happier life.

He packed everything into his car and started to prepare for the long drive to his new neighbourhood. Before leaving, he went into each of the rooms of the house, one last time, just reminiscing and trying to commit each room to memory. When he was ready, he stepped out the door. He turned to look at the house, smiling sadly as he thought about the memories he once had, now forever tainted by the tragedy.

Chapter 2

Getting into the car, Jack took a long, final glimpse at the old family home before starting up his car. His favourite song echoed around the car as he cruised down the road.

With the sun beating down, Jack lowered the sun visor to protect his eyes, allowing him a chance to see the road clearly. As the car cruised along, the sound of cars zooming past and the stereo music began to fade from his mind until there was nothing but silence.

"Daddy! let's play a game!"

"Alright sweetie, what game do you want to play?" Jack asked.

"I spy!" Eva requested.

"All right then. I spy with my little eye, something that is yellow!"

"A road sign!" Eva shouted quickly, unable to contain her excitement.

"Correct! that's my girl," Jack said, beaming happily at his adorable daughter at the back.

She giggled. "My turn! I spy with my little eye, something beginning with ...:"

HONK! HONK!

"Eva!"

Jack yelled in terror as the truck's horn jolted him awake. He saw the truck hurtling towards him.

"Ah crap!"

Jack gripped the steering wheel and dragged the car to the side of the road, narrowly avoiding the truck.

The truck driver pulled over and leaned through his opened window.

"What are you doing, dipshit! You trying to get yourself killed?"

"I'm really sorry," Jack said remorsefully.

"Ya damn right you're sorry!" The man hollered.

The truck started up again and cruised out of sight.

"Damn, man, it's happening again," Jack whispered in a hoarse voice.

Squinting his eyes, he peered at the horizon. Tears streamed down his face. He knew that the guilt and anguish were slowly corroding his heart. He tried so hard not to reminisce about his daughter, but he couldn't help himself.

Slowly, he calmed his troubled heart before starting up the car again. With his eyes wide open, Jack tried to stay vigilant, ensuring that he did not fall into a stupor again. Finally, he reached the dark, gravel track that led to his new town, blowing up the foliage as he passed through the countryside. The drive was scenic as the road was surrounded with lush greenery that soothed the soul. Jack watched the birds flying north for springtime, envying their freedom. As he reached the end of the road, he came across a sign with a town in sight up ahead.

Green Vale. Home of Mother Nature.

"And my new home, too," Jack muttered.

He pulled over at the entrance to the town. He got out of his car and wandered around the eerily quiet town.

"Amber Meadows Street, just where is that?" Jack mumbled.

"Hello there, stranger! Haven't seen you around before, you new here?"

Jack turned to face the southern-accented voice, a man who seemed to appear from nowhere.

"Umm, hi, I'm Jack, and you are?"

The stranger smiled. "The name's Ron, nice to meet ya. You must be the new tenant I've been hearing about," he said, shaking Jack's right hand warmly.

"Why, yes," replied Jack. "I didn't know that the folks here were so well-informed."

"Hahaha, well, we do get that a lot. Here in Green Vale, us tenants are closer than a lock and key. We like to know what's going on."

Ron winked at Jack. Jack seemed puzzled.

"Closer than a lock and ... Nevermind. Do you know where Amber Meadows Street is?"

"I sure do. Drive straight ahead and take a left. Once you've reached the end of the road near the forest area, take a right. What's your unit?"

"It's number 1-21."

"All the way at the end I see, you should be right beside where Denise lives," Ron added, pointed away from the town centre.

"Daddy!"

Before Jack could enquire about Denise, a cute little girl ran towards Ron and hugged his legs. Ron grinned at the little girl.

"Samantha! What are you doing here? Where's your mum?"

"We're playing tag," she giggled. "You're it!"

"Hey, that isn't fair," Ron playfully shouted as she bolted away.

Jack looked on this scene in slight pain. The brief exchange made him recall better times when he used to play tag with his own daughter, Eva. He could see her standing in front of him. He could remember every word of their conversations.

"Daddy, no fair! You're always so fast, it's impossible to run away from you!"

She was so beautiful.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Eva. Being fast is a must for me! How else am I gonna catch the bad guys?"

She laughed.

"Hehe, You're my Hero Daddy, I want to catch bad guys too!"

"Well then you better train up! You must be able to run faster than Daddy!"

She ran away. Even in his memories, she ran away.

"Hey, you're alright man?" Ron asked, tapping Jack on the arm and shaking him from his daydream.

"Hmm, oh yes I'm alright. Sorry, Ron. You have a lovely daughter."

"Ah shucks, thanks! She's my angel. I would be lost without her," Ron said proudly.

"Well, I better get going, and so should you, Ron, if you want to catch your daughter," Jack chuckled politely.

"Shoot! You're right! I'm gonna get ya, sweetie!" Ron shouted. "Before I forget - we're planning a welcome party for new tenants like you, Jack. It's happening soon, so I thought I should let you know in advance."

Ron started running after his daughter.

"It's being held at the Town Square!" Ron's voice trailed away.

He disappeared into the darkness.

Chapter 3

Jack got back into his car and took a slow, relaxing drive into town. He took in the different types of houses as he passed, but his thoughts mostly centred on his exchange with the new neighbour, Ron, and his little girl. The images of father and daughter playing together haunted him, sending him back to a place he didn't want to go. His hands were clammy.

"Let it go, Jack. Come on. Get a grip of it."

Greenvale oozed summer from its every pore. Nature was everywhere, cutting off its inhabitants from the outside world. Tall, cuscuta plants blanketed the ground. Trees shut the town off like a green wall. Jack remembered these trees from his time in the precinct as a beat cop, patrolling eerie neighbourhoods and forests. They always threw up their usual wonders of "nightly surprises" like an animal carcass and the occasional dead body.

"Shoot! I missed that turn in from the left."

Jack made a quick detour and returned to the track. He passed by an empty playground. A central sign spoke of a diner, a farm and a lake. He noticed some swans drifting across the surface of the lake.

Finally, he reached his house.

"It doesn't look too bad," he murmured. "Let's get to it."

The town's cheeriness and the green environment made it impossible for Jack to wallow, but after the long drive, he had no energy to do all the unpacking by himself.

He clicked open the trunk to grab the first box, but spotted a fluttering in the curtains of the house next door. His instincts told him he was being watched.

He started unloading boxes when a lady approached.

"Oh, sorry. You must be the new tenant. Hi! The name's Denise."

"Oh, yes, Ron told me about you. My name's Jack. Lovely town you got here."

Denise pointed at the boxes. "You think I can help you with that?"

"You sure it's not too much trouble?"

"Not at all! "

Denise had brown hair and slender eyes that matched her slim eyebrows. Her very delicate frame reminded Jack of a regal statue with angelic features.

He felt a little blown away, getting help from such a beautiful stranger on his first day in this new town.

For the first time all day, he found himself smiling at his good fortune.

Chapter 4

With heavy boxes in their hands, Denise and Jack trudged up the steps to the house. As Jack turned the lock, the door creaked loudly.

"This place still needs fixing up, but I guess it gives the house character, right?" Jack chuckled.

The moment he stepped inside, a strong musty odour overpowered his senses. Jack hesitated for a moment and turned to his new neighbour.

"Hey Denise? Do you.. smell that?"

"What smell? I don't smell anything."

Denise laughed as if nothing had happened and walked past him into the house.

Jack stared at her back, perturbed. If he didn't know any better, he would have thought it was the smell of bodies decomposing, but that seemed ridiculous. Perhaps the smell was just his own imagination.

He was probably just tired. Too many years in the police force could play tricks on the mind. He tried to ignore the pungent smell and followed Denise into the house. He put down the boxes and took a moment to look around. Despite the shabby exterior, the interior looked strangely new. Although it wasn't big, the place was quite cozy. Simple interior, a slim couch facing a small television, more than enough for a single man trying to shake off old baggage.

The kitchen was neat and complete, with a short stairway beside it that led to the second floor.

"Hmm, I wonder where Denise went? I haven't seen her in a while. Maybe she's in the living room." He thought to himself.

He went over to the living area only to find that the room was empty, except for a couple of boxes and a few sheets of plastic lying around.

"That's a lot of boxes you have to unpack."

Denise appeared suddenly beside him, smiling innocently. Surprised, Jack took a step backwards, his eyes locked with hers. She moved closer, and he felt uncomfortable as his personal space was invaded, her unwavering gaze boring into his eyes.

"Well, yeah, obviously," Jack responded touchily, moving away from her.

"Not surprising, Jack. Looks like you're planning to be here for a while," Denise chuckled.

The brief tension evaporated. With Denise's help, they quickly unloaded all the boxes.

"Thanks a lot, Denise. This would have taken ages without your help," Jack said gratefully.

"Not a problem. It's not everyday I get a cute new neighbour like you," Denise said, winking.

"Cheeky, aren't you?" Jack remarked.

Denise giggled and gave Jack a slow wave as she returned home.

"See you tomorrow, Jack."

The next morning, Jack woke to the sound of laughter and giggling coming from the neighbouring backyard. Curious, Jack took a quick shower and went out to the backyard after a change of clothes. There he spotted his neighbour Denise, playing with a young girl.

"Eva."

His heart skipped a beat as he briefly imagined seeing his daughter again. Shaking his head, he cursed himself under his breath.

"Get a grip, Jack! She's gone. Accept it."

Collecting himself, Jack waved and greeted his new neighbours.

"Good morning, Denise. Good morning to you, little lady."

Turning around, Denise greeted back. "Good morning to you too, did you sleep well?"

"Yes I did, thank you very much," Jack replied as he walked towards her.

Tired of being left out of the conversation, the young girl beside Denise butted in.

"Oh! Where are my manners, Jack, this is my baby sister Lucy. Lucy, meet Jack. He's our new neighbour."

"I'm not a baby," Lucy rolled her eyes. "And no wonder my sister spent so long 'helping you unpack' yesterday. You're just her type," she added mischievously.

"I see bluntness runs in the family," Jack thought to himself. 'It seems the older sister is playful while the younger sister is sarcastic. She's nothing like my sweet innocent Eva.'

"I see you've just woken up, wanna join us for breakfast? Denise offered.

"If you don't mind it? I'd love to."

"Yay, the more, the merrier! You can tell us your stories!" Lucy giggled.

The three of them entered the house and had breakfast. While having breakfast, Jack told Lucy about his adventurous days as a detective, regaling them with hilarious tales from his early days as a beat cop. Breakfast turned quickly into brunch, and soon after he was pulled into an afternoon of competitive video games with Lucy. He shared an easy chemistry with his new neighbours, and it felt so much like old times with his own family that a part of him never wanted to leave. Happily, they seemed to enjoy his company as well, and they invited him to stay & help prepare for dinner. He agreed enthusiastically, throwing himself into his new role assisting Denise in the kitchen and setting the table. Jack hadn't felt this happy since before the incident, until much later that night, when Denise drew him into her room with a small smile playing on her face, locking the door behind them.

"So Jack, you going to the party tomorrow?" Denise whispered to Jack from her pillow.

Slowly opening his eyes, he turned around in bed to face Denise.

"Well, I guess it would be a good idea to get acquainted with the neighbours," Jack replied.

"As long as you're not going to look at other women!" Denise said cheekily.

"With a beauty like you beside me, I would be a fool to look at anyone else," Jack muttered as he and Denise slowly returned to sleep in each other's arms.

Chapter 5

The party was in full swing. Jack walked in the town council hall and bumped into Ron, the first guy he met in town. Ron introduced Jack to his wife, Jacqueline. The town council was packed. As Jack made his way past a crowd of people, he could hear whispers drifting around the room.

"Is that the new guy that just moved in town?"

"Yeah! I heard he's a detective or something."

"I heard he has some dark past, wanted to escape from the city."

"Was it something to do with his job as a cop?"

"Don't know. Maybe it was a big, gruesome case, he had to escape."

"I wonder if he'll keep an eye on our town for us."

"I wonder if he's single?"

"I hope so. He is quite handsome... Wonder if he is already married."

"No idea, but Ron said he behaved really weirdly when he met Ron's little girl."

"Maybe he doesn't like kids."

"Doesn't matter. He's still very handsome."

"But you're already married."

"I don't care. He's still very handsome."

"Be quiet. He'll hear you."

"Good. I want him to hear me call him handsome."

Jack smiled, but pretended not to hear the whispers floating around him. The gossip was entertaining, but he wasn't interested, one way or the other. He looked around for Denise, but he couldn't spot her anywhere.

"Dad? DAD! Where are you?! DAD!"

Jack turned around, hearing a familiar, female voice shouting out from the crowd.

He spotted Samantha, Ron's daughter, frantically looking around. They made eye contact and the child ran up to him, tears falling from her eyes.

"Hey, hey, what's wrong?" Jack asked.

"I can't find my dad! He... He was just with me! I thought he was behind me but... but..."

Samantha was about to continue before she was pulled away harshly by her mother.

"Oh, don't mind her," Jacqueline snapped. "She does this all the time randomly at events. She wants attention."

"But she seems quite upset. Perhaps we should find Ron?" Jack suggested.

"Oh, he'll be around somewhere," Jacqueline insisted. "He's my husband. I know what he's like. And this one here likes to tell stories. Come on, you."

She grabbed Samantha firmly by the wrist and dragged the girl away from Jack.

His eyebrows furrowed uncertainly. Something was strange about these people, but he couldn't place his finger on it. A mother knows best, yet there was something in Samantha's eyes that Jack couldn't quite shake off.

The little girl looked terrified.

Chapter 6

The next morning, Jack went into the the diner to have some breakfast. He saw some of the neighbours he met briefly at last night's welcoming party, but he couldn't let go of the interaction he had with Samantha and Jacqueline. He hadn't seen Ron at all for the rest of that night, and when he spoke to his new neighbours, no one else had seen him either. Even stranger, nobody seemed to care. He wandered up to the counter of the diner to order some scrambled eggs and coffee. The coffee woke him up and he decided to find out more about his new home. Waitresses were always the best source of information in any small town.

"Hey, I'm Jack, I've just moved in here," he said.

"I know," the waitress replied, pouring him a second cup of coffee.

She didn't look up.

"So what's the story about this place?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know, what's the town like?"

"Just like any other."

"You lived in any other town then?"

"Nope. Only this one."

"Did you go to the party in the town square last night?"

"Nope, I was working at the diner."

"But everyone was at the party."

"I wasn't."

"So did you serve yourself?"

"Funny guy."

"Not really."

"Do you know Ron?"

The waitress yawned. "Of course, everybody knows everybody here."

"But I can't find him. He disappeared from the party and wasn't at home this morning when I called Jacqueline to check."

"Why are you worried?"

"He seems like a nice guy."

"He is. So what?"

"You don't think it's weird? No gossip, no scandal, nothing said about a missing person."

"No. You're the only one who says he's missing. Besides, it's none of my business and it shouldn't be any of your business either."

The waitress' sudden rudeness threw Jack off. His thoughts were hazy and confused. "How can the townspeople here not care that one of their own going missing?"

The waitress scrunched her face and wandered off.

After his breakfast, Jack went from table to table, asking everyone inside the diner about Ron's disappearance. But he was either shot down, shrugged off or ignored. And then, at the last booth, in the corner of the diner, an elderly man pointed a bony finger towards the woods through the window.

"Look through the nature trails," he croaked.

"What's in the nature trails?"

"Just look through the nature trails," he repeated, before returning to his coffee.

Beneath a grey sky, Jack headed for the nature trails. When he arrived, the heavens opened. The terrain was muddy and the air damp and misty.

"Where are you, Ron? Are you in some kind of trouble, or just drunk in a ditch somewhere? Am I going mad? What am I doing, anyway?"

Jack had no idea why he felt compelled to look for this man. The only thing he knew was that a man had disappeared, and the only one in town who seemed to care was Jack, a stranger.

His next step felt unbalanced and before he could react he slipped and tumbled down the hill. His arms flailed and he tried desperately to grab at anything to stop his descent, but the wet vines slipped out of his grasp. He came to a sudden stop when he thumped his head against a large, rotten tree stump.

Jack slowly sat up, groaning in pain, momentarily disoriented. When the wave of nausea stopped, he did a quick scan of his body and found he was covered in cuts and scratches. He brushed off the leaves and mud and looked around at his surroundings.

He thought he was dreaming.

He noticed a small trail of footsteps that didn't belong to him. He followed them until they reached a narrow drain covered with big fallen leaves. He noticed a really foul smell coming from the drain. Strangely, it was the same smell that hit him when he'd stepped inside his new home. But this scent was stronger, more visceral and tangible. And it didn't smell right.

Curious, Jack pushed a leaf to one side. His neurons started firing wildly. He was too stunned to speak. He pushed the other leaves away to fully reveal a supine body, its face turned away from view.

Chapter 7

Jack feared the worst. Recognising the clothes on the body, he immediately called out Ron's name in hope for a response. A feeling of unease overwhelmed Jack. He started feeling dizzy, and he almost threw up from the pungent smell. He noticed that the body was covered in strange runes. There was a symbol of a star in the middle of Ron's chest, surrounded by melted candles.

He took a careful step around the body to view its face. As he peered at the dead man's face, his worst fears were confirmed.

It was Ron.

Jack noticed that Ron had multiple wounds all over his body. There was a big cut from the neck down to the groin, which left a gaping hole, exposing his gutted carcass. Ron's body was devoid of any entrails. Not only that, his skin was covered in weird runes that seemed to move every time he looked at them. Ron's expression was devoid of fear, anger or despair. His eyes were empty and blank, as if his soul had been extracted from his body. Only a hollow shell of a man remained. Surrounding him were bloodied surgical tools and what looked to be a gutting knife with a jewel at the end of its hilt.

"Oh god," Jack retched, the stench stinging his eyes, causing him to tear up as he continued to throw up his coffee and scrambled eggs.

"Who would do such a thing?!"

Jack leaned back on a tree, exhausted from throwing up, and stared at Ron's body. His hands were shaking violently as he tried to regain his composure. Before he could move, a gust of wind blew by, followed by a horrible odour that smelled like all rotten things in the world combined. The stench was pervasive and enveloped him in an uncomfortable embrace. With a sudden sense of foreboding, Jack staggered towards the source of the stench. The stench grew stronger as he moved past two large trees with strange, runic symbols engraved on them. Beyond that, there were two even larger trees, their overarching branches framing the sky. Below that dark canopy, a thicket of bushes. Jack noticed something pale, half-hidden from the undergrowth.

With a growing feeling of fear in his gut, he walked past the bush into a large empty clearing. Poking out of the undergrowth was a human leg, and scattered across the clearing were dead carcasses everywhere. With bodies that only had their torsos intact, going through the second stage of decomposition. Bloated bodies with pus leaking through their flesh were strewn across the floor. With clouded eyes, Jack looked towards the tree and to his dismay, he found the victims' limbs and heads. Hanging on each branch, limbs dangling in the forest breeze. Crows feasted upon the heads. With a series of caws, they pecked the victims eyeballs out, sharing them with their babies. The environment of the forest began to change. Jack started to hallucinate. The dry blood on the tree started to flow down, as if the tree itself was bleeding. He felt dizzy. As his vision blurred, he began vomiting. The stench from the decayed bodies was too much.

He started to hear the screams of his wife and his daughter.

He saw the ghost of his Eva, his young daughter, running towards him. He felt his heart rate quicken. A panic attack was taking over his body, darkness taking over his vision until he couldn't see anything anymore.

Jack collapsed and fainted in the middle of the forest.

Chapter 8

Jack opened his eyes only to press them back shut, groaning and moving his head to the side. White lights blinded his vision. He opened his eyes once more, this time slowly, his head still faced to the side. His senses eventually readjusted and he finally looked at his surroundings. A white ceiling with bright white lights, the sound of beeping to his right.

He turned to face the door. Voices could be heard on the other side. They were rushed but soft. Jack could barely hear them. He groaned as he tried to sit up. Feeling thirsty, he saw a small pitcher with an empty glass on a table with a vase of sunflowers next to him. He quickly poured a drink and thirstily drank it in a single swig. Just as he was about to pour another, the door pushed open and in walked a man, who looked in his thirties. Two nurses trailed in behind him. One held a clipboard and the other held a fresh bouquet of daisies.

"Ah, It's good to see that you are awake Mr Mardoff. How are you feeling?" The man asked.

"Apart from the pounding ache in my head, I'm fine Doctor." Jack replied with a small smile.

The nurse with the clipboard began scribbling down notes while the other nurse replaced the sunflowers beside Jack's bed.

"What do you last remember, Mr Mardoff? Do you remember where you were or what happened?"

Jack was quiet for a moment. Images of the dead bodies flashed through his head, especially those of his wife and daughter. He closed his eyes momentarily, breathing in deeply before replying.

"I was walking; exploring the town's nature trail to be exact, but a foul smell caught me off guard. I followed the stink and I... I saw a dead body. I found Ron - the man that everyone insisted hadn't gone missing. Oh god, you have to tell his wife, his daughter - poor Samantha! But he wasn't the only one. There were so many bodies all over the forest. Bodies all dismembered and decomposing... There were even heads on branches that the crows were making a nest out of! And oh God," he sputtered, struggling to get the words out. "The smell! It was horrible! Like they had been dead for weeks! Months maybe? How did no one spot them? Why weren't they found and reported?"

He was hysterical. He thought he was going to vomit as he recalled the things he saw in that forest. However, the doctor just stared at his delirious patient with a mix of amusement and curiosity.

"Now now, Mr Mardoff. That can't possibly be true. I understand the town held a welcome party for you last night. Perhaps you had a few too many drinks last night, eh? We've all been there."

"But Doctor, I'm ..."

"It's OK, Mr Mardoff. Just take a rest first, relax and recover. There's someone here who wants to see you."

The doctor walked out of the room. The two nurses followed.

Jack huffed in frustration as a man in a black T-shirt and leather jacket swaggered in.

"Looks like trouble found you again, Mardoff, and I didn't even have to be there for it."

The man chuckled. Jack relaxed at the sight of his former partner.

"Chris, what are you doing here? I'm surprised that the chief even let you escape the station."

Chris laughed and took a seat beside Jack's bed.

"I just came by to visit you and to check in on how you're adapting to this small town. Although, you clearly forgot to invite me for the housewarming we agreed on."

The humour in the air soon disappeared. Chris spoke in a low voice.

"I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I accidentally overheard your conversation with the doctor earlier. What was it you said about all those dead bodies?"

Jack flinched at the doubt evident in Chris' eyes. Even his old partner didn't seem to believe him. Jack hardened his gaze.

"It's the truth, Chris. You know I wouldn't lie about such things. I swear on my life. I thought I saw my wife and daughter amongst the dead bodies. Chris, I swear, I am not lying."

Jack was frustrated that no one believed him. Taken aback, Chris tried to reassure his old partner.

"Now calm down Jack, you know that I trust you right? But think about it for a minute. Does it even sound plausible? If there really were so many dead bodies, the stench would be inescapable and foul. It would've pervaded into the town, someone would've reported it."

"But Chris..."

"And wouldn't the police have investigated it? Not to mention, when you were found in the woods, there were no bodies around, no stench at all. Just you, passed out in the middle of an empty forest floor. What the hell were you doing there, anyway?"

Frustrated, Jack could only look down in defeat. He felt ashamed. Maybe his mind had betrayed him. The stress, the grief, the loss, everything weighed him down, affecting his judgement. Maybe Chris was right but what Jack saw seemed so real, almost as if he could reach out and touch the dead. As stubborn as he was, Jack decided to keep quiet.

Chris sighed. "Listen Jack. I'm sorry to ask but have you been taking your medicine? Because it sounded like your PTSD is acting up again. You did mention that your wife and daughter were lying amongst the dead bodies. This can't possibly be true, it's not even remotely possible. You know that."

Silence took over the room. Taking a deep breath, Chris hesitantly continued again.

"They're gone. Taken by that psychotic man. It was horrific, just horrific, and no one could forget that - who wouldn't be affected by something like that? Who wouldn't need help moving past that? There's no shame in it. And I know you did what you could to protect your family. But you have to stop blaming yourself. Nobody on Earth could have predicted that night, no one could be prepared for seeing their loved ones killed in an empty parking lot. It's not your fault."

A single tear dripped down Jack's cheek at the memory. He quickly brushed the tear off. He was far too angry at the current situation. He just couldn't allow himself think about anything else right now. Every mention of his family was like a knife through his heart. It distracted him.

"Listen Jack, you were an amazing detective, and you still are deep down, but after what happened... No one blames you for needing time. Go back to therapy, take your meds. This will fade over time, I promise you, but chasing phantom bodies through the woods... that won't help."

Jack didn't say anything. Various thoughts ran through his head. Maybe it truly was his PTSD, but he still couldn't get rid of the tension building in his body. With a defeated sigh, Jack murmured a few comforting words to Chris and made up some excuse about being tired to make him leave. As Chris walked out, Jack stretched out on the bed and rubbed the sides of his temples with his hands. All this confusion was causing a headache. He turned to the side and looked out the window of his room.

A lady stood outside Jack's hospital room, smiling softly to herself.

She had heard every word of the conversation.

Chapter 9

"AH! A butterfly!" Lucy exclaimed.

It was a beautiful red and black swallowtail butterfly. It flew near Lucy, flying around and around before heading back towards the forest.

"Ah! Wait! Don't go!"

Lucy chased the butterfly into the forest, disappearing through the trees.

"Got you!" Lucy declared, as she gently cupped the butterfly with her hands. "Hehe, I got you now! My big sister Denise loves red and black - you're perfect!"

She turned around to head home and hesitated.

"Huh? Is this the same place?" Lucy wondered. "Why does it look so different?"

Backtracking again, Lucy found herself at the same spot.

The crows cawed in the distance, scaring her.

"What do I do, little butterfly?" She whispered.

With the butterfly still sitting on the palm of her hand, Lucy headed away from the scary sound of the cawing crows. Then she noticed two large trees with strange runes on them.

"What is this place?"

Terrified by the eerie atmosphere, Lucy inched closer towards the clearing between the trees. Before she was even halfway there, she felt dizzy.

"I don't feel so good," she mumbled.

Lucy realised that the closer she got to the trees, the more she felt like the atmosphere was suffocating her. She felt claustrophobic. The moment she was about to make contact with the trees, she felt a pair of eyes on her back.

"Who's there?"

With a shiver running down her spine, Lucy spun around, trying to find the person staring at her. She could sense a presence. Someone was there, but she couldn't see anything. Terrified, Lucy started running.

As she scrambled through the forest, she noticed that she'd accidentally set the butterfly free. She reached out to grab the beautiful creature again, only to see the butterfly flutter through her hand.

"What? How did it do that?"

Lucy noticed that her hands were slightly transparent. Realising that it may be a hallucination, she checked her hands again. They had returned to normal.

Confused and scared, Lucy started to burst into tears.

"Denise, where are you? Is anyone out there? Somebody, please, help me!"

The woman burst into Jack's hospital room.

"Lucy is missing!" she screamed.

In his disorientation, Jack struggled to place this young, beautiful woman screeching over his hospital bed until he realised it was Denise.

"LUCY IS MISSING. LUCY IS MISSING!"

"Calm down, Denise, you've got to calm down," Jack said, taken aback.

"MY BABY SISTER IS MISSING," Denise sobbed helplessly beside Jack.

Although Jack was still in acute pain, he reached out and embraced Denise in an attempt to calm her down.

Denise wiped her eyes and tried to gather her thoughts.

"I was taking a short nap, and when I woke up... Lucy was gone. My baby sister... Initially I thought Lucy was just out at the front porch playing with the butterflies. She's always chasing butterflies. Lucy loves them. But this time, she was nowhere near to be found. Nowhere. I've ran around everywhere."

"Have you tried asking around town to see if anyone saw her?" Jack asked.

"You know what they're like. Heck, they don't even talk about the missing people!" Denise replied with an angry sigh. "What if she was murdered? What if she was dead?"

Denise was starting to get really worked up again before Jack interjected.

"She probably just got playful and ventured out on her own because she caught sight of some really rare species of butterfly."

Jack comforted Denise, but he couldn't hide the fear and worry in his eyes. He was still thinking about the gruesome scene in the forest.

"I'll help you find her. I know how it feels to lose someone whom you love very dearly."

"What do you mean?"

"I... lost both my wife and daughter."

"Oh," Denise faltered. "I'm sorry. What happened?"

Jack clenched his fist in frustration.

"My wife and daughter were killed by a deranged man. We were so happy together. We'd just finished a great dinner, laughing and joking, taking selfies, messing around. All for it to be ruined by that insane man."

Denise gestured with her eyes at the hospital room.

"How did you end up in here, anyway?"

"I was walking along the nature trail and fell."

"Bad enough that you had to be hospitalized?"

"It was just after a rainstorm so the terrain was muddy and slippery. I fell and rolled down a pretty steep slope."

Jack hesitated, finding it hard to explain the hellish scene he had stumbled upon.

"I might sound crazy... but I found Ron," said Jack.

"Ron?! You found him? Where is he then?" Denise asked.

"Yeah... but he's.. he's erm.." Jack stuttered and started feeling nauseous.

"Jack are you okay? Calm down," Denise said, handing him a glass of water.

"Thank you," said Jack, taking a sip.

"So... what happened to Ron? Where is he?" Denise asked as she sat down again.

"Ron's dead. I found his dead body under a pile of leaves."

Jack stood up and walked toward the windowsill.

"Are you sure it was him?" Denise asked, struggling to accept such horrific news.

"Definitely."

As they sat in silence, Jack started questioning everything. That was one of the irrational job hazards that came with solving mysteries for such a long period of time. His old detective instincts were beginning to take over.

"Let's ask the townspeople once more before going out on a search ourselves," he said finally.

Jack gingerly removed the IV drip still attached to his arm and made for the door.

"Are you sure that's a good idea? They don't seem that bothered about the other disappearances," Denise replied.

"It's our only chance of finding where Lucy might have ended up."

"I don't know..."

Jack reassured her as he sat back down on his bed and grabbed Denise's hands firmly.

"We will find her. I promise. I have had enough misery in my life when it comes to children. This is one little girl that I will bring back safely."

Jack met Denise's eyes. They both softened.

"Hm.. alright. Where to?" Denise asked.

"Your house is near the woods right? Shall we start there first?" Jack replied.

There was a knock on the door and the nurse walked through.

"Jack, your paperwork has been done. You are free to leave anytime," she said.

"I'm leaving right now. OK, Denise, let's start by asking your neighbours, one of them must surely have spotted something," said Jack. "Let's hit the playgrounds first before going back home to check with the neighbours."

The car ride home was quiet and tense. Jack noticed that Denise picked her fingernails frequently. He also noticed Denise squeezing her knees together and fidgeting a lot.

After asking the townspeople and wandering around for a few hours, to their dismay, no one was willing to give any hint of Lucy's whereabouts and activities. Strangely, the people weren't rude like the waitress, but polite and careful. They watched every word. Jack also noticed a flash of fear appear in their eyes for a brief second, every time they looked at Denise.

"We can't keep asking around anymore. The longer we delay, the more Lucy's life is in danger." Jack said, worry filling his eyes.

"I know, but how do we find her?" Denise whimpered, tears streaming down her eyes.

"Do you know where Lucy likes to play?" Jack questioned.

"She likes to play in our backyard. Sometimes she would play around at the edge of the forest."

"Do you think she might have entered the forest?"

"Possibly," Denise replied.

"Then there's no time to waste. Go home and change into some pants - we can't have you venturing into the forest in just a dress. Your legs will be cut to pieces."

"Ha, oh, but don't you like this dress? I've noticed you peeking at me a few times throughout the drive," Denise said, weirdly.

"This is no time to be playing around," Jack frowned.

"You know, a girl doesn't like a man who isn't honest with himself," Denise whispered as they arrived at her house.

Chapter 10

"Are you ready?" Jack asked Denise after donning his military jacket and grabbing a machete from his car boot.

"Yes, let's go find Lucy," Denise agreed. Dressed in jacket and boots with her hair in a ponytail, Denise grabbed Jack and the pair ventured into the tall forest.

Threading through the trees, Denise and Jack looked for any trace of Lucy. But the sun was setting. Shadows covered the forest floor.

"It's getting late. Let's take a break," Jack suggested.

"We can't! Not until we find Lucy!" Denise said angrily. "How can I relax while my sister is alone in this forest, scared and alone and afraid?"

"Shhhh, it's okay. I understand. I will do everything in my power to find her safely," Jack said soothingly.

"Even if it costs you your life?"

"Even if it costs me my life," Jack replied without hesitation. "Alright, it's getting dark. Let's see if this city boy can light a fire in the forest."

After many feeble attempts, Jack stacked the fire wood and got a warming blaze going. They huddled together and watched the flames rise into the air.

Through the bushes, an eerie sound appeared to surround them.

"Did you hear that?" asked Jack.

He felt the prickling chills of panic dance across his skin. He took slow, deep breaths to calm himself. The leaves on the bushes rustled again. Paranoid, he turned to Denise.

"You heard that, right?"

Denise tended to the fire, stoking the firewood and building the flames.

"What's that, Jack?"

"You seriously can't hear anything? Look, stay here. I'm going to take a walk."

Jack followed the unusual noises until he reached a bush. Crouching low and silent, he peered through the bush, uncertain of what to expect. Was there a person on the other side? Or maybe some other worldly entity? Panic consumed him. He had to look. He had to know. He pushed the bush aside, ready to defend or attack, whatever came first.

A deer.

A harmless deer stared back at him through the bush.

Jack felt silly. His irrational paranoia in the darkness was affecting his judgement. But on closer inspection, he realised that the deer's legs were caught in a bear trap.

"Oh, well, it's about to die anyway, so I guess I can just bring it back to the campsite for dinner," he thought. Jack raised his machete and then put the deer out of its misery.

As Denise stared at the fire, she jumped as a bloody deer crossed her eye line.

"How did you hunt down a deer?"

"Well I didn't really hunt it. This poor thing was caught in a bear trap and it was going to bleed to death anyway, so we might as well eat it."

"Bring it over here. I'm starving."

"You know how to gut a deer?" Jack asked, surprised.

"The town is surrounded by forest. There're a lot of wildlife that the residents hunt, so most of us know how to gut and clean an animal." Denise replied.

"Well then, I'll leave it to you," Jack said, offering his machete to Denise.

"It's fine. I already have a knife, see?" Denise replied as she happily showed off her long blade.

"Isn't it beautiful? I made it myself."

The elegant, gutting knife had a gleaming ruby jewel at the end of its hilt.

"Oh wow, that's a great-looking knife..."

Jack trailed off as he stared at the knife.

"I swear I've seen that knife before... No. No, it's just my imagination, surely."

Jack's own thoughts alarmed him. He didn't want to scare himself needlessly.

"What's wrong Jack? You look pale," Denise remarked. "Why don't you take a seat near the fire, you look tired."

"No.. no I'm fine. It's nothing. I'll go and look for more firewood. I'll be right back."

Jack barely managed to finish his sentence before stumbling away from Denise and back into the gloomy forest.

Confused, Denise ignored Jack's weird behaviour. Instead, she examined the dead deer and smiled as she went to work on the carcass. She made an incision from the anus all the way up to the neck, exposing the large entrails. Reaching inside, she found the oesophagus, severing and pulling it out in one piece. As she removed out the deer's entrails, a gush of warm air wafted across her face, as the last breaths of life left the animal.

"Alright, time to skin it."

Unfazed, she started skinning and boning the deer, completing the task quickly. Like all of the town's residents, she was a natural with a knife.

Denise heard Jack's footsteps crackling against fallen leaves.

"Oh Jack, you're back, come sit down. I've started cooking the deer," she said cheerily. "Couldn't you find any firewood?"

Jack had returned with nothing, but his temper. He glared at the woman he no longer trusted.

Chapter 11

"It was you. It was you all along," Jack whispered.

Denise continued to cook.

"It was you all along, wasn't it?"

"Did you say something Jack?" Denise replied, still distracted by the cooking.

"I said it was you. Admit it," Jack shouted, a strange mix of anger and fear.

Denise looked at him, confused. She tilted her head, as if trying to get a different perspective on Jack and his bizarre comments.

"What did I do Jack? What do you think I did?"

"The knife! I thought I found it familiar! It was beside Ron's dead body. And I saw the way you gutted that deer! I find it hard to believe that a young woman like you would be able to gut a deer that easily, and the expression while you were gutting it. You were unfazed, like it was the most natural thing in the world."

"A young woman like me? Bit sexist, Jack, don't you think?"

"You killed all those people. All of them. You did it..."

Jack trailed off as he slowly started backing away from her.

"But why? How could you? Your own sister. What did you do to Lucy? Where is she? Where is Lucy?"

Denise walked to him leisurely, circling him like a predator. She grinned.

"You really shouldn't ask questions when you wouldn't be able to understand the answers," Denise tutted.

Jack couldn't move to get away from her. It was as though something had glued him to the floor. Not even his hands were functioning. His eyes desperately shifted around trying to find the closest way to escape or to search for a weapon.

Something had taken control of his body.

"I can't move. Why can't I move? It's you. How did you do that? You're evil - pure evil!"

"No, I'm not Jack. I'm not a bad person at all. I have my own reasons for what I've done. Whatever I have done is merely to survive. Not just for me, it was meant for Lucy as well. But you. Now you were a mystery. The new guy. I couldn't just let you go. I never really came to the forest to find Lucy. I came to the forest for you. There's something about you. The rest, they were never meant to last. But maybe you could be the final piece I'm missing."

As Denise talked on, Jack finally felt he was taking back control of his body. He could move and he spotted a clear path where he could run back to town and get the police. He watched Denise walk around until she stopped in front of the deer, cooking over the fire.

"Oh, what a shame, now I'd have to throw your portion away," she sighed.

Just as she ended her sentence, Jack took off running towards the path. He ran so fast that he could only see the trees as flashes of green. Adrenaline surged through his body, and the only thing on his mind was the thought of saving Lucy.

He kept running until his legs couldn't take it anymore. He slowed his pace and took in his surroundings, trying to wrack his brain for the direction back to town.

"What? Where am I? This was the path back? I came through that path. Where did I go wrong? Did I run the wrong way?"

Questions flooded his mind. The world spun around him. He was too disoriented and lost to focus. He still wasn't fully recovered from his earlier trip to the hospital. His energy was depleted. "Did you think you could run Jack?" Denise's voice echoed through the forest. "Look at you, running around like a headless chicken, making a fool out of yourself. I know this forest better than you, and like I told you earlier, I am not letting you go."

Jack walked in circles, looking around and upwards trying to make sense of what was happening. The last thing he remembered was seeing a bright smile as he fell to the forest floor.

Chapter 12

Jack found himself walking on the beach. He felt at peace with himself. That moment could last forever. It was a dream he hoped would never end.

The landscape was perfect. There was a familiar dining table in a familiar home.

"This is so delicious, Dad!" said a warm, kind voice.

Eva's voice. The most beautiful sound he had ever heard.

Jack nodded reflexively, as he always did, an old habit. He felt like he was starring inside a movie about himself, watching himself on screen. He could see himself walk and talk. He knew it wasn't really him. He could feel the dream. That was the problem. He felt too much. The dream always ended.

He woke up and felt a cold, hard surface against his back, His body was constricted. Jack blinked, trying to get his eyes to focus on the surroundings. He struggled to loosen the ropes around his hands. He raised his head to get at least a glimpse of his surroundings.

Red shadows covered the room. Melted wax filled the floors. Runes were scribbled on the walls with strange markings everywhere.

He hears shrieking sounds, like the legs of a metal chair being dragged across the room. Jack turned to his right and gleams of silver dazzled his eyes. On the other side, a pair of hands sharpened a blade. There was a ruby at the end of the hilt.

As the fight slowly drained from his exhausted body, Jack pulled his head backwards trying to get some relief. And that's when he saw a wooden box with a body on top.

A small body.

A child's body.

"Oh god, another one," Jack moaned.

Suddenly, he couldn't see. He was freezing. Cold water was being poured onto his face, filling his eyes and mouth, making him choke. He spat out the water, hoping that it wasn't anything poisonous.

"Relax, it's just water. I'm just cleaning your face. It's dirty," Denise said.

She continued to spray his face, gently removing the dirt and grime.

"You're the final piece, you know. The pain you hold within you, that misery. It's just perfect. Exactly what I need. You're the last piece I need for Lucy."

"Lucy?"

Hearing that name, the light in Jack's eyes suddenly sparkled as they focused on the frail body on the altar.

"THAT'S LUCY!? THAT LITTLE GIRL ON THE ALTAR!?"

Jack had so many questions, so many thoughts. They overwhelmed him so much, he could scarcely open his mouth.

"Correct, my sweet, sweet Lucy."

"You killed her!?"

"No, I didn't! ... Well, I didn't mean to. It just happened. I didn't mean to do it to her."

"What did you do, Denise? What happened?"

"I knew there was a price to pay for this kind of power, but I didn't know it was this heavy. It was my fault. I shouldn't have started and now I need to finish it. I didn't know how to control it. I had just started practicing. I shouldn't have tried it out around her. She was just collateral damage," Denise cried out, hugging herself for protection.

"What is it, Denise? What did you start? Why did Lucy become like that?" Jack shouted.

"BLACK MAGIC! It's forbidden magic, I know... but I wanted more power. I got greedy!" Denise broke down.

"That's why I need to do this. I need my sister back so I can finally get rid of this accursed thing. It's been a burden that I've had to carry for 50 years. I just want my sister back."

Jack's head was spinning and aching. He wiggled his hand, trying to find a loose knot to untie himself. He has to do something. He felt the knot loosen. He needed more time. He needed to keep the conversation going.

"Where are we?"

"This is my house," Denise replied.

"Why did you kill all those people when you could've just used me?"

"Since you're about to die, I might as well tell you. I must absorb the souls of 50 people before using a soul that is perfect like yours, the purest soul of a man in mourning, a father who has lost everything he cared for in life, walking in this world like a dead man until the day he is one."

"Then what was the need of gutting everything you killed?!" Jack cried, seething with anger.

"Oh, calm down, please. By using the organs of the people I killed, I was able to cast spells. For example, I formed a temporary body for Lucy's soul to reside in and then made the residents unable to question the disappearance of their loved ones. It was easy, really. I just needed to keep killing. Of course, it wasn't easy at first. Did you know, the first time I killed a human, I cried for a whole day? So silly. I couldn't sleep and all I could think about were the lifeless eyes of that corpse. Having to dismember the body made me lose my appetite. I couldn't eat."

Looking at Jack, she continued with tears streaming down her face.

"But when I was killing my second human, I found myself able to swallow the pain... and by the time I killed my fifth, I found myself able to enjoy a nice cut of steak afterwards. It got to the point when I would crave fresh meat every time I butchered a human. It made me curious... the taste of human meat... What would it taste like?"

As Denise continued her narrative in a deranged manner, Jack was getting paler by the second.

"Please just stop."

"Oh, ran out of questions?"

"Just one thing. Were your parents included in the 50 people you've killed?"

"Why, of course. They were at the end of their lives anyway. They were black magic practitioners as well, and when I said that I needed their souls to revive Lucy, they were ever so willing to oblige. And even if they weren't, well," Denise laughed. "It's not like they had a choice. After all, the only thing that matters to me is my sweet little Lucy."

"You don't need to do this. We can figure out another way. We'll find a new way together. I promise I'll help you if you just let me go. I'll do anything to help you."

"Oh, you are optimistic. Your death will give me everything I need to help Lucy."

Denise muttered incantations in a foreign language.

"KHU RAKA SHA DIUM TO SHAIZ!...."

She raised her jewel-encrusted blade in a trance and turned her attention to Jack. She forcefully flipped the palms of his hands upwards so that they facing the ceiling of the room.

Jack winced when she made the first cut on his palms, thin & precise slits. Slowly making her way up his forearms, she engraved strange markings. Blood poured from the wounds.

"ABSORB THE BLOOD OF THE VICTIM! ENCHANT THIS KNIFE WITH THE POWER OF LIFE!"

Slowly, the dagger started to glow a mysterious red.

"TO BRING BACK A LIFE! A LIFE MUST BE GIVEN IN EXCHANGE. DIE!"

Denise plunged the knife towards Jack's chest.

"IF YOU WANT A LIFE THEN TAKE YOUR OWN!" Jack roared.

Before Denise struck, Jack pulled himself free from the ropes and seized the knife, turning it towards Denise's heart. He cut the ropes and leapt to his feet.

"What? How did you do that, Jack?"

Denise started choking on a mouthful of her own blood. She peered down at her chest. The stab wound widened, revealing her beating heart, glowing a bright red as it burst through her chest and flew across the room towards Lucy's body.

"NO, NO, NO!! IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE YOU. YOU'RE THE SACRIFICE, JACK. NOT ME. NOT ME."

The markings on the floor and around the room began to glow. Jack ran for cover and hid behind a cupboard. A blinding light filled the room.

"Jack, I curse you, I swear that you will..."

Before Denise could finish, a burst of light exploded in the room.

Jack screamed and covered his eyes. But instead of feeling the light's scorching heat, he felt a warm gentle glow covering his arm. The cuts and wounds were rapidly healing.

"Wait, what? LUCY!" Realising that the light was harmless, Jack opened his eyes and ran over the body. He was sure he could see two Lucys. The one floating above was translucent while the one on the bottom was a pale human body. Slowly the two started to merge, converging into one as the light slowly dimmed.

The moment the light was extinguished, Jack grabbed Lucy.

"Lucy, wake up! Come on Lucy, I can't lose you too," Jack shouted, as his tears flowed. "Oh God please! Don't take her away from me!"

Slowly, Lucy's heart started beating. Jack felt the pulse. Finally, the little girl's eyes fluttered open.

"Where. Where am I?" whispered Lucy.

"Lucy!"

Jack embraced Lucy, afraid to let go.

"Ow, Jack that hurts," Lucy mumbled, still confused.

Jack looked down at Lucy in relief, struck by the resemblance she held in that moment to Eva.

He would never forget his wife and daughter. They had shared a great life together. But it was time to build a new one, with Lucy. They had both lost loved ones. Jack would make sure that they would never lose each other.

END

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"A digital animation student in the learning, writing this book was indeed an eye-opening experience into the writing process of a story."

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"I'm cold and chilling, just like the graves of our ideas."

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