

Michael Jensen

The manor looked exactly as it appeared in his dreams. Symmetrical three-story towers bookended the central steeple, which was adorned with a crooked wind vane. A wolf perched upon the metal rods, howling to the heavens as it claimed the manor's highest point.

Jensen's feet slapped against the cobblestones. Moss grew between the stones, making the way slippery; but Jensen's stride was sure. He pushed open the rusted wrought-iron gate and ignored the inhuman squeal the action wreaked on his ears. Up the cement steps he went, taking two at a time. It wasn't until the outside shrubbery, shimmering with raindrops, passed him by and the courtyard centered him before the doorway did Jensen stop and stare. The central tower window was aglow with deadly light. He closed his eyes and an image of a chandelier—ten feet of gold-plated glass befit with hundreds of solitary candles—swam unsteadily into the forefront of his mind. After all these years the chandelier was still burning. Or had it been lit just then to welcome him home?

Jensen grasped one of the double-door handholds with his right hand and flipped up his left wrist to note the time. Twenty past one in the morning. Twenty minutes since he had awoken from the dream, hopped into his car, and driven out of the city limits to a country he didn't remember. Twenty minutes. He had ten left until his mind would be wiped blank. *But the dream won't fade*, Jensen thought. *The dreams rarely do*. Still, he let go of the door handle, knelt to the slick stone, and took out a dog-eared notebook from an overcoat pocket. Balancing the notebook on his bent knee, Jensen flipped to a fresh page and wrote four words with the utmost concentration. *Childhood home. Find letter*. Satisfied, he returned the notebook to his pocket and stood, shivering slightly in the cold. The chandelier's light illuminated the rough brick wall exterior and the oppressive set of double doors. Jensen fixed his mind on the dream, bringing up

every detail, every useful bit of information he hoped would stay with him after the turnover. He grasped the door handle again and pulled. Unlocked. The corners of his mouth twitched.

Jensen entered the manor.

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Michael tripped running up the stairs. Twice. Groans of pain mingled with his desperate sobs. He reached his bedroom door on all fours, scrabbling for the handle. He found it and pulled himself up—all sixty pounds. Once inside, Michael crashed down on the four-poster bed and buried his face in the blankets. He stayed like that until his tears had dried and he felt more or less in control of his own thoughts. The first of these restored thoughts was: *How long?* Michael checked his watch—a silver antique his parents had gifted him last birthday. Fifteen minutes until a turnover. The second was: *Is that enough time?* Yes, Michael thought it was. Although he was only nine, his handwriting skills were as advanced as any adult. Michael held out a hand. Steady enough. That was good, because there wasn't a second to lose. He leaped halfway across the room, still hyperventilating, wrenched open his closet doors and dove upon a box filled with notebooks. Michael rifled through the box until he found a blank one, then took it over to his writing desk situated next to the door and sat down. Wiping his sweaty forehead with the back of a hand, he dug a pen out of a nearby drawer and prepared to write.

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The first thing Jensen did upon entering the manor was light every lamp on the ground floor using a box of matches he carried in his breast pocket for smoking purposes. He didn't like the eerie glow the chandelier provided and wanted other lights to drown it out. Jensen rushed from countertop to countertop, book stand to book stand, mantelpiece to mantelpiece, slowly filling the floor with flickering light to aid his investigation. Shaking out the last match, Jensen

returned to the foyer and placed his hands on his hips as he surveyed the narrow hallway that led to the living room. He no longer remembered where he had parked his car, or whether he had locked his apartment door, or even why he had begun lighting the lanterns in the first place. But those things didn't matter. The *dream* was what mattered, and the dream was the one thing he did remember. Images passed through his brain like a film reel, showing him what he needed to find. A letter. A letter with blurred words. Jensen didn't know why finding it was so important; he didn't know what the letter would say and he didn't know what would happen if he did, only that the letter was somewhere in this house and it was calling for him.

He started by pulling out the desk drawers placed on either end of the front hall. The wood was mahogany, polished with dust. They yielded nothing but lone chess pieces, broken samurai figurines, withered insect bodies and mothballs. Jensen shrugged out of his overcoat and folded it over the re-upholstered chair that sat alone in an alcove of framed photographs. His eyes wandered upwards. A picture of a stern-faced man in a dark suit. The eyes were hard, but a distant dream triggered Jensen's fractured memory. It was a dream of a child rolling down a grassy hill outside the manor on a bright summer afternoon. A man lay on his back at the hill's bottom, his hands behind his head. Two details always stood out whenever Jensen fell back upon this particular memory. The first was the man's pristine collared shirt, the first three buttons undone and the sleeves rolled up to the elbows; the second was the man's smile-loving—as he watched the boy, *his* boy, roll down the hill. The boy's playful tumble ended on the man's chest, where the man then took his child up in his arms and swung him around. Jensen raised a hand and ran it over a slip of paper taped to the tarnished frame. One word was written on the paper in a child's hand: Papa. *The man was my father and I was the child.* The revelation came to Jensen as if for the first time. Because for him, every time was the first time. The frame next to his

father's was his mother, similarly marked in crayon—Mama. Dreams of nighttime stories in the rocking chair surfaced with a certain degree of pain that Jensen couldn't identify. Beneath his mother's frame was a picture of himself at age five—a wide-eyed caricature of surprise. Taped to the bottom of the frame was a third slip of paper. The name written there was of a neater hand, an adult's hand. *Michael*, it read.

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Michael's pen was poised above the first line of his notebook. His brain clacked frantically through its mental gears as it struggled to condense the catastrophic scene he had witnessed into mere words. He checked his watch. Twelve minutes. All right. Breathe. Michael began to write.

*Remember this night. Remember every detail.*

*The first thing that comes to mind was standing on the second story stairwell and hearing the voices arguing. It was my bed-time, almost nine-thirty. I know that because you could see the moon outside the center window with the chandelier. I must have had a turnover while coming down the stairs. Maybe I was so intent on the voices that I forgot to prepare myself. Now..the voices. Familiar voices. Because I was in the house, they were most likely my parents. No, they were my parents. I know because I saw their faces later. Remember that, Michael. Remember that they were your parents.*

Michael stopped writing. He frowned and stared at his bedroom door. Distant floorboards creaking. Was that right? Sometimes he heard things; sometimes he saw things that weren't really there and heard things that were only in his head. The doctors had made it clear to Michael that he should do his best to ignore these happenings and had taught him different thought processes that would help combat the side effects of his condition. *It's my condition acting up*

*again*, Michael told himself. A flip of the wrist told him he had nine minutes. He went back to writing, though his hand didn't move across the page as easily as before.

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Jensen brought his fist down on the casing of the grand piano. Nothing. He had found nothing. The only letters he had come across were peppy monologues from people who must have been his relatives: Uncle Morris Jensen, great Aunt Beth Jensen, Grandpa and Grandma Jensen. None of them were what he wanted. Jensen had no clear idea what distinguished *his* letter from the imposters; but when his fingers touched the real thing, he would know. *Wrong room*, Jensen thought. *I am in the wrong room*. Closing his eyes, he tried again to summon a new detail from the dream, anything that would make the search easier. But there was only the letter, hovering in a field of gray mist, the wrinkled paper flapping like the edges of a magic carpet. Jensen gritted his teeth and bolted for the staircase that led to the second story landing. He would tear the house apart if need be; he would separate brick from mortar to see if the letter was hiding between.

Up the staircase he pounded, grasping the rickety railing with his right hand, then shooting it behind him, propelling himself to the top. The symphony of creaks, squeaks, and screeches did not deter him.

Jensen started with the guest rooms. Every mattress, pillow, and blanket ended up on the floor. Cosmetic drawers were upturned, spilling dust-coated contents over the bare floorboards. Peeling wallpaper was ripped off to expose rat-infested tunnels that ran through the rotting wooden support beams. Closets promptly lost all dignity as clothes flew from the open door in a constant stream. A cacophony of squealing floorboards, shouted curses, breaking glass, and wood smashing echoed throughout the old manor, fluttering candles, and most assuredly

disrupting any ghosts that dared to inhabit the walls. Jensen had five minutes before his next turnover, and the letter refused to reveal itself. Infuriated without knowing why, Jensen ripped a sheet of paper from his notebook, slammed it against the wall and scribbled: *Childhood home. Find letter. Not on first floor or second. Proceed to third floor.* Jensen scrunched the paper into his pants pocket and left the last of the dismantled guest rooms.

As his feet struck the uneven floorboards, lost memories in the form of past dreams flitted through his mind. This was an unconscious occurrence; Jensen could not recall former dreams any easier than the next person—an unfortunate development given that dreams were his only connection to the past. Sometimes though, a dream would settle into the subconscious too important to be dragged through his mental filter. Over the course of his life, Jensen had accumulated several such dreams that all left him with burning questions about what was real and what wasn't, what was a true memory and what had never been. These questions poured into Jensen's mind as he took the stairs two at a time. *Why did my mother shout at me about not going to the doctor during dinner so long ago? What did my father mean when he said he was worried about me? Why did we leave this house? What happened to my mother?* And perhaps the most stupefying of them all: *What made me set out on my own, away from a father who's done nothing but love me?* Possible answers to these questions filled up multiple notebooks, but Jensen knew he would not know the truth until he found the letter. The all-important letter, of which he had dreamt for the first time last night. The letter that could be covering up a memory so awful his brain refused to dream about it.

The third floor was home to a hodgepodge of rooms—the sewing room, the music room, a study that might have been his father's, a few spare rooms containing nothing but dust and rat droppings, and a smaller staircase at the end of the hall. Jensen stopped outside the door to the

sewing room and watched the second hand work its way to the twelve. He closed his eyes and fixed the image of the letter floating in gray mist firmly in his mind. When his brain reset, Jensen experienced a moment of total bewilderment before digging out the paper in his pocket.

*Childhood home. Find letter. Not on first floor or second. Proceed to third floor.* The dream resurfaced again. Jensen opened the door to the sewing room.

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With eight minutes left, Michael's handwriting slipped into a jagged scrawl.

*I was peering through the banister on the second story landing that overlooked the hallway. If I wanted to, I could have slipped through the bars and jumped onto the great chandelier that hung down from its chain. Below the candles and glass stood my parents: my father looking angrier than I had ever seen him, my mother desperately trying to make him understand something; I couldn't understand what. I know they were talking about me...*

A thump from downstairs. Michael's hand jerked, causing the pen to end the last letter with a swoop. Sitting perfectly erect, Michael's face contorted as he listened not just with his ears but with his mind, as if part of himself was roaming the manor's halls, looking for the source of the noise. Michael heard it again: clear sounds of footsteps on wood. Closer than last time. Michael looked behind his shoulder at the opposite end of his room. There was a second door there, hidden behind a map of the world. It opened onto a secret staircase—what once had been the servant's staircase—and would eventually lead him outside. His hands quavered.

*Remember this night. Remember every detail.*

More footsteps. Closer. Breath hissed from Michael's mouth like a boiling tea kettle. He had to remember. He had to write it all down in the next six minutes or this night would be lost to

him forever. Hadn't the doctor said the dreams would fade as he grew older? Whatever the case, he couldn't rely on dreams like he could in the past. Michael took up the pen and wrote faster.

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Jensen was at his breaking point. Hot tears of rage leaked from the corners of his eyes, traveling down the wrinkles his grimace formed. All the rooms on the third floor had been ravaged to no avail. Pictures flashed through his mind like a slideshow on triple speed. His father hugging him at the bottom of the grassy hill; his mother kneeling down to ask him a question, a look of concern on her face; a distant view of the manor from the back of a car; himself walking alone down a busy street; himself alone in an empty room by a window. Pictures. Truths. But what had caused these truths? The letter would tell him. It was all in the letter. And Jensen couldn't find it.

But there was still one last place he hadn't checked. The third-floor hallway split in two. The larger branch led to a staircase that went downstairs; the smaller branch narrowed into a winding staircase that led to an upper chamber in the central tower. Jensen would check, and if his search lacked the desired result, he might just find a window in that highest tower and jump.

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*Remember that night. Remember every detail.* The words thundered inside Michael's head on repeat as he wrote. Those words...and the sound of heavy footsteps running up the winding staircase to his room.

*My parents were arguing, shouting. I'm in the way of something...someone... That was what my mother said. My father's voice was slurred. I don't remember if he sounded that way*

*before. I don't really know either of my parents very well.*

A hesitant creak sounded right outside the door. Michael ran his tongue over cracked lips, and glanced sideways to the doorknob. Three minutes.

*I watched through the banister bars as my father drew a knife and stuck my mother with it. Blood went everywhere. My father is a murderer. Remember that, Michael. Your father is a killer.*

And now the killer was at his door.

###

Jensen burst into the room and took it all in with two vicious sweeps of the head. A bed. A closet. A domed ceiling. A writing desk. And on top of the writing desk, speckled with dust like everything else in the room, was a single sheet of notebook paper. The letter.

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Michael winced as the door was thrown open and his father—no, the *killer*—stood in the frame, tall and menacing. Falling backward in his chair, Michael scrambled to his feet and lunged for the world map. He tore it off the wall, reached for the secret door...and then rough hands hooked themselves around his upper arms, yanking him into a killer's embrace. Michael screamed. The killer spoke to him in a soothing tone, but white noise was filling Michael's mind. The second hand on his watch crossed the twelve. His mind went deliciously blank...

...His father was embracing him, speaking softly. Michael went limp in his arms. He was covered in sweat and did not know why; his heart was racing and he did not know why; he felt scared and did not know why. But his father was here. His father would protect him. They moved together toward the door, his father's arms looped over his shoulders, his own hands placed securely on his father's forearms. Focusing on steadying his breathing from whatever incident he had just experienced, Michael stared down at his feet as his father stared down at the letter on the

writing desk. Michael heard the sound of paper tearing from a three-ringed binder and crumpled into a ball. There was the scratching sound of a pencil on paper. Then, still whispering softly, his father led him out of the bedroom.

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Jensen stared at the only four words written on the sheet of notebook paper in his hands.

*Papa loves you, Michael.*