

# **Blinded By Time**

ENG3U

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It was the eve of his sixteenth birthday; the day his life would change forever.

As the sun set on the small town of Lakewell, Jay Berman peered at his distorted reflection as he crouched in front of the shattered mirror that had collapsed in the corner of the abandoned, darkened barber shop. The evening sun sent shadows wildly racing across the floor of the attic which rested under the sharp angles of Jay's defined facial structure. His dishevelled, cropped, auburn hair gently curled around the edges of his face and brushed into his eyes that held the hues of a forest encompassed by dark moss. The various tones and shades of those eyes held such beauty and danger and intelligence all at the same time. He tucked the unruly curls behind his ears. The boy's threadbare, yet somewhat presentable, clothing hung loosely from his tall, well-built frame. His outfit consisted of a navy hoodie and dark-washed jeans with unintended rips in both of the knees.

Jay continued to rock slightly on his haunches as he gazed at the reflection before him in the antique mirror, but not in a narcissistic manner. He wasn't studying his own visage, but the watch-like band that permanently encased his right wrist and everyone else's in the known universe. He read out loud what the watch-face read, "Four months, six days, five hours, thirty-two minutes, ten seconds...nine, eight—." Jay rapidly turned from his reflection and snatched a glass jar from a nearby shelf only to smash it violently on the unforgiving floor. As glass shards skittered and bounced across the tiles, he spun around and punched the already cracked walls with his fist as the veins in his arms and neck swelled. The evidently distraught boy sat down hard against the wall and ran his thin fingers through his hair. Everyone's life was intended to be simplistic and easy up until their sixteenth birthday. Everyone was to live out their childhood to its fullest and enjoy all the adventures and possibilities it had to offer, not worrying about the ever-ticking timer on their wrist.

As Jay rolled his weary head to the side, he was able to gaze out a filmy, crooked window that allowed him to observe the action happening on the Main Street of Lakewell in this evening hour at the beginning of November. Jay pressed deeper into the wall as he watched the people on the street below from the long-forgotten barber shop in the attic of an abandoned store. His eyes traced the lazy river that meandered through the nearby park and emptied into a glistening pond where the children chortled and jumped into piles of autumn

leaves. Those youths never once looked at the watch on their wrist—they had no need for concern.

Adults hurried back from work, soon to arrive at home to provide their children with their daily allowance as was custom in society. Time was valued greatly in the world, so much so it was used as universal currency. Every individual was born with this watch-like contraption encompassing their right wrist which provided them with three years of life from the moment they were born. If that timer ever reached zero, the individual would die immediately. Adults worked day after day for a salary consisting of hours, minutes, and seconds. Just as they worked for time, it was also used as the only form of payment for everything and anything from groceries to the latest iPhone. Adults with offspring would then provide part of their earnings for their children, that is, up until they reached the age of sixteen.

The significance of a sixteenth birthday was that the child had to begin working for his or her own time; their parents were no longer permitted to provide for them. Regardless, the majority of this community never really concerned themselves with their countdowns due to the high-status of the area Jay lived in; almost everyone was rich beyond compare in Lakewell. For generations, each person's parents had provided many years for their children to live and, thus, the youths never had to be worried about running out of time before they had lived a full life. On average, countdowns in Lakewell would reach approximately one hundred years, depending on the specific individual's ancestors. When they felt they had lived a full life, they would transfer the remaining time to their children and then pass away.

Jay rested his tired face in his palms as he turned these facts over and over in his mind, "*It's so unfair.*" He always felt that his parents had had their lives robbed from them and, therefore, Jay never had anyone to provide for him. Jay had no one to give him all the time in the world like the other children in Lakewell did. When his family still lived, they were severely poor due to the fact that his grandparents were extremely selfish. They spent the majority of their time on items that were particularly unnecessary like, for example, the abandoned store Jay now resided in. His grandparents had purchased it without much careful thought or consulting anyone. Because of the irrational purchase, they paid little attention to it and the business never took off. Before long, the building caught fire because of an electrical issue that

was carelessly overlooked. The damage was too great to be worth repairing and this caused Jay's grandparents to lose any interest they still had in the building. The couple soon reached ages that exceeded a century and arrived at the end of their timers; passing away without leaving any time for their own children or other descendants.

As a result of this, Jay's parents never received a comforting amount of time and could never seem to hold on to a good job to provide them with what they needed for a family of three. When his parents realized they couldn't possibly survive at this rate for long—let alone provide for a child—they transferred their remaining months to their only son, Jay. With minutes left on their lives and tear-filled eyes, they left him alone at the age of seven in the old barber shop and told him that they had to “go on a journey”.

Jay waited day after day at the small, crooked window in the attic for his parents to return. But, he soon came to the realization that they would never come back to him. Determined to not let what his parents had done go to waste, he began begging in the streets for time and picking up any simple jobs he could from compassionate storeowners in the village. His childhood was severely deprived, and this impacted Jay greatly. He became very withdrawn and had no desire to reach out to anyone as the residents of Lakewell evidently didn't want to be burdened by such a poor child.

Jay was brought back to reality by the sound of rain tapping against the tin roof of the attic; soon it would begin to leak. The dusty clock in the office of the retired barber shop struck eleven o'clock at night. The large room had become covered by a thick blanket of eerie silence, only ever broken by the sound of cars passing carrying people to a night shift. The room was cold due to the thin, poorly insulated walls that allowed for early November temperatures to seep in easily and take control of the room. Jay shivered and finally stood up from his spot against the wall; he knew he desperately needed to get some rest. He paced over to the old reclining chair he utilized as a bed and patted the seat which caused dust to erupt from each crack and crevice in the worn leather.

Jay laid down pulling a bedraggled towel over his long legs and gazed blankly up to the ceiling. He observed the fissures that twisted and cracked in confusion and chaos, seemingly representing his mind. Jay was lost and desperate and he feared what the future would hold for

him. His childhood had been extremely difficult, but he knew as he entered into this new adulthood, he would face even more challenging obstacles. His thoughts began to drift to a dangerous part of his mind. What was beyond this life? It couldn't possibly be worse. He began to think of the day he met the end of his timer for a few minutes until the thought became too much to bear and fear welled up inside of him and the intensity of it became agonizing. Rolling onto his side, he sealed his eyes and swallowed back his emotions. *"That won't happen, I won't let it. I won't let my parents' sacrifice go to waste,"* Jay promised himself this. After a short while, he succumbed to the sleep that offered such a sweet release.



Jay's rest was soon interrupted by searing pain located on his right forearm. He was ripped out of sleep and jumped out of the chair, holding his burning wrist. He watched with wide eyes as his wristband smoked and gradually shifted into a more complex and detailed contraption. His eyes shot to the clock in the office: twelve o'clock—just as he had expected. He was officially sixteen years of age and he was going through the same ritual each young individual did once they reached this point in their life.

The burning grew increasingly more intense until he collapsed on the floor with an agonizing groan from the immensity of the pain. Just when he thought he couldn't bare it any longer, the pain vanished just as quickly as it had come. He slowly sat up from his position on the floor and held his right arm out to the soft light from the moon shining in the window. On his wrist was no longer a simple black watch, but a polished, silver band about two inches thick. Besides the change in colour, the band had also obtained new buttons and screens that were intended to be used for adding earned time and transferring time. Jay hesitantly ran his fingers over the cool metal-like material of the watch as he observed each of the features that were alien to him.

All of a sudden, the large screen lit up in a bright red and began vibrating intensely; the ceremony wasn't quite completed. The screen read: PLEASE ENTER CONSENT CODE. The last thing that had to be done was for this code, a five-word phrase, to be formulated. This would be used in the event of transferring time as it would need to be entered into the watch to

confirm that the owner agreed to allocate time. Once the consent code was entered to each one's respective watches by both parties involved, the individuals would place their watches on top of each other until the desired amount of time was transferred. The consent code needed to be something only the one wearing the watch was aware of as that information would be deadly if it arrived in the hands of the wrong person.

Despite living somewhat out of society, Jay still knew and understood the significance of this concept. He had pondered what he would enter for a long time now, as he could never let time be stolen from him under any circumstance. With confidence, Jay entered his code. He held his breath as the contraption seemed to judge his phrase for several long seconds until the screen finally lit up green reading: CONSENT CODE ACCEPTED.

The screen went out, showing only the amount of time that remained for Jay. Four months, five days, twenty-three hours, fifty-two minutes, and seventeen seconds. He needed a plan and he needed it soon as he feared greatly what would happen to him and what consequences he would face if he didn't find a way out of this deathly countdown.



For the following week, Jay repeated his typical routine of begging on the Main Street of Lakewell beside a cast iron lamppost as the sun gently bloomed on the horizon. He rested his makeshift sign in his lap that he had made as a seven-year-old. It read in black, messy letters: "NO FAMILY. TIME RUNNING LOW. PLEASE HELP."

But, passersby were all of a sudden no longer as compassionate as they had been previously. Jay knew this was going to happen as they could see by the type of band enfolding his wrist that he was no longer a youth and now had the responsibility to provide for himself. Adults that once paid him attention now briskly walked past on their way to work and scoffed at the young beggar, turning up their noses and whispering to their neighbour about how unbelievable this sight was. An old man yelled at him as he passed by in his black Porsche, "Get up and get to work! You can't expect the world to be handed to you at this age! This isn't how society works, young man," amongst other more vulgar words. Jay had thick skin; he had to since life had been dragging him ever since he was abandoned. Because of this, taunts like

these didn't particularly bother him. What did bother him was the ticking countdown on his wrist and the fact that he didn't want to meet the end of it. Jay was determined to do absolutely anything to avoid it.

Around noon, Jay got up from his spot by a lamppost and went through with the next part of his routine: job searching. This was his least favourite part of the day as it offered so little hope and put him in a more solemn mood. Every day, he went about applying for a job and every day the doors were shut in his face. No business owners wanted a boy with hardly four months left on his watch. To them, Jay was already dead. They didn't want to risk losing an employee to their timer as it looked negatively upon the company and the owners didn't want to be burdened by such a depressing notion.

After a while, Jay bought just enough groceries to keep him from starvation, and then decided to take a different route back home. As he gazed longingly into the various store windows, he saw a group of high schoolers approaching. The group was made up of about three girls and four guys who were all in Grade 11 together at the prestigious Lakewell Secondary School just down the street. The guys were fooling around, pushing each other around jokingly as the girls watched and giggled from behind. *"Look at them, not a care in the world for their countdowns. I could be the same way if I had parents to give me that type of a privilege."* Jay scowled harder as he thought this and pulled the hood of his worn, navy sweater over his head.

Everybody knew that any student attending LSS was wealthy in time as their parents provided them with so much when they were youths. They only needed to work a couple times a week at an unpretentious, easy job in order to keep their timers sustained. It was people like this that Jay couldn't stand; to him, they embodied everything that was wrong with this world. Jay kept his head down, as usual, while he passed by the group of hyper teenagers.

Not looking where he was going, he inadvertently collided with a tall, slender girl trailing slightly behind the group. This caused her to lose hold of her school bag which emptied its contents onto the paved sidewalk. Jay may have been moody and withdrawn, but he hadn't lost all sense of common courtesy over the years. His cheeks flushed as he mumbled an apology and knelt down beside her to clean up the mess. Jay was thankful her friends hadn't even noticed as

they were too busy seeing who could stand in the middle of the road the longest. Once they had quickly picked up her belongings, they stood up and Jay handed her the schoolbag, making eye contact with her for the first time.

He was immediately struck by the intensity of her blue-green eyes that stared back at him from behind thick-rimmed glasses. They carried icy currents that swirled and mixed with flecks of hazel. Freckles dusted her nose and upper cheeks and then disappeared into her honey-coloured hair that fell about her shoulders and possessed just the right hint of wave. Jay found her rather striking; yet she did not seem equally impacted. She quickly took her bag from him, offered a polite smile, and hurried off to catch up with her friends who were now noticing her absence. A slight smirk ran across Jay's face for a moment as he gazed down at his worn boots, pondering the events of the last few minutes. It was only a moment before a cold gust of wind foreshadowing the coming winter shook him back to reality. But, for some reason, he couldn't get those eyes out of his mind. Not that he had fallen victim to love at first sight or anything of the sort, there was just something different about her. Some sort of magnetic force that seemed break through the walls he had constructed and drew him towards her.

Every day following this, Jay purposely took that way home just so he could catch a glimpse of that mysterious girl of whom he didn't know her name. She was one of the only people in this community Jay hadn't immediately hated. At first, she wouldn't even notice him or give him more than a quick glance. But, as the days and weeks progressed, she began giving him slight smiles or friendly waves until they even exchanged a quick greeting each time they passed. And though it may seem ridiculous, this was the only part of Jay's day that he looked forward to.



Jay woke up on the morning of the twelfth day of December and felt absolutely no motivation to do anything. The weather was that of a dreary, mid-winter day and the grey clouds blocked out any warmth or joy the sun had to offer that day. He didn't even look at his watch; he couldn't bare it. He thought to himself, *"Maybe if I just transfer the rest of my time to someone and just end it now. There's no way I'm gaining any more time at this point."* Jay

thought about that seriously for a while. But, then his mother's face came into mind. Her warm, loving face and the tear-stained cheeks she wore the last day he ever saw her. Everything his parents did for him would be for nothing if he gave up, their sacrifice would be a waste.

Jay swung his feet over the edge of the chair and stared blankly at the floor as a small centipede scurried across and into a crack in the wall. After many minutes, Jay finally got up and threw on his threadbare navy sweater and old winter coat. He ran his fingers through his dark hair, laced up his boots, grabbed his beggar's sign, and trotted down the black spiral staircase to head outside.

As he sat at the base lamppost where he always did, he had the sourest attitude. He felt so mournful for himself that he didn't bother putting any effort in to making people want to give to him. He leaned against the icy metal of the detailed post and closed his eyes, feeling the present winter press into his already flushed cheeks. Just as he began slipping into sleep, a sweet voice spoke out.

"Hello? Excuse me," a middle-aged woman wearing a large scarf that covered worn clothing gently pressing Jay's shoulder which caused him to jerk awake, "Oh, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to startle you! I've seen you here every day for the past few weeks and I have noticed how rude everyone had been to you. I know this is looked down upon, but I would like to give you some time." Jay was shocked; someone actually wanted to help him? Hesitantly, Jay nodded his head, entered his code, and reached out his wrist to the woman. She smiled and knelt down beside him, her cropped brown hair blew wildly in the wintry breeze as icy flakes melted against her being. She put her code in as well and pressed her watch to his.

Jay became overwhelmed with excitement and a lust for time. He strained his neck in an attempt to see how much time she was adding, but soon fell to disappointment when she quickly removed her watch from his. It was time, but it wasn't much.

"I'm sorry, that's all I can give you. I know it's not a lot, but I don't have much myself and I still need to provide for my daughters at home. I hope this helps, my dear. Stay strong." The compassionate woman got up, grabbed her purse, and hurried off to what Jay presumed was work. He looked at his countdown: three months, twenty-nine days, four hours, ten minutes, thirteen seconds.

How much he had wanted to reach out and press her watch against his and not let her take it away. Horrible, he knew, but he couldn't help it. He was so desperate to keep himself alive that he knew like he would do anything to obtain time.

And that was when, perhaps, the most twisted idea came to mind; the moment Jay Berman snapped.



A few days later, Jay had fully developed his idea and articulated his plan. He was giddy with twisted excitement and he didn't care how malevolent his idea was. The only goal he had in his mind was not allowing his timer to hit zero. He had a compulsory desire for more time and he couldn't think of a better way to do that than take it from those who never once had to worry about it in their lives: the wealthy.

Jay began daydreaming about how easy his life would be once he had a cushion of fifty, eighty, maybe even one hundred years on his countdown. He wouldn't even need a job! And maybe he could attend college or university and become a man that the mystery girl from LSS would possibly—no, not yet. He couldn't let that sort of thinking cloud his vision; he needed to focus on his task at hand.

Jay stared intensely at the wall that was opposite from that of the one the window rested in. The chipping paint and cracking drywall had been completely covered in hundreds of computer sheets on which Jay had scribbled his ideas and then pinned to the wall with thick nails from a nearby construction sight. The sheets contained a relatively organized scheme including lists of victims and what Jay knew about them, important locations, and various other ideas and strategies.

An important bit of information to note is that Jay had always been somewhat psychic and was skilled at reading people. He could determine a terrifying amount of information about a person just by observing them, just as he had been doing all his life as he begged on Main Street. This meant that Jay figured he would have no problem in determining the consent code of another individual and force them to give up their time.

Jay had been pondering his idea for a while and how exactly he would determine a code employing his intelligent gift. The first thing he figured was that the majority of the population thinks in similar ways and that most people's codes would have something to do with family, friends, past experiences, or interests that affected the individual when they were 16 years old.

Today, Jay had finally determined his first victim: Mr. Anders. This man was middle-aged and taught high levels of math at the nearby Lakewell Secondary School. He was very intellectual, somewhat introverted, and, generally, quite an empathetic man. And yet, Jay hated him with every fibre in his being. Mr. Anders was rich beyond compare and made sure everyone knew it by his house worth decades, incredibly modern sports cars, and extravagant apparel. Another reason Jay had chosen him was that he enjoyed a challenge, and this certainly would be one as Mr. Anders wouldn't fall for deception easily.

Jay had learned to be very observant as he went through with his daily routine on the Main Street of town each day, and he had gained some important, general knowledge about Mr. Anders. But today, he discovered the most valuable information yet.

As Jay walked down the street with the sole purpose of running into Mr. Anders, he heard the man talking in the distance. Jay quickly ran into a dark alleyway between two nearby buildings and crouched in the shadows, hoping to snag some information that would be valuable to him later on. Mr. Anders was wearing a handcrafted, striking three-piece suit as he sauntered to the parking lot where his car awaited him. He had the latest iPhone glued to his ear and as Jay neared the man, he could tell that he was talking to his wife.

"I'm so glad they're being good to you there...yes, the kids are loving the new school...don't worry about us...we loved your pictures of the Eiffel Tower...can't wait to see you...love you..." Mr. Anders ended the phone call with a click as a warm smile spread across his face as he studied the lock screen on his phone; a photo of him and his beautiful wife posing in front of their home. "*Good to know,*" Jay thought to himself. Mrs. Anders was evidently overseas for some reason, which brought a new idea into his mind.

Once the man had well-passed the alleyway, Jay hurried back to the route he typically took; the one with the girl he found quite fascinating. For those few seconds he saw her, his mind cleared and he felt peaceful and genuinely happy. His forest eyes connected with her

ocean eyes and her soft lips parted in a smile while her wavy hair bounced as she nodded towards him in acknowledgement. He returned the actions for a second as they passed. Jay sighed contentedly and then continued on his walk back home at a more prompt pace.

The small bell on the door jingled like always as he swung it open and hurried up the spiral staircase into the barber shop. He went to where the reception counter used to be and opened the creaky cupboard doors to reveal a pile of yellowed computer paper and some dull pencils that were entangled with thick cobwebs and visible piles of dust. Jay selected a couple papers and the least dull writing implement and lay down on the frigid tiled floor and got to work. He began his first deathly letter as follows:

*My love,*

*I have decided to write you letters now for I find them so romantic. Paris had been truly inspiring in that way! Let's keep these letters separate from our online interactions so we have a surprise to look forward to each week until I return home.*

Using the information he had acquired over the past few weeks, and what he already knew about Mr. Anders, Jay played the character of Mrs. Anders and wrote him a meaningful, loving letter. She was spending the next few months in Paris, France on a business trip so this would work out perfectly. Jay was impressed with how the letter turned out and how real it appeared. He concluded the message with the following amongst, perhaps, a few too many hearts:

*Much love from Paris,*

*Your wife*

*(Always <3)*

Jay was quite proud of himself that he thought to sign all the letters with the phrase “always” to add to the romantic gesture. After the letter was completed, he sealed it in an envelope he had snuck from the post office across the street a day prior. He precisely handwrote the address of the home Mrs. Anders was staying at—which he had determined by a parcel left on the Anders’ front doorstep—across the front and gazed at it for a moment, lost in thought. The idea behind writing these letters was to get the recipient to reveal something about themselves

that would lead Jay to their consent code. One may think this is ridiculous and completely impossible, but Jay was incredibly intelligent. He had what seemed to be a sixth sense which he had been nurturing since he was a child. He always had a gut feeling about people as he watched them scurry down Main Street. Things like where they worked, where they lived, what stores they would go into, and more were just a few things Jay would be able to guess before he witnessed them transpire. Some may call this a form of psychiatry or witchery, but Jay never thought much of it; he didn't know any different. Jay hurried down the stairs, his dark curls snagging on his unshaven face. He wrapped himself in his old winter coat as he braved the chilly weather outside and hastily made his way to the home of Mr. Anders. Winter had officially arrived in its full force.

Jay climbed the way-too-expensive fence that surrounded the high-status gated community where the Anders had their home. He made his way past beautiful homes and perfectly trimmed shrubs which were hardly suffering from the turning seasons. These homes were a great contrast to the smelly, rotting attic he lived in. Jay hated these people, but that didn't mean he hated the beauty of what they were able to own. He had always desired to be an Architect one day; having the power and possibly of creating such intricately designed buildings was a dream of his. And yet, it was another one of his dreams that he would never be able to quite grasp. The young man shook off that thought and refocused on the task at hand. He soon came upon the Anders' household, an elegant three-story house encased by a perimeter of sturdy trees that scintillated as the sun reflected off the snow that their branches held. Jay didn't have to be sneaky about placing the letter in the mailbox by the road as everyone in that very high-class community was either at school or work. Jay slowly slid the letter into the modern mailbox with a smirk on his face and gazed up at the immense structure before him. Suddenly, he caught a glimpse of something—or someone—moving in the top most right window. But, just as quickly as he saw it, it was gone. Jay assumed it was something of his imagination and shoved his hands into the warm pockets of his coat and headed back out of the gated community.



Jay's plan was executing itself perfectly. Mr. Anders and Jay corresponded for a few weeks and the young father didn't suspect anything; he had completely fooled the man. His deadly trap was laid out perfectly and he had finally gathered all the information he would need.

Jay had completely given up on following through with his daily routine as he put all his confidence in the expectation that this plan would work out. His timer was dropping at what appeared an intensely quick rate. And yet, there was one part of his routine that he vowed to keep. Almost each day he walked past the mystery girl as she made her way home from school; the only part of his day he truly enjoyed. And no matter how much he tried to ignore or deny it, a nagging feeling in his gut gave him the hope that if this all worked out according to plan, he would be able to get closer to her.



The day had finally arrived. It was a frigid early winter afternoon on January 10<sup>th</sup> at 4:52pm—the day of Jay's first ever murderous theft.

Jay had studied Mr. Anders' daily routine and knew it like the back of his hand. Each day, he would leave his house no later than 7:05 and drive his fiery red Mercedes-Benz through town for approximately twenty minutes to get to Lakewell Secondary School. Once there, he would begin preparing for the day of classes. He left the school by 3:45 each afternoon and drove back home. After resting awhile, Mr. Anders would walk the family's three-month-old German Shepherd out of their gated-community, down Main Street, and around the outskirts of town on the scenic trails for about forty-five minutes. At approximately 5:45, he would return for dinner.

The sky above Jay threatened harsh weather with dark, foreboding clouds. Jay paid little attention to it, though, as he glanced at his watch which read: one hour, twenty minutes, and five seconds. He needed to do this and he needed to do it now, there wasn't much time left. Jay crouched in the cover of some pine trees that formed a hedge along one of the trails that Mr. Anders was bound to walk on. Nestled within the coniferous trees was an old barn, well-worn

from years being exposed to the elements. As Jay waited, he adjusted the black mask he wore over his face that he had made the night before from an old sock. He would need to keep his identity a secret if he was going to keep this theft thing up. The barn in front of him used to be a beautiful stable with hundreds of horses, but now, it was so old and rotting that no one dared to go in it for lack of trust in the structure of the building. The wooden boards on the walls left gaping holes and decaying, dark green ivy had woven its way throughout most of them. The stable was on the outskirts of town and overlooked the glistening lake that gave the town its name. Mr. Anders would come walking down the path that curved up near the hedge and then back down to wrap around the lake and head back to town.

Jay could hear the beat of his own heart over the sound of the wind that was beginning to pick up and twirl dead, fallen leaves and other debris around its fingers. The drumming in his chest was not from nervousness or fear, but from the rush of adrenaline and distorted excitement. Jay awaited the arrival of his victim as the sap from the nearby pine tree stuck to his winter coat. The branches about him began to tremble violently and he felt droplets of rain mixed with snow on the back of his neck. He placed his hands together and breathed into them to add some warmth to his frozen fingers, all the while keeping his eyes on the path where his target would approach.

Suddenly, he spotted his victim and Jay's heart stopped. Mr. Anders was jogging down the path as fast as the puppy behind him would allow. The young dog easily got distracted by anything and everything which caused the man stop every few minutes. The path he was walking was completely empty and was starting to become soggy with the ever-intensifying rainfall. "*Perfect,*" Jay thought to himself.

Soon Mr. Anders was close enough for Jay to commence the plan; the boy jumped into action. He rustled the trees loudly and broke sticks to send the puppy into wild frenzy of excitement. The dog struggled and pulled until it finally got loose from his owner.

"Benji! Come here!" Mr. Anders yelled anxiously, not wanting to be out in this weather any longer than he had to. But, it was to no avail as the young dog wasn't trained yet and easily gave in to the distraction.

Mr. Anders began to chase after his dog, but Jay acted quicker. He leapt from the pine trees and jumped onto the man, using his height and strength to try to pin him to the muddying ground. Mr. Anders frantically struggled and grunted as the two fought against each other, limbs slapping into the wet ground. Mr. Anders managed to get hands on Jay and pushed him off for a moment long enough to attempt to make his escape from this wild boy he had never seen before. Jay was determined to get what he had come for and sprinted after the man who had run into the musty barn. Jay lunged at him from behind and the two men rolled deeper into the old stable. Jay came out on top and pinned Mr. Anders to the floor that was covered with decade-old straw and manure. The man struggled to get away from the strong-minded boy, but there was no chance. Jay was prepared and Mr. Anders wasn't.

The young boy laughed sharply and sneered at him, "You've made it much too easy." Mr. Anders shot an odious glare at Jay as the veins in his thick neck threatened to erupt from his skin. Jay leaned uncomfortably close to the man's ear and whispering even more sharply, "*Always.*" The man's eyes sunk back into his head as he revelled in shock, realizing what Jay had been doing. That was the way all the letters from his wife had been signed and, being the intelligent man he was, he immediately made this connection. Jay laughed again and reached for the band around the man's wrist. Mr. Anders' knew what Jay was attempting to do and began to taunt him in desperation.

"Ha! You think you're so smart. Try entering my code, I dare you. No one, not even my wife has knowledge of it." Jay guffawed and then stared intensely at his victim with his dangerous woodland eyes.

"Watch me." Skillfully, Jay entered the transfer code in the man's watch whilst he struggled, his strong arms bulging as they had met their match in Jay's strength. The boy smiled even larger when the screen lit up green with: `CONSENT CODE ACCEPTED; BEGIN TRANSFER NOW.` Jay wasn't even surprised. He entered his own code and placed his watch on top of Mr. Anders' to transfer the remaining time left in the pathetic man's life. Jay smiled uncontrollably as he saw his timer begin to climb out of the dangerous depths it had been in only a moment before. Mr. Anders only lay back in disbelief and horror as he knew there was nothing he could do at

this point; the boy had overpowered him. The life and warmth slowly drained out of Mr. Anders as he stared blankly into the giddy face of Jay Berman.

But, Jay was only able to gain a few hours on his timer when his plan shattered to pieces. Within a few minutes, the all-too-familiar voice of a young girl filled the air. Panic struck Jay's heart. He acted swiftly, jumping up and dragging the now dazed Mr. Anders into a nearby room which had previously been used as an office. Lacking time to even shut the door, Jay ran around the opposite side of the barn of where the voice was emanating and hid in the hedge once again; hoping against hope that the body wouldn't be found.

He had recognized the voice immediately. It was the beautiful, mysterious girl he had been observing for the past few months of his life. From his position in the treeline, he was able to see her on the phone with a friend as she hurried down the path that wandered past the barn. Jay observed her anxiously. "*Great, just what I need,*" he muttered to himself.

The girl rushed into the entrance of the stable to escape from the weather and prevent her phone from being drenched.

"Hey Jules, I'm sorry to cut you off, but it's raining pretty hard outside and I should probably get home. I'll see you tomorrow at school. Bye!" The girl hung up the phone and slid it into the pocket of her jeans and then proceeded to wring the water droplets out of her blonde hair which splashed onto the moldy barn floor. She walked to the large entrance of the stable and shuddered as the rain only began to beat harder and the wind picked up severely.

Jay was soaked to the bone from his position in the trees, but he was too preoccupied with the scene in front of him that it didn't bother him. He thought with relief that the young girl was going to make a run for it, but all of a sudden, she turned back into the barn, alerted by a sound. Jay had heard it too; Mr. Anders was stirring from his daze and began groaning from the room that Jay has stuck him in. Curiosity overcame the girl and she decided to investigate as she gingerly crept further into the barn.

Jay didn't want her to find the body, but that wasn't the only reason he was beginning to feel more and more anxious. All of a sudden, he felt a twisting pain in his gut and his "sixth sense" kicked in. Something was wrong. She disappeared down a hallway and out of sight from him and he rushed into the barn after her without hesitation. He threw off his makeshift

disguise and crept as quietly as he could further into the barn. The storm had arrived with its full intensity and the frail building began to shake violently.

Jay peeked around the corner and into the hallway to see the girl hesitantly reach to push the door open to the room from which the groaning sound was emanating. Just as her hand contacted the rotting wood, a terrifying creaking and cracking sound began to fill the air with its deafening noise. The winter winds were beating heavily against the insubstantial barn, causing it to give up the last bit of life left in its bones. Jay saw that the ceiling above them was beginning to fold and his heart fell to his stomach. His quick reflexes caused him to lunge towards the girl and knock her into a small storage room adjacent to the large office. Jay slammed the door shut and covered the slender girl with his body to protect her. The doorway gave way and the wall caved in in the blink of an eye. Jay army crawled further into the completely darkened room while carefully carrying the girl with him. The sound of splintering wood and crashing foundations filled the air, drowning out the cries of the girl from beneath Jay's strong arms.



After about an hour, the storm finally retreated and the destructive sounds outside of the room ceased. As the two teenagers cautiously opened their eyes, they were still in complete darkness aside from the delicate glow of their countdowns. Dust swirled in the room and entered their lungs as it tried to settle after what had just occurred. Jay and the girl could make out that the doorway had completely caved in, but, miraculously, there was still a small section in the back of the room that remained standing. There was just enough space for the two young people to sit comfortably against the wall that remained intact.

"I think it's over," Jay said as he leaned back and sat down on the dirty floor. The girl stared at him in a sort of dumbfounded shock attempting to process everything that had just occurred.

"What—how—what did—," the girl began to sob which caused the makeup left on her face to run further down her cheeks. Jay felt sorry for her and began to formulate his fake story.

"I was running home from work to avoid the rain when I heard talking in the barn. I've never had a good feeling about this place and I feared it even more since there was a big storm coming and I didn't want to see anyone get hurt. I saw the foundations start to give way and I

rushed in to try to save you. We're honestly lucky to be alive." Jay felt a little nervous for he couldn't let her know the true reason he had been in the area. He then continued, "My name is Jay Berman, by the way. I've seen you at LSS before."

The girl was still speechless and shaky, but after stumbling out a response and apologizing profusely, she added, "My name is Blaire Anders." She continued, but Jay never heard the words she spoke, those didn't matter to him. Jay's face was drained of all colour and he became consumed by his whirlwind of thoughts. *"Anders? Did she just say Anders? There's no way..."* This was Mr. Anders' daughter; there was no way she couldn't be since there was only one family with the name Anders in Lakewell. Jay felt panicky and was furious with himself for not making the connection earlier. And now, her father more than likely lay absolutely crushed beneath the beams and debris just outside their room. This was a deadly mess.

Jay snapped back out of his awful fantasies as Blaire began to crawl towards where the doorway was supposed to be. She began pulling back the debris as she said, "We should try to get out of here; we can't stay here long." Jay nodded mechanically, still trying to process what had all happened, and they both went to work at trying to clear the debris from the doorway.



After half an hour of desperately trying to open the only way of escape, they realized it was futile.

"We need someone to clear the beams away from outside before we can even think about getting out," Jay declared seriously with a heavy tone of frustration. He glanced at his timer: Three hours, ten minutes, fifty-two seconds. Jay hastily looked away so as not to lead Blaire to think anything was wrong. He didn't want her to know he was that poor for those types of people were severely looked down upon by society, especially by someone of her class.

"I guess we'll just have to wait then. I'm sure my father will come back soon. I wouldn't be too worried quite yet," Blaire said encouragingly. Jay felt sick to his stomach; he knew that wouldn't be the case as he pictured the deformed body of Mr. Anders lying lifeless just beside the room his daughter was in. He tried to push that thought out of his mind, and the two began to stir up small talk.



And that was the hour Jay Berman fell completely and utterly in love for the very first time. They chatted for so long and so intensely, that Jay lost all concern he had for his timer; he never thought of it once. He sighed in contentment and leaned against the wall in the dark room and smiled at Blaire even though he knew she couldn't see him. After a few moments of silence, Blaire brought forth a question.

"Can I ask you something?" She inquired a little shyly.

"Of course, anything," Jay assured, as he leaned closer towards her.

"I am afraid I don't have much time. I wasn't going to tell you because I didn't want you to be worried, but it's getting to the point where you need to know. You don't have to tell me your countdown, but from what you've told me, you sound pretty wealthy and I only need time until we get out, then my father will transfer me my allowance for the week." Blaire had spoken so hastily that it took Jay a moment to process. "*How on earth is this happening right now?*" Jay thought to himself. He couldn't believe he had assumed she had all the time in the world just because of her parents. His grandparents never provided for his parents, so couldn't that be the case with her as well? Feeling immense compassion for her he agreed to transfer her an hour at a time until help arrived.

They both entered their consent codes and Blaire's watch climbed as Jay's timer fell into deeper despair. Jay pulled back his arm and glanced at his watch: Forty-two minutes and thirteen seconds; he was running out of time.



A short while later, in the dimness of the room, Jay could see Blaire curled up in the corner using a pile of straw as a cushion for her head. His heart ached. He knew there was no way he was getting out of there and there was no way he was admitting to Blaire that he wasn't going to make it; he wanted to spend his last moments in relative joy. Jay closed his weary eyes and tried to sleep, desperately hoping that someone would rescue them from their deathly trap.



His eyes eased open soon after when he heard the sound of crinkling straw which alerted Jay to the fact that Blaire was awakening. The young girl came over to him too and rested her head on his broad shoulder, “We’ll make it out, don’t worry. Someone will find us.” Jay nodded his head, but he knew she was naïve. He had to tell her the truth, despite knowing it would break her heart as well as his own. He shifted his body so that Blaire was forced to raise her head and look into the silhouette of his face.

“I need to talk to you, seriously.” Jay leaned his head against the rotting wall.

“Of course, what is it?” Blaire innocently inquired. Jay sighed deeply and leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees and then placed his head in his hands. Instead of talking to her verbally, he lit up his watch and showed her what the screen read: five minutes and twenty seconds. He kept his eyes sealed as he expected the most painful response.

Silence. But the stillness was soon broken by laughter. Eerie, inappropriate laughter erupted from Blaire’s mouth as she stood up and began pacing where she could in the small room. Jay had never been so confused in his life.

“You’re so stupid!” Blaire accused amusingly, “You never saw this coming, did you?” The girl cackled uncontrollably. Jay was at a complete loss of words; Blaire continued.

“You have been tricking me this whole time, Jay. Did you really think no one was intelligent enough to eventually figure out your plan? Fool. I know you tried to steal from my father, I saw you place those face letters in our mailbox all the time. I know you’re the reason he’s dead right now. You may think you’re so smart, but you aren’t the only one. You are an evil, twisted person, Jay.” Jay’s face turned so pale, it could be seen despite the darkness of the room.

“Now, Jay Berman, you are playing *my* game. You really thought someone would love someone like you? You really are a ridiculous man. No, that’s generous. You are nothing more than a ridiculous boy.” Blaire spat those words in his face. Jay had never felt so many emotions all at once that he rolled forward onto his knees and felt sick to his stomach.

“I—trusted—you,” Jay spoke those three words through clenched teeth with such force and heaviness as his heart shattered into a million pieces; even more than the moment he was abandoned by his parents.

“And that was your first mistake,” Blaire had turned more serious now and for the first time in his life, Jay was genuinely afraid. Deathly afraid. He had received his own treatment and been deceived. “Your second mistake was actually believing that someone like me needed your worthless time. How did you fall for that, Jay? A smart little peasant like you? And now, you will face the consequences of your choices. You will die, and I will sit here and watch it.” Jay still couldn’t even process what was happening. He reluctantly glanced at his watch: fifty-eight seconds. It was odd seeing his watch with only one set of numbers. This was it. All his worst fears had come true and his passions had blinded him to the danger that had been resting in plain sight. Time passed agonizingly slowly for the first time in his life.

And then:

six,

five,

four,

three,

two,

one,

zero.

The loud, unnerving beeping sound from the deadly contraption on his wrist was the last thing Jay would ever hear.

His sixteenth birthday had come and gone, and Jay Berman’s life had most definitely been changed forever.