

BLUR

STEVEN JAMES



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“Men are so necessarily mad, that not to be mad would amount to another form of madness.”

—Blaise Pascal, seventeenth-century
philosopher and mathematician

To Susanna and Meg

PROLOGUE

Daniel held up a blanket so that it hung vertically above his bed. Stacy stood beside his desk, her back to the wall. He noticed that she was tapping her fingers nervously against her leg.

“Alright,” he said. “Imagine that everything on your side of the blanket is reality. Those are the things you can see, taste, feel, whatever. The things that are really there. Everything on my side of the blanket is . . .”

“Just imaginary.” She finished his thought for him. “All in your head.”

“Right. Now, from what I’ve found out in the last week, most people have a pretty thick blanket—barrier—that’s in their minds that helps them know which side they’re on.”

She was watching him carefully; if he didn’t know better, he’d say warily.

“So we can tell what’s real and what’s not,” she said.

“Exactly. But now imagine that the blanket is a shower curtain or something and you can see through it, but everything on the other side is blurry. So you’d know the other side is there—”

CHAPTER ONE

“But you’d be able to tell which side was which.” Stacy sounded slightly relieved. “You’d see the difference.”

“Yes.”

“And that’s you?”

A pause. “No. Not quite.” He dropped the blanket. “It’s gone.”

“The blanket is?”

“Yes.”

“Completely?” She’d moved almost imperceptibly farther from Daniel.

He nodded. A moment passed.

Stretched thin.

“Does that scare you?” he asked her.

She didn’t answer but said instead, “But can you tell this is real? That I’m really here, in front of you, right now?”

“Yes,” he said.

But he wasn’t sure. He wasn’t sure about anything.

Not since realizing he was going insane.

ONE WEEK EARLIER

The first blur occurred at Emily Jackson’s funeral.

At 3:54 p.m., thirty minutes before it happened, Daniel Byers was staring out the car window, watching deep shadows pass across the pavement as his father drove along the pine-and birch-enshrouded northern Wisconsin county highway. A handful of autumn leaves skittered along the road ahead of them. The sky was steel blue.

Though it was still September, it’d already snowed twice. Most of the snow had melted, but a few stubborn patches remained in the corners of the forest where the sun never reached. More snow would be coming soon. Winter was not kind to this part of the state.

“Are we almost there?” Daniel spoke softly, without looking away from the window.

Silence from his father.

“Dad?”

“The church is just past Highway Fourteen. Fifteen minutes maybe.”

Outside, an intricate web of leaves passed overhead. Wisped into light. Merged into shadow again.

“How’s your headache?” his father asked. “Gone?”

Daniel didn’t want to worry him. “It’s okay,” he lied.

Get ready. You’re about to see the body.

He suddenly felt cold and turned up the heater in the car.

It didn’t seem to help.

13 MINUTES BEFORE THE BLUR

His father slowed down as they approached the Beldon Road Community Church parking lot.

“Don’t worry,” he told Daniel. “We won’t stay long.”

Daniel didn’t know what to say. How do you deal with the fact that a girl who went to your high school, who you saw walking down the hall just a few days ago, is now dead?

They pulled into the lot. “Did you hear me, Dan?”

“Yeah.”

“We won’t stay long.”

“Okay.”

It felt a little weird coming to a church. He and his dad had only attended church twice since his mom left them six months ago—once for Easter and then the week after, as if they were about to start a new habit but never quite got enough momentum to carry things through.

The parking spaces closest to the building were filled, so his father eased into a spot near the back of the lot, then turned off

the engine. After an awkward moment, he stated the obvious: “We’re here.”

Neither of them moved.

At last his dad rapped the steering wheel twice, then said, “Okay, then.”

He eased his door open.

“I hardly even knew her, Dad.”

His father hesitated.

“I know.” He was still seated in the car but had one foot on the pavement. “But it’s important to be here.”

Daniel had never even officially met Emily Jackson, hadn’t even known her name until the news story hit. After all, he was a junior and she was a freshman, so it didn’t really make sense that he would know her very well. The thing was, he really *was* sad she’d drowned, he really *was*—and yet, in a way, he felt vaguely guilty that he wasn’t sadder.

Emily Jackson.

A girl who was easy to miss.

He’d seen what happened whenever she entered the cafeteria and sat at a table. Suddenly, the other kids who were already there would remember something else they needed to do and would get up one at a time and leave. Or when a group of kids was talking in the hallway and she approached them, they would tighten up their circle so there wouldn’t be any place for her.

And so she would walk past. Alone.

He didn’t think they did it on purpose, treated her like that, it was just the way kids are sometimes.

Whenever he saw her, she was always alone.

And now she was dead.

A girl nobody seemed to want to be around when she was alive.

But now there was a parking lot full of cars.

Now everyone was coming to see Emily.

Now that she was dead.

11 MINUTES BEFORE THE BLUR

Daniel and his father crossed the parking lot and walked toward the church. He caught himself noticing what was in people's cars as they passed them—the fast-food wrappers and water bottles on the floors, the pet hair on the backseats, the baby toys and backpacks. For some reason everything seemed to be registering in his mind more than usual. More than ever.

An older man with bristly white hair who was leaving the building nodded to Daniel's father. "Sheriff."

"Tony."

Daniel recognized him: Mr. Kettner, the man who announced their home football games. Now he said, "I'm sorry about this, son. I know she went to school with you."

Daniel wasn't sure how to respond. "Thank you," he managed to say.

Mr. Kettner hesitated for a moment, as if he were wondering what he should say next. At last he told Daniel's dad, "Good of you to come."

"We thought it was important."

Mr. Kettner let out a small sigh. "Tragedy, though. What happened to her."

"Yes, it is."

Though brief, the conversation seemed like it had already gone on too long, and no one really knew where to take it from there. "Alright, then. We'll see you later, Sheriff."

"Alright."

"Daniel," Mr. Kettner said with a nod. It was his way of saying good-bye.

"Good-bye, Mr. Kettner."

As he ambled away, Daniel's dad said softly once again, "We don't have to stay long."

Thank you, Daniel thought.

"Yeah," he said.

And they walked up the steps of the church.

CHAPTER TWO

A dozen men and women stood clustered in three groups just outside the front doors and as Daniel passed them, he heard them talking:

“She looks good.”

“Yes, she does.”

“And the flowers are nice.”

“She would have been so glad to see you here.”

It struck him how strange it was for people to be saying things like that.

Emily couldn't possibly look good, not after spending two days at the bottom of Lake Algonquin. And what difference did it make one way or the other what the flowers looked like? Didn't these people understand that the girl lying next to those flowers was absolutely and forever dead? And why would Emily have been glad to see a crowd of people she barely knew? Why, when they'd ignored her while she was alive?

So did you. You never talked to her. Not once.

A wash of guilt.

Daniel passed through the entryway and into the church.

All around the sanctuary, his friends and other kids he recognized from school were standing uneasily beside their parents.

Some of the guys looked anxious; others, like Brad Talbot, looked bored. All of them looked out of place, though—the guys wearing their fathers' ties, the girls dressed in dark, drab clothes that made them look much older than they were.

The air smelled of pinewood and old books.

Someone was playing a piano.

High overhead, dust floated through the air and passed across the streaks of sunlight slanting through the tall, narrow windows. It gave everything an unearthly, ethereal feel.

His friends, even the other guys from the football team, looked so fragile. So wounded. Some of the girls were crying, and so were some of the guys—but Daniel could tell they were trying their best to hide it. A lot of the kids were looking at him, like they did on the field when they were waiting for him to call the next play.

It made him uncomfortable.

Out there, he knew what to do, how to read the defense, how to respond. Here, he had no idea.

He avoided their gazes.

Daniel's headache seemed to be getting worse. He rubbed his thumb hard against his temple, but it didn't help.

Politely, his father excused himself and made his way to the back corner of the church to talk to Mr. McKinney, one of the teachers from Beldon High, leaving Daniel alone.

Everything around him was hushed; even the piano music coming from the front of the church seemed to be hollower, fainter than it should have been.

He saw the casket positioned near the piano.

You ignored her.

No, you just didn't know her. There's a difference.

Trying to shake the thought loose, he glanced to the left, where it seemed like there weren't so many people. Near the last pew, Stacy Clern, a girl who'd just transferred to his school, stood beside a woman who Daniel assumed was her mother.

Stacy was pretty, but not beautiful. Dark brown hair. Gentle eyes. And unlike the giddy, airheaded girls he seemed to attract like flies, Stacy seemed like the kind of real, down-to-earth girl he'd actually be able to connect with.

In fact, he'd wanted to ask her out ever since he'd first seen her around school, but he'd never quite gotten up the nerve to do it. On a football field or a basketball court he was fine—no problem figuring out what to do there. But stick him next to a girl like Stacy and he would fumble around all day for the right things to say.

From where he stood he couldn't tell if she'd been crying, but she looked really sad and he wanted to go and talk to her, tell her that things were going to be alright, but he couldn't figure out exactly what he might say. And he doubted he'd have the nerve to say anything at all once he got there.

Finally, he nodded to her and she offered him a small nod back.

A line had formed, leading to Emily's corpse.

Everyone was moving in slow motion, like animated shadows, circling and hovering around each other in tight bunches. Everything people said was lowered to a whisper.

You should have talked to her.

Somehow it seemed both unnatural and natural to feel guilty for not having talked to Emily. But he felt like he needed to do this thing now, to see her one last time. Maybe to redeem himself in some way for not knowing her better. Maybe paying his last respects—whatever that actually meant—would help to quiet the murky shame he felt crawling through him.

Daniel got in line.

CHAPTER THREE

8 MINUTES

There were sixteen people in front of Daniel Byers, and he was standing right behind the guy who took their team photos. One of the other girls from his class, Nicole Marten, handed him a church bulletin. The makeup all around her eyes was smeared.

“Thanks,” he said.

“It’s so sad, isn’t it?” Daniel had known Nicole for six years, in a friendship that had been pretty close but had never moved into anything beyond the just-being-friends stage. “I mean, how could this *happen*?”

“Yeah,” he replied. “I don’t know.”

She brushed away a stray tear, and then, without warning, she leaned against Daniel’s shoulder and gave him a small hug. It made him feel a little conspicuous but he didn’t pull away. He put his arm around her for a moment, then she backed up, rubbed at her eyes again, gave him a faint smile, and left to deliver more bulletins.

He noticed Stacy staring in his direction.

Not the best timing in the world, watching another girl hug him. Especially a girl as popular as Nicole.

He hid by looking at the bulletin Nicole had given him. Printed on the front was Emily’s name and date of birth. And date of death.

She’d lived fourteen years, four months, and twenty days.

Immediately, and without even realizing it, Daniel calculated that he had already lived 845 days longer than she ever would.

He didn’t open the bulletin. He didn’t want to see all fourteen years, four months, and twenty days of her life summarized in one tidy little paragraph. It didn’t seem fair.

The line edged forward as the first few people finished looking at Emily’s corpse and then made their way to a semi-circle of mourners, presumably Emily’s family, standing near the piano.

845 days.

The idea that death is the end, the end of every dream and memory that a person will ever have, every hope and smile and tear . . . it was unsettling.

Teenagers weren’t supposed to have to think about things like that.

845 days.

The casket was adorned with flowers. Only the left half was propped open.

The line of people shuffled slowly toward it.

Someone had placed fifteen framed photos of Emily on a table nearby.

A couple of them were pictures of her at birthday parties

when she was a kid; one showed her at the beach walking by herself. In another, she was inside a cabin with an older man who might've been her grandpa. In the biggest photo—a studio picture—she was kneeling beside a golden retriever. In the most recent photos she had on a silver necklace with a heart-shaped locket.

In all the pictures Emily was smiling, but it struck Daniel that he had never seen her smile at school.

Two people finished their viewing and stepped aside. As Daniel moved forward, a man who was walking past patted him on the shoulder. The man's face was drawn and sad. Daniel didn't recognize him.

“Were you a friend of Emily's?” the man asked.

Actually, no. I barely knew her.

“Um. Sort of.”

The man nodded and patted his shoulder again and told him, “Thanks for coming,” and, “It really means a lot to us,” and then he left to go stand by the piano, and Daniel realized he was probably a relative of Emily's, maybe even her dad, and he felt worse that he hadn't known her better, as if somehow it would have meant more to this man if he'd been Emily's good friend.

Daniel wanted to go and tell him, “Really, you know what? She was one of the nicest girls I've ever met.”

But instead, he stepped forward with the line.

It was moving faster now. Just eight people ahead of him.

He wished his headache would go away.

As he took another step, it struck him that if Emily had gone to another high school or lived in a town fifty or a hundred

miles away, he might not have even heard about her death, and he would be at football practice right now—the one that had been canceled in light of the funeral—and that would be that. Anonymous people die in distant places every minute of the day, but death doesn't seem to mean anything to us until it somehow touches our life.

Four people.

Finally, he caught a glimpse of Emily Jackson's face.