

Beyond the Grave

“Where am I?” Ashley groaned as she slowly sat up, picking twigs and leaves out of her hair. “I must have fallen asleep” she muttered, rubbing her eyes and looking around to get her bearing. A beam of sunlight peered through the thick treetops, landing on her face. The warm afternoon air pressed against her cold skin, while the cool dirt beneath her provided a perfect counterbalance. She was surrounded by dense trees, and heavy brush, hidden from the world.

What time is it? Why can't I remember anything? Questions flooded her mind but were interrupted by an excruciating headache. She gripped her temples, trying to ease the pain, but the pain worsened. Flashes of memories – a stream, and her childhood friend, Jack – surged through her mind. Then, as suddenly as it started, it stopped. Confused, Ashley knew only that she didn't want to feel that pain again.

She crawled out of the brush to get a better gauge of her location. Once freed, she wandered through the forest, her mind fogged with confusion. She was drawn to the sound of running water, hoping to clean herself up and clear her thoughts.

Kneeling by the water's edge, she noticed her face was stained with blood. Panicked, she felt a giant gash filled with dried blood on the back of her head. Oddly, she felt no pain, but the thought soon faded. All she wanted were answers.

Further down the stream, she spotted a figure. His eyes were glued to his journal as he frantically flipped through the pages. Realizing it was Jack, she screamed from afar, “I finally found you! Can you please help me? Where are we?” she unloaded each question without taking a breath in between. Jack's head snapped up and he immediately turned pale white. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

Jack was the kid who could never fit in at school. Raised in a dysfunctional family, he

faced constant arguments and was taught that love was conditional. At school, he preferred isolation, often documenting everything in his journal. Known for his interest in insects, he carried a vintage collection in his backpack. Due to his odd demeanor, most students found him hard to understand and easier to avoid.

“I’m so glad I found you!” she said, snapping Jack back to reality.

There was a noticeable shift in Jack’s attitude. “There’s something you need to hear.”

Jack remembered the day he met Ashley like it was yesterday. He sat in the back of the class, doodling in his notebook when suddenly, his attention was drawn to the front of the room. From the moment she walked in, Jack knew there was something special about her. Her eyes sparkled with intelligence, and she had a smile that could light up the room. Her infectious laughter and charming personality made everyone around her feel special.

Jack’s eyes darkened momentarily before his expression hardened. “You went missing three days ago. We thought...we thought something terrible might have happened.”

Chills ran through Ashley as questions began to flood her head once again. *Missing? How could I have been missing for three days?* Instantly the excruciating headache returned. This time, the pain grew worse and worse. With each surge, memories flashed — arguing, a blinding pain, falling to the ground, and the sound of someone throwing up. Suddenly, Ashley froze and said coldly “I think I was murdered.”

Jack’s eyes widened with genuine horror. “What do you mean?” he blurted frantically.

“I remember now,” her voice trembling and weak. “I was attacked, but I don’t know by who. I fought back and escaped, but... but I couldn’t... I think I’m dead, Jack.”

Jack shook his head in disbelief. “What do you mean? You’re standing right here.”

“Am I?” Ashley looked down at her hands, realizing for the first time that her body

remained cold, despite the warm air. She stood there, frozen, hoping to hear the faint sound of her heartbeat, but all she heard was silence. She reached out to touch Jack's face, but her hand passed through him like smoke.

Jack caught his breath. "Ashley... you're a ghost."

The weight of the revelation crashed down on her. "I need to find out who did this to me, Jack. I need your help."

Jack's face was set with determination, but his eyes showed something eerie and dark. "We'll figure this out, together."

Ashley smiled, feeling reassured by Jack's presence. "Thank you, Jack, I knew I could always count on you." She followed Jack back into the woods. As they continued to walk, an unsettling thought lingered in her mind. *What were we doing in the woods? Why are you out here by yourself?*

Unprompted, Jack began to explain, as if he could see the questions in my head. "It was my birthday," he said coldly. "You wanted to spend time with me, so we went hunting for insects to add to my collection, but we got separated. The next thing I knew, you were nowhere to be seen."

"Why are you still out here all alone three days later?" she asked skeptically.

He paused briefly. "I felt responsible, so I've been looking for you, every day, by myself." His voice was emotionless, and his gaze appeared soulless. They arrived at the edge of an open field, close to where Ashley woke up. "This is where you took me to look for some bugs."

The dense shrubs and giant rocks made for an ideal habitat for insect hunting. Looking around, Ashley could easily see how effortlessly one could become disoriented.

Jack continued to walk ahead, often referencing his journal as he talked about how the day unfolded. He started to list every detail, almost as if it had been rehearsed. While he continued talking, something captured Ashley's attention – a rock stained with splatters of blood. Ashley sank to her knees, an almost instantaneous headache gripping her. This time the pain surged to the back of her head, as if her body recalled the impact with the rock.

Suddenly, all her memories came crashing in. There was some truth to Jack's story – they were indeed friends, and they did go into the woods in search of bugs. What he failed to mention, however, was how he confessed his love for Ashley. She was always friendly with Jack, but only saw him as a friend.

Jack's demeanor quickly shifted. Accusing her of leading him on, he became lost in rage. Jack violently shoved Ashley causing her to stumble over the rocky terrain, crashing backward and striking her head.

As she slowly regained consciousness, the sound of Jack retching nearby filled the silence of the forest. Fear gripped her as she realized Jack felt compelled to finish the job. With grim determination, he seized a massive rock, ready to deliver a fatal blow. Before he could blink, she lashed out, delivering a swift kick to his groin. This caused him to drop the rock on his head, knocking him out cold. Seizing the opportunity, Ashley fled. She found refuge in a densely overgrown area nearby. It was there, concealed by the thick brush, that she succumbed to her injuries.

Ashley froze, her voice cracking with agony as she cried out, "WHY? Why did you kill me? Why are you helping me? I thought we were friends?"

"Please Ashley, it was an accident," Jack's voice quivered with desperation, his façade crumbling under the weight of his guilt as Ashley glared at him with tear-filled eyes. "But I can't

get caught. You need to show me where your body is.” In that chilling moment, his true nature was shown.

She felt a whirlwind of emotions – anger, betrayal, but also a deep sense of guilt. She had always questioned if she had somehow led him on. She wondered if she was responsible for his feelings that led to this tragic outcome.

But as Jack revealed his true, selfish nature, a new clarity washed over her. She realized that his actions were his own, born from his inability to accept the truth and not from anything she had done. This revelation was freeing, like a weight lifting off her shoulders.

“Ash! Where are you!” Her father's voice broke through her thoughts.

Without skipping a beat, she cried out, “Dad! I’m here! Please help!”

A massive man with a thick beard charged towards them. His hands were callused from years of work. He quickly analyzed the situation and bellowed, “What’s going on?”

Ashley blurted out, “I can’t explain it but I’m dead, and he killed me!”

Her father’s expression darkened with fury. With a powerful lunge, he slammed Jack to the ground. “Ash, I’ve brought help. The search party and the police are here. We can help you,” he growled through gritted teeth, tears streaming down his weathered face. He tried to wipe his daughter's tears away, only for his hand to pass through her like smoke.

“Thank you, Dad. Everything you need to know is in Jack’s journal,” Ashley whispered, her voice echoing softly. A heavenly light shined down on Ashley as she started to float away, her inner conflict resolved. She knew now that she wasn’t to blame and that she could move on, free from the guilt that had haunted her.

Ashley’s father looked at her with pride and sorrow, his voice breaking, “We love you, Ash. We’ll make sure he pays for what he did.”