

Prologue

Cheeks scratched her head with her tiny, chubby fingers. Her hair, the color of corn silk, was still crimped from the ribbons and clips she wore in it during the day.

“Where do we go when we die?” she asked.

Jack blustered at the question. “I’m trying to listen to the game. If you’re going to be here, you got to listen to the game, too. If you can’t, you can go to bed.”

Herb Score’s voice narrated the action as Jack, his legs folded and tucked under him, rocked nervously. It didn’t look good for the Cleveland Indians. Julio Franco was at the plate and he had struck out in his first two times at the dish against the Oakland Athletics.

“Shhhh,” Cheeks whispered, placing a stubby finger in front of her lips. “I think mommy can hear us.”

Jack reached his hand out from under the sky blue sheet that covered them and turned down the volume on the Timex flip-clock radio that sat on the cedar nightstand next to his bed.

Jack flipped off the flashlight and held his breath, listening for the bedroom door to creak open.

It didn’t.

Once he was certain all was safe, he reached under the sheet again and turned up the volume.

The crowd cheered. Herb Score exalted the virtues of Franco.

The bases were juiced.

Jack scrambled to get his scorebook caught up.

“Did he get home?” Cheeks asked in her high, squeaky voice.

“No, Cheeks. He didn’t get home yet. Why do you ask so many questions?”

Cheeks shrugged her shoulders and scrunched her nose. Her left eye squinted and her lips contorted oddly as she searched for an answer. "I don't know. Do you know, Jacky?"

"Just listen."

The crack of the bat made Jack's back straighten. He held his breath. The sound of the crowd and Score's elevated voice told him Mike Hargrove had collected a big hit.

Tony Bernazard scored.

Then Brett Butler.

"Did he get home?" Cheeks cheerfully asked.

"Yes, he got home."

Cheeks threw her fisted hands in the air and smiled. She was missing a front tooth, carried off by the tooth fairy for the price of one shiny quarter two days earlier. She still carried the quarter in the pocket of her pajamas.

"Yay!" She yelled. Jack shushed her and she said softly. "Welcome home."

"Jacky." Cheeks' voice broke with fear.

"What!" Jack barked after a deep, loud, frustrated sigh.

"I don't want to go to sleep."

He rolled his eyes. "Why, Cheeks?"

"What if I don't wake up?"

"You'll wake up."

"What if I don't? I don't wanna die."

He rolled his eyes again and let out another exaggerated exhale. "Why are you so weird? You won't die."

“Yes I will.”

“You won’t! Now go to sleep.”

“Everyone dies, Jacky.”

Jack heard frightened sobs coming from the other side of the room. For a moment in his half-sleep state, he thought it was just a dream. It took him several more seconds and another shrill whine for Jack to realize it was real.

And coming from Cheeks.

He crawled out of bed and walked slowly to her. She sat with her back flush against the wall, her knees pulled up to her chest, her arms snaked around her shins.

A stream of moonlight cast a soft glow to her face and was bright enough for Jack to see tears glisten off her ruddy, chipmunk cheeks.

“What’s wrong?” Jack could be a nurturing big brother when he wished to be.

Like now.

“She’s here.”

“Who’s here?”

“She’s gonna take me.” Cheeks let out a deep, trembling breath.

Tears ran down her face again, spilling from crystal blue eyes that glowed in the faint moonlight.

“No one’s gonna take you.”

“She’s gonna take me and I don’t wanna go.”

Her eyes were fixed on a point behind Jack. He turned his head, trying to see what she saw, but all he could see was the branches of the tree outside their window sway in a gust.

Jack tried to allay her fears. “It’s okay, Cheeks. I don’t see anyone.”

“Don’t let her take me!” Cheeks bawled. A high-pitched squeal followed.

Jack saw something in her eyes, a faint image reflected back to him by her glassy corneas. It’s a finger—long, boney, thin and crooked like a tree branch, knuckles big, round.

And scary.

On the end of that finger, a talon, blacker than the darkest void, inching toward her.

Jack threw himself in front of Cheeks, shielding her from what he could not understand.

He watched in her wide, petrified eyes as the talon drew closer and closer.

He felt a frozen hand pass through him, a deep chill rising and rattling through his bones.

A pain and burn so intense it made his muscles seize and cramp and his head pound.

Jack watched, helplessly, as the image in her fixed, wide eyes of the withered finger with the onyx talon vanished.

Cheeks’ eyes fluttered and then rolled into the back of her head.

She went limp.

Jack grabbed her and held her slack body in his arms. He stared at her face and began to sob.

Then he saw something curious.

He reached out for it and it shimmered when his finger touched it, as if it were a reflection on the surface of a calm lake.

It was projected on her forehead.

A timer, the numbers like his flip-clock radio, leaves turning with a grating click.

Counting down.

From forty-seven minutes.

Part I

Chapter 1

Just the When of It

Jack Grimm knows when you are going to die.

He doesn't know the how of it, or the why of it, just the when of it.

Only God knows why.

It was a skill he cultivated over the years, honed and nurtured for a grand, benevolent reason that was still unknown to him.

One day, I'll know. One day, I'll understand.

That's what Jack told himself, anyway.

There were times when he thought it ghoulish to know how much time those around him had left, to be able to tell if they had forty-seven years or forty-seven days or forty-seven minutes. He wondered if they knew when they would die if it would change the way they lived.

Jack looked to his right and at the slivers of the moon through the cracks in his bedroom window blind. The moon was big and round and bright on this night, and it appeared as if it was moving toward him.

Relentless.

Unblinking.

Unstoppable.

Like the march of time.

In that moment he realized he was afraid and had been afraid every day since Cheeks went limp in his arms thirty years ago.

Afraid of life.

Afraid of death.

Afraid he couldn't do a fucking thing with his Insight.

He had only tried to change that timer that clicked away on the foreheads of everyone he saw on two occasions.

Lessons were learned the hard way.

You can't cheat death.

Cheeks rode in the ambulance, its sirens shrieking, strobe lights of red and white flashing on the face of Jack's worried father as he followed behind in their Ford Pinto Hatchback.

Jack saw a clock on his father's forehead, too.

He didn't have time to concern himself with that now.

"Dad," Jack said quietly. His father took a quick glance at him out of the corners of his bloodshot eyes. "Cheeks is going to die."

"Maddie is going to be okay." Their parents never called her Cheeks. That was a Jack thing. "The ambulance is going to take her to the hospital and the doctors will make her all better."

Jack shook his head. He was calm, which obviously made his father that much more uneasy. He spoke with absolute certainty. "Dad, I saw when she was going to die. There's a clock-thingy on her forehead. She had forty-seven minutes. Less now, I guess."

His father didn't respond, just pressed his foot down harder on the gas pedal. The engine revved. The Pinto nearly rear-ended the ambulance as it roared toward the hospital.

Jack peered down at his lap. His scorebook lay across his thighs, opened to the game he scored that night. A tear dropped on Andre Thornton's name, blurring the letters written in pencil. Jack nibbled on his fingernails.

Jack could feel the rage bubbling inside his father, it was a palpable feeling that he knew well. He prepared himself for the eruption.

"You're ten!" The top blew. Jack flinched at the rising volume of his Dad's voice. "You can't know something like that!"

They arrived at the hospital and Cheeks was surrounded by doctors. They whisked her away, crashing through a set of double doors, and left Jack and his parents in the waiting room.

His mother sobbed, dabbing her eyes with a ball of tissues.

His father paced, pushing his hands through his thinning hair, and shot Jack a scornful glance on every pivot.

Jack studied the clock that hung on the waiting room wall and watched the second hand travel in a relentless orbit.

One minute.

Five minutes.

Ten minutes.

It was getting closer, Cheeks' death.

Closer and closer.

The doctor pushed his way through the double doors, a surgical mask hanging loosely around his neck. He removed his latex gloves and walked sullenly toward Jack's parents.

His Mom and Dad knew what the doctor was going to say. So did Jack, but for a different reason.

“Sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Grimm, there was nothing we could do.”

His father turned his gaze toward Jack—it was a look unlike anything he had seen. It dripped with hate, with utter and complete disdain.

Jack shut his eyes against the shame.

Jack’s eyes shot open. A stream of sunlight leaked through a slight opening in his almond venetian blinds and bore into them, blinding him for a brief moment.

It was a new day.

Same as the last.

Likely the same as the next.

Jack rose and fell quickly into his daily routine.

--7 a.m.: Brush teeth—at least forty-seven strokes on each side. Assess the state of the hairline. Stare at the reflection in the mirror, trying to see the timer on his forehead. It was always perplexing to Jack that he could see the flip-clock of others, but not his own.

--7:25 a.m.: Eat breakfast. Pancakes, smothered in syrup. Can’t go wrong with pancakes smothered in syrup.

--7:47 a.m.: Shower.

--7:55 a.m.: Get dressed. Wear a tie of varying colors and designs knotted firmly around the collar of a crisp white or powder blue or, on an adventurous day, a lavender oxford shirt.

Tuck shirt neatly into khaki, gray or black pants.

-- 8 a.m. Head out of his downtown condo for the hospital.

It was like clockwork.

Just like the timers on the foreheads of everyone he saw, leaves flipping and clicking toward the end.

The flip-clock timer moved in just one direction, much like the engineering of those retro radios. Those clocks could not be set backward, only forward. They marched unceasingly ahead and that could not be changed.

Much like fate.

On this day, Jack veered a bit from the norm. He decided to brave the blustery wind off the lake and walk to work.

He grabbed a coffee at a diner around the corner and pulled the collar of his coat up around his neck and chin to brace against the chill.

People milled about, most in business suits and fashionable dresses with overcoats draped around their shoulders. They were getting ready to start their busy work day doing ... whatever they did.

They were oblivious to the clock ticking down on their lives. They all had various settings.

Twenty-five years, four months and fifteen minutes.

Thirty-six years, nine months and forty-four minutes.

So on.

So forth.

Jack had grown weary of the Insight and tried to ignore it the best he could. He made little eye contact on most days, preferring to look up at the billowing clouds or down at the slate-gray pavement and off-white sidewalks.

That, too, was his routine, drilled into him over time.

Keep your head down.

Don't ask.

Don't tell.

Keep it to yourself.

One man's timer, though, captured Jack's attention. He couldn't veer his gaze away from the pear-shaped man who struggled to take in air as he leaned against an electric pole at the intersection of Euclid and 93rd street.

His ashen face was sunken and spotted with dark blemishes and his red scalp showed through thin strands of white hair. He braced himself against the pole again and launched into a coughing fit.

The timer was down to five minutes.

Jack hardly needed his Insight to tell the portly man had not long to live. He wondered how it would happen and the usual suspects sprang to his mind.

Heart attack.

Stroke.

Pulmonary embolism.

All likely culprits. Then again, anything was possible.

The man coughed again violently and pushed himself away from the pole when he heard the dingy chime of the crosswalk. The throng that collected around him moved briskly across the street and the pear-shaped man lagged behind after a stumble and another coughing fit.

He paused again in the middle of the intersection, throwing a fist in front of his mouth and bracing himself for another fit of croup as an obsidian-blue Honda CR-V, driven by a young woman distracted by a text, slammed into him.

The pear-shaped man flipped onto the windshield, cracked it, and then went airborne over the roof and helicoptered down to the pavement in a crumple.

His timer hit zero before he hit the street.

“Didn’t see that coming,” Jack said under his breath.

Nothing really surprised him anymore. It once bothered him that he was so unmoved by death. Knowing when the end would come had a way of disarming the shock. There were millions of ways to die.

Some of them peaceful.

Some of them not so peaceful.

The end was the same, though.

The end is always the same.

Just like the beginning.

Jack pushed his finger into the newborn’s mouth and pulled the gunk out of the airway. The baby gasped for her first breath, and then wailed, kicking tiny legs, waving stubby arms, as the nurse clamped the umbilical cord.

“Congratulations,” Jack said. “It’s a girl.”

The father, still trembling from the shock of the experience, blurted out a few syllables that almost sounded like words. The mother just sobbed from the joy of giving birth and from the joy that it was over.

After fifteen minutes, the father cut the cord. His hand shook so violently that the nurse had to help steady it. Jack took the baby and placed it on the table nearby to examine her.

It often took an hour—sometimes less, sometimes more—for a newborn’s timer to appear to Jack.

He wondered why. Perhaps it was God mulling over the infant’s fate, running through the possible scenarios of the young life before him.

He liked to think that, anyway.

Jack saw the timers as a string of shimmering split-flap numbers. Years first, followed by days and then hours. Most of the infants he delivered had large numbers and one baby he delivered a month ago had triple digits in the year column. That made Jack smile.

He stared at the baby, her eyes closed, her chest heaving with each deep inhale and waited for the numbers to fade into view.

When they did, Jack frowned. Tears welled in his eyes.

He thought by now he’d be used to this. He thought by now he would be numb to this. But he wasn’t—not when newborns were concerned. He was oddly comforted by the sorrow he felt in these situations. He hoped he wouldn’t lose his humanity to his Insight. He hoped he wouldn’t turn completely cold and unfeeling.

The baby girl, who the parents had named Ellen Renae, had just an hour and some change to live.

Jack wondered what would have become of Ellen Renae. She was this clean slate lying before him, struggling to breathe. If she would have survived, what kind of life would she have had? What wonders would she have seen? What gifts would she have brought to this world?

It didn’t matter. Jack would rather not think about such things.

There’s nothing I can do about it anyway. That was a common refrain.

He wasn’t God. He wasn’t privy to His plan. He just had a small sliver of Insight into it.

Jack didn't want to see his father like this.

Cold.

Still.

Lifeless.

Even if he did look like he was sleeping like his mother said, the sight was still too morbid for him to fathom.

So, he sat in the forward-most pew, picking at his fingers, while people lauded his father.

Loving husband.

Caring Dad.

Excellent craftsman.

The salt of the Earth.

Jack had not spoken often to his father over the years. There was uneasiness there. He spoke even less to his mother, who continued to mourn for a daughter lost so suddenly and unexpectedly.

The service wrapped up quickly and his father was laid to rest in a plot next to Cheeks. Jack found himself staring at her tombstone with sadness more than at the hole where his father's casket was lowered.

At home, they sat at the kitchen table: teenage son and aging mother.

They said nothing.

Such was the way in the Grimm household since Cheeks passed and Jack dropped the news that he could see when she—and others—was going to die.

Don't ask.

Don't tell.

Keep it to yourself.

Jack's mother breached that agreement, moving her aimless stare out the window at the rolling back yard, the grass still brown from the long winter, and onto Jack.

A cigarette burned between her fingers. She always had a cigarette lit.

It startled him, her gaze.

"Did you know?" She asked.

Jack's lower lip quivered. He didn't answer his mother. He didn't have to. Jack knew she saw the answer written on his face and in his tearful eyes.

He thought about telling her the day Cheeks died. He thought about telling his father that he had only a few years to live. But he didn't.

He swallowed it.

Wouldn't matter anyway, he supposed.

Couldn't save Cheeks.

She turned her eyes away from Jack and back to the withered lawn outside. She raised the cigarette to her lips and took a long drag, words, barely a whisper, blowing out of her mouth along with the billowing smoke. "You're a demon."

She probably thought Jack couldn't hear what she had just said.

But he did.

Every carcinogenic word.

Part I

Chapter 2

Questions With a Side of Pancakes

Jack was shaken to consciousness by a hand with thin, bony fingers. As his eyes shot open, a long, angular face hung over him with a jagged-toothed smile.

“Tough one today, buddy?” Lourdes was a master of the obvious, just as he was a master of the operating room as the top surgeon at the Clinic as well as the master of this doctor’s lounge. Always was.

Jack and Lourdes were polar opposites—Jack quiet and reserved; Lourdes loud and brash. Jack thought that’s why they were such good friends.

Jack sat up and rubbed his weary eyes as Lourdes sat next to him, slapped him on the back and clicked on the television. The channels flipped until they stopped on a rerun of *Three’s Company*.

It was the one where Jack Tripper and the girls had a miscommunication that causes hilarity to ensue. That was pretty much every episode, but Lourdes still cackled. He hadn’t grown up in the United States. He was raised in London where they had *Man About the House* when he was a lad. It was the U.K. version of *Three’s Company*, but it was more high-brow than the American fare and Lourdes liked American humor.

“Yes. It was a tough one,” Jack said between laugh tracks. “Lost a baby girl.”

“Oh, bloody hell.” Lourdes barely had an English accent anymore, except when he said *bloody hell*.

“Wanna get shit-faced?” Lourdes added.

That was Lourdes’ answer to everything—excessive inebriation. It usually worked.

“Sure. What the bloody hell.” Jack said, trying to fake a British accent. He was miserable at it. Didn’t have the ear for it.

The pub they frequented was just a block away from the hospital and it very much resembled the Regal Beagle from *Three’s Company*. It was a very nice place to get drunk.

Jack enjoyed heavy drinking every now and then. He discovered that alcohol masked his Insight and gave him a break from knowing everyone’s Moment of Death—M.O.D. as he called it.

He found, on occasion, he liked the respite.

It usually took about five beers for the numbers to fade. It took seven tonight. The beer must be more watered down than usual, he thought.

Lourdes ogled every woman in the bar. Most ignored him. Lourdes was quite ugly. His slicked-back, dark hair was thinning and receding rapidly—he had an impressive widow’s peak. His eyes were big and round and often had dark bags under them caused by his serious sleep deprivation. His teeth were crooked, and were yellowed from his chain smoking.

Lourdes was also a loud drunk—he was loud when he was sober, too—but when he was liquored-up, his decibel level was jet-engine-like. He was also a clumsy drunk. It wasn’t a night out unless he had dropped, or knocked over, two frothy mugs of beer.

“Give this man another pint!” Lourdes yelled. “He had a rough fucking day. He needs it.”

Jack usually stopped at seven beers, but he didn’t this time. He didn’t know why he took the death of Ellen Renae so hard. He had delivered babies before whose timer had even less flips than hers.

On one somber occasion, he delivered a baby that died before a timer even appeared. The boy was born small and sickly thanks to the methamphetamine habit of his mother.

So sad he had died before there was evidence he had lived.

Jack figured he was taking Baby Ellen Renae's death so hard because he was feeling a tad more vulnerable tonight.

It happens.

Restless sleep. Wandering thoughts. Timers ticking away in his full view.

It wore on him.

He needed to kick loose.

The eighth beer turned into a ninth when he caught the sight of a woman sitting at a table in the corner. He wasn't sure how long she had been sitting there, stirring her drink with one of those little, red straws and making eyes at him, but he was glad he noticed now and he was glad he could see no flip-clock grinding down toward zero on her forehead.

It was a beautiful forehead under a flow of blond hair. Her lips were lush and ruby red and her face was perfectly proportioned. That's the measure of beauty. Most people don't realize that is why we think someone attractive and someone else as not. It's the symmetry of the face and the features. The more symmetrical, the more we perceive it to be beautiful.

Lourdes was very asymmetrical.

And this woman was very symmetrical.

And breathtaking. Stunning. A million other adjectives that meant his heart had been captured by her.

Before Jack knew it he was sitting across from her. Lourdes had said something like *what the bloody hell?* before Jack ditched him and strolled over to her, but he couldn't hear him, nor did he care to.

She seemed delighted to have him as company.

"Well, you are bold," she said, still stirring her drink with that skinny, red straw.

"I figured that you could use a little three's company." His words were a bit slurred by the beers he had consumed. "My name is Jack, like Jack Tripper, only it's Jack Grimm."

The woman laughed. It was a flirty giggle. "Well, Jack, my name is Chrissy."

"No! No way!"

"Yes. That's my name."

Jack smiled. It was a big, toothy smile. He hoped his features were symmetrical enough for her. "It's fate then."

Fate. There was that word again.

"Well, I guess so."

Fate had taken them back to his place. He had all the creature comforts.

Plasma television.

An Italian leather section couch that wrapped around his living room.

A mirror-polished stainless steel coffee table with a glass top.

Hardwood floors.

Modern appliances, including an oven that had a touch display; it was like a replicator from Star Trek.

Soft king-size mattress with down pillows.

High ceilings.

Fifteen devices that could connect to the Internet.

And now he had one Chrissy, standing before him, naked, symmetrical.

It was her eyes that he noticed first. They were the bluest he had ever seen, like the water of a pristine lake on cold, cloudless day.

Impossibly blue.

Crazy blue.

Breathtakingly blue.

They had flecks of green in them. They were like tiny emerald islands scattered in the ocean of her eyes Not a lot of them. Just enough to count. Four in the left eye, and seven in the right.

Jack thought it nice to be mesmerized by a feature other than the spinning leaves of a clock on a forehead.

He was thoroughly engrossed with Ursula.

As they sat at a table at The Surely Temple, a diner near campus where all the beatniks and poets and hipsters went to drink coffee and talk about the important issues of the day, Jack stared into those eyes and, for a fleeting moment, could ignore the timer ticking away on her life.

Rolling down from twenty-three hours.

Twenty-three hours? How can that be?

They talked about their goals, their hopes, their dreams. Jack tried to smile through the conversation of the future, the reality of her situation driving deeper into him by the moment, strangling his ability to breath, crushing his heart, squeezing his stomach into knots.

*That feeling waned as they laughed about the professor and his odd way of saying
“Medulla Oblongata.”*

*It was all very normal. They smiled. They flirted. She batted her impossibly long
eyelashes at him and he put his sense of humor and charm on full display.*

All the while Jack’s Insight gnawed at him.

Jack agonized over Ursula’s impending doom.

*It consumed him for the eight hours he should have spent sleeping. Ideas, none of them
good and most of them preposterous, danced in his thoughts.*

He could kidnap her and isolate her from everything and everyone that could harm her.

He could take her to the hospital and plead with the doctors to examine her thoroughly.

*He could tell her everything and hope she had some idea how to stop her march toward
death.*

*All of those ideas were flawed for a simple reason: he had no idea HOW she was going
to die.*

There are a million things that can kill you.

*He could eliminate possibilities based on her young age, but that still left a cornucopia of
dangers that could snatch her life.*

Jack came to a hard conclusion.

He had to tell her the truth.

With one hour to go on Ursula's timer, they met again for coffee at The Surely Temple. He tried to listen to what she had to say, but he was distracted by those ultramarine eyes and her ground-zero, nuclear smile.

As the timer drained to forty-seven minutes, he wondered again how it was supposed to happen.

Aneurysm?

Allergic reaction?

Choking?

Thrombosis?

There were so many things, so many potential causes.

The world was a dangerous place. He knew that from the amount of people who had precious few clicks remaining on their flip-clock displays. He wondered what was the point of a girl like her dying so young?

Jack's heart rate increased. His palms were sweaty. His breath short.

Ursula's smile vanished. A narrowing of those spellbinding eyes quickly followed.

"What's wrong?" She asked.

Blaring silence.

"Jack, something is wrong," she said, reaching her hand out to meet his at the center of the table.

An emotion-packed thirty seconds passed.

They held eye contact for another long second before Jack finally said, "You're going to die—in thirteen minutes."

Her concern melted into fear and then morphed into anger. Her eyes, once so blue and beautiful, had the red fire of contempt in them.

“This isn’t funny,” she said as she pushed herself away from the table and stood.

Jack noted her cup of coffee was still half-full and her life nearly empty.

Ursula beat a rage-filled path toward the exit and Jack followed, tugging on her purple jacket in an attempt to prevent her from leaving.

“I know you think I’m crazy,” Jack pleaded, tugging again on Ursula’s coat to spin her around to face him. “But I am telling the truth. Since I was ten and my sister died, I can tell when people around me are going to die. I can tell you are going to die in twelve minutes.” The leaves clicked down to eleven. “Eleven minutes.”

Ursula yanked her arm away and scolded him. “Don’t touch me!”

A hush fell. People in the diner, yanked from their conversations by the unfolding scene, stared quietly at them. Jack didn’t like attention and he was getting far too much of it now.

It appeared Ursula didn’t much like the gazes from the patrons, either. She began her brisk walk toward the exit again. Jack followed closely behind, pleading as he did. “Please, please, please stop. I think I can save you.”

They hit the brisk winter air. Jack was taken aback by the frigid staleness of it.

His teeth began to chatter. The wind cut through him. It was snowing, even though just moments before the sun had been shining.

Ursula stood on the corner and seethed. Jack thought it a good sign she hadn’t yet bolted across the street to get away from him.

She had ten minutes left.

“I think I can save you,” Jack repeated. “I want to try to save you.”

Ursula turned her head quickly to face him. Her eyes were large. There was fear in them. He could see her mind churning, calculating the odds of Jack being correct.

Ursula, though, balked at such a notion. “Even if you can see when I’m going to die, what’s the point? What can you do in ...”

“Nine minutes.”

Ursula’s laugh had a trace of mockery in it. “Oh, okay, nine minutes? What can you do? You have no idea how I am going to die or if you can even stop it.”

Ursula backpedaled into the street. Visibility was near zero and snow lashed at Jack’s face. The icy pellets seemed to come down sideways.

Jack reached out and grabbed Ursula’s coat, pulling her back toward him onto the sidewalk just as a Geo Prism sped past, its right tires clipping the curb where Ursula had been standing.

He twirled her around to look at her, expecting to see the timer reset to a number that gave her a long, long life. Instead, it read eight minutes.

Eight minutes?

Jack couldn’t figure out why. He had saved her from the speeding Geo Prism. It would have surely hit her.

Killed her.

But it didn’t. His mind rolled through panicked thoughts.

Why is her death still eminent?

Why was her clock not reset?

Why was this happening?

Only God knows.

She smiled at him, her hand touching his cold, red cheeks. The wind gusted and thrashed her hair which was black as a moonless night. “You can’t be afraid to live,” she said. “Or you’re already dead.”

Jack heard the screams as “The Surely Temple” sign came loose, the rusted bolts that fastened it to the building front no longer able to withstand the whipping wind. He looked back at the sign, which appeared to move in slow motion, falling and twisting and then lifting slightly in another gust. His instinct was to duck and that’s what he did. He felt the scarp edge of the metal sign scrape his shoulder.

Once he looked back up, Ursula toppled to the pavement. The corner of the sign had clipped the side of her head, near her temple.

Ursula lay on the sidewalk, blood pouring from the wound. Jack cupped her head in his hands and looked down at her wide, shocked eyes.

One was the bluest he had ever seen.

Impossibly blue.

Crazy blue.

The other was filling red with blood.

He held her there, waiting for the ambulance to arrive, but he knew it would be too late. Her lips, turning purple, moved slowly. She was trying to tell him something and he lowered his ear inches from her mouth.

He felt a cold hand on the back of his neck. It squeezed, the nails digging into his skin.

Her shallow breaths were hot on his ear as she said, “You can’t cheat death.”

Jack lifted his head. Warm tears streamed down his cold face.

The water was thick in his eyes. It obscured his vision.

He blinked.

Just in time to see her clock strike zero.

Jack Grimm forced his eyes open. The lids felt like anvils. His head already throbbed.

Jack hated when he suffered from veisalgia. He suffered from it quite a bit in medical school and found himself with a very nasty case of it now. It was the first medical term he learned. Veisalgia: a fancy way of saying hangover.

He had a planet-sized one now.

He rolled over to find Chrissy gone, but he could hear her clanking about in the kitchen.

He licked his dry lips. His teeth felt filmy. He took a whiff of his underarms. He stunk of sex sweat.

Jack hadn't planned on this. He hadn't much recollection of the night before, but he was sure it was quite pleasant.

Soon, though, he would have to face the part he dreaded.

His Insight had surely returned.

He hoped Chrissy's timer was a healthy one.

"Do you like pancakes?" He heard her yell as he slipped on his boxers, a Cleveland Indians T-shirt and threw a robe over his shoulders.

Her voice boomed again. "Probably a dumb question, huh, since I found pancake mix? A lot of it, too. I assume you like pancakes if you have pancake mix. I'm rambling. I'm sorry. I ramble."

Jack pushed his hands through his crop of dusky hair. He tried to bring to it some semblance of order, and then splashed water on his face, which was rough with a fresh growth of whiskers.

Once he was comfortable enough with his rough appearance, he padded his bare feet down the hallway and into the kitchen. Chrissy's back was to him, her blond hair pulled into a ponytail, his old, blue robe draped over her shoulders. He saw a flying elbow as she mixed the batter in a bowl.

He dreaded for her to turn around.

"You didn't have to make breakfast." Jack said politely.

"I wanted to. Go wash up. It'll be ready soon."

That sounded good to Jack. His stomach rumbled.

The shower was soothing to his pounding head. He relished the feeling of the warm water rolling down his face. It was invigorating.

His damp feet left prints on the hardwood floor as he walked toward the kitchen. He buttoned his crisp, sky-blue oxford shirt and rolled up the sleeves along the way. Chrissy sat at the table, her back to him, scooping up pancakes and placing them on his plate.

"Again, thanks for making breakfast. You didn't have to do that." Jack sat down across from Chrissy, grabbed the syrup and bathed his pancakes in it.

He liked a lot of syrup. He used so much that Lourdes once quipped, *would you like some bloody pancakes with your syrup?*

Jack cut them with a knife and took a large bite. He was always hungry the morning after heavy drinking.

He hadn't looked up at Chrissy yet. He feared it. He always feared seeing someone's clock for the first time, and he particularly feared it in situations like this—not that he found himself in situations like this all that often.

Still, it was awkward.

“Are you okay?” Jack heard her ask. “You haven't looked at me. Are you ... ashamed of what happened last night? Do you regret it? I'm sorry if you are uncomfortable. I can leave. Oh, I'm rambling again.”

“No. No. You did nothing wrong. It's me. I'm ...” Jack looked up and saw her for the first time without the cloud of alcohol annulling his Insight, blotting out her fate. She looked even more beautiful with all his faculties in order—very symmetrical indeed.

But that's not what gave him great pause. Her stunning features were not what made his heart leap in his chest and his breath cease.

There was no timer. No clock with a leaf flipping with a click. No countdown.

Nothing but a pretty forehead.