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Author of Black Creek Crossing



Perfect Nightmare

A Novel

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SAUL



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PROLOGUE

I prowled through their house for a long time last night before I finally did what I knew I had to do.

I loved the house the first time I saw it—loved it almost as much as I loved the girl who lived there. And last night it was as perfect as it has ever been.

It was the candlelight, I think.

I remember the house being candlelit the first time I saw it—indeed, I think perhaps it was the candlelight itself that drew me to it.

Like a moth being drawn to a flame?

It's a cliché, I know, but didn't someone once say that a cliché is only a cliché because it's true?

And the candlelight did mesmerize me, almost as much as the girl's face.

Her face, and her body.

The first time I remember being in the house, the candles were lit. The family was having some kind of a party.

A birthday?

I don't know.

Now I shall never know.

It doesn't matter that I shall never know, of course, just as it never mattered that I didn't know her age.

x John Saul

All I know is that she was perfect, that I knew I loved her from the moment I saw the candlelight flickering on her face, making her flesh glow as if with an inner light.

A light I have never known.

Could that be why the candles fascinated me? Because of their strange, flickering light that warms as much as it illuminates?

I don't know.

Nor do I care, if I am going to be absolutely honest about it. All I know is that the first time I saw the house it was glowing with candlelight, and her beautiful young face radiated even more heat than the candles, and I was drawn to that heat.

After that first night, I came back to the house as often as I could, slipping into it at night and lighting the candles—just enough for me to make my way around. And the first time I slipped into her room, feeling my way through the darkness of the corridor, moving so silently I could hear my own heart beating—but nothing else—I knew.

I knew she was mine.

She, you see, loved candles as much as I do.

Her room was filled with them. She had them on her dresser and on the table by her chair, and on her desk and on the nightstand by her bed.

Most of them were out, of course, but there was one still burning.

I remember it even now, remember how I stood at her door, which I had opened just far enough to peep inside, and found myself gazing at a flame.

A flame that drew me toward her even from that very first moment.

I slipped into the room, closing the door so silently

there wasn't even the softest click to betray my presence. Inside the room—her room—an odd sensation came over me. It was as if I was floating, drifting over the thick rug on the floor, my feet not even touching it.

When I was close by her bed, I looked down and beheld her perfect beauty in the light of that single candle, and knew that we belonged together.

I didn't touch her that night. No, I was content merely to hover above her, gazing down on her youth and innocence.

It was a long time before I finally touched her. I don't know how long.

And she didn't mind.

I know she didn't, for she lay still and let my fingers trace her soft contours, let my lips brush hers.

So perfect . . . so very perfect.

I thought it would stay that way forever, that we would share our perfect love, but then one night she pushed me away.

Just like the other one had.

And I knew what I had to do.

I even knew it had to be last night.

Last night, after all, was Christmas Eve.

I'd seen the house once before on Christmas Eve, as I lurked hidden in the shadows, watching the candles being lit one by one, each of them pushing the cold and darkness a little farther away, until the entire house was suffused with a flickering golden light.

Even the Christmas tree, standing in front of the great picture window that overlooked the lake, was aflame with candles, each set in its own holder, clipped to the very ends of the branches so no wick had a twig above it.

It was a beautiful sight, that tree, and last night I lit it once more.

They had all gone to bed by then, of course, and I was alone downstairs.

I only lit that one room, but I lit every candle in it. The ones in the sconces on the walls, and the ones in the uplifted hands of the pair of brass figures—they look oddly Russian, though I don't know why—that stand on the mahogany game table. I even lit the six tapers in the three pairs of sterling silver candlesticks atop the glass-fronted bookcase that fills the wall opposite the picture window.

Then I lit the tree.

For a long time—I don't know how long—I gazed at the tree, knowing it would be the last time I saw it.

Knowing it would be the last time I saw this house.

Then I carefully extinguished every candle I had lit and went upstairs.

As always, she had a single candle lit by her bed, and I gazed at it for a long time, too.

It, and the perfect face it was illuminating.

Her hair was spread around her face like a halo, glowing in the soft light of the candle's flame, and as I beheld her innocence, I wanted to touch it one last time.

Touch *her* one last time.

I didn't touch her, though. No, not last night.

Last night I did what I knew I had to do, and as the candle by her bed burned low, I lit the dozen others that she had in her room.

With each match I struck, with each wick I lit, the room grew brighter, washing away the shadows that concealed me.

It didn't matter, though, for after tonight I would never come back here.

Never see this perfect place—this perfect child—this perfect family—again.

When all the candles were blazing, I turned to look one last time on the girl.

She was smiling, content in her sleep.

Did dreams of Christmas morning dance in her head?
I shall never know.

As I stood near the door, a slight breeze came through the window I had opened only a moment before.

A breeze that moved the light lace curtain just close enough to the flame of one of the candles so that it caught.

Caught, as my breath caught in my throat.

The flame on the curtain seemed to die away in an instant, fading to nothing but a glowing ember, but then another gust of air came through the window, and the fading ember leaped back to life.

Flames climbed up the lace toward the ceiling like a great glittering spider racing up its web. A second later the flames had jumped the gap to the curtain on the other side of the window.

Now the wallpaper was beginning to burn, and I knew it was time for me to go.

I beheld the face of the girl one more time.

"It's all right," I whispered. "We'll be together again someday soon."

I know she heard me, for I saw a smile cross her lips.

I turned away and left before she could awaken.

As I think about it now, I know it wasn't that I didn't want her to awaken and see me—or see what I had done—that made me leave so quickly.

No, it was something else.

I simply didn't want to hear her scream.

CHAPTER ONE

Kara Marshall glanced surreptitiously at her watch and wondered if there was any way—any *tactful* way—to get Claire Sollinger to eat just a little faster. But of course there wasn't; everyone in Camden Green knew that if you had lunch with Claire, it was going to be at least a two-hour event. Not that Kara minded. She and Claire had known each other ever since Claire had turned up as a volunteer for her project to restore the old town square to the park it had been before succumbing to the “modernization” of the post-World War II era when Camden Green, along with a dozen other towns along the north shore of Long Island, had decided to pin their future to the automobile and ripped out the old square in favor of a parking lot. The plan hadn't worked: ten years after the lot went in, so did the mall on the southern edge of town, and parking lot or not, Camden Green's downtown had gone the way of dozens of others. At least it had until she and a few of her friends decided to change things, and organized a committee to rebuild the square in an effort to revitalize the town.

Claire Shields Sollinger had shown up at that first

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meeting. A silence fell over the room when she walked in, for no one expected anyone from the huge mansions in the Flinders Beach area along the shore to come to the meeting.

Give money, yes. But not come to the meetings, let alone do any actual work.

But there Claire had been, and after looking around at the shocked faces, she'd raised a sardonic eyebrow and spoken directly to Kara. "It seems my husband has traded me in for his secretary, which means I have a lot of time on my hands. I'm a good gardener, and I don't mind getting my hands dirty. So how can I help?" By directly confirming the gossip that had been running through the town for weeks, she utterly disarmed everyone in the room, and she'd proven as good as her word, showing up at every work party in the square, helping Kara find (and paying for) a landscape architect to re-create the square as it had looked decades earlier, and generally making herself useful. Except that the lunches tended to drag on, and even after ten years, neither Kara nor anyone else had worked up the courage to tell Claire Shields Sollinger that they had other things they needed to do.

Now Claire's head was cocked and she was frowning, and Kara knew she'd been caught glancing at her watch. "I'm keeping you," Claire said, making it a statement rather than a question. As Kara searched for an answer that wouldn't be offensive, Claire signaled the waiter for the check. "Haven't we known each other long enough for you to tell me when I'm dragging lunch on too long, Kara?"

"You're not—" Kara began, but Claire cut her off.

“Of course I am—I always do. After all, it’s not like I have much else to do, do I? And it’s all your fault, you know.”

“My fault?” Kara echoed. “Claire, what are you talking about?”

“Your committees,” Claire said as she dropped her credit card on the waiter’s tray without so much as a glance at the check. “You haven’t formed a new one in months, and I have to tell you, I’m getting bored. And when I get bored, I keep everyone at lunch too long.”

Kara took a deep breath, deciding she might as well come clean with Claire now, rather than put it off any longer. “Well, I’m afraid you’re going to have to start organizing things yourself, then. I have an appointment with a real estate agent.”

Claire’s eyes widened. “You’re moving?”

“To the city. Steve and I just don’t have enough time together, and—” Kara cut herself off, remembering the circumstances a decade ago that had left Claire Sollinger with too much time for lunch.

“And you don’t want your marriage to end the way mine did,” Claire finished for her. “Well, we’ll miss you. At least I will.”

Kara tilted her head. “That’s it? Not going to try to talk me out of it?”

Claire shook her head. “Not after what happened to me. If you love Steve—which I know you do—you need to be with him. At least, if he wants to be with you, which I assume he still does. Unlike Phillip Sollinger.” The waiter returned with Claire’s credit card, and she added a generous tip and signed the voucher, still without checking the figures. “What about Lindsay?” she said as she stood and picked up her purse.

"She'll get used to the idea," Kara replied. They left the restaurant and stepped out into the bright spring afternoon. "She'll have to."

"Not necessarily," Claire said as they walked to the parking lot tucked well out of sight a block south of the village, which, after a decade of ministrations by Kara Marshall, Claire Sollinger, and a dozen other women, now looked much as it had a century earlier. The last trace of "modernism" had vanished last year when the electric street lamps were replaced with replicas of the old gas fixtures. "At Lindsay's age, a year is a long time, especially when it's your senior year. I remember when Chrissie—"

Now it was Claire who fell silent, but Kara didn't finish her thought, as Claire had finished her own a few minutes ago. It had only been a few months since her niece died in a fire at the Shields's ski cabin in Vermont, and Claire still found it difficult to talk about it. "I'm going to miss you," Claire sighed, just as the silence seemed to stretch on too long. "Anyone else would have tried to find the right thing to say when there is no right thing to say." As they came to their cars, Claire laid a hand on Kara's arm. "If I can help you out with anything, just call, all right?"

"Don't you think I've called you enough over the last ten years?"

"That was for the 'common good,' " Claire replied, emphasizing the last two words just enough to make both women smile. "This is for you. Anything you need, you just call. Just keeping your house straight so it can be shown will be a full-time job, and since I hire people to take care of my own house, I might as well help take care of yours. As long as it's not windows."

"I'll keep that in mind," Kara said. "And thanks." She got into the car, started the engine, and pulled out of the lot, but instead of turning left on the most direct route home, she found herself turning right and driving through the streets of the town she'd lived in for so many years.

The town she'd help to make what it was today.

The trees were leafing out, and the flowers in the square were coming into bloom. In another month the tourists who had begun discovering Camden Green over the last few years would begin to wander around the street that no longer looked like just another Long Island town full of strip malls and shopping centers, but more like the main street of one of the small New England villages in rural Vermont or New Hampshire that time seemed to have forgotten. In a few years, perhaps, it would become overrun with tourists, and be well on its way to being ruined again. But for right now, it was exactly what Kara had always wanted it to be.

A charming little town, where everyone got along with everyone else, the kids didn't have drug problems, and the streets were safe at night.

The kind of small town that Ronald Reagan had always talked about, but hardly existed anywhere at all.

And now she was going to have to leave it.

And move to the city.

Kara hated the whole idea of it. Hated having to sell her house, hated having to find an apartment, hated the thought of moving to the city.

But she knew it had to be done, so she would do it.

She and Lindsay both.

And the family would survive.

* * *

Lindsay Marshall did her best to control the anger that had been building in her since breakfast, but even so, she jerked open her locker to throw her books inside, then slammed it loudly. Her parents were ruining her life, and until she was eighteen and out of school, she had to do what they wanted her to do.

But it wasn't fair.

How could her mother have been so casual about it? "I'm meeting with an agent today," she'd said, like it was no big deal. "Your father and I are thinking of selling the house and moving to the city."

Lindsay had stared at her mother in openmouthed astonishment. "Just before my senior year?"

"It'll be fine," her mother said.

It'll be fine? *It'll be fine?* Lindsay hadn't been able to think of anything else all day. The phrase kept going through her head and she couldn't stop it.

It'll be fine. Life as she knew it was about to be ripped out from underneath her, and no matter what her mother said, it would *not* be fine.

Now she sat on the bench in the locker room, adjusting her sports bra and putting on her white socks and Nikes, unable even to listen to the rest of the girls. Their chatter usually cheered her up, but today it seemed totally frivolous in the face of the disaster that had struck at breakfast.

"Hey, Linds." Dawn D'Angelo opened the locker next to hers, threw her backpack inside, and pulled out her practice clothes. Dawn's big chestnut eyes—the same color as her long wavy hair—were a perfect contrast to Lindsay's blue eyes and blond hair. But though the two

girls had opposite coloring, that was the end of their differences—they'd been best friends since kindergarten.

"Hey," Lindsay sighed, making no attempt to mask her mood from Dawn.

One of Dawn's brows lifted. "What's up with you? You feeling all right?"

"I'm okay."

Dawn looked doubtful. "I hope it isn't the flu. My brother's got it. He puked all last night."

"Not the flu," Lindsay said as she finished lacing up her shoes. The coach's whistle blew from the gym, and she lifted herself off the bench to follow the rest of the cheerleaders out of the locker room, eager to work off some of her anger.

The varsity squad was just back from Florida, where they'd come in second in the regional championships held at Daytona. Until this morning, Lindsay had dreamed of being on that team next year.

Now that was simply not going to happen.

Inside her head, the endlessly repeating chorus of *It'll be fine* turned into *What's the use?* and her anger dissolved into hopelessness. In another two weeks the graduating cheerleaders would choose next year's squad and—most important—name the head cheerleader, but what did it matter now? Even if she performed perfectly today, with the entire varsity squad watching, it wouldn't matter. Her dream of trading in her black JV uniform for the red varsity uniform had been thoroughly crushed at breakfast this morning.

Her mother had been a cheerleader—she should understand how important this was! How could she have been so casual about it? Like it just didn't matter?

Lindsay tried to concentrate on the exercises, but kept

losing count and getting off rhythm. Even worse, she was finding it impossible to finish with the grand gesture and big smile that was as important as the stunts themselves. *Smile, girls*, the coach always said. *This isn't just a cheer-leading practice, it's smile practice, too!*

Keeping the coach's words firmly in her mind, Lindsay jogged in place, did her best to smile, and tried to find some energy as she waited for her turn to execute the simple flip they always used as a warm-up.

Then it was time. Lindsay smiled, took a deep breath, skipped a couple of steps to get her footing, took a short run, threw her hands down on the mat, and began a perfect flip.

And the worst possible thing happened. Just as she was upside down, one elbow crumpled and she collapsed, her shoulder and then her bottom smashing hard onto the mat.

Fire flooded her wrist.

The coach and Dawn were on her in an instant, helping her up.

"I'm okay," Lindsay insisted, horrified that the varsity cheerleaders had seen her screw up a simple flip.

Then, unable to control her emotions any longer, she started to cry.

Sharon Spandler, the coach, helped her up and walked her off the mat. "Okay, girls," she called back as she led Lindsay toward the locker room. "Run through them one more time, then do two sets of backflips. Consuela, you're in charge."

In the locker room, Lindsay took a drink of water and blew her nose. The coach came out of her office with tape and scissors, and they sat facing each other on the

bench. The coach gently took hold of her wrist and bent it slightly. "Hurt?"

Lindsay shook her head.

"Just a sprain, then." As she began to wrap the wrist with tape, Sharon eyed Lindsay carefully. "Everything okay with you?"

Lindsay nodded, but the coach could see the lack of conviction in her eyes and tried again. "Boyfriend troubles? Things okay at home?"

"Everything's fine. I'm just not feeling real good. I probably shouldn't even have come to practice."

The coach finished wrapping the wrist, then looked her square in the face. "I'll tell the girls you're sick." Then, thinking she knew what Lindsay was worried about, she said, "A simple fall shouldn't affect the vote. Don't worry."

Lindsay forced a wan smile. What would it matter if it did affect the vote? She wouldn't be back next year anyway. Someone else would be living her dream. The thought brought the hot lump up her throat all over again, but she managed to swallow it. "Thanks," she said.

"Just take it easy," Sharon said. "Rest up."

Lindsay nodded, then wiped her eyes on her soggy tissue.

A few minutes later Dawn D'Angelo came in from the gym, grabbed some toilet paper from one of the stalls, and sat down in the same place the coach had. Dawn stuffed the wad of paper into Lindsay's hand. "Okay, enough," she said. "What's going on?"

Lindsay started to cry again. "We're moving to Manhattan."

Dawn stared at her in utter incomprehension. "What?"

"Mom says we have to move to the city to be closer to