



*Signs of Life*

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John Howard

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **A STRANGE OBSESSION**

Chip Sonderman was a cutter. He tried to hide it, but everyone knew it. He would always come to school with new Band-aids plastered on his skin in some obscure place. I couldn't help but wonder if it was an accident. Maybe something went wrong. Maybe he was just cutting himself and he went too far. Maybe he was just too embarrassed to call for help. So he just lied there and bled to death. I guess we would never know. But for some reason, it disturbed me. It consumed me. I was obsessed with this thing and I couldn't figure out why. I didn't even know him. Not really. I mean, I had him in a couple of my classes. He even came over to my house once with Shelly Frazier to work on some project where we had to make a poster explaining a different culture, but he never came over again. I'd say 'hi' to him in the halls sometimes, but he usually didn't say anything back. He didn't even smile. Not much. I think once I saw him smile. One day in Biology class while we were dissecting frogs Brad Geizler started telling the teacher about how his pet tarantula got loose and ended up in his sister's pants the next morning and I glanced over in his direction to see, to my dismay, what appeared to be the subtlest laugh. Outside of that it was all serious.

I often wondered what he thought about. He was always so quiet. He seemed to stare off into space a lot. As soon as the school bell rang he would go straight home. I would see him walking sometimes. I talked to him a couple times. At least I tried, but he usually just shrugged or nodded. I could tell he didn't really want me there, so eventually I left. Thinking back it pains me a little. Maybe I could have tried harder to get to know him. Maybe underneath that shy and awkward exterior was another

teenager just like me, worrying that his face would break out the day before the dance, anxious over the upcoming test in Mr. Peterson's class, excited about the Highland County Fair coming to town, probably the biggest social event that the little town of Millview would see all year. But then, I imagine Chip Sonderman was too shy and backward to go to the dance or the fair. I don't recall ever seeing him at either one. He just kind of kept to himself.

I don't know what it was, but his death had me wrapped up in some strange world of confusion. I mean, we're teenagers. We don't die. We aren't suppose to die. We're strong and adaptable and invincible. And the fact that we were both teenagers wasn't the only thing that connected us. We were part of the same school. It was our little world. Our little time. Somehow the high school walls in which we were imprisoned for the next four years were supposed to wrap us up and keep us safe. Somehow. Oh, our school had its problems like any school, but death... I'd never known of anyone who had died. Not this young.

The idea of Chips death somehow challenged my security. It seemed to somehow cut through the walls of my safe little world with the sharp sting of the blade. Now rumors spun through the halls. People whispered casually about the event. As I walked down the hall of our little school, student's hands were cupped beside ears. I don't understand just what it is, but something about the topic of death seems to make people whisper. The topic itself seems somehow, taboo. Like were just not supposed to talk about it. But I wanted to talk about it. I wanted to scream about it. I didn't understand it. I didn't understand how death could reach its hand into our safe little world at Millview High School in our quiet little rural town in Millview, Illinois. But whenever I tried to talk about it, my words were met with hushes and downhill glances. It seemed that people

were suddenly fascinated with their shoes every time I opened my mouth about the subject. So I stopped talking. I stopped asking questions, but the silence burned within me. I hoped that the strange curiosity would just die out, but the funeral got it started up again.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **THE FUNERAL**

The pale color of his face disturbed me as I stared into the casket. They tried to color his skin, blushing his cheeks with makeup to make him look more natural, but it wasn't the same. It wasn't real. You could just tell that something was missing. Something like when someone sleeps with their eyes open and they just have that blank stare but you can tell that the lights are out. His eyes were closed. All you could see was a limp body there and people said it looked like he was just sleeping peacefully, but it wasn't like he was sleeping. Not to me. To me it was different than sleep. It was empty. It was lifeless. He laid there like a mannequin. There was no heat or life radiating from his body. There was no aura. I couldn't feel that sense that he was alive. It was cold. Vacant. Even a little spooky.

"Did you know him well?" A voice coming from behind startled me. I hadn't realized someone was behind me as I stared into the casket. I had tried to wait until everyone had stopped lingering before I gathered up the courage to step up and glance into the wooden prison that would forever enclose the body of Chip Sonderman. I suddenly felt a little embarrassed.

"Not really," I said squeamishly, then dismissed myself as the woman watched me walk away with a sympathetic look.

"It was a lovely service, Pastor Jake," I heard a voice say.

Pastor Jake Williams wasn't your usual pastor. He was a youth pastor, more hip than most of your older pastors. He had a bright smile and a cheerful disposition. Even today in the midst of the tragedy he looked meditative, but pleasantly so. He looked serious, but not somber.

As I watched the pastor make his rounds, I wondered if I should even be here. I felt a little guilty. I'm sure I looked as awkward as I felt. I noticed other kids from school, but no one really talked. I would occasionally make momentary eye contact with someone from school, but either they would look away or I would, hoping we didn't notice each other noticing each other. The whole thing was too weird.

Most of us were just there because of our parents. Chip's parents occasionally attended our little Methodist church and since it was such a small community, many of the parents were casually acquainted with the Sondermans and came out of sympathy. I think several of the students just came out of loyalty. Out of that sense of school spirit. We were a rather small high school and Chip was like one of those distant family members who you almost never actually see or talk to, but are part of the family anyway. One of those family members you send Christmas or birthday cards to every year out of a sense of obligation, or mysteriously get invitations to weddings and hear yourself saying things like, "Why, I can't believe little Franklin is getting married. What do you know about that?" School spirit.

It was awkward all the same. I was pleased to see Auriella there. At least I didn't have to play peek-a-boo with her. As soon as I spotted her, she waved and rushed over to me.

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