

Sydney Logan

Lessons Learned



Advanced Reader Copy

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Bible verses were taken from the King James Version of the Bible. Macbeth by William Shakespeare

Annabel Lee by Edgar Allan Poe, written in 1849 "Amazing Grace" by John Newton

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Prologue



Voices roar through the high school cafeteria while students navigate their way to the tables. The cliques are easily spotted: the jocks, the geeks, the beauty queens, the slackers . . .

Where will he sit today?

Despite the fact he's a handsome and impeccably dressed young man, he fades into the background. Knowing it's pointless, the girls don't bother to look his way, and the guys deliberately avoid his eyes.

He grips his tray tightly and heads toward the corner table with the rest of the outcasts. They nod hello, but that's the end of any real attempt at conversation. It's an unspoken rule of sorts. This is their refuge—a tiny bit of sanctuary in the hell that is public high school—and they're content to sit in peace.

He takes a seat, and I can see the exhaustion on his face. It's not a weariness that comes from too many sleepless nights. This is a bone-tired fatigue no seventeen-year-old kid should ever feel.

He's giving in.

Giving up.

In my peripheral vision, I see a senior stalk into the cafeteria. He's tall,

with deep brown eyes and jet-black hair that won't stay in place. He's good looking, popular, and a little conceited, thanks to his father's wealth and status.

He has a reputation to uphold.

Rumors to squash.

A score to settle.

He pulls the silver gun out of his jacket pocket. Amid the chaos, no

one notices. I notice.

I try to run, but I'm frozen in place.

I try to scream, but there's no sound.

The first shot rings out, and suddenly, everyone's on the cold tile. Tears, prayers, screams.

Another shot, and for some reason, I'm the only one who can't move.

Who can't scream. Who can't do anything but watch as the young man's body slumps over his tray.

Finally, I find my voice and scream his name.

Chapter 1



The piercing chime of my phone jerked me awake. Disoriented and shaking, I grabbed my cell and struggled to focus on the screen.

Congratulations, Sarah. You slept a whole three hours.

Falling asleep had been difficult. My restlessness could easily be blamed on yesterday's long drive or spending the night in a new place, but I hadn't slept well in months, so my fitful sleep wasn't all that surprising.

However, I could do without the nightmares.

It was nearly three in the morning when I'd finally arrived in Sycamore Falls. Exhausted from the drive, I'd collapsed on the couch, but sleeping proved impossible. It was just too quiet. I'd grown accustomed to noisy neighbors and blasting car horns.

A change of scenery could be exactly what I need, my therapist had told me.

Sycamore Falls was definitely a change in scenery.

Stiff and sore from the uncomfortable couch, I groaned as I struggled to sit up. My body trembled when my bare feet hit the hardwood floor. I'd forgotten how cold this house could be, even in the summer, but anything with long sleeves would be in a box, and all the boxes were arranged in a chaotic mess in my living room.

Maybe some sunshine will warm me up.

I wrapped my blanket around me and circled the maze of boxes before shuffling toward the kitchen. It was neat and tidy as ever, with its faded yellow wallpaper. Grandma Grace had always loved wildflowers, and I smiled as I gazed at the collection of daisy canisters lining the wall next to the sink. Mom had been a terrible cook, so grandma had taken it upon herself to teach me. Baking was my favorite, and we'd spent countless nights in this kitchen with my apron covered in flour. Grandma had been fine with making a mess—as long as I cleaned it up—and that freedom had led to many honest discussions throughout the years.

“Sycamore Falls has its issues,” Grandma had told me one autumn day while teaching me how to make fried apple pies. “We’re too sheltered from the rest of the world. Sometimes that’s a good thing. Sometimes it isn’t. The world can be a scary place. It’s good to know you have a safe place to come home to when the world gets a little crazy. You’re one of the lucky ones, Sarah. You will always have a home here. Remember that.”

I remember.

I opened the front door and was instantly greeted with cool morning air. Eager to see the house in the daylight, I gingerly walked down the steps and onto the sidewalk. Thankfully, Mr. Johnson had hired someone to mow the grass before I arrived, which allowed me to mark one thing off my to-do list.

As I gazed up at the house, I could see my list would be long.

Growing up, I'd thought my grandmother's home was the most beautiful in Sycamore Falls. Majestic and blue with its white shutters and wrap-around porch, it was the place I'd always felt the most comfortable and safe.

Time hadn't been kind to the house, and that was my fault. Mr. Johnson had done his best, but a house needs tender loving care, and its last two years

without an occupant had been rough on the place. The chipped siding needed a coat of paint, the flowerbeds resembled a jungle, and some of the shingles needed to be replaced, but none of that mattered.

I felt a small sense of satisfaction and breathed a sigh of relief. I was safe. I was home.



“Tell me you’re joking. There can’t be only fifteen hundred people in that town.”

The dilapidated city sign proudly displaying the town’s population passed my window in a blur.

“I didn’t say fifteen hundred. I said fourteen hundred ninety-nine.”

I felt a little guilty. After all, some poor soul was going to have to change the sign. Then again, with a town boasting the highest unemployment rate in the state, someone could probably use the work.

“I still don’t understand why you moved back,” Monica said. “You’ve never wanted to return to your hometown.”

“I want to teach in a small town.”

“Sarah, there are small towns just outside of Memphis.”

“I want to teach here.”

Monica’s voice became a whisper. “Because it’s safe?”

“Because it’s home.”

It was a simple answer and so much easier than the truth.

After promising to call tomorrow, I tossed my cell onto the passenger

seat and gazed at the highway. Monica was my best friend, but she couldn’t understand my turmoil. Granted, she’d stood by my side through it all, but she wasn’t the one consumed with memories and needing a fresh start.

She couldn’t possibly understand.

Breathing deeply, I flexed my fingers around the steering wheel and tried to concentrate on the scenery. The two-lane highway leading into town was surrounded by nothing but countryside and brimming with wildflowers. As I crept closer to the city limits, the mountain range became visible, standing tall and proud and unbelievably green.

I reached for the radio dial and pressed a button in search of the local station. I grinned when John Cooper's gravelly voice filled the air. The man had to be in his sixties by now, and his tired tone reflected those years. Coop had been on the air every weekday afternoon since I'd been a kid. He hadn't been very popular with the teens because he'd played oldies instead of anything remotely current. When his raspy voice introduced a George Jones song, I smiled.

It was just further proof that very little changed in Sycamore Falls.



“Sarah Bray, is that you?”

It was only the eighth time I'd heard those words in the past hour, but

who was counting?

Sighing softly, I closed the freezer door and dropped the ice cream into

my grocery cart. When I turned around, I was greeted with the pearly white smile of Shellie Stevens.

“It is you!” Shellie clapped her hands, reminding me of the regional basketball game when she had fallen from the top of the cheerleading pyramid, landing face first onto the gymnasium floor. I vividly recalled the blood and her horrified expression when she realized her two front teeth had been broken.

But that was a long time ago, and it would probably be impolite to mention it now.

“Hi, Shellie. How are you?”

“I heard you were back in town. Teaching at the high school, I hear.” “Yes, I

am.”

“I’m the cheerleading coach.” She smoothed her hair with her palm. It was still long and blond and straight out of the bottle. “Are you a teacher, too?”

“Nope, I’m a dental hygienist over in Winslow.” How ironic.

“You don’t have to teach to be a coach,” she explained. In small towns, it was sometimes hard to find good coaches. It was even harder to keep them here.

I smiled. “Well, I’m sure you’re a wonderful cheer coach.”

“You’ll make the second new teacher this school year. One just recently moved here from New York to take Mr. Franklin’s place,” Shellie said as she followed me down the produce aisle.

Charles Franklin had been my American history teacher my sophomore year. His was the only class besides English I’d truly enjoyed.

“Did he retire?”

“He suffered a stroke and passed away in March.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.”

“We miss him.” Then, her face brightened. “But wait until you see the

new teacher. He’s single and so handsome. Rumor has it he was in the middle of some big scandal up North and moved to the mountains to make a fresh start. Kind of like you, actually.”

The people in Sycamore Falls probably knew as much about his “scandal” as they knew about mine, but that wouldn’t stop them from gossiping. I wondered if the poor guy had any idea what he was getting himself into by moving to a small town.

After exchanging phone numbers, Shellie headed for the checkout while I grabbed what I needed and dodged other friendly faces. It was useless. Pastor Martin caught me in the deli and invited me to church. Lee Ann Patterson, a former classmate, asked if we could meet for dinner one night this week, and Imogene Jordan found me near the bread aisle. She brought tears to my eyes by telling me I was beautiful—just like my mother.

By the time I made it to the cashier, I was an emotional mess.

“You’re Grace’s granddaughter. Sarah, I believe.”

“That’s right. How are you, Mrs. Thomas?”

“Oh, you remember me,” she said with a smile. My grandmother and

Catherine Thomas used to sit together at church every Sunday morning. The woman had to be eighty years old by now. “Are you all settled in?”

“Getting there. I still have some unpacking to do.”

She began to scan my items, and I briefly panicked when I realized I didn’t have enough cash. I’d so rarely carried it in Memphis.

“Are you all right?”

“I only have a debit card,” I whispered, completely embarrassed and thankful no one was in line behind me.

“Oh, that’s fine, dear. We accept credit or debit,” Catherine explained, pointing to the little machine attached to her register. “We just have the one phone line, though.”

I jumped when she yelled at the manager to get off the phone so she could swipe a card. Just then, a teenage boy appeared out of nowhere and bagged my groceries.

“Grace would be so happy you’ve come home.” Mrs. Thomas handed me the receipt to sign. “She always hoped you would, you know.”

Emotion bubbled inside of me as I scribbled my name. “No, I didn’t know.”

“Oh yes, Grace always said a young girl needs to spread her wings, but a young woman needs roots, as well. That’s why she left the house to you in her will. She knew you’d be back someday. She was such a sweet, sweet lady.”

I thanked her and followed the young man and my groceries to my car. “Are you the new teacher?”

Smiling, I pressed the remote to open the trunk. “I’m one of them, yes.

Are you in high school?"

"Yeah, I'm Matt. I'll be a senior this year." He was grinning proudly, like all seniors tend to do. Carefully, he placed my groceries in the car. "So, what will you teach?"

"English literature."

"To seniors?"

"Yes."

He closed my trunk and smiled. "That's cool. You're a lot prettier than Mrs. Perry. Maybe I'll take English lit after all."

"I'm afraid you don't have a choice. It's required."

He frowned. That was something else about seniors. They hated to be reminded about graduation requirements.

"Enjoy the rest of your summer vacation," I said with a grin. Matt waved, but he was still sulking as I climbed into my car and drove away.

After dropping off the groceries at home, I drove across town to Mr. Johnson's Hardware Store. I was gazing in confusion at all the various paint samples when I heard a friendly voice.

"Sarah Bray, you're as pretty as a picture."

His hair was now completely gray, but his smile was still sweet.

"Hi, Mr. Johnson," I said, grinning at the man. Thanks for taking care of the lawn. I hope you didn't mow it yourself."

He laughed. "I'm too old to mow, Sarah, but I was happy to find

someone who could do it. Going to paint that old house of Grace's?" "Well, I'm going to buy the paint. I'm hoping to hire someone to paint

it for me. You wouldn't happen to know—"

"I know just the person!" Mr. Johnson smiled broadly. "I'll be right back."

Well, that was easy. Of course, I shouldn't have been surprised. Mr.

Johnson knew everyone in Sycamore Falls. I turned my attention back to the wall and thumbed through the shaded cards. There were literally forty shades of blue, and I groaned in frustration.

“I know. They all look the same to me, too.”

The accent was warm and soft and undeniably Northern. When I turned around, I was staring into a pair of beautiful crystal-blue eyes.

“Wow,” I whispered. I scanned the paint swatches, wondering if such a shade of blue would look good on the exterior of my house.

“Mr. Johnson said you might need help selecting paint.”

“It’s impossible,” I muttered. “I just wanted to buy some blue paint. Why is this so complicated?”

The handsome man stepped closer to my side. “It isn’t, really. Just pick what you like.”

I like crystal-blue. Luckily, I didn’t say those words aloud.

“I need to paint my grandmother’s old house—well, my house now.” “Mr. Johnson says you’ve just moved back to Sycamore Falls.”

I sighed. The prodigal daughter returning home from the big, bad city

was sure to make the local tongues wag.

“Why are you making that face?”

“What are they saying about me?” Nervously, I glanced at the men

over my shoulder. Mr. Johnson and two other customers were huddled around the cash register and watching us intently with gigantic smirks on their faces.

He shrugged. “Not much. Just that your name is Sarah Bray and you’re a teacher. Your parents died when you were sixteen and your grandmother raised you until you went away to college. You taught for a while in Memphis, and now you’re living in your grandmother’s old house. You’ll be teaching at the high school when classes start in two weeks.”

I laughed.

“Not much, huh? That’s pretty much my life story.”

He smiled. “Not really. I don’t know why you left Memphis. I’m

Lucas Miller, by the way.”

“It’s nice to meet you.” I managed to tear my eyes away from his long enough to focus on the samples. “So, Lucas Miller, which shade of blue do you recommend for the exterior of a house?”

Lucas motioned to the adjacent aisle, and I groaned when I saw yet another vibrant wall of colors.

“For starters, you need to be looking at exterior paint.” He was failing miserably at hiding his smirk.

“There’s a difference?”

This time he laughed loudly. “Have you ever painted a house?”

“No.”

“Do you plan on painting this house yourself?”

“I was actually hoping to hire someone to do it, which is probably a good thing considering I can’t even pick out the paint.”

“You could hire me.”

“You’re a painter?”

“No, but I have some experience in construction, and I have a few weeks off. I’m just working here to earn some extra money over the summer.”

Lucas looked to be about my age, and I wondered what he actually did for a living. He knew my entire life story. Would it be inappropriate for me to ask?

Probably so.

“You could paint it in two weeks?”

“I think so, if the weather cooperates.”

“I couldn’t pay you much.”

“You could pay me with dinner.”

Of course, Mr. Handyman would be a flirt. “You’d paint my entire house in exchange for dinner?”

“Well, Mr. Johnson says you must be a great cook because your

grandmother taught you everything you know.”

“Mr. Johnson knows entirely too much about my life.”

“I think he probably knows everything about everyone,” he said with a

laugh. “So, am I hired?”

I eyed him skeptically. “Don’t you even want to see the house first?” “No need.”

“Why not?”

Lucas grinned. “Who do you think mowed your lawn?”

“I really appreciate you doing that,” I said with a laugh.

His face grew thoughtful. “The house needs a lot of work, Sarah.”

“I know. I don’t suppose you do landscaping, too?”

“I do a bit of everything,” Lucas said, “although, landscaping might

cost you two dinners.”

Mr. Johnson and his buddies cackled at the register.

I wasn’t interested in dating—even if he did have a chiseled chin and pretty blue eyes—but dinners in exchange for labor seemed like a sweet arrangement to me.

“It’s a deal. When can you start?”

“Tomorrow,” he replied, grinning brightly and shaking my hand.