

Sam's Letters to Jennifer

James Patterson

Published by Headline

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First published in Great Britain in 2004
by HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING

First published in paperback in Great Britain in 2005
by HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING

A HEADLINE paperback

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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ISBN 0 7553 0574 4

Typeset in Centaur by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Polmont, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING

A division of Hodder Headline
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.headline.co.uk
www.hodderheadline.com

Prologue
Just Like Always

SAM AND I are sitting on a mostly deserted beach on Lake Michigan, a little north of the Drake Hotel in Chicago. The Drake is filled with treasured memories for both of us, and we had dinner at our favorite table there earlier. I need to be with Sam tonight, because it's one year since, well, everything happened that shouldn't have happened – it's one year since Danny died.

'This is the spot where I met Danny, Sam. In May, six years ago,' I say.

Sam is a good listener, who holds eye contact beautifully and is almost always interested in what I have to say, even when I'm being a bore, like now. We've been best friends since I was two, maybe even before that. Just about everybody calls us 'the cutest couple', which is a little too saccharine for both of our tastes, though it happens to be true.

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'Sam, it was freezing that night Danny and I met, and I had a terrible cold. To make it worse, I had been locked out of our apartment by my old boyfriend, Chris, that awful beast.'

'That despicable brute, that creep,' Sam contributes. 'I never liked Chris. Can you tell?'

'So this nice guy, Danny, comes jogging by and he asks if I'm all right. I'm coughing and crying and a total mess. And I say, "Do I look like I'm all right? Mind your own blanking business. You're not going to pick me up, if that's what you're thinking. Scram!"' I snorted a laugh Sam's way.

'That's where I got my nickname, "Scram". Anyway, Danny came back on the second half of his run. He said he could hear me coughing for two miles down the beach. He brought me coffee, Sam. He ran up the beach with a hot cup of coffee for a complete stranger.'

'Yes, but a beautiful stranger, you have to admit.'

I stopped talking, and Sam hugged me and said, 'You've been through so much. It's awful and it's unfair. I wish I could wave a magic wand and make it all better for you.'

I pulled out a folded, wrinkled envelope from the pocket of my jeans. 'Danny left this for me. In Hawaii. One year ago today.'

'Go ahead, Jennifer. Let it out. I want to hear everything tonight.'

I opened the letter and began to read. I was already starting to choke up.

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Dear, wonderful, gorgeous Jennifer . . .

You're the writer, not me, but I had to try to put down some of my feelings about your incredible news. I always thought that you couldn't possibly make me any happier, but I was wrong.

Jen, I'm flying so high right now I can't believe what I'm feeling. I am, without a doubt, the luckiest man in the world. I married the best woman, and now I'm going to have the best baby with her. How could I not be a pretty good dad, with all that going for me? I will be. I promise.

I love you even more today than I did yesterday, and you wouldn't believe how much I loved you yesterday.

I love you, and our little 'peanut' . . . Danny.

Tears started to roll down my cheeks. 'I'm such a big baby,' I said. 'I'm pathetic, the queen of the losers.'

'No, you're one of the strongest women I know. You've lost so much, and you're still fighting.'

'Yeah, but I'm losing the battle. I'm losing. I'm losing real bad, Sam.'

Then Sam pulled me close and hugged me, and for the moment, at least, it was all better – just like always.

Part One
The Letters

One

MY TWO-BEDROOM apartment was in a pre-war building in Wrigleyville. Danny and I had loved everything about it – the city views, proximity to the real Chicago, the way we'd furnished the place. I was spending more and more time there, 'holed-up', my good friends said. They also said I was 'married to my job', 'a basket case', 'a hopeless workaholic', 'the new spinster', 'romantically challenged' – to name just a few of their more memorable jibes. All of them, unfortunately, were true, and I could have added some others to the list.

I was trying not to think about what had happened, but it was hard. For several months after Danny's death I kept having this terrible, obsessive thought: *I can't breathe without you, Danny.*

Even after a year and a half I had to force myself not to think of the accident, and everything that happened after it.

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I had finally begun to date – Teddy, a tall-drink-of-water editorial writer from the *Trib*; sportsaholic Mike, who I met at a Cubs game; Corey, a blind date from the tenth circle of hell. I hated dating, but I needed to move on, right? I had a lot of good friends – couples, single women, a few guys who were just buddies. Really. Honest. I was doing okay, I told everybody, which was mostly crap, and my good friends knew it.

So, anyhow, my deadline for that day's incredible, awe-inspiring column in the *Tribune* was three hours away and I was in a jam. I'd already tossed three ideas into the recycle bin and was staring at a blank screen again. The really tricky thing about writing a 'witty' newspaper column is that between Mark Twain, Oscar Wilde and Dorothy Parker, everything worth saying has already been said, and said better than I could ever say it.

So I pushed myself up from the sofa, put some Ella Fitzgerald on the Bose, and dialed up the air conditioner to high cool. I took a sip of coffee from my Uncommon Ground take-out cup. Found it sooo-ooo good. There is always hope in small things.

Then I paced around the living room in my writer's outfit du jour: one of Danny's Michigan U. jogging suits and my lucky red writing socks. I was dragging on a Newport Light, the latest in a string of bad habits I'd picked up lately. Mike Royko once said that you're only as good as your last column, and that's the truth that dogs me – that and my anorexic twenty-nine-year-old editor, Debbie, a former London tabloid reporter who

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wears Versace everything and Prada everything else with her Morgenthal Fredricks glasses.

The point is, I really care about the column. I work hard to be original, make the words sing on occasion, and get the work in on time, without fail.

So I hadn't answered the phone that had been ringing on and off for hours. I *had* cursed at it a couple of times, though.

It's hard to be fresh three times a week, fifty weeks a year, but of course that's the job the *Trib* pays me to do. And in my case, the job is also pretty much my life.

Funny, then, how many readers write to say that my life is so glamorous they'd like to swap places – wait, was that an idea?

The sudden crash behind my head was Sox, my year-old mostly tabby cat, knocking *The Devil in the White City* down from a bookshelf. That startled Euphoria, who'd been snoozing on the very typewriter F. Scott Fitzgerald supposedly wrote *Tender Is the Night* on. Or something like that. Maybe Zelda wrote *Save Me the Last Waltz* on it?

And when the phone rang again, I grabbed it.

When I realized who was on the line, a shock ran through me. I called up an old picture of John Farley, a family friend from Lake Geneva in Wisconsin. The minister's voice cracked when he said hello, and I had the strange sensation that he was crying.

'It's Sam,' he said.

Two

I GRIPPED THE phone receiver tightly with both hands. 'What's wrong?'

I heard him suck in a breath before he spoke again. 'Ah, there's no good way to tell you this, Jennifer. Your grandmother has taken a fall,' he told me. 'It's not good.'

'Oh, no!' I said, and sent my thoughts out to Lake Geneva, a resort community about an hour and a half north of Chicago. Lake Geneva was where I'd spent most of the summers of my childhood; some of the best times of my life.

'She was all alone in the house, so no one knows for sure what happened,' he continued. 'Just that she's in a coma. Can you come up to the lake, Jennifer?'

The news was a jolt. I'd just spoken to Sam two days before. We'd joked about my love life, and she'd threatened to send me a box of anatomically approximate gingerbread men. Sam is a comedian, always has been.

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It took me all of five minutes to change my clothes and throw a few things into a duffel bag. It took me a little longer than that to catch and cage Euphoria and Sox for an unexpected journey.

Then I was gunning the old Jag up Addison Street, heading toward I-94 North. The '96 Jaguar Vanden Plas is a midnight-blue sedan that was our pride and joy, Danny's and mine. It's a handsome thing with a quirky detail: the car has dual gas tanks.

I was trying to think about everything *but* Sam. My grandmother was the only one I had left now, the only family.

Sam was my best friend after my mother died when I was twelve. Her own marriage to Grandpa Charles made me and everyone else want whatever it was that they had. My grandfather wasn't the easiest guy to get to know, but once you broke through to him, he was great. Danny and I had toasted and roasted them at their fiftieth-anniversary gala at the Drake. Two hundred friends stood to applaud when my seventy-one-year-old grandfather dipped Sam low and kissed her passionately on the dance floor.

When Grandpa Charles retired from his legal practice, he and Sam stayed at Lake Geneva more than in Chicago. After a while they didn't get so many visitors. Even fewer came after my grandfather died four years ago and she moved to the lake full time. When that happened, people said that Sam would die soon too.

But she didn't. She'd been doing fine – until now.

At about 8.15 I got on Route 50 West and took it to

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12, a local two-laner that skirts Lake Geneva – the BPOE, 'best place on earth'. After three miles I turned off 12 on to Route NN. Lakeland Medical Center was just a couple of minutes away, and I tried to prepare myself.

'We're close, Sam,' I whispered.

Three

REALLY BAD THINGS happen in threes, I was thinking as I arrived at the Lakeland Medical Center. Then I tried to banish the thought from my mind. *Don't go there, Jennifer.*

I got out of the car and started uphill to the main entrance. I remembered that many years before I had been here to have a fishing hook removed from just above my eyebrow. I was seven at the time, and it was Sam who brought me.

Once I was inside I tried to get my bearings, taking in the horseshoe-shaped ICU with patients' rooms on three sides. The head nurse, a thin, fortyish woman with pink-framed glasses, pointed out my grandmother's room. 'We're so glad you're here,' she said. 'I enjoy your column, by the way. We all do.'

'Thank you,' I said, and smiled. 'You're very kind. That's nice to hear.'

I walked quickly down the corridor to Sam's room. I

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slid the door open and entered. 'Oh, Sam,' I whispered the second I saw her. 'What happened to you?'

It was so awful to see the tubes in her arms, and the banks of beeping medical equipment. But at least Sam was alive. Though she looked diminished and gray, and as fragile as a dream.

'It's Jennifer,' I whispered. 'I'm here now. I'm right here.' I took her hand in mine. 'I know you can hear me. I'll do the talking for now. I'm going to keep talking until you open your eyes.'

After a few minutes I heard the door slide open behind me. I turned to see the Reverend John Farley. His thick white hair was askew, his smile tremulous. He was still a handsome man, though stooped now. 'Hello, Jennifer,' he whispered, and welcomed me with a warm hug.

We walked out into the hallway, and suddenly I was remembering how close he had been to my grandparents.

'It's so good to see you. What have you heard about Sam?' I asked.

He shook his head. 'Well, she hasn't opened her eyes, and that's not a good sign, Jennifer. I'm sure Dr Weisberg will have more to tell you tomorrow. I've been here most of the day, ever since I heard.'

Then he handed me a key. 'This is for you. Your grandmother's house.'

He hugged me again, whispering that he had to get some sleep before he wound up here as a patient. Then he left, and I slipped back into Sam's room. I still couldn't believe this had happened.

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She had always been so strong, almost never sick, always the one who took care of everybody else – especially me. I sat for a long while just listening to her breathe, looking at her beautiful face, remembering all the times I'd come here to Lake Geneva. Sam had always reminded me a little of Katharine Hepburn, and we'd seen all her movies together, though she vehemently denied there was any resemblance.

I felt so scared. How could I lose Sam now? It seemed as if I had just lost Danny. Tears began to stream down my cheeks again. 'Shit,' I whispered under my breath.

I waited until I got back some control and then I moved close to her. I kissed both of her cheeks and stared at her face. I kept expecting Sam's eyes to open, for her to speak. But she didn't. Oh, why was this happening?

'I'm going back to the house. Pancakes for breakfast,' I whispered. 'I'll see you in the morning. You hear me? I'll see you in the morning. First thing, bright and early.'

One of my tears fell on to Sam's cheek, but it just trickled down her face.

'Good night, Sam,' I said again.

Four

I HAVE LITTLE or no memory of the drive from Lakeland Medical to Knollwood Road on Lake Geneva. I was just suddenly *there* at my grandmother's house, and it felt incredibly familiar and safe.

A century of parked cars had worn away the grass under an ancient oak in the side yard, and that's where I brought the Jag to a stop. I shut off the ignition and just sat for a minute or two, hoping to gather myself before I went inside.

To my left, the lawn flowed downhill to the shoreline. I could see the long white dock jutting out on to the moonlit and glassy surface of Lake Geneva. The water was a mirror for the star-pricked sky.

To my right was the old white clapboard lake house, porches all around, rising up to two asymmetrical stories of added-on dormered rooms. My grandparents' home sweet

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home. I knew every curve and angle of the house and the view from every porch and window.

I released my seat belt and stepped out of the car into the humid summer air. And that was when the fragrance of the casa blanca lilies hit me. They were Sam's and my favorites, the prize of the garden where we had spent many a night sitting on the stone bench, smelling the flowers, gazing up at the sky.

It was here that she'd tell me stories about Lake Geneva – how it freezes east to west, how when they were digging ground for the golf course at Geneva National they unearthed a cemetery.

Sam had stories about everything, and no one told them the way she could. *This* was where I became a writer. Right here at this house, and Sam was my inspiration.

I was suddenly overwhelmed. Tears I'd been holding in broke free. I dropped down to my knees on the hardpan parking area. I whispered Sam's name. I had the terrible thought that she might not ever come back to this house. I couldn't stand it.

I had always thought of myself as strong – and now this. Somebody was trying to break me. Well, it wasn't going to happen.

I don't know how long I stayed there in the parking area. Eventually I stood, opened the trunk, shouldered my duffel bag, and started inside with the cats. They were vocalizing from their cages, and I was about to liberate them when I saw a light go on in a house a hundred yards or so down the shoreline. A second later the light winked out.

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I got the feeling that somebody was watching me. But
who knew I was here?

Not even Sam.