

University of New Orleans
ScholarWorks@UNO

University of New Orleans Theses and
Dissertations

Dissertations and Theses

Spring 5-16-2014

In Another Life

Ariel J. Spengler

University of New Orleans, arielspengler@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>

Recommended Citation

Spengler, Ariel J., "In Another Life" (2014). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 1836.
<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/1836>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

In Another Life

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

Ariel Spengler

B.A. James Madison University, 2009

May, 2014

Table of Contents

Chapter One	2
Chapter Two	24
Chapter Three	45
Chapter Four	61
Chapter Five	74
Chapter Six	87
Chapter Seven	97
Chapter Eight	118
Chapter Nine	136
Chapter Ten	153
Chapter Eleven	162
Chapter Twelve	176
Chapter Thirteen	183
Chapter Fourteen	193
Chapter Fifteen	209
Chapter Sixteen	220
Chapter Seventeen	229
Vita	245

Part One

Chapter One

Jessica learned to tie her shoes on her twenty-first birthday. Well, technically she had known how; she learned when she was a child, just like everybody else. But not many others were in an accident that caused them to forget almost everything. Before that accident, Jessica was supposedly very smart. That is what she had been told every day since the morning of February sixth when she opened her eyes and woke up.

Her birthday was February fifteenth. She woke early, and from the gap in her bed covers, watched snow trickle periodically past her window from the rain gutters on the roof to the walkway below. She liked the contrast between the white snow and the gray clouds beyond it. The alarm clock next to her bed was blinking 12:00. Beside it rested a dog-eared spiral notebook with *Read Me* scribbled across the cover in messy black ink and a pen wedged into the metal coils. Jessica slid it onto the bed and opened it lazily, reading the pages of handwritten notes until she came to about the seventh page and the writing stopped altogether.

So it had snowed another two inches yesterday. That explained the weight on the house. Jessica felt a heavy, claustrophobic feeling in the air. Too much snow on the power lines across the street caused an electrical outage three days ago. She could remember now how there was a day in the past when the clock wasn't blinking. There probably was a way of correcting the time, but the notebook didn't give any instructions, so she left it be.

According to the first page in the notebook, Jessica had been in a car accident and was kept in the hospital for about six weeks. Now that she was home, Patty and Harris – her mother and father – woke her up at seven o'clock every morning. Patty wasn't going into work anymore, and on more than one occasion Harris would stay home, too. They would move her to the sofa in front of the television and wrap her in three or four quilts before heading into the kitchen to whip up platefuls of food. They told her she was so skinny and so pale, which meant every bite had to be hot and fatty. "Perfect winter food," Patty told her yesterday when she delivered a tray of hot chocolate, chicken noodle soup, and mashed potatoes onto her lap and slid a DVD from their movie collection into the DVD player.

Jessica stretched her arms out of the covers and over her head, resting her fingers against the backboard of her twin bed and stretching her toes to the footboard. This was her childhood room. The room she'd grown up in. Patty and Harris thought it was the perfect place for her to do some remembering. Patty turned it into a scrapbooking room when Jessica moved away to college, but now that she was back, the room had returned to its original state. The day before Jessica came home from the hospital, Patty removed the heavy boxes from the back of the bedroom closet and unpacked trophy after trophy into the bookshelf over Jessica's old desk. She arranged the top shelf by sport – softball, tennis, cross-country, track – and the bottom shelf by school club – Debate Team, Mock Trial Club, and a third grade runner-up trophy for the Franklin Elementary School Spelling Bee.

On the faded blue walls, Patty hung Jessica's school photos from every picture day from kindergarten through her senior year of high school. Each one contained the same aged, purple backdrop and stiff over-the-shoulder pose. The pictures started next to the bookshelf and trailed under the window and around the wall above her bed. Jessica followed the transformation of her

faces along the wall. From missing front teeth and pigtails to turtlenecks and braces to make-up and contacts, the pictures revolved around her head like an aging merry-go-round.

Patty had also reserved a spot on the wall next to her dresser to hang more frames – her high school diploma, her ninth grade art projects, her honorable mention for her second grade science fair project. Dangling from the frames in faded blue and red were her field day ribbons for events like the fifty-yard dash and the group egg toss. Scrawled in shiny silver lettering across the ribbons were phrases like, “Way to go!” and “You did it!” And in a stack on the floor were her high school yearbooks and old photo albums. The notebook told Jessica that she sat up with those books most nights, flipping through the photos of her and some old boyfriend named Ben: smiling at their lockers, waving during homecoming court, exhausted after a track meet. Nothing jogged her memory, but today was only the ninth day since she’d woken up.

Getting out of bed, she dug through her dresser drawers looking for socks. She remembered Patty teaching her where everything was located yesterday, but not everything they taught her stuck right away. She found the socks in the left top drawer, and slid a pair of fuzzy pink ones over her cold feet. The air in the house felt stagnant and numb. She wrapped the blue robe that hung from a hook on the door around her shoulders, concealing the too small pair of pajamas, adorned with hunting dogs, that she was wearing. Apparently, these were her middle school pajamas. Patty thought it’d be a good idea for her to wear them as much as possible since they had been her favorites. She’d even stuck an old photo into her bedroom mirror of twelve-year-old Jessica standing in the yard in the hunting dog pajamas, pointing off toward the edge of the picture where two deer were standing at the corner of the yard. Jessica hated the ugly maroon color and the breeze on her ankles as she walked through the house. But she was willing to try anything.

She passed the mirror on her way out of her bedroom and was startled by her reflection. The face looking back frightened her. Especially because it looked so different from the girl in all of the pictures on the walls. She didn't have those rosy cheeks or wide eyes. Her cheekbones jutted out on either side, pulling her pale skin tight around them and her eyes looked set back in her skull, hidden by the dark circles under them. Even her blonde hair, which had grown down to her chin since the accident, was coming in faded and frizzy. Nothing like the shiny, sleek hair of high school Jessica taped next to the mirror. And an ugly, red scar now scratched its way down the side of Jessica's face, from the tip of her forehead down past her left ear and around under her chin. She pulled and twisted her skin with her fingers, trying to reassemble the face everybody knew. But it wasn't working. And it made her face hurt. She grabbed her notebook off the bed and left the room.

At the bottom of the stairs, Jessica stopped at the front-door window. From the top of the hill, their house overlooked everything. Down the sloped yard at the edge of the property was the corner stop sign, leaning forward slightly, like a man hunched over against the wind. The road had been plowed already and twinkled with road salt every time the sun escaped a loaded cloud. Surrounding the house was a neighborhood of two-story houses, with covered Jacuzzi hot tubs snowed in on the porches and smoke puffing steadily from the rooftop chimneys. Jessica could see mountains off in the distance through the smoke, blue in appearance despite the snowfall, outlined across the sky like the jagged teeth of a hibernating bear.

"Jessica?" Patty's voice sounded strained above her. Jessica turned and looked up to the second story landing where Patty and her messy, dark curls darted out from inside Jessica's bedroom. "There you are. You scared me."

"Sorry," Jessica said. "I couldn't sleep."

Patty padded down the stairs in her red robe and matching slippers and hooked her arm in Jessica's.

“Do you feel all right?”

“Yeah, I feel fine,” Jessica said, though her smile was forced. Her cheeks felt hot under Patty's stare.

Patty's eyes went over Jessica's forehead, her cheeks, her mouth. Then she frowned.

“You're so skinny.”

Jessica shrugged. There seemed to be nothing she could do about it.

Patty's eyes lit up and she smiled. “Happy birthday!”

“Thanks,” Jessica said. February fifteenth was her twenty-first birthday. She remembered that without having to read about it. It was one fact the family didn't let her forget.

“Are you hungry? Let me make you something special.”

Patty led her into the open kitchen. It was clean and orderly and white as the snow outside. Jessica sat on a barstool at the counter and stopped herself from protesting when Patty draped two quilts around her shoulders. It seemed to make her mother happy to dote on her. And perhaps it made Jessica happy, too, a few months ago. She couldn't be sure. She only knew what she was feeling today. And today the gesture felt uncomfortable. She wished the attention could be focused on somebody else. Patty moved to the stove and turned a knob on the front; the bottom left burner glowed red.

“How about some chocolate blueberry pancakes?” Patty set a frying pan atop the heating burner. Smiling, and lifting her eyebrows as if awaiting a certain response, she hinted, “It's your favorite.”

Jessica raised her eyebrows, too, as if catching on. “Yes. Sounds perfect.”

Patty laughed and set to work about the kitchen, grabbing milk and eggs from the fridge and combining them with the pancake mix in a large mixing bowl on the counter, all the while humming something cheery and upbeat. Jessica was on the verge of recognizing it when Patty paused, pointing with her wooden spoon out the hallway.

“Why don’t you go lie down on the couch?” she said and moved over to Jessica to help her stand up. “I can put on one of those Shirley Temple movies you love so much.”

Jessica ducked out of Patty’s grasp. “I can do it,” she said, smiling down at the floor. “I know how.”

That was a lie. Jessica didn’t even know where the couch was.

“You don’t have to do everything by yourself,” Patty called after her, but Jessica was relieved that she wasn’t following her.

She stopped again at the front-door window at the bottom of the stairs. A boy was bicycling by at the bottom of the hill in a large puffy overcoat, his scarf waving behind him like a flag. He paused to slip something blue into their mailbox and biked off. His wheels wobbled a little over the salt and slush until he picked up enough speed to steady himself and rode on to the next house.

What was that he put in there? She closed her eyes and willed her brain to remember. That was a boy. And a bike. And a mailbox. The names of the objects were all she had. But she couldn’t connect the names with any meaning. Listening to make sure Patty was still humming in the kitchen, Jessica opened the front door a crack and stepped out onto the front porch. The concrete below her feet was freezing. She bounced back and forth from one foot to the other, finally hopping back into the hall. On the doormat were three pairs of shoes, placed neatly in a line, but none looked familiar. She settled for the red boots in the middle that were caked in dry

salt around the soles. Her heels slipped out of them when she lifted up on her toes, but her feet were warm and that was all she needed the boots for. She went back out on the porch and closed the door softly behind her.

Jessica followed the porch steps down to the sidewalk that led around the house to their driveway. A sudden memory hit her: watching Harris and his snow blower from the garage last night as he made clean, controlled lines up and down the driveway. He had stopped in the road as a plow came by and chatted with the driver for a bit, who tossed him a bag of salt before driving off.

Jessica read about that in her notebook this morning. The people of Northampton, Pennsylvania, took care of each other. Either that, or the town looked after the Wheatons. Every day, flowers were being delivered to the house or phone calls were taken to congratulate Patty and Harris on the recovered health of their only child. In an entry dated from two days ago, Jessica wrote about Patty turning away three separate families who came to the front door with baked goods to visit with Jessica. Patty refused to let them in and refused to let Jessica eat their cookies and pies, saying that Jessica was still recovering and couldn't risk infection. She piled the desserts on the dining room table in a collection that was heading to church with them next Sunday.

Jessica's boots mucked through the slush on her way down the gravel drive to the mailbox. About halfway there, she glanced behind her, half expecting to see Patty watching her from the window, her pale hand connecting lightly with the glass.

The mailbox stood facing the road with a shiny black number twelve contrasted against the clean silver metal. Jessica pulled down the lid, grabbed the blue bundle from within, and closed it back up. It was a blue, plastic baggie with the newspaper folded within it. She pulled

the paper out and unfolded the crisp edges of *The Morning Call* and read the headlines on the front page. The top story detailed how a Lutheran church in town had been forced to postpone their winter raffle until the following weekend because of the snow. The article promised no shortages in prizes to be won.

As she struggled to hold the paper steady against the wind, she noticed a large black vehicle approaching the stop sign at the bottom of the hill. Its tires crackled to a near stop before it turned left, without a blinker, and headed up the road in Jessica's direction. The car eased to a stop at the driveway, and a black tinted window rolled down on the driver's side. A blonde woman in red lipstick smiled out the window. Her teeth were blinding in contrast with her tanned skin. Dark roots were showing at her scalp. The arm that rested on the steering wheel was covered in gold bracelets that slid down her wrist as she idled there, the engine blowing hot fumes out the back of the car.

"Jessica. How are you?"

Jessica did not recognize her. She smiled to be polite.

"You look good," the woman continued, but her eyes betrayed her as they moved over the gap of skin showing between Jessica's hunting dog pajama bottoms and her oversized red boots. She also must have noticed the bathrobe belt string that Jessica now saw had been dragging in the dirty, gravel-caked snow. "We've been praying for you, you know. We're all so glad you made it home safe."

Jessica heard a door slam behind her and turned to see Patty marching through the snow in her robe and slippers toward Jessica and the woman in the black vehicle.

"Margaret, she's not ready for visitors yet," Patty called as she half-ran down the drive, using one hand to hold her robe closed against the biting wind.

“Hello, Patty,” Margaret called, her bracelets jangling together as she waved. “Jessica looks great. I’m so thrilled for you and Harris.”

Patty reached Jessica, and dumped both hands protectively across either shoulder, heavier than she probably intended. “Thank you, Margaret.” She turned Jessica around to face her. “Can you take that paper inside for me?”

Jessica went back to the house, turning back once to see her mother gesticulating wildly up at Margaret. When the car finally drove away, Patty dropped her head into her hands and stomped one slippered foot into the slush before turning around and catching Jessica watching her. Jessica turned on the spot and hurried into the house, leaving the shoes on the mat and snatching her notebook from where she’d left it on the kitchen counter. She was halfway up the stairs when Patty came back into the house.

“Where are you going?” she called up to Jessica, who stopped in her tracks. “It’s your birthday breakfast. Come on.”

She put an arm around her daughter when she got back within reach and led her onto her barstool again in the kitchen. The quilts were draped around Jessica’s shoulders once more.

“Thank you for getting the newspaper,” Patty said, taking *The Morning Call* out of Jessica’s hands and dropping it on the kitchen table behind her. She was back to her usual happy self, though Jessica sensed it wasn’t really what a genuinely happy Patty looked like. “But you can’t leave the house just yet. Remember?”

She resumed work on the pancakes, although she had stopped singing and kept slamming dirty dishes into the sink until one of her ceramic mixing bowls suffered a chip to its side and she muttered, “Shit,” and threw it away in the trashcan under the sink. Jessica pretended to busy herself with her notebook. She scribbled a note below the others about the newspaper being

delivered every morning. When she finished, she flipped back through and found a passage about going outside the day before to run her fingers through the snow on the lawn. She'd been shoed back inside then, too. She looked down at her hand, imagining the snow in her fingers. Cold. It'd been very cold.

By the time breakfast was on the table, Harris was downstairs. He'd decided to go into work today, apparently, because his hair was still drying and he had a suit and tie on. According to an entry in the notebook, he had his own law office downtown. Harris was tall and lean, and gave Jessica a confident smile from under his thick, brown mustache before bending over to kiss the top of her head. He was in very good shape; both of Jessica's parents were. The shelves in the living room were littered with pictures of the two of them rock climbing in the Pocos or kayaking down in Key West. The notebook didn't mention them doing anything active since she'd been home. Maybe they didn't do that anymore? Maybe it was her fault.

Harris and Patty dominated the conversation over breakfast. Harris told jokes about the buddies down at his firm, Bromfield, Wheaton, and White. How Dan Bromfield slipped on the ice outside the office again. How, on a dare, Gary White had once streaked the quad at Muhlenberg his freshman year of college. How the secretary's youngest daughter was now dating a guy from downtown Bath with six tattoos and a pet tarantula. Patty seemed to laugh in all the right places and placed a hand on Jessica's shoulder as if they were in on the joke together. Jessica smiled, moving the pancakes around on her plate. It seemed like they were putting on a show. Jessica wished they would just go on with their regular lives. She didn't need any special treatment. And she didn't like all the pressure to perform.

"Just trying to jog your memory," Harris said afterwards, as he washed their dirty plates in the sink. Patty had given Jessica the task of drying the items and then finding their home in the

kitchen cabinets. So far Jessica had put a wooden spoon back in the vase on the counter that already had three wooden spoons sticking out the top. The rest of the clean dishes, however, were forming a large junkyard pile on the stove. She wished they could just use their dishwasher instead.

“Thanks,” Jessica said, adding a plate to the top of her wobbling collection. *Villanova Law* was embossed around the rim in thick, navy letters. “I’m in law school, right?”

“Pre-law.” Harris winked, handing her a wet plate. “For now. But soon it’s,” he waved his hand in front of her face like he was reading off a movie marquee and said, “Bromfield, Wheaton, Wheaton, and White.” He shrugged. “It’s all you’ve ever wanted.”

Patty came up behind them and swatted her husband playfully in the back of the head. “Hey, it’s not too late to have Jessica join my practice.”

“You’re a lawyer, too?” Jessica asked.

Patty exchanged a quick look with her husband. “No, I’m a dentist.”

“Dentist. Right,” Jessica said, remembering the name but not the meaning. “I knew that.”

“Of course you did,” her father said.

“Oh, Jessica.” Patty had stopped in front of the stove and steadied the stack of dishes with her hands. “Don’t you remember where any of this goes?”

Jessica had no idea where they went. She figured they all belonged somewhere in the cabinets, but like her dresser drawers this morning, she’d have to go hunting through each one to find what she was looking for. It wasn’t remembering. It was guesswork.

“Look.” Patty finagled all of the plates out from under the rest of the kitchenware and stacked them in her hands. “I showed you which cabinet the plates were in when I got them out to set the table.”

“Patty.” Harris turned the sink off.

“No, she can do this,” Patty said. She held the plates up to Jessica. “Just think for a second. You remember this.”

Jessica’s eyes darted over all the silver knobs on all the pristine cabinet doors. She was terrified to give the wrong answer. She looked back over at Patty and Harris – one looked desperate, the other, hopeful. Her cheeks felt warm again. She took a deep breath. Okay. She had watched Patty set the table. She could do this. “I guess I would say the plates are in that cabinet.” She pointed to the far left cabinet door, next to the refrigerator.

Patty sighed. She went over to the door Jessica was pointing at, grabbed the silver knob, and flung it open so hard that a stack of plastic cups wobbled out and bounced across the counter and fell to the floor. “Cups.”

“I’m sorry.” Jessica backed away into the stove.

“Patty, stop.” Harris took the plates out of his wife’s hands. “She’s not ready for this yet.”

“But we just got them out an hour ago,” Patty insisted, talking to her husband as if Jessica had left the room and couldn’t hear what they were saying. Maybe she already caught on that Jessica would most likely forget the conversation once it was over. Which was probably what was going to happen. “If she can’t even remember something like this, how is she ever going to remember anything else?”

Patty’s voice was wavering. She wiped her bangs off her forehead as Harris set the plates down and reached to console her. Jessica could feel her heart pumping wildly in her chest. She dropped the dishtowel on the stove and went around to the kitchen table. The notebook swam in her line of vision as she picked it up and blotted a tear off her cheek with the heel of her palm.

“How is she going to remember us, Harris?”

Harris rocked Patty gently against his chest, shushing her, patting her back with his wet hands. “Stop that, now. Stop that.”

Jessica left the room and went upstairs and buried herself under the covers of her bed. That was so embarrassing. Why would they ask that of her? Didn't they see her struggling? She was writing everything down; she was asking stupid questions. She couldn't figure out what a mailbox was used for just an hour ago.

Jessica was smart. She knew that. Patty reminded her all the time. Even if she didn't say anything, all Jessica had to do was take a look around her bedroom to be reminded. There were trophies and certificates everywhere. Clearly they just expected her to figure this all out. Of course it must be frustrating. They had a brilliant daughter a couple months ago. A beautiful, smart, athletic daughter. And now they had this ugly shadow of her former self who couldn't even remember her name unless she wrote it down somewhere.

And they were so nice. They had been so great. Her notebook had countless examples of their love and support: helping her get to the bathroom the first few days before she gained some strength in her legs, making her all of her favorite foods, filling her room with old memories to help her remember. Jessica didn't feel like she deserved it. And she certainly wasn't repaying them for all of their hard work. Why couldn't she give them what they wanted? Why couldn't she be the daughter they were still missing? And how much longer would they keep being there for her before they realized she couldn't be who they wanted her to be? Where would she go then?

Jessica stared at the faces on the walls until her eyes ached. At some point, she heard a soft knock on the door and heard Patty calling her name softly from the other side. Jessica shut her eyes and pretended to sleep. It didn't stop Patty, however. She came in and sat on the bed for

a moment, rubbing a hand through Jessica's knotty curls. Then she went around the room, picking up some dirty clothes off the floor and straightening the stack of books next to the bed before leaving again. Jessica knew she should have sat up and apologized, but she was so exhausted that she soon did fall asleep, and didn't wake up again until the sun was setting behind the mountains outside her window, turning her room every shade of orange and red.

She sat up, confused. Why was she in bed this late? What had happened? Then she remembered breakfast – her special pancakes. It was her birthday. Oh! And she met someone outside today. Who was that? Was that a dream?

Something scratched her leg and she reached under the covers and pulled out an old notebook, the cover bent in half from the weight of her body resting on it. She opened it up and read every entry of handwritten notes. But nothing told her why she was sleeping.

She heard banging in the kitchen. Right. Her mother was making her a birthday dinner tonight. She dug around in her dresser drawers for an outfit more befitting a celebration than her pajamas and settled on a ripped pair of jeans and a black sweatshirt that said *Northampton Track and Field* in orange lettering across an orange running shoe in the center. She left on the pink, fuzzy socks she woke up in.

When she got downstairs, her notebook tucked under her arm, she saw that the small television in the corner of the room was broadcasting the local news. Patty was setting the table and Harris was standing over the stove. Whatever he was cooking smelled delicious. It caused a shift in Jessica's stomach when she smelled it, but she couldn't place what it was he was making. Patty set the third plate down atop its winter snowflake placemat and turned around. She looked surprised when she saw Jessica standing there, but she went forward and took her hand.

“Jessica, I want to apologize for how I behaved this morning.”

Jessica thought back to this morning. Was she mad that she'd fallen asleep? Was that why she was in her room? Was she being punished for something? She swallowed. What stupid thing had she done this time? "You were fine."

"I wasn't. I know that now," Patty continued. "And I promise I'm going to try a lot harder to be better."

"Oh, no." Jessica shook her head, not meeting Patty's gaze. "You don't have to."

Harris turned around at the stove and smiled over at Jessica. "We get a little impatient sometimes. What can we say?"

They weren't giving her any hints as to what happened earlier. However, the sight of Harris in a suit and tie reminded her of him coming down for breakfast that morning and kissing her on her head. She laughed at the thought of it. "Back from work?" she asked, to take the focus off her blushing cheeks.

"I decided not to go in today, actually," Harris said, looking over at Patty. Then he smiled. "Come see what I'm making." He held an arm out for Jessica, and she walked under it to see the contents on the stove. There was a large pot of noodles resting on the burners on the left, and chicken sizzling in the pan on the right. It reminded Jessica of something she'd read about in her notebook.

"Well, my favorite food is fried chicken."

"As is mac n' cheese," Harris finished for her, tapping the casserole dish with his spatula. "Perfect birthday meal."

"It smells really good," Jessica said, nodding her approval.

“It’s going to taste even better,” Harris said. “Your mother is a miracle worker over this mac n’ cheese. You’ve been trying to perfect it yourself over the past few months at school, but according to your emails, you haven’t quite gotten it yet.”

“Well, maybe she’ll get it while she’s home,” Patty offered from the table, where she was filling each cup with a brown liquid. “Since you won’t be in school this semester and I won’t be working so much, we’ll have lots of time together to get it right.”

They sat down for dinner a few minutes later, passing food across the table to each other in no particular order, other than Jessica being served first. The food *was* amazing. Jessica could understand how this would have been her favorite meal. Harris left the television on while they ate and for that, Jessica was thankful. She needed a break from all of the coddling. Maybe Patty and Harris needed a break as well.

When everyone was leaning back in their chairs, rubbing their extended stomachs and dropping their dirty napkins onto their empty plates, Patty and Harris got up from the table. Patty disappeared into the hallway while Harris stacked the dirty plates in his arms and carried them to the sink. Jessica was left alone. She grabbed her notebook off the empty seat across from her and opened it to a fresh page. Midway through a paragraph on the juice she’d been drinking – apparently it was apple cider from the Redner’s market down the street – the lights went out around her. All was quiet, except for the wind pushing against the house. Then Patty and Harris started to sing. Patty came in carrying a large chocolate cake brimming with lit candles. And Harris’ arms were full of wrapped boxes and bags. Patty set the cake down in front of Jessica, and their voices harmonized together on the last line, “Happy birthday to you!”

Harris clapped as Patty leaned down and hugged Jessica from behind. They both watched her, expectantly.

“Thanks,” Jessica said, giving a forced smile as she watched the candles drip onto the cake. “That was very nice.”

“Jessica,” Harris said, and Jessica looked up at him while he tried to steady the boxes in his arms with the help of his right knee. “You wish for something in your head, and then you blow the candles out. Then your wish comes true.”

“Okay.” Jessica turned back to the cake, wanting to write that down before she had to do anything else. The candles’ flames waved and danced together in unison with the breath from her lungs. She closed her eyes. What should she wish for? That her memory came back? That her parents stopped gawking at her? The thought made her more aware of them watching her. She opened her eyes and blew a heavy breath across the top of the cake, extinguishing all but three candles. She blew a short burst across the remaining three, and watched the gray smoke puff up to the ceiling. Her parents clapped again and the lights came back on. She’d wish for something later. In private.

“Time for presents,” Harris called, who probably only said that because his arms were getting tired. He dumped the boxes at Jessica’s feet as Patty started removing the candles from the cake to cut it. Harris pulled a rectangular box out from the middle of the pile and placed it on Jessica’s lap. “This one first.”

“Wow. Thanks a lot,” Jessica said, peeling hesitantly at the wrapping. Inside was a long, cardboard box with a checkmark across the lid.

“Here.” Harris reached over and grabbed the lid. “I got it.”

Inside the box was a pair of shoes. They were black with neon green laces and soles, with a neon green checkmark on the sides.

“They’re new running shoes,” Harris said, removing them from the box and pulling out crumpled paper from inside them. “You lost your favorite pair in the accident.”

“Harris,” Patty scolded.

“I had a favorite pair of running shoes?” Jessica asked. “I ran?”

“Every day.” Harris looked up at Patty then grabbed a shoe out of Jessica’s hands. “Can I help you try them on?”

He grabbed her left foot and slid the shoe onto it, pulling it up around the ankles and tightening the laces. Then he did the same with the other foot. Jessica liked the shoes immediately.

“Do you remember how to tie them up?” Harris asked.

Tying them up. She couldn’t be sure. “I don’t think so.”

He squatted beside her and took the laces of her left shoe in his hands. “You do bunny ears, see? Make a bunny ear here,” he worked the left lace into a circle, “make a bunny ear here,” he did the same with the right lace, “then swoop under here,” he tucked one lace ear under the other lace ear, “and pull them tight,” he grabbed each of the ears and pulled until the laces formed a knot. “Bunny ears.”

He worked with her on the right foot for a few minutes, letting her work the laces herself, but occasionally making suggestions like, “No, no, the other ear swoops under,” or, “Pull, pull, pull!” When she finally was able to do it herself, Harris clapped again. Patty handed her a large slice of cake.

“I taught you how to do that,” Harris said, taking a plate of cake from his wife for himself. “When you were little. The first time you learned, I taught you.”

“You did?” Jessica smiled up at Harris.

Just then, a loud bang came from the hall. Everyone turned toward the sound. The wind outside felt louder. It seemed to whistle down the hallway and into the kitchen.

“Did you invite someone else over?” Patty looked to Harris.

Harris rose from his chair. “We probably didn’t close the door tight enough.”

“Where is she?” a man’s voice called out in the hall. It was deep and harsh. “I want to see her.”

Jessica’s parents looked first to each other and then to her.

“Harris,” Patty said, but he was already moving into the hallway.

“Who is that?” Jessica asked.

Jessica heard scuffling in the hall and her father’s low, consoling voice. But the deeper voice only seemed to get angrier.

“Bring her out here, damnit. I want to talk to her,” he called. Patty grabbed Jessica’s shoulders and squeezed.

“Who’s out there?” Jessica asked again, but Patty only smiled.

“It’s all right, Jessica. Your father’s taking care of it.”

There was more struggling at the front door.

“Come on, now,” came her father’s voice. “You can’t keep coming by here.”

And then Jessica remembered a night – when was that? – when she sat in the living room watching television while her parents got up to have a talk with a man at the front door. He made it into the living room for a second and startled Jessica – brown-gray stubble on his chin, dark, wet hair, long overcoat, dirty boots – and looked at Jessica with intense, gray eyes. He looked as if he was crying. Then Harris came around the corner and pushed him back out into the hallway.

“Let me see her,” he was calling now, and Jessica got to her feet.

“Jessica. Stop.” Patty grabbed her arm, pushing her back into her chair.

They heard some more movement at the door, and some soft words spoken by Harris, and the front door closed. Jessica heard the heavy lock slide into place above the knob. Harris came slowly back into the kitchen, loosening his tie.

“Who was that?” Jessica asked again. “Did he want to see me?”

Harris looked to Patty, whose hands were still tight around Jessica’s arm.

“He’s come here before, hasn’t he?” Jessica asked, looking back and forth between her mother and father. “To talk to me?”

“He’s sick,” Patty offered, reaching to wipe Jessica’s hair out of her eyes. “He doesn’t really want to see you.”

“Who is he?”

Harris sighed, and looked again to his wife. “When you were in your car accident in December, there was another girl involved in the crash. She was from here, too. You graduated together.”

Jessica frowned. A car accident. That’s right, she had heard some of that before. Or read it somewhere. “We were in a car together?”

“No, you were in a car with Ben,” Patty said, rubbing Jessica’s arm. Ben? “Hannah was in the car in front of you. You weren’t really friends.”

“She was that man’s daughter.” Harris had his hands on his hips and was taking deep breaths, as if he’d been for a long run. “She died.”

Jessica looked around at Patty, who put her face in her hands. She nodded to confirm what Harris said.

“If she died,” Jessica said, “then why is he looking for me?”

Patty reached up to hold Jessica again. She had tears in her eyes. “He’s going through a very difficult time. When the accident happened, we were the lucky ones. You made it out alive. We got to take you home. But he lost his little girl, whom he loved very much. And now he’s just trying to deal with that loss in whatever way he can.”

“He’s a drunk,” Harris said, under his breath. “He comes over here all the time, stupid drunk, and wants to hurt you.”

“Harris,” Patty said. She rubbed her eyes. “We don’t know that.”

Harris scoffed, apparently wanting to say more.

“He’s just looking for some closure,” Patty insisted. “He wants to understand why this happened to him and his family. And why we got our daughter back and he didn’t get his.”

“At what cost?” Harris asked. “At the expense of us? Of Jessica? How long are you going to let this go on?”

Tears were rolling down Patty’s cheeks now.

“I can make one phone call,” Harris continued.

“Harris. No. We’re safe. He’s not going to hurt us.”

Harris let out a long sigh and rubbed a hand through his hair. “Jessica,” he said, turning back to his daughter. “What do you say we save the rest of your presents for tomorrow? I think we could all use some rest.” Harris gave a tired smile to Jessica, but his thoughts were clearly elsewhere.

Jessica nodded. She grabbed her notebook and left the kitchen. At the front-door window she saw a dark shape at the bottom of the hill, leaning against the stop sign. Was that the man? The one who lost his daughter? Jessica wanted to go out to the corner and sit with him. He looked so alone. She felt sorry for him.

“We can’t let him keep coming over like that,” Harris said from the kitchen. “You know it’s not safe.”

Dishes clanked together as Patty’s rushed voice said, “What am I supposed to tell the man? If I lost Jessica – ” Her voice wavered. “If she had been the one that died. I don’t know. I don’t know what I’d do.”

Jessica sat on the bottom step. She opened her notebook again and started a new paragraph about the man out in the snow while Harris consoled Patty in a soft voice that was too low for Jessica to hear.

“I know. *I know*,” Patty said a few minutes later. Jessica put her pen down to listen.

“Her memory’s not getting any better.”

Sniffles. More dishes clanging together.

“We’re doing everything we can,” Patty said.

“She doesn’t even remember running,” Harris said.

“It’ll come back,” Patty said and the sink came on. “We just have to try harder.”

“Or we have to try something different,” Harris said.

“Stop it,” Patty said. “I know what you’re going to say and it’s not going to happen.”

“We have to call Ben.”

Chapter Two

Ben's foot hit the windshield wiper controls on his crawl to the backseat of the Jeep.

"Damn it."

Nikki's head bumped the backseat passenger-side window.

"Hang on." Ben tumbled into the back, ignoring the angry swish of the wiper blades swiping right, left, right, left, and pushed Nikki further down against the door. He mashed his lips against hers.

She pulled away. "Wait. My elbow." She tugged her arm free and around Ben's shoulder. She laughed and let her fingers get tangled in his bushy blonde curls. Her other hand searched his waist for his belt buckle.

But it was no use; Ben wasn't into it. He never really had been, including the moment he had first walked up to her at the Gin Mill a couple months ago and asked to buy her a drink. Her response, "What took you so long?" made him all the more uninterested. But he'd had another fight with Jessica and was just feeling like he needed something – someone – to take his mind off of his shitty life. Nikki had been that person. But she wasn't doing the trick anymore. He almost hated her, now, though she didn't deserve that. She'd always had the gap in her front teeth. Always raked her nails down his arm during sex. It was only recently that it bothered him so much.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” she asked him now as he sat up in the Jeep, bumping his head on the ceiling.

“Nothing.” He pulled his black, polyester vest down and straightened the nametag over his right pectoral.

Nikki ran her nails through her hair. “Ben. What’s been going on with you lately?”

“I’m fine,” Ben said. “I’m just not in the mood.”

“You’re never in the mood anymore,” Nikki said, sitting up to join him, one hand pulling her skirt back down over her thighs. “You think I don’t know what’s going on.”

Ben almost rolled his eyes, but caught himself.

“Ever since she woke up it’s been different, Ben. You barely look at me.”

“That’s not true,” Ben said, again, for the millionth time. Each time less convincing than the last.

“I don’t even get it.” Nikki grabbed her purse off the floor and removed her pack of cigarettes from inside it.

“Don’t smoke in here.”

Nikki paused, the last cigarette of the pack between her fingers. Ben avoided her gaze, which he knew would be murderous. “Fuck you. And fuck this thing you have going on with Jessica. It’s over. It’s been over – ”

“She was in a coma.”

“Yeah, and you were screwing me before then, too, dipshit, or did you forget that already?” Nikki put her cigarette between her lips and lit it using a neon-yellow lighter that she threw back into her purse. As she exhaled smoke into the already foggy interior of his Jeep, she said, “She wasn’t good for you. You told me all the time.”

Ben closed his eyes. He regretted ever opening up to her. “I know.”

“So, you’re with me now.” Nikki rubbed his leg. “I give you everything you want.”

Ben watched her nails go up and down his thigh.

“I make you happy, Ben?”

Ben nodded.

Nikki leaned over and kissed his cheek, her breath smelling of tobacco. “Call me after work.”

She opened the door, grabbed her jacket and purse off the floor, and slid out into the snow. As she turned around for a final goodbye, Ben leaned over the seat and closed the door in her face.

Luckily, the Jeep windows had steamed up against the cold weather outside, so he couldn’t see Nikki’s reaction as she turned and crossed the parking lot, probably heading to the gas station on the corner to buy another pack of cigarettes. He leaned back into the seat and sighed, rubbing a hand over his eyes. Why was he getting so high and mighty about Nikki anyway? He was no better than she was. He was worse. And he was lucky to have her – it was becoming rarer and rarer these days to find someone in this town to hang out with. Most of the people his age had moved out of Northampton right after high school graduation and were scattered in all directions along the east coast – getting married, starting graduate school, moving up in their careers.

Ben, on the other hand, was still working nights at the Roxy movie theater whose parking lot he was now sitting in. He looked down at the nametag pinned to his vest. He’d been working there since eighth grade. Seven years now. An embarrassingly long amount of time to be collecting ticket stubs and distributing popcorn and Jujubees to the elderly moviegoers in town.

There was no reason for him to be working there anymore, anyway. He hadn't touched his film equipment in months.

Ben knew he should be moving on. His parents wouldn't stop telling him that, either. Jessica had never wanted him at the Roxy to begin with. But there had been a time when the movies made him pretty happy – the smell of the ticket stubs, the popcorn, the candy. His favorite spot had always been in his creaky chair at the back of the movie theater. Of course, once he started dating Jessica, he was constantly being reminded that he should be spending his talents elsewhere. It eventually got to the point where he couldn't even relax in the back of the theater anymore, where he watched hundreds of movies before sweeping up the floor at the end of every night.

This whole town had become a nightmare for Ben. He had to move on. The only thing stopping him was his inability to figure out where he would go from there. He'd already taken the semester off from Muhlenberg. He wasn't graduating anytime soon anyway, having switched majors about four times in three years. First it was Anthropology. Then Political Science. He'd tried English for about four weeks and finally he'd resigned to the elegant status of Undecided. He'd only gone to Muhlenberg because Jessica said it was the perfect fit for him. She still didn't know that he'd been driving home every weekend to spend his Friday nights in the back of the Roxy, forgetting his troubles in the movies he loved so dearly.

It was one of those Friday nights when he first met Nikki. She had sat with her friends a few rows in front of him during the midnight showing of *Rocky Horror Picture Show* the Roxy played on Halloween night. She kept turning around to catch his eye, then turning back to whisper something to her friends. On the way out, she winked at him and the three girls left

giggling. Something about all that attention made him want to follow her. That, and the phone conversation he'd had with Jessica on the drive over.

"Undecided?" Jessica had hissed, because she'd been in the library studying for her history midterm. "That's a major?"

"I have no idea," Ben said, turning into the Roxy parking lot. "I shouldn't even be spending my money on school. I'm wasting my time there."

"You're not," Jessica said. "You're just not applying yourself. Get serious. Get focused. There's a career out there for you. You're not even trying to find it."

She spoke to him as if he were a child. Like he wasn't trying to figure out his next move just as much as she was. Her words rang in his ears as he left the Roxy after the movie that night and followed fifty yards behind Nikki and her friends as they ducked into the Gin Mill for a quick drink.

Ben now climbed into the front seat of his Jeep to turn off his windshield wipers and the engine. He grabbed his coat off the passenger seat and exited into the parking lot, stuffing his keys in his pants pocket. The snow was only about two inches deep in the lot, with dirty plowed heaps of snow around the outer spaces. The parking lot was behind the Roxy, so Ben had to trudge uphill in the alley between the Roxy and the local jewelers to the Main Street-facing front doors. A drift of fallen snow on the roof hit him in the shoulder as he went along, but he didn't bother brushing it off.

He swerved around the line of six or seven people waiting for the theater doors to open. Hilda, the 76-year-old volunteer employee waved to Ben from inside the ticket booth.

"Honey, where's your jacket?" she called through the microphone. "You look freezing."

He didn't look at her as he held up the jacket in his arms and pushed through the front doors.

"You're going to catch a cold," she warned before the door closed behind him.

The theater opened in 1921, and besides a few restorations to add newer seats or to refurbish the wood floors, the theater still retained the look of when it was first opened. Above the outdoor entryway was the classic marquee displaying what movie was being shown – only one at a time because of the single screen – as well as the giant vertical, well-lit art deco style block lettering reading, "ROXY," that could be seen at night from all the way at the other end of Main Street.

Ben nodded to Frank, the gray-haired ticket collector playing solitaire with a faded deck of cards at his podium, and made his way behind the candy counter. He stuffed his jacket on the shelf under the register then hit a button that made the cash drawer slide open with a cheery *ding*. He counted the drawer. They kept fifty bucks as a starting bank – six five-dollar bills and a heavy pile of one-dollar coins. Since Ben's worked here, the price of a movie ticket has never gone higher than four dollars, with candy and popcorn on sale for about a buck fifty. That meant his tips usually came in the form of nickels and dimes, or sometimes a quarter from a cheery old lady who smiled when she said, "You look just like my grandson," as she deposited the coin directly into Ben's hand.

He rubbed his eyes again, feeling tired or restless or stuck. Jessica used to say this was an indication that his body needed exercise. She was always running: just another thing she was great at. And she was always trying to get him to run with her. He tried track sophomore year because she wanted him to but he collapsed after the first practice. Jessica thought he only needed training, but he'd jogged with her after school a handful of times after and never quite got

the hang of it. Of course, Jessica went on to win first place in every race in the area. Set school records, ran marathons for charity, got a full scholarship to run at Villanova. Whenever he thought of a memory from high school involving Jessica, he thought of her in a pair of running shoes with her ears red from running through the cold.

Jessica said running was the best way to figure out where she was going. Because apparently a good run helped her figure out she was naturally talented at everything she set out to do. She didn't understand that not everyone was that lucky. As much as she nagged him, he could never admit to any career goals. Besides making movies, of course, but Jessica dismissed that idea with a wave of her hand every time he brought it up. "Don't sell yourself short," she'd say. "You don't have to be at the Roxy forever. You can dream so much bigger." Well, apparently he couldn't, because he was still here. His future stretched out in front of him as dim and hazy as the fog that hung low over the ticket booth outside.

"All right, people. Look alive," came a voice to his left. Ben didn't need to turn to know that Nancy, his boss, was standing there, clipboard resting on her plump hip, eighties style glasses on the bridge of her nose, and permed blonde hair pinned back by a black headband with plastic teeth. She was young to be an owner of a movie theater like this, but her father had passed away the year before, and she'd inherited the job from him. She did the best she could with it. She offered Ben a cupcake from a Tupperware container in her arms as she walked by. He shook his head, so she marched past, up the ramp next to Frank and opened the glass front door.

The elderly were the first ones in. Ben watched them teeter like toddlers down to Frank, leaning on canes or each other's arms. Frank took each ticket stub and said, to each customer in succession, "Enjoy the show," and slipped the stubs into the box on his podium. They used the

cheap, blue paper tickets with nothing typed on them except *ADMIT ONE* so they could be used again.

Ben helped the crowd of three around his counter. People over sixty loved their peanut M&M's. He worked the register on autopilot, having memorized each button location and each candy price.

“Thank you. Enjoy the show,” he mumbled back to them, watching as most of them pocketed their change and ignored his empty tip jar in front of them on the counter.

Next came Shirley, the Roxy regular. He gave her the usual Diet Coke and Red Vines and when she disappeared behind the curtain, Ben attended to the stragglers. There were the middle schoolers who never looked up from their smart phones when they ordered. The grandparents in with their grandchildren, spoiling them with Sour Patch Kids and Buncha Crunch. An older man with a bad cough who asked Ben to please fill him up a cup of water.

Finally, the Roxy music started in the next room where Ben knew the audience was watching the usual introduction of spotlights and red curtains and flashbulbs before golden letters scrolled across the screen: *Welcome to the Roxy and Enjoy the show!*

Ben's phone buzzed in his pocket as he gave his last customer in line – a thirteen year old on what looked like his first date – a bag of Skittles and his change. Ben fished the phone out of his pocket, but paused when he read the caller ID.

Harris Wheaton.

What could this be about? He knew Jessica was awake; everyone in town had been keeping up with the articles in *The Morning Call*. Could she have remembered him? Was she asking for him? Or maybe it was something else entirely. Did they know what Ben had done?

“Can you talk?” Mr. Wheaton asked when Ben finally answered.

“Yeah.”

“How are you?” His voice was soft on the other line, as if he was either sneaking around the house to make the call or trying hard to restrain himself from screaming.

“I’m okay.”

“Ben, I want you to come see Jessica.”

Ben was suspicious. Did she remember him? Did she know what he did to her? Or was she getting worse? Maybe Mr. Wheaton wanted him to come say his final goodbyes.

“I don’t really think that’s a good idea,” Ben said, moving out from the counter and pulling aside the curtain into the theater and looking down the dark row of seats to the previews on the screen. An old time cartoon was playing: a popcorn box and a Pepsi can with arms and legs dancing together. The speakers blared the old, familiar jingle: “Let’s all go to the lobby, let’s all go to the lobby, let’s all go to the lobby, to get ourselves a treat.”

At the bottom of the screen, white lettering blinked on and off. *The concession stand will be closing in fifteen minutes*, it read.

Mr. Wheaton was silent at the other end. Then he said, “So you’re still working at the Roxy?”

Mr. Wheaton was judging him. He sounded just like Ben’s father. “I should probably go,” Ben said, and turned back into the lobby.

“No, wait. Sorry. I didn’t mean to – ” He sighed. “I’m calling because Jessica is still struggling over here.”

“What do you mean?”

“She hasn’t gotten any of her memory back yet. It’s been twelve days.”

“Is that normal?” Ben asked, even though he’d already done the research himself. Most of the articles he’d read online said that regaining one’s memory depended on a variety of factors – extent of the injury, level of amnesia, involvement from the family members. The real answer was that one could never be sure.

“It’s been really hard on us. On my wife, especially,” Mr. Wheaton said. Ben thought of Patty, the hardworking dentist by day, and fearless mountain biker by night. He couldn’t imagine her weak or struggling. Or Harris, for that matter. Jessica’s family was the strongest, most positive group of people Ben had ever met. To think of them suffering gave Ben an uneasy knot in his stomach. He paused at the front doors of the lobby and watched a light snow trickle down from the darkening clouds outside.

“Well, if she’s not remembering anything then what am I supposed to do? How will I make any difference?” he asked.

Mr. Wheaton paused on the other end of the line. Ben imagined him, alone in his study, running a hand back and forth through his hair, something he did whenever he was thinking. “Look, I know you have been reluctant to play your part in all this,” he finally said. “And I can understand how you’d be afraid or uneasy about coming back. But we are willing to put everything behind us. If you are.”

Ben rested his forehead on the cold glass of the front door.

“You were a very important person in her life.”

Ben sighed. “I know.”

“And you were there for every important moment. Don’t you think you could help her remember?” Mr. Wheaton asked, and Ben thought of him and Jessica in her car last December on the Interstate, weaving through a forest of snowcapped trees. He’d turned the video camera

towards her in the driver's seat, recording her as she turned the radio higher as she sang, and he'd felt, just for a moment, that maybe he was about to make a mistake. "Don't you think you should at least try?" Mr. Wheaton asked.

Ben's forehead was numb from where it was resting on the glass. The snow was falling more heavily now and sticking to the ground.

"I can try," he said after a moment. It was the right thing to say, but he hated saying it. Hated everything about the whole situation.

"Thank you, Ben," Mr. Wheaton said, and hung up.

Ben put the phone into his pocket and turned back to the candy counter. Nancy was coming out of her office next to the restrooms, her Tupperware container and clipboard still in her arms. She raised her eyebrows when she saw him. "Leaving already?" she asked.

"Sorry," Ben said, dragging his feet back behind the counter.

"You sure you don't want to try one of these?" Nancy asked, offering the cupcakes to Ben again. "Key lime pie flavored. Made them myself."

Ben shook his head.

"I've got a job for you," Nancy said, dropping the container onto the counter, oblivious to Ben's mood. She dropped her clipboard on the counter, too. She had a calendar clipped onto it, open to March. "I want to do something new around here. Appeal to the younger crowd. Get some more butts in the seats. I could use your help."

He nodded, his mind back on the Interstate.

"You're a movie guy," Nancy continued, leaning on her elbows, clicking her pen in rapid succession on the counter. "What kind of things could we be showing?"

Ben watched the pen click for a few moments before he realized Nancy had stopped talking. “I’m sorry?”

Nancy sighed and lifted herself off the counter. “All right. Something’s bothering you again. Get out of here. I’ll have Frank close up.”

She turned to where Frank was at the podium. He’d gotten his deck of cards out again.

“Thanks, Nancy,” Ben said, opening the cash drawer below the register to begin closing down. “I owe you one.”

“Think about our schedule,” Nancy said, backing away, clipboard in hand. “I’m willing to pay extra for your services. And take a cupcake to go.”

Ben shoved their profits from the night in an envelope and handed it to Nancy before turning off the display lights in the case of sweets and grabbing his jacket.

Hilda was still sitting in the ticket booth outside in case anyone came late. She was bundled in a coat, scarf, and mittens, and had a book propped up against the glass. She waved when Ben walked by.

Ben drove slowly out of the parking lot, thinking of Jessica. He drove past the liquor store on the corner – already closed for the night – and turned down McArthur Road towards home. He’d moved back in with his parents after the accident to a two-story house about fifteen minutes outside town. In the same neighborhood as the Wheatons. That’s where he first met Jessica.

It started when they were younger. On those never-ending summer nights before school started back up, the neighborhood boys met in Ben’s backyard for baseball games. They’d show up in the afternoon, barefooted, swinging bats and spitting into the tall grass sprinkled with

dandelion flowers. These were the days before dating girls, stealing parents' liquor and doing donuts in the cul-de-sac the day after getting a learner's permit.

One night in mid-July, Jessica showed up in Ben's yard – dirt on her knees, blonde hair pulled back in a gnarled ponytail, bubblegum smacking in her mouth – and insisted she was better at baseball than any of the boys, including Joe Deck, whose dad took him weekly to the batting cages. They all teased her at first, sticking out their tongues and pulling her out of the yard by the back of her shirt. It wasn't until the night Lenny Kosciulek stubbed his toe running bases that she was allowed to bat. And on her second swing she hit a long drive onto the second story roof of Ben's house and knocked a shingle off the roof. Ben caught it all on his old video camera. Right before Ben's dad came out the back door and chased them all out of the yard with a broom. She could run then, too. Before long Jessica was the best player they had. She played center field, and did more diving for balls than the boys.

That's what attracted most people to Jessica when they first met her. She was a fighter. She knew what she wanted and she went after it. She asked Ben out on their first date sophomore year before he even got around to thinking that way about her. But she convinced him because that was just the kind of thing she did. Mr. Wheaton always joked that she bossed Ben into submission and, in a way, she had. He had always been quieter. He liked to be alone, or behind his video camera. It took a few months of dating before he could wrap his head around the fact that she wasn't that little girl with the dirty toes that used to spit in his backyard anymore.

Ben's Jeep cruised out of town. The businesses and streetlights flickered away one by one. He turned on his high beams and eased past endless fields of dead corn half-buried in snow. The rundown house on the corner had electronic, plastic candles burning in every window. He drove past the farm with the Amish hex painted on the side of the barn. The snow dived

headlong into his windshield, giving him the feeling that he was on the *Millennium Falcon* traveling through hyperspace.

He slowed and turned into his neighborhood, passing the old fire station on the corner. When he reached the stop sign, he slowed, and turned to look up the hill at the Wheaton house.

It was something he always did when he came home at night. The house on the hill. It was mostly dark tonight. There was light flickering in the living room. Probably from the television. What was Jessica doing in there?

Ben chewed a hangnail on his thumb. Six months ago he would have said she was studying for something. Writing a paper. Doing research on the Internet. She took her future law degree very seriously. In the summers she'd come home and work with her father in his law office downtown. But surely she couldn't still be doing any of that now. What do you do when your mind is a complete blank? Look through pictures? Read a book?

He wasn't really planning on responding to Mr. Wheaton's request, at least not the same night, but he found himself pulling into the Wheaton driveway and turning off the engine. He hesitated in his seat for a moment. He'd been driving by this house every day for the past twelve days imagining what could be going on inside. The conversations they were having, the things Jessica was being reintroduced to. Were they telling her about him? Would they bother?

Again, Ben wished what he wished every day since the accident. That she had died. He hated himself for thinking it, but it kept coming back like an illness he couldn't wash his hands of. He was mad at her. Resentful. Confused. If she could have only died, he would not have been stuck here. He felt as if he had been holding his breath for months now, and he just wanted to shove her off and breathe. Just breathe. But he couldn't. Even without seeing her every day, she was still suffocating him.

He hated admitting it to himself, but when she was healthy, it was the same problem. She was always nagging. “Where are you going with your life?” “What are you going to do?” He didn’t know. He had no clue. And she was always pushing him. “You’ve got to get moving, Ben.” “Time waits for no one, Ben.”

He’d felt that way for months before he finally got up the courage to break up with her. He thought it had been perfect timing. They were on their way home from school for Christmas break. He’d talk to her on the car ride home, where they could be alone. He’d explain that he needed some time apart. A chance to clear his head. He’d practiced what he was going to say for the entire week leading up to it. But when he looked over at her in the car, carefree and laughing, her cheeks pink and warm, he expected to back out. To be reminded of his love for her. To want to call the whole thing off.

Instead, he felt nothing. There was nothing there anymore. Nothing positive, anyway. It was over. For good. And Ben was finally going to move on.

He dropped his head against the steering wheel in the Wheaton driveway. What kind of a horrible person resents his girlfriend for going into a coma before he has the chance to break up with her. Whose girlfriend depends on him to get well and all he wants to do is figure out where his life is taking him without her. Who seems to be forever reminded that the last thought he had in his head before the truck appeared around the bend was that he didn’t love her anymore. Without lifting his head, he reached his hand around the side of the wheel and turned the engine back on. He couldn’t talk to her.

“Ben?”

Ben lifted his head and there was Harris Wheaton at his window, wrapped in a puffy jacket. He looked confused. Ben opened his door.

“Ben, are you okay?” Mr. Wheaton looked down the driveway. “I heard your car. I thought you were somebody else.”

Ben shook his head. “I saw a light on,” he said, and trailed off. He swallowed. “I was just leaving.”

Mr. Wheaton reached into the car and wrapped his arms tight around Ben. He held him there for a long time, then said, “It’s so good to see you.”

Ben blinked tears from his eyes and pulled away, keeping his head down. Of course Mr. Wheaton wouldn’t be mad at him. He was too good a person.

“Jessica’s still awake,” Mr. Wheaton said, looking up into Jessica’s window. “You should come talk to her before she goes to bed.”

“I actually can’t right now.” Ben knew Mr. Wheaton could see right through him and any of his weak excuses.

“She would love to see you,” Mr. Wheaton said. “Come on, Ben. Let’s go see her.”

Ben turned off the engine again and pocketed his keys. He let Mr. Wheaton lead him from the car and up the walk. Mrs. Wheaton was waiting by the front door, and she looked shocked when she saw Ben come around the corner.

“Ben,” she said when he came inside. She kept her eyes on Mr. Wheaton as she pulled Ben in for a hug. Ben wondered fleetingly if Mrs. Wheaton knew that her husband had called him tonight.

“You know, Jessica’s pretty tired,” Mrs. Wheaton said.

“Absolutely,” Ben said. “I should leave.”

Mr. Wheaton held out a hand to stop his escape. “I think Jessica can stay awake a little longer to talk to Ben,” he said.

Patty glared at her husband but Mr. Wheaton led Ben past her and down the hall to the living room. Ben's heart was thumping hard inside his chest and his tongue felt dry. He wanted to run, wished he could have gotten out of the driveway before Mr. Wheaton saw him, but he knew there was no turning back now.

"Jessica, we have someone here who wants to see you," Mr. Wheaton said, grabbing Ben by the arm and ushering him into the living room.

Jessica was sitting in the dark on the couch, covered in quilts, with a book open in her lap. She looked up when Ben entered, a pen poised in one hand. Before he could stop himself, Ben gasped audibly into the room. Jessica looked completely different. Her once plump cheeks were deflated and clung to the bones beneath them. Her eyes seemed set back in her skull, and an ugly scar ran down the side of her face. Her hair was different, too – it only reached below her ears and it curled and puffed about her head in a way Jessica never let it before. If he hadn't known whose house he was in, he wouldn't have known who she was.

"I think Jessica's too tired after all," Mrs. Wheaton said behind him, clearly offended by Ben's reaction to her daughter's appearance.

Ben opened his mouth to apologize, but forgot how to form the words. Jessica looked down self consciously, and her cheeks and forehead turned a dark red. Who was this girl? She looked so afraid, like a deer lost in the woods.

"Jessica," Mr. Wheaton said at Ben's side. "Do you remember who this is?"

Jessica's eyes darted back up to Ben, and her brow furrowed in concentration. Then she looked back down into her lap. She shook her head.

"This is Ben," Mr. Wheaton said. "Do you remember him from pictures?"

If it was possible, Jessica's face reddened. She nodded.

“Okay, well, now that you’ve seen him – ” Mrs. Wheaton strode past Ben to get to her daughter, but Mr. Wheaton grabbed her wrist and held her back.

“Why don’t we give them some time to talk?” Mr. Wheaton said, ignoring Mrs. Wheaton’s furious expression and led her back out into the hall. “We can finish the movie later, Jessica.”

Mrs. Wheaton said, “We’ll be right in here, Jessica. If you need us.”

Jessica’s eyes widened in fear. They stared at each other for what felt like an impossibly long amount of time. Ben was just planning on bolting when Jessica finally spoke.

“I dated you?” Jessica asked in a voice barely above a whisper.

Then again, maybe she didn’t know as much as he thought she did. “Yeah.”

She didn’t recognize him.

“Have you come to see me before?” she asked.

“No.”

She nodded. “Do you live far away?”

“No, I live in the neighborhood.”

“And you didn’t come to see me?”

“I’m sorry. I – ”

“Patty doesn’t let me see anyone anyway,” Jessica cut in. Ben found it odd that she was calling her mother by her first name.

“I see.”

They stood there for a second, eyeing each other. Ben scoured his brain for something to add to the conversation but came up blank.

“I know how bad I look,” Jessica said.

“You don’t look bad,” Ben said, and he meant it. She didn’t look like Jessica. And he could tell from the purple hue around her eyes and the deep scar down her face that she was still recovering from the plastic surgery. Underneath it all, she wasn’t unattractive. She seemed to sense what he was thinking and she looked away, embarrassed.

“So,” he drew it out, giving himself an additional second to come up with something more interesting to say. “You don’t remember anything?”

Jessica eyed him, as if wondering what it was he wanted her to remember. “I don’t know,” she said. Her eyes moved to the book on her lap. “I went to the doctor’s this afternoon and they said I am remembering things.”

“Oh, yeah? Like what?”

She thought for a second, and then smiled. “I don’t remember.”

Ben smiled, too. “Well, that’s not good.”

She laughed. “No, probably not.”

Her cheeks flushed again, and she looked back down at the book in her lap. It was a journal of sorts, and the pages were filled with her handwriting. “I started writing down some things so I don’t forget them.”

“What kind of things?” Ben asked.

She flipped through the pages for a minute, as if deciding what to tell him. Ben took a few steps into the room and sat in the chair in the corner. Finally, she said, “I really like *The Lord of the Rings*. I read them yesterday.”

“All of them?” Ben smiled. “You should see the movies.”

“And I don’t like spinach,” she said.

“Now, that’s not true,” Ben said. “You love this spinach dip that your mom makes. She makes it every December at your parents’ holiday party and you always say, ‘This is my favorite.’”

“Oh.” Jessica looked disappointed. She took her pen and scratched something at the bottom of the page. “I thought I didn’t like it,” she mumbled.

“No, you know, maybe I’m wrong,” Ben said, and Jessica stopped scratching the pen across the page. Ben felt so bad for her. It was like he had taken away the one thing she felt she had control over. And it was her feelings about spinach. “You know better than me, right?”

Jessica gave a shy smile and then laughed. “Yeah. I don’t like it.”

“There you go.”

Ben watched Jessica flip through more pages. He could see that there was something different about her – besides the nasty scar and the shorter haircut. She was so quiet and unsure of herself. Every experience was new to her, and there was so much to take in. She now seemed to have a lot more in common with Ben than she did back in December. He was going to be sad to see this Jessica go.

She closed her book and drew her quilts closer around herself. “I think I have to start running again.”

Ben sighed. That sounded exactly like the old Jessica. “Why’s that?”

“I don’t know,” Jessica said. “I feel like everybody wants me to. My parents got me these nice running shoes for my birthday.” She sighed. “They put a lot of pressure on me in this house.”

Ben realized he was smiling. “Yes, this family is full of achievers.”

“I’m sorry,” Jessica said quickly, as if she realized what she said. “My parents are so great. They treat me so well.”

“Yeah, they always have.”

Jessica leaned back against the couch. “My parents have pictures all over the house of themselves climbing up the side of a giant rock.” She was bragging.

Ben laughed. “I’ve seen those. We’ve gone with them a few times.”

Jessica’s eyes widened. “How was that?”

“I couldn’t lift my arms for three days afterwards.”

Jessica laughed. “That sounds awful. Let’s never do that again.”

“Write that down,” Ben said, pointing to her journal. “I don’t want you to ever forget that one.”

They sat together in comfortable silence for a minute. It felt almost like old times. Although Ben couldn’t remember ever feeling so comfortable in Jessica’s presence. It was like they were finally on the same page. He found himself glad for the first time in months that Jessica had lived after all. Then he quickly dismissed the thought. Her memory would return. And then they’d be right back to where they started. Especially if they continued to hang out.

“So do you want to come with me tomorrow?” Jessica asked quickly, blushing again.

“To run? I don’t know.” He knew it wasn’t a good idea, but he found himself going against his better judgment. “I guess. I guess I could.”

Jessica smiled again. “Good. What’s your name again? Paul?”

“Ben.”

“Ben. Sorry.” She scribbled something in her journal. “There. You’re in the book. Now I won’t forget you.”

Chapter Three

Jessica was nudged awake the next morning by Patty, who looked considerably anxious that Jessica was still sleeping.

“It’s almost nine thirty,” she said, helping Jessica sit up. “Is everything all right?”

Jessica was confused. “I think so.”

Patty took a notebook off her nightstand and handed it to her. “Well, here’s your journal.”

Jessica opened the book in her lap. Everything was in her handwriting.

Patty paused at the door, her hand on the knob. “Are you remembering anything? Is that what you’ve been writing down?”

“I’m not sure,” Jessica said, without looking up from the journal. “I’ll let you know.”

There were only fifteen pages of notes. Toward the end she found a paragraph on a man who came to the door on her 21st birthday. As Jessica read, she remembered it vaguely. There had been an argument. He was drunk. The paragraph explained that he was the father of the other girl in the accident, and he kept coming to the house and making Harris and Patty upset. At the bottom of the paragraph, she wrote,

I feel terrible about his daughter. I wish there was something I could do to help him.

She scrambled out of bed and got ready for the day, taking her notebook with her into the bathroom. While brushing her teeth, she flipped through the rest of the journal entries. Most of her notes were bulleted lists on things she liked and things she disliked. They all sounded

familiar once she read them off: She didn't like staying in the house all day. She did like her mother's cooking. She didn't want to be compared to her old self all the time. She did want to try running in her new running shoes.

There was also a paragraph in yesterday's journal entry on her visit to the hospital that afternoon. Her plastic surgeon's name was Dr. Branson, and he had been pleased with the healing of her scar. And another doctor told the family he saw improvements in her memory. She had regained the ability to recall names and places, which was something she couldn't do a week ago. Now it was just a matter of putting meaning to the names. Apparently, all areas of the brain were regaining their original functions – all but the frontal lobe, which controlled her memory and personality. They told her that since the brunt of her injuries occurred in the front half of her skull, it wasn't surprising that her identity was taking longer to catch up. Of course, there was the possibility that her slate would be wiped clean permanently. Only time would tell.

I'm worried, Jessica wrote on the car ride back from the hospital. Everybody keeps comparing me to the way I used to be. What if I start to remember some things from my past but not all of them? Patty and Harris will never love this damaged me compared to the amazing one they used to have. I wish I wasn't such a disappointment to them.

As Jessica returned to her bedroom to change, she reached the last of her entries. It was a sloppy note at the bottom of the page, dated from last night. She wrote, *Tomorrow you are going to go for a run with your boyfriend, Ben. P.S. He's so cute.*

She stopped in the hall. That's right. She had met Ben. She forgot what he looked like, or anything they talked about, but his dim memory warmed her chest to think about.

Jessica searched her drawers for running-appropriate clothing, based on the track photos of her on the wall. She pulled on some black leggings and a cross-country sweatshirt, grabbed

her journal and running shoes, and went downstairs. Patty was at the table laying out Jessica's plate of eggs and sausage.

"Patty, can you teach me how to tie these for me?" Jessica asked, holding up her running shoes as she sat down.

Patty made a face. "I hate that you call me 'Patty'," she said. "I'm your mother. You should call me 'Mom'."

"Oh, gosh. I'm so sorry," Jessica said. Patty was a terrific mother. Jessica's brain was just having slip-ups. She pulled her shoes on her feet.

Patty smiled and knelt in front of her and worked the laces gently in her fingers so that Jessica had time to jot the instructions into her journal for the future. Then Jessica took the laces in her own hands and guided them into their knots.

"You got it," Patty cheered as she got to her feet and headed to the sink. "You don't have to wear shoes in the house, though, Jessica."

Jessica shoveled the eggs in her mouth. "I know," she said, her mouth full. "I'm going out for a run with Ben today."

Patty turned to look at her. "You what?"

As if on cue, the doorbell chimed throughout the house. Jessica jumped up, her heart pounding, and turned on the spot. "He's here," she said, and darted into the hall bathroom to check her reflection.

"Where are you going?" Patty asked, following Jessica into the bathroom. Jessica swerved around her mother and went to answer the door.

Ben stood on the welcome mat outside in a big jacket and gym shorts. He was tall and curls the color of caramel puffed around his head like sheep's wool. She wanted to run her

fingers through his hair, but even she knew that was probably rude. He gave a nervous smile and an awkward wave.

“Let me get my coat,” she said and turned to the hall closet, her cheeks on fire.

Patty was clutching her robe around herself. She ducked into the closet and hissed in Jessica’s ear. “This isn’t a good idea.”

“Please can I go?” Jessica whispered back, taking a jacket off the rack.

Patty grabbed it out of her hands. “That’s your father’s.”

Jessica looked up and grabbed another one. “Can I wear this?”

“You can’t leave the house yet,” Patty said. “You’re not well.”

“I feel fine,” Jessica said. She poked her head out into the hall. Ben was standing on the porch, looking thoroughly uncomfortable. She turned back to Patty. “I want to *run*, though. Just like I used to.”

Jessica put on the jacket in her arms. It went down to her knees. Apparently she had grabbed another of her father’s.

Patty bit her lip, clearly at war with herself over which decision to make. “Wait here,” she finally said and went into the kitchen.

Jessica came out of the closet and caught Ben’s eyes. Wow, he was good looking. “I’ll be right out,” she said, waving like an idiot, and turned her back on him. Patty came back into the hall carrying a hat, gloves, and a scarf and jammed them all on Jessica as she fidgeted to get out of her grasp. Then Patty shoved something into her jacket pocket and zipped it closed.

“I will be watching from the porch,” Patty said, walking with Jessica to the front door. She spoke loud enough for Ben to hear, too. “You will take one lap around the neighborhood.

And I mean *one*. You will not stop to talk to anyone. If you get hurt in any way, Ben is to run back to the house to grab me. I can be there to pick you up in thirty seconds.”

Jessica stepped down onto the porch. She looked up at Ben on the mat, his face inches from hers.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi.”

They smiled.

“Well,” Patty said, coming onto the porch behind them. “Be back in ten minutes.”

“Yeah. Yes. Let’s go.”

Jessica turned back and waved to her mother as they left the porch; Patty was gripping the railing in front of her so tightly that her knuckles were turning white.

Ben drove a bright yellow Jeep. Jessica liked the way it stood out in the driveway against all the white snow and clouds. She followed him past the Jeep and down to the street. Ben looked off in both directions. He definitely didn’t look happy about running. Whose idea was it to do this anyway? Maybe he didn’t want to hang out with Jessica at all. But hadn’t they dated for years? Shouldn’t he be happy to see her?

“Well,” he said, his breath smoking up from his mouth. “Should we just run?”

“I guess so.”

He pointed downhill toward the stop sign, and they began to jog. At the corner, he led her left, deeper into the neighborhood. They started off slow, keeping to the right hand shoulder where their shoes splashed in the slush left over from the plows. The houses looked nearly identical on either side of the street. One had Christmas lights still dangling from its gutters.

Another had a mailbox in the shape of a giant trout. But they were all upper-middle-class two-story houses with big yards and long, sloping driveways.

Jessica hated running almost from the onset. She was self-conscious about the swinging of her arms and the pumping of her windbreaker jacket up and down her waist as she moved. She worried that Ben was going slower to keep in step with her, and whether that aggravated him. Then, at the first curve in the road, her throat began to burn from the cold air moving in and out of her lungs in rapid succession. Was she breathing too loudly? Her calf muscles tightened and resisted her. Soon she was breathing so quickly that she had to pull Ben's arm to get him to stop.

She huffed along the curb, her hands on her knees, sucking in more air that froze her insides as she took it in. She was so embarrassed, imagining Ben waiting there with his hands on his hips, wondering why he even bothered to come with her at all. When she looked up, however, she saw Ben in the same position, struggling for air.

"This sucks," she gasped, and Ben nodded.

Ben sat on the curb. Jessica joined him. They sat in silence together for a minute, catching their breath. Jessica looked back towards her house but, luckily, a giant pine tree in the neighbor's yard was blocking Patty from their view. This would probably bring tears to her mother's eyes. Another reason why Jessica would never be as good as her former self.

"I hate exercise," Ben said, running his hands through his hair. Jessica watched the light curls flatten against his skull and then bounce back to their original shape.

"Yeah, me too," Jessica said. "Whose idea was this?"

Ben looked up at her. "Are you kidding me?"

"Okay, it must have been mine," Jessica said. Great. He'd never want to hang out with her again.

Ben put his head back down between his knees, but not before Jessica saw him suppress a grin. She smiled, too. Then looked away before he caught her staring.

Jessica's hands were freezing. She unzipped her pockets and stuffed her hands inside. Her left hand found the bundle that Patty had stuffed in there. She pulled out a napkin with her breakfast sausages wrapped inside them.

"Give me one of those." Ben grabbed a link out of her hand before she could object and shoved it into his mouth. Jessica bit into the other one. "Oh, that's good."

Jessica watched him lick the grease from his fingers when he was finished. She did the same. "So, maybe we should get to know each other a little?" Jessica asked.

Ben shoved his hands back into his jacket pockets. "There's not that much to know about me."

Jessica nodded. "Are you in school?"

"No."

"Do you have a job?"

"Part-time."

"Doing what?"

He scratched the back of his head with his free hand. Again, Jessica found herself staring at the curls as they bobbed with the motion. "I work at the Roxy. It's a movie theater."

"I saw it!" Jessica sat up. "It's in one of our pictures."

"Yep," Ben said. "That's it."

Jessica had remembered a photograph in her bedroom. It was the one in a frame on her nightstand. She and Ben were standing outside an old movie theater, their arms linked, their heads leaning into one another. Bright flashbulbs made out the word, *Roxy*, above the door. She

couldn't believe she remembered all that. Or that he worked there. Jessica had seen dozens of movies since she'd been home. It sounded fun to work somewhere where you could get paid to watch movies all day. "Do you run as much as I used to?"

Ben laughed once, hard. "No, I don't."

"I ran a lot, huh?"

"All the time."

"And I was in pre-law at Villanova. I lived in Philadelphia."

Ben wiped his nose on his jacket sleeve. "That's also correct."

She was boring him. Her parents loved to play this game with her – let's see how much Jessica knows. Of course that wouldn't be interesting for anyone else. She was rusty on actual conversation. She looked back over her shoulder at her house atop the hill.

"Can you tell me more about my accident?" she asked, since that topic was usually off limits in the Wheaton house.

Ben turned and stared at her. "It was *our* accident. I was there, too."

"You were?"

Ben nodded.

Jessica realized her mouth was open. She closed it. "Were you okay?"

Ben shrugged. "I had a bruised rib and some cuts on my arms. I was fine."

Jessica ached with the urge to write that down, but her journal was back on the kitchen table. She watched him rub his eye. "I'm glad you weren't hurt too badly."

They sat in silence for another minute. A red car drove slowly past them, its brake lights lingering at the stop sign before continuing on toward town.

"Do you remember anything from the accident?" Ben asked.

“No.”

Jessica’s family hadn’t told her much about it, either. Her mother cried every time it was brought up, and Harris always smiled and said, “You’re lucky to be alive,” right before changing the subject. It was an automobile accident, she knew that. And she was on her way home from school for Christmas break. There was another girl involved in the accident, and she died.

“There was a tractor trailer that tipped over,” Ben said.

“What?”

“A truck. A big truck.” Ben didn’t look at her, but kept his eyes focused on the tire tracks the red car left behind in the snow. “It landed on Hannah’s car. She was in front of us. It was early morning so there weren’t a lot of cars around. You were driving. You turned the wheel, really hard, and we slid in some ice on the road and flipped. The car flipped a few times. When we stopped, it was because we had hit the side of Hannah’s car. I woke up on my side, in the car. The passenger side window was in pieces and I was lying on the road. I was lying on the road but I was somehow still in the car.

“That’s when I turned to look for you and you were gone. The windshield was broken. You had flown out of the car at some point – I don’t remember when. I crawled out of the windshield. Our stuff was all over the road. All of our clothes and textbooks and stuff. And the truck had been carrying boxes of tomatoes, so there were tomatoes rolling around in all directions. It was hard to tell what was tomato and what was blood. The truck driver came out of his truck, and he was screaming. His hands were dripping blood onto the highway – I think he punched his way out of a window. He kept screaming. I tried to talk to him, ask him if he was all right, but he wouldn’t stop screaming.

“I don’t know who called the police. Or when. But suddenly the police cars and ambulances were all there. I could see you and Hannah in the road, lying on glass and car parts. Neither of you were moving. I thought you were both dead. The keyboard from your laptop was right by Hannah’s foot. I remember that so vividly. It was just a foot and a keyboard. In the road.”

He laughed and wiped his nose on the back of his hand. “There was so much blood. And so much gravel. The paramedics got there, and they put me on a stretcher and took us all to the hospital.”

Jessica wondered why he wasn’t at her house every day since she’d been awake. Or if he stayed with her at the hospital. Were Patty and Harris keeping Ben away from her? Did they blame him for the accident?

Something poked Jessica in the leg, and she turned to see a large golden dog nosing around at her feet. The dog was connected by a leash to a man in a jacket and wool cap, with a scruffy beard. “You kids okay?” he asked. Ben didn’t look up.

“We’re fine. Thanks,” Jessica said, resting a hand on the dog’s head.

“Say, you’re Harris Wheaton’s girl, aren’t you? The one from the car accident on 95?”

“No, that’s not me,” Jessica said. She nudged Ben and he looked up at her. “Let’s get back to the house.”

“Right.” The dog approached him as he got to his feet. He muttered some form of greeting to the dog and followed Jessica back in the direction they had come. The bearded man called out to them as they left, but Jessica didn’t turn to respond. Ben kept his eyes to the ground as they walked. She could tell he was still on the interstate, at the scene of the accident.

“Thank you for telling me that story,” Jessica said, as they turned up the hill towards the driveway. “No one had before.”

Ben nodded. “I try not to think about it.”

Jessica said, “I can see why.”

As they turned into Jessica’s driveway, she saw Patty waiting on the porch, her arms folded tight across her chest. Patty watched them until the side of the house blocked them from view again. They were alone at his Jeep.

Ben took his keys out of his pocket, turning a silver house key over and over in his fingers, his head down. Jessica watched the way he blinked rapidly, his long lashes wet, but keeping back any tears. That accident had such an impact on him. But Jessica was fine. She was alive. She could talk, walk, think. She was a lot better off than Hannah was. Hannah’s foot had been sitting in the road.

Finally, Ben’s shoulders heaved as he drew a deep breath and blew it out slowly from his mouth. “Well,” he said. “Running was a mistake.”

“Yes, it was.”

Ben sighed again. He was probably trying to tell her that he was done hanging out with her. She should go back inside. Patty was waiting for her. And Ben probably wanted to go. But Jessica didn’t want to go back inside. She’d been inside every day for two weeks now. She was suffocating. She kicked at the gravel in the drive.

“Are you still hungry?” Ben asked, pointing his key at her.

Jessica shrugged. “I guess a little.”

“Do you think your mom would care if you came to get a cheesesteak with me?”

Patty would definitely care. Jessica was surprised Patty hadn't come around to the driveway to grab her already. "Well, maybe we just shouldn't tell her we're going," Jessica heard herself say, and opened the passenger side door of the Jeep and climbed in.

Ben laughed and got in next to her, starting up the engine. What was Jessica doing? Patty was going to be furious. Not to mention panicked. And terrified.

Sure enough, as Ben backed the Jeep out of the driveway, Patty came running down the walk, waving her hands for them to stop. One of her red slippers flew off, and her bare left foot splashed in the slush as she ran. Ben put the car in drive and drove down the hill and out of the neighborhood. Jessica turned in her seat and saw Patty slow her run to a stop at the end of the driveway and punch the side of the mailbox with her fist.

Jessica turned back around, her heart hammering in her chest. What had she just done? And for what reason? This was not worth the trouble she'd be in when she got home. After everything Patty and Harris had done for her. Jessica looked up at Ben, and her beating heart skipped a little faster. On the other hand, there was something exciting about leaving the house for something other than a doctor's appointment. Jessica didn't even know what a cheesesteak was, but she liked the thrill of finding out for herself.

"Have you had a cheesesteak yet?" Ben asked, taking one hand off the wheel to adjust the heat.

She looked up. "No."

"They didn't serve those at the hospital?" Ben asked, in mock surprise.

"Not that I am aware of," Jessica said. "But I was asleep for most of my stay."

"Still," Ben said. "They should have had you on a cheesesteak drip at the very least."

"If you say so."

Heat blew from the Jeep vents as they rolled down a winding country road. All of the sights felt new. Her eyes scanned in all directions – at the covered swimming pool in someone’s backyard, to the old firehouse on the corner with a sign out front advertising Bingo night next Thursday, to the geese that flew overhead in a sloppy V over acres of snow-covered cornfields.

When they got into town – Jessica could tell by the banners waving from every lamppost in orange and black that cheered *Welcome to Northampton* – Ben turned down Main Street.

“There’s the Roxy!” Jessica sat up in her seat, turning in the window as they passed it.

The Jeep stopped a block past the movie theater at a little brick building with a faded green awning that advertised cheese fries and pierogies in neon lettering in the window. Inside were a few wooden tables and chairs to the left and a long, off-white counter on the right with one overweight man behind it. He was in a white tank with yellow stains under his armpits and grease stains over his potbelly. It looked like he manned the kitchen himself.

Ben ordered for them – two cheesesteaks, a plate of pierogies, French fries, and a side of nacho cheese. He brought it all on a red plastic tray to a table under the window then went to fill up two Pepsis at the drink machine. The meal was so colorless. Patty was obsessed with filling her up on vegetables and greens. When Jessica told Ben this, he shrugged and said, “French fries are potatoes.”

As they ate, they watched the crowd of old people that were gathering outside the Roxy for their matinee showing. Ben told her funny stories about each one – Phyllis sneaking in a flask, Duncan snoring from the back row, Meryl and Harry getting kicked out for making out. Ben pulled his shorts up over his belly button and did his best Gerald yelling at the screen imitation. They laughed so hard the man behind the counter cleared his throat and intentionally turned the volume higher on the television hanging on the wall.

They talked about movies, too. Ben had seen everything she'd been watching at home – *Gone With the Wind*, *Star Wars*, *Back to the Future*. His face lit up as he recited lines from his favorite scenes. He knew a lot about them. It was obvious he really enjoyed his job at the Roxy. Sitting in on a different movie every night sounded like it taught him a lot.

“No wonder you're not in school,” Jessica said after Ben finished telling her about the *Batman* movie marathon the Roxy held last month. “You already know everything about filmmaking.”

Ben opened his mouth to say something, but laughed instead. He dipped a fry in the puddle of ketchup they were sharing on the tray. “I'm not in school because filmmaking isn't a career. It's a hobby.”

“So do you film things, then?” Jessica asked.

Ben shook his head. “Not really.”

“You should,” Jessica said. “I think you'd be really good at it.”

“How could you even tell that about someone?” Ben asked, his fry forgotten in his hand. “You don't know anything about me.”

“I'm sorry. I don't know what I'm saying.”

Jessica jumped as something hit the window above their table. Patty was rapping her knuckles on the glass, a jacket over her robe and her hair frizzed out in all angles.

“Get out here.” Patty's voice sounded muffled, like she was screaming underwater.

“That's our cue to leave,” Ben said, stacking their dirty paper plates and napkins on the tray and carrying them over to the trashcan. Jessica followed him outside.

Patty ran forward and grabbed Jessica by the wrist. “What the hell do you think you're doing?”

Jessica started to answer, but realized the attack was not on her, but on Ben. Patty shoved Jessica behind her and pointed a long finger at Ben's chest.

"I tried to give you another chance," Patty said. "And this is how you repay me? By kidnapping my daughter? What is wrong with you?"

"I didn't mean –"

"Stay away from her," Patty said. She grabbed Jessica by the arm and dragged her down the sidewalk. "You just stay away."

They stopped outside a silver Honda on the curb, and Patty pressed a button on her keychain that unlocked the doors. She opened the passenger door and practically pushed Jessica down into the seat. Her eyes were swollen and smudged with make-up, and when she went around to get in the driver's side, she almost opened the door into oncoming traffic.

When Patty finally got inside the car, she slammed the door closed and turned the key in the ignition with shaking fingers. She had the same red rubber boots on her feet that Jessica had worn to go outside. At first, Jessica was excited that she remembered such a specific detail. But her happiness dissolved quickly.

"Patty, I'm so sorry," Jessica said as the car swerved out into the road. "I don't know what I was thinking –"

"You weren't thinking," Patty said, turning left at the light. An oncoming car slammed on its breaks to allow her room. "Of me. Of your father. Of your *health*."

"I know."

"And I'm your mother." Tears were falling from Patty's eyes now. Her nose was pink. "I'm not Patty. I'm Mom. And I know best. If I say you are never to see Ben again, then you are never to see Ben again. Understood?"

Jessica nodded but kept her face towards the window so Patty couldn't see her expression. She knew she was being childish, but she wasn't ready to say goodbye to Ben yet. There was something about him that made her nervous and giddy at the same time. She liked laughing with him. She liked the way she felt when Ben looked at her – like a snow globe had been knocked upside down in her stomach, the contents swirling and jumbling around inside her. He was the only person that seemed okay with the way that she was now. Who wasn't trying to get the old Jessica back. Who wasn't putting so many expectations on her. The way he smiled out of the side of his mouth or the times he looked too long in her direction when he didn't think she noticed – it all seemed like he liked her just the way she was now. There was no pressure.

When they got back home, Patty helped Jessica in the door. She removed Jessica's jacket, scarf, gloves. She untied and removed her shoes. Placing a hand on Jessica's forehead, she checked for a fever. Jessica let herself be smothered. It was the least she could do after the afternoon she'd put Patty through. Soon after, Patty insisted she take a nap. Jessica meant to write about her day in her journal first, but the excitement of everything put her right to sleep. And when she woke up, the first thing she thought about was Ben.

Chapter Four

Ben had been thinking about tomatoes spilling out onto the Interstate when he heard his parents' garage door opening. He jumped up from the table, shoving the crust of his reheated pizza into his mouth. He was rinsing his plate in the sink when his mom opened the door off the garage and joined him in the kitchen.

"Can you help me with these?" she called, and Ben turned to see her hands full of paper bags from Redner's Market. He grabbed the heavier of the two and brought it over to the kitchen counter.

They unpacked the groceries in silence. Ben chewed the remainder of his food.

"Working tonight?" his mother asked, throwing the empty bags in the trashcan.

Ben shook his head.

"The night off," she said, nodding her approval. "Maybe you could use that time to look into getting a fulltime job somewhere."

"All right," Ben said, moving around her and heading for the stairs.

"Your father and I are serious about that rent check," she called after him. "You've got to start pulling your weight."

Upstairs, Ben swung his bedroom door shut and fell across his bed. *Kill me now*. But then he heard his phone vibrating on the nightstand and sat up to grab it. At a glance at the screen, he saw the call was from Nikki. He brought the phone to his ear as he lay back down on the bed.

“Yo, loser.” She was always calling him that.

“What’s up?”

“I want to go out tonight,” she said. “Can you pick me up?”

“I’m working.”

“Fuck you, I know you’re not.”

Ben let the phone drop onto the bed and rolled away from it. She continued to talk for a while, Ben catching every other word if she screamed loud enough. Finally, he groaned and rolled back over, bringing the phone to his ear.

“Can you pick me up?” she asked again.

“Yeah.”

He grabbed his jacket off his desk chair, avoiding the humming coming from inside his closet. Shoving his keys, phone, and wallet into his back pockets, he took the stairs two at a time and left out the front door to avoid running into his mom again in the kitchen.

As he drove through the neighborhood, he thought about which bar to take Nikki to. Gin Mill was getting old. Triboro Country Club too far. She hated going to Metro’s. And he loved it. But then again, he hated having to pick up Nikki – she lived fifteen minutes outside town in the opposite direction. He only did it because her license got taken away last summer after her second DUI. Maybe if he reminded her of that, she’d concede to go to whatever bar he wanted for a change.

At the stop sign, he instinctively looked up the hill at the Wheaton house. The sun was setting behind it, turning the house bright red as if it were oozing blood onto the snow around it. Ben thought for a second of the truck driver’s hands. And the foot on the road.

And, again, he thought of Jessica. The new Jessica. The one he went running with a few days ago. She looked different; she acted different. He had actually had a good time with her. He couldn't remember the last time that happened. Hopefully the Wheatons weren't punishing her too hard. She clearly had a case of cabin fever in there.

He turned back to the road and started to drive through the stop sign when he did a double take. Someone was on the Wheatons' roof. Because of the angle of the setting sun, it was hard to get a good look, but there was definitely a figure in white sitting on the roof below Jessica's bedroom window. He stopped in the middle of the intersection and rolled down his passenger side window to get a better look. The figure was small, skinny, and pale. Jessica. And as he watched her, she lifted a hand in the air and waved.

Ben laughed. The whole thing caught him off guard. For no reason other than his surprise at the sight, he pulled over on the side of the road and turned the Jeep off. He jumped out and trudged through the snow and up the hill towards her.

Jessica had laid out what looked like her bedroom sheets on the roof shingles and she was sitting on them in a short white dress that Ben remembered her wearing last summer at his grandmother's 85th birthday party. She was wearing her new running shoes. She patted her hair down as he approached her, but her hair went back to its unkempt frizz when she let go.

Ben checked the windows of the first floor before speaking, to make sure the coast was clear. "What're you doing up there?"

Jessica held up the book in her hand – *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.
"Reading."

Ben laughed again. It was the oddest sight. "Aren't you cold?"

“Yeah,” she said, then turned to look back in her window. “Patty and Harris aren’t letting me go outside anymore.”

“I’m sorry about that,” Ben said. “I feel like that was my fault.”

“No, it’s my fault. I wasn’t allowed to leave the house.”

“And you’re still not allowed to leave the house.”

Jessica smiled. “I’m a rebel.”

Ben smiled, too. This Jessica was funny.

“Where’re you going?” Jessica asked.

Ben had to think for a second. He’d forgotten about his date with Nikki. “Out for a drink.”

“Because you’re twenty-one?”

Ben laughed. “Yeah, I am twenty-one. I can drink.” He shrugged his shoulders. “But, hey. You’re twenty-one now, too, right? So you can drink, too.”

Jessica nodded. “I want to drink, I think. Remember that scene from *Pulp Fiction*? When they get drunk and dance on the bar?”

“Yeah.”

“I want to do that,” Jessica said, softly, before her cheeks turned red.

“Well – ” Ben stopped himself. His instinct had been to invite her out. But that was stupid for a number of reasons. First of all, he wasn’t allowed to see her anymore. And second, and most important, once her memory returned, she’d go back to bossing him. The best thing for her – and him – was to distance himself and let them both get a fresh start. So instead of finishing his thought, he grinned like an idiot and shoved his hands in his pockets.

“I guess I’ll let you go, then,” Jessica said.

“Yeah.” Ben nodded. “See you.”

He was halfway down the hill when he heard a loud crunch at the house and turned around to see Jessica emerging from a large bush under her bedroom window. She ran after him, her hair blowing behind her.

“Can I come?” she asked, coming to a stop in front of him. She had a scrape on her knee and dirt and leaves clung to the front of her dress. She talked fast. “I know you don’t want to babysit me. But I just need to get out of the house for an hour or two. My parents think I’m sleeping.”

Ben realized his mouth was open. “Yeah. Um. Yes. Okay. Come on.”

They drove in silence on the way to the bar. Ben gave her his jacket, which she pulled tight around her. Her arms and legs were both crossed in front of her and her legs were covered in goosebumps where her skirt ended mid-thigh. He reached over and turned the heat on high.

They passed the Papa John’s and the bowling alley and turned into Metro’s parking lot. Ben cut the engine. “Okay, we’re here.”

“Is this your house?”

“No, but it’s in the basement of somebody else’s house.”

Metro’s was owned by Ben’s father’s good friends. They were three older, Polish brothers who made their living off selling two-dollar drinks and greasy hamburgers out of the basement bar of their mother’s house. Ben led her inside. The room was small, consisting of wood paneling on the walls and cracking tiles along the floor. The bar looped around the center of the room, trapping the bartender inside it. Tonight it was Adrian, the youngest brother, serving the drinks. Adam and Damian, the other brothers, were still here, however, drinking at a table in the back. A small stage had been erected behind the bathrooms but tonight it was not in use –

probably owing to the Flyers game being broadcast on the three television screens over everyone's heads.

Ben and Jessica took seats at the bar. When Adrian came around to take their order, Ben asked for two Yuenglings, which were brought to them in foaming boot-shaped mugs and set on paper napkins with the bar's emblem stamped across them. Jessica slurped the head off the beer and crinkled her nose as it hit her tongue.

"It takes some getting used to," Ben said, sliding his beer closer to him on the napkin and taking a deep gulp. "You weren't much of a drinker before, so –"

"That doesn't matter," Jessica said. "I don't remember anything from before the accident. I have to start from scratch."

She took another sip and tried to hide her distaste as she swallowed. She turned to watch the game on the television against the back wall. Ben took another big gulp from his own glass. It must be frustrating for Jessica to have to deal with the pressure of living up to her former self. God, how did she even stand it? Especially with Mr. and Mrs. Wheaton, Jessica's biggest fans. This girl probably couldn't go two minutes without them reminding her that their daughter was the best at everything. No wonder she was rebelling.

"So, how much trouble are you in?" he asked.

Jessica turned from the screen, her chest heaving in a tired sigh. "I should never have run away like that," she said. "Patty and Harris – my mom and dad – they've given up so much for me already."

Ben felt bad for not seeing things the way she did. He supposed his parents gave up a lot for him, as well. As did Jessica, come to think of it. When had Ben ever given up anything for anybody else?

“And look how I’m repaying them,” she said, shaking her head. “First chance I get, I run away again.”

“Well, you said it yourself,” Ben said. “It’s a lot of pressure in that house.”

He jumped as Jessica turned suddenly on her stool to face him, so that her legs were on either side of Ben’s body. He could feel the heat coming off her body as she stared. “Do you ever feel like nobody cares who you are?”

“Jessica, lots of people care about you.”

“No, a lot of people care about *Jessica*,” she said. “Who she was. Who I’m going to be, I guess, once I get my memory back. They don’t care about who I am right now. Do you ever feel like people only really care about the vision they have in their head of who they want you to be?”

“Yeah,” Ben said, noting the irony in the fact that he was admitting this to the girl that up until a few months ago, made him feel that way during every conversation. “I’ve felt like that.”

“I feel like that every day,” she said, twisting back to face the bar and gripping her beer in both hands. “Jessica used to love her eggs scrambled. Jessica used to drink out of this cup. Jessica went to sleep every night at eleven thirty. Jessica. Jessica. Jessica.”

“Well, you *are* Jessica.”

“But I’m not,” she said, turning to face him again. “Not anymore. Or, not yet. I’m a different person. I don’t like my eggs scrambled. I hate to run. Last night I stayed up until six o’clock in the morning.”

“You did?” Ben asked. “Why?”

“I wanted to see the sun rise.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and the motion sent several hairs flying up towards the ceiling from the static in her fingertips. She looked crazy.

“Okay.” Ben drank the rest of his beer and smacked it down on the counter before wiping his mouth on his sleeve. Adrian looked over and shook his head before returning to the game.

“So, you’re not Jessica anymore,” Ben said.

“What?”

“You’re Jess.”

Jessica smiled, bewildered. “What are you doing?”

“You haven’t heard about Jess?” Ben asked, feigning shock. “Wow. You’ve got to meet her. She can shoot Pepsi out of her nose when she laughs.”

Jessica snorted. “I don’t do that.”

“And she hates exercise. But she loves movies. And cheesesteaks.”

“Do you know what else she hates?” Jessica asked.

“Spinach,” they both said together.

Ben waved to Adrian, who filled two new mugs of beer for them. “So, you’re Jess,” he said again, lifting his full glass for a toast. When she looked confused, he dipped his glass against hers on the table, the clink making a few heads turn away from the hockey game. “To Jess.”

“To Jess,” she repeated, taking a sip.

Ben kept his eyes on her as he took a long sip from his glass. It was true – this girl was not Jessica Wheaton. Not in looks or in personality. It was like she was in between the Jessica of the past and the Jessica of the future. She was the hopeful, spirited girl that was here for a short time before the all-talented, all-knowing Jessica returned to take over. Ben could be friends with Jess. While she was here.

“That’s who you are,” said an old man on Jess’ other side. He had turned away from the game, his flannel-clad elbow resting on the counter in a puddle of spilled beer. “You’re that coma girl.”

A few more faces turned to look.

“Yeah, that’s me,” Jess said, pulling her hair in front of her face as if in hiding. “I’m awake now.”

“And living it up right.” The old man tipped his faded hat at her frosty glass.

“Say, my grandson went to school with you.” A man in a Parkland wrestling sweatshirt called out to her from across the bar. “Jimmy Snyder.”

Everyone was watching Jess. She looked to Ben for help, her cheeks glowing again.

“Right, we know Jimmy,” Ben cut in. “Flunked out of Drexel first semester, didn’t he?”

Jimmy’s grandfather harrumphed and turned back to the game. Soon the rest of the bar patrons’ attention had refocused on the Flyers.

“Small town gossip trumps coma patients ten to one,” Ben said in Jess’ ear.

“Thank you.” Jess smiled and did that thing she did sometimes – holding his gaze a second longer than expected. She turned shyly back to her drink.

Ben smiled, too, and finished his second beer.

“Hey.” Jess suddenly grabbed his arm. “Who’s that guy over there?”

She was pointing to a table under the dartboard. Richard Thatcher was drinking alone at his usual table. Nothing surprising about it. What was surprising was that Jess was interested in him.

“That’s Richard,” he told her. “He’s just a drunk.”

“His daughter was Hannah?”

So that's how she knew him. "Yeah. She was dead before we all made it to the hospital."

"That's terrible," she said, watching Richard as his head drooped down onto the table. When his nose hit the wood, he snapped back up and took another sip of his drink. "Were we friends with Hannah?"

"No," Ben said, thinking of Hannah's flowing hair at the homecoming dance in tenth grade. "Hannah lived in town with her dad and brother. They had all kinds of problems."

"Like what?"

"Hannah was okay, I guess. She was a year younger than us. We didn't have many classes together. But her dad was always an alcoholic. And her brother, Cody, killed himself two years ago."

"That's terrible," she said again. "What about Hannah's mom? Richard's wife?"

"I don't know exactly," Ben said. "I know she was never really around. I think she was in prison for a time."

Ben looked up as Jess got off her stool. "I'm going to go talk to him," she said.

"Jess, I don't think that's a good idea."

But she was already leaving. Ben got up and followed her over, keeping a step behind her. As she approached the table, Richard put his head in his hands, groaning loudly.

"Richard?" Jessica said in a voice barely over a whisper. She tried again, a little louder.

Richard lifted his head out of his hands and met Jess' eyes. He stared at her for a few seconds. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Ben couldn't believe he let Jess come over here. "Come on, Jess," he tried, grabbing her wrist.

“Richard. My name is Jessica Wheaton,” she said. “I was in an accident with your daughter.”

“Get away from me.” Richard stumbled to his feet, knocking his chair backwards. “Get this girl away from me.”

Jess backed up into Ben, who turned to see that Adrian and a few guys at the bar were making their way to Richard’s table.

“I want her away from me,” Richard yelled again as Adrian and the old man in flannel they’d talked to at the bar grabbed Richard’s arms and led him towards the door.

“Time to go, buddy,” the old man was saying.

Adrian turned back to his older brother, Damian, who was out of his chair as well. “Call a cab,” Adrian said, and the three men disappeared out the door.

“Are you okay?” Ben asked, turning Jess around in his arms.

She looked rattled. “I just felt so bad for him.”

“I know.” Ben put an arm around her and helped her back to their place at the bar.

“There’s not much anyone can do for him anymore, though. He’s drinking more than ever. I saw him get kicked out of a bar downtown last week. This is who he is now.”

“It’s just not fair. Why did we get to live and Hannah had to die?”

“Jessica Wheaton.”

Ben and Jess turned to the door. It was Ben’s worst nightmare. Mr. and Mrs. Wheaton back again and this time, Jess was in Ben’s arms. Mrs. Wheaton looked livid – hair wild, wide stance, her hands in fists at her sides. Mr. Wheaton was pinching the bridge of his nose, as if he knew that the position of Ben’s body towards Jess was going to cause some problems. Ben immediately backed away.

“What did I tell you?” Mrs. Wheaton turned on Ben.

“No, he didn’t do this,” Jess said, stepping in front of him. “I just wanted to come have a drink.”

“A drink?” Mrs. Wheaton whispered in disbelief. “You think your body can handle a drink?”

“Patty.” Mr. Wheaton moved forward, taking Jess’ shoulder. “Let’s just get her home. It’s late.”

Jess looked back before disappearing with her father outside. Mrs. Wheaton stepped towards Ben, her eyes narrowing.

“Patty,” Mr. Wheaton said again and she was called off like a rabid dog. She slammed the door of the bar closed behind her.

Ben let out the breath he’d been holding and ran his fingers through his hair. His forehead was wet with sweat. Another close call. He dreaded what Mrs. Wheaton would say to him if they were ever given a substantial amount of time together. Of course, she was right in saying it.

But he felt sorry for Jess. She had no one she felt she could talk to. Or trust. But Ben was not that person for her, either. And the sooner she realized that, the better. This was the last time they’d hang out. It had to be.

That night, as he lay in bed dreaming of Jess in her white dress, dancing on the Interstate, something hit softly against his window. Then another hit. Then another. He turned on the light, his head still groggy in dreams, and went to the window, half expecting to look down and see Jess, asking to come up. Instead, he found the window dripping in what looked like mucus and looked down into the yard where Nikki was throwing the last of a carton of eggs at his house. Her face was wet with tears and it was then that he remembered, for the first time since picking

up Jess, the plans he'd make with Nikki earlier. She threw the empty egg carton in the yard before chucking him the finger – adorned with a red, sparkly fake nail – and running back to her mother's car.

Chapter Five

“ – and to go behind our backs like that is just so unlike you.” Patty finished cutting Jess’ waffles into bite-sized pieces and moved down the plate to cut her sausages.

“I’m sorry – ”

“You know how much I worry.” Patty’s knife paused and she looked up at Jess. “Do you know that? Because I just *worry*.”

“I know.”

“I mean, you would never have done this to me before,” Patty said, sawing into the sausages once more. “We’ve always had such a good relationship. And now you’re testing me at every turn – ”

“I don’t mean to test you,” Jess said. And she didn’t. But she had to start doing something different if she was ever going to get her memory back. Jessica hadn’t sat around the house all day watching *Finding Nemo*. She had been out there living – going to school, running downtown, hanging out with Ben.

Ben. That was the second time her mother had torn them apart. And it felt like the harder Patty tried to separate them, the more it fueled Jess’ desire to see him again.

“Thank God your health is still okay,” Patty continued and she set the knife down and let Jess eat. “That reminds me. I need to pick up some antibacterial soap while we’re out today, Harris. Imagine the kind of germs that live in a bar like that. It’s in a basement, after all.”

Harris had been quiet while Patty ranted about the previous night's events, but he peeked around *The Morning Call* now to wink in Jess' direction. Jess smiled and ate her waffles.

The rain outside was picking up, turning everything it touched into ice. Jess sat in the living room on the armchair under the window all morning watching the rain come down in torrents and bounce off the slick snow. A flood of rainwater was collecting at the bottom of the hill and whooshing down the sewer drain under the stop sign like a giant waterfall. Her notebook lay forgotten behind her on the coffee table. She could hear her parents arguing upstairs. They had some lunch to go to with one of Harris' coworkers and his wife in an hour. Patty was panicking about leaving Jess alone again. But as Harris was pointing out, probably while tying his tie in front of the full length mirror in their bedroom, the plans had been made for weeks and it really would do Patty good to relax for a couple of hours.

It wasn't like Jess was going to go anywhere in all this rain. Or that she'd even have anywhere to go. She could only imagine what Patty said to Ben at the bar last night while she was being escorted to the car. It couldn't have been worse than what she'd said the other day, could it? "Stay away from her." Isn't that what she'd said? And how could she? Ben is her boyfriend. Or was. Why did everybody have such a problem with the two of them spending time together? Well, it didn't matter anymore. He was done with her. That was for sure.

Speaking of people who were done with her, it seemed that Richard was, too. She thought he'd be pleased to get a chance to speak finally with the girl he kept trying so hard to talk to. But she had been very wrong. If only there was something she could do to gain his trust. She felt such a connection with him. He was alone, too. And he was even more so than she was. At least Jess had Patty and Harris. Sure, they were overprotective and a bit neurotic and in denial that the girl sleeping under their roof wasn't the actually Jessica Wheaton they knew anymore. But at

least she had them. Who did Richard have? A wife in prison, a son who'd committed suicide, and a daughter – the last person he had left – dead on the side of Interstate 95. No wonder he was drinking so much and getting kicked out of every bar in town. She just wanted to tell him that he wasn't alone. And that she was there for him if he ever needed anything.

The phone rang throughout the house. Jess considered picking it up – just for something to do – but someone else did before she got up. A minute later, Harris came down the stairs, yelling up to Patty, "It's George Yenser about his mother's will. I'll get it in my study."

Harris poked his head into the living room. "Jessica," he hissed and beckoned Jess over. He looked back over his shoulder before he spoke again. "Ben's on the phone for you."

Jess couldn't believe it. What could he be calling for?

"Don't talk long," he said. "And don't tell your mother."

"Thanks," Jess said, running into the kitchen to grab the phone. She pulled the receiver into the hall bathroom and closed the door – the cord curling out from under the door.

"I've got something for you," Ben said, and Jess could hear the rain falling fast through the line.

"Where are you?"

"Outside," Ben said. "Listen. I buried something in a Ziploc bag next to your porch steps."

"What?" Jess was laughing, but she couldn't wait to go dig it out. "Are you crazy?"

"I was going to put it in your mailbox, but I didn't think your mom would let you that far away from the house."

“You’re right about that,” Jess said. “I think she’s in charge of all this rain, somehow. She knew it’d keep me inside.”

Ben laughed. “Go grab it when you can. I thought it’d be a welcome distraction.”

Jess left the bathroom on tiptoe, listening for the sounds of Patty and Harris. They seemed to both be back upstairs getting ready. So she hung the phone back on the wall and headed for the front door.

She closed the door quietly behind her and ran barefooted across the porch and down the steps and into the freezing rain. She gasped as it hit her – why hadn’t she thought to put on a jacket? But it was too late now. Looking over the railing, she saw a small patch by the bottom step where the snow had been disrupted. She dug her bare hands into it, wincing as her hands went numb. But she found it: the Ziploc bag. Jumping up, she dashed back inside.

She ran for the bathroom again, closing the door behind her and stripping her soaked pajamas off as fast as she could. She let them sit in a wet pile on the tiles and rummaged through the cabinet over the toilet for a towel. When she was wrapped in the towel and sitting on the toilet with her feet over the heating vent, she took the bag off the counter and opened it up. Inside was a small cell phone.

She laughed. What a perfect idea. It was old – there were chips in the navy blue casing and the number 4 had worn off its button. But Jess didn’t care. It was a link to the outside world. As she held it, it lit up and a message appeared on the screen: *Did you find me yet?*

“Jessica?”

Jess jumped and shoved the phone in the medicine cabinet before going out into the hall. Patty came around the corner and screamed.

“What on earth happened to you?”

Jess forgot about her appearance. She was completely soaked head to toe and practically naked except for a decorative towel around her middle. "I just wanted to feel the rain," Jess said. Stupid. So stupid.

But Patty gasped. "You poor thing," she said. "We need to get you into a hot shower before you catch a cold. Come on. Let's go upstairs."

They passed Harris on the stairs. "She can get in the shower herself, Patty," he said, but he turned around to follow them back up to the second floor. "We're going to be late."

"Look at her," Patty said. She turned the shower on in the upstairs bathroom. "I obviously can't go."

Harris sighed. "Patricia."

"I can shower by myself, Mom," Jess said.

"Obviously you can, but then you're going to need hot soup and bed rest." Patty ticked the list off on her fingers. "She went out in the freezing rain, Harris. I'm not going."

"I can come, too," Jess suggested. "Then you can keep an eye on me."

Harris seemed to consider it, but Patty jumped on him. "Absolutely not, Harris. She's not ready. After last night?"

"But I'll be with you," Jess said. "I can spend some time with you."

That seemed to soften Patty a bit. She ran a hand down Jess' wet hair. "But your health."

"They serve soup there," Harris said. "And Dan and Mary would be thrilled to see Jessica."

"I'll go get dressed," Jess said, ducking between them and heading into her room.

"But your shower," Patty called after her.

"I feel fine."

And she did. She wasn't hanging out with Ben, and she wasn't getting any closer to helping Richard, but she *was* getting out of the house and that was good. She grabbed Ben's cell phone before they left and texted Ben quick from the backseat of Harris' car. It took some getting used to but she managed to send, *tHank u*, before too long and hide the phone again in her jacket pocket.

At the restaurant, Dan and Mary Bromfield were as Harris said they'd be – thrilled to see Jessica.

"We can't wait to have you join our firm in a few years," Dan said.

"When you start running again, let us know," Mary said. "We want to be at the finish line for your first race back."

Jess ordered soup – Patty's orders – and listened as Harris and Dan told stories of their time at Villanova law.

"You'll be back in the fall?" Dan asked Jess after a long story on Harris' smelly econ professor.

"I'm not sure." Jess hadn't thought about it. She assumed her memory would be back by then, but what if it wasn't? Jessica might want to be a lawyer, but Jess certainly didn't. Although, that was hardly the point. Jess wouldn't last forever. Right?

"Absolutely, she will," Patty said, buttering another roll and placing it on Jess' plate. "The school has been so accommodating. I expect if she takes a couple classes at the community college this summer she'll still be able graduate on time."

Summer classes? That gave her even less time to get her memory back. Jess didn't know the first thing about college pre law classes. She didn't know the first thing about college. And she doubted she could pass an elementary school class at this point.

“I’ve been doing other things, though,” Jess said to Dan and Mary. “Reading, watching movies. I like writing. I write a lot.”

“And you’ll be writing a lot in law school, let me tell you,” Dan said, knocking Harris in the shoulder. Food flew from his mouth as he laughed. “I wish someone would’ve told me about that back in the day.”

“Well,” Jess continued. “I just think Patty and Harris would be happy no matter what I did.”

Dan’s laugh stopped almost instantly. Jess looked up from her soup. Everyone was looking at her. She caught herself a moment too late.

“I mean Mom and Dad.”

“Jessica.” Patty shook her head. She shut her eyes against the tears that were already forming.

“I meant Mom and Dad,” Jess said again, reaching for Patty, but her mother shook her off and got up.

“Excuse me,” Patty said, and left the room.

Harris was staring at his fork. Jess could tell from his slight bounce that his leg was jumping under the table.

“Dad,” Jess said. “I’m sorry.”

Harris nodded, but kept his gaze at the table.

The waiter came by just then and, sensing the mood, tried to back away from the table.

Dan got his attention. “I’ll take the check,” he said.

Harris muttered something about paying his own half but Dan shook it off, squeezed Harris' shoulder, and went to pay at the hostess stand. Mary kept smiling at Jess then looking over her shoulder as if she'd rather be with Patty.

When they got back into the car ten minutes later, their hair and clothes dripping from the rain that was still coming down outside, it was obvious that Patty and Harris thought it had been a mistake to bring Jess along to lunch. And Jess knew that everybody wished it had been Jessica at that lunch and not Jess.

Patty's nose was red again and she kept sniffing and wiping her eyes with her right hand in a way she probably thought looked discreet. Harris held her left hand. And Jess sat between them in the backseat, wishing she could remember something from before the accident to make this day better for her grieving parents.

But it was no use. Jess was not Jessica. And she probably would never be Jessica. She had been awake from that coma for seventeen days now. Surrounded by her family, her childhood house, her pictures of past memories. If this wasn't bringing Jessica back from the dead, then what would?

"There's something you guys should probably know about me," Jess said, the rain pummeling the roof of the car so loudly that Patty and Harris probably didn't hear her.

"What is it?" Patty said, turning around in her seat.

"I might never get my memory back."

Patty let a tear fall down her cheek. "Honey," she said, reaching back to take Jess' hands in her own. "You will. It all just takes time."

“But how much time?” Jess asked. “I don’t remember anything. Not you or Dad. Not Ben. I can’t even run to the end of the driveway without my side cramping up. I can’t be a lawyer.”

Harris pulled the car over on the side of the road and turned to face Jess as well. “We’ve been too hard on you,” he said. “We’re pushing you too hard and you’re not ready yet.”

A big truck passed on their left, rocking the car and splashing the windows in muddy water. Jess was surprised to feel a hot tear of her own on her cheek. She wiped it away. “I’m just worried that you’re not going to get the old Jessica back. And you’ll be stuck with me.”

Patty pulled Jess’ hands to her mouth and left behind a wet kiss across her fingers. “You *are* my Jessica,” she said, smiling as the tears fell off her chin. “We love you so much. Don’t ever think that we are expecting you to be something that you’re not.”

“That girl is still inside you.” Harris had tears in his eyes, too. He put an arm around his wife. “You are beautiful. You’re talented. You’re athletic. You’re smart. You are still everything you were a few months ago.”

Jess wasn’t sure about all that.

“And look how far you’ve come,” Patty said, continuing where Harris left off. “You were in a coma for over a month, but you would never know from looking at you. You’re walking, talking. You’re our miracle.”

“We don’t tell you that enough,” Harris said. “But we are so lucky to have you back.”

“Think of Richard,” Patty cut in. “We could have lost our daughter, too. But we got you back.”

“You got her back, but she’s not the same anymore,” Jess said, wiping more tears with the back of her hand. She felt undeserving. All of this love wasn’t meant for her. She was a nobody. She was temporary. “I’m not the same anymore.”

Patty shook her head. “You are my Jessica,” she said again. “You’ll figure out how to get back to your old self.”

“And in the meantime, we’re going to ease up on you,” Harris said, looking at Patty for confirmation. “This isn’t a race.”

Patty nodded and sniffled loudly. “Your father’s right,” she said, though she looked terrified to admit it. “From now on, we’ll do things on your schedule. We’ll go slower. We’ll let you live a little. To figure things out.”

“I think some time away from the house will do you good, too,” Harris said. He rubbed Patty’s back as she turned to him, wanting to interrupt. “Just a little at a time,” he assured her.

Patty sighed. “Just a little at a time,” she repeated. “So you can figure things out on your own.”

Jess could almost feel the weight lift from her shoulders as they talked. There was no pressure. Jessica would come back when she was ready. Her parents were too kind to her. After all of her running away, after all of the embarrassing things she’d said and done, they were still accepting of her. They still wanted to help her. To love her. It was more than Jess could have expected.

“Gosh, look at us,” Harris laughed, looking around at everybody’s tear-stained cheeks. He reached into his glove compartment and pulled out some crumpled tissues and passed them around the car. “We’ve got to get a grip on ourselves.”

Jess lay into her tissue and took a deep breath. She was feeling better all the time. They wiped their tears in silence, except for the occasional honk of someone blowing a nose, and let the rain outside wash away their worries and concerns from inside. Jess looked out to where they were parked. They were outside a cemetery. The graves protruded from the ground all the way back until the hilly land met woods behind it. As she looked, she saw a taller figure among all the stones – a man hunched over a tiny, black umbrella in a long overcoat and boots.

She gasped. “It’s Richard.”

Patty and Harris turned to look as well.

“Hannah must be buried here,” Harris said.

“And Cody, probably,” Patty added, then turned to Jess. “I don’t know if you know, honey. Richard lost his son, too, a few years ago. He – ”

“Killed himself,” Jess said. “Yeah. I heard.”

“Poor guy,” Patty said. “And in all this rain, too.”

“I’m going to go talk to him,” Jess said, sliding over and opening the door.

“Jessica, it’s freezing,” Patty turned to grab her, but Harris held her back.

“Be quick,” he said, nodding his approval to Jess.

She closed the door behind her and ran down to the archway into the cemetery. She gripped the cast iron gateway as she slipped on a patch of ice, but managed to stay upright. The rain was falling so fast and hard that it was hard to see where she was going, but Richard stood taller than the graves around him, and running between the graves in the snow proved easier than taking the slippery, paved walkway up the center aisle.

Jess nearly knocked him over as she ducked under his umbrella. He was clearly caught off guard – he stumbled back in the snow – and Jess had to grab his arm to keep him from toppling over.

“You,” he said, when he finally spoke.

“I’m sorry to keep bombarding you,” Jess said, pushing her soaked hair out of her eyes. “I’m Jess. Jess Wheaton. I was in an accident with Hannah this past – ”

“I know who you are.”

She crossed her arms in front of her chest to keep from shivering. “I just wanted to let you know how sorry I am for your loss.”

Richard frowned. “You what?”

“I – I’ve heard about the accident,” she stuttered, her teeth rattling in her mouth. “And about your son. I just wanted to say that I’m sorry.”

Richard watched her for a moment before nodding. He was in bad shape – he was unshaven, his hair was balding and greasy, and now that Jess was closer, she noticed he still smelled like the bar last night. “Thanks for your concern,” he said, and Jess saw the yellowing teeth as he spoke.

“Our car is right over there,” Jess said turning to point towards the direction Harris was parked. She would never have found the silver car in all this snow and rain if it weren’t for his headlights beaming back at her. “Can we give you a ride home?”

“Oh.” He was caught off guard. “I don’t need that.”

“Please,” Jess said. “It’s really coming down out here.”

Richard watched her for a moment, and then shook his head again.

“I don’t mind,” she said.

She put her arm in his and smiled up at him. With this kind of guy – proud, alone, mistrusting – she got the feeling that she would have to push him a little to make him accept any kind of help.

“Preciate it,” he mumbled, holding his umbrella up for the two of them to share as they made their way back to the car. He limped a little as he walked, and halfway back he stopped against a gravestone to massage his left side.

“Are you okay?” Jess asked. “Are you hurt?”

He shook his head and picked himself up, wincing as he started to walk again. “I’m fine.”

Harris got out of the car as they approached and helped Richard into the backseat. Then they pulled out into the street. The drive was quiet at first, except for Richard’s heavy breathing.

“Thanks very much,” he said once, looking around the car.

“Absolutely, Richard,” Patty said, a little too loudly, a little too happy. “We’re so happy to help.”

It seemed Harris knew where Richard lived, because he took them into town and down a side street off Main Street. The houses here were close, brick structures. Most of them duplexes. Philadelphia Eagles flags hung from a few porches. A ratty, floral couch stood alone on a sidewalk. Harris pulled up in front of a house with cracked front steps. The front door screen was broken, and the mail slot had letters poking out of them, as if he hadn’t been home in a while.

“Let us know if you need anything,” Jess said as Richard got back out into the rain.

He grunted once before closing the door. It didn’t sound like he’d be taking her up on her offer.

Chapter Six

If I have to hear Frodo whine about this ring one more time, I'm turning this off.

Ben smirked, and opened his phone to text back: *It gets better, I promise.*

I still prefer the books, came Jess' response a minute later.

"Put your phone away," someone hissed. Ben looked up to see a pre-teen group in the back row throwing popcorn at him.

"Hey." He stood up and turned his flashlight in their faces. "No throwing popcorn."

"No texting during the movie," some redhead in braces whispered back. "We're trying to watch."

Ben rolled his eyes and ducked out of the theater. He was alone in the lobby, except for Nancy, who was pinning tomorrow night's feature poster – *The House on the Hill* – into the poster case. "It's crooked," he mumbled as he passed.

"Shut up," she retorted. "Hey, we got two more boxes in last night. Can you stock up before you go?"

Ben grabbed the heavy cardboard boxes off the floor outside Nancy's office and dumped them on the concession stand counter. Using a pen under the cash register, he ripped the tape and opened the flaps to reveal box upon box of Swedish Fish candies.

Nancy came by as he was finishing up, her usual clipboard in hand. "Given any more thought to this month's movies?"

“I got a couple more suggestions,” he said and pulled a folded list from his back pocket.

Nancy’s eyebrows shot up. “Seriously?”

Ben had been up late last night, researching some independent theaters in Los Angeles. He couldn’t sleep; it was something to do. He started reading off what he’d found. “We could honor a different director every month,” he said. “Spielberg September. We play *Jaws*, *Jurassic Park*, *Shindler’s List*. Or we could do it like Coen Brothers Mondays. *Big Lebowski*, *True Grit*, *No Country*.”

“Coen Brothers Mondays...” Nancy repeated, writing it all down.

“I thought maybe we could do some kind of local filmmakers screening,” Ben said. “Like the third Wednesday of every month or something. You know *Loggerheads*? That sea turtle movie that won all those awards at Sundance a few years ago? Well, Zeke Zelker co-produced that and he’s based out of Allentown.”

“Really?” Nancy looked up in disbelief.

“I bet we could get him to come down here and do a kind of Q and A thing. And we could get others that could.”

“That’s really good, Ben,” Nancy said, writing again.

Ben skipped down the list a little. “What about a film festival with all amateur filmmakers in the area? Anyone can submit. And there can be a theme every time. I wrote down a few: Love, Siblings, Monster. And we’d give awards, obviously. Best cinematography, best director, audience award. Oh, and maybe we could host one of those twenty-four hour film competitions – ”

“Slow down,” Nancy said, grabbing Ben’s hand, which had been gesticulating wildly into the air. “Why don’t I just look at your list?”

“Yeah, sure.” Ben handed it over.

“These are all great.” Nancy flipped the list over and continued reading on the back. “I can’t believe you thought of all this.”

It hadn’t taken him long to come up with. Nancy inherited the place from her father, and he knew she didn’t know much of what to promote. If she could, he knew Nancy would prefer to be baking cookies somewhere. But that didn’t bring in customers. The Roxy was a historic theater – it had been in a few movies itself – and Ben really thought she should be taking advantage of its unique charm.

“It’s just a few ideas,” Ben said. “I had some time.”

His phone buzzed in his pocket, and he took it out to read the text from Jess: *J.R.R. Tolkien would be rolling over in his grave if he saw what Peter Jackson did to Legolas. He was not meant for comic relief.* Ben laughed and started to write back.

“Well, whatever it is that got you thinking about movies again,” Nancy said, grabbing his list and heading for her office. “Hold on to it.”

Ben slid his phone back into his pocket. “I’m heading out,” he called, grabbing his jacket from under the counter.

It was another beautiful day – the third day in a row that the temperatures had risen higher than fifty degrees. The only snow left was in the brown piles the plows had constructed in the corners of every parking lot in town. As Ben drove home, he passed geese lounging in the muddy cornfields and cows stepping furtively from their covered stalls to bask in the sun. Even his neighborhood was busy. Cars were being washed of road salt and grime in the driveways and new mothers gossiped together as they pushed their newborns around the neighborhood in

expensive pastel strollers. Ben waved to the mailman as they drove past each other at the intersection and he turned into Jess' driveway.

Jess and Harris waved to him from the garage as he pulled in. They were lounging on the ground, out of breath, taking long sips from water bottles.

"What's going on?" Ben asked, hopping from his Jeep and coming towards them.

"Jessica's kicking my ass in a game of H.O.R.S.E.," Harris said, gasping for air.

Jess got up, grabbing the basketball she'd been sitting on. As she dribbled, Ben watched the muscle definition in her calves. She was getting healthier every day. Her hair was now long enough to put into a ponytail and the scar running down her cheek was so light that she barely tried to hide it anymore. She still wasn't Jessica, but Ben could at least see the resemblance now.

"Come on, old man." Jess dribbled around Ben and into the sun. "Rematch starts in thirty seconds."

She took a shot at the hoop over the garage door, but the ball hit the rim and bounced away, hitting the hood of Ben's Jeep.

"I am so sorry," Jess called, as they ran after the ball. "Did I make a mark?"

Ben grabbed the ball before it could bounce into the grass. "Not at all," he said. "My car can take it."

Jess smiled and took the ball back. She had a dimple in her left cheek that hadn't been there before. Ben had the sudden urge to run his thumb across it.

"I'm gonna get going," he said instead. "I'm starving. Come with?"

"Nah, I got money on this one." She threw the ball to her dad, who was coming out of the garage. "Call me later."

Ben backed the Jeep out of the drive as Jess and Harris began another round and made his way back home. His heart sank as he pulled in – his dad’s car was in the garage.

“Ben.” His dad came out of the living room as Ben entered the house. He looked a lot like Ben, only taller, and he buzzed his hair tight to his skull before his curls had a chance to grow. As a Delta pilot, he was out of the house a lot. Which made it even more difficult on those rare occasions when he was home. “Mom tells me you haven’t called Muhlenberg yet.”

“I will.” Ben went into the kitchen, but his dad followed him. His parents had been nagging him about school for the past week. The deadline to sign up for fall classes was next Monday, and Ben hadn’t called yet to get himself enrolled.

“You’ve only got a few more days.”

“I know, Dad.” Ben pulled open the fridge. Leftover chicken salad. Microwave lasagna.

“Do you know if you’ll be living on campus?”

Ben grabbed a Gatorade off the top shelf and closed the door. “I don’t know.”

“These are decisions you’ve got to make fast,” his father continued. “Spots are going to start filling up.”

“Dad. I get it. I’ll call them.” But Ben had no intention of it. Or maybe he did. Honestly, he had no idea. It would be going back to a school he hated with no major. And now he was another semester behind his classmates, which meant he’d have to stay there even longer.

His dad sat down at the counter. “What about film school?”

“No.”

“It’s the only thing you show any interest in. If you just try it out – ”

“I’m not interested.”

“Your mother and I don’t care what you’re studying, as long as you’re doing *something*.”

“I’m not having this conversation again.” Ben headed for the door.

“I don’t know what you’re so afraid of,” his father called after him.

Ben took the stairs two at a time up to his bedroom. He slammed the door behind him and threw his unopened Gatorade bottle across the room. He kicked off his shoes and tore his Roxy vest over his head and threw it in a heap on his desk chair.

It always came back around to film with them. No matter how many times he told them that he wasn’t interested in it. Sure, there was a time when he thought about it. There was a time when he even considered it. But that wasn’t him anymore. There was something else that he was meant to do.

Ben sighed, looking around for his Gatorade bottle. It had slammed into his closet doors and rolled inside. He went over to the double doors and pushed them open. It was the first time he’d been inside his closet in months. It was a large walk-in closet, but Ben didn’t use it to hang clothes. Instead, he’d used it as his own personal editing suite. A desk against the wall held his computer – editing keyboard, double monitors. The walls were lined with movie posters. And against the back wall was a bookshelf full of old camcorder tapes and burned DVDs. The smell and sound of the room brought back so many memories. His parents let him change his closet to an editing suite in fourth grade, the same year they bought him his first video camera. The same year Jessica hit that ball onto the roof and joined their neighborhood baseball league.

Ben sat down in the metal folding chair and pressed the spacebar on the keyboard. The computer came to life. His tiny closet buzzed around him as the monitors blinked to life and the fan in the computer hard drive whirred methodically under them. He grabbed a tape that was resting on the desk and dropped it into the video camera on the floor. It was hooked up to the computer, and in a few seconds, it was playing the footage on both screens.

Jessica was running around the high school track. It was sometime sophomore year, Ben thought, and he was filming her practice. The camera zoomed in on her as she came around the bend in the track, her leg muscles rippling as she picked up speed and took the last straightaway in a full-on sprint. High school Ben cheered, then there was a lot of jostling as he made his way down the bleachers, still recording, to catch up with her below.

“Great job,” he called from behind the lens.

Jessica was stretching in the center lane of the track. Her face was flushed, her hair sticking to her forehead and neck.

“That was your best yet,” Ben said, putting the camera up to her face.

“I’m too slow,” Jessica said, barely out of breath. “I’m going to go again.”

“Come on,” Ben said. “You said that was your last one.”

“One more,” Jessica said and ran off around the track again.

The camera cut to a busy hallway – they were in school in between classes. They were at Jessica’s locker. Ben focused on the motivational quotes she had taped on the insides.

“God, you’re not recording again,” Jessica said. Her hair was down now, and it fell all the way down to her waist. It was sleek and straight – nothing like Jess’ hair looked now. Jessica was tan, too. Tan, tall, and naturally beautiful. She pulled a heavy textbook down off the top shelf. “Shouldn’t you be studying for your math test?”

“I know all the answers,” Ben said. “Quiz me.”

“When’re you going to start taking things seriously?” she asked him.

Ben pressed the spacebar on the keyboard to make the tape stop. He pressed the eject button and took the tape out. On the shelf he found another one from a few years later. He put it into the camera and hit play.

Ben was recording again. He was sneaking up the stairs at the Wheaton house, turning a corner, and then bursting into Jessica's room. She was at the mirror with her friend, Lisa. Both were wearing floor-length gowns for the senior prom. Jessica was stunning. Her gold dress sparkled with every movement, and it perfectly matched her hair, which had been curled and pinned back by the hairdresser earlier that day. Ben felt like that day could have been yesterday.

Lisa turned toward the camera. "Get out of here, creep."

The tape cut to a group of them in Jessica's living room. They were all huddled together, taking pictures, talking. Everyone's parents were there.

"We have a surprise for Jessica."

The camera turned on Mr. Wheaton, who was coming into the room with something hidden behind his back. Ben zoomed out to get Mr. Wheaton and Jessica in the shot.

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

Mr. Wheaton pulled a thick envelope from behind his back. "You got one more letter today."

Jessica jumped and snatched it out of his hand. "It's Villanova."

Everyone was talking at once. Jessica's girl friends huddled around her.

"You got it," Lisa said. "I know it."

"Make room," Ben said, edging forward with the camera. "Let me get this."

Jessica tore open the envelope and pulled out a stack of papers. She unfolded them and read the letter on the top. Ben zoomed in on her face. Her eyes moved back and forth across the page as she read.

"Well?" Patty's voice called off-camera.

“I got a full scholarship,” Jessica yelled and the room erupted in applause and congratulations.

Ben paused the video again and took the tape out of the camera. He sat there for a minute, thinking of the footage he really wanted to see. Before he could stop himself, he bent down and opened a drawer, took out his USB drive, and plugged it into the side of his computer. He double clicked on the GoPro folder and opened the link.

Jessica was in the driver’s seat of her red SUV – a graduation gift from Mr. and Mrs. Wheaton. Ben was filming from the passenger seat as they drove down the Interstate together.

“So once I told him about *that*, he said I would have no trouble getting on the committee,” Jessica said, finishing a story. She looked over at him and rolled her eyes. “When did you get that thing out again?”

“It’s not a thing,” Ben said behind the lens. “It’s a GoPro, and it was very expensive. It’s also waterproof.”

“Oh, did God tell you about another flood, Noah?” Jessica checked her rearview mirror. “This car is hauling ass,” she said, getting into the passenger lane.

A beat up Chevy passed them in the left lane. Ben caught his breath in his throat and hit a button on the keyboard to rewind. He hit play again, and replayed the footage in slow motion. He would know that car anywhere now. It was Hannah Thatcher. As the driver came into view as the car passed, Ben knew he was right. There she was. Wow. He hit the play button again to get it back to full speed.

“I love this song,” Jessica said, turning the volume higher on the radio. She tossed her long hair over her shoulder and belted along. The camera zoomed in on her face. Happy, positive, hardworking Jessica.

Ben paused the video. That was the moment. The moment he realized he wasn't in love with her anymore. The moment he saw that beautiful, happy girl and felt nothing for her. And a moment later he stopped the camera to begin his prepared speech. To break up with her. But he would never get the chance.

Now, he got out of his chair and left the closet, closing the doors behind him. He felt claustrophobic. Crossing to the window, he pulled up the blinds and lifted the window, ducking out to get the crisp air in his face. He breathed deep. No, film school was out of the question. He wanted to throw everything in that closet away. That was the plan, Ben thought, as he ducked inside and crawled into bed. Before the accident, anyway. He was going to move on. Away from Jessica, away from anything that reminded him of Jessica. Well, here was ten years of evidence as to her existence. As to who he was when he was with her. He'd never be able to move on if he kept clinging to the past. No. He'd have to find something else to interest him. Because it was not film.

Chapter Seven

Jess closed *Pride and Prejudice* and leaned into the house, watching the newspaper boy ride by on his bike. That might have been her favorite book. She turned to her open bedroom window and threw the book inside, then grabbed her notebook and a cookie off the plate on the windowsill. She held the cookie in her mouth as she flipped to the back of the book to write about Lizzie and Mr. Darcy.

“Jessica?” Harris’ voice drifted out the window onto the roof. Soon his head popped out the window above Jess’ head. “Your mother is going to kill you if she catches you out here again.”

Jess took the cookie from her mouth. “But it’s so nice out.”

“So what was your excuse when you were doing it three weeks ago?” he asked, but he smiled. “Finish another one?”

“*Pride and Prejudice.*”

Harris nodded. “I’ve got your next one for you.” He dropped a slim book in her lap.

“*The Rule of Law.*”

“All the rage among my colleagues,” Harris said.

“Hint taken.” Jess grabbed her things and climbed back into her bedroom. “I’ll look into it. I promise.”

She’d been promising to look into law school for a few weeks now. It just seemed that

every time she tried, there were so many other things she'd rather be doing. Cooking with Patty, watching movies with Ben, reading on the roof...

"We're heading to the grocery store in a second before things get too hectic," Harris said. "Care to join us?"

"Sure," Jess said. "I'll be right down."

It was Easter Sunday, and Patty was making some sort of baked ham for dinner that night. It was a tradition in the Wheaton house. Jess was still dressed in the light yellow dress she wore to the Easter service that morning. She slipped on her shoes and tried to tame her hair in the mirror. Now that her curls reached below her shoulders, there was almost nothing Jess could do with them besides let them flow free. They had a mind of their own anyway.

On her way out, she grabbed *Pride and Prejudice* from where it had fallen on her floor and went to return it to her bookshelf. Last week she did some rearranging of her room, and she was much happier with the arrangement. Her school pictures were down, most of her trophies and certificates were put back in the closet, and now she could see the yellow paint all around her. It warmed her like sunshine. Her childhood room. She liked returning it to the way it was meant to be.

Her bookshelf was the only difference to the room. It was now overflowing with books. She'd read everything already there – apart from the law books – and then started buying more from the bookstore downtown. She stopped in there a lot on her way to or from the Roxy. Ben had shown her almost more movies than she'd read books. But he liked them, and she liked the company. She liked the company a lot. Ben was great. Funny, smart, passionate, talented, good looking. The perfect match for Jessica. Whenever she got her memory back, Ben would be

thrilled. But she was grateful that he was willing to be patient. She knew she wasn't exactly what he wanted. Yet.

Well, it was clear that there was no more room in her bookshelf for any more books. So Jess took the yearbooks off the bottom shelf and balanced them in one hand while shoving *Pride and Prejudice* into the space with the other. It required a lot of poise, and Jess was soon realizing she did not have any of that because the yearbooks toppled out of her hand and landed in a pile on the floor.

“Jessica?”

“Coming,” Jess called, stooping to pick up the fallen books. She paused. One of the yearbooks had opened up to a page Jess hadn't remembered seeing when she'd looked through them in the past. In the middle of the page was a picture of a boy with long, dark hair that fell across his face. And under the picture were the words, *In Memory of Cody Thatcher*.

Cody Thatcher. That was Richard's son. Hannah's brother. The one who killed himself. She picked up the yearbook. Around the outside of the page was a collage of photographs of Cody. In one, he was holding a guitar. In another, he was sitting at a classroom desk, sticking his tongue out for whoever was taking the picture. Jess smiled. The last one was a picture of Cody in the school hallway with his arm around a girl. She had thick, strawberry blonde hair that fell to her waist and she looked like she was trying to get out from under Cody's arm. They had the same nose.

Hannah. Even with the annoyed expression, she was very pretty. What a picture. Both of them together, captured in this moment before both were killed. Tragic. Jess thought again of Richard. She hadn't seen him around since that day they gave him a ride home from the

cemetery. She'd knocked on his door once or twice with Ben but he never answered. Or he was never home. She hoped he was doing all right.

“Jessica? We're leaving.”

“Coming,” Jess called again. She closed the yearbook and left her room.

Redner's Market was still a madhouse, even though Patty said they were there hours before the real crowds showed up. Jess followed behind her parents as they moved slowly up and down the rows, going down Patty's meticulous list and throwing things into the cart. People still stared at Jess whenever she was out in public. And stopped Patty and Harris to tell them how good Jess looked. It wasn't true, Jess knew. She was gaining more weight and getting some sunlight now, but she still didn't look like Jessica. Dr. Branson, her plastic surgeon, did the best he could with her face. But she would never look exactly right again.

“You can barely see the scar,” said one man in the frozen food aisle before walking away.

“Do you even know who that is?” Harris asked Patty. Patty shook her head.

Jess sighed. “Do you mind if I wait outside?” She took *The Rule of Law* out of her dress pocket and held it up for her parents to see. “I'll be okay.”

She found a bench next to the shopping cart return to sit down on while she waited. She read the back cover of her book – it sounded pain-numbingly dull. But as she had some time to kill –

“Well, look who it is.”

Jess looked up. A girl in a Redner's vest was standing over her with her hands on her hips. She had long, dark hair, a cigarette between her fingers, and four-inch heels. They seemed to be about the same age. Jess didn't know her.

“Ben too busy for you today?” the girl asked.

“I’m sorry. I still don’t remember everything,” Jess said. “Are you a friend of Ben’s?”

The girl laughed. She had a gap between her front teeth. “Yeah, you could say that.”

Jess felt herself blush. So this girl was involved with Ben romantically. That’s fine. Jess wasn’t doing anything like that with him. Although she did think that Ben wasn’t doing anything like that with anyone else, either. Weren’t they kind of dating? Or was that not the case?

“Didn’t mention me. Did he?” The girl brought her cigarette to her lips and breathed deep. “Doesn’t surprise me.”

“Who are you?”

“I’m Nikki. I guess you could call me the other woman.”

Jess was aware of her heart beating quicker in her chest. She tried to stay calm, but her voice came out high and panicked when she spoke. “Look, I don’t know what you think Ben and I are doing, but – ”

“Oh, I know what you and Ben are doing, princess.” Nikki bent down so that their eyes were level. “But it doesn’t matter to me. Because I was there first.”

First? Jessica and Ben had dated since sophomore year. Maybe this girl was just trying to scare her into backing down. Maybe Ben wasn’t even interested in her. “Well,” Jess said, trying to match Nikki’s stare. “I’ve been dating Ben since sophomore year of high school.”

“Yes, but you weren’t fucking him.”

Jess’ eyes widened. “Oh, my God.”

“So while you were being a little pussy about it, I was giving Ben what he always wanted.” Nikki inhaled on her cigarette again and blew the smoke into Jess’ face. “And we were doing it while you two were still together.”

“What?”

“Didn’t tell you that, did he?” Nikki smiled. “Ben came to me in October. Before your little head wound. Ever wonder why he never came to see you in the hospital?”

“He what?”

“Because he was with me,” Nikki said, straightening up. “I made him happy. And if it weren’t for the guilt he feels now, he’d still be with me. I’m guessing you’re not giving Ben what he wants, then?”

Jess turned out to the parking lot, her heart hammering. She didn’t want Nikki to see the tears collecting in her eyes.

Nikki laughed. “Just as I thought. He’ll be back.”

“Nikki, get in here.” Someone in a Redner’s vest was standing in front of the automatic doors. “Your break ended five minutes ago.”

“See you around, princess.” Nikki flicked her cigarette at Jess’ feet and turned on her heels to go back inside.

“Oh, my God,” Jess whispered when she was gone, pressing the heels of her palms into her eyes to catch the tears before they could fall. She got up and turned in a circle, unaware of where she was going but too full of adrenaline to sit back down. She wrung her hands. “Oh, my God.”

Jess started walking into the parking lot, a hand over her chest to slow her heart. What was happening? How in the span of two minutes had her life turned so completely upside down? Ben was cheating on her with Nikki. Maybe not anymore but he apparently had been. In *October*. But the accident wasn’t until the end of December. And what was she talking about that he never came to see her in the hospital? Surely he did. Or if he didn’t, there must be some

explanation. Is he only hanging out with Jess because he feels sorry for her? But why would he bother to come back at all? Why wouldn't he just stay away?

The fact that Ben could be interested in a woman like Nikki drove Jess insane. If he could be interested in Nikki than he certainly wasn't interested in Jess – past or present. God, this Nikki was horrible. If that's the kind of person that Ben likes then Jess didn't want to associate with him. He just seemed so different.

She reached the edge of the parking lot and stood on the sidewalk, watching as cars drove by in front of her. On the other side of the road was the liquor store. But it was closed. Easter Sunday and all. Someone was sitting on the sidewalk in front of the store.

Jess waited for a break in the traffic and crossed the street.

“Richard?”

He looked up. “You.” He was carrying a drink in a paper bag. His overcoat lay beside him on the sidewalk, and he was wearing a stained white T-shirt.

“Do you remember who I am?” Jess asked.

“I know who you are.”

She sat down beside him. “How are you?”

Richard was watching her. “How are *you*?”

Jess tried to say that she was fine, that she was just picking up some groceries for Easter dinner, but instead she started sobbing uncontrollably. She buried her face in her hands. It was all so embarrassing. This was not how she wanted her next meeting with Richard to go. He had enough on his plate. She was supposed to be there for him, not the other way around.

“What happened?” he asked.

“It’s nothing,” Jess said, wiping her eyes. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s coming over me.”

“Are they treating you all right?” Richard asked. “Your parents?”

“Yes, of course,” Jess said, and for some reason that only made her cry harder. “They’re so great.”

“What about your health?”

Jess brought her knees up to her chest and laid her head on her knees. She couldn’t believe herself. Nothing was wrong. There was nothing wrong. She was healthy; her parents were great; she survived a terrible car crash that Richard’s daughter did not. She had to stop crying.

“Are you okay?” Richard asked. He sounded panicked. “Do we need to get you to the hospital?”

Jess pulled her face out of her knees. “I’m fine,” she said, and buried her face in her hands.

They sat like that for a minute – Richard tentatively resting a hand on her back while Jess tried to pull herself together. She wiped her cheeks again and ran a finger under her nose to stop it from dripping. She was sure she looked like a mess.

“I’m sorry,” Jess said again, when she could speak without gasping for air. “There was this horrible girl at the grocery store.”

“Oh, well. You can’t let that bother you.” Richard seemed to remember his hand on her back and removed it quickly. “It’s not worth crying over.”

“You’re right. I let her get to me.”

“And why should you?” Richard said. “Look at you. You have a good life, right?”

Jess nodded.

“You have a great family. You live in a great house. You’re going to become a lawyer and a track star and make lots of money and marry someone great and leave this town and never look back.”

“I guess so,” Jess said.

“Don’t be bothered by anybody,” Richard said. “Just focus on your school. And get yourself out of this place.”

“Okay. I will.”

It struck Jess as odd that this man that seemed to have nothing going for him had such good advice. She couldn’t believe people just saw him as a drunk. If they ever got to talk to him, they would find what a great man he was. Smart, caring, intuitive. He was just dealt a bad hand in life. But he wasn’t completely lost, in spite of everything.

“Thank you for listening to me,” Jess said.

Richard smiled. “You should get back to your parents now.”

She nodded and stood up to go. “Richard?”

He looked up from his bag of liquor.

“Do you want to come over for Easter dinner?”

“No, I’ll be okay.”

“I would really like you to come,” Jess said. “Patty is making a baked ham with pineapples and cherries. I guess she makes it every year. And you should’ve seen the one she put in our grocery cart – we’re going to have leftovers for weeks. Really. You should come.”

Richard told her he'd think about it, so she gave him her cell phone number – she was still using Ben's old one – and told him that dinner started at four. By the time she got back across the street, Patty and Harris were loading up the trunk full of groceries.

“There you are,” Patty said when she saw Jess. “Are you okay? You look like you've been crying.”

Jess shook her head. “I'm fine. Just allergies.”

“You don't have allergies,” Patty said, but she let Jess get into the backseat without another word.

When they got back home, they were halfway through the cooking when Harris remembered that he'd forgotten to pick up the Easter cake from the bakery.

“Don't start without me,” he shouted as he ran out the door.

“Like we could,” Patty said to Jess after he'd gone. “There're only three of us.”

Jess smiled. She should tell Patty about Richard. At least give her some advance notice that somebody else might come to dinner. But Patty put Jess in charge of the dirty dishes soon after Harris was gone, and Jess found herself loading the dishwasher and scrubbing pots and pans in the sink while her mother ran around in the dining room setting the table. When Jess was finished, she felt exhausted. She was thinking about excusing herself to lie down, but then Patty came back in the kitchen.

“Are you going to tell me what's wrong or am I going to have to beat it out of you?” Patty asked as she opened the oven door to check on the ham.

“How could you tell?”

“A mother always knows,” Patty said.

Jess sat down on a barstool at the counter. Patty had told Jess several times that she and Harris had been at the hospital every day while Jess was in her coma. They would know if Ben had ever been there, too.

“Mom,” Jess said. “What happened while I was in the hospital? With Ben?”

Patty took her head out of the oven and turned to face Jess. “He finally told you.”

“No.”

Patty nodded. “Well, that makes more sense. I don’t expect Ben wants to tell you now that he’s back in your good graces.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know,” Patty said. “He disappeared.”

“What does that mean?”

Patty opened the jar of cherries on the counter and offered it to Jess, who took one cherry out by the stem. Patty did the same. “Your father and I thought the two of you were still dating before the accident,” Patty said, shrugging. “Maybe we were wrong. But Ben never came to see you in the hospital. Not once.”

“And you thought it was because we were broken up?”

“Honestly, I don’t.” Patty put her cherry in her mouth, and pulled off the stem. She chewed for a minute. “I think Ben was scared.”

“Scared?” Jess asked. “Of what?”

“Scared of losing you if you died. Or scared of taking care of you if you lived. It’s a lot of responsibility for someone so young. I don’t think Ben knew what to do in that situation. I think he got cold feet and thought it would be better just to leave.”

“But that’s awful,” Jess said. She stared at the cherry in her fingers, thinking of Nikki. He

wasn't scared. He was guilty because he had been sleeping with Nikki. "How could somebody do that to another person?"

"I don't know." Patty took another cherry from the jar and pulled the stem off with her fingers before popping the cherry in her mouth. "I was angry with him for a long time because of that. Your father and I both were."

"But you're not anymore?" Jess didn't understand how they could ever get past that. Or how she could.

"Well, the important thing is that he came back." Patty was tying her two stems together in a knot. "And he seems to make you happy. That's all your father and I could ask for, in the grand scheme of things."

"But, now, how am I ever supposed to trust him again?" Jess asked. Trust him not to run away. Not to cheat on her. Not to lie.

"Well, that's what you're going to have to decide." Patty closed the jar of cherries and took them to the fridge. "And this isn't all one-sided, Jess. You can decide not to be with him, too, if that's what you want. He's not holding all the cards here."

Harris came home a few minutes later with a large chocolate cake, humming a little tune. Jess went to the bathroom to wash her face. She grabbed the towel off the wall and put it to her face, taking a deep breath. Patty was right, of course. Jess didn't have to stay with Ben. But she didn't like making any decisions while she was in this state of recovery. What if – when she got her memory back – she didn't like the choices she'd made? She wished she could have a conversation with her past self. What was she supposed to do? What was the right direction to go in? What would her old self do?

When she came out of the bathroom, Patty gave her a quick kiss and handed her a stack of plates. “Can you finish setting the table?” she asked, running her hand down Jess’ curls.

The dining room table had been cleared of the legal papers and odd knick-knacks that usually collected there. Patty had spread a light green tablecloth over the dark wood table, and hung various egg and bunny ornaments from the chandelier. Jess went around the table, placing a dish in front of each of the three chairs for her parents and herself. Patty had given her the entire set of ten china plates, so Jess set a place for Richard, too. She would have to tell her family that he was coming.

The doorbell rang.

“Jess, can you get that?” Patty called from the kitchen.

Jess hadn’t expected Richard to get there so fast. She went out into the hallway and pulled open the front door.

Ben was standing on the stoop in dress slacks and a light jacket, with a pot of purple pansies tucked under one arm.

“What are you doing here?”

“I ran into your dad outside the bakery,” he said, after a pause. “He heard my parents were working today. So he invited me for dinner.”

Harris came down the stairs, buttoning his shirt, and stopped at the front door. “Ben. Glad you could come,” he said, clapping him on the shoulder.

“Thanks for having me,” Ben said, giving Jess a puzzled look. “I think.”

“Do you want a beer?” Harris asked, nodding his head in the direction of the kitchen.

Ben looked to Jess again. “Sure,” he said, and followed Harris down the hall.

“Hey,” Jess hissed, grabbing Harris by the elbow and pulling him back to the door. “We’ll meet you in there,” she said to Ben and waited until he disappeared into the kitchen before whispering, “You invited Ben?”

“What’s the problem?” Harris asked. “You’ve been hanging out with him nonstop.”

“I don’t hang out with him nonstop,” she whispered.

“I thought I was being polite,” he said.

“Well, you aren’t.”

“What is going on?” he asked.

“Nothing, I’m fine.” Jess brushed past him and into the kitchen.

Patty and Ben turned to her. Ben had a foaming pint of beer in his hand, the other still wrapped around his pot of pansies. Patty, who had ducked behind Ben, was giving Jess a look to convey both her sympathy for Jess’ situation and her support in whatever action she chose to take with it.

“I need a drink,” Jess announced, heading to the fridge to pull down the unopened bottle of white wine off the top shelf.

Patty came over and grabbed her arm. “Jess. Is alcohol the answer? Why don’t you – ”

“Mom,” Jess warned, looking back at Ben. “Ben is having some beer. I would like some wine.”

“Right.” Patty turned back to Ben as Harris came into the kitchen.

While Jess struggled to release the wine bottle’s cork by the fridge, her parents made small talk with Ben – thanking him for the pansies, asking about his parents, complimenting his longer hair. When she finally pulled the cork out of the bottle with one fast, hard pull of the wine

bottle opener, the pop of released tension caused everyone to turn in Jess' direction and watch as she poured the wine into her wine glass until it looked ready to spill over the top.

"What?" she asked, returning the half empty bottle of wine to the counter. "It's Easter."

Patty lifted her fist in solidarity. "Here! Here!"

Harris jumped. "Patty. The ham."

They hurried over to the oven and opened the door.

"Caught it just in time," Harris said, using oven mitts to grab the pot of ham and lift it up onto the stovetop. He fanned a mitted hand towards his face and smiled in delight as the salted fragrance hit his nostrils. "Perfect. We're ready."

"All right, everybody," Patty announced, waving her arms towards the dining room like a theater director announcing show time. "Take a seat around the table."

Jess went quickly into the dining room, keeping her distance from Ben, who she could tell wanted to speak with her. She tried to get as far from him as possible, but he sat down across from her in the seat she had set out for Richard. Jess wondered whether it wouldn't be better if Richard decided not to show up after all. This dinner looked like it was going to be complicated enough.

"Jess, what's wrong?" Ben asked, while Patty and Harris cut the ham in the kitchen.

She took a sip of wine, spilling some down her chin. "Nothing," she said, refusing to make eye contact. "I'm just really thirsty."

"It seems like something happened," Ben said. "Or that you're angry with me."

"I met your friend today." Jess spoke fast before she lost her nerve or started crying.
"Nikki."

She looked at Ben when he didn't answer right away. His face had drained of all color.

“We had a good talk.”

“Jess.”

“Who’s hungry?” Patty asked, carrying steaming bowls of mashed potatoes and corn in from the kitchen and placing them in the center of the table.

Then Harris followed with a serving plate full of carved ham. Jess chugged a massive swig of wine and felt it travel over the lump in her throat. She pushed it back down, refusing to cry. Patty sat down and, with an anxious look around the table, announced that she’d like to give the blessing. As Jess reached up to hold Patty’s hand on one side and Harris’s hand on the other, she felt the alcohol pumping through the veins in her arms and stopping to tingle for a moment in her fingertips. She hadn’t had a sip of alcohol since that first night out with Ben. Halfway through the prayer, she looked up and caught Ben watching her from across the table. She returned her gaze to her lap.

“Amen.” Patty smiled and dropped her hands back into her lap. Everyone echoed her sentiments and allowed the food to begin being passed around the table.

“So, Ben,” Patty started, scooping a heap of corn onto her plate. “What have you been up to over the past few months?” She passed the bowl to Jess. “We haven’t seen you as much as we did in the past.”

“Patty, stop.” Jess knew her mother was trying to come to her rescue, but she didn’t want this dinner to become any more awkward than it already was. Patty turned to Jess in alarm, and Jess realized her mistake. “I mean Mom.”

“Honestly, Jessica,” Patty said.

“I’m sorry,” Jess said. “It was a mistake. I meant to say Mom.”

“I’ve just been working at the Roxy,” Ben cut in, and Jess knew that he did so to come to her rescue. She was relieved. And then annoyed again. She took a second long sip of wine.

“Going back to school next fall?” Harris asked Ben.

“Probably,” Ben said. “I just have to figure a few things out.”

“Why?” Jess asked, cutting into her ham. “You weren’t the one in a coma.”

“Oh, goodness,” Patty said.

“What is wrong with you?” Harris said to Jess, then to Ben, “Please excuse my daughter. That was incredibly rude.”

“I’m being rude?” Jess asked, laughing into her wine as she took a sip. She swallowed and felt the rush of the wine hit her stomach. It was as if she was underwater for a moment before the dining room settled back into focus. “I could say a lot worse.”

“Do you need to leave the table?” Harris asked, pointing his steak knife in Jess’ direction. “Clearly you’re still young enough to be sent to your room.”

“Harris,” Patty said, and turned to Ben. “I am so sorry, Ben. Where are our manners?”

“That’s okay, Mrs. Wheaton,” Ben said, moving the ham around on his plate with his fork. He looked like he wanted to run. Jess wished he would. She wanted to throw her plate across the table at him. Tears were swimming in her eyes already.

“I’m going to get another drink,” Jess announced, standing up from the table. She carried her nearly empty glass into the kitchen and poured as much of the bottle’s contents into it as could fit. Then she took a long swig directly from the bottle. She wiped her eyes on a dishtowel and took her shoes off, leaving them in a pile on the tiles as she took another pull from the bottle. She held onto the refrigerator with one hand to steady herself. She looked around, watching as the room moved a second slower than she did. Something caught her eye in the hallway.

She could see out the front-door window. Richard was sitting on the porch steps. She took a quick peek towards the dining room to make sure nobody was watching her, and then ducked down the hallway, wine bottle in hand, and snuck out the front door.

Richard turned around when he heard the door open.

“Why are you out here?” Jess asked. She sat down beside him. The temperature was dropping, and the cement steps felt cold against the bottom of her feet. She set the bottle of wine down beside her and crossed her arms against her chest.

Richard was in his same filthy overcoat with the stains and the rips around the seams. He was again holding a paper bag of liquor. He watched her shivering on the step for a moment.

“I was just leaving,” he said, pushing his unkempt hair back off his forehead.

“But you haven’t even come in yet,” Jess said.

“I was never going to,” he said. “It’s not my place to be here.”

“I invited you,” Jess said. “Of course you can be here.”

He took a hand off the bag and put it over his eye, rubbing the loose skin back and forth with the tips of his fingers. “I committed to something,” he said in a tired voice. “I said I was going to do something. I decided on it. And I need to remember that.”

“You have other plans?”

Richard took a long sip from the bottle in the bag. Jess reached around for her bottle of wine and took her own long sip. Richard looked over as she swallowed.

“What are you doing?”

She smiled at the bottle in her hand. “It’s crazy in there,” she said, aware of the slight slur on her lips. She slowed her words. Concentrated on the shape of her mouth around the vowel

sounds. “I’m pissed that Ben is here right now. And my parents are trying to keep the peace. And failing miserably. And Ben is just an asshole.” She turned to Richard. “So I am getting drunk.”

“You shouldn’t be doing that,” Richard said.

She laughed. “Why not? You are.”

“But I have nothing. You have a good family and a good home,” Richard said, raising his voice at her. “You’re in college. You’re not supposed to be doing stuff like this.”

“Whatever,” Jess said, furrowing her brow. “You’re one to talk. And besides, my life is a lot harder than you think it is.” Like anyone could relate to waking up from a coma and having to relearn all of her past memories and feelings. Like anyone understood the pressure she was under to return to her old self.

“Your life is easy,” Richard yelled, rising to his feet. He groaned when he stood, and doubled over on the step, resting his head against the cement porch.

“Are you okay?” Jess put a hand on his back to steady him. “What’s wrong?”

He stood up, slowly, clutching his side. “You’re supposed to be taken care of,” he said. “You’re supposed to have a better life than this.”

“What is going on out here?” Harris was at the front door.

Richard pointed a long, accusing finger at Jess. “Look at what you’re doing to her,” he yelled. “Look at her now.”

Patty came out onto the porch from behind Harris and took hold of Jess’ arm, pulling her up.

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s get you inside.”

“I’m fine,” Jess said. “There’s something wrong with Richard.”

“Let your father talk to him,” Patty said, leading Jess inside. Ben was coming into the hallway from the kitchen.

Jess turned back. “No, there’s something really wrong with him. Something in his side,” she called, watching Richard sneer at Harris while doubled over in pain.

“Get in the house, Jessica,” Harris instructed, stepping back to let her through. He moved onto the porch and closed the front door behind him.

“I’m serious,” Jess said, shrugging out of her mother’s arms. “He’s sick or something.”

“Obviously he’s sick,” Ben said from behind her.

Jess turned to face him, amazed that he had the nerve to even speak to her. “*You’re* sick,” Jess said. “You’re disgusting.”

She pushed past him, the force of which unbalanced her, and she fell to her knees.

“Come on, Jessica.” Patty knelt down to take hold of her again. “You need to lie down.”

“Get off me,” Jess yelled, holding the wall as she struggled to her feet. “I don’t need any help from anyone. Richard needs help. He doesn’t have anyone, and he’s all alone.”

Patty grabbed her arms again. “Richard is fine, Jessica. Let’s get upstairs.”

She led Jess around to the stairs, but not before Jess caught sight of Ben again. He was backed against the wall, looking terrified. Her stomach turned at the sight of him. She thought she was going to be sick. But she struggled to stand upright, so she could meet his eyes when she spoke.

“I may be lost right now,” Jess said, suddenly aware of the tears falling from her eyes. “I know I am. I’m confused, and scared, and alone. But I’m going to get better. And you will always be lost. And confused. And scared. And alone. And someday someone will do to you what you’ve done to me and it will *ruin* you. And I won’t even remember your name.”

Jess didn't know what happened after that. She woke up later in her bed, in the dead of night. She was still in her church dress, the fabric wrinkled and bunched around her waist. Her mouth tasted horrible, and she turned to see the trashcan next to her bed, the trash covered in a rancid, liquid vomit. She groaned and rolled over towards the nightstand. Before she fell asleep again, she looked up into the picture of her and Ben outside the Roxy, their arms intertwined, their heads leaning in to meet in the center.

Chapter Eight

“Ben?”

Ben opened his eyes. The sun was shining – it must be late in the day. There was a knock at his door again, and then he heard it open and someone came in.

“Ben?” It was his mother. “Are you seriously going to lie in bed all day?”

Ben groaned and moved the covers up over his head. He saw Jess again, her hair in her eyes, tears running down her cheeks.

“You will always be lost. And confused. And scared. And alone.”

He closed his eyes and tried to will himself into nonexistence. But she was right. He was going to be forced to live this miserable life out to its conclusion. He’d probably live longer than anyone ever had. A just punishment.

He felt his mother sit down on the edge of the bed. “You can tell me what’s wrong,” she said.

Sure, he could. She would be ever so supportive. He could almost hear her reaction to his sad tale. “She’s right you know,” she’d say. “You’re worthless. You work at a movie theater. You’re a college drop out. Your girlfriend was in a car accident, and you left her to die. The only thing that makes you sad these days is that she lived.”

His mother’s hand found his head under the covers, and she patted it twice. “Tell me what happened,” she said. “Tell me how to make it better.”

She pulled the covers off of him. He kept his eyes closed.

“Are you crying?” she asked. He hadn’t realized it, but now that he thought about it, his pillow did feel wet under his cheek.

He sat up and wiped his face. “I don’t think you’ll understand.”

“What did you do?” his mother asked.

Where to start? Which bad decision trumps all the others? “I let Jess down.”

“You let yourself down.”

Ben nodded. “But I don’t feel as bad about what I’ve done to myself.”

His mother sat with him for a minute. “Sometimes I wonder if you realize that Jessica didn’t die.”

“What do you mean?” Ben rolled his eyes. “Of course I realize – ”

“Then why aren’t you doing anything to fix your mistakes?” she asked. “Sometimes I think you’re still sitting on the Interstate waiting for the ambulance to arrive.”

He was in pause. A hot tear fell down to rest by his nose.

His mother took his hand. “It’s not December anymore, Ben. You’re not the same person you were in December. And neither is Jessica. That experience changed everything.”

Ben nodded, wiping a tear away.

“So get moving.” She smiled, and squeezed his hand. “You’ve got a lot of catching up to do.”

Ben left the house a few minutes later, squinting as the sun hit his face. He sighed and climbed into his Jeep. His mother was right. It was time to get caught up. He wasn’t in pause anymore. It was time to get going.

“Ben!”

His mother ran out of the garage and handed him his GoPro – the camera he was recording on the day of the accident. “Thought you might need this,” she said, pulling him by the neck to kiss him on the cheek. “I love you.”

Ben smiled and set the camera on the passenger seat. “Don’t wait up,” he said, starting the engine and heading off.

He drove with the windows down, letting the breeze blow through his hair. He drove fast, eager to get started. But what did that even mean? Where was he going to go? What was he going to do? He looked down at the GoPro. It only reminded him of December, on the Interstate. But his mother was right. He wasn’t there anymore. So where’s the first place he should go to catch himself up on the past few months?

And then he knew. Turning out of town, he drove until the traffic grew, the lanes widened, and airplanes cruised over his head as they descended into the airport. A few minutes later, he turned into the hospital parking lot. The automatic doors flew open to welcome him, and Ben stepped into the lobby, the GoPro around his neck.

The smell hit him first. He turned right and through a set of double doors, walking fast before anyone could stop him. The emergency room was quiet today, but he felt as panicked as he had that day when their ambulances arrived. Three stretchers, side by side, each separated by a cloth divider. He backed into the wall – staring at the place where the doctors had bent over them, calling codes and attempting to stop the bleeding.

“Excuse me?”

Ben jumped as a nurse touched his arm.

“You can’t be back here.”

Ben turned and went back out to the lobby. He was sweating. He took a few deep breaths, holding the wall to steady himself. And then he looked up and saw Jessica.

He had found the Jessica Wheaton bulletin board. It was pink and yellow, with a white stethoscope border. In bright yellow bubble letters across the top it joyously shouted, “Jessica Wheaton’s Road to Recovery!”

The first picture in the top left corner was from a clipping in *The Morning Call* of the scene of the accident. It must have been taken after they were already off on the ambulances because the keyboard was still in the road but the foot was gone. Police cars surrounded Jessica’s upside down SUV, their lights flashing blue and red. Hannah’s car was on its side. In front of it was the bed of the tractor-trailer, tipped and spilling tomatoes onto the highway. There was broken glass and what looked like blood sprinkled over the scene like a sugar glaze. In the corner, the driver of the 18-wheeler was talking to a police officer, his hands still covered in blood.

He skimmed the paragraph underneath – 18-wheeler slid along the black ice, Wheaton’s SUV flipped six times, Hannah Thatcher was pronounced dead on the scene – and moved to the next photo on the right. There was a doctor in green scrubs talking at a podium to a slew of cameramen and reporters. He looked to be in his late forties, with salt and pepper hair and strong hands that were gesticulating whatever point he was making. In the paragraph below the picture, the man was identified as Doctor David Branson, the top neurosurgeon on the east coast. The blurb detailed Jessica’s injuries and what procedures Dr. Branson was attempting to heal them. According to this, Jessica came in with a brain bleed to the frontal lobe, brain swelling, massive tissue damage to the skull and face, and three broken ribs.

Ben moved on to the next picture. It was Jessica – must have been Jessica – but she was unrecognizable. She was lying in a hospital bed, wrapped in gauze from the neck up. Even her arms were covered in the white dressings. There were slits for her eyes, nose, and mouth, but other than that, she was completely hidden from view. There were flowers all over the bedside tables beside her, and Mrs. Wheaton was in a chair at her side, holding her left hand gingerly in both of hers.

So this is what Ben would have found if he'd gone to the hospital to visit her. A mummy on a hospital bed. He read the paragraph below the picture:

Dr. Molly Murphy performed three emergency surgeries in the first days after the accident to stop the swelling in Jessica's brain and to repair any bleeds to the frontal lobe. From there, it would be a long six weeks of waiting before Jessica was finally ready to wake up and say hello to her family and friends. In the meantime, Lehigh Valley plastic surgeon, Dr. David Branson, performed seven rounds of reconstructive surgery to return Jessica's badly damaged face to its original beauty. Thanks to the thoughtful donations from thousands of concerned citizens in the area, the Wheaton family was able to accept the best care for their daughter from the Lehigh Valley Hospital. Talk about a giving community!

Ben remembered reading about that in the paper. In the first forty-eight hours alone, the Wheaton family had received up to 1.8 million dollars in donations from strangers in the community and around the country. It hadn't been a surprise when he'd read it – the Wheatons had always been well liked. Mr. Wheaton was a local attorney, so he was on a first name basis with most of the politicians in the area. And Mrs. Wheaton ran into a good friend everywhere she went. She was largely involved in her church community. Her patients loved her. She was

always going mountain biking or kayaking with a woman she met at the grocery store or an old friend from college. Everyone who read their story wanted to help in some way.

The last picture on the bulletin board was from shortly after Jessica woke up. Her hair had been shaved for each of her brain surgeries, so it was short – just some adorable curls around her ears. And the scar running down the side of her face was still dark red and stitched. Ben’s heart ached when he saw her. She looked so scared. Or lost. He longed to be able to put his arm around her and tell her that everything would be okay. But he’d missed his chance.

“Are you the reporter from the high school?”

Ben turned from the bulletin board. She must have noticed the camera around his neck.

“Dr. Branson just got out of surgery,” the receptionist behind the front desk told him. “He said you can meet him upstairs in plastics.”

That was Jess’ plastic surgeon. Ben had never met him. The receptionist was looking at him expectantly, waiting for a response.

“Thanks.” Ben punched the button for the elevator, looking again at Jess’s scared face on the bulletin board.

“Fourth floor,” the receptionist said.

Ben adjusted his collar in the reflection on the elevator doors as he rode up to the plastic surgery wing. When the elevator bounced to a stop on the fourth floor, Ben ran a hand through his hair one last time before the door opened.

At the desk, he asked a nurse in pink scrubs where he could find Dr. Branson.

“He’s right behind you.” She returned to the game of solitaire on her desktop.

Ben turned and recognized the man in the green scrubs from the bulletin board picture. He was standing in front of a computer along the wall.

“Dr. Branson?” Ben approached him, but Branson did not look up. “Are you Dr. Branson?”

“Are you the kid who’s interviewing me?” he asked, without looking away from the screen.

“Yes.”

“Then I’m Dr. Branson,” he said, making eye contact at last. “But if you’re Nurse Kelly’s twelve-year-old son asking for another autograph, you can get the fuck out of my face.”

Ben swallowed. “I’m not twelve. Sir.”

“I see that,” Branson said. “You’re in high school?”

Ben nodded. “I’m tall for my age.”

Branson lowered his brow and left the computer. Ben hurried to keep up with him. “I need some coffee,” Branson said. “I’ve been in surgery for seven hours without break.”

Ben followed Branson into the stairwell and up a flight of stairs. They came out at the end of a hallway with a coffee vending machine against one wall.

“You want anything?” Branson asked, sliding quarters into the machine.

“No, I’m okay,” Ben said.

“I don’t know how much help I’ll be right now,” Branson said, as a Styrofoam cup dropped from within the machine and began filling from above with a thin stream of steaming brown liquid. “Too much adrenaline. I won’t be able to sit still.”

“That’s okay.”

“After a surgery like that one, I get such a high that I can’t come down for several hours,” Branson said, taking the coffee from the dispenser and blowing across the rim. “This woman had

a thirty-seven percent survival rate. The tumor was about the size of a baseball. I'm not even kidding you. It was fucking huge."

He took off down the hallway, Ben following behind. "How long were Jess' surgeries?" Ben asked.

"Who?"

"Jessica Wheaton."

Branson stopped in his tracks and turned to face Ben. "I thought you were doing a story on your principal's breast implants."

"Uh –"

"Although, I was a miracle worker on the Wheaton girl. So I can understand your curiosity."

"Right."

Branson turned left and headed into the maternity ward, Ben following close behind. A young nurse in pink scrubs rolled her eyes when she saw them coming and ducked into a patient room.

"Lost a shit ton of money at the casino last night, thanks to that one," Branson said, smiling back at Ben without stopping. "She's a real tease."

"About Jessica Wheaton, sir?"

"Yes. I think I was in surgery with Jessica Wheaton for about twelve hours that first night."

"And everything went successfully?"

"As successfully as it could for a first surgery like that," Branson said, waving to another female doctor as they passed. She looked as happy to see him as the other one did. "We had to

close her up and give her about twenty-four hours recovery time. The human body can only handle so much. You have to work slow. Give her time to recover from all the trauma. Then you go in again.”

“Did you accomplish everything you wanted to?”

“I would say so,” Branson said, sipping his coffee. “Minimal scarring.”

“Is there any reason for her memory loss?” Ben said. “I mean to say, is it common with coma patients to retain only the memories that occurred after the accident?”

Branson shrugged. “Not my field, but every coma patient reacts differently. Someone can be in a coma for thirty minutes and never be able to walk again. Others can wake up after several years and walk out the door as if they were just taking a nap.”

“But what are the chances of her remembering who she is?”

Branson stopped and turned to face Ben. “Shouldn’t you be writing this down or something?”

Right. Yes.” Ben lifted his camera and pretended to press a button on the side.

Branson smiled into the lens. “Has she started remembering who she is?”

Ben shook his head. “Well, no, not yet.”

“Then it’s probably not likely that she will,” Branson said, continuing his walk. Ben dropped the camera and ran to keep up with him.

“So she’ll never return to the old Jessica?” he asked.

“Dr. Murphy talked to the Wheatons before surgery,” Branson said. “They knew the risks. With her injuries where they were, the odds of retaining any cognitive function, including her memory or her personality, were very slim. She could even wake up and believe she was somebody entirely different.”

“Has that happened before?”

“Sure. When I was in med school I met a coma patient who swore he was a Russian spy for the first three weeks of recovery.” Branson laughed. “He was a pizza delivery driver. What’re you gonna do?”

“Jessica’s personality does seem very different than what it was,” Ben said.

“You know her?”

Ben faltered. “I’ve met her once or twice.”

“Let me tell you how I see it,” he continued, stopping outside the nursery window to finish his cup of coffee. Ben looked inside the nursery, where a handful of newborn babies in pinks and blues stared up at them through the glass. “The second that tractor-trailer flipped, Jessica’s life would be changed forever. Whether she lost a limb, her vision, her memory. Whatever. Her life would never be the same. I gave my all. Did my best. Everything. And I got that girl pretty damn close to the original. And, with any luck, she’ll never regain her memory and realize that she doesn’t look identical. That would be a bonus for me.”

“Excuse me?”

“Off the record,” Branson said quickly. “Sorry. I’m so very tired. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

Ben shook his head, turning away from Branson to hide his look of disgust. He’d immediately disliked the doctor. He had no connection with his patients – no sympathy, concern, anything. Jessica could wake up thinking she was a milk carton, and Dr. Branson wouldn’t care as long as she still *looked* like Jessica.

Ben turned to watch Branson head down the hallway to greet an older, hunched over gentleman in a ragged jacket and thick boots. He was holding his side, and talking to Branson in

a low voice. Ben watched the transaction for a few seconds longer, his thoughts still on Jessica's surgery, before something clicked.

"Richard?"

Branson and Richard Thatcher turned to face Ben.

"You know this kid?" Branson asked Richard.

"He's Jessica's boyfriend."

Branson's eyes darted back to Ben. "Excuse me?"

Ben was walking towards them, but stopped a few yards away at the look on Branson's face.

"What is going on here?" Branson asked.

"I just wanted some information," Ben said.

"Well, get the hell out of here." Branson raised his voice. "Before I call for security."

Ben darted past them and made for the elevator, his mind racing. Why was Richard here? What did he have to talk to Dr. Branson about? Could he really be sick, as Jess suspected yesterday? Or could it be something else? It was far fetched, but Ben couldn't help but believe that Richard was here to discuss Jess. The coincidence of his appearance was too much to ignore. But what exactly did it all mean?

As the elevator doors closed around him, he became aware of his phone vibrating in his pocket. He pulled it out. It was Nikki.

"We need to talk," she said when he answered.

"I agree," Ben said, staring at his spooked reflection as the elevator dropped him back down to the lobby.

"I'm going to meet you at the Roxy."

“I’m not there,” Ben said. “I’ll come to you.”

Ben drove back into Northampton on autopilot. What turns he made, what stoplights he stopped at, he would never remember. Instead, he thought of Jess. The emergency room, the picture of Jess wrapped up like a mummy, Dr. Branson. There was a lot of horror at the hospital. He was guilty for having missed it before, and he still was, but he felt closer to Jess having seen a little more of what she went through while she was there. He was moving forward. It was a small step, but he felt lighter, as if there was a chance that he and Jess could salvage their friendship. But first he had to fix another big mistake. A walking, talking mistake in four-inch heels.

Nikki lived in a neighborhood behind the trailer park, in a house that looked as old as the town itself. She was waiting for him on the yellow couch that sat on her front porch. She flicked the ash from the end of her cigarette as he sat down beside her.

“I saw your girlfriend at work yesterday,” Nikki said.

“She’s not my girlfriend,” Ben said. “And I heard.”

Nikki looked over. “She’s not your girlfriend anymore?”

Ben bit his nail. “She’s not really Jessica anymore,” he said. “She’s different.”

Nikki blew cigarette smoke into air. “Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“For us?”

He took her silence as a yes.

“We’ve never been a good thing,” he said.

He watched a small bird swoop down from the roof and plop in the brown grass, hopping through the blades, looking for something to eat. Nikki sniffed, and Ben turned to see that she was crying.

“I’m sorry for what I said to her,” she said.

“I know.” Ben swallowed.

“I was just so hurt.”

“I’m sorry that I hurt you,” Ben said. “I’ve been hurting everybody I talk to lately. I don’t really know how to treat people very well.”

“You’ll figure it out.” Nikki brought the cigarette to her lips again. “You’re not a bad person. Deep down.”

Ben smiled. “Thanks.”

The bird flew up to sit on the railing in front of them and jerked its head from Nikki to Ben until flying off around the house and out of sight.

“You’re lucky,” Nikki said, wiping her cheek. She smiled. “Jessica really loves you.”

Ben smiled. “I think she loves the best version of me. But it’s a lot of pressure to always try to be that for her.”

“Yeah, I know she thought that way,” Nikki said. “But you said it yourself: Jessica’s different. And I saw her face yesterday. She loves you. Just as you are. Just as she’s supposed to love you.”

Ben thought of Jess, in her white dress, waving to him in the dark from her seat on the roof. He laughed, and shook his head. “She just likes having someone to hang out with. We’re friends.”

Nikki was watching him. “Sure you are.”

Ben lowered his grin. Nikki didn’t exactly know what she was talking about. And anyway, he hadn’t forgotten what Jess had said to him yesterday:

“Someday someone will do to you what you’ve done to me and it will *ruin* you. And I won’t even remember your name.”

“I’m sorry,” Ben said, standing up. “I have to go.”

Nikki flicked her cigarette into the grass. “Go get ‘em, Tiger.”

Ben laughed. “Take care of yourself,” he said, and left the porch.

A few minutes later, he was in the Wheaton driveway. Jess’ window was open, and her curtains were blowing gently in the breeze. The sun set as he drove, and now, as Ben looked to the sky, he could see the first stars making their appearance in the night.

Patty came to the door when he knocked. She smiled, as if she expected him here.

“Mrs. Wheaton,” Ben said, taking his hands from his pockets. “I was an idiot. I left Jess at the hospital because I was a coward. I didn’t know how to make myself happy. So I ran. But she deserved someone to be by her side every day that she was in there. And I am so sorry that I wasn’t that person.”

Patty leaned into the door. “Thank you.”

Ben lowered his hands. “How is she?”

“Why don’t you come see for yourself?”

She moved to let him in.

“She’s in the living room,” Patty said, letting him go.

He nodded. Suddenly, he felt very afraid. He hadn’t planned anything to say. And he hadn’t forgotten the things she’d said to him just the day before. He was trying to fix things, just like his mother suggested, but he didn’t quite know how.

He turned the corner into the living room, his palms sweaty. Jess was lying on her side in the dark, the television flashing light across her face. Her hair was strewn about her pillow and

her eyes looked puffy and her cheeks flushed. Used tissues were strewn all over the coffee table and the floor. When she saw Ben, she sat up slowly, as if trying to determine whether it was a dream or not.

“Hi.” He waved.

She waved back.

He smiled. If he could only pause his life here, life would be perfect. Forever.

“Ben.” Jess’ eyes were already brimming with tears. “I am so sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.” Ben moved into the room and gestured to the couch. “Can I?”

He sat down, taking some of Jess’ blanket for his own lap. What a difference he felt sitting here with Jess than he had a few minutes ago on the couch with Nikki. He remembered what Nikki had said about Jess’ feelings for him, and felt suddenly embarrassed.

“I can’t believe how much I drank,” Jess said, turning to face him. “It made me say such terrible things. I never would have said that to you. I was upset. And the alcohol made me mean.”

“Please stop apologizing,” Ben said. “Everything you did was justified. I’m the one who needs to fix everything.”

“But there’s nothing to fix!” Jess blurted out.

“Can I finish? You deserve to hear this at least once.”

Jess nodded reluctantly.

“I haven’t been a very happy person,” he began. “It was never your fault, but before the accident, I treated you as if it were. I resented your drive and your ambition, because I had none. And the more lost I became, the further we drifted apart. I got involved with Nikki because I

didn't think I deserved you anymore. By December, I realized that my hatred for myself had poisoned our relationship. I didn't love you anymore. I couldn't."

Jess watched him, unblinking.

"When I went to Villanova after finals week last semester, I knew things were over," Ben continued. "And on that drive back home, I was planning on ending it."

"You mean," Jess said, connecting the dots. "The day of the accident?"

"I never got the chance to have the conversation," Ben said. "And I will most likely never have it again. Not with the old Jessica, anyway."

"So that's why you never came to the hospital. Because you were trying to end things." Jess closed her eyes. "With me."

"I left the hospital soon after we got there," Ben said. "The doctors wanted to keep me overnight, but I refused. I had sat on the Interstate too long with your unconscious body. I knew it wasn't good. It scared me too much. So I left."

"There were several reasons why I didn't come back," Ben continued. "I was guilty, for starters. I couldn't come to terms with the reality that this woman I'd been with for four years would die without knowing the truth about me. And everything that I had put her through."

"I also felt guilty because I was not the one who deserved to walk out of there unharmed. You were on your way to law school. You are an exceptional athlete. A terrific public speaker. You are driven, passionate, charitable, witty. The list goes on. You are an absolutely amazing person. It wasn't fair that I got to walk out of the hospital that night while you were on the brink of death for weeks. I hated myself even more for that."

“I also didn’t go back because I believed that you were going to die, and I was too scared to deal with that possibility. I thought it would be better if your parents were the ones surrounding you in your final moments. And not someone like me.

“But then you lived.” Ben shrugged. “And I still was too afraid to see you. I worried about what your family would say. If they asked me why I hadn’t been to see you, I couldn’t tell them the truth. I was a coward. And so I shrunk away like a rat. When you woke up, I followed your story in the news. You hadn’t remembered me. You hadn’t remembered anything. After a few days I realized that was probably for the best. I thought you could have a fresh start without.”

Jess wiped a tear away. “But you did come back.”

“Your father called me,” Ben told her. “He thought I could help you remember. But I haven’t.”

“That’s why you were hanging out with me?” Jess shook her head. “To help bring back my memory.” She wiped another tear midway down her cheek.

“Jess, I wanted to help you and your family,” Ben said, leaning in and catching her eye. “But I don’t need the old Jessica back.”

Jess nodded.

“I’ve really come to like the new Jess,” Ben said, smiling. “I’ve been trying not to. But I can’t help it.”

Jess’s cheeks reddened again, the way they always did now when he complimented her. Ben found it to be one of the most adorable things he’d ever seen. “You’re the only one who wants me to stay this way,” she said.

“Well, they’ll come around,” Ben said. “When they come to terms with the fact that it’s time to start getting to know you as you are. Right now they have blinders on.”

“But how could they ever feel anything for the new me?” Jess asked. “You said it yourself. Jessica was ambitious and athletic and charismatic. Who am I?”

“You’re beautiful,” Ben said, and looked away to keep his voice steady. Every part of him wanted to run and hide. But that was how he knew he was where he was supposed to be, doing what he was supposed to be doing. “And you put others before yourself. You’re smart, too; you’re always thinking one step ahead of everybody else. And you’re the strongest person I’ve ever met. Nobody could be in your situation and handle it with more grace and understanding.”

“And you make me feel different than anybody’s ever made me feel,” Ben said, smiling despite himself. He didn’t think he felt this way before, but now he knew he had known it all along. “You challenge me. You accept me. You see me for who I am, and not who you wish I would be. You make me feel comfortable. You make me feel like it’s okay to just be me.”

He was talking too much. He laughed – a nervous habit – and looked up at Jess for the first time in what felt like hours. She was laughing, too. And holding her wrist against her eye to capture more tears before they could fall.

She shook her head. “I thought I would go my whole life without anyone feeling that way about me,” she said, and grabbed a tissue off the coffee table to wipe her eyes. “I thought everyone would be disappointed in me if I never remembered who I was before the accident. I thought no one would accept me for who I am now.”

“Just give it time,” Ben said. “And eventually they’ll see the girl I see.”

Chapter Nine

Jess woke suddenly to a banging from downstairs. It took her a second to exit her dream. In it, she had been running through the hospital – past white door after white door. Someone had been chasing her, but she couldn't remember whom. And she had been chasing someone herself. It was Richard Thatcher. She remembered the way he'd whip around a hallway corner and out of sight, but not before his overcoat billowed out behind him and smacked against the wall. She'd turn the corner a second later, and he'd be gone. She'd hear a door slam in the distance and know he was just somewhere ahead.

There was more banging from downstairs. Jess rubbed her head as she sat up. It was the door. Someone was banging at the door.

She stumbled out of the tangle of sheets around her ankles and went to the stairs. She was surprised she had been sleeping so heavily. It had felt like she had never gotten to sleep last night. Ben had finally said all of the things she'd been dying to hear him say. He had feelings for her. Her stomach seemed to leap against her lungs as she padded down the stairs in her bare feet.

It had almost seemed like yesterday was the real dream. Had Ben really admitted those things to her? Called her strong? And beautiful? Admitted that he liked her the way she was? Jess had stared at the ceiling for what felt like hours last night, reliving the memories of the day before. And then he had asked her on a date – a real first date – before he left.

“That is, if you can forgive me,” he’d added, looking into his lap as those bouncy curls fell across his forehead.

Of course, she probably shouldn’t have forgiven him. It was a terrible thing that he had done. To Jessica. But he had said it himself – she wasn’t that Jessica anymore. And so he hadn’t done anything personally to her. Those were his mistakes. And they were in the past, along with all of Jessica’s past. If she had to start over, she might as well let Ben start over as well.

She opened the front door as the banging started again. There was Ben, one fist raised to rap his knuckles against the door again.

“Rise and shine, sleepy head,” he said, and walked past Jess into the hallway.

“What are you doing here?” Jess asked, running her fingers through her hair as she closed the door. As soon as she saw him, she knew the words exchanged yesterday had not been a dream. There was a certain unspoken something between them now. Some secret pact between two people who finally tell each other exactly what they’d been hiding. They were exposed. It felt comforting and terrifying at the same time. Jess felt as though she could run back upstairs and hide under the covers as easily as she could wrap her arms around Ben and kiss him flat on the lips. Instead, she laughed, and pulled her deer pajamas down over her exposed stomach.

“I’m here to pick you up for our date,” Ben said, and faltered a little in his eye contact. Then he smiled, and held out a bouquet of twigs, tied together with a long yellow ribbon. “It’s all that’s growing in my backyard at the moment,” he explained. “But you deserve them all the same.”

“I deserve these?” Jess asked, taking them in her hands. “Are you sure?”

“I have a surprise trip planned for us today,” Ben said, following her into the kitchen. She found a vase under the sink and shoved the bouquet inside. “Can you guess where we’re going?”

Jess turned, the vase in her hands, and looked at Ben, his arms outstretched and his eyebrows arcing high into his forehead. He had sunglasses propped amid his curls and was wearing a floral button-up shirt, and lime green shorts.

“The circus?”

“Close,” Ben said, dropping his hands to his waist and giving his head a powerful shake to drop the sunglasses down to his nose. “We’re going to the Jersey Shore, baby.”

Jess covered her face with the bouquet to hide her blushing cheeks and giddy grin. “Isn’t it a little cold to be going to the beach?”

“It’s the warmest it’s been in months,” Ben said. “And even if we don’t go in the water, there’s still plenty that we can do.”

Jess set the vase on the counter and sighed. “I guess I better get changed, then.”

“Great,” Ben said, clapping his hands once in front of him. “It’s a three-hour drive, so the sooner we leave, the better.”

Jess twirled about herself when she got back up to her room. One spin out of excitement, and one spin of anxiety. She dug through her drawers about three separate times before settling on a tight pink bikini – probably still at the house from when Jessica was in high school – under a soft green summer dress. She grabbed a light jacket and ran to the bathroom to brush her teeth and apply make-up. She put her hair in a high ponytail and when she got back in the kitchen, she wrapped the yellow ribbon from Ben’s bouquet around her hair in a neat bow.

“Looking good,” Ben said, holding the front door open for her.

The Jeep had a couple bikes hooked to a bike rack over the spare tire. When they got in the front seat, Ben lowered all four windows, and inserted a CD into the CD Drive. In permanent marker along the CD’s front, Ben had scribbled, *Jersey Shore Mix*.

When they were on the highway, Ben reached an arm into the backseat and pulled a grocery bag up into Jess' lap. Inside were bags of chocolates, gummy candies, and trail mix.

"Did you raid the Roxy's concession stand last night?" Jess joked, opening a bag of gummy worms.

"I stole it all. Just for you," Ben said, taking the wriggling gummy Jess offered him. "That's my aim on most dates. Don't pay for anything."

"Yeah, you have to save up that Roxy money for more blank CD's."

Ben swallowed his worm and turned down the music. "Speaking of my budget cuts," he said. "I hope you don't mind, I have a bucket in the trunk we can use as a communal bathroom. I couldn't afford the price of the public restrooms on the boardwalk."

"Or the shovel to dig our own bathroom in the sand."

"Alas, the bucket was all I could afford," Ben said. "But I plan on letting other beachgoers use it for twenty-five cents a squat."

"You're disgusting," Jess said, tossing her flying hair away from the window. "No wonder your last serious girlfriend pretends not to know who you are anymore."

Ben's mouth hung open in shock. "Well played, Jess Wheaton. Topical."

Jess laughed and pulled another worm away from her teeth until it snapped in two. She chewed on the piece in her mouth, relishing the effortless nature of their conversations. Gone were any concerns to behave like the old Jessica. She could be herself now.

The drive lasted about the length of two and a half listens of the *Jersey Shore Mix*. By the time they got off the highway on a winding road surrounded by sand, tall grass and motels named after creatures of the sea, Jess could sing along to most of the choruses. The air outside was warm, and smelled of the ocean. At every stoplight, wooden signs in the sand advertised

fresh strawberries ahead. Farmers with their dusty trucks parked along the road and sold giant cantaloupes out of their truck bed.

Ben didn't stop driving until they reached the ocean. He parked in a beach parking lot and they got out and stretched on the sand spotted asphalt.

"Come on," Ben said, taking Jess' hand and leading her in the direction of the waves.

He led her down a wooden pier in the valley between two sand dunes and out onto the beach, where they kicked off their shoes and abandoned them in a pile by the pier. The sand was soft and warm under Jess' toes. They clambered down the beach together, putting their weight on their joined hands to pull each other out of the sinking sand. Soon the ground beneath them grew harder and wetter until they were yards away from the brown ocean water. The waves reached for them as they walked, tumbling and stretching for them, before receding back into the sea, leaving behind frothy suds of salt and seaweed.

They stopped in the goop left behind from a previous wave and waited together – side by side – for the next wave. The wind whipped their clothes in front of them, but they stood their ground, and watched as a wave crashed and climbed up the sand towards them. When the water hit Jess' toes, she screamed.

"It's freezing," she laughed, jumping from one foot to the next.

"It's April," Ben said, watching her squirm.

They stayed there for a long time, hand in hand, watching the waves run back and forth over their feet.

"I have another surprise for you," Ben said, dropping her hand and turning to face her.

They went back into the parking lot, carrying their shoes in their hands and tiptoeing across the sharp gravel. At the Jeep, Ben disconnected a black bike off the bike rack.

“This is my old bike from high school,” Ben said. “I put some air in the tires last night. Hopefully it’ll hold up.”

He rested it on the side of the Jeep and took down the second bike. It was a beautiful shade of yellow, and had a red bow tied across the handlebars.

“And this is your bike,” Ben said, setting it in front of her.

“What are you talking about?”

“I hope you don’t mind,” Ben said. “But I came by your house this morning and took your old bike and exchanged it for this new one.”

Jess looked over its sleek frame and cushioned seat.

“I thought you might want something a little more grown up,” Ben added, watching her look over the bike. “Your old bike still had streamers on the handlebars.”

“I love it,” Jess said, and she did. “Can I take it for a ride?”

They made wide loops around the parking lot at first, driving through clusters of sleeping seagulls that ran in all directions, flapping their wings and squawking irritably at them. Then Ben drove out into the street and Jess followed him the three or four blocks to the boardwalk. They pedaled hard up the steep ramp, dodging a small boy running ahead from his parents.

The boardwalk stretched down the beach with shops and arcades along one side, their wide doors open to face the ocean. They pedaled into the lane designated for the tramcar, and rode side by side amid joggers and fellow bikers. It was relatively clear of traffic, and a lot of the shops were closed for the afternoon, some still closed for the season. As they drove, Ben told her that the boardwalk filled up in the summer months with east coast vacationers who came for the sun, the shops, and the amusement park on the piers. When they reached the first pier, Ben steered her through it, past carousels and roller coasters that were closed until nightfall.

They rode until they reached the other end of the boardwalk – all in all about a mile drive – and then turned around to go back, stopping only for fresh lemonade and some chocolate fudge.

It was late in the afternoon when they returned to Ben's Jeep and returned their bikes to the bike rack.

"Thank you so much for my bike," Jess said, taking Ben's lemonade so he could hoist the bikes up onto the rack. "I love it."

"You don't miss streamers on the handlebars?"

"Not at all," Jess handed him back his cup. "Just the training wheels."

They made their way back to the beach, Ben's arm wrapped around Jess' neck. Jess loved the weight on her shoulders. They plopped down in the sand together, sipping their lemonades. The setting sun behind them warmed their backs and turned the ocean shining and sparkling as the tide came in, inching towards their feet.

"Do you know when your parents will get you another car?" Ben asked.

Jess' SUV had been totaled in the accident. The thought of getting behind the wheel again was a little unnerving. The thought of Patty and Harris spending so much money on another car caused even more anxiety. "I don't want them to get me another one."

"Jess, I'm sure they don't mind," Ben said. "You're not working right now, and if you're going back to school in the fall –"

"They've done so much for me already," Jess said. "I'm not letting them get me anything else I don't absolutely need. I'll be in the city. I won't need a car."

"Well, you might want to visit some people," Ben said, his lips close to her shoulder as he spoke. "From time to time."

Jess smiled as her stomach flipped. “I might,” she agreed. “But I don’t deserve anything else from them. From anyone. I have everything I could ever want already.”

She could feel Ben’s eyes on her as she stared out at the ocean.

“What?”

“You’re just.” Ben looked out to the ocean as well, shaking his head. “So selfless. And thoughtful. You’re wonderful. You really are.”

“Stop it.”

“I’m serious,” Ben said. “You weren’t this way before. You were great then, too, but – different. You appreciate things more now. And you see those around you. You notice things you didn’t.”

“Like you?” Jess asked. Her face went warm as she turned to face him, but she knew it had nothing to do with the sun on her cheeks. “I see you.”

“You see me.” Ben reached up to put a hand on her cheek. He ran a finger down her scar as if he were unzipping her and exposing her to the world. She felt naked. “And I see you.”

She closed her eyes as he moved in. And that’s when she saw it.

She was sitting in the back of a classroom, years ago. She looked away from her book, down a row of students to where Ben sat in the front, surrounded by a group of friends. He was lankier, his hair shaggier – and he was laughing at someone’s joke. She smiled, because the sight of him did something to her that she didn’t expect to feel. His head turned, and he met her eyes. And he smiled. It was a smile just for her.

Jess sat up and turned back out to the ocean. It was a memory. Just a single memory, but it was there. A moment from before the crash. From high school, probably. But it wasn’t a

moment from a photograph in her yearbook or a picture hanging on her bedroom walls. It was a moment from the inner recesses of her subconscious.

“I’m sorry,” Ben said behind her, and he sat up, too. “Too much too soon?”

“No, I – ” Jess said, but never finished. She turned down the beach, away from Ben, to hide her tears. Jessica was ready to come back. She was fighting to break through. And she was much stronger than Jess. And when she arrived, what would she be like? Would she still be this person that Ben was falling for? Or would she go back to her old self? Would she push him away again? Make him unhappy? Cause him to cheat? He wasn’t in love with the girl she was anymore. What did that mean for the girl she was now?

“You know what I could do right now?” Ben asked, putting a hand on her back.

Jess wiped a tear with the flick of a finger, hoping it was discrete, and turned to face him. “What?” she asked.

“Ride a roller coaster.”

She smiled, hopefully. “Sounds like a great idea.”

He got to his feet and reached down to help her up. “Need a hand?”

He pulled her up to within an inch of his face. She met his eyes again, and was reminded of her memory again.

“Let’s go,” she said, turning away and heading back up the beach. She took a deep breath, steadying herself so she wouldn’t lose control.

They walked in silence to the boardwalk, his hand in hers. When they climbed the ramp, Jess saw that it had come alive with flashing lights from the shop windows and jingling noises from within the arcades. A larger crowd of people filled the wooden walkway now, carrying ice cream cones, bags of merchandise, and giant stuffed animals.

Jess and Ben moved out of the way of the long, blue tramcar that took people up and down the boardwalk for a buck fifty one-way. It snaked through the crowds, its headlights casting long shadows on the wood, and through its speakers a recording of a female voice ordered over and over again to, "Watch the tramcar, please."

"Isn't this great?" Ben turned to Jess, squeezing her hand in his.

Jess nodded, taking none of it in. An hour ago, she would have loved this. The lights, the sounds, the people. His hand in hers. But now it just felt like the last hurrah in a dream world she was waking up from.

This can't be real. Things can't be ending like this. She wiped another tear away as Ben led her around two teenage girls sharing a cotton candy. When would another memory arrive? It could be while they were on the roller coaster. It could be on the car ride back. She bumped into a man walking with his wife beside her.

"Sorry," she mumbled, hiding her face.

"Slow down," he cautioned her, but Jess knew she couldn't. No matter what she did, her memory was out of her control. And it was going to arrive faster than she wanted, no matter how slow it came.

Ben led her into the first pier where they had biked around that afternoon. Kids ran screaming around them, and lined up in twisting queues in front of the bumper cars and log flume. Ben stopped outside a ticket booth and ordered them both a book of tickets to use towards the rides.

"Are you nervous?" he asked, handing her a book, and meeting her eyes.

Jess nodded, tearing up again.

“Hey, hey, hey.” Ben put his hands up to Jess’ face, forcing her eyes to stay on him. “It’s okay. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.”

Jess laughed. She knew he was talking about the roller coaster ride, but it fit so cruelly with her fear of regaining her memory. A child in his mother’s arms stared at Jess’s teary face as they passed.

“It’s over really fast,” Ben continued. “In the blink of an eye. And you’re going to want to do it again, I know you will.”

Jess nodded.

“Just have fun with it, okay?” Ben said. “There’s no point in worrying about it. Just relax.” He took a deep breath and let it out. “Breathe. Enjoy it. It’s fun.”

“Okay,” Jess said, as he dropped his hands from her cheeks. Just have fun. Enjoy the moment. She might as well. It was all going to be over soon, she should at least enjoy what time she had left. She forced a smile and took Ben’s hand again as he led her down the pier to where the giant wooden roller coaster, The Great White, was constructed.

The line was short, but Ben insisted that they wait for the front row seats. “It’s the best view,” he said, squeezing her hand. “How are you doing?”

“I’m good,” Jess said, watching the car in front of them pull out of the station, down a hill and into a tunnel running under the pier. Haunting, echoing screams muddied the air below them. A second later, the car reappeared in the distance, climbing a giant hill adorned with sparkling white lights. The chain cranked loudly as the car was pulled towards the peak. People in the car were turning in their seats and waving at family members and friends below them. Then they were whipped down the hill and out of sight, leaving only their screams behind.

Jess took a deep breath. Enjoy the ride. Enjoy the ride. Ben's words of advice became a new mantra that she repeated in her head as she watched the car race around the track. She had gotten Ben to date her twice now. Once as the old Jessica. And once as Jess. Who's to say that she couldn't get him to fall in love with her again, as the new Jessica? Maybe she would be the new and improved Jessica. She wouldn't be all those things Ben didn't like – bossy, pushy, controlling. She would be easy going, fun, carefree. She would love Ben. She would show him every day.

Or what if she remembered that she didn't love Ben? What if they had both fallen out of love? Would that part come back to her as well? Could she shut it off? Could she learn to incorporate the old into the new?

The car turned back into the station and braked in front of the line of people waiting to ride next. The lap bars were released and the passengers climbed out of their seats and ran down the stairs to find new rides to ride. Jess and Ben moved forward and sat in the front seat of the now empty car and lowered the bar across their laps.

“It's going to be okay,” Ben said, giving her a smile. “You trust me?”

Jess nodded again. He was right. It was going to be okay. She was going to figure out how to be Jessica and how to keep Ben. She was strong. Just like Ben said. She could do it.

The car eased out of the station then plunged down into the tunnel. It was utter blackness, filled with the screaming of the passengers around her. Jess closed her eyes, and accepted the unknown before her. And when she opened her eyes, they were climbing up into the sky.

“Wasn't I right?” Ben said. “Take a look at that view.”

Jess looked over the side of the tracks. Below them, the boardwalk was alive with the little ants of people scurrying along across the boards. In the distance, the ferris wheel blinked

greens and reds and yellows as it spun slowly on the second pier of rides. In front of them, the ocean was an inky blackness stretched out before them against the darkening sky. And above them, seagulls circled the top of the hill, grabbing the bugs that danced around the flickering lights.

Jess smiled.

“See?” Ben said. “Aren’t you glad you came on the ride?”

And she was. Her stomach lifted as they lurched over the hill, the wind whipping her hair in the breeze. She was free. She put her hands over her head and screamed along with everyone else. Today had been a perfect day. And tomorrow, she would have to accept that she was Jessica. But she would be a new Jessica. A free Jessica. And everything would be okay.

When they got back to the Jeep, Ben helped Jess into the car, then went around to his own door and climbed in. They drove out of the city in silence. Jess watched groups of younger people stumble down the sidewalk with fruity drinks in their hands, kids playing in their hotel pools, and cars parked with surfboards tied to their hoods. She closed her eyes and leaned against the window with her jacket tucked under her head for support.

The next thing she knew, Ben was nudging her awake. She sat up, and recognized the gray panels of her garage. She had slept the entire way home.

“I’m sorry,” she said, stretching her arms over her head. “I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“It’s okay. Neither did I,” Ben said.

“No?”

“I was too excited to sleep,” he said, and smiled.

He was too excited about Jess to sleep. Even though she had a lot on her mind, she was still able to feel her heart beat fast against her ribcage. Her arms and neck felt warm, despite the cooler air now coming in through the window.

“Thank you for today,” Jess said.

“I figured we could benefit from getting out of town for a day.”

Jess smiled. It did benefit them getting out of town. At least, it benefitted Jess. It gave her a first glimpse into the person she was before her accident. It gave her a lot to think about.

“Can I ask you something?” she asked him, looking down.

“Of course.”

“What if my memory does come back?” Jess asked. “What if Jessica came back?”

“That would be great.”

“Would it?” Jess asked, looking up. “You stopped loving Jessica. She was different than me. She was busy all the time. You were unhappy when you were with her.”

“Jess.” Ben took her hands. “I was unhappy when I was with her because of me. Not Jessica. If I had been honest with her, or with myself, who knows what my feelings would have been?”

“Yeah, but – ”

“If you got your memory back,” Ben continued. “That would be okay with me. Because I am happier today than I’ve ever been. As long as we both remain happy, and supportive of each other, then we’ll be great. I couldn’t do either of those things before. But I’ve learned how to do better. I will be better.”

“Well,” Jess said. “I will be better, too.”

“Just keep being yourself. And I’ll never want to let you go.”

They made eye contact again, laughed, and looked away.

“Okay,” Jess said, finding the car handle in the dark with her hand.

“Wait,” Ben mumbled, reaching his face across the seat. He stopped as his nose hit her cheek, and laughed. His warm breath hit her lips. His face retreated an inch or so, and his hand found her neck. Then he went in again.

His kiss was soft, tentative at first. His hand pulled her into him, and his mouth worked around her lips, caressing first her lower lip, and then her upper. Jess felt surrounded. He moved slow, taking the time to explore the curves of her mouth. Jess felt him pull back, timid, and then moved in again with a confidence about himself and his feelings.

Jess breathed him in. Felt his curls between her fingers. Smelled the sweat and sun on his cheeks. And as they kissed, she went back to that memory of him in high school that she had discovered earlier.

She watched him from over the top of her book, and when he smiled at her, she returned to her notes. It was a secret look, the way he looked at her. It was a look no one else saw. A look that Jess felt. She could remember the butterflies.

And then there was another memory. Just like that, she was riding a bike down a street. It wasn't a street in Jessica's neighborhood, but a street downtown. There was someone holding onto the back of her seat, running behind her, and when he let go, she took off, pedaling down the street on her own, passing a dirty, white car parked against the sidewalk. She tumbled into the yard of a neighbor, and removed her helmet and turned to look back and Richard was there. He was laughing and running towards her. And there was another kid there – a boy, older, and he was riding his bike, too.

And then she was walking down the hallway of her high school, her books held tight against her chest, and she edged around a group of kids talking against their lockers. There was Ben again. His hair was longer. And he looked at her again, and there were those butterflies. But then he looked away and kept walking. Jess stopped in her tracks, causing a big boy behind her to knock into her and drop her books. She bent down to pick them up and as she did, she glanced back down the hallway to where Ben was kissing a girl at her locker with long, straight blonde hair and a short skirt revealing tan, toned legs.

The memories were coming faster now. She was reading in a bedroom. She was in the backseat of a dirty station wagon. She was eating alone at lunch with a book open on the table next to her. She was at her brother's funeral. She was washing her mother's wet sheets. She was working at the movie rental shop. She was on a school bus, watching from the window as Jessica Wheaton ran around and around the track at school, and Ben watched from the bleachers. She was mad, and packing quickly, and getting into her car, she was on the highway, she was dodging a tractor-trailer that flipped in front of her, she was lying on her side as an SUV flipped faster and faster in her direction.

And just like that, she remembered it all, and knew her past, and she knew who she was, and why she was awake in the hospital bed, with a new face and a new haircut and a new family. She wasn't Jessica Wheaton. Not in December. Not ever.

She was Hannah Thatcher.

Part Two

Chapter Ten

My parents are keeping me busy today. But I'll be in touch.

Ben found himself reading Jess' text for the fourth time since he received it a few hours ago. It was very formal. "I'll be in touch." She didn't talk like that. Although, she could. She might. And what's to say anything is wrong? They had the perfect date two days ago. Everything had gone right.

If something were wrong, Jess would tell him. He had been completely honest with her, and she had been honest with him. There was no reason for her to hide anything from him. Especially because he had made it clear to her that he wasn't going anywhere.

He put his phone down on the kitchen counter as the wind shook the glass in the window above the sink. Ben looked outside. Snow was falling again. Ben thought spring was here to stay, but apparently, winter wasn't leaving without a fight. The weather report had dropped temperatures every day for the rest of the week.

He sighed and went back to his application for Temple University. He'd already filled out applications for Widener, Villanova, and Drexel. Muhlenberg wasn't the school for him. Jessica always thought it was, but it never felt right to him. So even though it might put him back another semester of work, it'd be worth it for him to go somewhere that felt right to him.

The airport had closed this morning when the snow started so his dad was home today too. He came into the kitchen earlier to refill his mug with coffee from the pot and stopped to look over Ben's shoulder at the applications he was filling out on his laptop.

"Widener?" he said. "Do they have a film program?"

"I don't know," Ben said. "I'm not interested in film anymore."

"What are you interested in, then?"

"I haven't decided." Ben tried to keep his voice level. It wasn't worth another argument.

His dad left the room without another word. He probably was afraid to cause any trouble as well. Ben was glad for that. He didn't want anything to dampen the mood he was in now. He didn't want a bad relationship with his parents. But this bickering over Ben's future was a constant strain between them. The sooner Ben could get enrolled in a good school, the happier everyone in the family would be.

Ben was looking into programs in Philadelphia for two reasons. One, he wanted to be closer to Jessica. Before, the hour distance was a welcome bonus of Jessica going to school in the city. Ben felt like he needed space from her. Now, he couldn't imagine not seeing her every day. It was hard enough giving her these past few days with her family. When they started school, Jess would need him. She didn't remember her previous pre law classes, the friends she'd made, her way around her campus. She would need a friendly face around to help her back on track.

He was also heading into Philadelphia because he knew it would be better for him if he finally got out of Northampton. This town was his security blanket. Besides the fact that his parents were here, meaning he always had a home and a hot meal, he also had the Roxy here. The temptation to come back to that back row seat every weekend was too great. He never felt

more at peace than when he was in his favorite chair, letting the stories on the screen transport him to other places. He was worried that if he were too close to home, he would return too often. And it was time for him to move on. At last.

His cell phone rang as he was finishing up his application to Temple, and he jumped for it, hoping it was Jess. But it was Nancy.

“Need help shoveling the walk?” he asked when he brought the phone to his ear.

“No, Frank is here,” Nancy said. “We’ll manage.”

“So, what’s up?”

“Did you get my email about our summer schedule?”

Ben had looked over it that morning. He was kind of proud of it. Nancy had worked hard with him to incorporate a lot of his ideas into the schedule – midnight movies, film festival screenings, Q and A’s with local filmmakers. He was excited to see if it would improve sales.

“It looks great, Nancy.”

“Well, I have you to thank for it,” she said. “When Daddy died last year, I didn’t know what I was going to do with that pile of bricks.”

“Hey, now,” Ben said. “That pile of bricks is like family to me.”

“I know. That’s why I’m calling.”

“What are you talking about?”

“This theater isn’t like family to me. But it is for you.”

“Meaning?”

“I think you’d do a better job running it than I would,” Nancy said. “Hear me out,” she added, as he started to interrupt. “I have a degree in business. That’s why my dad handed the

place off to me. But I never saw this for myself. I want to start my own catering business. You know that.”

He did. She had been halfway through culinary school when her father passed away last year. “I don’t know anything about running a movie theater,” Ben said.

“You know more than most,” Nancy said. “And I can teach you the rest. This summer. I’ll train you up. It’s really simple. The hardest part is figuring out how to make money, and you’ve already figured that out. Your head is full of ideas. I think you can really get this place thriving again.”

“I don’t know,” Ben said. “I haven’t even finished school.”

Nancy said, “Just think about it, okay? There’s no rush.”

Ben hung up a few minutes later, his head spinning. He already had so many ideas – new paint in the bathrooms, longer hours for the concession stand, black and white picture Sundays. But then he looked back down at his laptop. He was applying to schools. He couldn’t just drop everything to run the Roxy. Could he? Well, he did say the place was his second home. The idea of having the keys to the place made him almost giddy. Maybe he could take night classes – get a business degree.

But what about Jess? She would still be in Philadelphia all alone. It was only an hour away. He could visit every weekend. Once he got the theater running. If he ever got it running. That struck Ben with a terrifying thought: what if he ran it straight into the ground? It certainly gave him a lot to think about.

“You sure have been quiet today.”

Ben looked up. He was at the dinner table, his plate untouched, his parents both staring at him from across the table.

“Sorry?”

“What’s going on in that head of yours?” his mother asked. “You’ve barely said anything since I got home.”

Ben sat up. “It’s nothing. Just thinking about the future.”

“Ben’s been applying for schools today,” his father told his mother, as if Ben wasn’t at the table.

“That’s terrific, Ben.” His mother smiled. “It’s all about moving forward.”

“You’re right,” Ben said. “There just seem to be a lot of paths to take.”

“What paths are you considering?” she asked, wiping the edge of her smile on her napkin before laying it back in her lap.

“Well.” Ben looked past her and out the window. It was still snowing. “I could go to school, but I don’t know what to study.”

“I don’t understand why it’s not film,” his father said under his breath.

“And I don’t understand why you refuse to see why that might be painful for me,” Ben said back, his voice rising.

“Ben.” His mother reached over and touched her husband’s wrist on the table to silence him. “What were you saying?”

Ben sighed. “Well, Nancy called today. She’s leaving the Roxy. And she wants me to have it.”

“What?” his mother asked.

“That’s terrific,” his father said.

“Yeah, but I’d have to stay in town. I’d have to postpone school even longer.”

“Ben, this is exactly the kind of thing you would be good at,” his father said. “It’s a no brainer.”

“No, actually, it requires a lot of brains,” Ben said, clenching his fork tight in his hand. “It’s a big commitment. And I don’t know if it’s the right one for me.”

His father scoffed, rolling his eyes, but one look from his wife silenced him again. She turned back to Ben.

“You have some time to figure it out,” she said. “And you’re smart. We know you’ll do what’s best for you. Just remember that we’re here if you need any help deciding.”

Ben nodded, pulling his phone out of his pocket and checking it again. Still nothing. He wished Jess would be around to help him decide. Where was she?

He got his answer soon enough. After he’d done the dishes, sat with his mom watching television in the living room for an hour or so, and checked his phone about fifteen times, Jess called to tell him she was coming over. She sounded upset, so he went out into the garage and opened the garage door, hoping to meet her as she pulled in.

He was shocked when he saw her approaching – on her bike. She had her jacket hood up over her eyes and she was pedaling slowly and shakily over the icy road. The plows had been through twice already, but that didn’t mean the roads were safe to drive on – by car or otherwise.

“Are you crazy?” he said when he reached her on the road in his bare feet, helping her down. “Why didn’t you call me? I would’ve come to pick you up.”

They ran together down his driveway and into the garage. Jess put her hood down – her hair was a mess around her face, her cheeks were flushed, and she was out of breath. But she was beautiful.

“Come here,” Ben said, wrapping his arms around her to keep her warm. “Do you want to come up to my room?”

“No,” Jess said, pulling away. “Let’s just talk here.”

“Here? It’s freezing.” Ben bent down to look Jess in the eyes. “What is it?”

“I don’t –” Jess shook her head. “I don’t know where to begin.”

“Take your time,” Ben said, breathing heavy. “Start from the beginning.”

“The past few days have just been *awful*,” she said. “I had to get out of that house. I don’t know if I can go back. I don’t know what to say to them. I don’t belong there.”

Ben’s head was spinning in a million different directions. “Did something happen with Patty and Harris?” he asked. “Did they hurt you in some way?”

“No!” Jess was tearing up again. “God, no. They’re so great. It’s me. I’m the problem.”

“What did you do?”

She looked down. “I’ve been.” She sighed. “Remembering things.”

“You have?” Ben grabbed her hands. “Jess, that’s great. You don’t have to be upset about that. Everyone has been waiting so long for this.”

“No, it’s not what you think.”

“What does that mean?”

Jess pulled her hands away from him again. “I remembered things I wasn’t expecting to,” Jess said. “I don’t know how it happened, but I remembered exactly who I am. And it’s not what you think.”

Ben needed to sit down. What had she remembered? It must be about them or she wouldn’t be so worried to tell him. Had Jessica cheated on him before the accident? Was she not

in love with him? Was she in love with somebody else? God, the thought of that would be too much to handle right now. Please don't let it be that.

“Ben?”

He looked up. “What did you remember?”

Jess bit her lip to keep it from trembling. Then she took another big breath, closed her eyes, and said, “I'm not Jessica.”

Ben didn't get it. “What.”

She opened her eyes. “I'm Hannah.”

He blinked. “That's not funny.”

“I'm Hannah. I've always been Hannah.”

“No. No, you've always been Jessica. You live with the Wheatons and – and you went to pre law school and you went to high school with me. We dated for over four years.”

Jess was shaking her head. “That wasn't me, Ben. That was Jessica. I'm Hannah. I am.”

She reached for his hands, but he pulled them away and backed into the wall.

“You were in the car with me,” he said. “I saw the paramedics take you away.”

“I don't know how it happened,” Jess said. “They must have switched us up.”

“No. No, you're not Hannah because if you're Hannah then that means that Jessica is –”

Tears were falling down Jess' cheeks. “I'm so sorry, Ben.”

Ben's vision went blurry. It couldn't be true. She wasn't dead. She couldn't be dead. After everything they went through, she was gone. God, she had been gone for months. Dead. Since December. He didn't even know where she was right now. He loved her, and she was dead.

“Ben.” Hannah reached for him again.

“No.” Ben held up his hands against her. “I don’t know you.”

Hannah took a step back. “Ben, it’s me.”

A sob came up his chest as his tears began to fall. “Stay away from me,” he said. “I don’t know you.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“I don’t know what you think you’re doing,” Ben said, his voice rising. “But you don’t belong here anymore. You’ve been lying to me. You’re a liar.”

“Ben, I didn’t – ”

“You made me tell you things I’d never told anyone,” Ben yelled. “I trusted you.”

“I trusted you,” Hannah yelled back. “Why do you think I came here tonight?”

“I don’t know,” Ben said. “But I need you to go.”

Hannah turned, her hands in her face. Ben needed her gone. He felt like he was going to collapse. But she turned back to face him, lifting her hood back up over her face. “I’m sorry,” she said, and took her bike and left the garage. Ben reached up to press the garage door switch and dropped to the ground as the door slowly came down, separating him from the outside.

Chapter Eleven

Hannah showered at four a.m. when the house was still dark. She squeezed the water out of her hair with her hands, fluffed it with a towel, brushed out all of the knots, and braided it back away from her eyes. It was an easy way to control all of her hair. Her mother taught her that when she was little, before her mother went to prison the second time. She had Hannah's wild hair, too.

Hannah wore Jessica's bathrobe as she brushed her teeth with the new toothbrush she picked up at the 7-Eleven a few days ago. She'd been using Jessica's long enough. She held up their senior yearbook, open to the page with the picture of Thatcher, Hannah.

Her dad didn't want to spend money on professional portraits like everybody else did, so Hannah had Cody take it for her in their backyard. She stood with one arm resting on their chain-link fence. She'd spent an hour containing her hair. It fell down to her waist in loose curls. She tucked a flower behind one ear – a dandelion. Hannah smiled now. That was stupid. But when Hannah was eighteen, she had been very proud of how it turned out.

Hannah looked up into the mirror. She looked nothing like the girl in the picture. Her hair the only real similarity. It grew fast – always had – so now it was almost at her shoulder blades. Dr. Branson had taken her nose away. She loved that nose. It was her father's nose. She touched the one she had now. Small, delicate. Patty's nose. Branson had also attempted Jessica's plump cheeks, but combined with Hannah's high cheekbones, she saw how it was unsuccessful. She didn't have any freckles anymore, either. A plus, she supposed.

Strangely, Hannah was learning just how similar she and Jessica were. They were the same height and relatively the same build – Jessica, of course, was in much better shape, but she would have lost her muscle definition in a six-week coma, too. Their eyes were both blue. Hannah’s a shade lighter, but barely noticeable. Their hair almost the same shade of blonde. Their voice not much different, either, apparently. Still, someone should have picked up on something sooner.

The sun was coming in the window now. The Wheatons would be up soon. And Hannah would like to be gone already. She left the bathroom to change. Whereas Hannah’s closet at home was tiny and bare, Jessica’s closet was huge. Some clothes still had price tags attached. But these clothes were not Hannah’s. So she wore some of the old stuff and went down into the kitchen. Flicking on the overhead light, she grabbed a cereal bar from the pantry.

“Jessica?”

Hannah spun around. Patty came into the kitchen in her usual red robe, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

“I’m glad I caught you,” she said. She went to the coffee machine and took the pot to fill with water at the sink. “You’ve been leaving so early the last few days.”

“I’m sorry to wake you,” Hannah said. “I’ll get out of your hair.”

“No.” Patty poured the water from the pot into the top of the coffee machine and turned it on. “I miss you. Where are you going off to every day?”

Hannah had been to a lot of places. And nowhere. Anywhere to be out of the house. To not be watching their television or sitting on their furniture or eating their food. Since she’d told Ben the truth about who she was, she hadn’t been home longer than a couple of hours just to rest.

Ben's response had been so awful that she knew she couldn't tell the Wheatons that their daughter was dead. At least not until she figured out a better way to say it.

Her biggest priority was to find her father. As soon as the roads were safe enough to drive on, she headed into town and spent most days there, pedaling through the streets looking for him. He was never at the house, she didn't know where or if he was working, and she couldn't find him in the bars. But she had to find him soon. She couldn't be alone much longer.

"Just out." Hannah stuffed the cereal bar into her sweatshirt. "I'm going to be late."

"Late?" Patty crossed her arms. "Jessica. Is everything all right?"

"I'm fine," Hannah said.

"Well, it's so cold out there," Patty said, looking out the window. "Can I give you a ride somewhere? Or do you want to take my car?"

"No. I don't need anything from you."

"I know you don't *need* me, Jessica."

"Can I go?"

Patty sighed and returned to her coffee. "Yeah. Go ahead."

Hannah went out into the garage. She couldn't keep this up any longer. Not only was she lying to Patty and Harris every day by not telling them the truth, but now she was purposefully being rude to them, too.

The air was cold again. Hannah grabbed her jacket from inside before peddling down the driveway on her new bike and leaving the neighborhood. The streets were still mostly empty, with the occasional pair of headlights in the distance, emerging out of the fog on some winding road a mile over. Wind bit at her cheeks as she pedaled. Her nose ran and her ears stung. By the

time she made it into town, however, she had to unzip her jacket. Her hot sweat cooled instantly to her skin.

She stopped on Third Street to catch her breath. This was the intersection where her brother, Cody, used to meet his drug dealer. Hannah had gone with him a few times to keep a lookout. She had been an enabler, she knew. But she also knew he couldn't afford to get arrested again.

She hopped off her bike and pushed it up the side alley to Second Street. There was her house at the bottom of the hill. Across the street, Margaret Webster was in her rocker, pulling pieces off her Quik Store rotisserie chicken to feed to the stray cat rubbing against her leg. If only Hannah had come here after waking up in the hospital. She'd have gotten her memory back within a couple hours. How could she have ever forgotten about this place? She never thought she'd leave it. But being across town in the Wheaton house made her feel like she'd traveled the globe and was coming home now after a long trip away.

Hannah went down the hill to her house. Her dad still hadn't fixed the screen door. She wondered if he was home. Or if he still had his job with the trucking company. His car was parked on the curb, but that didn't mean much. If he'd been drinking, he'd be wandering around on foot. It was what he was famous for.

She climbed the steps, rested her bike against the house, and tried to see through the gap in the living room curtains. Beer cans littered the coffee table and there was a pile of newspapers collecting on the couch. She opened the screen door and tried the handle. Locked. She knew the key would still be under the ceramic turtle around the side of the house, but she was reluctant to use it until she could talk to her father first. She didn't look like Hannah anymore, after all.

“He's usually not home during the day.”

Hannah turned. Mrs. Graver, Hannah's elderly next-door neighbor, was on her own porch, a watering can in her hand.

The Gravers were a sweet couple who used to babysit Hannah and Cody sometimes when their father was off on the road. They had both worked for Bethlehem Steel before the factory was shut down, and Cody always made them retell the tale of the crane that broke on top of over thirty employees, crushing them under thousands of pounds of molten steel. Cody was fascinated with death when he was little. Before he really understood what it meant.

Hannah stopped short of an informal greeting, remembering that her face didn't reflect the person within.

"It's very important that I speak with him today," Hannah said. "Do you have any idea where I might find him? At work, maybe?"

"No, Richard doesn't work anymore," Mrs. Graver said, resting her watering can on the railing. "He lost his daughter a few months ago. Did you hear about it? It was in all the papers."

"I did hear about that," Hannah said.

"Lovely girl," Mrs. Graver said, cocking her head to one side. "It's a shame what happened to that family. You know, they lost a son just a few years before that. Suicide."

Hannah nodded, remembering Mrs. Graver's inability to stick to a subject. "That is very sad," she said. "So, do you know where Richard might be now? If he's not at work?"

Mrs. Graver looked reluctant to release any information, as if she were having a battle with herself over how much to reveal. "Richard has been dealing with a lot," she said.

Hannah seemed to know where she was going with that. "You think maybe he went to a bar for a drink?"

Mrs. Graver nodded. "I think he does that sometimes. When the pain is too much for him."

"I understand," Hannah said.

"My husband used to have a drink with him sometimes after work. Before his knees got so bad. He can barely drive anymore. My husband," Mrs. Graver said. "You know, nowadays we just have Billy Walker from up the street bring us our groceries. He's such a nice young man. Do you know Billy?"

Hannah remembered little Billy growing up. Last she heard of him, he had gotten arrested for selling marijuana. Must be out of jail now.

"Thanks Mrs. Gra – ma'am. For your time," Hannah said, backing off the stoop. "I'll keep looking for Richard."

"Tell him he can stop by any time," Mrs. Graver called after Hannah.

Hannah waited until Mrs. Graver was bent over her fern before she snuck around to the back of the house, stopping for the spare key as she went. She'd been looking for her father for days. Maybe if she looked around inside, it would give her some clues as to where he might be. She let herself into the kitchen from the back door. The first thing she noticed was the smell. The house was musty and damp, like nobody had been in it in months. It was dark. All of the curtains in the house were closed and a layer of dust clung to everything. In the sink, dishes overflowed up onto the counter, and there was a rotting stick of butter sitting out next to the refrigerator.

She went out into the hall. The front door had a massive pile of mail under it that had been collecting through the mail slot. She knelt down. It was hard to sort through the mail in the dim light, but she did the best she could. When she was finished, she threw out all of the junk mail, and kept the larger stack of bills. There was a final notice from the bank on their mortgage,

postmarked from two weeks ago. And there was an envelope from her father's trucking company, which, when opened, she discovered was a final check of three hundred dollars that had sat unopened for over two months. Hannah stuck it on the fridge door with a magnet before heading up the creaking stairs.

She went into her parents' bedroom first. She pushed the door open and saw a massive mound of blankets and pillows on the bed, but no body underneath. This was the only place in the house Hannah ever remembered seeing her mother. When she wasn't over at a "friend's" house. Her mother had been battling depression for as long as Hannah could remember. And anti-depressant medication. And other pills. And then selling them herself.

Hannah was six when she last saw her mother. She and Cody had been surprised when their mother picked them up from school early and took them with her to visit a friend. They stayed for three days, eating Cheetos on the couch watching cartoons while her mother was in the bedroom with a couple of other people. Hannah remembered a man in nothing but a pair of socks bring them bowls of ice cream one morning. Their dad finally showed up with the police.

Hannah wrote to her mother after Cody's death to let her know about the funeral. Apparently, her mother was out of prison and living with some guy in New Jersey. She didn't come to the funeral, though, and Hannah hadn't tried to get in touch with her again.

Hannah closed the door behind her and went across the hall to Cody's room. She opened the door slowly, afraid she'd find him still hanging from the rod in his closet, a fear she had every time she went into his room since. All that remained was his bed with the black and white sheets, his guitar on its stand near the window, and a tall dresser filled with his clothes. Hannah bent over at his dresser and pulled open the bottom drawer. Underneath his sweatshirts and ratty jeans was a baggie of white powder and the photograph of his son. Garrett would be three soon.

When Garrett was born, Cody was thrilled. He and Tonya had planned to get married, but then she'd left him for some other guy. Hannah figured they moved away. She hadn't seen her nephew since Cody's death. Cody never told her the details of their relationship, and he died not long after Garrett was taken away from him.

Hannah stuffed the picture back under his jeans and closed the drawer. She didn't like to think about the past. Like how she hadn't tried hard enough to stop Cody's addictions. Or that she didn't talk to him as much as she should have. She would never know what was on his mind those last few weeks, except that he was probably miserable. And if she'd only been more available in his life, he might still be alive.

At the time – her senior year of high school – she thought she was too busy for him, though. She was applying to colleges, working at the video store next to Redner's, filling out scholarship paperwork and financial aid packets. There was a lot to do if you didn't have any money to put yourself through school. Of course, when Cody died, all of that stopped. She wasn't about to abandon her dad right after his son died. She couldn't leave him all alone.

She left Cody's room and went down past the bathroom to her own room. Like Cody's, it remained untouched since her supposed death. Her bed was still unmade. Her dresser drawers were still open, and clothes were in piles on the floor. She had packed in a hurry that day. She went to her bookshelf and scanned the dusty rows of her cracked and faded collection. Of course, her Stephen King books were gone. She forgot that she would have packed them. Stephen King had been Cody's favorite author. He bought her a Stephen King book for every birthday, every Christmas, every time she covered for him. And he usually had to read it first before he gave it to her. Because that's just who he was.

Hannah got into her twin bed and pulled the covers up around her. The bed smelled like home. The room felt like hers. And yet she knew it was a different person in her bed right now. It was Jessica. Somebody must have switched them up. At the hospital? On the highway? How could something like that happen? Doesn't the hospital have dental records? Wouldn't her dad be required to identify the body? It didn't make any sense.

She rolled over and looked out the window. A light snow was falling. And to think just the other day she had been at the beach. It seemed like another lifetime ago. Jessica and Ben rekindling their relationship and starting anew. And now this wrench in the plans. Hannah slid down farther into her covers. It was such a surreal experience. She had always had a thing for Ben. Every class with him, every time she passed him in the hall, every time he sat near her in the cafeteria. She longed to have a conversation with him. To tell him how she felt. To hear him say it back. She had even caught herself wishing she could be Jessica. Beautiful and smart, Jessica had the future that Hannah had always wanted and the guy that Hannah had always wanted. She had made it to college. Made it out of Northampton. Hannah had longed to know what that all felt like.

That's ridiculous, though. She'd seen *Freaky Friday* when it came to the Roxy. Is that what this was? Was there such a thing as wishing so hard to be somebody else that you swap places? That Jessica became Hannah and Hannah became Jessica. But then that would mean that Jessica is in a dead person's body, right? And so Hannah couldn't ever swap back. That would mean that Hannah was stuck in Jessica's body for the rest of her life.

Would it be so bad, though? If Hannah really thought about it, it didn't make sense for her to be upset. It was, after all, essentially what Hannah had been attempting on the day of the accident. She'd just returned from the police station, where her father had been arrested for

drunk driving. He told her he wasn't drinking anymore. He *promised* her that he was going to be better. She was so mad. She'd packed her bags and taken some of Cody's cocaine to his friend's place in Philadelphia to sell. With the money she made off that, she could afford to start somewhere new. Get a job, save some money. All she knew was that she was not going to waste away in Northampton. Everyone she cared about had abandoned her, or died, or let her down. She just wanted to get away.

And, essentially, she got her wish. If she stayed Jessica, she could return to school in Philadelphia in the fall. Get a real college degree. The Wheatons had money. This could be her ticket to the life she always wanted. And maybe she should seriously consider taking it.

No, that wasn't even something to joke about. Hannah closed her eyes. As much as she wanted out of the life that she had been born into, she was stuck with it. No matter who she looked like, she was, and would always be, Hannah Thatcher. She couldn't abuse the Wheatons like that. She couldn't leave her father behind. And she couldn't lie to everyone for the rest of her life. She would have to set things straight.

She slipped out of the back door of her house a few minutes later, after she'd washed some dishes and gotten rid of the empty beer cans. She carried the trash out with her, dumping it in the overflowing trash bin in the backyard. She left the key under the turtle and came back around to the front porch for her bike. But it was gone.

Of course. She didn't have a lock for it. Only a matter of time.

Grabbing the cereal bar from her pocket, she ate her breakfast while she walked. The snow that she saw falling from her bedroom felt more like a freezing rain now that she was walking around in it. She put up her hood and ducked out of the neighborhood.

Her church was on the corner. Not that she ever went, but Cody was buried here. Maybe she was, too. She went around back to look. She was surprised when she got there. It was the same cemetery she was in that time she saw her father here and Harris had given him a ride home. Just as she thought it, Hannah looked up and saw him about a hundred yards down, staring down at a tombstone.

Was it hers?

She jammed her empty cereal bar wrapper in her pocket and zigzagged through the gravestones until she was right behind him. She recognized the headstone to his left. It belonged to her paternal grandparents – Thomas and Hilda Thatcher. Both were heavy drinkers. Hannah couldn't be around bourbon anymore without being reminded of them. They used to give her and Cody their empty Jim Beam bottles to play with. Her fondest memories of her grandfather were when he'd hold Hannah on his lap, dip his finger in his glass, and let her suck the liquor off. He'd tell her stories of the old days, when Pennsylvania Dutch whiskey kept the boys warm during the revolution.

They died around the same time as each other. Hannah didn't quite remember. She just knew that it was because of their deaths that Cody had to start babysitting Hannah after school, and, in hindsight, that probably wasn't the best undertaking for an eight year old.

Hannah looked to the smaller tombstone on her grandparents' right. She hadn't been back to visit Cody since the day of his funeral two years ago. Going from spending every day together to never seeing him again had been the most difficult thing Hannah had ever had to go through. Cody had been her best friend. She remembered sitting on the couches behind the car wash listening to his band practice. And covering for him with their parents whenever he slept over at Tonya's. Usually when she thought back on Cody, she remembered the afternoon when they sat

at their kitchen table and Cody told her that Tonya was pregnant. Cody had cried harder than Hannah had ever seen him cry. It was only after Garrett was born that he saw what a blessing his son was to him. He swore to turn his life around. For Garrett.

Hannah pushed the thoughts away and moved to the last grave – the one her father was standing in front of. It was small, too – dark gray granite, probably only about two feet off the ground, no doubt he couldn't afford anything better. She read the inscription across the front:

Hannah Thatcher

August 12, 1991 - December 20, 2012

May She Find Peace in Another Life

“Hey.”

Her dad turned around. He had another bagged bottle of something under his arm. He wiped his nose and nodded to acknowledge her, then turned back to the grave.

“I’ve been looking for you,” Hannah said, moving up to stand beside him. “I want to talk to you about something.”

“I’m not really in the mood for conversation,” he said. “Why don’t you get on home?”

“That’s actually what I have to talk to you about.”

He turned to face her again. “What is it?”

She took a deep breath. “This is going to come as a shock,” she said, thinking again of Ben’s reaction. At least this was one person that would welcome the news. “But I got my memory back a few days ago.”

Her dad lowered his eyebrows, but didn’t look away.

“Well, there’s no easy way to say this,” she said, and tried to smile, though the rain made her teeth chatter. “It’s me, Dad. It’s Hannah.”

He didn't move for a few seconds. "Bullshit."

"It's true. I don't know what happened at the hospital, but they've made a mistake. I'm Hannah, not Jessica."

"You're wrong." He backed away. "Leave me alone."

"Dad," Hannah pleaded. "It's me. It's your Hannah."

"You're just confused," he said. "Call the Wheatons to come get you. You're not well."

"I am, Dad." She tried to move towards him, but he held up his hands against her. Just as Ben had. "It's me," she said again.

Her father looked around, as if buying time. Then he took a step towards Hannah and spoke softly. She could barely hear him over the rain. "I don't care who you think you are," he said. "My daughter is dead. And you are Jessica Wheaton. Get on with your life and leave me alone."

"I remember you," Jessica yelled. "I remember you, and Cody, and Mom."

"Stay away from me," he yelled back and threw his bag of liquor in the snow. An empty bottle of Jim Beam slipped from within the paper bag.

She looked up, but he was already almost at the gate. She was alone again. Sniffling, she turned back to her gravestone and plopped down to her knees in the snow. If he didn't believe her, and Ben didn't want her, then where was she supposed to go now?

She brushed the snow off the top of her grave and thought again of the girl buried underneath. They were both alone. Poor Jessica. She left behind kind parents, a loving boyfriend, dozens of friends. A complete life. And now she had nothing. And Hannah, who for a brief time, got to know the love that Jessica felt, had ruined everything. And now they were both alone. She lay down, and cleared a spot in the snow so that she could rest her ear to the ground. She wanted

to hear something. A sign of movement, maybe. An indication of where to go from here. Who to become. But she heard what she expected she always would. A never-ending, heavy silence.

Chapter Twelve

Ben reached down to grab his ringing cell phone off the coffee table and silence it. A few minutes later, his house phone rang. He ignored it, but he heard his mother pick it up in the kitchen. She came into the living room.

“It’s pretty embarrassing for me to have to say this,” she said. “But your boss is looking for you. Seems you were supposed to be at work half an hour ago.”

“I’m not going,” he said, keeping his eyes on the television.

“Well, you can tell Nancy yourself.” She threw the phone onto the couch beside him. “I’m sure she’ll be thrilled to hear the future owner of the Roxy is too busy watching cartoons to come into work.”

“I’m not the future owner of anything,” Ben said. He waited for her to leave before he answered the phone. “I quit.”

“Ben, what is going on with you?” Nancy asked. “Two days ago, you came into work long enough to eat a Snickers and fall asleep in the back row. Now you’re quitting?”

“I don’t want to work there anymore.”

Nancy sighed on the other line. “Did I put too much pressure on you?”

“No.”

“If you don’t want the promotion, fine. I can sell the theater to somebody else.”

“Do whatever you want.”

“Are you even going to tell me what happened?”

“No.”

She was silent on the other end.

“Hello?”

“I’m still here,” she said. She sounded tired. “Tell you what. I’m going to give you a few days to mull this new decision of yours over. I have a feeling you’re going to regret it. But if you’re not at work by the weekend, I’m not giving you any more chances.”

“Sounds good.” Ben hung up and turned the volume on the television higher.

“Benjamin Thomas.”

Ben looked up. The room was darker. His father was standing over him.

“Did you know the application deadline for Temple was yesterday?”

Ben blinked. “And?”

“I checked online,” he said. “Villanova’s expires on Monday. Widener, tomorrow.”

“Sounds good,” Ben said again.

“You’re just going to throw your education out the window?” he asked.

“I thought you wanted me to take the Roxy job.”

“Yeah, and it’s five o’clock and you’re not handing out any popcorn, are you?”

Ben laughed. “I got it, Dad.”

“You’re screwing up your entire future.” He left the room. When he came back an hour later, he turned the overhead light on. Ben squinted, and held a hand over his eyes. “Your mother’s got dinner on the table,” his father told Ben.

Ben got up. “I’m going out.”

He grabbed his jacket by the door and, ignoring his parents' protests from the kitchen, went out to the garage and got into his Jeep. The sky was covered in heavy clouds. Snow still lay upon the ground, and the temperature was still low. He left the neighborhood and drove away from town. He drove with the radio blaring, but it couldn't keep out everything on his mind.

And usually he thought about Jessica. He missed her. He wanted to talk to her, to apologize, to make things right. But he couldn't. He'd never be able to. Because she had been dead for months. He had tried to move forward, but now he knew how horrible he had been to think that he could. She would never be able to move on. She would never know that he loved her again, that he was sorry for abandoning her, and that she was missed every day. And now he had more to feel guilty about – he had moved on with Hannah. He didn't even know Hannah.

The song on the radio turned to static for a moment, and it shook Ben from his head. He was in the right lane, near the airport, and he was veering off onto the interstate. He tried to get over, but there was a minivan to his left and he was forced onto the ramp. He sat up, gripping the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white. The interstate was busy – headlights ablaze in his rearview mirror as he merged on. A car honked behind him. He'd cut someone off. He swerved over and slammed on his brakes on the side of the road. More cars honked as they sped past him.

His heart was pounding. He unzipped his jacket to cool off and wiped sweat from the back of his neck. He put his head down on the steering wheel. Last time he was on the interstate, he was crawling through tomatoes and ice and debris, trying to get to Jessica before the paramedics pushed him aside and got to her first. Her black jacket was ripped and wet. Wet with blood.

Ben sat up, wiping his face. He pulled out his cell phone. He had to get off the interstate.

“Can you come pick me up?” he said when she answered.

Nikki arrived ten minutes later, in her mom's car. He got in next to her and they merged back onto the interstate, taking the next exit into town.

“God, something must really be wrong if you're calling me,” Nikki said, rolling her window down with one hand, an unlit cigarette between her fingers in the other hand. “Lucky my mom was taking a nap or I wouldn't have had a way to get to you.”

Ben let her take him back to her house. They went inside, her hand in his, and she led him to the back of the house and into her bedroom. They lay down together, his head on her chest. She stroked his hair with her long fingers. And it felt nice. Ben fell asleep there.

When he woke again, the house was dark and quiet. Nikki breathed heavily beside him. He moved away from her, rolling over, but she followed him. She wrapped a heavy arm across his chest. The bed smelled like cigarettes. The whole room gave him anxiety. Last time he was here, he was cheating on Jessica. Sneaking around, not answering the phone, avoiding his parents. He was miserable. And now he was back.

Where else should he be, though? He was fooling himself to think that he'd be able to move on from here. This was where he belonged. Where he deserved to be. If Jessica couldn't move forward, than neither could he.

Nikki stirred beside him, and wrapped her arm tighter around him. Her nose touched the back of his neck and then she kissed it, slowly, tentatively. Ben froze. If he pretended to be asleep, she would leave him alone.

But she didn't. Kissing him up his neck to his hairline, she stuck a wet tongue in his ear. He fidgeted out of her way – a reflex – but she followed him. Climbing on top of him, she bent down to kiss his lips. Her mouth tasted about as bad as the room smelled. He thought of Jessica.

“I can't,” he whispered, moving his head away.

She didn't say anything, but after a moment, she got off him and fell beside him once more.

"I should go." Ben got out of bed.

"Your car." Nikki said. "I can drive you."

"That's okay. I'll be okay."

He let himself out. The sun wasn't up yet, but birds were chirping in the dim blue light of early morning. He stretched on the porch before shuffling out to the road. The snow crunched under his feet as he walked. He thought of the morning he had gone running with Jess. Or, with Hannah.

He was so embarrassed. He had told her so much. And she was a stranger. She didn't understand his relationship with Jessica. And it wasn't her business to know it. He would never have shared that with someone who wasn't Jessica. Not with his parents, even. No one saw that side of him. He couldn't shake the feeling that he had been lied to. Tricked in some way.

Hannah didn't understand him, either. She couldn't. Her life was drastically different than his and Jessica's. She never even spoke to them, and they were in the same classes since kindergarten. She never talked to anyone. Except her brother, who did drugs and committed suicide. Ben couldn't even imagine what her life was like. They couldn't relate to each other. They didn't have a past. What present they had had been a lie. Ben didn't know how she could have thought they'd have any type of future together.

He did remember her, though. Growing up. A specific memory came to mind every time he thought about Hannah. It was sophomore year and he had just started dating Jessica. Ben didn't like doing anything school related, but Jessica told him that he was taking her to the homecoming dance, and that was that. He spent the entire night against the wall while she talked

with her friends. He liked matching the songs with various movies he'd heard them in. Occasionally, Jessica would drag him out to dance if a slow song came on. Mainly Ben just wanted to leave.

It was a big deal for most of the guys in Ben's class when Hannah showed up. She didn't dress up a lot, and she didn't really hang out with anybody. She was always reading by herself. But for whatever reason, she showed up at the dance that night. And she was beautiful. She did something with her hair. Took it out of her braid, at least. It fell down her back in ripples, like a mermaid's.

She took everyone by surprise. The guys were tripping over themselves trying to get a dance with her. Ben couldn't keep his eyes off her. At one point, Jessica caught him watching Hannah, and in this fifteen-year-old jealous kind of way, said, "Looks like she made that dress herself."

Anyway. Hannah was back to her usual incognito self on Monday morning and everybody forgot about her again. But Ben found himself still watching her from time to time – in the halls or at lunch. She had these adorable freckles. And this one dimple on her left cheek.

Ben's stomach shifted again when he remembered all that he had done with her. He barely knew her a few days ago, but he thought he was falling in love with her. No, he thought he was falling *back* in love with Jessica. The whole thing had been one big, embarrassing misunderstanding. And now Ben was trapped again.

God, for those brief couple of days, he thought he was finally moving forward. He had everything – a woman he loved, a possible career, the chance to go back to school. Everything had been falling into place. Why did this have to happen? Why couldn't that have been Jessica under there all along? He couldn't move on without her. She was his everything.

He walked until the sun was up, then called his father to pick him up.

“What happened to the Jeep?” His father was still in his pajama bottoms when Ben got into the car beside him.

Ben thought of the interstate again. The tomatoes, the glass, the truck driver’s trembling bloody hands. The foot lying in the middle of the – Christ. That was Jessica’s foot. He thought he was going to be sick. “I’ll get it later. Just take me home.”

Chapter Thirteen

Hannah stood in front of Jessica's bulletin board. Road to recovery, indeed. She couldn't believe she'd had so much work done to her. And there was Patty, holding her hand in every picture. On Jessica's twenty-first birthday, Patty had been distraught.

"If I lost Jessica – " her voice wavered, "If she had been the one who died. I don't know. I don't know what I'd do."

And now here she was, in that position. Her daughter had been the one to die. And Richard Thatcher had gotten the girl who lived.

Only he didn't want to accept it, either. Would it be easier for everyone if she just pretended to be Jessica again?

Hannah went to the elevators and rode them up to the fourth floor with a man in blue scrubs and an elderly woman in a wheelchair. When she got out on the plastics wing, she went to the front desk. The nurse sitting behind it was filing her nails and didn't look up when she directed Hannah to Dr. Branson's office at the end of the hall.

Hannah looked into the rooms she passed as she went down the hall – patients sitting up watching TV, others napping, one with gauze wrapped under her chin, as if to keep her mouth shut. Branson's office door was open and Hannah heard talking inside.

She peeked her head in. Branson had his feet up on his desk and was laughing into the phone at his ear.

“Well, that depends on how soon you can get here, darling.” Branson caught Hannah’s eye and sat up. “Uh, look, I’m going to have to call you back.” He smiled at the response on the other end. “Seven o’clock, then,” he said, and hung up.

“Jessica Wheaton.” He motioned her towards the chair opposite him. “This is a surprise.”

“I should have called.”

“No, it’s fine,” he said. “I always have time for my miracle patient.”

Hannah sat down. Maybe this was a mistake. Did she have to tell another person the truth about her? What good would it do? She’d already gone to the two people she thought she could trust above all others and both of them had turned her away. She really didn’t know Dr. Branson. Could he be trusted? Would he call the Wheatons and tell them the truth?

“Everything okay, kiddo?”

No, she had to tell him. If nothing else, to find out how the mix-up occurred. It must have been here at the hospital that they’d gotten the two of them confused. She had to set things straight, at least for Branson’s sake.

“I got my memory back, actually,” Hannah said. “And I’ve been remembering who I am.”

“Well, that’s not bad news at all.” Branson grinned at her, his teeth strikingly white against his unnaturally tan skin. There was still snow on the ground outside, after all. “Look, if you’re here to complain about that nasty scar, you can save it,” he said, pulling a drawer open on his other side and pulling out his prescription pad. “I can get you something that’ll help with that.”

“No, the scar is fine.” Hannah sighed. “I just wanted to let you know that there’s been a mix-up. I’m actually not Jessica Wheaton. I’m Hannah Thatcher.”

Branson had the same look of fear in his eyes that her father and Ben had, too. And it just as quickly passed. “You’re confused. Well, your other doctors can help you with that. Sometimes the brain – ”

“No,” Hannah cut in. “I have all of my old memories back. I’m Hannah.”

“But that’s impossible.” Branson looked around wildly. “Shit. You’re sure?”

“Positive.” Hannah put a hand on his. “I’m not blaming you at all – ”

“Good, because I didn’t do anything,” he said, pulling his hand away. Everybody pulled away. “I was told that you were Jessica Wheaton. You can’t pin this on me – ”

“I’m not,” Hannah said. “That’s not what this is.”

“Shit,” Branson said, lower this time, as if speaking to himself. “I knew I shouldn’t have let Richard anywhere near you.”

“Richard?” Hannah met his eyes. “What are you talking about? What did my dad do?”

“Nothing,” Branson said. “He identified the body. He was here first.”

Hannah imagined her father bent over Jessica’s ravaged body. Her heart ached for him. She remembered how she felt when she found Cody. At least her father didn’t have to see him that way. But he did have to see his daughter, dead. No wonder he was drinking more. He had to identify his dead daughter’s body. Anything to get out of the room faster.

“It was a simple mistake,” Hannah said, wanting to run to her father and wrap her arms around him. “An accident.”

Branson laughed. “Tell that to the Wheatons’ lawyer. Christ. Are you absolutely sure you’re not Jessica?”

“I think I would know.”

“Still,” Branson said. “We should run some tests. I can get Richard in here. We can take some blood samples.”

Hannah had thought of this already. “No,” she said.

“We have to do something.”

“No,” Hannah said again. “I don’t have health insurance. And neither does my dad. We don’t need any costly tests to prove who I am. I already know.”

“Well,” Branson shrugged. “Everyone still thinks you’re Jessica. We’ll just bill it to the Wheatons.”

“Absolutely not,” Hannah said. She was really wishing she had gone to one of her other doctors first. “They’ve done enough.”

Branson sighed, and rubbed his hands through his hair. “Why are you even telling me this? You want me to fix your face or something? Because I don’t do that pro bono shit.”

Hannah shook her head. “Can you think of anyone but yourself?”

Branson looked up, his eyebrows raised. Hannah felt her cheeks grow warm. “Excuse me?” he asked.

“Well,” Hannah said, trying to keep her voice steady. “The Wheatons think their daughter’s been alive for months. But she’s dead. And buried in a cemetery under the wrong name. They didn’t even go to her funeral. They never got to say goodbye. And they’ll never have closure. How do you get past something like that? Where do you go from there?”

“Where do *you* go from here?” Branson asked.

“What?”

“Look at you,” he said. “You’re a perfect blend of Hannah and Jessica, I see that now. That’s why my surgeries never took. Not the way I wanted them to. It’s because you’re not

Jessica. But you aren't Hannah anymore, either. You say you don't have money for a simple DNA test. Well, you certainly don't have the money to get your old face back. So who are you now? Where do you go from here?"

Not a day went by that Hannah didn't think about her place in all of this. She was losing everyone: her father, the Wheatons, Ben. Everybody that she loved. Where would she go when the truth came out? What would she do?

Even bigger than these nagging questions, Hannah couldn't come to terms with what she was doing to everybody else. Ben, for starters, had told her he was finally happy again. But now, after realizing that the woman he thought he was falling back in love with was dead, he would return back to his old, miserable self. What if he never got better? She couldn't live with herself if she had to sit by while another person she loved lost himself to depression.

And then there was her father. Even if she did manage to convince him that she was Hannah, what would he do? He was further into his alcoholism than he'd ever been. He was out of work. The city was about to take their house. He couldn't afford to get help, and Hannah had no money to help him.

And, of course, there were the Wheatons. The most generous people Hannah had ever known. For the first time in her life, Hannah had felt truly loved. But as soon as they found out their daughter was dead, their lives would change completely. How would that family continue living? How would they deal with the death of their only child? Patty was a terrific mother. Harris, a wonderful father. It was what they were born to be. And Hannah was about to rob them of that.

She looked up to see Branson watching her. "I don't know what to do," she finally said.

Branson sighed, and reached up to place a hand on her shoulder. The gesture was small, but it felt like the weight of the entire world. Hannah leaned into the desk, and they sat for a minute in silence. As terrible a person as Hannah suspected Branson was, she appreciated him staying with her.

“Are you sure you want this secret to come out?” Branson asked after another minute in thought.

“It doesn’t matter what I want,” Hannah said. “I have to do the right thing.”

“Well, maybe keeping this secret is the right thing to do,” Branson said. “Maybe the Wheatons would benefit from staying in the dark.”

“But it’s a lie.” Hannah suspected Branson was just trying to stay out of trouble. She was sure the hospital would undergo some kind of investigation after the news broke that her doctors had switched them up. She couldn’t keep this from the Wheatons just to please Branson.

“You’d be taking away their pain,” he said. “You’d spare them from having to say goodbye to their daughter.”

“I would be taking away their right to mourn their daughter’s death and move on with their lives,” Hannah countered.

“They never have to know she died,” Branson said. “You’d be keeping her alive for them.”

“But I’m obviously not their daughter,” Hannah said, raising her voice. “And their daughter *is* dead. You think they haven’t noticed that Jessica has a completely different personality? Suddenly, she doesn’t want to go to law school. Or run marathons. What happens when they expect me to remember something from my past and all I can come up with is my mother’s jail time or my brother’s suicide?”

“A lot of coma patients lose their memory forever,” Branson said. “They have to start over, too.”

Hannah shook her head. It made a lot of sense, honestly, but it was completely wrong to even contemplate. “I could never. I’d be a terrible person to attempt something like that.”

“A side effect of the greater good,” Branson said. “This would spare more than Jessica’s life. It would spare the Wheatons as well. And yours. Tell me, if everybody found out the truth about you, do you think you could still stay in this town with Jessica’s face? You’d be a constant reminder to everyone that Jessica is dead. And where would you go if you left? How would you get there? What family do you have? What friends? You need this lie as much as the Wheatons do.”

Hannah stood up. It was too much. She couldn’t cry again. Not here, in front of him. “I have to go.”

“Let me know what you decide,” Branson called after her as she headed out the door and made for the elevators.

Of course he’d want to know her decision. So he’d know whether or not he was in the clear. She rode the elevator alone, the lift in her stomach from more than the drop down the floors. She jumped into a taxi that was parked out front and told the driver to take her to the Wheaton house. He looked back at her through the rearview mirror periodically as he drove, but Hannah kept quiet.

She hated herself for even admitting that Branson’s suggestion was a possibility, but she knew it was. Maybe it was worth it to spare Patty and Harris’ feelings. To keep them from knowing the truth. Even though Hannah would never be Jessica, could never even begin to fill

those shoes, she would at least be a body. She would be a living, breathing daughter. And she needed them as much as they needed her.

Maybe Hannah could be happy again. In time, when she'd gotten used to her new life. She had been loved by Patty and Harris. She would always have a home there. They could help her get to college. They could give her the life she never dreamed she could have before. It was her ticket to a happy life.

Of course, Ben would always know the truth. But he didn't want to have anything to do with her anymore. It was hard to imagine, but Hannah could make a life without him. If she went away to college, she could meet someone else there. She had never been good with meeting people. Small talk and whatnot. But the accident changed her. It did. She knew what happiness was. She was bolder. She went after what she wanted. And she wanted everyone she loved to be happy.

The cab pulled into her driveway. She paid – Harris' money that he insisted she have – and got out. It looked like rain again. She went up the walk and inside the house. Patty was at the sink, unloading the dishwasher, in her pantsuit. She turned when she heard Hannah come in.

"I just got home," she said, turning off the water and grabbing a towel to dry her hands. "Where've you been?"

Hannah was so relieved to see Patty that she ran to her and wrapped her arms around her. Patty paused in shock then hugged her back.

"It's okay, Jessica," she said, rubbing a hand over Hannah's hair. "Whatever it is. It's all right."

It was going to be all right. Hannah had the power to keep everybody happy. And the relief of knowing that she could keep Patty and Harris in her life was overwhelming. She didn't

deserve their love, but now that she had it, she didn't think that she could live without it. A few days ago, in that cemetery, she felt more alone than ever. And now, she was surrounded by love.

"I miss you," Hannah said, her voice muffled in Patty's shoulder. "I'm sorry I've been so distant."

Patty hugged her tighter. "It's okay, Jessica. I love you. You know that."

"I love you, too."

Patty pulled back to look in Hannah's eyes. She wiped a tear away. "Do you want to talk?"

Hannah nodded. "I just want you to be happy. You and Dad."

"We're thrilled," Patty said. "How could we not be? We have you."

"But I'm different now."

Patty set her towel down and crossed her arms, looking Hannah up and down. "Yes, you are."

"I wish I could be the old me," Hannah said. "But I don't think I can."

"I know," Patty said. "It's been hard for us to accept. Because you were so wonderful."

"I'm sorry," Hannah said. "I want to be everything you want me to be."

Patty smiled. "No. We want you to be everything that you *are*."

Hannah looked up to stop more tears from falling. Patty was being so wonderful; it made Hannah feel even guiltier for lying to her. But Patty looked just as happy as Hannah felt.

Patty put her hand on Hannah's cheek. "Even if you don't pursue law. And even if you never run again. You don't have to keep trying to win us over. You've already succeeded."

Hannah smiled. "I really do love you. I want you to never forget that."

“Come on,” Patty said. She turned away, but not before Hannah saw the tears in her eyes.
“Let’s get some dinner going. Your father will be home soon.”

Chapter Fourteen

Ben's phone beeped under his pillow. He groaned and pulled it out. The bright screen hurt his eyes. He'd been lying in the dark, thinking of riding bikes on the boardwalk with Hannah. He had a voicemail.

"I know I said I'd leave you alone." Nancy. Tonight was their first film festival weekend at the Roxy. She must be in way over her head. "The projector's not working again, and we were supposed to start fifteen minutes ago. Anyway. Thought I'd call to thank you for abandoning me. You know you're an asshole, right? Next time I get the urge to put my faith in you, I'll just shoot myself in the leg instead. Seems to be just as productive."

Ben deleted it and shoved the phone back under his pillow. He pulled the covers up over his head and rolled back into the corner of his bed. Surprisingly, his parents hadn't been upstairs to bother him yet tonight. They knew about the film festival, too. Nancy had been calling them as well. Looks like they were all finally giving up on him. Took them long enough.

Rain hit his window. The snow had melted about two weeks ago; it seemed that summer was finally here. However, the sun hadn't showed itself in quite some time. Every day was overcast and gray. Ben closed his eyes. He was just starting to doze off when someone knocked on his door.

"Leave me alone."

Another knock.

“I’m not going.”

The door opened and the light flicked on.

Ben groaned again and rolled over. “What the hell – ” It was Jess. Or, rather, it was Hannah. He sat up, suddenly extremely self conscious of his stale breath. And his dirty plate on the floor next to his bed.

She closed the door behind her. Ben hadn’t seen her in over three weeks. Since the day she told him who she really was. She looked okay. Good, even. Her hair was longer. It was pulled away from her face in a headband, but it still fell in those swooping curls down her back. She was wearing the white dress again; a tiny sweater covered her pale arms.

“What are you doing here?” she asked him, looking around.

“I could ask you the same question.”

“I know you don’t want to see me again. I just – ” Her cheeks went red as she caught his eye. She looked down. “I went to the Roxy. To see the film festival. Nancy told me you hadn’t been to work in awhile.”

“I’ve been busy.” He saw her eyes fall to the dirty clothes on the floor, the empty cups on his nightstand. “Things have come up.”

“I thought you might enter a film into the contest,” Hannah said. “I wanted to see it.”

Film was something he’d talked to Jessica about. It felt wrong that Hannah was bringing it up. That wasn’t something that was meant for her ears. “I don’t film anymore,” he said.

“I know,” Hannah said, as if she knew who he was. “But this was a chance to do something for the Roxy. I thought you might try again.”

“Why are you here?” he asked her. “I don’t know you.”

“Ben – ”

“The person I knew was Jessica Wheaton. She’s the person I want to talk to. Not you.”

He swallowed when he saw the look on her face. Great, he’d hurt her feelings again. Just pile it on. Another thing to feel guilty for. She turned to leave, but paused at the door, her hand on the handle. Why couldn’t she just leave him alone?

She turned back around to face him, her cheeks still pink, but her expression hardened.

“You may not know me,” Hannah said. “But I know you. And I know what you’re doing.”

“What am I doing?”

“You’re giving up. It’s what you always do,” Hannah said. “Things get tough, and you run. You hide. And why? Because you fell in love with someone who wasn’t Jessica? You didn’t even like Jessica.”

Ben looked away. That wasn’t true. He loved Jessica.

“Don’t be mad at me because you had feelings for me,” Hannah said. “And don’t blame me for being honest with you. I told you the truth because I thought I could trust you. But clearly I can’t. You couldn’t be honest with me. You can’t even be honest with yourself.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Ben said, getting out of bed. “I have been honest with myself.”

“Yeah?” Hannah asked, lifting her arms. “Why aren’t you making movies, Ben?”

Ben’s mouth fell open. Where did that come from? “That’s completely besides the point.”

“You told me you used to film all the time,” Hannah said. “What happened? Why did you give up?”

“What?” Ben shook his head. “I didn’t – ”

“You’re in such denial,” Hannah said. “This whole time you act like Jessica had it all figured out and you were some lost little puppy. But you’ve always known what to do. What you were meant to do.”

She turned to look for the closet door. When she found it, she walked to it and pulled open the doors, revealing his editing equipment. The computer fan buzzed awake; the monitors blinked back to life.

“Right where you left it,” Hannah said. She started to speak again, but stopped when she saw the picture on the left monitor. The video was still paused on Jessica in the car, singing along to the radio, moments before the accident. “What’s this?” she asked.

“Nothing,” Ben said, but Hannah had already gone into the closet. He followed her in. “Play it,” she said, looking up at him. “Please.”

“This is the end of the footage,” he said, but he leaned forward and pressed the space bar. The video came back to life. Jessica sang into the camera, holding her fist in front of her mouth as a microphone. She laughed.

“Jess!” Ben had seen the truck before Jessica did.

Jessica turned back to the road and yanked the steering wheel to the left. The camera jumbled around, aimed at the car floor.

Hannah put a hand to her mouth beside Ben in the closet. He waited for the footage to stop. But it didn’t.

Instead, the camera bounced around and around until finally coming to a stop. Everything was black, but they could still hear audio. There was crackling and scraping. Something bumped the camera and it seemed to flip over. It was on its side on the interstate. The cargo trailer of the eighteen-wheeler was crushing Hannah’s car. A large gash in its side was releasing dozens of

tomatoes that bounced off the hood of Hannah's car and rolled in all different directions in the road. There were bodies in the distance, by the back wheel of the truck. One in a black jacket. Another in white.

"That's me," Hannah whispered, putting her hand on the screen over the huddled body in white. "That's my old jacket."

"And that's Jessica." Ben pointed to the other body. "She was wearing black."

A frantic, deep scream came through the speakers. Hannah jumped back against the wall. Ben felt claustrophobic. He remembered that sound. That was the truck driver.

Sure enough, he shuffled into view a moment later, the blood dripping off his hands. His head was bleeding, too. Ben hadn't noticed that before. There was more scraping and crackling out of view and then someone appeared on his knees next to the camera. Ben. He got to his feet and went to the truck driver.

The man dropped to his knees, screaming into his hands. Ben bent over him for a minute. He had been talking to him. Trying to ask him if he was okay. The man was inconsolable. Backing up, the Ben on camera moved to the two bodies in the road. He was heading for them when the sirens sounded in the distance. He sat in the road, running his hands back and forth along the road.

"I don't remember doing that." Ben looked down at his palms in the closet. "I guess I was in shock."

The paramedics showed up a few minutes later. They separated among the four of them – Hannah, Jessica, Ben, and the truck driver – running back to the ambulance for supplies and stretchers. After about ten minutes of confusion, everybody was on a stretcher and pushed out of view. A pair of clean, white sneakers appeared in front of the camera.

“Try to find a purse or wallet,” a paramedic in the distance called, running back to Hannah’s car. The pair of shoes moved behind the camera, and there were sounds of rummaging through the debris. The camera was hit once or twice in the process, and then the image went topsy-turvy as the camera was picked up.

It followed the road as the shoes walked through the mess and got into the passenger seat of a vehicle. The paramedic placed it on the middle seat, facing a leather bag.

“That’s Jessica’s purse,” Ben said.

A minute later, the sound of a door opening and closing and an engine starting.

“I got her purse.”

The camera swayed as the ambulance drove off. A hand appeared – the woman in the passenger seat was going through the purses in the middle seat.

“Jessica Wheaton,” she read. “And Hannah Thatcher.”

“Poor things,” the other paramedic said as they drove. “So close to Christmas.”

When the ambulance stopped, the paramedics got out and there were the sounds of people shouting instructions to each other as doors opened and the stretchers were unloaded at the hospital. There were a few minutes of silence, and then the camera was picked up again.

They followed the motion across white tiles until they were set down again.

“Victims’ things,” a male voice said. “Keep an eye on them for right now.”

The camera was turned down a hallway – Ben recognized it as the hallway leading away from the emergency room. The doctors came through that hallway when they got there. Sure enough, a few minutes later, a few doctors in blue scrubs and white jackets ran down towards them and out of sight, Branson among them.

They watched for about twenty minutes. Ben couldn't hear much of what was going on behind them, and the hallway stayed relatively clear except for a young kid sitting on a bench at the other end playing on his phone. Then Branson came into view again. He stopped right in front of them, and pulled a phone out of his back pocket.

They watched him place a call and put the phone to his ear.

"Richard," he said. He sounded out of breath. He paused, rubbing sweat from his upper lip. "No, I can't drink right now. Listen. I need you to get down to the hospital, Rich. It's your daughter."

Ben looked at Hannah. Her eyes were wide. He turned back to the screen.

"There's been a car accident." Branson paused again. He nodded while Richard Thatcher said something on the other line. "I don't know, Rich. There were two bodies. I need you to come and identify her. Just – just get here as soon as you can."

He put his phone back in his pocket and went down the hallway. They watched the empty hallway for a few minutes. The little boy on the bench got up and went running into a room on his left. A little while after that, Branson came back down the hall, running a hand through his hair. "Molly," he called into the emergency room. He beckoned someone over.

A petite redheaded woman came into view, blood on her scrubs. Ben remembered her working over Hannah. Or Jessica. Or...

"I have the father of Hannah Thatcher coming to identify her," he told her in hushed tones. He set his hand on the counter where the camera was sitting. The lens focused on his knuckles. "How's it going?"

Molly crossed her arms. “We’re about to take her into surgery. Pat’s clearing O.R. Three. Internal bleeding of the abdomen. Broken ribs. We’ve paged Shepard. We need to get a CT-scan, but I expect there’s a brain bleed as well.”

“There’s Richard.” Branson took his hand off the counter and the lens went back to focusing on the two doctors. Molly went back to the emergency room. Branson turned to someone to his left. “Can you get these out of here?” he said, gesturing toward the camera. “Take it across the hall. That’s where we’re bringing the body. It’ll be safe there for now.”

The camera picked up again, but they only saw black as it was mushed between Hannah and Jessica’s purses on the trip. When the picture came back into focus, they were in an empty room, and a nurse in white scrubs was leaving the room, closing the door behind her.

“I can’t believe this is still filming,” Hannah whispered next to him.

“It’s a GoPro,” Ben said, but he couldn’t believe it was still filming, either. “It can film through anything.”

There was a window next to the door and through it they saw a team of doctors and nurses wheel somebody down the hall. Somebody in white.

“That’s me,” Hannah said.

The door opened and Richard and Branson came in.

“Stay here,” Branson said. “We’ll bring the body in.”

He left Richard alone. He looked terrible. But not terrible like he’d been looking lately. It was a different kind of terrible. It was panic.

The door opened a minute later and Branson wheeled a covered stretcher in. There was a body underneath the sheet. Ben leaned back into the wall. He didn’t want to watch this. Branson put an arm on Richard’s shoulder.

“Tell me when you’re ready,” Branson said.

Ben looked at Hannah. A tear was running down her nose. He looked back to the monitor.

Richard took a shaky breath. He was tearing up as well. He put his wrist to his eyes to stop the tears – just as Hannah does when she cries. “Can you give me a minute alone?” he asked Branson.

Branson put a hand on Richard’s back. “Take all the time you need. I’ll go check on the other body’s status. In case. In case that’s Hannah.”

Branson left the room. As soon as the door closed behind him, Richard broke down, burying his head in his hands. Hannah stifled a sob beside Ben, and he looked to see that she was crying just as hard as Richard was. His instinct was to take her hand or put an arm around her, but he didn’t know her that way. Only, he wished that he did.

Richard took another deep breath as if to steady himself, running his hands through his hair. Then he bent down and pulled the sheet back off the body’s face. The head was turned towards him, so Ben and Hannah didn’t have a clear view. But there was no mistaking the black jacket. It was Jessica.

Ben turned away. He couldn’t watch this. That was his Jessica. God, this was disgusting. Why were they subjecting themselves to this? He moved forward to stop the video, but Hannah reached forward and grabbed his arm.

“Wait.” She bent down in front of the monitor to get a better look.

Richard sighed. “Thank God,” he said, under his breath, pulling the sheet back up over Jessica’s head. “Thank you, God.”

“He knows,” Hannah said. “He knows that’s Jessica.”

Ben watched Richard's mouth crack into an unmistakable grin. He was obviously relieved. His daughter was still alive. But why, then, did Hannah get mistaken for Jessica?

Richard sank into a chair against the wall. His eyes stayed on Jessica's body on the stretcher, but for awhile, all he did was breathe, as if he had just finished running a marathon. Then he jumped up, surprising Ben and Hannah – who jumped beside him – and pulled back the sheet again, revealing Jessica's dead body once more.

He began to go through her pockets. He searched through her jeans and her jacket. When he finished, his hands were covered in her blood.

“What is he doing?” Ben asked.

“I have a hunch,” Hannah said, straightening up. “I just hope I'm wrong.”

Branson came into the room as Richard was wiping his hands on his pants. He stopped when he saw Richard, and looked over at the body, still exposed on the stretcher.

“David,” Richard said, turning to Branson. “How is the other girl?”

“You mean this is...?”

“Will she live?” Richard asked, taking a step towards Branson.

Branson cleared his throat. “She has a long road ahead of her. A lot of internal bleeding. Possible brain damage. Her face is completely unrecognizable – it's going to be a nightmare to put it back together.”

“But will she survive?” Richard asked.

“Richard.” Branson placed his hand on Richard's shoulder. “We need to ID this body – ”

“Will she survive?” Richard asked again.

Branson sighed. “She has a chance. Yes.”

Richard nodded and turned to look back at Jessica's body.

“Richard?”

“This is Hannah,” Richard said.

Branson’s eyes widened. “I’m so sorry.”

“He’s lying,” Hannah said, hitting the space bar to pause the video. She went back out into his bedroom.

“There’s no way,” Ben said, following her out, but she didn’t stop in his room.

“I have to go talk to him.” Hannah opened his bedroom door and headed for the stairs.

Ben couldn’t understand her logic. Why was she so convinced Richard did this on purpose? If Richard actually thought that was Jessica’s dead body in the room with him, then why did he just tell Branson that it was Hannah’s? More than likely, Hannah had some false hope that her father had some grander plan for keeping his thoughts a secret. But he didn’t. First of all, he could never get away with something like this. And secondly, there was no reason to lie. What was the point of sending Hannah off to live with somebody else?

No. This was an honest mistake. This grieving father saw what he feared most in the disfigured face of Jessica – he saw Hannah. He was heartbroken. And in shock. And his eyes deceived him. That’s all this was.

Yet, even though Ben knew he was right, he felt uneasy about Hannah going after Richard. Her father wasn’t the most stable person in the world right now. What if he didn’t believe Hannah when she told him who she was? Is it possible that he might hurt her?

Ben grabbed his shoes from under his bed and chased Hannah down the stairs.

“Let me drive,” he offered at the door, slipping into his shoes.

Hannah met his eyes. “Thank you.”

He looked away, nodded, and let her out into the garage. His accompanying her didn't mean anything. He was making sure she stayed safe. But that was it.

It was still raining – they ran to Ben's Jeep in the driveway and jumped in. Ben turned the windshield wipers on high and took them out of the neighborhood and in the direction of town. Hannah said something under her breath as they drove, but because of the sound of rain hammering the windshield, Ben didn't catch it.

“Sorry?” he asked.

“I can't believe my dad did this,” Hannah said, louder.

“What makes you think he didn't just make a mistake?”

“There was no mistake,” Hannah said. “You saw his reaction when he saw Jessica's face. He knew right away that it wasn't me.”

“Are you sure?” Ben said. “Maybe that look on his face was shock. Because his daughter was dead.”

“He wasn't shocked. He was relieved.”

Ben could feel Hannah staring at him in disbelief. But he wasn't convinced. “Well, why did he go through her pockets, then? What was he looking for?”

Hannah turned away from Ben. Then she turned back to him. “He was making sure there was nothing in her pockets to give away her real identity,” she said. “If the coroner found a student I.D. or something, then everyone would know the truth.”

“That's crazy,” Ben said. “You act like your dad is capable of thinking up something like that. This is Richard Thatcher we're talking about.”

“In case you forgot, Richard Thatcher is my dad. Have a little respect.”

“Sorry, but come on.” Ben turned off Main Street onto Third Street. “All he's been doing

since the accident is drink. He's a wreck."

"Yeah, I wonder why."

Ben pulled up in front of Richard's house. There was no light on above the porch. No lights on in the house. "What's your theory, then?" he asked Hannah, turning the car off.

"About?"

"Why'd he do it?" Ben asked. "Why did he tell everyone that you were dead?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Hannah said, avoiding his eyes. "Because he wanted to get rid of me."

Ben would have never come to that conclusion by himself. But Hannah was right; she knew her father best. Was that really something Richard would do, though? He was a little unstable, sure. But Ben couldn't believe he'd be so reckless as to get rid of his daughter on purpose.

"Thanks for the ride." Hannah threw her hood over her eyes and ran out into the rain.

Ben followed her. He was here to keep her safe, after all. And if there was any possibility that Richard did get Hannah off his back on purpose, then he might be capable of anything. They ran up the porch steps and out of the rain. Hannah tried the door, but it was locked.

"Excuse me." Ducking around Ben, she put her face to the window. "He's home. I'll be right back," Hannah said, and she ran back out into the rain and around the side of the house.

A minute later she was back with a key in her hand. She unlocked the front door and they went into the dark house. It reeked. It reminded Ben of the morning after a college party – of warm beer and urine. Even the floors were sticky. He looked down and saw in the light coming in through the window that he was stepping on unopened envelopes on the mat.

Hannah turned the hall light on and shook her hair out of her jacket. Her curls were dotted with raindrops, making her hair look like it sparkled. Ben thought for a moment of the

homecoming dance again before Hannah turned to him and said, “He’s in here,” and led him across the hall and into the living room.

If possible, the smell got stronger in here. There were empty beer cans on the floor, the coffee table, the couch. A stack of newspapers next to the couch was also being used as a table to hold his beer bottles. And on the couch, huddled under the usual overcoat, was Richard. He was snoring loudly.

Hannah turned a lamp on in the corner and went to shake her dad awake. “Dad,” she said, nudging his arm. “Get up, Dad. Come on.”

Richard didn’t move.

Hannah sighed, and looked around. Grabbing a glass of some unknown liquor off the coffee table, she poured it over Richard’s face. Richard jumped up, wiping his face. Another smell hit Ben’s nostrils. Ah. The glass had been filled with Scotch.

“Dad?”

Richard winced, rubbing his right side. “Hannah?” he said, turning around. When he saw her and Ben standing over him, he swallowed. “What are you doing here?”

“You called me Hannah,” she said, her hands on her hips.

“No. No, I – ” Richard bent over suddenly to cough into his fist. He looked awful. Much worse than usual. His skin was yellow, and his beard was patchy and flecked with gray. He coughed for a long time. Until his face was red and sweaty. Ben was just about to suggest he get some water from the kitchen when Richard jumped up and left them. There was some skidding around in the other room and then Ben heard the sound of Richard gagging. The sink water in the kitchen came on. Ben was disgusted. He looked over at Hannah. Surely they should get out of there. But she crossed her arms, waiting for her father to return. Richard came back in a minute

later, a glass of water in his hand, and sat down again on the couch. “You broke into my house,” he finally said.

“No, Dad.” Hannah took something out of her pocket and laid it on the coffee table. “I let myself in.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“I can’t believe you’re still going to lie about this,” Hannah said. “We know the truth. We know you told Dr. Branson that I was dead.”

Richard’s mouth quivered up and down, as if he were trying to decide which response would be best. Then he reached his arm up to his face and coughed again. “Go back home,” he croaked. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I can’t believe you’re going to be this much of a coward.” Hannah was trying to sound tough, but Ben knew she was more hurt than anything. This wasn’t like Hannah to raise her voice or say what’s on her mind. But then again, she’d been through a lot. And this wasn’t the same Hannah that Ben grew up with in school. Not anymore. “If you didn’t want me in your life, all you had to do was say so. I could have left on my own.”

Richard wasn’t saying anything anymore. He just stared at the coffee table.

“But that would have been too difficult for you,” Hannah said. “Not to mention you’d be stuck with all of those hospital bills. God, this is so like you. When are you going to get your life together?”

Richard stayed silent. Hannah’s voice started to shake. The tears weren’t too far away.

“I know we’ve been through a lot,” she said. “We lost Mom. And Cody. Garrett’s gone.”

Who was Garrett?

“And, yeah, we don’t have much. But I thought we would always have each other,” Hannah continued. “I really didn’t think you could sink this low.”

“You don’t understand,” Richard said, softly, his eyes still down.

“No, you don’t understand.” Hannah was crying now. “I would have done anything for you. You’re my father. I love you. How could you just give me away?”

Richard sat up. “Hannah.”

“Leave me alone.” Hannah backed away from the couch. “You wanted me out of your life. You got your wish.”

She turned to leave. Ben followed. He couldn’t believe it, but it was true. Richard was responsible for switching Hannah and Jessica’s identities. What the hell was Hannah going to do now that she knew?

“Hannah,” Richard called after them. Ben turned around to see Richard coming after them. He was doubled over, his hand on his side.

Hannah pulled the front door open and they were heading back out into the rain when they heard a large crash behind them. They turned around. Richard’s body was crumpled over the coffee table. Empty beer cans were rolling in all directions. Ben expected Richard to get up, but he didn’t move.

“Dad.” Hannah pushed past Ben and ran to Richard’s side. She kneeled down and rolled him over. Richard wasn’t moving. “Dad!” She looked up at Ben. “Call an ambulance.”

Chapter Fifteen

Hannah's leg slipped and she was jerked awake. She sat up, catching her breath. She looked around, disoriented. Then she remembered: she was in the hospital. Sitting in the nursery waiting room, her jacket over her legs, she stretched. She pulled out her phone. It was a little after eight o'clock in the morning. She needed coffee.

She took the elevator to the second floor. There was a coffee machine next to the nurses' station. She pulled out some of the change Branson had given her and used it to get a small cup. She held it in her hands for a while. The warm cup felt so good on her cold hands. She took a sip and went down the hallway to her dad's room.

He was in a small room at the end of the hall. He had to share a room with another patient – no way around it, neither of them had any money or health insurance. But Hannah had brought in some flowers from the gift shop. And some balloons. They brightened the place up. He hadn't seen any of it, but whenever he woke up, he would. He and his roommate were sleeping when Hannah came in. She was glad for this. His roommate was loud and complained constantly.

Hannah sat in the chair by her dad's bed and finished her coffee, watching him sleep.

"I thought you might be here." She looked up to see Branson leaning against the doorframe. "Visiting hours don't start until noon," he said.

"I know," she said, getting up.

“I’m serious. You can’t keep coming down here,” Branson said. “You’re not related to Richard Thatcher, remember? Technically, you should never be allowed in.”

They went out in the hall.

“Did you get my results back yet?” she asked, though she knew by his expression that he hadn’t.

“I’m going down to breakfast. I’ll check again after,” he said. “You want to come?”

Hannah shook her head. “I think I’ll just stay here.”

“Not here,” Branson said, pushing her gently back down the hall. “You promised you wouldn’t get me into trouble.”

“That’s not why I want to stay.” Hannah had more on her mind than Branson’s fear of being punished. But she knew she was pushing her luck with him. He’d agreed to run some tests for her free of charge. And he was letting her visit her dad every day, despite the ban on unrelated visitors. She owed him more than this. “I’ll go find somewhere else to be,” she agreed.

“Why don’t you go home?” Branson said as they headed together to the elevators. “I’ll call you as soon as something changes.”

“I want to be here,” Hannah said. “You’ve got work to do. If anything changes, you won’t be the first to know. And I want to be.”

“Well, get some rest.” Branson held the elevator for her, but she shook her head. “You look like shit,” he said, getting in and letting the doors close behind him.

Hannah laughed. He was such an asshole. But she appreciated the company. Any and all company. Her phone buzzed in her pocket again and she pulled it out. Patty was calling her again. She picked up.

“I’m okay,” she said as a greeting.

“Jessica, what is going on?” Patty sounded frantic. “I woke up and you weren’t in your room. You promised you were coming home last night.”

“I’m sorry,” Hannah said. “I stayed the night at the hospital again.”

“But, why?” Patty asked. “You should come home.”

“I’m not leaving Richard,” Hannah said, tossing her empty coffee cup in the trash next to the elevator. “I want to make sure he’s okay.”

“Well, you can do that from home.”

“I know – ”

“I don’t understand why this is so important to you,” Patty said. “He is surrounded by doctors. He’s well taken care of.”

“There’s nobody else here for him,” Hannah said. “I want to be here.”

Patty sighed. Hannah knew she was having an argument with herself. “I just wish you would tell me the truth,” she said. “I feel like you’re hiding something from me.”

Hannah didn’t even know where to begin with that. Of course she was hiding something from Patty. She was hiding everything from her. But where to start: Richard is my father. Your daughter is dead. I’ve been pretending to be Jessica. At this point, it was better not to say anything at all. “I’ll call you later,” she said and hung up.

Hannah went to the hospital window and looked out over the parking lot. It was still raining. The waiting room televisions stayed locked on The Weather Channel. Apparently, the Lehigh Valley hadn’t been hit with this much rainfall so early in the summer since 1912. A streak of lightning lit up the dark sky. Hannah closed her eyes and rested her forehead on the glass.

Of course, she would love to go back to the Wheatons. Every night when she curled up on a couch in the waiting room, she dreamed of the soft twin bed in Jessica's room. She wished she could go back to the days when Patty and Harris followed her around the house, draping quilts around her shoulders and cooking up macaroni and cheese and mashed potatoes. But going back wasn't an option.

Her father was sick. Branson snuck a peek at his chart for her two days ago and told her everything.

"Liver failure."

Hannah and Ben had sat with Branson in the hospital cafeteria around three in the morning the night the ambulance took Hannah's dad to the emergency room. They got coffees – Hannah and Ben were still soaking wet from standing in the rain while the paramedics loaded her dad into the back.

"You can't drink that much without it catching up to you," Branson had said, stirring his coffee with a wooden stirrer.

"What does this mean?" Hannah asked.

"He needs another liver," Branson said. "They're putting him on the transplant list."

"But that could take months," Ben said. "My grandfather was on a transplant list when he got lung cancer. He died before they found him a new pair."

Branson's mouth was full of coffee, but he shook his head and swallowed. "He was old. He had no chance."

"Excuse me?" Ben asked. Hannah could tell Ben wasn't a fan of Branson.

"You move up the list depending on a variety of factors," Branson said, oblivious to Ben's tone. "Age. Location. How close of a match you are to the donor."

“So, he might be able to get another liver?” Hannah asked. “He could survive?”

Branson frowned. “Eh. Maybe,” he said. “Your boyfriend’s right. It could take months. Richard might not survive that long. Although, he might.”

Hannah had no idea what to do. What would she do without her dad?

“Or,” Branson continued, between sips of coffee. “He could get another liver but his body could reject it.”

“Dude, you’re really not helping here,” Ben said.

“No, it’s okay,” Hannah said. “I need to know the risks.”

They finished their coffees in silence. After, Branson left with a nurse on his arm, promising to let Hannah know if her dad’s condition worsened. Ben stayed with her for an hour in the lobby before he left, too.

“Let me know if you need anything,” he’d said.

She’d been using him ever since to bring her a change of clothes, her toothbrush, some food. Speaking of which, Hannah took her cell phone out of her pocket again and called Ben.

“Hey.” He picked up after only one ring. “Any news?”

“No. He’s still asleep. And Branson said the test results aren’t in yet.”

“Yeah, I’m sure that’s it and he’s not too lazy to go pick them up,” Ben said.

“He said he’d check again after breakfast.”

Hannah was nervous. About as nervous for her test results to come back positive as she was for them to come back negative. But she’d thought about little else since she’d decided to get them done. She’d been waiting in Branson’s office the morning after they met in the cafeteria for coffee. When he finally arrived, he was wearing the same clothes he’d had on the night before.

“Jesus,” he’d said, as Hannah sat up from his desk. “What’re you doing in here? I said I’d call you.”

“I could be a match,” Hannah said. She’d realized it just before she’d gone to sleep in the lobby after Ben left the night before. She was angry that she couldn’t stay with her dad in his room. But she technically wasn’t family, as Branson kept reminding her. Only she was. She was a part of him. “My liver could be a match.”

Branson threw his umbrella in the corner of his office. A puddle seeped out under it. “I guess you could be,” he said. “You’d have to get tested.”

“You could do that,” she said, standing up. “Please. Run the tests. If I’m a match, my dad can have part of my liver. My liver will grow back in my body and the part that he has will grow into a fully functioning liver in his body. I’ve been researching it all night. This is the solution.”

It was only after she’d convinced Branson to schedule the tests that she realized what it could actually mean for her if she was a match. The surgery would be painful. There’d be a long recovery. She’d have to stay in bed for weeks afterwards.

And that was only the half of it. If she were a match, she would have to come clean about who she was. She’d have to tell the Wheatons that Jessica was dead. And it was worse now. Because for weeks, she had been consciously pretending to be Jessica so that she could stay in their family. That could destroy them. They would never forgive her. Not to mention the pain they’d be in to know that Hannah’s dad had purposely misidentified Jessica’s body the day of the accident.

Not only would her relationship with the Wheatons be over, but she also couldn’t go back home. If her dad did survive, which was still only a slim possibility, Hannah couldn’t stay with

him. He didn't want a daughter anymore. He gave her away. If Hannah had this surgery, she would lose more than a part of her liver – she would lose everything.

But backing out was not an option. No matter what relationship she and her father would have afterwards, she couldn't turn her back on him. She was not a killer. And even though he didn't love her, she loved him. This was the right thing to do. And after weeks of doing the wrong thing, this was something she could make right.

“Are you okay?” Ben asked on the other end of the phone now. Hannah looked up as thunder rumbled in the distance out the window.

“Could you bring me another change of clothes?” she asked. “That should cover everything. If the results come back positive, I should be able to have the surgery today or tomorrow. I'll be in a hospital gown after that.”

“Are you sure this is what you want?” Ben asked. She'd told him about how she'd been pretending to be Jessica with the Wheatons. He seemed to agree that it was a smart thing to do, especially after witnessing her dad's reaction to her. “If you do this for him, there's no going back.”

“Actually, there's only going back,” Hannah said. “Back to Hannah.”

“I just want to make sure you've thought about this,” Ben said. “You'd be throwing an awful lot away. Richard deserted you. He gave you up. If you think he's going to be grateful to have a new liver, he won't be. He'll ruin it the same way he ruined his. He's an alcoholic, Hannah.”

Hannah smiled. “You called me Hannah.”

Ben sighed. “Harris came to see me last night.”

Hannah's smile faded. “Why?”

“They know something’s going on,” Ben said. “He wanted to know why we were at Richard’s house the other night.”

“What’d you tell him?”

“What you told me,” Ben said. “We were checking on him.”

Hannah nodded. “Good.”

“They’re not idiots, you know,” Ben said. “They know you’re keeping something from them. And they’re only going to keep pestering you until you tell them. They’re not going to give you up without a fight.”

“It’s not me they want to hang onto,” Hannah said. “It’s Jessica.”

Wind blew the rain directly into the window Hannah stood in front of. She watched water bounce off the glass and trickle down and out of sight.

“When I get my test results back, I’ll tell them everything,” she said. “I’ll have to.”

“Did you know – I did some research last night – that some people donate their organs and they aren’t related to the person they give it to?”

“So?”

“So, you don’t have to tell them you’re not Jessica,” Ben said. “Trust me, this is something Jessica would have done for somebody who needed it. Granted, she wouldn’t do it for someone like Richard, but still. The Wheatons don’t have to know the truth.”

“You said it yourself,” Hannah said. “The Wheatons aren’t idiots. What are the chances that Jessica Wheaton is an organ match for Richard Thatcher? They’d figure it out.”

“Not necessarily – ”

“Ben.” She waited for him to stop arguing. “I appreciate the concern. But it’s time. I have to do this.”

She hung up a few minutes later and went back up to the nursery waiting room. They had the nicest couches. Plus, every once in a while she got to spend some time with a nervous father or a little boy about to become a big brother. She liked surrounding herself with people whose lives were just beginning. It distracted her from the fact that her life was ending. Well, it was more like Jessica's life was finally ending. She was finally being put to rest. And, in the end, that would be the best place for her.

Branson came up to check on her an hour later, a folder in one hand. This was it.

"I'm about to go into surgery," he said. He held up the folder. "I got 'em."

"I see that," Hannah said, taking a deep breath. "And?"

Branson sighed. Behind him, the elevator door opened and Ben came out, carrying a backpack over his shoulder and some books in his arms. He met Hannah's eyes, and raised his eyebrows at her. What did that mean? And then she understood. Patty and Harris were following him out of the elevator. She stood up.

"They insisted they come," Ben said.

Branson turned around and saw who had joined them. "Shit," he muttered. He cleared his throat and flashed his famous grin. "Wheatons," he said loudly. "What a pleasure. Excuse me."

He shoved the folder in Hannah's arms and ducked into the stairwell.

"Where's he going in such a hurry?" Patty asked.

"Asshole," Ben said. He turned back to Hannah. "I'm so sorry. I went to pick up a few things."

He held up a stack of books – Jessica's yearbooks. Probably a last ditch effort to convince her to stay quiet about her identity. It was sweet.

“Jessica.” Patty went forward and hugged Hannah against her, pressing the folder in between them. “We’ve been so worried.”

Harris came forward to hug Hannah as well. “We missed you.”

Hannah felt about to break down. Why did they have to be here? Why did they have to say exactly what she wanted to hear? Was Hannah making a mistake after all?

She sat back down on her couch. Patty sat beside her, Harris on the chair facing her. Ben, looking uncertain as to whether or not he should stay, perched on the arm of a chair next to Hannah.

“You look awful,” Patty said, running a hand through Hannah’s hair. “Please let us take you home. You can shower. Get some rest. We can bring you back tomorrow.”

“No, I can’t leave.” Hannah felt surrounded. She wanted to let them scoop her up and carry her far away from this place. It was all so unfair. It was as if she were being blamed for surviving in that accident. She didn’t mean for any of this to happen. Yet here she was, having to take on the entire burden herself. She looked down at the folder in her arms. This was it.

“What’s that?” Harris asked her, following her gaze down to the folder.

Hannah looked up, her vision blurry with tears. “I – ”

“Let me.”

Hannah looked up. Ben was at her side. He reached down and took the folder from her and opened it. His eyes moved down the page.

“Jessica, what is that?” Patty asked.

Hannah kept her eyes on Ben. He looked over the page once more, then turned to Hannah. Nodded.

She was a match. Her liver could save her father's life. She closed her eyes and let the tears fall.

“Jessica?”

“Tell us what's going on. Jessica, what is that?”

Goodbye, Jessica. I'm sorry for everything.

Hannah opened her eyes, and faced the two people that treated her better than anyone ever had. The ones who showed her what it meant to love unconditionally. The people who would have done anything for her. “I'm not Jessica,” Hannah said to them. “I'm Hannah.”

Chapter Sixteen

Ben used the spare key Hannah told him about to let himself into her house. It smelled much better now that the kitchen was clean and the beer bottles were out of the house along with the rest of the trash. He grabbed the mail at his feet again, organized it into a neat pile, and set it with the rest of the mail on the kitchen table. He took the dishes he'd done yesterday out of the drying rack and put them away in the cabinets over his head. Then he went upstairs to Richard's room. The surgery went well. The doctors expected Richard to be able to be up and about in a few days. Which meant he'd be needing some clean clothes. Ben looked forward to getting him out of that smelly overcoat. Especially since the sun was finally coming out again.

Ben went to Richard's closet and packed some jeans and button down shirts into his backpack. He grabbed a toothbrush and deodorant from the bathroom leading off the bedroom. Then he went down the hall to Hannah's room.

He'd made the bed yesterday and opened the curtains to let the sun in. He actually laughed when he'd first seen it because it reminded him so strongly of the girl he once knew: Jess. Books everywhere. Journals scribbled in her neat handwriting piled on her desk. A dresser filled with clothes of baby blue, pale yellow, rosy pink. You'd never know that Hannah had any sort of a difficult upbringing. Her room looked happy.

He took some books off her shelf and put them into his backpack along with Richard's things. She'd probably already read all of them, but she would need something to keep her

entertained. While Richard was able to leave the hospital in a few days, Hannah would be on bed rest for weeks. It all seemed unfair. Richard, equipped with a perfectly functioning liver, would be feeling better than he had in months. While Hannah, who made the biggest sacrifice of her young life, would be painfully dealing with the repercussions of losing a part of herself. It was almost symbolic. Body and soul, alone and afraid. It was cruel what she was going through. And none of it was her fault.

Ben took the painting of a bouquet of flowers from above Hannah's bed. This would brighten up her hospital room. Going through some desk drawers, he found a small stack of photographs. There were several of Cody, a few of her and her father on various occasions – birthdays, pool parties, etc. He stopped when he found a picture of Hannah he remembered. She was leaning against a chain link fence, a dandelion flower behind one ear. There was that hair again. The color of a peeled banana, it curled and rippled down her back like a wave breaking on the shore.

He took them all with him. She could decide which ones she liked. He left the house a few minutes later, locking the door behind him. Getting in the Jeep, he put the backpack and painting beside him on the passenger seat and drove back home.

As he pulled into the neighborhood, he slowed at the stop sign at the bottom of the hill, and turned to look up at the Wheaton house. What were they doing in there? What do you do after something like this? He pictured Patty, hunched over her kitchen table, crying into her arms. And he could see Harris locking himself away in his study to sit in the armchair by the window. Did he see Ben watching the house from the stop sign? Ben drove through the intersection.

He let himself into his house a minute later, his backpack over his arm. He'd have to grab some DVDs for Hannah, too. She could borrow his laptop so she'd have something to watch them on. He stopped in the kitchen on his way upstairs, where his parents were having lunch. They both turned around as he came in.

“Did anyone call for me?” he asked.

“Hannah’s still sleeping,” his mother said.

Ben nodded. That was good. She needed rest. It didn’t necessarily mean anything had gone wrong. She’d been through a lot. Her body was just trying to heal itself. He ducked back out into the hallway, but stopped, his foot on the bottom step, as he realized something.

His mom said Hannah was still sleeping. *Hannah.*

He came back into the kitchen. His parents hadn’t moved – they were still watching him.

“A Dr. Branson called for you.” His mother pushed the chair next to her out from the table.

Ben took a seat.

“How long have you known about Hannah?” she asked him.

Ben shrugged. “A few weeks, I guess. Hannah told me as soon as she got her memory back.”

His parents exchanged a look.

“What?” Ben asked.

“And are you doing okay?” his father asked.

“I’m fine,” Ben said. “I’m not the one who was in a coma.”

“Ben, Jessica’s dead.” His mother took his hand. “Surely, you’re not fine.”

He wasn't fine. There was a lot he wanted to say to Jessica. He wanted to apologize to her. He wanted to make things right. Knowing that she was dead, and that he at one point wished she would be, was difficult to live with. She was a part of him. And so part of him felt dead, too.

"You're doing a good thing for Hannah," his mother continued, dropping his hand and leaning back in her chair. "I'm sure she won't have many visitors. Especially after everything she did."

"She didn't do anything," Ben said immediately. "It's not her fault she got mistaken for Jessica."

"I can't even imagine," his mother said. "Having another person under your roof for *months*. And Richard Thatcher's daughter, of all people."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She laughed. "Well, that's not exactly the type of person you'd want sleeping in the next room –"

"That's so unfair," Ben said. "You don't even know Hannah. She's nothing like her father."

His parents exchanged a look again, unconvinced.

"If you say so," his mother said.

"She's not," Ben said, leaning forward in his chair to catch her eye again. "Hannah's smart. And considerate. Her heart's in the right place. She would never do anything to hurt the Wheatons."

"Okay, I'm sorry." She held her hands up in defeat. "I was too quick to judge."

"Yeah, well." Ben looked away. "So was I."

"Sounds like you really care about her," his father said.

Ben rolled his eyes. Everything was so black and white with his parents. If he didn't absolutely hate Hannah, then he had to be in love with Hannah. Not everything was that clear-cut. This was complicated. He didn't know what he felt.

"I'm going upstairs," Ben said, standing up from the table.

"I didn't mean anything by it," his father called after him as Ben left the room.

Upstairs, Ben went through his DVD collection on his bookshelf in the closet. He knew everything Hannah had seen since she woke up in February. But he wasn't sure what she'd seen before then. He formed a pile for her to choose from. Some feel-good movies to cheer her up. Some scary movies to distract her from her current situation. No movies with strong father-daughter bonding. That ought to be enough. He was organizing them in his backpack when there was a knock at the door. Ben was surprised to see his father outside the door when he opened it. His dad usually didn't come up to Ben's room.

"May I?" he asked, crossing the threshold.

Ben went back to his backpack, but kept his father in his peripherals. He could see him glance into the closet at the computer buzzing away on his desk.

His father sighed. "Ben, I don't know what to say to you anymore."

Ben didn't have time for this. "What are you talking about?"

"I want to be there for you," his dad said. "But lately I feel like everything I say to you is wrong."

"This isn't about you."

"What isn't? Your life?" his dad asked. "You're my son. If it concerns you, it concerns me. Why won't you let me help you?"

“Because you’re not helping me,” Ben said, zipping his backpack up so violently that the zipper jammed. “You’re telling me how to live my life. I’m an adult. I don’t need you telling me what to do.”

His dad pinched the bridge of his nose, his eyes down. Ben dropped his backpack to the floor, its contents spilling out onto the carpet. He watched as Hannah’s photographs slid out – the one on top was the picture of her with the dandelion behind her ear.

“We were just as scared that day as everybody else was,” his dad said, out of nowhere. He moved to the bed and perched on the edge of it. Ben sat down next to him, curious as to where this was going. “You know, when we got the call from the hospital about the accident, they didn’t know if you were alive, either. I’ll never forget the drive to the hospital. I knew you were dead.”

“You knew I was dead?”

“You were dying a little every day before then,” his dad said. “Your mother and I saw it. How unhappy you were. We wanted so badly to pull you out of it and we just didn’t know how.”

Ben had never heard his dad say this. Were they really worried about him?

“As we drove to the hospital, we knew.” His dad took a deep breath. “We were too late. We had failed.”

“But I didn’t die.”

“And do you know why we’re pushing so hard for you to get back out there?” his dad asked, turning to face his son. “We promised ourselves that we weren’t going to let you get that way again. We were given a second chance. Just as much as you were. We were going to do everything for you to keep you from going down that dark road again.”

“We decided not to push you when you weren’t visiting Jessica in the hospital. We suspected that she was a part of your unhappiness. She meant well, but she couldn’t see what made you happy. And we let you drop out of school because we knew if you were driving home every weekend to sneak into the Roxy, you weren’t happy in school, either.

“And at first, nothing changed. If it was possible, things were getting worse. You weren’t filming anymore, either, and we knew that was something that made you happy.”

“It doesn’t,” Ben said. “I don’t know why you think that.”

“It’s okay to be sad about Jessica,” his dad said. “But it’s not your fault that she’s dead. You know that, right?”

“What?”

“You don’t have to stop doing things you love because you feel guilty,” his dad said. “Jessica wouldn’t want you to stop living because she did. She would want you to keep moving forward.”

“I know she would.” Ben was frustrated. His dad didn’t understand what Ben was talking about. And the fact that he was talking as if he did only made Ben angrier. He didn’t know what he was saying. Ben didn’t blame himself for Jessica’s death. He didn’t stop filming because he was afraid of moving forward. “I know what Jessica would want,” he said, but even as he said it, he felt the lump forming in his throat.

Ben’s dad reached up and laid a hand on the back of Ben’s neck. “She loved you,” he said. “She wants you to be happy.”

“I know,” Ben said again, looking away. Was he about to cry now, too? God, what was happening to him? He knew Jessica had loved him. But he also knew that he hadn’t loved her. Not in the way she had. And, towards the end of Jessica’s life, he was terrible towards her. He

cheated on her, he tried to break up with her, and he abandoned her when he thought she was struggling for life in the hospital. It wasn't his fault that she was dead, but so much else was his fault. And now that she was dead, he'd never have a chance to make it up to her. To set things straight.

He admired Hannah, really. At least she had an opportunity to fix things. But Ben would never be able to. He couldn't move forward from here. He couldn't really be happy again. He thought for a second that he could, but that was when he thought he was fixing things with Jessica. But he hadn't fixed anything. And he'd never be able to.

"It's okay," his dad said, pulling Ben to his side. Ben rested his head on his dad's shoulder. His dad rested his head on Ben's. "Jessica is okay."

"She's not," Ben said. "She's dead."

"She died happy," his dad said, squeezing Ben's shoulder. "She died with a family that loved her and a boyfriend that was always there for her. She was loved by so many. She was taken too early, but she achieved so much. Now it's your turn. You were spared in that accident because you still had more to do. You need to move on. To find happiness. And love."

"It's not fair," Ben said. "I can't do it."

"I believe you can," his dad said. "So does your mother. And I bet Hannah does, too. You were happy once. You can be happy again."

"So what do I do?" Ben asked.

"I think you'll figure it out," his dad said. "Where were you happiest?"

Ben closed his eyes. When was he happiest? The answer crashed into him like a wave. "With Hannah."

Hannah was the light at the end of his long, dark tunnel. She always was. She was his first crush in high school. She was the person he hoped to see every day when walking the halls. She was the one who saw all of him and accepted him whole-heartedly. She was the one who loved him. And he was the one who loved her.

“Your mom was right, you know,” his dad said. “Hannah needs you now. She’s all alone. There’s still time for you both to find happiness.”

Ben sat up, his eyes moving again to the floor where Hannah’s smiling face looked up at him from inside her photograph. He thought again of her face at the homecoming dance, deciding between her numerous suitors for the evening. She wanted love, too. She needed it. She didn’t have any family left. No Wheatons. No Thatchers. He was all she had left.

“What are you still doing here?”

Ben turned to see his dad watching him, smiling through his tears.

Ben smiled, too. “Thanks, Dad,” he said. “I love you. You know that, too, right?”

His dad laughed. “I know that. Yes. Tell your mother that on your way out, though, will you?”

Half an hour later, Ben was back in his Jeep, his backpack on the passenger seat. He had to get to the hospital. But not before he made a quick pit stop first. As he drove, he pulled his cell phone out and dialed Nancy’s number. He was going to have to do a lot of begging if he wanted that promotion now.

Chapter Seventeen

Hannah felt the sunlight on her face before she opened her eyes. It was warm and smothering. Like being under twelve of the Wheatons' quilts. Or like sitting on the front porch in the summer while Cody played his guitar next to her. She smiled and took a breath.

That's when the pain hit her. She looked down. She was in the hospital. Under her covers was the stitched crescent moon across her side that meant that part of her was gone forever. She turned from the window. Next to her, in a bed of the same size, was her father. He was doing the crossword puzzle in the newspaper, just as he did every Sunday morning growing up. The door into the hallway was closed behind him, but she could hear noise from the nurses station behind the door.

"Dad." Her throat was dry. But he heard her.

"Hannah," he said, putting his pencil down on the tray across his lap. He lay back into his pillow. "How are you feeling?"

Hannah wasn't sure. She was alive, which was good. She was in pain, which wasn't good. And she had told the truth of her identity to everyone that mattered to her. It was freeing, in a way, but also terrifying. She was now truly alone. "I'm okay."

He smiled, but there was pain in his eyes, too. He looked how Hannah felt.

"I did it," he said, as if he'd been waiting for her to wake up so he could tell her. "I knew you were my daughter. But I told the doctors that you were dead."

At least he was finally admitting it. "I know."

"But it's not what you think," he said. "I didn't want to give you away. I didn't stop loving you. I never could."

"Then why did you do it?"

He looked down. Hannah followed his gaze. There was a cup of water on his tray next to his newspaper. Inside it he'd placed a single dandelion flower.

"I had an opportunity to give you a better life," he said. "And I took it."

"Please tell me you're joking."

"Your life is as good as over with me," he said. "I can't keep a job. I can't control my drinking. I couldn't afford your hospital bill. And I knew you would never leave me. You have too good a heart. But that would mean you'd never get an education or a real job. You'd never move on."

"That doesn't make it right to do something like this."

"I know – "

"No, I don't think you do," Hannah said. Her wound ached as she spoke, but she could think only of Patty and Harris. "You lied to so many people. You made an awful situation even worse for the Wheatons. You made me a burden to them. You took away their right to grieve. You cost them money. You're lucky you don't get sued by the Wheatons. Or the hospital."

"I probably will."

"This is so selfish of you."

"No, Hannah." He sat up. "I did this for you. I tried to give you a better life. And I gave the Wheatons their daughter back."

“You make it all sound so selfless, but it’s not,” Hannah said. “You are too weak to get help for your problems. If you would stay clean, you’d be able to keep a job and then you wouldn’t be so desperate to save money. You wouldn’t have given up your only remaining family member over having to pay a hospital bill. You’re a coward.”

The door swung open behind Hannah’s dad.

“What is going on in here?” A nurse came in, flanked by people on her right and left, all holding news cameras or flashing pictures. She closed the door on them, but not before Hannah heard the yelling:

“Hannah Thatcher, were you involved in the plot to take over Jessica Wheaton’s body?”

“Richard, what do you say about the hospital’s security policies?”

“Will you be suing the hospital for negligence?”

The nurse came over to Hannah’s bedside, adjusting a knob on the bag above her head that was dripping medication into Hannah’s arm.

“What’s going on out there?” Hannah asked.

“Don’t you worry about that,” the nurse said. “They aren’t allowed in here. Just lie back. Get some rest.”

She pushed Hannah gently back down into her pillow.

“And don’t wind her up,” the nurse said to Richard on her way to the door. “She’s regrowing a liver for you. Give her a break.”

Hannah watched the nurse struggle to get back out into the hallway as the news crews pushed forward for another view of Hannah and her father in their beds. When the door was closed, her dad looked over at her again.

“She’s right,” he said. “You need rest.”

Hannah wanted to argue, but her head felt heavy and drowsy all of a sudden. She looked up at the bag dripping steadily into her arm before closing her eyes. She didn't wake until late afternoon when another nurse struggled to get through the door, carrying a dinner tray. Branson came in behind her.

"Get back, you fucking animals." Branson called into the hallway as the reporters yelled their questions into the room. He pointed at a newsgirl in the front, wearing a tight dress and brandishing a microphone. "Except for you. I'll need to see you in my office later for extensive questioning." She blushed as he closed the door.

The nurse set a tray of meatloaf and mashed potatoes in front of Hannah's dad.

"No solid food for you, yet, dear," she said to Hannah, changing the bag of fluid above her bed.

Branson pulled a chair up to Hannah's bed and sat down. "How's it going?"

The nurse rolled her eyes and left them again.

"Never better," Hannah said, sitting up slowly so as not to aggravate her wound. She was glad to see another familiar face. "Although I'm sharing a room with a criminal."

She looked over at her dad, who was staring into his tray of food without eating. She was probably being too harsh on him. He had it bad enough already.

"Is the hospital going to press charges?" she asked Branson.

He put his feet up on Hannah's bed. "As far as I can tell," he said. "They're not."

"They're not?" her dad asked.

"How is that possible?" Hannah asked.

"Well, technically, the hospital didn't do anything wrong," Branson said. "They followed the correct protocol. In an accident such as this, where the bodies can't be identified, we first turn

to a family member to identify the body. If that can't be done, we turn to other methods – DNA testing, dental records, things like that. But Richard Thatcher was the father of the victim, or so we thought, and he confirmed the body just as he was supposed to.”

“What about the Wheatons?” Hannah asked. “Couldn't they sue?”

She looked over at her dad. He looked like he was turning green.

“I guess they could sue,” Branson said. “For emotional grief of some kind, although I don't know that they would. They wouldn't win.”

“Why not?” Hannah asked.

“Well, their daughter is dead. Doesn't matter if they found out in December or in ten years. The facts are still the same.” Branson shrugged. “And, technically, the matter isn't even up to them.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, you're twenty years old,” he said.

“Twenty-one.”

“Whatever. You're a legal adult,” he said. “I suppose if anyone was thinking about suing, it'd be you.”

She looked over at her dad again.

“You brought this upon yourself,” she told him, but she knew she wouldn't take any action against her dad. She could no sooner sue her own father than she could let him die without a part of her liver. She sighed. “It's okay. Nothing's going to happen to you.”

“You're a better girl than most,” Branson said.

“What about the medical bills?” Hannah asked, turning back to her doctor. “Could the Wheatons ask my dad to pay them back?”

“They could,” Branson said. “If they had paid any themselves. But they didn’t. The community did, remember? Everybody wanted to help the parents of Jessica Wheaton. Patty and Harris didn’t pay for anything.”

Hannah couldn’t believe it could be that simple. Her father had knowingly misidentified Jessica Wheaton’s body in order to get Hannah into a better family. He had let doctors put a different face on his daughter’s body. He had stayed silent for months. And there would be no repercussions. No money he had to pay, no jail time. It seemed too good to be true. He deserved some form of punishment.

Although, he was in enough trouble without everything else going on. He was a broke alcoholic without a job and soon to be without a house. He had enough on his plate as it was.

Branson kept them company while Hannah’s dad ate. He told them that the Wheatons hadn’t been back to the hospital since Hannah went into surgery. Neither had Ben, but he’d asked to be told when Hannah woke up. Hannah was glad to hear it. She must have inherited her father’s selfishness.

“That reminds me,” Branson said, standing up. “I should go call lover boy and tell him you’re awake.”

“Don’t call him that,” Hannah called after him.

Branson laughed. “You know, I’m really going to miss you. This is the craziest relationship with a patient I’ve ever had. And the most chaste.” He reached into the back pocket of his scrubs and pulled out a business card and set it on her dad’s tray. “Give me a call when you need me again. I assume you won’t want to look like Jessica Wheaton forever.”

Hannah completely forgot about her appearance. What would she do now that she looked like someone that everybody knew was dead? She surely couldn't wander around town like this after everything that she had done to the Wheatons.

"I may even give you a discount," Branson said, going out into the hallway again.

Her dad looked over at her after Branson was gone and the cameramen were shoved back out into the hall. She was still angry with him, but she was relieved that he wasn't going to be in any more trouble than he was already in.

"Are you feeling okay?" he asked her. "Is there much pain?"

Hannah was in a lot of pain. But, honestly, her surgical spot bothered her less than everything else did. She wanted to know how the Wheatons were doing. And she wanted to know if Ben would come to see her once he found out that she was awake. Was it smart to get her hopes up?

"Do you remember what Cody used to say?" she asked. "Whenever you or Mrs. Graver would yell at him?"

He smiled. "I would get so mad at him. All those times he was arrested. Or I found drugs in his room. I would say, 'When are you going to get your life together?' and he would laugh and say, 'In another life.'"

Hannah smiled, too. "He always said that."

Her dad looked down. "He got what he wanted. Maybe he's doing better. Wherever he is."

"Well, we got what he wanted, too," Hannah said. "We got a second chance. And we're going to do better this time around."

He looked up into her eyes again. The sun was setting outside, and the room was basked in deep reds. His eyes sparkled in the light, the tears not far behind his lids. "I love you so much, Hannah," he said. "I only did what I thought would be best for you. I wanted you to get the life you've always deserved."

"I deserve a life that includes my dad," she said. "My life could never be better if you weren't a part of it."

"So this is our second chance."

"Our second chance," she said. "Our other life. We're going to do it right this time. And we're going to do it together."

He nodded. Then, looking back at the door first, he threw off his covers and got carefully to his feet.

"Dad, don't," Hannah said. "You're not strong enough."

"Thanks to you, I feel great," he said, and shuffled the few feet over to his daughter. He took her hand in his and kissed it.

"I love you, Dad."

Outside, the reporters started shouting. Hannah heard the flashbulbs of cameras and saw the flash under the crack under the door.

"What's going on?" she asked as the door opened.

It was Patty and Harris, followed by a nurse.

"I told them visiting hours were over," the nurse said, pushing the reporters back with one arm.

"No, please," Hannah said. "Let them in."

Hannah's dad reddened, but said, "You know, I think I'm ready for that walk."

The nurse looked taken aback. She turned to face the news cameras. “Right now?”

He nodded. “Yes, I’m strong enough.”

She came in and took his arm, leading him out into the hall, all while the reporters swarmed them. Harris kept them back and closed the door on them as a man shouted, “What are you going to do to Hannah Thatcher?”

Hannah was alone with Patty and Harris, the parents that she thought were hers for months. They looked tired. They both had bags under their eyes. Patty was already crying. And Harris kept his arm around her, as if he was holding her up.

“Hannah,” Patty said.

Harris looked at Patty, but when she didn’t say anything, he turned to Hannah. “How are you feeling?” he asked. “We heard the surgery went well.”

“I’m okay,” Hannah said. “They keep me on a lot of pain medication.”

Harris nodded, looking again to his wife.

“You don’t look like Hannah anymore,” Patty said. “I remember her pictures from the paper. I saved your obituary.”

“Oh.” Hannah didn’t realize she had an obituary. She didn’t think there was anything to say about her. But Patty was right. She didn’t look like herself anymore. “I don’t look much like Jessica, either. I guess.”

“No, you don’t.” Patty sniffed. “She had such soft hair. And these rosy cheeks.”

Hannah nodded. “She was beautiful.”

Patty turned into her husband to cry.

“Patty,” Hannah said. She almost corrected herself and called her Mom. But she didn’t have to do that anymore. “I wish there was something I could do. I never meant to give you false hope.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Harris said. “You’ve been through so much.”

“But it is my fault,” Hannah said. “When I got my memory back, I kept it from you.”

Patty lifted her head, wiped her face, and came to the bed to take Hannah’s hand. “I don’t want you to blame yourself for anything,” she said. “Don’t ever think that we are angry with you.”

“But, how could you not be?” Hannah asked.

Harris came forward too. “This was a new situation for all of us. We just did the best we could,” he said.

Hannah couldn’t believe they were still on Hannah’s side. She had intentionally lied to them for months about her true identity. It wasn’t right that they were brushing this off. If anything, they should be angry. They should feel betrayed. The only explanation for them not blaming Hannah was because they were blaming somebody else. And if it wasn’t Hannah’s fault, then it was her dad’s.

“You know,” Hannah said, breaking their gaze. “My dad did a terrible thing. And I think if he were here, he would tell you how sorry he is.”

Patty shook her head. “Hannah, it’s okay,” she said. “Harris and I aren’t looking to blame anybody. We just want to say goodbye to our daughter.”

“Of course,” Hannah said, but she didn’t entirely understand. She wasn’t their daughter. So what were they doing here?

“We’ve been spending the past few days getting things prepared for her funeral,” Harris said. “She deserves to have a proper one.”

“Of course,” Hannah said again, this time understanding completely. Jessica was still buried under a tombstone with Hannah’s name on it, after all.

We’re going to move her to my mother’s church,” Harris said. “She’ll be with her grandparents there. We’re holding a service on Friday.”

“She can finally rest,” Patty said.

Hannah couldn’t imagine how they had gotten through these past few days. But she was glad that they were finally getting the closure that they needed. They could say goodbye to Jessica properly. It was delayed, but at least they were moving forward.

Hannah noticed then that Harris was holding a bag at his side.

“What’s that?” she asked him.

“Oh.” He put it on the bed and took out her old notebook. “We thought you’d like to have this back. There’s also a lot of books back at the house that you probably want back.”

“You can keep those,” Hannah said, taking her journal. “I have plenty of books at home.”

Patty and Harris exchanged a look. How strange it must be to finally hear Hannah speaking the truth about herself. Their home wasn’t Hannah’s anymore.

“I’m sorry,” Hannah said. “I just mean back at Richard’s house.”

No, that’s okay,” Patty said. “That’s your house. He’s your father.”

Hannah should be better about what she said. She sounded as if she was moving on and that nothing was bothering her. But Patty and Harris were going home every night to an empty house. Where they once had a child was now just an empty room. At least Hannah had her dad. Who did Patty and Harris have?

“In a way, it all makes sense now,” Patty said, and Harris nodded behind her. “You never felt like Jessica. You were always different.”

“I wish I had gotten to know her better,” Hannah said. “But I’m glad I got to hear from the two of you how great she was.”

Patty smiled. “That’s sweet of you to say,” she said. “She was a wonderful girl.”

“It’s not fair that this happened to you,” Hannah said, choking up at the sight of Patty’s returning tears.

“At least we got to know you,” Harris said. “I’m going to miss having you around the house.”

Hannah smiled. “I’ll miss our basketball games,” she said to him then turned to Patty. “And cooking dinner together.”

Patty squeezed her hand. “We love you, sweetie. You’re welcome back any time.”

“We would love the company,” Harris agreed.

It was all too much for Hannah to bear. She expected her father to want nothing to do with her, yet he still loved her. And she couldn’t imagine Patty and Harris wanting to see her ever again, and here they were, telling her that they loved her. And they knew who she was this time. She hadn’t realized it before, but it was possible for them to love Jessica and Hannah.

“The two of you treated me better than anyone I’ve ever known,” Hannah said, unable to hold in her tears anymore. Patty and Harris were both crying as well. “I love you both so much. And I can’t thank you enough for taking such good care of me.”

She reached forward and hugged Patty tight to her. She felt Harris fall into the hug above her as well. Her torso was screaming in protest, but she felt better than she could ever remember feeling. It was worth the pain. She had her family back.

“Well, we’re going to be expecting you to visit now,” Patty said when they pulled apart. “And bring your father. I know he can use the company, too.”

He really could. As if on cue, the door opened behind them, and the nurse led her dad back into the room. Surprisingly, the crowd of reporters were gone.

“You should have seen Dr. Branson,” the nurse said, bringing Hannah’s dad back to his bed and helping him sit down. “He showed up out of nowhere and practically shoved them into the elevator. All except the blonde female reporters, but that’s to be expected.”

She saw Hannah and the Wheatons crying and started. “I’m sorry, I’ll give you another minute,” she said, backing out into the hall.

Hannah laughed, looking at the tearstained faces of Patty and Harris. “Look at us,” she said, thinking back on the day they had all cried together in the car outside the cemetery.

Patty got up and went to Hannah’s dad, however, rather than wiping her tears away. “Richard,” she said. “How are you?”

“I’m okay,” he said. “I feel great, actually. Thanks to Hannah.”

“She is great,” Harris said.

Hannah’s dad nodded, his smile fading. “Look, I know there’s nothing I can really say to fix anything –”

Patty reached up and took his hand, just as she’d taken Hannah’s. “Let’s not even say the words,” she said. “They aren’t necessary.”

The door burst open again. Hannah expected the reporters to be back, but it was Ben. He was sweating; it looked almost as if he had run all the way here. He looked wildly around and when he found Hannah, he went over to her, dropping his backpack at the foot of her bed.

“You came,” she said.

“I’m sorry it took so long,” he said, wiping his curls away from his face. Hannah watched them bounce back into place over his forehead. “I wasn’t at your side when you were in the hospital last time. And I wasn’t at your side after you were honest with me and told me who you really were. But I’m not going to do that again. I’m never going to leave your side anymore.”

Hannah looked to Patty, Harris, and her father; they were all looking bewildered at Ben. Her cheeks burned. What was Ben doing?

“I love you, Hannah,” he said.

Hannah laughed. “What?”

“I love you,” he said, throwing his hands out to his side. “I think I always have. From the moment I saw you at the homecoming dance in tenth grade.”

“You what?” Hannah was so confused. What dance? What was he talking about?

“I was just too scared,” he continued. “It took you becoming Jessica for me to feel comfortable enough to talk to you. And I learned that you are caring and strong and passionate. And you make me the same way. You make me feel like I can do anything. Whenever I’m with you, I’m happy. And so I never want to be without you again.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small black box.

“Oh my God.” Hannah gasped as Ben knelt down next to her bed.

“Hannah Thatcher,” he said, opening the box to reveal a ring. “Will you marry me?”

Hannah looked over at her dad, Patty, and Harris. Her dad and Harris were still staring at Ben, their mouths hanging open. Patty looked over at Hannah and her face broke into a wide grin.

Hannah turned back to Ben, who looked like he had just noticed that the room had other people in it. He swallowed.

Hannah laughed. “Okay,” she said. “I’ll marry you.”

Ben grinned. He jumped up and kissed her hard, his hands on her cheeks.

They broke apart at the sound of applause. The nurses were clapping in the doorway.

Ben’s parents were there, too, Ben’s dad recording the whole thing on Ben’s GoPro. Ben turned back to Hannah and kissed her again. They both laughed.

Patty and Harris jumped up to hug Ben’s parents. Hannah reached over and took her father’s hand in the next bed over. He had tears in his eyes, too.

“The ring,” Ben said, remembering, and took it out of the box to slip on Hannah’s finger. It had a simple, silver band with a tiny yellow diamond in the center. “I might be working at the Roxy the rest of my life to pay this off,” Ben said. “I hope you don’t mind.”

Hannah didn’t mind at all. “So we’re staying in Northampton after all?” she asked.

“Why would we leave?” he asked, sitting in the bed next to her. “Everybody we love is here.”

Hannah met Patty’s eyes and smiled. Patty went back to her husband, putting her arm around his waist. “Jessica would have loved this,” she said, looking around the room. “She would want us all to be happy. And to keep moving forward.”

The nurses came in a few minutes later with sparkling cider from the maternity ward and several plastic champagne flutes.

“None for Hannah,” one of the nurses said, taking her champagne flute from out of her hand and replacing it with a cup of water. “And please keep it down.”

Ben raised his glass and everyone followed. Hannah looked around the circle at everybody she loved. Her father, the Wheatons, Ben, and Ben’s family. She once thought she

would be alone forever. And now, because of one person, her life would always be surrounded by those she loved.

“To Jessica,” she said, lifting her water into the air. “And everything she stood for: happiness, love, and a new tomorrow.”

Vita

Ariel Spengler was born in Northampton, Pennsylvania. She obtained a Bachelor's degree in Media Arts and Design from James Madison University in 2009 and moved to New Orleans, Louisiana to join the Creative Writing Workshop at the University of New Orleans in 2011. She currently resides in Ruston, Louisiana with her boyfriend.