

Write What You Know: The Process of Writing a Young Adult Novella

The Honors Program
Senior Capstone Project
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April 2017

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ABSTRACT

One tragedy, two lives changed forever. This novella follows the paths of two characters coping with the death of loved ones. It examines the themes of grief, friendship, family, self-discovery and inner strength. Specifically, how these things manifest and change after experiencing extreme loss. The dual narrative compares and contrasts the varying ways people react to grief. This project on creative writing followed the writing process from brainstorming to final draft.

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INTRODUCTION

This Senior Capstone is a creative project focused on the brainstorming, outlining, and writing a Young Adult novella. To do so I researched both the creative process behind the trade and the topic of grief. The novella differs from a novel in length, complexity and structure, and is roughly 20,000-40,000 words. The themes and plots of a novella are typically more direct and unified than a novel, due to the smaller space available.

Themes present in my book include grief, friendship, family, self-discovery, and inner strength. I hope this piece can shed light on the sensitive topic of loss, and even help those enduring grief of their own. Last spring semester, a friend I went to high school with lost her three year battle with cancer. Shortly after her death, I wrote a short story about grief for my fiction writing workshop class. I found writing that story to be a cathartic experience. By working with a grieving character who eventually found hope, I was able to work through my own emotions and consider the emotions of others. Students in the class told me that they were able to relate to the story, and that it accurately captured how they felt after the death of a close friend. This short story became the inspiration for the novella I have since been working on. Although the book is sad, there is a sense of hope at the end. This journey towards hope and self-discovery is something that I wish to share with anyone who has grieved.

By writing a novella from both personal experience and academic research, I believe I have created something that reflects the world around me. Anyone who were to read this book would remember that they are not alone in grief. During my search for literature, I was surprised to find very few books and articles relating directly to loss and young adults. There were sources on generic grief counseling, parents losing children, and very rare disorders such as Prolonged Grief Disorder. While these things are important, I also know that it is important to discuss the impact grief can have on young adults. Losing a friend last year was not my first experience with the death of a young person- when I was 15 a classmate was killed in a car accident, when I was 17 I lost another friend to cancer, and when I was 18 my little sister's classmate was killed while riding his bike. At the beginning of my freshman year at

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Bryant a member of the class of 2017 died in a car accident. I know that losing a friend so young can completely change your life. It becomes a part of who you are. This is an important topic, which I believe other young adults can benefit from reading about.

As mentioned, I studied both the craft and topic of writing. Information on the craft came mostly from reading books about writing. I used these books for inspiration, to serve as a guide and help me become a better writer. This included reading books by published authors Stephen King, Anne Lamott, and Dani Shapiro. I also read as many Young Adult novels and novellas as possible to analyze tone, character development, narrators, and storytelling techniques. I found that it is vitally important to have a likable narrator, but that these narrators can be deeply flawed. My research also reinforced the idea that writing can and should be a reflection of real life. Lastly I read guides and memoirs written by and for those dealing with loss. Especially helpful were personal accounts written by C.S. Lewis, Joan Didion, and Rachel Blythe Kodanaz. The personal reactions to grief present in these books helped me understand how different people react to grief, and how they put that grief into words.

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CHAPTER 1: REGAN

Avery Hanley's silver Hyundai Sonata pulled up to the second house on the left of Wenscott Ave. The car smelled like Applebee's leftovers and lemon chiffon air freshener, but not in a bad way. Mae, who had been chatting happily about how excited she was to hang out with her boyfriend, unbuckled her seatbelt and opened the door, still talking faster than either girl listening cared to keep up with. Avery gave Regan a sly look and smiled. "Tell Chris we said hey. Oh, and make sure you ask him about that party on Saturday!" That shut Mae up. Avery knew that Chris wouldn't want to go, therefore Mae wouldn't be going either. It was a sore subject amongst the girls. Mae forced a smile anyway,

"Will do! But you know I think I have other plans Saturday night..."

Avery and Regan both nodded with false sympathy, knowing fully well that there was no way she had plans that didn't involve them. And Chris never bothered to take her anywhere nice, so if they were hanging out it was either in his cramped and sparsely decorated dorm room, or her parents' basement. Fortunately for Mae, Avery must have been feeling benevolent because she didn't bring that up. Regan was surprised, knowing fully well how fed up Avery was with Chris and all his nonsense.

"Well have fun tonight babe, text us!" Avery shouted as Mae exited the car.

"See you tomorrow, drinks at PJ's, right?" Mae asked.

"See you tomorrow," Avery and Regan both confirmed at the same time.

Avery waited until Mae was in the house before shooting Regan an aggravated look. She hit the accelerator, speeding down the road as she complained about their best friend and her boyfriend. Her voice grew louder and her turns sharper.

"I mean seriously, everyone but Mae is going to be at Anna's. Last time Mae missed a party because of Chris, she was so mad she swore it would never happen again. Yet here we are!" Avery's cheeks were flushed.

"Okay, first of all, Ave, calm down. Eyes on the road." Regan wasn't necessarily a reasonable person, but Avery needed someone to act as an angel on her shoulder. Mae was better at calming Avery from her moods, whereas Regan's semi-permanent scowl usually only made things worse. Not that Avery was moody, she was just passionate. Her voice would raise and her eyes would start shining with a fire no one could extinguish. That's why Regan

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was having such a hard time wrapping her head around Mae and Chris. Avery had expressed her displeasure with such vehemence, Regan expected any rational person to turn tail and run. And Mae had never been anything less than rational. But not where Chris was concerned.

Every time Chris told Mae she couldn't hang out with her friends, or blew off an important event, or insulted Mae in the dining hall, Regan would give him the dirty look she had been perfecting since the fourth grade. Avery would remind Mae with as much contempt as she could muster that she deserved way better than the likes of him. And Avery could muster enough contempt to leave the devil himself speechless. Apparently Chris was worse than the devil, because he wouldn't relinquish his hold on Mae. Regan shuttered to think how deeply rooted he was in her brain. Whatever he had over her, apparently the idea of leaving him was even more frightening than Avery was. And Avery walked into the room with the force of a typhoon. Regan couldn't imagine anything worse than living with Avery's disappointment. Not just because she had a look that could melt ice, but because she was never wrong about things like this. If she hated you, you deserved it.

"You alright?" Regan's face must have betrayed her because Avery was looking at her with concern. Regan nodded, but Avery didn't take her eyes off her as she drove past her street.

"Hate to tell you, but you missed the turn" Regan said dryly, earning herself a mischievous smile from her best friend.

"We aren't going home."

"Well then where are we going?"

"On an adventure," Avery dragged out the last word, making it sound tantalizing even though she probably only meant driving around the outskirts of their small town until her gas tank was so close to empty they'd risk running out of fuel on the way home. As far as Regan could tell, Avery's car was always on empty because she a) always insisted on driving because the passenger seat made her restless, and b) refused to get gas until the empty light was blinking an annoying orange color.

Regan didn't even think to protest and sure enough, with an aggressive turn of the wheel, Avery swung the car towards the town borders. She started telling a wild story about what happened at last weekend's Delta Chi party, and Regan howled with laughter as the landscape

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flew by outside the window. She saw Mrs. Anderson's house with the green shutters, where Avery and Regan had gotten yelled at for throwing a baseball through the front window when they were eight. Regan vividly recalled Avery throwing the ball, but to that day Avery swore it wasn't her fault. Up ahead was a two-story Victorian era home with a wraparound porch and intricate moldings along the side. Their fifth grade teacher lived there, Mr. Goulding, who had once yelled at Regan for copying someone's math homework. When Regan started to cry, Avery had jumped in and starting yelling back at him. The two of them had stoically sat through detention together that afternoon.

Regan reminded Avery of the story, and she shot her a grin. "Stick with me, Rae. I'll always have your back." She rolled her window down, letting the cool May air float through the car and whip what was left of her corn silk hair around like she was in a wind turbine. She had chopped most of it off six months ago in a fit of spontaneity, trading in a sleek waterfall of waves for a spiky bob. She hung an arm out the window, letting it ride the tide of the night sky.

Regan rolled her eyes, typical Avery to play the hero. They were getting further away from town, houses becoming more and more spread out. "But don't forget the times I've had your back too. It was right up there that you crashed your bike into a fence." They drove past a large wooden fence that still had damage caused by Avery's Power Rangers bike over a decade ago. Avery looked at the place and shuddered, absentmindedly rubbing the scar on her left forearm.

Regan repressed a shudder too, remembering how quickly it had all happened. Avery had been pedaling as fast as her legs would carry her when she caught traction on some sand and ended up tangled in a heap of metal bicycle and wooden fence. There was blood everywhere when Regan reached her, and Avery had stared at her with wide hazel eyes begging for help. Regan still swears she has never moved so fast. She rode her bike a mile down the street to the nearest house, sweating and gasping for air, and urged them to call 911. Then she rode back to where Avery was laying on the side of the road, and waited with her until the ambulance arrived.

"Yeah, I guess you're a pretty good friend too, huh?" Avery gave her a sheepish smile, and Regan shook her head in exaggerated annoyance. Avery pushed harder on the accelerator,

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her car making a whining noise as she urged it faster. The outside world flew away and Regan watched it with her forehead on the cool window. There were never any cops in the area, never a risk they'd get pulled over for pushing 90 in a 55 or doing donuts in an open field. Mae always gripped her seat until her knuckles were white, and Regan made a quip about how Avery belonged behind the seat of a Jaguar, not something that would start rocking from side to side when she went on a joyride. "So, you think Mae and Chris are having a good night?" Avery asked with barely concealed bitterness. Regan snorted with contempt,

"Are you joking? I'm sure he yelled at her for daring to ask about Anna's party, and will spend the rest of the night watching some low budget Netflix movie while giving her dirty looks for eating too much popcorn." Sadly, Regan was only half joking.

"And she would rather be there with him than here with us," Avery scoffed. Regan couldn't imagine preferring to be anywhere else. Late night drives with her best friend, when the only thing louder than the wind was the radio. The one thing that would make it more perfect was if Mae was in the backseat, nagging Avery to put her seatbelt on. Regan had given up on the matter years ago, but Mae couldn't help but worry. Avery sped up as she turned a corner, letting out a hoot of joy at the rush it brought her. Regan grabbed onto the handle above her seat, grimacing at the way the car jolted. Someday, when she was the youngest female CEO in the country, she was going to buy Avery a Jeep Wrangler so she could have some proper off road excursions.

"Who needs them," Avery said suddenly.

"Who needs who?"

"Any of them! Boyfriends, guys in general, our other friends, *Mae*. Who needs them when we've got each other? When Mae's 55 and miserable because Chris is an asshole husband with a beer belly, we're going to be singing karaoke at PJ's Pub and flirting with 30 year old guys. Now, tell me who's got the better deal?"

She didn't mean that. Well, not the part about not needing Mae, at least. Where Avery kept them wild, Mae held them steady. And Regan, well Avery argued that her attitude kept their heads from getting too big. Mae was nicer about it, and said that she offered comic relief. Sometimes Regan felt she was just along for the ride, but she didn't mind. It wasn't a ride she wanted to get off of.

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“You’re right, who needs anyone else? It’s been you and me since we were five, it’ll be you and me when we’re 105.” That earned her a beaming smile from her best friend. Avery reached across the console and grabbed her hand.

“Screw everyone else. It’s you and me.” They both laughed, and for a moment Regan felt like she could tear an empire to the ground as long as she had her best friend by her side. For a moment, the wind whipped their hair around their faces and the radio blasted the uplifting beat of a pop song. The car was moving so fast they felt weightless and they looked at each other like they were standing on the top of the world. They didn’t realize they were actually standing on a precipice.

Neither of them saw it coming. The headlights from the other car wavering before veering into their lane. They didn’t see it, but they heard it. The crunch of metal on metal, the screech of the tires, the shattering glass. Regan smelled it too, burning rubber on the asphalt, and tasted metallic blood in her mouth. But above all, she felt it. Felt her body lurch forward while the seatbelt pulled her back, constricting against her neck and making it hard to breath. Shards of glass ripping into her skin like it was paper. There was a searing pain in her left leg from where the center console compacted into the passenger seat, her spine screamed in protest as she was jolted forward and backwards like a boomerang. When movement finally ceased she wanted to scream through the pain, but all that came out was a weak and frantic moan.

Dazed, Regan turned her head to the side slowly, each movement causing ripples of pain. With a pang of horror she realized that the driver’s seat was empty, and the front windshield was in smithereens. Numb, Regan fumbled for her seatbelt, growing increasingly frantic when it wouldn’t unbuckle. She was screaming in earnest now, both from pain and terror as she wildly tried to release herself from the confines of her seat. The framework of the car was a mess. Regan could hardly even reach the buckle, but eventually heard a glorious *click* as she was released. She pressed heavily against the car door, which opened slowly with a loud groan. She practically fell out of the car, landing on all fours and hastily trying to right herself. Her auburn hair covered her vision, or maybe it was blood dripping out of the cut above her right eye. She grabbed onto the car with both hands, dragging herself towards the

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front of the wreck and stumbling to remain on her feet. She groaned through clenched teeth, forcing herself to put one foot in front of the other. The gash on her leg opened further with each step she took, filling her white Converse sneaker with warm blood. Regan's spine felt like it was shattering, her bones screaming at her to stop. She allowed herself to collapse when she spotted Avery, laying in a heap ten feet from the car. Regan crawled over to her, cutting her knees on fragments of glass, but it was better than the agony of walking. Her stomach coiled as she inched closer, taking in the scene. Avery was crumpled up like a rag doll, laying in an unnatural position with her eyes closed.

“Ave? Avery?” Regan muttered with a hoarse voice. She wanted to shake her, wake her up but was afraid that touching her would break her further. Avery wasn't supposed to be the fragile one. Regan wanted to scream for help, to run to the nearest house for assistance, but she knew her legs would never carry her that far. She looked up at the cars on the overpass, surely one of them would see the wreck. Surely they would send help. It was then that Regan noticed the other car for the first time. A blue pickup truck, impaled upon Avery's driver's side door. Regan didn't see anyone moving inside, but couldn't bring herself to care. All that mattered was the girl in front of her, splayed out on the concrete in a lake of glass, metal, and blood. Regan watched her chest to see if it was rising, listened for the telltale signs of breathing to reassure her that her best friend wasn't, couldn't be...

But all she heard was quiet. The only person inhaling air was her, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to do so. Still on her knees, Regan froze, and felt something deep inside of her shatter. She couldn't feel the pain any more, couldn't think about anything at all. She stared forward with wide eyes, mouth gaping in a silent scream. Broken and defeated, she stayed with Avery until the ambulance arrived.

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CHAPTER 2: JEREMY (EARLIER THAT NIGHT)

The sound of ice cubes clinking against glass brought Jeremy out of his reverie underneath a string of twinkling white lights. He gave himself a shake and looked around in time to see his brother approaching. Tucker gave him a sloppy smile and slung an arm around his shoulder. Jeremy had been watching his brother make his round amongst the other partygoers for about two hours now. He had started the night off with a round of beers with his friends, letting the ale unwind their workday stress and settle their jitters. Then he'd poured himself a rum and coke and struck up a conversation with Cora, last year's summer fling. After that it was a vodka lemonade shared with Angela, or was it Angelina, who had graduated high school with him. Thirty minutes later he was knocking back shots of Fireball with the girls of Theta Omega Something.

Jeremy, meanwhile, was still sipping his first cup of raspberry flavored vodka mixed with Sprite and orange juice. He had spoken to a total of three people, but one of them was a drunk lacrosse player who had accidentally spilled a drink on him. Jeremy had been covered in a sticky mix of what smelled like energy drink and vodka from thereon out, which probably wasn't helping his situation. The second conversation was with a drunk coed asking if he'd seen her friend Carmella (he had never met said Carmella, so he was unfortunately unable to help). Lastly was a beautiful dark haired girl who had approached him with a smile so bright his heart had almost leapt out of his chest. Unfortunately, all she wanted from him was a lighter. After he had incoherently stuttered that he didn't smoke the beauty turned away in disappointment, and Jeremy slinked away into the shadows, where he was content to remain for the rest of the night.

"Having fun, Jer?" Tucker asked loudly and Jeremy grimaced at the nickname.

"Yeah, sure," he said in a voice even he didn't believe was convincing. Tucker's grin wavered for a moment, and Jeremy saw a flicker of concern in his chocolate eyes. He couldn't help but feel guilty then. After much insisting, Tucker had finally managed to convince his recluse little brother to join him in a night out. Jeremy knew that he should be enjoying himself. After all, how many high school seniors got to say that they had been to a college party? Tucker's best friend Kyle and his housemates threw massive parties most Thursday and Friday nights during the school year. The yard was full of kids from James and Christian Community

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College, where Tucker and Kyle were almost finished with their second year, and the state college up the road. This party was even bigger than most, in celebration of the fact that they were almost finished with their Associate's Degree. Kyle was currently looking for positions as an engineer technician, and Tucker had been accepted to Southern Concord State University where he would finish his degree in physical therapy. The guys were thrilled with their impending success, and were set on making their last couple of weeks of school together as memorable as possible. Or not memorable perhaps, considering they had both spent most of last weekend blacked out. Tucker had taken an economics exam with a raging hangover, and had come home that afternoon moaning that he would never drink again before knocking out on the couch. Jeremy had rolled his eyes and continued writing his AP Humanities paper, knowing that Tucker would wake up to a text from his friends and be drunk by 8pm.

“What’s wrong, Jer? Is someone giving you trouble? Do you want a different drink?” Jeremy shook his head, no one had paid him enough attention to give him trouble, and no matter what was in the drink he simply didn’t like the taste of alcohol. The problem was that there was no problem. He knew that he should be having fun, but all he could think about was that it was a school night and he had an AP Calculus quiz second period. He was watching the strangers around him talk and laugh, pour drinks and pose for selfies, and felt as though he was seeing it all from afar. Like they were figurines in a snow globe, and he was the giant observing from the outside, unable to interact. Except that he wasn’t a giant, he was tiny. So small no one even saw him as they walked by. He was surrounded by people and yet entirely alone.

“Nothing’s wrong, Tucker. I guess I just don’t like parties.” Maybe tomorrow, when Tucker was sober, they would play video games and Jeremy would tell him all about the suffocating loneliness. Typical Jeremy, bringing down Tucker’s eternally good mood. His brother ran a hand through his shaggy dirty blonde hair that was always falling in his eyes. The girls he was friends with always laugh and run their hands through his hair, telling him he should cut it so he could see better. Jeremy has a sneaking suspicion that that’s exactly why he let it grow so long. Jeremy was determined not to ruin the night of fun for his brother, so he put on a brave face. “But maybe you’re right and I just need a different drink.”

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That earned him a beaming grin from Tucker. Tucker couldn't help but worry about his little brother, something that had never changed. In sixth grade he had gotten suspended for beating up the boys who had stolen Jeremy's lunch money every day for a week. A couple of years later, Tucker had promised Jenny Turcott a ride home from school every day for two weeks if she would go to 9th grade semi-formal with Jeremy. Tucker was nervous that Jeremy would have no one to go with, and Jenny wanted to show off to all of her boy crazed friends that she was being given a ride by an older boy with his own car. Which was great, until Jeremy asked Jenny to hang out with him after the dance and she told him the truth. When Tucker asked him afterwards if he'd had a good time, Jeremy hadn't had it in him to tell the truth. He had said yes, torn between being grateful his brother cared and annoyed that he thought he couldn't get a date on his own.

"How about a beer then, Jer? Bud Lite never failed me." Tucker's enthusiasm was hard to say no to. Kyle decided to stagger up to them then, putting one arm around each brother.

"Keg stands, anyone?"

Jeremy groaned. Tucker shouted happily and ran off to rally the troops of drinkers.

"What's the matter, kid?"

Jeremy had never felt so annoyed in his whole life. He wished people would stop asking him that, and wondered what exactly it was about his face that made people so concerned. Not to mention the fact that Kyle was always talking down to him, despite the minimal age difference.

"Nothing," he said, shrugging out from under Kyle's arm.

"Lighten up a little then!" Kyle gave him a wide but empty grin before growing serious. "This is supposed to be a celebration, you know. Tucker's worried about you. He's always so damn worried about you. Let him have a good time, alright?"

Jeremy felt his cheeks growing red. It was one thing to know that he was always ruining people's highs; it was an entirely different story to hear someone else say it out loud. "It's not like I'm trying to ruin his night. I didn't ask him to be like this." Jeremy grew more defensive with every word.

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“Hey, calm down kid.” That empty grin was back, “I just want everyone to have a good time. No moping at my parties, ok?” With that he was gone, leaving Jeremy more alone than before. He scanned the crowd for his brother and saw him in a corner, talking on his phone. He resisted the urge to interrupt and beg him to bring him home. A few more minutes dragged by, Jeremy tightening the grip on his cup to keep his hands from shaking. After what seemed like a lifetime Tucker arrived, cutting through the oppressive space around him.

“I gotta run, Jer. But I’ll be right back!”

Jeremy balked. There was no way he was getting left behind in this nightmare. “Where are you going!” He was a little embarrassed at the way his voice squeaked.

“Just something I gotta do. I promise I’ll be right back- just stay here and have fun. You won’t even notice I’m gone.” Tucker jingled the keys to his blue pickup truck.

“Are you even sober enough to drive?” He had been drinking as though his life depended on it, but that wasn’t anything out of the ordinary. Tucker rolled his eyes.

“Mr. Responsible. Relax a little, please.”

Jeremy thought about the concern in Tucker’s eyes whenever Jeremy had a bad day, the way he was always hanging back to make sure no one was giving him a hard time. He thought about what Kyle said about Tucker deserving to have fun, and how relieved his brother looked when he pretended to be enjoying himself. “Ok, fine Tuck. I’ll just wait here.”

“Hold down the fort for me while I’m gone, little bro.”

And with a grin, Tucker was gone.

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CHAPTER 3: REGAN

Regan was positive that at any moment a doctor in a white coat was going to walk into the emergency room and tell them it was all a mistake. This couldn't possibly be true. The EMS had revived her as they whisked her away. The trauma surgeon on call had performed some miracle that would soon be on the front page of medical. There was no way they had just given up on her. Turned their backs and proclaimed her dead. They said she was dead on arrival. But they didn't know Avery Hanley. They didn't know that she couldn't possibly have given up without a fight. Regan leapt off her small bed in the ER, earning herself a concerned whine from her mom and doctors. She had to find Avery, had to show them they were wrong. The body growing cold in the hospital morgue was some *other* five-foot, three-inch girl with a blonde bob and hazel eyes. *This isn't happening.*

The knuckles on Regan's right hand were bleeding. Her mother put a gentle hand on her shoulder, which Regan promptly shook off. "*Don't*" she snapped vehemently. Shiny blood splattered the wall she had just hit, dripping past her fingers and landing in small puddles near her ruined Converse sneaker. Drip. Drip. Drip. She wrapped her fingers through the roots of her long hair and pulled, noting how well the drying blood blended in with her locks. Maybe *she* should have been thrown through a windshield tonight instead. It would have matched her complexion. Regan wasn't sure when she'd started screaming, but her throat felt burnt and raw. She wanted to rage, to destroy, to inflict pain like the pain she felt. Everything was red. Red seeping through the tight bandage on her leg, red bleeding into her line of vision. Red in her hair and on Avery's lips, swirling red designs painted in contrast with Regan's porcelain skin. Regan felt like she was melting into nothing. Her trembling nerves were short-circuiting, and she was disappearing into a cloud of red fury.

Somehow Regan was staring at a crucifix for the first time in five years. She had wandered away from the others- from the wailing of Avery's mother and the steady words of the doctors. Now she was on her knees in a musky chapel. She wet her lips, trying to think of the right words.

"I'll be a better friend. Honestly. I know I was selfish sometimes. Last week when Avery wanted to get coffee I told her I had too much homework, but really I just didn't want to change out of my sweats."

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The things that she thought were important weren't important at all.

"I'll do better next time. I'll try harder if you give her back."

Please give her back to me. Regan shifted her weight from one knee to another, searching for a position that didn't hurt. The kneeler was sheathed in an ugly green plastic that stuck to her knees and provided little comfort.

She glared up at the crucifix. *He* was providing very little comfort as well. She had limped through the maze of elevators and hallways, seeking that thing preachers were always proclaiming from their pulpits.

"Please give her back. Please. Please."

The dark room ate up her prayer, which she repeated over and over. Regan stared at the wooden carving of the crucified Jesus, but found his eyes as empty and sunken as her own. She found the quiet of the chapel to be unsettling then. She leapt to her feet and frantically looked over her shoulders. She considered lighting a candle before scoffing at herself. She would find no help here. Regan paused at the doorway of the chapel and turned to once more face the altar. She wondered where Avery was. The doctor said she was *gone*, but didn't that mean she had somewhere to *go*? She almost asked Him, but assumed He would ignore her again. Regan left then, closing the door loudly behind her.

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CHAPTER 4: JEREMY

This isn't happening. They're wrong. He's ok. Jeremy practically sprinted through the automatic sliding door separating him from the terrible truth. The hospital was bright and loud, an entire emergency room of sudden sicknesses and ill-fated adventures, waiting in sticky plastic chairs with their family and friends. Jeremy paused for the first time since hanging up the one minute and twenty-three second phone call that was actively ruining his life. He allowed himself a second to soak in his surroundings. The ten-year old girl, who kept coughing all over her sleeping little sister, while her mother told her to cover her mouth. The twenty-something guy, trying to look brave while nursing what was probably a dislocated shoulder as his buddies made jokes. Past another set of doors was a pretty girl with auburn hair yelling at a man wearing teal blue scrubs.

Jeremy closed his eyes and breathed in the contrasting scent of disinfectant and sickness. The seconds trickled past, and Jeremy stayed rooted in his spot. He asked himself if he really wanted to move forward. Did he really want to find his parents and talk to some doctor, or police officer, or coroner who was going to tell him that... Unless they were wrong. Rationally Jeremy would say that Tucker would never leave him. He was his big brother. Looking out for him, teasing and advising even when, especially when, his words were not sought out.

That Tucker, the Tucker that had made Jeremy's life feel dynamic and secure and sometimes miserable, would never leave him. He was a good big brother. The best brother there was. Was it possible that the moment he was living in was his last moment of being a brother? *Are you still considered a brother if your brother's dead and you don't know it?* Jeremy pondered the question and decided yes, yes he was still a little brother. Tucker was still alive and well, in some room flirting with a nurse and rolling his eyes as their mother kissed his forehead and told him to be careful. Tucker was alive until Jeremy could no longer find a sane reason to claim he wasn't.

Still impersonating a breathing statue, Jeremy wondered what he had become. Mr. Valedictorian, Mr. 4.0, Mr. Always-Has-His-Nose-In-A-Book. How many times had Tucker teased him for being a nerd, or tried to cover up the discomfort he found in his little brother outsmarting him. Jeremy would spend the better part of a Saturday afternoon locked in his

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room learning something new, not bothering to come out for meals because he was half convinced he could be sustained on knowledge alone. The rational side to him, the side that won out nine times out of ten, was yelling at him to find someone, anyone, who could tell him the truth. The other side was begging him to play make believe like he had done as a child. Even then he hadn't been very good at imagining things that couldn't be explained. The part of Jeremy that still dreamed wanted him to stand there and hold onto hope for as long as humanly possible.

Eventually the choice was made for him. A motherly looking woman in scrubs stepped into the emergency room. She was looking for him. No one's face looks that sad. Not unless you're looking for a boy so you can tell him that his brother is dead. She locked eyes with him, looking as apologetic as humanly possible. No more make believe. The time for acting a child died along with Tucker.

His father, a man of few words, was screaming himself hoarse. Screaming at the doctors and the man who ran the morgue, the nurses and people walking past him in the hallway. He wanted to speak to the EMTs who arrived at the scene and scream at them too. He wanted to yell at the owner of the house he had been drinking at, the liquor store employee who sold them so much alcohol, the mechanic who recently replaced Tucker's tires because certainly that had something to do with it. It was only a matter of time before he rounded on Jeremy.

"AND YOU," Jeremy tensed up, prepared to flee. "YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE THE SMART ONE, JEREMY. AND YOU JUST LET HIM GET IN THE CAR? WHERE WERE YOU WHEN HE LEFT? WHAT WERE YOU *THINKING*?"

Jeremy's father didn't get mad; it was their mother who yelled. Their dad just got quiet and gruff and would shoot them a look that ensured they knew they had done wrong. He was never angry, just disappointed. But at that moment, his fury was palpable and hit Jeremy like a fist to the gut.

He double over, placing a hand on the white hospital wall and wondering if he was going to be sick. Jeremy noticed the smallest trace of blood smeared on the wall and felt his stomach tighten to think of all that was spilt tonight. Blood all over his brother's impeccable car, the only thing he had ever been capable of keeping clean. His blue pickup truck that

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gleamed in the sun, which had caused more than a couple of fights between the boys after Jeremy would leave trash in the cup holder or get crumbs on the floor beneath the passenger seat. The truck would be ruined now with broken glass and blood stains. Tucker would be furious, if he was capable of being anything at all.

Jeremy barely noticed when his father stalked off to find someone else to yell at. Apparently there was no satisfaction in beating someone who wouldn't put up a fight. Jeremy didn't have any fight in him, even if it would have made his dad feel better. How could he fight something that he knew in his core to be true? Jeremy saw Tucker drinking. And he saw him leave the party. His father had every right to be angry. He raised Jeremy better than that. Jeremy leaned up against the wall heavily, his mother coming to his side and placing a hand on his arm. Her touch was all it took for Jeremy to fall apart completely. He sank to the ground, sliding down the wall until he hit the floor, bringing his knees to his chest and releasing sob after sob. His mom held him close to her, just like she had done when he was seven years old and fell chasing after Tucker and his friend on the playground, requiring stitches in his left knee. Jeremy remembered, believing it was the worst pain in the world. He was a foolish boy. He knew better now.

He remembered that day clearly, his mother promising that he would be just fine, and they would go out for ice cream as soon as the nice doctor was finished. She had no such comforting words now. For the first time that Jeremy could remember, his mother had nothing to say. She simply rocked him back and forth, muttering over and over "my boy, my boy, my boy". Jeremy wasn't sure if she was referring to the boy falling apart in her arms, or the boy she would never hold again. Jeremy didn't feel particularly comforted, but he was glad he was not alone.

Some amount of time passed. It could have been ten minutes or ten hours, or anywhere in between, and Jeremy and his parents found themselves sitting in a long, empty board room with two police officers. He was sure they must have introduced themselves but couldn't remember their names if he tried. Every part of his surroundings seemed to have levitated and was swirling around his head, just out of reach. Names, words, images, time were all abstract concepts at this point, blurring together in a sickeningly heavy haze. The police officers were telling them something important, his mother looked horrified, and his father looked furious.

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Jeremy tried to focus, staring at the officer's lips as he mouthed words that couldn't possibly matter, yet were somehow supposed to.

Then Jeremy heard the word "toxicology" and swore his heart stopped. The officer kept talking about blood alcohol levels and the legal limit. Jeremy wanted to clasp his hands over his ears and yell so loud it would drown out the officers' stabbing words. He flattened his hands against the polished table to grant him some stability. He focused on the cool wood, realizing that if he pressed his hands down hard enough he could feel his heartbeat in the tips of his fingers. Reminding him cruelly that he was still alive, still enduring this disaster.

The officers gave each other an uneasy look. They were uncomfortable with what they were about to say. What could be more uncomfortable than telling a mother that her son was dead? It's not like it could get any worse than this. Jeremy was certain, with every fiber in his bones and molecule of blood that this was the worst devastation anyone had ever felt. Then the officers started talking about the details of the crash. Jeremy got the sudden feeling that he did not want to hear whatever they had to say. He wanted to jump up and run from the room, but some sick sense of curiosity or duty kept him tied to his seat. Or maybe he just wasn't brave enough to get up and walk away. Or tell the officers to shut up and let them grieve.

We're dying over here. Jeremy thought with desperation, wishing telepathy was part of police officer training. *This is killing us and you're making it worse, shut up, shut up.*

They either were not skilled in telepathy or did not care. They started talking about the other car. The other car. Jeremy wanted to hit himself for being so stupid. He was so confused, so overwhelmed, he didn't even stop to wonder if there had been another car.

"Who was in the car?" His mother whispered.

The officers gave each other another grave look.

"Two young women, twenty-years old. At this time, it does not appear that your son knew either of them"

Jeremy was certain he was going to vomit all over the officers' crisp blue uniforms.

"Are they ok?" His mother trembled.

Jeremy desperately wishes she would stop asking questions. Didn't she realize this was only going to get worse? Nothing that the morose officers could possibly say would make this better. They didn't need to know. He didn't want to know.

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Before that moment, Jeremy was certain that hearing your brother was dead was the worst thing that could possibly happen. There could be no heartbreak more devastating, no words that could make it worse. But he was wrong. He had been wrong about everything. Jeremy had been sitting in the hospital, thinking that you don't know true horror until you lose a brother. And then he learned the truth. You don't know true horror until your find out your brother is a murderer.

Maybe murderer was not the right word. There was no intent. He never meant to hurt anyone. But it didn't matter what he meant to do. Not to the twenty-year old girl lying next to him in a body bag of her own. If Tucker had survived the crash, he would be charged with manslaughter. Some judges would rule it a felony. If Tucker were alive, his life would be over.

It was one thing to know that he was dead. It was something else entirely to know it was his fault. Jeremy wanted to be angry, but there was no one to be mad at but his own brother. You can't be mad at a dead man. So he had no choice but to be angry at the survivors. Mostly himself, but there was plenty of blame to go around.

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CHAPTER 5: JEREMY

Jeremy sat up in bed and the memories flattened him like a freight train. At first they came back in pieces, like trying to recall a dream that was threatening to slip away. The hospital, the police, lots of screaming, the party, Tucker.

Tucker.

Jeremy shot out of bed in horror. He wanted to run but didn't know where to go. Usually when he was upset he found himself sitting in the wooden chair at Tucker's desk. The boys had (poorly) painted it four different shades of blue when they were young, and it was otherwise used as a seat for folded laundry their mother would carry upstairs that Tucker couldn't be bothered to put away. Jeremy paced his room frantically. He tugged at the collar of his shirt like it was suffocating him.

Sometimes Jeremy would sit in Tucker's chair, and they would talk about music. Tucker wouldn't ask what was wrong because usually that just made it worse. Instead, he would ask what Jeremy thought about some band's newest album. He'd get him talking, make him forget about the heavy feeling in his chest. Sometimes they wouldn't say anything at all. Tucker wasn't very good at knowing when to be quiet. But eventually he would realize he wasn't getting anything out of his brother. Then they would sit in silence. Jeremy might watch Tucker play video games or flip through an issue of *Rolling Stone*. At some point the quiet company would fill him up enough, and he'd be able to continue on with his day.

But now. There was no continuing with this day. He didn't want to move but didn't know if he would survive standing still. It was like his skin was on fire. He walked to his bedroom door and rested a hand on the shiny knob. Jeremy wasn't sure why, but he was afraid. He turned the knob slowly, half expecting a monster to push it open and bowl him over. But no one was on the other side. Then Jeremy realized that's exactly what he had been afraid of.

He found his parents sitting at the round kitchen table. His usually well-groomed parents looked like they too had been thrown against a windshield. At first neither acknowledged him. They were sitting across the table from each other. His father was leaned back and taking up a lot of space with a vacant stare on his face. His mother was curled up in herself, making a face he had only seen her wear while watching the scariest part of a horror

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movie. Like there were demons dancing in front of her eyes. Jeremy stood there for a long while, the heartbreak in the room so palpable he was afraid to walk inside, lest it tear him apart. A tremor ran through both his hands.

Eventually his mom noticed him. The terror in her eyes subsided slightly.

“Jeremy,” she said with a raw voice, beckoning to him to sit beside her.

He didn’t want to. Didn’t feel safe getting so close to that kind of grief. What if it was contagious? He couldn’t shoulder one more drop of remorse. He was already neck deep. But his mom looked so desperate that he took one hesitant step toward her. When he didn’t combust he figured it might be safe to get closer. He reminded himself that grief was not contagious or, as far as he knew, lethal. He slowly took a seat in the chair next to his mom. The three of them sat there in silence for a very long time, unspoken horrors of the night before laid out before them on the kitchen table. Jeremy wasn’t sure he wanted to be around them, but knew for certain that he didn’t want to be alone. Eventually his dad got up to put on a pot of coffee. His mom mumbled something about maybe making breakfast, but stayed rooted in her seat. Jeremy found her intentions commendable. For a second, it almost felt like a normal morning. For a second, Jeremy almost felt better. Then they heard a knock on the door.

The vultures had arrived. And they were taking pictures. Jeremy opened the door without bothering to look behind the curtain first. He realized he had made a mistake the moment he threw the door open. There was a perky blonde woman standing on his stoop with a bright red jacket and fancy looking microphone. Behind her was a burly man with a camera on his shoulder and a tripod under his arm. Waiting on the walkway was a similar looking reporter/cameraman pair. They were wearing blue jackets and looked thoroughly disgruntled at not being the first to the door. A third news van was pulling up to the house.

The blonde lady smiled. Her teeth were perfect. “Hi, I’m Amy Travelers from Channel 8 news. Is this the prior residence of Tucker Harris?”

Prior residence. Because Tucker didn’t live here anymore. He was sleeping in a morgue now. Soon he’d be moving to the basement with the maggots. Jeremy wondered if he could convince his parents to cremate the body.

“Y...yes.” Jeremy stumbled out.

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“And do you live here as well?”

“I do... I’m, well, I was his brother. Sorry, what are you doing here?”

“So sorry for your loss. What did you say your name was?”

“Jeremy?”

“Ah, sorry for your loss Jeremy. Same last name?”

“Yeah,” Jeremy saw her nod to the camera man, as if saying *write that down!*

“Well, Jeremy, I’m covering this story for tonight’s evening news and would really appreciate a comment from the family.”

Jeremy stared at her. She was there to interview him. He lost his brother less than 12 hours ago, and she wanted to know how he felt. At the moment, he felt like hitting someone over the head with that stupid tripod. He knew that they were going to say. It wasn’t hard to imagine how they were going to slant this story. Party boy with a drinking problem gets himself and some innocent girl killed. They would probably show a clip of the girl’s mother crying and saying she just didn’t understand why it had to be her little girl, looking into the camera and asking how a monster could do something like this. Jeremy found himself wondering about the girl yet again. He was pretty sure the police officer said her name was Avery. She was young, like Tucker. Jeremy wondered if she was in college, if she had any siblings. He imagined her having a little brother, who was feeling just as lost and broken as Jeremy was. He felt like he was going to throw up right on the woman’s expensive looking high heels.

If the girl had siblings they would be on the news, of course. Perhaps they would be filled with anger, or overcome with grief. They would be pitied, as they should be. Their feelings would be validated and consoled. Jeremy didn’t know how people would react to him. Would they at least feel bad enough to let him grieve in peace? Or was the brother of a monster a monster in his own right?

The camera people would film Jeremy’s family shifting uncomfortably from one foot to the other, trying to defend their dead son’s actions without dismissing the girl he killed. Jeremy knew that no matter what he said, there was no way they walked out of this in one piece. What Tucker did couldn’t be explained away. Maybe it shouldn’t be. Maybe he didn’t deserve for them to be defending him.

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Tucker was the bad guy in this story. They'd find a picture of him holding a red solo cup on his Facebook and point out that he was only at community college. They didn't care that he was teaching himself to play the guitar. They didn't care that he just got accepted into a bachelors program, that he had big plans for the future. They didn't care that he was so funny he could make even the most uptight person crack a smile. They didn't care that when Jeremy told him he was being bullied in fifth grade, Tucker taught him how to fight. He let Jeremy land a lucky blow that split his lower lip open and didn't even try to retaliate. When Tucker realized that Jeremy wasn't particularly good at fighting, he took care of the bullies, so Jeremy wouldn't have to.

Jeremy wasn't going to feed into their systematic breakdown of his brother's character. He gave the blonde lady one last look before stepping back and closing the door. She called to him from outside, "Just one, quick statement from the family!" while she rang the doorbell again. Jeremy shook his head like he was trying to free water from his ears. Let her interview the grieving mother everyone would feel bad for. Leave alone the one nobody was going to care about. They would probably blame the whole mess on parenting, anyway. Everything could be explained away with a bad upbringing. It was a good way for people to feel better about themselves.

Their child would never drink and drive. Their child would never kill a stranger and themselves on a winding road some lonely night. They raised him properly. Their child knew right from wrong. Their child would never disappoint them like that.

No one wanted to hear that Tucker's dad was an accountant. He wore a suite and tie to work every day and got a huge Christmas bonus each year for having the best numbers in the department. They didn't want to hear that their mother stayed home with her sons until the youngest one was in the fourth grade. Then she went to work part-time at a day care. No one would listen if they tried to explain that Tucker was a good boy from a good family. He was a murderer, and why should they believe any differently. The truth would only make people afraid. They didn't want to hear that something like this can happen to anyone. It can come out of nowhere and turn your whole world upside down.

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The reporter lady was still knocking on the door. Or maybe the pair behind her had stepped forward for a turn. Jeremy would have felt more upset by their ruthlessness if the night before hadn't taken away his ability to be shocked. Jeremy walked back into the kitchen.

"Who was that?" his mom asked, eyeing his expression with concern. Jeremy kept walking.

"Jeremy, your mother asked you a question."

"I'm going back to bed."

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CHAPTER 6: REGAN

Regan was sitting cross-legged on her bedroom floor, surrounded by two-dozen photographs of the same face. Avery looked up at her, glossy eyed and smiling, lying out on the beach, sitting shotgun in red Jeep with the top down, getting ready for a party. Regan shuffled through the photos, tapping her foot against the beige ash beneath her. None of the photos were *right*. Not the one of Avery holding a beer bottle at a Fourth of July party, or the one of them leaving a concert drenched in glow in the dark paint. Their dresses were too short, or they were making ridiculous faces, or they were wearing all black. God, why did they dress in black all the time? Why had they never realized how morbid it was? No, none of these would do. None of them represented her best friend, her blood sister. None of them showed the world the Avery that Regan knew.

There was timid knock on Regan's door.

"Regan, how's it going in there? Find any good pictures?" Her mother poked her head into the room. Regan shook her head without making eye contact.

"How about this one?" Her mother pointed to a picture of the girls sprawled out on sleeping bags in Regan's basement. She wrinkled her nose.

"She had *braces* in that photo, Mom. She hated those things. She'd be furious with me." Regan's mom sighed and pursed her lips as though she was considering making a comment, but decided not to.

"Have you eaten today?" She asked instead.

What day is it? Saturday? I haven't eaten since Thursday at 7pm.

"Yeah, I had cereal this morning."

"And did you sleep last night?"

No, it's been 48 hours since I last shut my eyes. I think I've started hallucinating. But that might be from the tranquilizers I'm taking.

"Yes, of course I slept."

"Okay, it's just... you don't look great. Do you want to talk?"

I haven't washed my hair in three days, I spent the night screaming into my pillow, and I've been staring at the same two-dozen photos for the past four hours.

"No Mom, I'm alright."

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Her mother continued to talk, but Regan wasn't listening; she was staring at a picture of Avery making a wish as she blew out the candles on her twentieth birthday cake.

An hour later a car horn blared outside Regan's house. She stepped out into the muggy air, bringing a hand up to shield her eyes from the setting summer sun. She should have remembered sunglasses. But she'd barely remembered to put shoes on before leaving the house. Mae was sitting in the driver's seat of her silver Toyota Corolla, braiding her long black hair. Regan slid into the passenger seat without a word, clutching her photograph (in the end she'd gone with the sleepover picture. No one would notice the braces, probably). The drive to Avery's house was silent, except for Mae's slightly labored breathing. Mae should have also asked the doctor to prescribe her a tranquilizer; he'd offered it to all of them. Avery's mom was smart, she'd wisely accepted every script the doctor could dole out. There was no way she'd have left the hospital on her own two feet without their assistance. She used to be a bright and shiny PTO mom. Avery used to tease her mother about her perfectionist tendencies. Looks like Avery had gotten the last laugh.

The car rolled to a stop outside of the white split level ranch. Mae cut the engine, leaving the two girls in a heavy silence. After a minute of quiet pensiveness, Mae swung her door open, causing Regan to jump. She was hyperaware of the sound her flip flops were making on the cement walkway leading up to the big purple door. Regan's eyes darted around anxiously until the door opened, revealing Avery's red-eyed little brother. Austin had grown a foot in the past year, shooting up far past his mother, sister, and even their father. Avery used to joke about him being part giant, and told him pretty soon he'd be too tall to walk through the doorway. Regan remembered the sly look on Avery's face whenever she teased her brother, and almost smiled. Austin smiled at them then, but it was forced, wrong. It looked grotesque somehow, like an unwanted guest invading an otherwise miserable canvas. When he hugged Regan she felt like she was suffocating. He had his sister's hazel eyes. It made her want to vomit. Mae shoved a casserole into his arms and told him she'd made it for the family yesterday. Regan vaguely wondered where Mae had found the time, when she herself had spent a majority of the day staring at a wall in her bedroom and ignoring her mom knocking on the door.

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The house was full of people. There were three grandparents, five aunts, and nearly as many uncles. Regan counted three, four cousins that looked like Avery, and two toddlers whining about something unimportant. She couldn't help but notice how pointless Mae's casserole was. There were two tables full of dinner food and a counter overflowing with desserts. Apparently everyone in town thought a lasagna would make the Hanleys forget their twenty-year old daughter was lying in a mortuary. Regan sat at the kitchen table and watched Mae run around the room, looking for dish soap. The sink was full to the brim with dirty plates the family had been using for chicken a la grief. She was tearing the cupboards apart when she finally found it in the cabinet to the right of the sink.

Regan had known it would be there. She remembered Avery using it one afternoon after they made a mess of the kitchen trying to replicate a brownie concoction they'd seen on a cooking blog. Avery's mother hadn't been home that day, fortunately. Avery had howled with laughter, imagining the look on her mom's face had she seen the mess. Regan wondered what Avery would say if she could see her mother's face now. Then she wondered offhand if she herself looked as bad as Mrs. Hanley. If her eyes were puffy and red, and her face was pale as snow. People used to think Regan was pretty. People would probably think she was a dead girl walking now.

"Have you cried yet?" a spearmint voice breathed into her ear.

Regan brushed her auburn hair behind her ear and avoided eye contact with Mae. They were leaning over the table, looking at baby pictures of a bright-eyed toddler with a crooked smile and gap between her front teeth. Who knew that toddler would someday turn twenty and turn her 2009 Hyundai Sonata into a heap of scrap metal?

"No, I haven't cried." Regan muttered. She hadn't been able to, in truth. She would have expected it to be her first reaction—sobs that ripped through her body and left her gasping for air. That's what she'd been waiting for. Any second now the grief could come bursting through and wreck what she was barely holding together.

"Me neither," Mae said breathlessly.

Their eyes caught each other for a moment, green and chestnut, both wondering the same thing. What on earth were they supposed to do now?

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There were Elmer's glue sticks and child safe scissors all over the table. The younger cousins were sticky with glue, and the adults were struggling to maneuver the little scissors around precious pictures. Regan felt sick to her stomach, looking at the morbid arts and crafts project sprawled out in front of her. She had her picture clutched in her bandaged right hand. With a start, she realized that she was holding on so tightly she'd made a crease through the center. She hastily smoothed out the wrinkles and picked up a glue stick. Two half-finished posters of memories lie out before her. Two posters that were supposed to summarize twenty years of life that ended in a ten-minute death. The doctors said she hadn't suffered much. It was a quick death. A short death for a short life. Regan wondered if those ten minutes had felt like an eternity. Wondered which was more painful—when Avery broke her spine, or when her mother got a phone call about it. Regan saw it again in flashes, the glass, the blood, Avery on the ground. She shook her head firmly, hoping the visions would fly out through her ears and go bother someone else. There was a time and a place to lose your mind. This was not it.

“They look nice, don't they?” Mae stared at the posters, looking for affirmation that she was doing some good. Regan thought they looked like a weak attempt to memorialize a life so bright it made others flicker and dim in comparison. Someone as vibrant as Avery should never be trapped in two dimensions. But she stuck her photo between an image of Avery on her first day of third grade and Avery at her high school graduation party. Stepping back, Regan took a small comfort realizing no one would notice Avery's braces. Regan wondered if she was crazy for being so obsessive. Then she wondered if crazy people knew they were crazy. She might have known the answer before she started coming undone at the seams.

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CHAPTER 7: JEREMY

Jeremy had run away from home. It was a gloomy morning and he was wandering around the neighborhood, acting like the worst runaway in the history of troubled teenagers. As a child he had pictured runaways as mean looking little kids, carrying their meager belongings around in a ratty wool blanket tied around a stick. Whenever another street urchin crossed them, they'd whack them over the head with the stick and steal their spare coins and cans of baked beans. Jeremy had considered running away as a kid. He knew exactly what he would pack in that little blanket-stick makeshift luggage. His journal, a #2 pencil, the best pencil sharpener he owned, his dad's map of New Hampshire, his lackluster collection of Pokémon cards—which consisted of far too many Pidgey and not a single shiny Kyogre, even though he'd spent his entire allowance for three months at the card shop around the corner looking for one—and lastly, his book of imponderables, which was entirely too heavy for the stick blanket, but mused over the most perplexing questions in the world and Jeremy needed that information.

Whenever the kids at school teased him about his glasses or a big bully decreed that no one was allowed to let him on their team for recess wall ball, Jeremy would start packing in his mind. He would envision himself walking from the bus stop to his house, searching for a reliable stick along the way. He would certainly find one laying in the overgrown grass at the base of Mrs. Pettigrew's yew tree. He'd carry it to his house, letting himself in and heading straight to the linen closet. He had decided ages ago which blanket he would use. There was a pale yellow blanket made of itchy wool with a satin trim. It was the right size, and so uncomfortable that no one would try to steal it from him and his mom wouldn't miss it too much when she realized it was gone. Next he would go to his room, pack the necessities, and write a note reading something like:

Dear Mom and Dad,

Don't come looking for me. I am never coming home.

PS. Tucker, please feed Hammy the Hamster. You can play with all my video games.

- Jeremy

Jeremy had never been very poetic.

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Something always stopped him, though. He would get off the bus and not be able to find a stick the right size or durability. Sometimes he would return home empty handed, kicking small rocks out of his way and taking no joy in the way crunchy leaves sounded under his beat up sneakers. Sometimes he would panic and grab as many stick candidates as his arms could carry and arrive at his house sweaty and red cheeked, twigs and small branches spilling onto the vinyl tiles. In the end, they didn't really matter. Something would always stop him. Maybe it was the thought of the mean, dirty, street kids. He could picture them vividly, beady little eyes constantly looking around for the next threat, skinny faces and sharp noses. In his head they vaguely resembled lab rats and all worked as carnies, traveling around the country setting up displays of plush giraffes to be won by throwing darts at balloons. Jeremy wasn't mean or dirty and had skinny arms that probably weren't good for hitting people over the head with sticks or setting up carnival booths. He imagined the boss looking him up and down with one good eye (dark and beady, of course) and one glass eye, arms crossed over his chest and resting on a voluptuous beer belly. His jowls would bounce as he growled, "now what am I supposed to do with a scrawny kid like you?"

So he never ran away. If he couldn't handle the bullies at school, he certainly wouldn't be able to deal with the street kids and carnies. But maybe it had nothing to do with them. Maybe it was Tucker. He was never home during Jeremy's ideal runaway fantasy. But of course he was in real life, having gotten off the middle school bus a half hour before Jeremy came home. Tucker would call to him from his spot on the living room couch, hardly taking his eyes off the video games to tell Jeremy there was half a PB&J sandwich in the fridge for him. Jeremy would spot Tucker's abandoned math homework on the kitchen table, note the incorrect answers and frustrated work still half visible after being hastily erased. There would be one or two spots where the eraser eroded a hole through the paper, and soon after that Tucker would have given up completely, leaving 23 of the 34 questions blank. Jeremy would pull out his own homework, finish that and the sandwich Tucker made for him, and sneak a peek at his brother's homework. It was beyond fourth grade math, but Jeremy had read ahead in his text book, and the friendly school librarian had loaned him a few more advanced books. Jeremy would finish Tucker's homework with relative ease before joining his brother in the

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quest to keep the earth safe from space zombies. Tucker would ask him about his day and always knew when there was something Jeremy wasn't telling him.

"Who do you want me to beat up, kid?" Jeremy would smile, and forget all about his great escape plan.

But Tucker wasn't at home now. Strange, that as a kid Jeremy could always conveniently forget that his big brother would be at the house waiting for him. Over the last three days, Jeremy had started picturing him everywhere. Sitting on the couch, a video game controller in one hand and a ham sandwich in the other. Lounging in the bean bag on his bedroom floor, eyes closed as he nodded his head along to The Killers blasting from his record player. But he wasn't. Tucker should be walking through the front door after class, or tossing a baseball around in the backyard with one of his buddies. Jeremy saw him everywhere, which is why he had needed to get out of the house. He left through the back door to avoid whichever family member was there bringing them dinner. He hadn't packed a stick and blanket suitcase, or even remembered to bring his phone. He wondered if he could be considered a runaway if no one was looking for him.

Maybe he wouldn't go home. He wandered past the train station, thinking of all the possibilities. He could get on the first train that pulled up to the station, and get off at the last stop. Somewhere no one knew his name, or that his dead brother had just killed a girl. Jeremy would get a job at a record store or a coffee shop. Maybe take some online college courses. Calculus, or biology. He didn't have much money in his bank account, maybe enough to shack up in some decrepit motel for a couple of weeks. Longer, if he dipped into his savings account. He watched the large blue and grey train make its way toward the station. He could get on it. He could jump in front of it. So many possibilities, so many ways to ensure he would never have to go home and see his brother's ghost again.

There was no Tucker at home to keep him there. And he wasn't scared of kids on the street any more. Nothing was scarier than the nightmare he was living already. The train came... and left. The burst of wind it brought as it flew by pushed the hair off Jeremy's forehead and made him feel as though he was about to fall over. But he never moved off the platform, never tried to get on the train or underneath it. He was a coward, as always—afraid to move. Tucker was never afraid of anything. He'd have gotten on the train, if he felt

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compelled to do so. He could have fun away too, if he ever wanted to. He'd have made a great carny. Tough, street smart. The mean little kids would have been scared of him. Tucker was good at everything, back then. Now, he was just dead.

Jeremy was wandering around, not paying much attention to where he was going. He stopped when the front page of a newspaper reached out and grabbed him around the neck. He'd know that pickup truck anywhere. The paper was screaming about lives lost in a senseless tragedy. His hands moved towards the paper on their own accord, bringing the horror closer to his face. He stared at it, afraid to read but catching a few words here and there. *On the evening of May 3rd... speed may have been a factor... Avery Hanley, age 20...*

Her. Jeremy focused in on the name, trying to turn paper and ink into flesh and blood. He stared at the page until his eyes watered, trying to make her real. She only lived one town over from him. He wondered if he'd ever driven past her while she was on a run (he thought she seemed like the type to go for early morning jogs). She went to Southern Concord State, she probably knew some kids from his high school. Maybe she was a biology major, or pre-med. Maybe she and Tucker had gone to the same parties once or twice. Was she the type to get invited to the coolest parties every weekend?

The services were today. St. Matthew's Catholic Church, right in the middle of Clayton's town square. It would only take him 20 minutes to walk there. On a whim he turned towards the church, looking for the dead girl.

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CHAPTER 8: REGAN

The funeral morning was an odd blur of black clothes and grey skies. She wasn't sure exactly how she'd gotten to the funeral parlor, but had a nagging suspicion that her mother had dressed her. She and Mae got there early, before the hordes showed up doling out respects and condolences. She anxiously balled her sweaty hands in the fabric of her black dress as she stood in the doorway of the calling room. Regan took a long, shaky breath and smoothed out the wrinkles before turning to look at Mae.

“We should go up to the casket,” her friend whispered.

She was referring to the dead body at the front of the room. That's what they were here for: to look at a corpse for five hours while friends and family milled around, trying not to acknowledge the fragility of their own lives.

Regan almost refused, but somehow ended up staring down into the casket. Avery looked good, pretty even. They had dressed her in purple, powdered her face, and hidden all of the bruising. *She looks more alive than I do*, Regan reflected. Maybe she should have a mortician do her makeup next time she wanted to leave the house. That way she wouldn't frighten children with how ghostly she looked. Grief wasn't a good look on Regan. But death, death looked beautiful on Avery. She always was the pretty one. She had been prepared so impeccably it looked as though she was going to open her eyes at any moment. Regan held her breath and stared intently at the body, half terrified and half enchanted, while she waited for Avery to sit up. Waited for her to turn her head and wink at Regan, laugh her mischievous laugh and reveal it had all been an elaborate prank. It was possible, Regan tried to rationalize. If it was possible for her best friend, so full of life, to be gone without warning, then wasn't it possible she could come back? Regan wanted to shake her, scream her name and pound on the coffin until she woke her up. Regan shot her arm out, grabbing onto Avery's hands that were folded in prayer. She pulled her hand back almost immediately, and hissed as though she had been burned. Avery's hands were cold as ice. There was no pulse, no blood flow to keep her warm. This wasn't her best friend. Just a cold, dead thing. Her best friend was gone.

Regan fled to the bathroom with Mae on her tail. She slipped in before Regan slammed the door and clicked the lock. Regan put one hand on either side of the porcelain sink and leaned forward, dipping her head down and breathing in short, shallow gasps. She

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couldn't force enough air down her lungs. She threw her head up in a panic, and recoiled at the face reflected in the mirror. Her cheeks were fire red, and black mascara was trekking down her face. Tears dropped over the slope of her nose and past her chin, landing with splatters on her sweater. Sobs rippled through her as she felt Mae wrap her arms around her center. Regan felt her shoulder being soaked with Mae's tears as the girls broke together. The two slid to the floor, sitting against the door and clutching each other like lifelines. An indefinable amount of time passed. When Regan finally felt as though she could breathe, she gratefully gulped down precious oxygen. She felt her breathing steady and held onto Mae's hand as hard as she could. Her best friend was dead. *Their* best friend was dead. But they weren't alone. And some day they would feel okay. Regan wove her fingers between Mae's, and they sat there in silence, reveling in the feel of one another's pulses.

Regan and Mae had managed to hide themselves for the beginning portion of the wake. They heard the preacher say some nice words from where they sat on the bathroom floor. Regan had her ear against the door, listening to the mournful murmurs in the larger room. She knew she was supposed to get up and join the crowd, but she felt safe with Mae's arms around her. This spot felt sacred somehow. To move would be dangerous. Like she would break all over again.

Someone knocked softly on the door. The girls stiffened, gathering more closely together. They knocked again, a little less softly. Regan thought about telling them to go away. *Find another bathroom! We're safe in here, can't you see?* Mae let out a resigned sigh and pulled Regan to her feet. There was some red faced uncle waiting on the over side of the door, dressed in a suit jacket that was too tight over his stomach. There was a bratty little kid near the man's ankles with chocolate smeared around his mouth. Regan felt annoyance ripple through her. Mae took her hand and guided her to the first row of seats. Regan jerked forward on coltish legs, not quite sure she wanted to move. She followed Mae through the aisle of mourners, afraid to let go of her hand. Regan diverted her eyes, not wanting to look at the coffin again. Instead she looked around, taking in everyone but Avery.

There was a frail grandmother who looked as though one gust of wind or particularly harsh sentence would push her right into her grave. Grandparents aren't supposed to outlive their grandchildren. Regan shifted in her seat, uncomfortable with the wrongness of it all. A

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couple of blonde cousins—pretty, but not as pretty as Avery—chattered a couple of rows back. A middle-aged man loosened his tie and looked at his watch, as though it was a great inconvenience to be there. The boy Avery dated for three months in the ninth grade was there, looking guilty. Maybe he felt bad for breaking up with her over text message. Allie Andovi was there in high heels that were too big for her. She looked afraid, as though Avery was going to sit up and start calling her Allie Anchovy like she did every day in seventh grade. The Greenwich twins were there, even though Avery hadn't spoken to either of them since graduation and hardly liked them before that. Avery's senior prom date, Jimmy was there. The girl who sat in front of them in their psych lecture, some kids from her management group project, the boy she met last weekend at a frat party. None of them belonged here. None of them deserved to take Regan and Mae's pain and make it their own. Even the sight of the girls they hung out with nearly every weekend made Regan clench her jaw. She could see in their eyes that this was all about them. How did they feel; how would they cope? Tomorrow, they would sit around reminiscing about the good times, in one month they would post something sappy on Facebook, perhaps a handful would post a picture to Instagram. All the while, they would be slowly forgetting. By the time one year has passed it would be as if Avery had never been a part of their lives. They might say to each other, "I can't believe it's already been a year," and then get on with their days.

Regan couldn't imagine. She felt as though there was an invisible iron fist around her neck. Until then it had been about getting one foot in front of the other. Get out of bed, put on clothes, drink some water, talk to Mae. Time passing alternately in the slugging meander of a lazy river and quick bursts that left her breathless. She hadn't thought about the future yet. The fact that she had to do this for another year, or ten, or fifty. For most of the people standing before her, the wake marked an end to this tragedy. A way to say goodbye and close the book. For Regan, it was just the beginning. She hated them for it.

"It's like a damn social event," she muttered, not as quiet as she could have been when she saw a group of girls from the debate team whispering to each other. One even started to laugh. She could picture the sorority sisters sitting around their house.

"Are you going to Avery's wake?"

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“Well we have chapter at 5, but I guess we could make an appearance before it starts?”
“I’m only going if you go.”

“I don’t have anything to wear, can I borrow that skirt you wore to dinner with Jake last week?”

Regan felt like puking all over the stiletto heels that were not appropriate funeral attire. Mae placed a soothing hand on Regan’s arm, like she was trying to brush off the mottled bruises there.

“They’re all mourning too, Regan. Theirs is just a different kind of grief.”

Regan tried not to feel angry, as she watched the hordes of people pay their respects. She was certain Avery would have some quip about not feeling respected serving as the centerpiece for a social gathering. The faces started to blur together, turning into a jumble of sad smiles and “I’m sorry for your loss.” An aunt nervously smoothing her hair, a family friend with a misbuttoned shirt, a child wrapping her fingers around the edge of the coffin, a boy with curly brown hair who Regan had never seen before, but looked just as sad and angry as she did.

Regan was starting to feel like she couldn’t breathe, like she had drunk too much and set the room spinning. There were too many faces, too many glossy eyes trained on her, too many people, who felt bad for her and worse for themselves. Regan took a deep breath and let her eyes flutter shut, but the horrors hiding behind her eyelids only made things worse. There was too much happening around her, and every time she made eye contact with someone new she felt like a wave was crashing over her head. Regan gripped the sides of her chair firmly, holding herself there. Her eyes finally fell on Avery’s body, and she found that she couldn’t look away. There was a morbid comfort in those familiar features that kept Regan steady and still, like an anchor. In life, Avery’s mom had always told her she was wild like the waves. Regan almost smiled at the irony.

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CHAPTER 9: JEREMY

Jeremy used to love school. Not the sloppy joes he secretly suspected were made of dog food. Not the jocks who hung out in huge groups near their lockers and bumped into him without saying sorry. But he liked Mr. Mandalay and the chemistry classes he taught. He liked that his guidance counselor was always telling him that he was “going places.” He liked that during enrichment he tutored freshmen students in biology because it meant one less class period of listening to his classmates make mind numbing small talk. Besides, biology was fun.

School could have been bad for him. Well, it could have been a lot worse. The kids that acted like he was invisible could have looked at him like a piñata ripe for getting cracked open. But Tucker, despite having graduated two years before him, left a legacy that was just cool enough to let Jeremy slide by. Jeremy wasn’t a total nerd. He sat through history class drooling on his notes and watching the clock tick by just like everyone else. He loved winter break because it meant snow ball tournaments with his cousins. He loved summer break because it meant trailing behind Tucker, as he went to the skate park every day. But Jeremy loved school as well. He loved to learn.

Jeremy didn’t want to go to school today, though. He would rather die. He almost said as much to his parents. But he thought hearing the words would help his mother take those final steps off the brink of sanity. As it was she had accidentally gone to the supermarket in her slippers last Tuesday. Her eyes glossed over with tears and memories every time she saw her living son. For her sake, it was certainly better to stay quiet. Besides, his father, who had always sworn he would never hit his boys, looked so ready to burst Jeremy was worried he would beat him within an inch of his life should the words leave his mouth. And while Jeremy didn’t want to go to school, he didn’t want that either.

They had decided that it was time. Time to send him back to school so everyone could start moving on with the brand new versions of their old lives. Jeremy had missed almost two weeks at this point. He wasn’t sure who decided the timer had rung and the mourning period was up, because his opinion certainly hadn’t been accounted for. But he got up anyway; he took a warm shower because maybe that would make him feel better (it didn’t); he put on his softest shirt with a picture of his favorite band because maybe that would bring him comfort

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(it didn't); he ate a bowl of the usual morning Lucky Charms because maybe it would make him feel normal (it didn't). Jeremy remembered three bites in that he didn't even like Lucky Charms. His mom bought them because they were Tucker's favorite, and he whined if there wasn't anything sugar-laden for breakfast. Jeremy poured the rest of his cereal down the garbage disposal.

Nothing felt normal, nothing felt real. This place looked like Jeremy's house and the people spoke like Jeremy's parents, but on the inside everything was wrong. Jeremy was wrong on the inside as well. He would step one foot inside the school, and everyone would know he was an imposter. Perhaps he had been an imposter all along.

His dad drove him to school. That never happened. During grade school Jeremy's mom drove him in the beat up green minivan they eventually traded in for a Kia. Freshman and sophomore year Tucker drove. Junior year Jeremy started taking the bus. But on this most unusual mornings that felt like the entire world had been flipped on its axis, Jeremy's dad was driving him to school. The car ride was long and silent. It felt suffocating when compared to the music Tucker used to blast, making the speakers rattle. He would put the windows down and turn the dial to the right, letting the guitar riffs fly away. A group of girls would pull up next to him and giggle, turning their own music down, happy to let Tucker dictate the soundtrack of their morning commute. Tucker would lean back casually and toss the girls a wink if he thought one was cute enough. Jeremy would punch his arm as they drove away, blushing if he thought the girl was cute as well. He was the only person who seemed to think Tucker was trying too hard. Everyone else thought he was a natural.

Their dad drove with the radio off. His hands gripped the steering wheel too tight at exactly 10 and 2. The sharp contrast made Jeremy tremble like the beginnings of an avalanche. Something had been knocked loose inside of him and was rolling around like an empty beer can tossed in Tucker's backseat. Jeremy wanted to say something to fill the black silence but words were evading him. He fiddled with his seatbelt instead. He wondered what would happen if he threw himself out of the car before they made it to the school. Jeremy turned his head to watch the trees fly by.

Jeremy's dad carefully pulled into the parking lot after the longest drive of Jeremy's life, yet if they had never arrived that would have been too early for him. The school didn't

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look any different. Tall and old and in need of some love and care. The students didn't look any different either. Maybe they didn't care. Maybe they hadn't heard the news.

No. He was wrong about that.

They knew. Jeremy could feel it the second he opened the car door. A group of guys on the student senate were hanging out by the next car over. They stopped moving and turned to stare at Jeremy. He felt more rocks rattling, sand slipping down the mountain.

Jeremy froze too. They all stood there, staring uncomfortably. One of the boys opened his mouth as if to offer some meaningless consolation. Another looked down like Jeremy had done something embarrassing. Jeremy wanted to cry. He wanted to hit them. *Why are you staring at me? I'm just the brother of a dead man, nothing to see here!*

"Let's go." His father said curtly, putting one hand on his shoulder. His dad steered him away from the gawkers towards the school. Past rows of pickup trucks, none of which shone the way Tucker's has. He cleaned that thing meticulously. That hunk of scrapyard metal had been his pride and joy. More rocks trickling down the mountainside. More students turning to stare. Jeremy didn't know what would be worse. The staring or someone actually trying to speak to him.

He wasn't sure why his father was still by his side. But his dad walked with him through the silver double doors, across and foyer and into the principal's office. Jeremy had been to the principal's office before. The first time was with his freshman year science fair group so Principal Burns could congratulate them on winning the regional National Science Day competition and advancing to states. Some of his classmates teased him afterwards, but Tucker had clapped him on the back and congratulated his "nerdy little bro" in front of a big group of his friends. Jeremy had smiled all day.

This was nothing like that.

They were waiting to ambush him. The principal, guidance counselor, school resource officer. Even the school nurse who never had anything to offer but a band aid, and Jeremy was relatively positive a band aid was not going to fix this. Jeremy wondered vaguely why his parents hadn't warned him about the onslaught of school officials he would be meeting with. Then he decided that knowing wouldn't have made him feel any better or worse, so really it didn't matter.

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“Jeremy, Mr. Harris. Please, take a seat.” Principal Burns sounded nicer and sadder than Jeremy had ever seen her. Except she couldn’t possibly be as sad as she seemed. She was making this sympathetic face like she knew exactly what they were going through. Like she lost Tucker in the same way they had. It wasn’t true. Jeremy wanted to launch across the desk at her. He took a seat and decided being spoken to was markedly worse than being stared at.

The adults exchanges some formalities and consolations, which Jeremy determinedly tuned out. He was trying to stare a hole through the ugly picture of kittens climbing over a teacup hanging behind Principal Burns’ head. Jeremy was concentrating so hard on ignoring them that he missed it when the conversation turned his way. His father cleared his voice and Jeremy gave a little start. Everyone in the room was staring at him. He hoped he hadn’t voiced one of his thoughts aloud.

“Jeremy? I asked what you thought about that.”

His principal was staring at him with even more concern than before, probably worrying that he didn’t have all of his mental facilities. Jeremy tapped his fingers on the chair armrest.

“Oh... Umm... Yeah.” *Yes* was probably the answer these people wanted to hear. *Yes, I’m ready to come back to school. Yes, I’m sad but realize my education is important. Yes, I promise to grieve in whatever way you have deemed appropriate and not cause any scenes. Yes, you can walk away from this meeting feeling good about yourselves for checking in with me, and not worry about me ever again.*

Burns gave him a sickening smile. “Great, so you’ll head to class right after this meeting. I’m afraid we’ve cut into first period, but I’ll write you a hall pass. You have Mr. Healy for English Lit this period, right? He’ll be very understanding. And you’ll have your first meeting with Ms. Lawrence tomorrow during your enrichment period. She was hoping to meet with you today of course, but she’s unfortunately booked with meetings all afternoon. I’m sure you’ve been very brave about all of this, Jeremy. Welcome back.”

Jeremy sensed that to be his dismissal and rose from his seat belittling himself for not paying attention. He had unwittingly agreed to meet with the school therapist tomorrow for the *first* time, which implied there would be more meetings to follow. Jeremy had always thought Ms. Lawrence seemed like a foolish woman. She would come to class wide

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assemblies and remind them that feeling insecure and nervous was perfectly normal and easy to overcome with determination and a chat with your friendly resident shrink. Jeremy was doubtful that she even had the credentials to be referred to as such. To make matters worse they didn't even have the decency to pull him out during history class. Jeremy didn't want to talk to a therapist or anyone else. He didn't ask for any of this. Jeremy felt the ground tremble as the mountain threatened to topple over entirely. He and his father left the office in silence, and parted ways with his dad mumbling "have a good day." Jeremy stood in the middle of the foyer watching his dad walk away, not able to figure out what it was he wanted to say.

If Jeremy thought the adults were insufferable, his peers were deadly. Their stares stalked him down the hallway as he made his way to Mr. Healy's third floor classroom. People walking in the other direction did double takes when they saw him. A group of sophomore girls standing by a locker leaned their heads together to talk in hushed whispers, glancing over at him intermittently. Classrooms full of shocked students trailed him with their eyes as he walked past their open doors. An exceptionally short freshman boy stood up on his chair, so he could gawk better. One teacher even caught sight of him and stopped her lecture mid-sentence, staring at Jeremy as if she'd seen a ghost. Her name was Ms. Royale. She taught creative writing and had been Tucker's favorite teacher. She was one of the few to ever had to think Tucker had promise. Jeremy could remember a note she wrote home to their parents during Tucker's freshman year. *Tucker has natural talent that I don't believe he has completely tapped into yet. If he applies himself, Tucker has a very bright future ahead of him.* Jeremy felt hot bile rising in the back of his throat.

This went on all day. People staring but not wanting to get too close, just like driving past a car wreck. Some of the kids he knew tried to offer condolences but Jeremy just looked down or walked away. He shuttered at the idea of engaging in those conversations; them not really wanting to be around him but feeling obliged to say something nice that would ultimately make Jeremy feel worse; him being completely unsure what to say because "it's ok" was a blatant lie and "thank you" felt insincere because he wasn't grateful at all. Even the smallest interactions were making his palms sweat and his stomach knot. A couple of people had tried to contact him after the accident. Jeremy had ignored all of them, a decision he almost regretted now. This would probably be easier to endure with some friends.

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Jeremy didn't feel like he had a single friend now. His classmates' eyes feel hot and mean. So many years of being invisible. Not cool enough to matter. Not weird enough to acquire their rage. Just silently, perfectly, invisible. And now they are all staring at him. Like he had three heads. Like he was a celebrity. But a celebrity nobody cared for. Like he had personally offended each and every one of them. Like he was a murderer walking around with red blood still wet on his hands. Jeremy wanted to scream. He wanted to put his fist through a wall or right through someone's face. He wanted to give them a reason to look at him. A reason to be so scared. As if they have any right to be more afraid than he was. He could only imagine what they were whispering behind their hands. That his brother was a fallen idol. That his brother was a drunk or a murderer. Every set of staring eyes sent more rocks tumbling down the mountain, which was now threatening to collapse on them all.

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CHAPTER 10: REGAN

Regan was done with school for the semester. Not that the semester had ended. There was still another week of classes, plus final exams. But she, personally, was done. Her mother had called the dean of students, and her doctor had spoken to her advisor. They had collectively decided that returning to school so soon after the accident would be detrimental to Regan's recovery, both physically and mentally. Physically, Regan felt fine. A little bit of whiplash, some bruising across her chest and shoulder where the seatbelt had intervened to save her life. Sometimes Regan didn't mind the pain. It reminded her that she was alive. Sometimes she hated it for the same reason. Her mental facilities didn't feel quite up to par with her body. Now that the funeral was over, she truly didn't know what to do with herself.

Regan dragged her ratty cotton bathrobe over her shoulders. The pink fabric had faded, and there were strings dangling from the sleeves, but it smelled like fabric softener and scented candles. She tied it loosely around her waist and shuffled from her bedroom to the den, her worn slippers dragging across the carpet. She woke up that morning to her mom's light knock on the door. She had called to her daughter in a soothing voice that only mothers could perfect, encouraging Regan to at least get out of bed. Biting back nasty retorts, Regan had conceded. It was the least she could do, considering the fact that her mom was taking time off of work to be home with her. She ignored the fact that her mother's face lit up as she walked by and sank down onto their old brown couch, the worn cushions trying to eat her up. Regan curled up on her side, nuzzling her face into the side of her bathrobe. She flipped through channels as her mom said something about making coffee.

Cartoons. Real housewives. Scripted reality shows. Obnoxious morning news hosts. *Flip. Flip. Flip.* She froze when she saw a familiar face, her finger hovering over the next channel button. Her short blonde hair was peeking out from underneath a graduation cap bedazzled in black gemstones. She was posing with her arm around another girl in an ugly yellow graduation gown, proudly showing off her diploma. The other girl had been cut out of the picture, but Regan caught a hint of her own auburn hair. Regan hit the pause button on the remote quickly. She sat up straighter, staring at Avery's smiling face on the television. She could remember the exact moment the picture was taken. Regan closed her eyes, letting herself drift back to that hot June afternoon, nearly one year ago. The girls had been planning

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a road trip- they wanted to leave right after graduation. They were going to see the whole east coast, and end up in Miami. The plans had fallen apart. Regan hadn't saved up enough money, Mae wanted to take a summer class, and Avery's mom was worried about three young girls traveling by themselves. But on that day, they were still planning their grand summer adventure.

"The great escape," Avery had cheered "out of this too small school, out of this boring town, nothing but my babes and the open road."

Avery did make it out of town, a weekend on the cape with her cousins. But she didn't come back with stories of wild nights or midnight adventures. She had hardly wanted to talk about it at all. She said it wasn't the vacation it was supposed to be. Mae promised her they would all go away together soon.

The picture on the television now was perfect. Everyone would look at it and think "oh, what a beautiful girl. What potential. What a story she could have told." Typical Avery. No one would suspect that moments before the photo was snapped, she'd been saying something mean about their least favorite science teacher. Or that she was hungry and hungover and had been snapping at her mom all day. She was buzzing with a wild excitement she didn't know what to do with.

"Oh Avery, won't you try to smile for just one picture?" Mrs. Hanley had practically begged.

Avery had turned on the charm for one second, which resulted in the picture that was plastered all over her parents' house and Facebook profiles. Proof that their sullen teenager had a lovely smile! Proof that their wild daughter was college bound! The picture worked well for the television too. Regan pressed play. The news anchors were charmed by her, too. It was clear in their voices. Even in death, Avery was good.

Regan turned up the volume, soaking up every word as though she didn't know the story by heart. Who the beautiful blonde girl was. What had happened to her? Then the image changed. There was a picture of a young man on the television screen, probably a year or two older than Regan. He had a handsome face and shaggy brown hair that fell into his eyes. He was laughing in the picture, wearing a backwards baseball cap and saluting someone with a

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red solo cup. Regan didn't know who this man was, didn't know why he was part of Avery's story.

Her mind was moving slowly, having a hard time understanding what the reporters were talking about. They called him Tucker Harris, but none of it made sense until they showed a picture of him standing beside his pickup truck. Regan became suddenly, impossibly still. Because she knew that truck. And she knew that man. She had seen him slumped over the wheel of his truck. He was probably dead by that point—Avery was—but Regan hadn't bothered to check. In truth, Regan had forgotten about him. Her memories of that night were a blur, thanks to the shock and the pain medicine. The past few days Regan had hardly thought of anything except life without her best friend. There hadn't been room for contemplation on much else. But she saw him now.

There was a police officer on the screen now, another face Regan recognized. She had spoken to him that night, as the hospital. The memory hit her like a flood now.

“Ma’am, I’m very sorry for your loss. Do you know where you are?”

She was lying in a hospital bed, even though she kept pushing the doctors away and insisting she was fine. The white blanket was scratchy on her skin. There was an IV sticking out of her left arm, pumping something cool into her blood. She was vaguely grateful for the fact that she wasn't afraid of needles.

“I’m in the hospital.” Her voice was scratchy, weak. Probably from screaming.

“Yes, you are. And do you remember what happened tonight?”

“We were in the car. Avery and me. We were driving and then, we weren't. There was a crash. Someone hit us. Now Avery's...”

Now Avery looks like a rag doll. Like a puppet who's strings were cut. The officer said some more things, but Regan was staring past him. Staring at Avery's body on the pavement.

“I understand that this is difficult, but are you able to answer the question? Was Avery speeding at the time of the accident?”

“No,” Regan lied. *She hadn't even glanced at the speedometer in at least 10 miles. There was never anyone on those roads. Those were our roads. Avery drove them as she pleased.*

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“Was she texting? Or otherwise distracted?”

“No,” Regan lied. *She wasn’t looking at the road, she was looking at me. She was laughing.* Regan felt a trill of fear. Was it her fault? Should Avery have seen the car coming? Avery thought she was invincible, was that what got her killed?

“Is there anything unusual that happened? Anything that might have contributed to the crash?”

“No,” Regan lied. Why was she covering up for a dead girl? It didn’t matter now, did it? If people thought she had gotten herself killed. But Avery, so perfect and so strong, had to stay that way. The perfect sad story, the perfect way to be remembered. Avery deserved that.

The police officer sighed. Regan realized that he looked very tired.

He didn’t look quite so tired on the news. He looked sad, though. Cops were supposed to bust bad guys and pull people over for driving too fast down the freeway. Dealing with dead kids probably wasn’t why he signed up for this job. Regan watched his lips moving, saying things like “crash” and “speed.” Then another word, “toxicology.” Regan pressed down on the volume button until the officer’s voice filled the room and rang around her head.

Twice the legal limit.

Twice the legal limit.

Regan feels herself turning to stone. There was a fire spreading through her, starting in her center and spreading outward with every pump of her heart. The hot fury radiated out of her until she was certain it had become tangible. Regan jumped to her feet but didn’t know where she wanted to go. Her hands curled into fists, but there was no one to hit. The enemy was dead, he took himself out when he took Avery. The blue pickup truck impaled on the side of Avery’s door, the figure slumped over the steering wheel, the stupid smiling boy with the red solo cup. *Tucker.* Regan says his name, letting it sit in her mouth and tumble across her tongue. She hissed the name, growled it, screamed it, cursed it to hell. It didn’t matter how fast Avery was driving. Didn’t matter that she had looked away from the road. It wasn’t her mistakes that got her killed, or Regan’s. It was the choices of a stranger. A boy in a backwards baseball cap who became a killer for the evening. Regan was struck by the audacity of it all. That Avery, with all of her brightness, was taken out by some frat boy with a drinking problem. Regan was surprised to see a stain on her bathrobe. At some point she had spilled

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her scalding coffee all over her leg. Apparently it wasn't as hot as her boiling blood because she hadn't even felt it. She clutched the hem of her bathrobe. Regan found herself wishing this boy hadn't died. Wishing he was still alive so Regan could kill him herself. Can't get revenge against a dead man.

Regan didn't think it was possible to hate someone so much. The reporters had video of the empty spot in a driveway where a pickup truck was supposed to be. The outside of his house. Startled looking parents and a stumbling teenager. People she would never meet, never speak to. Not that she wanted to. She didn't want to be around people like them, people that helped ruin her life. The people that could love a killer. She straightened her bathrobe out nervously. Regan couldn't stand there any longer. She felt like the sage green walls of her den were threatening to crush her.

"Regan, honey, what happened, where are you going?" her mother asked in alarm as Regan rushed past. She grabbed her keychain off their hook by the door and clutched them until her house key was imprinted in her skin.

"Out," she mumbled, practically sprinting out the door.

She was halfway to Mae's house when she realized she was still in her bathrobe. She probably looked like an escapee from a mental hospital. Coffee stained bathrobe with old slippers, wild hatred lighting her eyes up and turning her cheeks pink. She barged through the front door to Mae's house without bothering to knock. She needed someone to talk to. Someone who would rage with her. Someone who would feel the same kind of anger that was coursing through Regan's blood. She was confused for a moment, almost not sure where she was. Mae's house was always clean and quiet. It was where the girls went to study for midterms because it was so orderly it helped everyone think straight. They had to take their shoes off and leave them on the rug by the front door. There were almost always oatmeal chocolate chip cookies sitting on a plate on the kitchen counter, and the floor was so clean the girls had actually eaten off of it.

There was something different. Regan could feel it when she walked in. The usually calm atmosphere felt alive with tension. At first she couldn't pinpoint what was different. Then she saw Mae had dropped her purse, the contents strewn across the floor. Regan walked towards the kitchen and saw a barstool by the center island was on its side. Then she heard

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raised voices floating down the staircase. Never in her life had she heard yelling in Mae's house. Before she started dating Chris that was. There were two voices now, one male and one female. Regan could see the unwanted image of Chris getting in Mae's face, screaming at her as she tried to turn away. Regan nibbled on a cookie, not sure what to do. She rather wished she had remembered to put shoes on now.

Mae wasn't a fighter. She didn't like it and had never been good at it. Avery had been fighter enough for all three of them. Regan pictured the last day they had had together. Once again she was sitting in the same lecture hall where she had listened to Professor Dawson drone on about biology for the past three months.

The musty blue chair creaked when Regan shifted her weight, earning her an angry glare from the soccer mom sitting in front of her. The 40-something was wearing a denim jacket over her flare jeans and had a haircut that screamed *I want to speak to the manager*, so Regan wasn't particularly concerned with what she thought. She had driven the whole 42 miles from Plymouth to Concord, and she'd be damned if she missed a single word uttered by the Smith College Debate Team. Regan, meanwhile, was finding it difficult to imagine a situation that would capture her attention less than this. She didn't care about debate, even though the winning school would be crowned Best Debaters of New Hampshire, or something. She couldn't be bothered to listen to arguments or counterarguments or objections (can college students object one another?). In fact, she wasn't even sure what the topic was. Something about highway regulation or work zone safety. Whatever it was, Regan didn't care. She cared about Avery. And Avery always gave the closing statement.

If it were up to her, Regan would have slipped into the back of the hall 15 minutes before the debate was scheduled to end. She'd have heard her best friend say her piece, applause loudly, and still be able to gush over what a great job she did. Avery would see right through her, but hardly cares about anything other than her own performance. Avery didn't care about debate either. She wasn't on the team because she wanted to be a lawyer, or cared about the issues presented. She simply loved to argue. During their freshman year of high school, the best teacher either girl ever had asked Avery to stay after class one day. Ms. Marianelli, who taught English Literature, had grown concerned with Avery's combative nature. She didn't think it fostered a healthy atmosphere for class discussion. Instead of

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discipline, Ms. Marianelli had suggested Avery join the debate team, which she herself was the advisor of. Regan would never understand why their saint of a teacher had wanted to spend two extra hours with Avery a week, but it did the trick. Avery learned how to argue a point using fact and reason, instead of bringing people to tears with personal attacks. Avery's mother claims the Clayton High School Debate Team turned her daughter into a model citizen. Regan thought it created a monster, because the last thing Avery had ever needed was to become *better* at fighting. Regardless, the debate team had stuck and by sophomore year she was the captain. Avery's name was the first to go on the debate team signup sheet at the annual Southern Concord State University clubs and organizations fair on the second week of September.

And here they were, eight months later, stuck in a humid lecture hall. Regan was tapping her foot and scrolling through her phone, while her friend Mae sat beside her shooting her looks of warning and whispering that she was being rude. Mae was hanging onto every word, and nodding or even cheering under her breath when she side she agreed with made a good point. Regan wasn't sure which side that was, exactly, since she couldn't figure out who was defending what. Regan was surprised Mae wasn't jotting down notes in the purple composition book she carried everywhere. It was Mae's insistence that had forced Regan to endure the entire hour and forty-eight minutes and counting of droning.

"You might want to listen, Regan. They're talking about important stuff. Road safety, diver liability. You drive a car, this stuff affects you."

For some reason the Mother of Denim didn't turn around to shush Mae. But Regan gave her a wilting look, which had roughly the same effect. After another twelve and a half minutes, not that Regan was looking at her phone every forty-five seconds urging time to speed forward, Avery took her place at the podium. Regan snapped to attention, leaning forward in her chair and fixing her gaze on the girl center stage. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Mae doing the same thing. Here comes the good stuff. The rest of the drabble were previews of coming attractions, and this was the feature film. Regan found herself craving a bowl of freshly popped, buttered popcorn.

Every time Regan listened to Avery give a closing statement she walked away with goosebumps. Avery spoke with such conviction that even when she was wrong, the opponents

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would tremble in their slacks and shiny new dress shoes. Regan couldn't tell you who was right and who was wrong. But she knew that she trusted Avery with her life. Her words filled the hall with a nearly audible hum of excitement. Regan knew exactly what they were thinking, *I'll give you my money, I'll sign your bill, I'll rally at your convention, please keep talking*. Every time Avery spoke she lit the room on fire, and her subjects were content to sit and burn. When she finished speaking, Regan was the first to leap from her seat and applaud, rippling with pride.

No one was surprised when her team won. Avery didn't lose. Avery could make an atheist believe in God if she felt inclined to. While she would make an exceptional lawyer, or preacher, or telemarketer, she was majoring in English, probably because Ms. Marianelli inspired her to do so. She was going to be a reporter and change the world, probably because she related closely to the scene of *Spider Man* where Uncle Ben tells Peter Parker that with great power comes great responsibility. Regan was just grateful Avery had never gotten it in her head to start swinging across building tops. She surely would have dragged the other girls along with her. Mae would have sprained an ankle, Regan would have been blamed for any and all rules they broke, and Avery would have had a grand old time.

Avery was practically vibrating by the time she stepped off the stage and into Regan's embrace. She was talking a mile a minute, and could barely spare a breathless "thank you" as Mae shoved a bouquet of tulips under her nose.

"Did you *see* the look on their faces when I brought up my last point? I totally blindsided them. Poor kids never saw me coming. I almost feel bad for them..." Avery paused, looking around wickedly while Regan let out a snort

"Yeah, right. You're probably disappointed you didn't make anyone cry this time."

People often cry when Avery speaks. Regan thought it was her shocking intensity, but Avery swore they had nothing but their own inferiority to blame. Mae said she needed to be nicer to people. Avery's parents, who had never missed a debate, broke between them to drown their oldest child in accolades. Mrs. Hanley wiped a stray tear out of her eye. She cried every time Avery debated, and claimed she had allergies every time Avery teased her about it.

"So, what are we doing to celebrate?" Mr. Hanley exclaimed.

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“Actually, Dad, I was thinking of going out with the girls.” Avery wriggled out of his grasp. “Isabelle is having a bunch of people over her place to celebrate now, and I’ve been craving a wing night with these two.”

Bailey’s was her favorite restaurant, and they had 50-cent wing nights every Thursday. Which was perfect, because Avery loved buffalo sauce. Most of the juniors and seniors hit The Tippy Mermaid on Thursday nights because of their draft deal, which left Regan itching for her 21st birthday that felt so far away. She and Avery both had fakes, but Mae refused to get one. She was convinced the first bouncer she encountered would call her out right away, and no amount of tears and apologies would keep her from being hauled off to jail. Regan and Avery could go without her, of course. And sometimes they did. But they never had as much fun when Mae wasn’t with them. Besides, without her there was no one to remind them that, yes, six shots was in fact too many. Regan and Avery goaded each other on, never wanting to be the first to stop. They were much safer when Mae was around.

Mr. Hanley seemed more than a little disappointed. “But Ave, this is a big deal. Can’t we take you out for dinner, at least? Regan and Mae are more than welcome to come along. You can always go Bailey’s on another night.”

But Avery wasn’t having any of that. She was restless, Regan could see it in the way she kept toying with the silver studs in her ear. Avery could never sit still after a big debate, she was too excited.

“We’ll go out for dinner tomorrow night, I promise! How about that Italian place we went for Father’s Day last year?”

Her dad sighed, thinking Avery’s proposition over.

“Fine, I’ll call to make the reservations now. Don’t stay out too late, tonight!”

“Have fun, girls! Be safe!” Mrs. Hanley called as Avery grabbed Mae’s arm and pulled her away, Regan following dutifully.

Avery looked over her shoulder, shouting promises to be careful and text her mother when she got to Isabelle’s house. Filled with excitement, the girls burst through the auditorium door and into the windy May night.

A loud *thud* came from above her, shaking Regan out of her memory. Regan steeled herself for a confrontation she was certainly not ready for, and made her way up the stairs.

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CHAPTER 11: REGAN

Insistent knocking at the bedroom door dragged Regan to the brink of consciousness. Stubborn as always, she rolled over to bury her face in the pillow, still standing on the edge of a dream. She was walking down the hallway of her old high school, white Converse sneakers smacking against the linoleum as she rushed to class. *Late again, Miss Foster*, crone-like Mrs. Higgins was screeching into her ear. A couple was making out in front of a flashing neon sign that read “Jaime loves Cicely,” and the two vice principals were whacking late students over the head with hockey sticks. Regan burst through the door of period 2 pre-calculus. Her 24 classmates turned their heads in slow synchronization, staring at her. Regan was rooted in her spot for a moment, made heavy by the weight of 48 glaring eyes. She moved slowly, like wading through thigh deep water. Her usual seat was open, fourth seat down in the second row from the window. Regan felt like there were spiders beneath her clothing.

Mrs. Higgins turned to face the board, her long red coat brushing up a cloud of chalk from the ground. She was writing on the blackboard, except that the noise was like a drill inside of Regan’s head. She brought her hands to her ears, cowering in pain as Mrs. Higgins scraped on. If the other students heard the red hot screeching they didn’t respond. They just stared forward, empty and sad. Regan felt her stomach churn when she realized old Higgins wasn’t writing on the board, she was using her crooked yellow talons to carve words straight into the board itself. Not words, though. Word. One, singular word.

Avery

Regan felt an ice cube leave a trail of cold terror down her spine. She turned her head to the left, gripping onto her desk for dear life. There she was. Her skin was as white as the moon, with two sunken craters for eyes. Her hair looked coarse and brittle, smudged with dirt. She was wearing her funeral clothes, dirty and ripped and wrinkled. There was blood caked under her fingernails. Overall, she could have looked worse for having dug herself out of a grave. For the first time in her life, or death, Avery looked afraid. Higgins opened her grotesque mouth and let out a scream so shrill it shattered the glass on all of the classroom windows. No one noticed. Avery opened her mouth to speak, but no noise came out. Regan wondered if she bit off her tongue in the crash, or if her vocal cords had been damaged. Avery opened her mouth again, wider, this time there were no words but a garden snake came

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slithering out, slipping out of Avery's mouth and landing with a *plop* on her desk. Mrs. Higgins stalked forward, transforming into a beast more hideous with every step. The hag stopped still at Avery's desk, curling her claws around her shoulder and screaming one last time before yanking Avery out of her chair and back to the dirt. Regan sat still, wide eyed, mouth slightly agape. She looked just like the porcelain doll little girls hide at the bottom of their closets because the sight of them is too frightening to sleep next to. At some point, Regan became aware that the screams filling the room were her own and she was lying in bed, tangled up in her sheets and covered in a layer of sweat.

Regan went to the cemetery that day. Part of the reason was just that she wanted to leave the house. Her mom kept looking at her with sad eyes and asking if she wanted to talk. Regan did not want to talk, and she didn't want to remember just how sad she was making her mom. She also thought some fresh air might do her well, because the sight in the mirror was starting to genuinely frighten her. Regan wouldn't want to be alone with herself in a dark room, that was certain. The other reason was that while she was quite sure Avery couldn't have possibly crawled out of her grave last night, it wouldn't hurt to double check.

She thought about calling Mae first. She picked up her phone and stared at the background, which of course was a picture of her, Avery and Mae. They were posing in front of a blue tapestry with swirling purple print. Regan stared so hard she could almost swear Avery was staring right back at her. She remembered the fear in her sunken eyes last night and felt a cold tremor run through her. Regan threw her phone across the room where it slid down the crack between her bed and the wall. She plucked her keys from the pile of dirty clothes they were laying on top of and practically ran out of the house.

It was a short drive from her house to the cemetery. Just ten minutes away, and yet she had scarcely even noticed it before the day a black limo dropped her off. Like she was some sort of morbid celebrity with a supporting role in death's little show. Avery had been cast as the star, she always was. Everyone had dressed in black to come watch her final scene. It was sunny that day. Regan vaguely remembered her mom bringing her a pair of sunglasses, because she had of course forgotten to do so herself. Regan was glad to have them to block out the sun that shouldn't have been shining so brightly. They made the world darker, made it

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look the way she felt. Regan had taken comfort in that consistency and refused to take them off for the remainder of the day.

It wasn't so offensively sunny when Regan arrived at the cemetery for the second time. The sky was dim, silver clouds blocking out the sun. The grass was squishy from last night's rain. The air felt cooler here than it had just moments before, but Regan wondered if she was imagining that. She weaved between headstones, trying to remember the path to the only one that mattered to her. Some of the graves were adorned with dead flowers, wilted and hunchbacked. Regan was quite sure there were few sights more depressing than dead flowers at a gravestone. It was a subtle kind of horrible. Regan had seen so much horror in the last few days that she was starting to compartmentalize it. There was traumatic horror, which she had seen plenty of, and then there was muted horror. Like a dull but heavy blade. Little things that were easy to miss, unless you were expecting to see misery in the way Regan was. Little things like dead flowers at a grave, or a veteran's flag that had been blown over and was covered in mud. Little things that Regan collected, burying herself in a blanket of sad things. They were crushingly heavy, but they were keeping her warm.

There were no dead flowers at Avery's grave. She hadn't been in the ground long enough. They were still fresh, blooming in spurts of red, orange and pink. Their bright colors could almost make you forget that they were dead, technically. They'd been plucked from their roots, cut at the stems. They had been alive once, thriving in the ground. But they were just pretty dead things now. Regan realized that living flowers at a grave might be even more awful as the dead ones. They give the illusion of life, when really there is no life here. At least dead flowers were honest.

That there was no life at Avery's grave was blatantly clear. The dirt still looked freshly turned, but there was no Avery-sized hole. No signs of blood or a struggle, not fresh footprints leading from the grave to the land of the living. Avery had never been one for subtlety. If she had risen from the grave there was no way she would have covered her tracks. She would have marched straight home, demanding an audience. Not that Regan had actually thought Avery could possibly do so. That would be insane, and Regan was almost sure she was not insane. She found herself deeply relieved to discover Avery's grave to be in order. As awful as dying must have been, Regan was certain dying a second time would be worse. She

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didn't want Avery to go through that. Besides, if Regan had to watch her die again she would, without question, follow her to the grave.

Regan wasn't sure how long she had been there, staring down. The headstone hadn't arrived yet. She tried to picture the way Avery's name would look carved into granite. A particularly strong wind blew, making a pinwheel at a nearby grave spin in quick little circles. It made a light tapping noise that normally Regan would have ignored, but in her recent easily agitated state she found impossible to ignore. It invoked a deep sense of wrongness inside of her. Perhaps it was the idea that she appeared to be the only living thing for miles. She knew then that she had made a horrible mistake by not asking Mae to come with her. The loneliness was so profound it was easy to imagine she was the only living thing in the world. Surrounded by dead flowers and bodies, all of whom used to be alive just like she was now. Regan's throat restricted uncomfortably and she absentmindedly wiped tears off her face. She was glad she had stopped wearing makeup. Her sudden bouts of crying were impossible to foresee and left her with red eyes and a runny nose. The last thing she needed was black mascara staining her cheeks.

Someone had hung wind chimes, which made a soft noise that sounded like twinkling stars. It made Regan think of little girls laughing, of herself chasing Avery through a playground while the wind blew her long blonde hair away from her excited face. Regan felt almost peaceful. The more she listened, the more the chimes sounded just like Avery's laugh, being carried by the wind from the gazebo a few rows away. Regan could picture Avery dancing in that gazebo, laughing as she twirled about without needing a partner. She stared and stared at the gazebo, not sure if she was willingly imagining it or hallucinating the blonde figure spinning around and around in circles. She took a step towards the gazebo before deciding she didn't actually want to know if ghosts could dance.

Regan turned around to flee the graveyard and found herself crashing into something. She took a step back onto the freshly dug grave, wildly afraid for a moment that she was going to fall right through the earth. Whatever she hit reached out to grab her arm, steadying her. Regan blinked in confusion. Too solid to be a ghost, too soft to be a statue, but sad and still enough to pass for either, a man stood in front of her. A boy, really. Tall, lanky, and looking vaguely familiar. He took a step backwards, a delayed reaction to their collision. "S-

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sorry ‘bout that. Wasn’t watching where I was going.” He kept his eyes on the ground while he spoke, so really it was no wonder he walked right into her. He kicked the loose dirt with the toe of his worn sneakers. Regan watched him, feeling even sadder than she had a moment before.

“Not your fault. I ran into you, after all. Sorry. You ok?” Regan bit her lip, not sure why she had asked when she was so desperate to get off the hallowed ground.

The boy looked at her in surprise, finally standing up straight. His eyes were warm like chocolate. They’d be sweet if they weren’t so sad. She wanted to tell him that he should always keep his head up, but didn’t think it was her place.

“I’m fine.” He looked like he wanted to say something else, but didn’t.

“Did you know her?” He looked confused again, so Regan nodded towards Avery’s grave. She had never been one for small talk, but felt suddenly desperate to connect to someone who was just as broken as she. Maybe if they could talk about Avery, swap stories and share memories, she’d feel real again.

The boy looked panicked. He had curly hair that looked soft enough to touch. Regan thought it was sad that he didn’t smile. She realized it was sad that she couldn’t smile any more either. Maybe she should try. Not here, though.

“I... no. She’s just, well my... I didn’t know her myself. My b- I saw the story on the news, is all. Thought it was sad.”

His cheeks were turning red, but at least it made him look a bit more alive.

“Right. Yeah, it is sad.” She stepped past him to leave, but paused at the last moment. There was something about meeting someone who didn’t know Avery, when it felt like Avery had saturated every corner of the earth.

“She was great, you know. Smart and clever. She always knew what say. Even if she was a bit of a brat sometimes.” Regan laughed, not believe she had really just said that. It was true though, Avery was so sharp around the edges it hurt to touch her sometimes. Something Regan could never say to anyone who had known her. “But she was incredible. Strong and ambitious. She was going to do great things”

“My brother died.” The boy blurted out. “Not... not too long ago. He was going to do great things, too.”

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“I’m sorry. Guess we’ll just have to do great things for the both of them.” Regan finally left the cemetery, keeping her head high despite the tears freely flowing.

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CHAPTER 12: JEREMY

Jeremy watched the auburn haired girl walk away. He couldn't decide which was more devastating, her beauty or her sadness. She spent most of their conversation curled up in herself, making herself small. Maybe she felt safer that way. Jeremy realized he'd been biting the inside of his cheek so hard he'd made himself bleed. He spat the blood out on the ground. The smell of blood mingled with the scent of fresh dirt and made his stomach clench. He should have said more. Should have told her he was sorry, dropped to his knees and begged for forgiveness. But he'd stood there like a fool, gaping at the girl whose life Tucker tore apart. She'd have denied him that forgiveness, Jeremy knew. She could try to hide herself away, but Jeremy's skin felt burnt from the fire inside her. Too strong to cave, even if he begged. He wondered if anyone spoke of her strength the way she spoke of the dead girl's. He hoped someone braver than he would tell her. Then he wondered if maybe it took more strength to forgive and ask for forgiveness. That's why he hadn't hold her the truth, after all. Tucker would have apologized, if he were here in Jeremy's place. He was brave. Jeremy wasn't even sure what he would be begging for. Forgiveness on Tucker's behalf? Forgiveness for letting him get in the car? Permission to grieve? Was he asking those things of the girl, or of himself?

She wasn't the girl he had come here for, anyway. Jeremy fiddled nervously with the zipper on his sweatshirt, having a hard time looking at her grave. He didn't know why he was stalking a dead girl. First at her wake, now at her gravesite. He felt like he needed to know her. Needed to really understand what happened that night. He wished he could bring her back and hand her to the sad girl. That way an innocent girl wouldn't be dead. That way his brother wouldn't be a murderer. Maybe then everyone would say nice things about him. They'd stand around his grave and say he was funny and brave and selfless. Maybe then Jeremy wouldn't feel like he killed the girl himself every time he tried to grieve. He could worry about himself instead of the pretty stranger in the graveyard.

She'd told him she was sorry about his brother. Maybe that was the closest thing to forgiveness he would ever get. Avery Hanley was being rather quiet about the whole thing. He silently willed her to give him a sign. *If you don't want the girl to forgive me, make the earth shake. If you hate me, reach out your hand and let the dirt gobble me up.* Jeremy was

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met with only wind chimes. They sounded nice but disjointed, louder then quiet, fast or slow depending on the gusts of wind. They sounded like the week Tucker spent trying to teach himself to play the keyboard, sweet and unsteady noises filling up the house. Jeremy knelt in the dirt and cautiously placed a hand on the grave. He sent a desperate apology and a silent goodbye into the earth and eventually walked away.

Jeremy didn't want to go home, but there was nowhere else to be. He sat on the edge of his bed tapping his foot and feeling like he wanted to claw at his skin. He could clean his room or take a nap or make lunch for his mom. Nothing felt right, though. Jeremy felt antsy, but afraid to move. He eventually stood up and started walking circles around his room like an animal at the zoo. Jeremy's feet started moving without permission, out his bedroom door and down the hall. The door to Tucker's room was shut. He hadn't been in there since the day of the accident.

He hadn't known what to wear to the party. A button down felt too formal, but most of his t-shirts had Star Trek references on them, and that simply wouldn't do. He had anxiously pawed through Tucker's closet looking for something that would help him blend in with the crowd. Tucker had let out a roar of laughter when Jeremy told him what he was so nervous about. He'd fished a t-shirt out of a pile of dubiously clean laundry and thrown it at Jeremy's head. Jeremy hadn't even bothered looking at it before throwing it on. He felt soothed just knowing it had Tucker's seal of approval. He felt anything but soothed now, standing outside the door. But being in his brother's room had a way of making him feel better.

He knew he had made a mistake as soon as he opened the door. It wasn't the room that made him feel better, it was the brother. And the brother was gone. Jeremy wanted to puke. He was so overwhelmed by the sight of Tucker's belongings and the smell of his cologne that he didn't notice the figure sitting on the bed. Jeremy's heart nearly leapt out of his chest. Hunched over and grasping an article of clothing, there he was—No. He looked up at Jeremy and he realized it wasn't, of course it wasn't, Tucker. He just had never noticed how much his brother resembled their father.

Once Jeremy got over the initial shock of thinking he saw his dead brother, it registered that his dad was crying. Jeremy averted his eyes. He knew he had walked in on something he wasn't meant to see, a private moment that they were supposed to pretend never

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happened. His father didn't cry. Jeremy was about to leave the room when he heard his father stand up and say his name. He turned, wondering if he misread the situation. Maybe his dad would want to talk about it. Jeremy worried he might seek comfort from him, a hug or some consoling words. The idea was so far from their usual interactions that Jeremy was certain he would mess it up.

His father's words hit him like a slap to the face. "What are you doing in here?"

"Just... I don't know. Nothing."

His dad had been holding Tucker's baseball jersey in shaking hands. He let it drop to the ground. "Don't touch anything."

"I wasn't going to."

"We're not cleaning it out. We're not moving a single thing. I don't want to see anything of his in your room. Do you understand me?"

Jeremy felt like he was choking. That hadn't been his intention, but he felt wounded to think that he couldn't wear his brother's sweatshirt to bed if it would make him feel better.

"Why not?"

"Because they're his. This room is his, the way he left it. It has to stay his. Don't touch anything. Just, just stay away."

"You were holding his jersey. How come you can be here and I can't?"

Jeremy wasn't one to talk back to his father. But someone had to step up and fill the role of rebellious son. Maybe the girl had rubbed off on him.

"It's not the same thing."

"Why not, Dad? He's my brother, I lost him too."

"Don't you think that you've done enough, Jeremy?" His dad never used to yell, but it seemed like he hadn't stopped doing so since Tucker died. He had saved up 22 years of shouting and was releasing it all on Jeremy at once.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just get out, Jeremy."

"NO. Tell me, Dad. What do you mean?"

Jeremy felt anger boiling up in him. The curt tone his dad had been using with him, the way he had hardly been able to look Jeremy in the eye since the hospital. Anger at Tucker,

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anger at himself, anger at Avery Hanley and even her pretty friend. It was all there, burning the back of his throat. He knew he shouldn't push his dad, not right now. But he couldn't take another second of being quiet.

“Why don't you just say whatever you've been wanting to say since that night?”

“How could you DO THIS, Jeremy? You were supposed to be the smart one. You think things through, you don't pull stupid stunts. You were supposed to keep your brother in line, help him make good decisions. And you just let him go- you let him get in that car . . . and . . .”

“He got in that car, Dad. Tucker decided to leave, and Tucker got into that crash. Not me. I didn't do anything!”

“EXACTLY. You didn't DO ANYTHING. You never do anything, Jeremy and maybe if you did your brother would still be alive.”

“When did that become my responsibility?” Jeremy's voice cracked. He couldn't believe this was happening.

“Your brother wasn't like you. He was irrational and free spirited. Tucker didn't think about the consequences of his actions. That was supposed to be your job, Jeremy. Tucker did stuff like this. But you? I expected more from you.” His father was breathing heavy, face red.

Jeremy was crying freely now. He tried to wipe the tears away. Harris boys don't cry.

“I tried to stop him, Dad. He didn't want to listen. If I had known- don't you think I wish things were different...”

“I don't care what you want! That doesn't matter now, does it? Tucker spent his entire life looking out for you. Always worrying about you, always trying to keep you safe. This was your one chance to repay the favor. The one time you were supposed to look out for him instead. And you failed. You failed him, Jeremy.”

Jeremy felt like Tucker was dying all over again.

“This isn't my fault.” He wished he believed it.

“Isn't it?” His dad gave him one more hurtful look and left the room. Jeremy stayed there for a very long time. He somehow ended up curled in a ball on Tucker's threadbare rug. How was it that he was the surviving brother? Sobs tore through him. He knew his dad must be able to hear him, but he didn't come back into the room. Jeremy wasn't suited for life

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without his brother. He wanted nothing more than to be wherever Tucker was. His dad knew the truth. It was Jeremy's fault. Tucker and Avery, the lost look in his mother's eyes and the lonely girl at the cemetery. His fault, his fault, his fault. His parents buried the wrong son. Jeremy closed his eyes, praying angels would come and take him away. They could switch places. Or at least they would be together. No one came to get him, though. He was very much alone.

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CHAPTER 13: REGAN

Warm sunlight streams through the sky window, leaving patches on the hardwood. Regan's sitting cross-legged on the attic floor, eating applesauce with a stranger's child. Perhaps they couldn't really be considered strangers. The kid's mom did book club with her mom. Somehow Regan's mother had heard she needed a babysitter for a chatty blonde toddler. Apparently Regan was the only 15-25 year old girl they knew with nothing better to do. Regan wasn't qualified to take care of a child, even on her best day. Kids made her nervous when they cried. Her mom wanted her to do something productive with her time. She wondered how many lies she told to Mrs. Grimley. She probably told her Regan had a big heart and loved kids, or some nonsense. It had been two miserable hours so far. The OCD mother told Regan that Millie had to eat dinner at precisely 5:45 and was allowed absolutely no snacks beforehand. Regan was to wash her hands every time she touched her cell phone, because she wouldn't believe the germs on that thing. She was under no circumstance to take Millie outside (she might let her get kidnapped from the back yard), or turn on the television (it might melt the child's brain). Millie had told Regan she was bad at Chutes and Ladders, didn't do the voices right when she read stories out loud, and looked like Grumpy from Snow White. Regan had finally given the brat applesauce to shut her up, hence breaking the "no snacks" rule.

Splat. Millie dropped a spoonful of applesauce on the floor.

"Oops," she giggled, "napkin!!"

Regan looked at her incredulously. Shouldn't the kid be able to clean up after herself by now? Grumbling, Regan got up to find a tissue, only to turn around and find Millie scooping the applesauce off the floor and eating it from her fingers.

"There are germs on the floor. You'll get sick doing that."

"Nope, I don't get sick. You're wrong."

"You're going to get sick and die and then you're mom's going to have to pick out a baby-sized coffin for your funeral."

Millie blinked a couple of times. "You're almonds."

"What?"

"Almonds. It means you're nuts."

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Regan wondered how much trouble she'd get in abandoning a child alone in the house. She dug her fingernails into her palms. Regan turned the TV on and plopped the kid down in front of it before going downstairs looking for air that didn't make her feel dizzy. She hoped the Grimleys fired her.

Mae thought that Regan was making a mistake. It was too soon for a night out with the girls, the same girls Regan had been griping about at the wake. Regan couldn't sit at home in her pajamas one more day. She couldn't have one more slow and sad conversation with her mom, who spoke in fragile whispers as though loud words would cut through Regan's skin, or Mae whose eyes were far away and afraid. Regan had called up some of their friends and told them she needed to do something fun. They all made sympathetic noises and promised a girls night would help her get her mind off of things. Like she was stressed out over finals, or upset about a boy who wasn't texting her back. It was that or listening to the philosophy of a three-year-old.

Mae was staying home with Chris. She hadn't been out in a while. Chris hated to dance, and apparently didn't think Mae could be on her own with the wicked influence of Regan and Avery. Regan wondered if he was glad Avery was gone- Mae was all his now. Regan thought that Mae was making a mistake. But neither girl was apt to listen to the other.

Somehow Regan found herself in an 18+ dive bar with her hand pressed against a stucco wall. The paint was peeling- beige slathered over dark gray. Its prickly surface dug uncomfortably into Regan's hand, but she needed it to hold herself steady, remind herself where she was. Jamie had insisted Regan borrow her new dress, black and too tight around the middle. Being in someone else's clothes made her skin crawl. The music was too loud and she didn't know the song the DJ was pumping through the speakers, but everyone was moving their bodies as though their lives depended on it. Either Regan was pathetically out of the popular music loop, or they were all pretending to be excited over the mediocre beat. The DJ keeps playing the song because he thinks everyone knows the words, but really they're all just moving their mouths and mumbling drink nonsense in each other's ears. Regan keeps her hand on the stucco wall. Digging it in until the peeling paint breaks skin, reminding her that Avery isn't here.

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Regan's friends had followed the tide to the center of the dance floor, but Regan was floating along the edge. The body heat of too many people was making her heart pound. People brushing past her made her feel like she was wearing someone else's skin. She clenched the hem of her dress, resisting the urge to scratch at the dirt they were leaving on her skin until she reached the bone. Her heel kept getting stuck in the sticky residue on the floor. Someone smelled like cigarette smoke. The peeling paint just looked dirty. It didn't look worth a \$5 cover. None of this was worth their time. Regan was here to feel alive, but she felt as empty as ever. There was something lonely about being the saddest girl in the room.

Kate was standing in front of her now, some boy trailing her movements.

"Are you having fun, Regan?" She could only grit her teeth and nod. "Are you sure? Tonight is about you! If you aren't having fun, we can go somewhere else!"

Regan wanted to go to Avery's house and sit in her bed like they used to when they had sleepovers. She wanted to curl up in a blanket that smelled like her best friend, in a place where she felt safe.

"I am having fun. We don't have to leave."

Kate smiled with relief. "Oh, great, I'm so glad! Anna, we can stay!" Relieved Regan wasn't about to ruin their trip, not relieved she was ok.

"Regan, you're having fun then? Great, we'd all been worried about you. You've been so quiet! Come dance."

Anna danced over to them, beckoning Regan to join them. Another forced smile that was really more like a snarl.

"I'm fine right here- I have the spins."

The room did seem to be spinning. But Regan has only drunk one beer. The rest she poured out on the pavement while the girls weren't looking because the cheap beer on everyone's breath was making her stomach churn.

She watched Kate exchange numbers with that boy as if it was the most important thing in the world. Didn't they know- that none of it mattered? She almost felt bad for them. The heat of so many moving bodies was sickening, and yet Regan couldn't help but feel like it was all empty and cold. If this didn't matter, what did? She didn't like where she was, and she'd lost where she'd been. Her friends were flirting and laughing and there was a circle of

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space slowly growing around Regan. There must be a wild look on her face- like a homeless child- scaring people away. Anna was making eye contact with some guy who looked just like all the other guys on the floor.

“Should I go talk to him? Should I tell him my name?” Anna whispered in Regan’s ear. Regan wasn’t sure what to say. “What would you do?”

Nothing. I don’t do anything anymore. I could be staring into the eyes of the love of my life and I wouldn’t say a thing. But that’s just me. Do what makes you happy.

Regan wondered what she would have done before she shattered. She couldn’t remember. Anna shoved the rest of her drink into Regan’s hand and gravitated towards the boy, hoping he’d ask her to dance. Regan noticed a well-dressed boy leaning up against a pillar, staring at her. Did he think she was pretty, or did he just have a thing for girls with red hair? Would he be disappointed when the lights came on and he saw the muddy brown mixed in with copper strands? In another life, Regan was certain he’d be just her type. Too clean cut for Avery, too dangerous for Mae. She’d have smiled and he’d have loved her for the night.

The DJ played a raunchy song and everyone shrieked and wriggled their bodies. They played this song a half hour ago but no one seemed to remember. Avery loved this song. Regan could see her in her mind’s eye swaying from side to side with a vodka soda in her hand. Regan finished the glass in her hand. It tasted like lighter fluid. Someone bumped into her, a warm body pressing into her side and splashing a drink over her arm and shoulder. The sudden rush of warmth and liquid made her think of sticky blood running down her arm. The person apologized but she could hardly hear. Suddenly the flashing lights looked just like a headlight, blinding her, coming too close. The thump from the speakers matched her heartbeat, pounding too fast, right out of her chest.

The boy she noticed before was there suddenly, holding onto her arm.

“You alright?” He asked, shooing away whoever had bumped into her. “You wanna dance?”

Regan’s throat felt too tight to answer as she felt herself being pulled onto the dance floor. He moved closer, whispering nonsense in her ear. Regan didn’t know what to say, she pursed her lips and tried to let the boy guide her towards the rhythm. She used to be good at this. Now she felt like she had hollow limbs and plastic skin. The boy gave her an odd look-

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there was something wrong with her. This wasn't what he expected. She wondered if she should apologize for the distant look on her eyes. Then she remembered she hadn't wanted to dance in the first place. Maybe she didn't owe him an apology, or anything else. Mae would apologize, she was always apologizing. Regan was wondering now if part of the problem was that she was always saying sorry for needless guilt. Regan looked around at all the happy sweaty people, dancing with humans of flesh and blood. Regan was waltzing with the Grim Reaper. Kate shot her a thumbs up and handed her another drink. One song blurred into the next and Regan got lost in the commotion, her mind flying out of the bar and over the small town, hovering over the bed Avery should be sleeping in and landing in the cemetery where she rested. She was shocked awake when the curly haired boy pressed his lips against her. Regan panicked.

Do I taste like a graveyard? What does he think? More importantly, what do I think?

Regan turned her head away, feeling sick and angry. Was she angry at the DJ or the boy, or at herself for not speaking up? She angled away from the boy and to her relief he didn't kiss her again. She probably felt too cold for his taste. Perhaps he could feel the venom boiling at the back of her throat. Regan's thought strayed again to Mae. She wondered if she ever felt angry when Chris pulled her closer. She should scream. She should leave.

Regan could practically hear Avery in her ear hissing about what the girls deserved. She was shocked by the realization that she didn't have to stay. Not on the dance floor, not with this boy, not in this dingy bar. She turned on her heels and walked away, pushing desperately through the crowds of people. This time she didn't even think to apologize. The world was spinning on its axis when she finally burst through the door, the fresh air hitting her lungs too fast. She made it two steps before bending over and throwing up in the gutter even though on a good night she could house an entire bottle of rum. She felt better when she stood up; cleansed.

She didn't belong here. She pulled out her phone and clumsily called for an Uber, setting the address to Mae's house instead of her own. If Regan had made a mistake, then certainly so had Mae.

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After a quiet car ride in the backseat of a stranger's Escalade, Regan found herself outside Mae's house. She grit her teeth when she saw Chris's car in the driveway. Regan banged on the front door until a sleepy looking Mae opened the door.

"Rae, whassamatter?" Mae mumbled through a yawn.

"We need to talk."

"Can we talk in the morning?"

Regan gripped Mae's arm and pulled her over to the couch, making the plastic sofa protector groan loudly. Mae looked at her, sleepy and confused, waiting for Regan to figure out what she wanted to say. There were too many words floating around her head, filling it up and spilling over into her throat. She wanted to pluck the perfect words, the ones that would make her listen but not scare her away. Maybe that's why no previous interventions had worked. Avery's words were too strong, and Regan's never strong enough. She had a feeling she wouldn't get many more chances at this.

Regan opened her mouth and the words spilled out; stories and fears and advice tumbling from her mind and getting tangled on her tongue; filling the room and hanging in the air between them. Regan told her about the boy at the bar who wanted too much, about the monsters in her nightmares. She told Mae that when Chris says her name it sounds heavy, and when Mae says his name it sounds sharp. Regan told her that Chris should say her name like it's his favorite song. That Mae gives him the same look she gave Avery's grave the day they all said goodbye. That Regan watches Mae go still and empty whenever he give a command, and every time it reminds her of the way Avery laid too pale and quiet in her coffin. Regan told her about the blood on the pavement, and that she can't imagine this will end in anything other than blood. High on alcohol and adrenalin and the rush of being finally free, Regan told her everything. When she stopped her insides felt scrubbed clean.

For a moment, the words hung stagnant in the air while the girls stared at each other. Then Mae started to speak and the words recharged, flying about the room and bouncing off the walls.

"You don't even know him, Regan", and "he's so much sweeter when you guys aren't around" turned into "I know he scares you" and "is that really how I look at him?" Trembling, stalling and stuttering, Mae worked through what Regan was telling her.

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“But I can’t just leave him, Regan. I *can’t!*” Mae said wildly as her voice rose.

She tangled her fingers in her hair, looking around the room. Regan felt vaguely worried Chris was going to wake up. Then she hoped he would, so she could tell him off herself.

“Why, Mae? Wouldn’t you be happier if you were free?”

“But he loves me.”

“He’s trying to suffocate you. His hold on you is too tight. That’s not love, that’s...”

“Don’t.”

“You don’t need him to love you. I love you. Remember how it felt at Avery’s wake. How lost we were. How sad. How much better we felt when we were together. If we can get through that, we can get through this.”

“I can’t leave him, though. You don’t understand... even if I want to I can’t.”

“You can. I’ll help you, I promise. I need you to trust me on this, Mae. After everything we lost I can’t lose you, too.”

“You’re scaring me, Regan.”

“I don’t think I’m the thing you’re scared of. Just think about what I said. Please”

They were quiet for a long time after that. Regan didn’t know who fell asleep first, but she woke up feeling hopeful and brave. Until she heard his voice calling Mae’s name. Mae was sleeping beside her on the couch, looking more peaceful than she had in a very long time. Regan got up quietly, careful not to jostle her, and walked into the kitchen. She did everything she could to hide the hate on her face, but wasn’t quite sure she succeeded.

“Mae’s sleeping. We were up late talking, so she’d tired.”

Chris gave her a disgusted look. Maybe because he thought she was a crazy person for barging in in the middle of the night and, or because he thought he was too good to associate with someone who went to 18+ dive bars and slept in skinny jeans.

“You’re the one who looks tired. You should go home. I’m going to wake Mae up.”

“Can’t you just let her rest?” Regan snapped. “We haven’t had it easy lately, in case you didn’t notice.”

“Mae’s fine. She’s coping perfectly well. Just because you’re losing it doesn’t mean Mae is too.”

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It took all of Regan's willpower not to growl at him.

"I don't care what you think of me, Chris. But I do care about my best friend. Trust me when I say that you are the worst thing for her right now."

Chris's eyes grew dark. Regan felt a hint of what Mae must feel, the reason she insists she can't leave him.

"How about you mind your own business, Regan. This isn't something you want to get involved in. Trust *me*."

"I'm not Mae. You can't tell me what to do. I see right through you, I hope you realize that. You want to seem like the nice guy, the good boyfriend. But none of that's real, is it? Truth is, you're one of the worst people I've ever met."

Chris was quiet for a moment, visibly trying to reign in his anger as a vein in his neck pulsed.

"You're upset. About Avery. You're afraid that Mae will choose me over you, and then you'll really be alone. I can't blame you, Regan. I mean, why would Mae pick you? You were psycho even before Avery died."

In another life, Regan might have believed him. She might have conceded defeat, wondering why anyone *would* choose her. But she had seen hell, and not even the devil could scare her now.

"Who do you think you are? Who gave you the right to tell me how I feel? You've never cared about Mae! You're controlling, and cruel. You don't love her, you love the power you feel you have over her!"

"Lower your voice. You sound crazy."

"YOU'RE the crazy one! My best friend died, what's your excuse?"

"My God, Regan, give it a rest. No one cares any more. Avery was a bitch any way."

"How dare you. How *dare*... you didn't like Avery because she told the truth. Told Mae that you're a controlling psychopath. Told everyone we met that she hated your guts. That you think you can just do whatever you want. Guess what Chris, you're not a god. You're not nearly as perfect as you think you are. You're pathetic and weak and you make yourself feel good by putting people down."

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“She made everyone hate me? Guess you two were so wrapped up in each other you couldn’t see the truth. You’re the ones everyone hated. You think you only had each other because you were too good for anyone else? More like no one could stand you. Always acting like you were the center of the universe. I’m pathetic, Regan? You aren’t even a real person. You’re a cheap imitation of your dead best friend. Even Mae saw it. I was there for her when you two were leaving her out. And now she’s stuck with you because she feels bad. We’d all be better off if you’d just gone ahead and died in that crash too.”

An ear shattering silence followed.

“Guys? What’s going on in here?” Mae was standing in the kitchen doorway. Perfect timing, because Regan was about to strangle her boyfriend.

Chris’s mannerisms changed so fast Regan was frightened. He looked suddenly relaxed and warm- a drastic change from the way he’d been towering over Regan moments before. “Babe, you’re up. Sorry about the noise. See Regan, I said you were going to wake her.”

Regan wanted to claw his eyes out. She might have tried, if Mae didn’t look so angry. She decided to let her take this one.

“Why are you yelling at Regan?”

The fake smile looked frighteningly believable now.

“I wasn’t yelling at her, was I Rae? We were just talking through a difference of opinion. You look tired, did Regan keep you up all night? Go get changed, I’ll take you out to brunch.”

Mae wasn’t budging. “And what was that you said about Avery?”

It was sweetly satisfying when Chris’s smile finally faltered.

“I... I didn’t mean that, babe. You know I feel awful about Avery. Regan, she just- she was acting ridiculous. She made me say something I didn’t mean.”

This was usual for him. Regan had heard him blame his words and actions on Mae one hundred times. Everything he did wrong was either for her or because of her. Everything he did right was because he is a god among men. It wasn’t going to fly this time. Not with Regan and Mae finally on the same side.

“You need to leave.”

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Chris stared at Mae like he couldn't believe his eyes. Like he didn't even recognize her. Regan saw the strongest part of Mae finally shining through again.

"Baby, please. Don't be silly, that's not what you want."

"*Enough.* I've had a year of you telling me what to do. Making me put you before my friends. Believing everything you said even though none of it was true." She looked flustered now, talking faster and angrily shaking tears out of her eyes. "But this. I won't have it, Chris. I won't let you talk about my friends that way. I want you gone, and I don't want you coming back."

"Baby, you're not thinking straight. You can't mean this. You need me. And I need you. I don't know what I'll do without you..." His rapidly changing emotions were making Regan's pounding head spin around and around.

Mae put up a hand to stop him. "They were right. They were right all along. Get out."

"Mae, baby-"

"OUT." Mae turned on her heel and stormed up the stairs, not waiting for a response. Regan turned to Chris with a triumphant smile. Her joy was short lived.

"This is all your fault."

There was an anger in his eyes so wild Regan shrank back, certain he was about to hit her. Instead he leaned in close, hissing in her ear, "Avery got hers, you're going to get yours."

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CHAPTER 14: JEREMY

Jeremy stared into the mirror above the bathroom sink. His face was swollen and flushed, tears flowing freely out of his red and swollen eyes. He had never looked more like himself. He gripped either side of the sink, tapping his fingers against the porcelain. He wondered if this was the bravest thing he had ever done, or the most cowardly. Jeremy had never been brave like Tucker, but he had never felt so afraid.

His head had felt hazy since his fight with his father. Jeremy realized that he'd been in a fog since the night Tucker died. Like he was standing too still while the world around him shook and shattered. Maybe he'd felt that way before his brother died as well. Staring at his reflection, Jeremy felt wide awake for the first time in too long. The house was empty and quiet. Jeremy felt like it was holding its breath, waiting to see what he would do. Jeremy didn't take action. He never said anything definitive, could never take a stand. He watched the people around him move while he did nothing. Tucker had exploded his world in one catastrophic action, and Jeremy had done nothing. Maybe this wasn't what his father had meant. But at least he was finally doing something.

He'd heard that sometimes people put their lives together before they end them- tie up loose ends, make phone calls, clean their rooms. Sometimes they'd make a drastic change, like cutting off all of their hair or donating everything they own. Lots of people wrote letters. Jeremy had his miserable reflection and a bottle of pills on the counter. That felt like enough preparation for him. His heart was pounding so fast he wondered if he would die before he got the bottle open. If only he were so lucky.

His sweaty hands fumbled with the child safe lid. His parents had child proofed the house when they were young. Kept them away from electrical outlets, hot stoves, poisons of any kind. It hadn't done much good in keeping their children safe. The top screwed off- pills hit the counter- gathered up in Jeremy's sweaty palm- crammed down his constricted throat. Jeremy used his hand to spoon water from the faucet into his mouth, choking down the pills. He hadn't been sure how much to take, so he just grabbed a handful. Maybe he should have done some research- it wasn't like him not to. He looked in the mirror again, feeling nauseous this time. He decided he actually didn't look like himself at all. He didn't even know the person looking back at him. His stomach constricted frantically.

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And then came the crash. A loud noise from just outside the bathroom door, like the house had finally released the breath it was holding in. Jeremy had been so focused that he leapt back at the noise, tangling in the shower curtain. He cursed under his breath. He reached his hand out to open the door before pausing, his hand hovering just above the doorknob. He realized that it didn't matter what the noise was- not to him, anyway. Everything suddenly seemed very final. His mind was so scattered it was hard to form a coherent thought. He wasn't sure why, but he opened the door. Maybe to make sure his parents weren't home. Maybe if they were being robbed he'd have one fight left in him- that seemed like a better way to go out, anyway.

Whatever he was expecting, it wasn't what he got. His mother's favorite lamp had been knocked over, and lay in pieces on the floor. That explained the crash. But it was the baseball laying at Jeremy's feet that captured his attention. Looking at it he knew exactly how the red stitches would feel when he ran his thumb over them, how nicely it would fit in his palm. He could hear Tucker's laugh, floating through the window just like the baseball had.

"Watch your form, Jer! Bend your elbow, there you go."

Jeremy had always been rotten at baseball. When he was little he would run from the ball, convinced that it was going to break his nose. Of course, Tucker never threw it at his face. He should have trusted him more. Tucker had perfect aim. He liked to show off with the rest of his buddies from the team. He could hit a bird's nest out of a tree, or a bottle off the top of a wooden fence. He could throw a baseball through an open window and knock over a lamp, if he felt inclined to do so.

Jeremy practically tripped over his own feet running to the open window. He cursed again when he stepped on the forgotten glass on the floor. He gingerly limped the rest of the way to the window, leaving bloody footprints behind him. Jeremy stuck his head out the window, looking... for what? His brother? It didn't make any sense, but he called for Tucker anyway. Just like he always did when he was afraid. Jeremy listened for a response. He heard a car alarm, a little girl crying, wind chimes. But no one answered his cry. He limped back at the baseball on the ground, and wondered if that was his answer. It seemed to be a good one. And he knew exactly what it was saying.

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He bent down slowly, picking the baseball up off the floor. His head was spinning now. In his mind's eye he vividly saw the day the town team Tucker pitched for won the regional championship. Jeremy couldn't have been more than 10 at the time. The whole team lifted Tucker up on their shoulders. Their father looked so proud. "Good job, Tuck," Jeremy had said shyly.

"What's the matter, bud? Today's for celebrating!" Tucker asked him, ruffling his hair.

"Nothing! It's just... you're the best baseball player in New Hampshire, I think! And I'm... well I'm not very good at all."

"Aw, don't be jealous, little bro!"

"I'm not jealous! Honest!" And he really hadn't been- he was happy for his brother. "I just want to be like you, is all."

Tucker let out a howl of laughter at that one. "You want to be like me? Jeremy, you're smarter than most of the kids in my class. You know more about science than my science teacher. Why would you want to be like me, when anyone who knows you wants to be like you?"

Jeremy had been shocked in that moment. He had never for a second considered people being jealous of him. Though admittedly he had a telescope that allowed him to see Jupiter on a good day, and that was pretty cool. "But Tucker... you're the best! You're the coolest guy on the team!"

Tucker shrugged nonchalantly. "Yeah, but you're you. And I think that's pretty cool too. Besides, when you're a doctor or something you're going to be the one making the big bucks."

So much had changed that day. Knowing that Tucker thought so highly of him changed the way Jeremy thought of himself. He had started answering more questions in class, even talking more to the other kids. Tucker knew all sorts of things, so if he thought Jeremy was cool there must be something to it. Though Jeremy had never become a social butterfly, he had started taking pride in who he was.

Something was changing again. Jeremy's head was really spinning now. Tucker thought he was going places. Tucker was certain that he was going to succeed.

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“When you’re a doctor. We’ll have to do great things for the both of them.”

He knew what Tucker had wanted for himself, lots of things he would never have now. He also knew what Tucker wanted for Jeremy. He couldn’t become a doctor if he was dead. Jeremy clutched the baseball tighter and spun around towards the bathroom. He somehow ended up on his hands and knees, dragging himself along the linoleum. With his head over the toilet bowl he shoved his free hand as far down his throat as he could, hitting the uvula with the back of his knuckles. Nothing happened. Terrified, Jeremy wondered if it wasn’t going to work. His mother was going to walk through the front door and find her favorite lamp shattered to pieces and her final son crumpled on the bathroom floor. He pushed his fist further down his throat in one last desperate gasp for life. And finally there it was, the glorious pull in his stomach that told him the pills were coming back up.

When Jeremy was finished he hung let himself slide to the ground. He felt exhausted, but purified. He was truly awake now. Awake and alive, just like Tucker would have wanted. He would have to make things right with his father eventually. Have to tell his mom what just happened. Maybe he should start talking to the kids at school again, answering teacher’s questions. He would leave for college in the fall. Join the astronomy club, hang out with his roommate, talk to a pretty girl. Until then, maybe he would take his dad’s Toyota for a drive to clear his head. Down the backroads and past the big cornfields he and Tucker used to chase each other through. And after that, he would work on doing great things.

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CHAPTER 15: REGAN

Millie wouldn't go to bed. The baseball incident had her deeply troubled, and she'd been off all night. Regan was cursing herself for taking Millie for a walk in the first place. She felt trapped in that big house, so she found the nearest outdoor toy she could find and took Millie for a stroll to the suburbs. That outdoor toy happened to be a baseball, which Millie had thrown right through the open window to a little white house. They had heard a crash, and while Regan knew that she should probably go to the house and offer to pay for any damages, she hadn't felt up to the confrontation. So she'd taken Millie's hand and ran, while the little girl cried the entire way home.

Now it was 8:45, way past bedtime, and Regan was too exhausted to be dealing with this. She simply didn't have it in her to say "Millie, let's get your pajama's on!" one more time. The teary eyed little girl was overtired at this point. She'd been crying for 20 minutes now, and Regan was close to tears herself. She wished she could leave the house and the wailing child, walk into the night and not come back to this stifling little house. Regan went to the kitchen to fill Millie's sippy cup with water (*ice* water because she couldn't go to bed with lukewarm water) when she heard a knock on the door. Regan froze. Mr. and Mrs. Grimley always came home through the garage. Besides, they weren't due back for hours. The knocking got louder and more insistent. Regan rushed to the living room, noticing that Millie had stopped crying. She was staring at the front door with wide eyes. They both stood like statues, the banging at the door reverberating through them. Then he called her name.

"REGAN."

Chris had come to find her, just like she knew he would. Regan felt something inside of her switch. She moved into action, swiping little Millie up in her arms. She ran into the kitchen, locking the deadbolt on the side door. Regan rushed past the center island, and then paused. She took a split second to think before switching Millie's weight to her left arm and wrenching open the drawer that held cooking utensils. She rifled past ladles and the arms to a blender, serving spoons clanging against each other. She finally found the black handle to the long carving knife she had once watched Mr. Grimley use to mutilate a pig's carcass.

Regan gripped the knife tightly in her hand and flew up the staircase, holding Millie tight to her body. She was careful not to fall, but wanted to put as much distance between her

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and the beast on the other side of the big white door as possible. He was yelling still, his words getting louder and more frantic.

“Open the damn DOOR, Regan!!”

She shouldn't be surprised. It was always going to come to this. Mae had no idea, but Regan should have known it. Avery probably did. Regan was taking the stairs two at a time. “What's happening?” Millie whined, twisting her little body so she could get a proper look at Regan's face. Her shifting weight sent Regan lurching forward. She threw her hand up to grab the step above her, successfully preventing what would probably be a broken nose. Too late she remembered the carving knife gripped in her hand. She saw blood gathering in a puddle on the step, and slowly rolling down the stairs in ugly red streaks. Regan and Millie stared at each other for a split second, Regan's surprise echoed in Millie's eyes. Then the pain came. Regan bit back a swore as she straightened herself the best she could, considering the gash the knife had opened in her left leg.

Regan bit back her howl of pain. She didn't want to do this. There was warm blood dripping down the outside of her jeans, and she was panting with the effort it took to stand. She was shocked by the amount of blood she had seen this summer. Blood on a leather seat, blood soaked shards of glass, blood in pools on black pavement, blood smeared on a hospital wall. Now there was blood on the banister and droplets dripping down the staircase. She wanted to give up. Put down the knife and the child, open the front door and tell him she just didn't care what happened next. She wanted Avery to be there, to handle the situation for her. She would have known exactly what to do.

The trembling child in her arms gave her neck a little squeeze. Regan gave a start, almost having forgotten she was there. Millie gave her an imploring look. She stayed quiet this time, but her eyes seemed to demand both answers and action. Regan leaned heavily against the wall, and heaved herself and Millie up to the next step, favoring her uninjured leg. Despite the overwhelming desire to quit, she felt a surprisingly strong need to protect the precocious child in her arms. One step, then the other. Regan reached the landing and let out a shaky sigh of relief. Far from safe, as least she wasn't on the edge of tumbling down the stairs. The idea of having to make the entire climb again was enough to make her good leg go weak.

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Her relief was short lived. She could hear him hammering at the door, even from here.

“You can’t hide from me, Regan. You can’t *hide*.”

His voice had become manic. The man was unhinged. A bolt of adrenaline pushed Regan forward, stumbling into the master bedroom. She dropped Millie unceremoniously onto the floor, turning around to slam the door shut. She realized her hands were shaking as she turned the lock, and pressed both of her hands palms down on the door, bowing her head and taking deep breaths to settle herself.

“Ok. Ok, here’s what we’re going to do.”

Avery would have a plan, Avery always had a plan. Regan wracked her brain, all of her thoughts becoming jumbled together. Her mind had decided to go off road, bringing her over twists and bumps, holding on for dear life. Help. Regan needed help, and Avery wasn’t there to give it. It was up to Regan now. She had never felt more alone in her life.

“...what are we going to do?” Millie was giving her an incredulous look.

Regan took a second to appreciate the fact that incredulous was a ridiculous expression for a four year old to wear. In her rush, Regan had left her cell phone downstairs. It had probably slipped between the couch cushions while Millie was jumping about as Regan tried to read her a bedtime story. Regan wracked her brain. She could vaguely remember a landline ringing once while she was babysitting. She had been standing at the kitchen island eating mint chocolate chip out of the carton, while Millie brushed a Barbie’s hair. She remembered thinking how strange it was that the Grimleys still had a landline, deciding to let the machine pick up, and never paying mind to the phone again. But if they had a landline in the kitchen, they should have one upstairs as well.

“Millie, sweetheart, do you know where Mommy and Daddy keep their phone?”

“Their pockets.”

“Yes, you’re right. Their cell phones are in their pockets. But what about a house phone? One with a cord, maybe?”

Millie was giving her a blank look, and Regan was trying very hard to stay composed. Looking around wildly, Regan saw the empty base for a cordless phone on the bedside table. This time Regan didn’t even bother trying to hold back her loud swear. She started flying about the otherwise spotless room, tearing through dresser drawers and knocking over picture

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frames looking for the missing phone. She moved as fast as she could with her slashed leg, like a lopsided tornado. Blood on the beige carpet, blood on the mint green duvet. She was fairly certain that if she survived this, the Grimleys were going to fire her.

Millie was starting to cry. Quietly, for now. But the last thing Regan needed was her loud wailing. Regan brought her hands to the top of her head, tugging at the roots of her hair. She closed her eyes and took a deep, shaky breath to steady herself. First things, first. What would Avery do first? Avery would leave Millie in the bedroom and run downstairs for her cell phone. She wouldn't have tripped running up the stairs, wouldn't have injured herself. And if Chris got in the house when she was downstairs, so be it. She would give him a piece of her mind, put up her dukes or sharpen her knife. She might even open the door and let him in, rearing for a confrontation.

Avery would have underestimated him. She did that, underestimated everyone who wasn't her.

Avery would have gotten herself killed.

Regan reeled as she realize that she actually may be better suited for this situation than Avery would have been. Avery didn't know this house, she didn't know the family and she didn't care about the child. If Avery were her, she might even be looking to Regan for guidance. Regan wished Avery were there to tell her what to do. But maybe it was alright that she wasn't. Maybe Regan could do this on her own.

First things first. She was getting sick of staring at the blood staining her light was skinny jeans. Not to mention the fact that her head was spinning. Regan opened the first drawer she saw, pulling out a white sleepshirt of Mr. Grimley's and wrapping it tightly around her leg. She spoke to Millie as she did so, rambling calming nonsense to keep the child's attention on her. Regan tied a think knot over the wound, because she was pretty sure she'd watched someone do it that was on a survival show on the Discovery Channel. It didn't feel quite right and didn't ease the pain at all, but seemed to staunch the flow of blood. Millie wasn't crying at the moment, merely sniffing and watching Regan work. "I'll get a Band-Aid, that's what Mommy always does," she said as she ran to the adjacent bathroom.

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Regan continued her search for the cordless phone, tearing pillows off the bed and searching the crack between the wooden dresser and the ugly wallpaper. “Regan, do you still need the phone?” Millie chanted from the bathroom. Regan froze in the middle of ransacking the sock drawer, and turned towards the bathroom in disbelief. There Millie was, holding a box of Band-Aids upside down in her left hand, leaving a trail of bandages from the first aid cabinet to the spot she stood in. Dangling from her right hand was the phone, and there was a proud smile dancing around the corners of her mouth.

The brief peace Regan felt settling over her was interrupted by a particularly loud crash from outside. It sounded as though Chris had picked up something heavy and was trying to break through a door or window. Not for the first time, Regan wished she babysat for a family that didn’t have an entire cornfield between themselves and their closest neighbor. Regan snatched the phone from Millie’s soft hand, dialing 911 with shaking fingers.

“911, what is your emergency?”

The crisp voice of the operator on the other end of the line was the most glorious sound Regan had ever heard, even if she was a bit annoyed with the woman for daring to sound so collected at a time like this. The words raced out of Regan’s mouth, stumbling over each other in a dash to come first.

“Miss, slow down. Where are you?”

“25 Ochre Ave, please, he’s trying to get in the house.”

The infuriatingly calm woman, who told Regan her name was Sally or Cindy or something, promised police were on their way. She started asking other questions, which Regan felt too frazzled to answer properly.

“Are all entrances to the house locked?” Suzie asked.

“Yes,” Regan said confidently.

No, a little voice seemed to whisper in her ear. *The garage door. You didn’t lock the garage door.*

The hair on Regan’s arms stood to attention as goosebumps swarmed her skin. It was true. Regan had locked the back door and completely neglected the entrance to the garage. It wouldn’t be easy, but she knew Chris could get in that way if he tried.

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“Wait. No... No there’s another door I didn’t lock... I left it open,” Regan could hardly choke the words out. Stupid girl. Stupid, stupid. There was a brief silence on the other line, as if Sandy needed a moment to let Regan’s foolishness set in properly. Millie was looking at her with wide eyes that seemed to accuse her of something. Regan was going to get this girl killed tonight.

“I’m going downstairs. I’m going to lock the door.”

Samantha seemed to start advising her not to, but Regan had dropped the phone from her ear so she could scoop Millie up. She opened the walk in closet, rushing to the very back. Regan pushed the dress shirts hanging from the lower rack to the side, making a Millie-sized hole. She plopped the child down amongst the clothes, putting the phone in her lap.

“Millie. Sweetheart. I need you to be really brave right now. Do you know what brave meant?” Millie shook her head silently. “Being brave means that you aren’t scared, even when you’re facing something scary. It means you do what you have to do, even if you *are* scared. We both have to be brave right now. Think you can do that for me?”

Millie nodded solemnly.

“Good girl. I need you to stay right here. You have to be very silent, and very still. Or else a bad guy might find you. The good guys are on their way. You just have to wait a little while. The good guys will help us. Until then I need you to stay right here. Can you do that for me?”

Millie shook her head frantically, “No no no don’t leave me Regan. I don’t want to be alone. No no no no.”

“You won’t be alone, sweet girl. There’s a very nice lady on the phone. She works for the good guys! Like a sidekick! She’s going to talk to you until her friends get here, so it’s just like having someone here with you. Can you say hi to the nice lady?”

Millie mumbled a small “hello” into the phone, listening intently to whatever was being said on the other side.

“Great job. Now you just have to stay here. Stay, and talk very quietly to the nice lady. I’ll be right back.”

Regan reached forward impulsively and kissed Millie on the top of the head, which is possibly the first ever show of compassion in their rocky relationship.

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Millie looked at her with startled eyes. To Regan she seemed to be saying “please don’t get me killed.” *I won’t*, Regan made a silent promise. She piled a few sweatshirts on top of Millie and stepped back, making sure Chris wouldn’t be able to see her. Regan closed the closed door and pushed the dresser in front of it. It caused a scraping noise, and dug scratches into the floor. The dresser would keep Millie inside, and hopefully slow Chris down if he made it upstairs. Now all she had to do was pray there wasn’t a fire. For now, she was relatively positive that the threat outside the house surpassed any potential needs to leave the house.

You can do this. The little voice whispered in her ear again.

“You can do this.” Regan repeated out loud, with as much conviction as she could. Regan opened the bedroom door, feeling braver than she had since the night Avery died.

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CHAPTER 16: REGAN

The stairs creaked traitorously as Regan leaned on her uninjured leg. She cursed the noise inwardly as she tiptoed past her blood stains smeared on the wall. She was halfway down the staircase when her nerves threatened to leave her. She planted herself on the step, knees shaking. *Fight or flight*. She could run back up the stairs. Barricade herself in the bedroom and send some prayers up to the sky. The police were on their way, maybe they'd make it in time. Rather, maybe they could have made it if the Grimley family didn't live in the middle of the New Hampshire wilderness. There was no one around to help- some squirrels perhaps, a moose if she was lucky. *Fight or flight*. She could book it to the back door and hope no one grabbed her on the way out. Leave the frightened child locked in the upstairs closet and run as fast as her mangled leg would carry her. Even if there wasn't blood seeping out of the makeshift bandage on her thigh, even if Chris wasn't perfectly capable of catching up with her, Regan couldn't do that. She'd never considered herself particularly brave, but she was braver than that.

Fight or flight. Regan gripped the handle of the carving knife until her knuckles turned white. All she had to do was lock the garage door. Lock the door, and hope he hadn't already found his way inside. *I can be brave*. Regan crept down the remaining stairs, thinking of all the times she had done the same thing at her house in the dead of night. At sixteen years old Avery always had something better than sleeping to do. And it was usually something that would get Regan in trouble with her mom. Regan remembered feeling a similar knot in her stomach as she imagined her mother waking up to catch her. She tried to tell herself that villain in the dark was nothing more than an angry parent. Regan told herself that Avery was waiting for her just outside the door. She had to make it there on her own, but she'd feel brave again when she saw her best friend. Then Regan shuddered, realizing that might be a little too accurate.

Regan knew something was wrong the moment she reached the landing. She had been drinking a glass of water when she first heard the knock on the door. She had put it down on the edge of the counter. The glass was now a pile of broken glass on the floor. She was staring at the puddle of water when a cool draft hit her. Regan leaned her back against the wall, her

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heart threatening to beat right out of her chest. Silently she crept down the hallway, peering around the corner. The door to the garage was swung wide open. He was in the house.

Suddenly every dark corner of the house was harboring a demon. Each shadow was reaching an arm out to grab her. Regan stayed very still, not sure what her next move should be. What she could do to make it out of this alive.

“Regan, that you?” a voice from the living room called. Or was it the dining room?

Regan felt like there were spiders crawling up and down her spine.

“I heard you walking down the stairs. I just want to talk.”

Chris’s voice was low and steady. It was even scarier than when he was yelling. He sounded too calm now. Too calculated. Chris had a plan, and Regan didn’t.

Fortunately, she had always been good at improvising. Across from Regan was a panel of light switches. Kitchen, hallway, living room, dining room. She lurched forward and pulled each switch down in quick succession, plunging the house into darkness. She heard Chris swear. Regan knew this enormous colonial house like the back of her hand. There was a noise to her right that sounded like Chris stubbing his foot. It was just like playing hide and seek with Millie. “Now why did you have to do that, Regan? I meant it when I said I want to talk. You owe me an explanation.”

His voice was definitely coming from the right. Regan moved slowly to the left, keeping her back against the wall.

She moved through the dark kitchen, possible hiding places running through her mind. “There are some questions you have to answer, Regan. Like why you thought you had any right to interfere with my relationship with Mae. Why you have to ruin everything you touch.” He kept trying to bait her as she slid into the dining room and shut the door. There was a slight noise from the adjacent room. Moving as fast as she could without making noise, Regan made her way to the tall cabinet beside the window. It was an antique, so Mrs. Grimley refused to fill it. The empty piece of furniture fit Regan perfectly as she closed herself in.

Regan took a second to gather herself, trying not to let panic set in. She had never been a fan of tight spaces. But being in here was certainly better than being out there. Regan tried to steady the hand holding the knife. If he opened that door, she needed to be ready.

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“You’re only making things worse for yourself, Regan. It’s not too late though, we can still work this out.”

His voice gave him away. Chris was slowly losing his cool, and Regan had to hope he was less dangerous when acting impulsively.

She heard the door to the dining room open slowly. Regan’s heart stopped beating for a fraction of a second. In that moment, everything felt perfectly still. Then her heart started pounding so loudly she was certain Chris would hear it from across the room. It seemed to be trying to beat its way out of her chest- maybe it was trying to run away. Maybe it was telling her she should have run when she had the chance.

“Regan?” His voice was quiet again, almost soothing. “Regan, are you in here? Let me see you. Let’s talk. It’ll be alright.”

She was tempted to come bursting out of the cabinet right then. Whatever Chris had planned for her, it couldn’t possibly be worse than the waiting. He spoke so sweetly it was almost easy to understand why Mae had stayed with him for so long.

“*Regan,*” he called again with a bite in his voice.

Chris was walking across the room, growing closer and closer to Regan’s hiding spot. She tried to steady her erratic breathing as she stood on legs made of marshmallow fluff. It was too dark to see anything clearly from the crack between the cabinet doors. It didn’t matter that she couldn’t see him, or that he had stopped talking. She could sense him, standing there. She imagined him trying to sniff her out like a bloodhound. Regan clasped her free hand over her mouth to muffle the sounds of her breathing. She wondered if this is what it felt like to be in the presence of evil.

Regan had thought she understood evil. She was there on the cursed night Avery was taken from her. She thought she knew destruction, thought she knew hatred when she saw her best friend’s broken body on the pavement. This was different. This was intentional, it was predetermined. This was one human being *trying* to harm another. Before that moment, Regan hadn’t thought it mattered. She hadn’t cared if the guy driving the truck- Tucker, whatever- was trying to hurt anyone or not. Intent didn’t make Avery any less dead. Regan understood the difference now. This wasn’t something Chris had to do. It wasn’t something he was doing by accident, either. He wanted to hurt people. He would kill Regan, and then he would kill

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Mae. She knew it in her bones. There was an evilness radiating out of him, making his intentions more than clear.

He paused in front of the cabinet. Regan could just barely make out his silhouette from where she watched. He turned to face the cabinet, as if he could see her through the wood. Regan wondered wildly if he actually could hear her heart beating, or smell her blood pumping. The door bucked slightly, which meant Chris had grabbed onto the handle. Regan wished she could see him, wished she knew what he was planning. She considered pushing the door open and taking him by surprise, but she didn't know what kind of weapon he might have. She imagined him standing directly across from her, separated only by a piece of antique wood. Regan wondered if his heart was beating as fast as hers. He tugged on the cabinet door enough to open it a fraction of a centimeter.

Both Regan and Chris jumped when the air conditioner turned on in the hallway. Chris shifted away from Regan's hiding spot and towards the noise. She willed him to go, mouthing a silent prayer. When he finally left the room she slumped against the cabinet wall. She hadn't realized how tense she had been until she felt the muscles in her limbs begin to tremble. She wondered how much time had gone by, how far away the police officers were. The call felt like hours ago, though realistically it had probably been more like minutes.

Regan listened for the sound of Chris leaving the room and slowly counted to 10 before cracking open the door and slipping out of the cabinet. She was halfway across the room when she heard another noise. Panicked, she ducked under the large dining table, hoping the long table cloth would keep her hidden. She lay flat on her stomach, watching in horror as his boots stalked towards her. She hadn't realized until then how loud his footsteps were. For someone planning on a home break in, he should have worn quieter shoes. Regan realized how close he was to her. Close enough for her to reach out and slash his leg with the knife. She wondered if that would be enough to take him by surprise and get the upper hand. She freed her arm from underneath her body, reaching forward with the knife. Regan held back a swear as Chris started to move, walking around the table. She listened to his footsteps as he circled the table and opened the dining room door. She strained her ears, but heard nothing but silence.

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Relieved, she let her forehead rest against the smooth wood floor. She assumed Chris had wandered into the kitchen looking for her. It came as a surprise then, when a strong hand wrapped itself around her ankle.

Regan screamed, finger nails scratching at the floor as she was dragged out from under the table. Chris tangled his fingers in the roots of her hair and pulled, lifting her to her feet. Regan's eyes watered at the pain as she clawed at his hand.

"I told you we were going to talk," he growled in her ear.

He pulled her backwards out of the room, maintaining a viscous grip on her hair. Regan was disoriented- everything was happening too fast and she felt utterly powerless. Except, of course, she wasn't. Regan slashed desperately behind her with the knife. She heard a howl of pain and felt warm blood gushing over her hand. He let go of her in shock, reaching up to cradle his face. Regan hoped she had gouged out his eye, but didn't stick around to check. She ran as fast as she could towards the nearest exit, well aware that it was only a matter of time before he began following her. She trusted that for now Millie was safe. It was Regan he wanted.

She raced out the front door. Chris's explosive screams of rage chased her up the long driveway. She had just made it to the street when he caught up with her, grabbing her by the arm. She swung around, knife raised, but this time he was ready. Chris swatted the weapon out of her hand where it skidded into the middle of the road with a clang.

"HELP! SOMEBODY HELP ME!" Regan screamed as she tried to wrench her arm free from his grasp.

There was no one around to hear her. This was a quiet street, surrounded by tall elm trees. There was nothing around for miles, except for nearly identical winding roads. A single street lamp flickered just overhead.

"Help isn't coming, Regan. Who would help you?" He sounded almost mad with rage.

Regan gave a particularly strong tug of her arm, startling Chris and sending them both toppling backwards. Chris landed on top and wrapped both his hands around her neck. Up close she could see that she'd slashed his cheek with the knife. There was blood covering the lower half of his face, and a truly wild look in his eyes. Avery always said Chris was going to snap one day. Regan remembered Mae always being very quiet after the two of them fought.

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She would shake her head when anyone asked what was wrong, while he gave her threatening looks from across the room. Regan understood now that she was terrified of him, and probably had been for a while. Regan wondered if she had ever felt this afraid. Ever looked into Chris's eyes and felt certain that they were the last thing she was ever going to see.

Regan tried to fight him off, scratching at his hands and arms. She tried reaching for the knife, but it was just out of arms reach. Regan dug her nails into the gash on his face. Chris screamed, letting go of her neck just long enough to smack her across the face. Regan's vision started to go black around the edges. The pressure on her windpipes made it so that she couldn't scream, could hardly even breath.

"Look at what you did, Regan. YOU did this. You had to go sticking your nose where it didn't belong."

Regan kicked her feet desperately, panicking as she gasped for air.

"I never wanted to hurt anyone. Now I don't have a choice. You made me do this, Regan."

She was struggling violently now, limited air passing through her lungs.

"You deserve this. It's your fault, your fault."

There wasn't enough oxygen getting to her brain. Everything felt fuzzy. Regan had tried to fight but now it felt like she was flying. She stared up at the flickering street light.

Regan was going to die in the middle of a dark, lonely road. Just like Avery did. The irony might have made her laugh if she were able to breath. She felt an overwhelming sadness for Mae. Regan knew she would have hated to be the only one left behind. Chris's voice faded away until all she could hear was a dull roar, like waves crashing on the shore. This was the time when your life is supposed to flash before your eyes. Instead, Regan found herself remembering the last time she went to church. Her grandmother had dragged her to Sunday morning mass right after the accident for the first time in so many years. There were lots of old ladies in nice cardigans and squirming children hanging off their tired looking parents.

Grandma Rose was convinced quiet prayer and a powerful homily would make Regan OK again. Regan, who was sure to evolve into the family disappointment, decided it couldn't hurt to let Grandma Ro hold onto hope for a little while longer. Regan had sat down in the

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pew only to receive a reproachful look from her grandmother. Regan grumbled under her breath and slid onto the kneeler, bowing her head for obligatory prayer.

Hello... God. Are you there? It's me Margaret. Ha, ha. Just kidding. It's Regan. Obviously. If you really have the power to part the sea and topple mountains then prayers shouldn't need a return address. You know who I am. And you know why I'm here. You know what you did.

Regan had chomped down on the inside of her cheek. Hadn't her mom always told her not to bite the hand that feeds her? Regan always had this problem. A Sunday school teacher once told her that she was a spiteful child.

She had clearly grown into a spiteful adult as well. She took a deep breath and held it until her shins started to ache on the poorly padded kneeler. Still as a statue, Regan tried again.

I need help... or something. I need... I don't know. My grandmother told me that I need Jesus but honestly I'm not sure what you can do for me now. What I need is her and you took her away. I want her back. That's what I want from you. But I doubt you're willing to crack open the Earth and pull Avery out. There are probably rules about that, or something. Didn't stop you from doing it for Lazarus, though. I thought fathers weren't supposed to play favorites.

Regan had clenched her fists until her nails dug crescent moons into her palms. Then she dug a little deeper. She was a bitter girl. Bitter and spiteful. No wonder she wasn't his favorite child.

She had decided that was quite enough prayer for the day. Regan sat and looked around, which only made things worse. Jesus was judging her. He was singling Regan out from every station of the cross. Scolding her as he was whipped and muttering about her under his breath while graciously accepting the crown of thorns. Regan was not gracious in loss.

Bonus: Jesus, larger than life, dangling from a crucifix to remind Regan that she was an ungrateful brat. Her last attempt at prayer ended with her storming from the church and probably narrowly avoiding being smited, and 13 Jesus' were there to remind her of it. Regan didn't rise for communion.

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Now, lying on the cold pavement, Regan stared up at the street lamp. It seemed to be growing brighter. She wondered if Jesus was going to forgive her or not. Regan was confused to notice that there were two lights, not one. And they actually were getting brighter, and closer. She wasn't looking at the streetlight, it was the headlights of a car coming around the bend.

Chris was so consumed in his rage that he didn't even notice the car racing towards them. Instead of being strangled, Regan was going to be crushed by an oncoming car. Regan actually did let out a laugh this time, a tiny, broken noise. She had survived one car wreck only to be killed by another. The noise she made was what got Chris's attention. He, too, saw the headlights, and lurched backwards in a panic. Regan gasped in as much air as her lungs would hold. Nothing had ever tasted so sweet. Panting, Regan turned to face the oncoming car, lifting herself up on her forearms. She tried to stand, but couldn't.

It was all too familiar. The unbidden memory of the accident sprang into Regan's mind for the thousandth time. Sitting in the passenger seat, laughing wildly. Avery wasn't watching the road. She didn't think she would ever falter. That's why she didn't see the car coming. If she'd been paying attention, she would have had enough time to swerve. Instead, Avery was looking at Regan with a grin, wicked humor dancing across her face. The headlights of an oncoming truck reflecting in her baby blue eyes. Now Regan was staring into a set of headlights as well. She realized something that should have been quite obvious, but came as a shock. She didn't want to die. And it had nothing to do with leaving Mae behind, or disappointing her family, or even honoring Avery's memory. Regan wanted to live for herself. She wanted to graduate college and get a job as a fancy personal assistant. She wanted to visit California and get a tattoo. She wanted more sunsets, more midnight swims in the ocean. She wanted back the months she had wasted after the accident wondering why she was still alive. Regan wanted all of these things, but was prepared not to get them.

And then the car swerved. The driver was paying attention in a way Avery hadn't been. They turned the wheel at the last second, tires screeching as they narrowly avoided hitting Regan. The black Toyota never slowed down as it raced away. For a moment she was so shocked that she forgot the reason she was lying in the middle of the road in the first place. Luckily, Chris was even more shocked than she was. He was sitting back on his heels, staring

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at the spot the car had disappeared to. Regan lurched forward with every ounce of energy she could muster. She knocked him backwards, where he hit his head with a dull crack. He let out a moan, seeming dazed. Regan scrambled for the knife, positioning it above Chris as he tried to sit up. She thought about his fingers around her neck and gripped the knife tighter with both hands. Then she remembered what she had learned about evil. Regan thought about what it meant to do harm, and to desire to harm. With more self-control than she ever knew she had, she turned the carving knife around and whacked him hard on the temple. The blow sent him down, alive but hopefully concussed at the very least.

Once Regan was sure Chris was unconscious, she allowed herself to collapse in the grass along the side of the road. Between the nerves and the strangulation, Regan was surprised she hadn't passed out yet. She thought she deserved a rest, considering she was nearly killed twice that night. She closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them hazily, she could have sworn she saw a pretty blonde girl standing over her. Could have sworn she saw her wink. Regan sat up with a jolt and saw that she was surrounded by flashing sirens and emergency personnel. She smiled weakly, glad Avery had waited with her until the ambulance arrived.

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