

HAYLEY GEARHEART

#42

She was found in the car, bullet to the head. That's what the daily news said Monday morning. More importantly, that's what all the students were talking about. It was in every exhale of breath, every wandering eye. Whether discussed in the halls between each passing period, shared whispers at the beginning of class, or notes exchanged during a test, the students found a way to share their theories. Some excused themselves from class, blotting a tissue to their eye, while others were "too distraught" to work. The school felt like a precariously stacked house of cards; any slight, insignificant movement could send it all tumbling down.

Amidst it all was Mrs. Sydney Sterling. Foundation and blush were caked under her eyes, concealing the dark bags underneath, a combination of emotional drainage and lack of sleep. Unlike the rest of the school's population, she heard about the incident shortly after it happened. It came in the form of a phone call to her husband, the boy's assistance basketball coach, at 2 in the morning. At the time, very few

details were confirmed. All they knew was that she was dead.

Hours later, Mrs. Sterling was in the hallway between passing periods, alternating between standing on the tips of her toes to see over the heads of students and talking with her colleagues. No one knew how much she knew, and she was going to keep it that way. It wasn't her business; it wasn't her story to tell.

"I heard that she'd had problems for years," Robert Curran said, standing against the wave of students. His arms were crossed, legs spread in a relatively wide stance given his small, pudgy body. Every few seconds a student would shoot him a dirty look, bothered by the fact that they had to take an extra step to move around the invisible circle created by the small cluster of teachers. "In and out of rehab, severe depression."

Mrs. Sterling shook her head in annoyance at her colleague's ignorance and lack of compassion. Rob caught the look, returning one of question, eyebrows furrowed together, lips pulled down in a frown. Of course Mrs. Sterling knew that the boy's mother had struggled with depression for years, but that didn't warrant gossip to run rampant.

"Well," Jared Hyden started, sticking his head into the middle of the circle. From the gleam in his eye, it was apparent that he thought he was about to impart some particularly juicy gossip to the group at large. "I heard that that Gallagher kid got trashed last night."

"Shh," the young, newly hired Lisa Gipson flailed her arms, successfully distracting the passing students from the other teacher's words.

Personally offended at being interrupted, Jared sulkily sank into his corner, leaning back between the black pillar and wall. The others in the circle chuckled—that was the most animated they had seen the new teacher since a fight broke out in her room the first week of classes. All except Mrs. Sterling, who bit her tongue. She knew for a fact that Blake Gallagher did not go out last night and "get trashed." He was home, as any sensible student would be on a Sunday night,

sitting with his sister.

“I don’t know,” Nathan Potter, one of the history teachers, reasoned with a shrug, watching as the last students straggled into their various classrooms. “It sounds like the kid is better off without her around.”

“That was his *mother*,” Mrs. Sterling snapped. Everyone in the circle stared with wide eyes, shocked at the sudden outburst. Except Robert Curran and Lisa Gipson, who watched on with concern.

Fingernails digging into her fleshy palms, Mrs. Sterling stalked to her classroom. This time, she was the one found blotting her eyes.



“You know he followed her around for hours,” Aaron Sterling said into the darkness.

It was way past the husband’s and wife’s bed time, but neither could sleep. Both were lying in the dark, finally enjoying a quiet moment together. After a long day of classes, practice, the hour drive home, finding something edible (and fulfilling) in the house to eat, taking care of the dogs, and planning out their outfits for the next morning, the two were perfectly content to sit in the dark. But sleep evaded them. Instead, images of blood-splattered leather seats, shattered windows, and the broken-hearted, raven-haired Gallagher kid circulated in each of their minds.

“No,” Sydney breathed, hands coming up to clasp against her aching heart.

“Yeah,” Aaron continued, sounding extremely detached, almost as if he were on autopilot. “Coach talked to Mitchell after practice. He said that Blake knew something was up when his mom left the house, so he followed her. They went around for hours.” Aaron’s voice became thick. “He feels so guilty. He feels like he should’ve followed her for longer. He thinks he could’ve stopped her—.”

He cut off abruptly, clearing his voice loudly, dejectedly.

Sydney was once again amazed at her husband's compassion for those boys. Even though he had only been working with them for a few weeks now, he was so attached already. It didn't matter that he had never met, nor even conversed with, Blake's mom. The young boy was hurting and that was enough to have Aaron concerned.

"Who is he staying with?" Sydney asked, finally finding her voice.

"His grandma," Aaron sighed. "On his mom's side. No one knows where the dad is; he's been out of the picture since he was a kid."

"God," Sydney seethed, banging her fist against the bed. The springs underneath groaned, shooting her hand back up. "That poor boy."

Aaron's hand reached across the bed, covering her tightly balled fist. He squeezed it comfortingly, holding it for a few seconds before turning towards the door. Sydney breathed in slowly, looking up at the ceiling to stop the tears from slipping out the corner of her eyes. It was unfair, just so unbelievably unfair, that a sixteen-year-old was forced to deal with this. At least she had been in her twenties when her older sister killed herself.

Grace, Sydney thought, a fist tightening around her heart. For a moment, she saw her sister's face flash before her eyes. She was immediately brought back to the day she found out, could hear the music playing softly in the background, feel the phone slowly slipping from her grasp. Then she thought of the months that followed, ones that she spent relentlessly beating herself up over not knowing, not seeing the signs, not figuring it out earlier. *I should've known*, she thought, *I should have done something...*

"Honey," Sydney said suddenly, stretching her arm to touch his back. "What if we--"

"No," Aaron cut her off.

"Aaron, you didn't even let me finish."

He turned around, meeting her stare. His eyes were soft

in the glow of the moonlight, looking sad but resolute. For a moment, she was reminded of the first time they were in a classroom together. It was fourteen years ago, when he was just her teaching assistant and she was a new teacher. She had been teaching eleventh grade English for weeks when the principal suggested she get some “muscle” in the room, or at least someone to settle the rowdy ones. Naturally, she adamantly refused. That same day, after receiving a bad grade on an assignment, a student threw a desk at her. Before Aaron could even get across the room, she had the student pinned to the wall. After he was removed from the building, Sydney looked at Aaron, telling him she had it all under control, that it wasn’t the student’s fault, but her own. She should’ve known better than to hand out grades for other students to see, giving them ample opportunity to mock those who did not do well. Hours later, Aaron found her crying over the news that the boy had been expelled. Aaron had looked at her with such admiration for her faith in her students, yet an underlying sense of sadness for her inability to help them all.

“Syd,” Aaron breathed, brushing the loose strands across her face. “We can’t take him in.”



Wednesday morning, there was a collective hush in the small high school.

The day began with a moment of silence, each student, staff, and faculty asked to remember the lost life of an alumni, the lost life of a fellow classmate’s parent. Teachers were informed to allow their students moments to “collect themselves” if they so needed. Students passed solemnly in the hallway, knowing that today, out of all days, was not one for roughhousing and goofing around.

Feeling antsy, agitated, and completely useless during her free period, Mrs. Sterling walked the halls. Not having Aaron in the building, on top of the funeral procession just down the street, was taking its toll on her. The basketball team’s absence

was tangible, especially for Mrs. Sterling. They had all left in support of their fellow teammate.

Turning a corner, Mrs. Sterling came up short. Near the end of the long corridor a locker seemed to have exploded. Various objects were spilling forth across the waxy floor, almost reaching the middle of the hall, and expanding across the base of four lockers. She strode forward purposefully, readying herself to hunt down the student who caused such a mess, when the pile became more distinct.

Tears blurred her vision, turning the rows of red lockers into one giant, rectangular blob. Centered before a singular locker, laid out in mounds, were handwritten letters, unlit candles, tiny toy bears, and plush basketballs.

A small gasp bubbled through Mrs. Sterling's clenched lips, completely overpowering her. She tried to look away, but one note, taped across the middle of the locker, held her.

Inscribed in bright red letters was the simple message: "We are your family."



"How did practice go today, baby?" Sydney asked, eyes constantly scanning the tunnel of light before her.

An utterly defeated, exhausted sigh crackled through the car's speakers, "It was okay. The boys still don't trust Tieman."

"That takes time," she prodded gently, "you said that at the beginning of season. You both knew it wasn't going to be a good first year, especially with a brand-new coaching staff."

"I know," he snapped. Not a second later he mumbled, "I'm sorry," barely registering over the sound of the tires running along the rough road.

Sydney looked at the glowing blue screen on the dashboard, picturing her husband closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose as he tried to calm himself. Just over the hum of the engine, she could hear him breathing. They stayed silent for a moment. Aaron waited for his wife's sarcastic retort or outpouring of sympathy, knowing one or

the other was inevitable. She knew him enough to know that he was only beating himself up or putting on more stress than was needed. Still, both knew that nothing they said would change the other.

“Blake said he wanted to play tomorrow night,” Aaron said a few minutes later.

“Is Coach Tieman going to let him?” Sydney tried to picture herself in a similar situation, wondering what she would do. Unwittingly, she thought of her college volleyball coach asking if she was ready to play a week after her sister’s funeral. She hadn’t played since.

“He’s the best player we have,” Aaron avoided directly answering the question.

“His mother just killed herself,” Sydney exhaled with a laugh of disbelief. She adjusted, straightening in her seat as she pulled into town. “And Blake practically knew it was going to happen.”

“Coach thinks it could be good for him,” Sydney could see in her mind’s eye the slow rise of her husband’s shoulders as he shrugged, showing his indifference. “A way to heal. Can you blame him?”

“What do *you* think?” She countered, disagreeing with Coach Tieman for the first time since he started at the school just a few weeks before.

Sydney pulled into the driveway, stalling as the other end of the line went silent. To her left, the dogs barreled out into the yard, jumping against the fence, begging for attention. For a moment, she thought they had lost connection. Then, in a quiet breath: “I think it’s a shitty situation.”



Friday night the gym was packed. Music blasted through the loudspeaker, every fifth word bleeped out for modesty’s sake. The student section spilled over onto the opposing team’s side, red clashing with purple. On the court, the small cluster of cheerleaders created a tunnel for the players to run

through. This turnout was unusual, given a late Friday night game. Obviously, news had spread quickly that Blake would be playing, making his first appearance in the school since his mother's passing.

Mrs. Sterling sat with Miss Gipson on the second level, behind one of the baskets. Since the young teacher started at Lincoln High School, the two had bonded over their shared love for their students and mutual animosity towards the rest of the staff in the building.

The music changed, signaling the arrival of the home team. Both teachers rose to their feet, clapping with the other fans as the 11 young men of the varsity basketball team ran across the court. Mrs. Sterling scanned the bobbing heads as they each stretched and shot around the arc. Blake's tousled black hair stood out against his teammates' shades of blonde and light brown.

A buzzer went off, signaling the end of the ten minutes allotted for warmups. The student announcer, a scrawny kid with frizzy hair, found his place behind the official bench as the two teams went to their respective sides.

"Good evening and welcome to another night of Lincoln high men's basketball," the commanding voice bounced off the walls. "Before we get started with tonight's game, there are a few announcements..."

Mrs. Sterling tuned out the commentary, using the distraction of the announcements to her benefit. All of the boys, including the coaches, were intensely focused on the official bench, allowing her to scan the line. Under different circumstances, she wouldn't be caught dead looking at the sideline; it was against the rules to make eye contact with Aaron when he coached. Just one of the many quirks that came out when he coached; he was a very superstitious man.

Miss Gipson suddenly nudged her friend, pulling her attention back to the announcements.

"This past week," the announcer went on, voice becoming very somber. "We lost one of our own. Natalie

Gallagher was a former basketball player and Lincoln alum, but most importantly, she was the mother to our very own rising basketball star, Blake Gallagher.”

Mrs. Sterling grasped her friend’s hand, blinking back tears as she made eye contact with Aaron down on the court.

“Tonight, win or lose, this game is dedicated in her honor,” the student announcer finished.

Mrs. Sterling missed the poorly recorded playing of the national anthem, she even missed the reading of the opposing team’s roster, too focused on her husband down below. He was sitting on the bottom row of bleachers, fiddling with the cuff on his pants. To others, it was simply a man smoothing out a wrinkle. But to her, after years of perfecting a system, it held a hidden message, just as most of his movements did on game nights: *watch this*.

The attention was shifted to the home team, each starting player’s name was listed off for all to hear. There was Ian Blanchett who did a running jump to the end of the line of non-starters, meeting the last player, mid-air, in a chest bump. Then there was Mitchell Kingston, Blake’s best friend, who ended his arrival on the court with a little dance, one he did before the start of each game. Mrs. Sterling still found it funny that each of the boys had their own ritual before each game; they were just as superstitious as her husband.

Then a hush ran across the gym as the final name was called: “Blake Gallagher.”

The young boy, with his mopyy mess of black hair and lanky arms, ran through the tunnel of his teammates. At the end of the line, he stopped, looking lost as his head swiveled around the gym. His eyes were bright with anticipation of the game about to begin, but a rising panic was visible as he continued to scan the crowd. A few rows below Mrs. Sterling, a small clump of five people animatedly waved, finally getting Blake’s attention. She recognized one as Blake’s younger sister, who was at every single game.

Mrs. Sterling watched, transfixed with the rest of the

crowd, as he brought his fist to his mouth, kissed it, and pointed it to the sky. Turning around, his new jersey number—42, the one his mother wore for years—flashed for all to see. Then he smiled, settling any trace of unease from his eyes, and Mrs. Sterling realized she would never be as strong as the young man standing in the middle of the court before her.