

LISA AMOWITZ



**B R E A K I N G**

**GLASS**

LISA AMOWITZ



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Spencer Hill Press

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When the girl he loves disappears, a seventeen-year-old tries to call her back from beyond the grave to solve her own murder.

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For my parents, Gene and Sherry, who nurtured the spark. For my children, Benjamin and Rebecca, to  
whom I pass it along, with love.

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# CHAPTER

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## one

*Now (November 17th)*

Outside the dinner theater lobby, the glow of street lamps barely penetrates the thick mist that shrouds the parking lot. It's the kind of night that Jack the Ripper might have prowled the cobblestoned streets of London searching for victims.

In the lobby, fresh from the standing ovation he's received as Tony in our production of *West Side Story*, my best friend Ryan Morgan is surrounded by a crush of people. For two weeks running, his performance has been drawing crowds from all over Westchester County.

I glance around furtively, but no one notices the lighting guy. Truth is, my heart's not in theater. I'm only working weekends to pad my college applications, and my wallet. So, I take a minute to study the latest text from Susannah Durban, Ryan's girlfriend of three years. Heat creeps into my cheeks.

For the past year, Susannah's been inexplicably texting me with YouTube links to her haunting stop-action animations. I watch her body drift across the screen draped with filmy gauze, her dark bronze hair and golden skin amid floating leaves, graveyards, ballet dancers, Indian goddesses, and scattered words in Hebrew and English, most of which make no sense.

But other than telling me the link is private and to keep it our little secret, Susannah never mentions them when I see her. Neither do I.

Yet if I could dive into my iPhone and swim beside her, an exotic fish in her private world, I would do it and never look back.

And Ryan would kill me. Best friends don't want to *do* their best friend's girlfriend. I think that's written somewhere. So is not cheating on your girlfriend. And so is not ratting him out.

I glance behind me. Ryan is intertwined with Claudia Herman, the community college girl who plays Maria. Claudia's hot. And she's slept with our whole track team. I think of Susannah, mercifully out of town on a college visit.

My phone vibrates. Susannah again. This time it's an actual text.

I clench my jaw and look away from Ryan and his latest fling, sworn to silence by the Guy Code of Honor.

Jeremy! guess what. i'm here! got n earlier flight

I peer out into night, then glance at Ryan again. Shit.

Claudia has one leg coiled around Ryan's tall frame, like a boa constrictor. I fumble with my phone. Texting under pressure has never been my strong suit.

Heart pounding, I gulp in air and think of my water bottle, nestled in the glove compartment of my car. I can feel my lips pressed to its cool rim, imagining the warmth of its contents sliding down the back of my throat.

But no. I have to stay sharp. I'm sensible, I tell myself. *Sensible Jeremy Glass*.

Besides, there's no time. Susannah emerges from the parking lot mist carrying a single red rose. A circuit flips on inside me; a familiar volt of current sizzles through my core like heat lightning. I stuff the phone in my pocket and try to position myself to block Ryan from view. My palms are slick. *A*

first, I identify the heaviness behind my eyeballs as guilt. Only as Susannah pushes through the glass doors, droplets beaded on her hair like diamond chips, do I recognize the cold hollow thing that clamped up into my throat for what it really is.

Shame.

Panic cramps my insides. The water bottle beckons.

“Jeremy!” Susannah hugs me, smelling of rain and vanilla. She flashes a smile, her clear eyes bright, but at the temples her deep golden skin is almost transparent, stretched just a bit too tight. And her raincoat hangs loose. “I thought I should be here for the big night, so I booked an earlier flight,” she says. “Surprised?”

“A little. I know Ryan certainly will be.” I’m buzzing like I’ve just downed a fifth of Absolut, the damp ache inside me incinerated to ash. The idiotic smile still frozen on my face, I notice a scarlet string around her wrist. Buying time, I ask, “What’s that?”

Susannah shrugs her bronze curls behind her shoulders. She takes a step closer and tilts her head toward me in a way that causes a shudder to run up my legs.

“It’s a souvenir from the Kabbalah fair I stumbled onto this weekend. Can you believe it?” Susannah gazes at me as if this bit of information should hold some significance. We are both part Jewish, at least in lineage, though Susannah has always been more into the occult. I keep the Magic 8 Ball she gave me for my fifteenth birthday in a place of honor with the first track medal I won. For me, her fascination with the spiritual realm has always added to her mystique and made me want her all the more. “Oh, the trendy spiritual stuff,” I say, stalling for time. “Isn’t Madonna into that?”

Susannah narrows her eyes. My heart stutters. The way she looks at me sometimes, I wonder if she sees through the placid mask I’ve worn all these years. With my hands-on experience, I figure I’m probably a more accomplished actor than Ryan is by now, so I should be able to hide how I really feel.

But Susannah smiles, roots around in her giant handbag, and hands me a pen with a clear top and a little floating carousel horse inside. “Since you made such a stink about Rhode Island having the oldest carousel still in use in America.”

“The Flying Horse Carousel. Wow. Thanks, Suze.” I pocket the pen and wipe the dampness from my palms. “I love it.” I don’t mention that I will probably rearrange my shelves to find a special place for it among the historic relics, personal and otherwise, I collect the way birds gather twigs. My shelves are crammed with artifacts people bring me from their travels: old baseballs, gravestone rubbings, arrowheads, even chunks of brick from buildings where significant events took place.

You don’t have to worry about what’s going to happen with history.

Because it already happened.

Then it dawns on me. I’d been so wrapped up in the details I’d missed the main point. “What happened with your portfolio review at Rhode Island School of Design, Suze? Isn’t that why you were in the first place?”

Susannah looks away. “I can’t afford that place.”

“Can you say *scholarship*? Your art is amazing,” I offer, avoiding mention of her strange but genius animations.

“With my grades?” She smiles and meets my gaze, emotions I can’t read flickering in her green eyes. Her smile falls away. “Besides. I’d never fit in there.”

I reach for her hand. “I thought you said your filthy rich half-brother was going to pay. Suze, you can’t just—” I start to say. Until I remember what’s happening right now, about twenty feet behind us, I’m afraid to look.

“I never went to the interview,” she mutters, sniffing the rose.

“Are you kidding?”

Susannah scans the crowd for Ryan. For the past two years, RISD was all Susannah talked about.

She'd trudge every weekend to that portfolio class in the city, just to get ready for it.

"So was he awesome?" she asks brightly.

I swallow hard and try to answer, but my mouth is dry as pavement. Even though it's ripping my insides apart, I'm still covering for Ryan.

"Bet you were great on the lights, Jeremy," Susannah adds quickly. She cranes her neck, trying to spot Ryan in the crowd. "So where is he?"

Heart pounding, my mind hiccups through its storehouse of facts. I reposition myself to block her view. There's no time to try texting Ryan a warning.

I could tell Susannah. Tell her how Ryan has been sneaking around behind her back for over a year, even hooking up with two college juniors in a motel room during one of our out-of-town meetings. But defying the Morgan machine by pointing this out would take too much energy. Instead I blur. "Did you know the Flying Horse Carousel in Watch Hill was once part of a traveling carnival?"

She laughs and shakes her head. "What? Jeremy, sometimes you can be such a—"

But her voice trails off as her gaze wanders past mine, her smile crumpling like a paper bag. I follow her line of sight and I know this is it. The crowd has thinned around Ryan, enough for her to see him with his mouth smashed against Claudia's.

"Oh, man," I gasp. I turn to comfort Susannah, but she is already gone.

I stand, dithering, wanting to run after her and apologize for letting her walk into this ambush.

But, no. This is something Ryan needs to take care of. I might have signed on to sweep his mess under the rug, but I'll be damned if I'm going to clean up after him. I push through the crowd to get to him.

"What? She *what*? Did you know she was coming back early?"

I feel my face heat. "No."

Ryan pushes a pouting Claudia off him, his stage makeup still glistening and thick, traces of Claudia's lipstick smeared on his lips. "Good job, Jeremy. You could have at least texted me."

My hand curls into a fist. I stuff it in my jacket pocket. "She ran out," I say. "Maybe you can catch her."

Ryan shrugs, and without a coat, stalks out of the theater into the night. I wait a few minutes, then follow. Susannah's car is gone, and so is Ryan's. I try to call Susannah, but she doesn't pick up.

I get in my car and focus on resisting the water bottle's siren call, panicked glimpses of my waking nightmare crashing through the floodgates, the terrifying memories swept through with it. The rain and the torrents of water sweeping past, draining into the Gorge, forcing me to remember. To relive it. No. Not *now*. I need to stay clear.

Since eighth grade, when I discovered that liquor dulls my terrors, I have been a master thief and spy.

Not even Ryan knows.

Just a sip to calm my shaky nerves. One tiny sip to beat back the rising waters that threaten to drown me. I can do it. I pride myself on my steely self-control and my ability to remain stone-cold sober, even when the track team holds a victory keg party. They call me Jeremy the Teetotaler, Jeremy the History Nerd, who never partakes.

I snap open the glove compartment. The innocuous silver bottle is shoved behind the owner's manual, gas receipts, and a collection of PowerBar wrappers. I raise it to my lips and gulp once, twice, three times, the cold liquid igniting as it hits my throat. It takes two, three more gulps to slow my heart to normal speed. The bottle is nearly empty. I cap it and return it to the compartment, warmth flowing to my cold fingers. I'd need to drink three times as much as that to lose focus.

Swerving through the deserted black roads, slick with rain over the ice, I follow my usual running circuit. This is familiar turf. Practically my backyard.

Yes. I can do this. Susannah knows my route, so I hope she's come this way and parked, knowing I'd find her. ~~She wants me to find her. To comfort her. I'll tell her everything. How I'm sorry for lying to her. For letting Ryan hurt her. And maybe, at last, she'll accept that it's not Ryan she wants, but me.~~

But there's no sign of her.

After driving and searching fruitlessly, my mind churning with outcomes, the now-driving rain blurring my windshield, I can't stand it anymore. My heart is racing. Just one last sip to fortify myself is all I need.

When I round the next hairpin curve, my headlights flash on Ryan's car parked behind Susannah's, both engines running. I squint through the rain and mist and spot them behind the guardrail, illuminated in the headlamps' cone of light. There's no shoulder on this side of the road, so I pull over when I can, about twenty yards past them.

When I finally get out of the car, I can hear her shouts over the racket the rain makes. My head is buzzing, but my thoughts are clear.

In fact, they've never been clearer, as the roots that entangle me fall away.

The damp air smells like freedom.

Susannah screams, and pounds at Ryan's chest with her fists. He shoves her hard and she falls backward. I don't see her get up again. Raucous arguments are nothing new between Susannah and Ryan, but I've never seen him hit her before.

There's a steep decline into the woods where they've chosen to have their argument, and I worry Susannah could have gotten hurt. Ryan disappears now, too. *What the hell are they doing?*

I begin to run at full tilt. I still have some distance to cover, but that's no problem for me, even with the Absolut pumping heat through my veins. But my boot heel catches on a wet leaf and slides out from under me.

I'm flying, but I land softly.

I should have worn my running shoes, I think crazily, then scramble to my feet.

There are blinding lights. The squeal of brakes. Breaking glass.

I don't make it to the other side.



*Then*

Art class was mandatory freshman year, and I'd spent most of my summer griping about it. I preferred to be out running, not cooped in a smelly room with Mr. Wallace, the creepily silent art teacher who looked like an iguana, but with even less personality.

None of my track buddies were in the class with me, so I fidgeted on my stool, trying to figure out a way to get an extra period of gym.

Five minutes after the late bell rang, a bronze-skinned girl with a cloud of hair a shade lighter than her skin flounced in. She wore a tight-fitting black T-shirt and baggy black cargo pants tucked into lace-up combat boots. Mr. Wallace's iguana-eyes followed her to the empty stool next to me. When she got closer, I could see the tiny white hand-written letters on her shirt that said "laugh."

I'd never seen anything so beautiful in my life.

"Is that an order, or a noun?" I whispered once Mr. Wallace looked away, busying himself with the attendance roster.

A slim eyebrow arched over one bright green eye. "You don't remember me, do you?"

"If I'd met you before, I wouldn't have forgotten you."

I rubbed my sweating palms against my jeans. Scrawny as I was, I knew I had no chance with the girl. But at least I could charm her with my biting wit.

"I looked a little different back then," she said, leaning in so close I could almost taste the scent of vanilla on her skin. She pulled away just as Wallace began to read off the attendance.

After my name was called, she leaned in close again and said, "Jeremy Glass, say hello to your Pirate Queen."

I had no idea what she was talking about, but I did learn her name was Susannah Durban. The syllables sat on my tongue like melting sugar.

*Now*

There's some kind of fog in the room. Through the fog I see my father's eyes.

"Jeremy," he says. "Can you hear me?"

The fog is heavy. It bears down on me, forcing my eyes to close.

"Jeremy. Stay with me." Air hisses in my ears. I'm losing the sound, too.



It seems like a long time later when my eyes flutter open again. My gaze lands on my father. I struggle to understand why I am lying on my back trying to focus my vision on my dad's bloodshot blue eyes.

"Jeremy," he says. "There was an accident last night."

My mind scrambles to piece together the last thing I remember. Susannah and Ryan fighting. Oncoming lights. I struggle to sit, but everything, every inch of me screams with pain.

"Did something happen to Susannah?" I think I am shouting, but instead it comes out as a muffled

croak. I sink back on the pillow and let my eyes slip closed.

“Nothing happened to Susannah, as far as I know,” Dad says.

I sigh, my eyes still closed, the harsh light stabbing through my eyelids. My heart is starting to race and I remember the flask. And how buzzed I was as I stepped onto the road. My memory stops there. Had I ever made it across? “Was her car still there?”

The chair scrapes the linoleum as he slides it closer to me. “I have no idea. Susannah Durban isn’t really my main concern right now, Jeremy.”

My eyes blink open and scan the fluorescent tableau. Machines purr, hum, and bleep. Wires and tubes sprout from me like I’m some kind of space-age hookah pipe.

It’s me. I’m the one in a hospital bed. Not Susannah. I’m numb, floating, but I can feel my weight sinking into the hard bed. One foot pushes up from under the blanket and I wiggle my toes to make sure it works. The other leg, mottled and swollen as a raw sausage, is suspended above the bed, enclosed in a configuration of rings and pins. It tingles vaguely, but doesn’t actually hurt.

“She was there. With Ryan,” I say.

Dad stares at me, his eyes weary and filled with something vague. It dawns on me that it’s resignation. It’s the same expression he dons before a particularly tough trial, along with one of his expensive but slightly worn suits. His calm demeanor makes me want to vault from the bed, run into the hall, and keep going.

No way that’s happening.

Dad sighs. “Actually, Susannah’s mother, Trudy, called this morning to tell me Susannah never did come home last night, as if I could do anything about it.”

*Was she on the run again?* Susannah had run away seven times since Freshman year. Dad had had to intervene on Mrs. Durban’s behalf to stop child services from placing her in foster care.

“I told her that, at the moment, I had more pressing things to attend to,” he adds.

“Shit.” I glance at my engineering feat of a leg and realize that I won’t be running anywhere for a while.

Dad pushes away the salt and pepper flop of hair from his forehead. His face is creased and the skin under his eyes puffy beneath his lawyer’s composure. “Don’t worry about Susannah. Worry about yourself.”

He looks away. I can tell by the way he swallows he has more to say, but I’m too tired to ask. I want to know if they found the water bottle full of vodka, then I realize a simple blood test will tell them the whole story. But mostly I want to know where, exactly, Susannah is. I reach for my phone. No texts from her.

I don’t even think about Ryan, until he walks into the room.



Dad has ducked out for coffee. It’s me, Ryan, and the beeping of the machines.

Ryan pulls up the chair Dad has just vacated. “I came as soon as I heard.”

I furrow my brow and search my memories. “Dude. Weren’t you there?”

Ryan twitches the sandy curls out of his eyes. He studies me, confusion and sorrow mingling on his face. “I was so busy having it out with Susannah we didn’t even hear you. Then she started to run, so I chased her.”

I stare back at his uber-sincere expression. This from a guy who was pissed I hadn’t lied well enough for him. I grind my teeth. “She *ran*? I thought I saw her fall. It’s all rocks, and then there’s that steep slope to the reservoir.”

Ryan shrugs. “She tripped, got up and started running like a mad cow.”

“She tripped, or you pushed her?” I try to sit forward, but pain lances through my leg as if a team of chainsaw-brandishing dwarves have crash-landed on it. I fall back shakily onto the pillows.

“Take it easy, Jer.”

I search my mind for details, but the night is hazy, a mix tape of rain, vodka, and bright lights. And then Susannah’s face is in front of me—glistening lips, autumn leaf eyes, tears sparkling on the rims. The urge overtakes me, like it always does when there are things I can’t face—the urge to run. But I’m pinned to the bed like a butterfly specimen. “Where is she now, Ryan? My dad says she never got home last night.”

“Jeez, Jeremy, how should I know? I *did* follow her. It’s pretty rough going on those rocks. It hasn’t changed since we used to fish there. And the weather last night was hideous. The ground was slippery. I lost my footing and wrenched my ankle. I couldn’t keep up. I just lost her.”

“So, she vanished into thin air. And a high school track star like you couldn’t keep up with her? You expect me to believe that?”

“C’mon, Jeremy, what’s up with you? It wasn’t like I didn’t try to follow her. She was hysterical, and I was worried because she cut her head when she fell. But I could barely walk with my ankle, you know, and I lost track of her. I figured she probably doubled back to where her car was and took off. I got back to the road just as they were loading you into the ambulance. You can check the police report. They asked me if I’d seen what happened, but I didn’t find out it was you in there until later.”

“You left a bleeding girl stumbling around in the woods and you didn’t wonder why her car was still there,” I say in a monotone. “And your ankle looks okay today,” I add.

The nurse comes in, adjusts my drip bag, then leaves. Ryan leans forward, his voice soft. Reasonable. “She wasn’t that hurt. Just a scratch. Shit, Jeremy. You know Susannah. She pulls these stunts all the time. She used to run away all the time.”

“Right. I saw you hit her, Ryan.”

Ryan turns a bit green. “C’mon, Jer. It was just a little shove. If you saw us, then you know she was slamming me with her fists first. I wasn’t going to *do* anything with Claudia Herman. Suze is just—*oversensitive*. You know how she gets.”

I’m getting fuzzy. It must be the drugs they keep pumping into me. The words kick out like a knee to the groin. I’m shouting now, my voice hoarse, my mouth flooded with a sour taste.

“You mean how she gets when you *fuck around* behind her back?”

I want to suck the words back in. In all our years as The Lone Ranger and Tonto, I’ve never violated the sidekick rules. Even when I had to bite my tongue so hard it bled.

Outside my room, I hear voices speak rapidly in urgent tones, too low to understand but loud enough to recognize. It’s Patrick Morgan, *Esquire*, talking to Dad. I’d know his booming voice anywhere. Ryan’s uber-influential father is probably here to make sure the Morgan interests are safeguarded—as in, Ryan’s name is kept clean. He had to have heard my outburst and now Dad’s most likely supplicating himself and pleading to the Almighty for forgiveness on my behalf.

Clouds of cotton breeze over me, my eyes closing. The drugs are claiming me again. I almost forget Ryan is still here, beside me.

“That’s not what we fought about, Jer,” he says softly.

Behind my closed lids, I still see only Susannah’s face. “Then where the hell is she, Ryan?”

*Then*

“Pirate Queen?” I repeated, at a loss for words. My brain, which was used to snapping facts in place like Lego bricks, groped helplessly for something to latch onto.

“In the playground. With the bossy kid. I gave you a Buffalo nickel. I bet you still have it.”

I scratched my head and blurted, “Wait. How long ago was this?”, just before Mr. Wallace turned around to glare menacingly at us.

Then it all comes back to me. We were eight, Ryan and I. Ryan’s babysitter and my mother were sitting on the playground bench, yakking with the other babysitters and parents. Ryan and I were deep into an epic Pirate Quest. Ryan was Captain Hook. I was the first mate. *Of course*. We had a six-boy team of trusty crewmen at our command. We’d just landed on the deserted island, and according to the map (the one I’d scribbled in crayon on a napkin in the lunchroom earlier that day), we were getting close.

The last thing we needed was a girl intrusion. Girls were gross. Yucky. Annoying. A pathetically skinny girl with dark skin, a mop of lighter curls, and eyes like lime-green lollipops swung silently from the monkey bars, watching our every move. We ignored her. Until she jumped down and stalked over to us, all knees and elbows, topped with a ridiculous orange bow that was almost as big as her head.

“I’m the Pirate Queen, and I bet I know where the treasure is.”

Ryan leaned on his long pirate’s staff, a big stick we’d found in the woods that lined the playground. My gaze shifted between the girl and Ryan as he sized her up. He squinted. I squinted, too.

“No, you don’t,” he said. “Girls don’t know anything.”

“Oh, yeah? If you let me on your treasure hunt, I’ll tell you where it is. Take it or leave it.”

Ryan swung the sweaty curls from his eyes and squinted harder, his lip curled into an exaggerated sneer. “First, you have to pay us a pirate bounty,” he said. Even then, he was great at playing a role.

But the girl was, too.

She shrugged and pulled a four-leaf clover and a Buffalo nickel from her pocket.

Ryan pocketed the clover and tossed the nickel to me.

She seemed to be on her own at the playground. After an hour of intense play, a car pulled up and honked. The Pirate Queen bounced off with a quick goodbye.

“I would marry that girl,” I said to Ryan, watching her go, the Buffalo nickel in my pocket.

“You’re a dork,” Ryan said. “Girls are stupid.”

We never saw her at the playground again.

And there she was. The Pirate Queen. And her name was Susannah.

Susannah Durban.

After class, in the hall, Susannah pulled me aside. “So, do you?”

“Do I what?”

“Still have the nickel.”

In my mind, I scanned my cluttered shelves full of mementos. I never threw anything out, especially something potentially valuable. I knew just where it was, but I hesitated. I didn't want her to peg me for the geek I was. "Um, probably."

"I'd like it back."

Proximity to this girl was pumping icy fire through my veins. I was helpless under her command. If she'd told me to walk down the hall like a chicken, I'd have probably done that, too. But she summoned my cool and kept my head together. It was a skill I'd be perfecting over the years. "Sure. Okay. I'll look."

"Will you walk me to my next class, Jeremy? I have no idea where West Hall 3 is."

I cleared my throat, honored, yet disturbed that in my feverish state I hadn't offered to be her knight in shining armor first. "Sure," I bumbled. "That's the Bio Lab. I have that fourth period."

She glanced at me and smiled a darkly shy cat smile, as if she knew she'd just taken permanent possession of my soul.

On the walk to West Hall 3, I tried to make casual conversation and wondered if she could detect the tremor in my voice. I'd had crushes before, fleeting little fancies that blew in and out with the breeze, all, of course, unreciprocated. But this was different. This was not a breeze. This was a hurricane gale. "So, uh, what brought you back to Riverton after all these years? The thriving cultural scene?"

Riverton has exactly three restaurants, a nature preserve, an ice cream shop called Awesome Cow, a library, a supermarket, and the Riverton Historical Society. The Society was founded through the largesse of the Morgan dynasty, primarily to document and showcase their near century-long stranglehold on the town and to preside over the properties they'd donated to the state. In it you can see old photos of the whole Morgan brood, from their original dry goods store to the three mansions overlooking the river, one now a historic site. There's a young and handsome Patrick Morgan on his wedding day when he married Ryan's mother, Celia. If you squint, you can even see my parents holding hands in the background. You can see pictures of Patrick, with numerous athletic trophies. There's a graduation photo on a framed yearbook page, Patrick and his friends in caps and gowns, beaming megawatt smiles in black and white.

"Ha! My mom's a realtor. She was showing a house in Riverton that day when I told you I was the Pirate Queen. Last month, she found out that the house she grew up in was on the market. So she grabbed it, and back to Riverton we are."

I struggled to focus and connect this exotic creature to the little waif from the playground. The pointy ankles and skinny ribs were all smoothed over in streamlined curves. I was actually short of breath, as if I'd just sprinted a mile. "Your mother grew up here? So did my parents. Maybe they already knew each other."

"Maybe," she said, her gaze suddenly distant, then added, "Hey. Where is that bossy kid with the big stick? Does he still live in Riverton?"

"His name is Ryan. Ryan Morgan. If your mother is from here, then she has to know the Morgans. They basically own this town."

*Now*

Time in the hospital is formless. Shapeless. People come and go, but coherent thoughts are hard to come by. I drift slowly up from my dreams to find Dad by my bedside, his eyes even more shadowed through with red veins than before. I have a fleeting thought of how quiet the house must be with his rattling around alone without me to hassle.

"Jeremy," he says. "They've operated."

The words shock me off my cloud of cotton fuzz. "On *me*?" Dad gives me his sorrowful one

cornered smile, as if there's a tax on using both sides of his mouth. Or maybe they don't work tandem. I realize I can't even remember what his two-cornered smile looks like, or if he'd ever had one.

"On your leg, Jeremy. The break was very serious. Your tibia was fractured in three places. The doctors say you have compartment syndrome, which is when—"

It's a known fact that Dad reverts to jargon during times of stress. Usually it's legal jargon, but medical terminology is more suited to the occasion. I cut him off with my own trademarked brand of issue avoidance. "Did you know that there are historic records of bones being set all the way back to 3000 BC?"

"Jeremy." He sighs. "This is serious. You're going to be off your feet for a while. And—and the doctors won't know if the surgery took for about a month."

The last words sting like the peeled skin of a blister. "Took? What does that mean? My leg wasn't cut off and reattached, was it?"

Dad's face is blotchy and purplish. The breath whistles out through his nose. "No. It's all there. He stands abruptly. "I'm going to send the surgeon in to speak to you. Maybe she can explain things better than I can."

"Dad, just a second. Was Ryan there when they loaded me into the ambulance? He says he was. And his car should have been there. He says it's on the police report. Did you see the report?"

He stares at me for a beat as if I'm speaking a different language. "Does that really matter right now, Jeremy? Look at you."

"It matters to me."

Dad heaves a sigh. "I saw the police report, Jeremy. The truck driver that hit you called the police, reported the accident in and waited with you until the ambulance came. There won't be any charges filed. There was no one else there. Ryan went for dinner with his parents after the show."

"But, Ryan was there with Susannah! I saw his car. I saw him. He says the police talked to him after the accident. Asked him if he'd seen it. Why would he lie?"

My father's face grows red. "Jeremy. Please. You were in a terrible accident. What you think you remember may not have been what actually happened. I'm an attorney, so I know—people have been convicted on the false memories of witnesses. Be careful about what you claim you saw, because your recollections may be faulty."

"I know what I saw. Ryan was there. We just talked about it. Ask him."

"Patrick Morgan made sure I got a copy of the report, and there's absolutely no mention of Ryan being a witness at the accident scene." Dad wipes his brow and continues in a low and soothing tone. "This will all blow over when Susannah turns up. So settle down. You have other, more important things to think about right now. Like your health. The doctor will be along in a minute."

Dad scoots out of the room, leaving my confused mind to make sense of the conflicting accounts. *Why would Ryan say he was there if he wasn't?*

Instead of the doctor, a very small person, her tiny face lost in a fury of dark hair, shuffles in hesitantly, like Dorothy approaching the Wizard. She's wearing a white uniform and holding a small package.

"They said it was okay to come in. Is this a bad time?"

I glance at my leg. It's swathed in white gauze and suspended by an elaborate system of wires and pulleys the Brooklyn Bridge would envy. "Are you a nurse?"

She shakes her head. "I'm Marisa. I work for Mrs. Durban."

Mrs. Durban. Susannah's mother. I'd met her maybe three times, but we'd barely spoken. Something about her fierce eyes and harsh features put me off. I can't imagine working for her, and I feel pity for this slight girl.

I detect a faint accent. Her eyes are large and luminous. She looks about eleven. She looks like she's about to pee her pants.

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I check out her boobs. Definitely not eleven.

I know this girl. She goes to my school. But she's nearly invisible there, someone who slips from shadow to shadow, barely stirring the air as she moves.

She hands me the package, messily wrapped in brown paper and covered in marker scribbles. I turn it over in my hands and spot my name in the jumble.

Marisa is skittish, like a cat at the edge of a riverbank. "Mrs. Durban found this in Susannah's room. She asked me to bring it to you."

"So no one's heard anything from Susannah yet?" I ask, still turning the package over and over. My fingers tremble. I've lost track of time in the hospital. How many days have I been in here? Two? Four? A week?

"No. Not that I know of." Marisa says, and turns to leave.

"Do you want me to open it now?" I ask, though I regret it instantly. The package is meant for me. Susannah wrote *my* name on it. Me.

I glance at my phone on the bed table. My calls to Susannah have gone to voicemail, text messages unanswered. Where is she? Is anyone looking for her? Suddenly, I'm afraid to open the package.

"I have to go now," Marisa says. And she does.

I'm alone with my trussed-up leg and a package from Susannah.

The phone shuddering beside me nearly jolts me off the bed. It's a text. A YouTube link from Susannah.

I click the link and it directs me to another one of her animations. Leaves float through black space in the herky-jerky, stop-action way that is Susannah's style.

*She wanted to study animation*, I think. She'd just come back from visiting her way older half brother, Dennis, in Rhode Island. One of her mother's cast-offs, Susannah called him. She'd often wondered how many more there were. Going to RISD meant everything to her. Why on earth would she run away now, when she was almost free? Where would she go?

I think of her face as she told me she skipped out on the college tour, and watch the small screen cluttered with Susannah's personal iconography. Old gravestones. Torn lace. Faded cigar boxes.

Before she'd left, I'd barraged her with interesting tidbits about Rhode Island and she'd scribbled them in the ratty little notebook she took wherever she went. The first circus pitched its tent in Newport in 1774. The world's oldest operating carousel is in Watch Hill. Hence, the pen from Watch Hill.

And, sure enough, a carousel horse flies past an eerie circus tent.

I shudder.

This is recent.

And I wonder—has Susannah been keeping secrets of her own from me? From everyone?

The scene closes in on a mound of dirt. A pair of disembodied hands unearth a peeling cigar box. The box opens. Inside is a word in old wood-type lettering. And I have my answer.

## SECRETS

Shaking, I rest my phone upside-down on the bedside table.

My eyes close, and all I can see is her face, watching me, asking me silently what I'm going to do, forcing me to relive the many ways I've failed her.

I lie there, the package sitting on my lap. An hour. Two hours. Time here is, again, shapeless, measured by the beeps of the equipment I'm connected to. I step onto the cloud that has lowered itself

like a magic carpet.

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*Then*

As if she'd conjured him just by the mention of his name, Ryan ambled down the hall, headed straight for us, his eyes locked on Susannah. I guess I might have wished somewhere deep inside my animal brain that Susannah would have been as mesmerized with me as I was with her, but that tiny hope was quickly snuffed out when I saw the look in her eyes.

I knew that look. It was the glazed expression most girls got when they laid eyes on Ryan Morgan. Susannah's lips had fallen open, as if she'd been struck dumb by a holy vision, and I wondered where that tough little Pirate Queen had gone. Gritting my teeth, I imagined Ryan as he looked at her, the saintly corona glowing around his head full of wavy gold hair.

I wanted to pull her aside and warn her that, though I loved him like a brother, angelic Ryan was already, even in ninth grade, hell on girls. In eighth grade he'd torn through about five relationships leaving a trail of flaming wreckage behind him, broken-hearted nymphettes who followed me around hungry for any little crumbs of information about him I could provide.

But I did no such thing. Despite his flaws, my loyalty was to Ryan. Steadfast and true, I squeezed my sweaty hands into my pockets, clenched them into fists, and clamped my mouth firmly shut.

*Now*

The weight of the package on my lap pulls me back. So does the persistent throb in my leg. Where are the nurses when you need them?

I tear open the package.

Inside is another package wrapped like a gift. On it is a label. The word SECRETS is stamped across it.

I tear it open, terrified, yet desperate to know what's inside. Terrified to learn what burden she wants to place on me. Terrified that I owe her and that I'm partly to blame for her pain.

It's a wine-colored velvet pouch with a flap. Inside are five candles, a pendant on a red cord, a piece of chalk, and a parchment envelope. The pendant is the Kabbalah one Susannah always wears. The one Ryan gave her. I strain to recall if she was wearing it the night she disappeared, but there is no way to know for sure; she'd been wearing a jacket. My hands sweaty, leg grinding with pain, I pull the paper from its envelope.

There's a Post-it note stuck to it, written in Susannah's neat hand.

*I'm entrusting my secrets to you, Jeremy.*

The pain chews its way up my leg. I read the title of the paper under the Post-it.

To Summon The Dead

*Where the hell are those nurses?*

The pain shoots pointy roots up my spine and into my cranium. I reach for the call button and struggle to get the package under my pillow, squeezing my eyes against the tears.

In the time it takes to blink, the pain brings a flash of crystal clarity. And I know.

I may never run again.

History is only a crutch that won't support me any longer.

But history, because of my love of it *and of her*, is why Susannah is entrusting her secrets to me.



*Then*

The look of rapture on Susannah's face was reflected in Ryan's. It was a look of curiosity and wonder, a look of such intensity that I knew anything I did to come between them was pointless. Right there in the hall near West Hall 3, I witnessed two people falling in love.

It felt like horses were trampling over my chest, like my ribs were cracking, the bone shards jammed into the soft tissue of my lungs.

But I kept the smile pasted on my face and managed to speak between painful breaths. It was a skill I'd come to master over the next three years. "Susannah. This is Ryan Morgan. The bossy kid from the playground. Ryan, meet the Pirate Queen."

Ryan's blue eyes dilated, his mouth falling open like he was about to take a bite of the most delicious ice cream cone ever. "Huh?" he said, eloquent as usual.

"From the park. It was like five, six years ago? Remember when we used to play pirates, and the girl came along and you said that girls were—"

"Yeah! I remember. I said girls were stupid."

I didn't mention that I was the one who'd vowed I was going to marry her.

Susannah smiled and flipped some stray curls out of her face. "You really said that?"

Ryan chuckled. "What did I know when I was eight? Where's your class? I'll take you there."

And just like that, he slipped a muscled arm over her slim shoulder and they drifted away as if I wasn't there. As if they'd been standing alone. I watched them go, the ridiculous smile clamped on my face like a too-tight mask.

*Now (November 26<sup>th</sup>)*

Six days later, I'm carted out of the hospital, a pincushion on wheels.

I've had no further contact from Susannah and there's been no sign of her. Search teams have combed the reservoir banks and turned up nothing. Trudy Durban has been on the news nightly pleading for information about her whereabouts, leaving me to ponder why she's never called to ask me what was in the package.

Dad rolls my chair out to the car, my casted leg pointing the way like a battle standard.

My leg, the doctor tells me, is on probation. Okay, that's not how she put it. Compartment syndrome. Nerve endings starved for oxygen. Potential tissue death. I heard every other word, but I got the point.

Wrapped in gauze and held together by pins and rods, my leg has a month to plead its case.

I'm sent home with a set of crutches, metal ones, with cushions to support my armpits and protruding rubber grips that comfortably fit my grasp. There's a sturdy permanence about them, unlike the one-size-fits-all wood crutches you can buy in the local drugstore.

I don't trust them.

Dad's had a narrow makeshift wood ramp built over half the steps so I can roll in through the back door. His study-slash-den on the first floor is to be my home while I recuperate. I maneuver the

wheelchair to the window and watch the sparrows land at the feeder Dad and I set up on the ancient gnarled oak at the end of our driveway last winter. I want to fly away too, but instead I'll be collecting dust like the artifacts on my shelves.

Days pass. I don't want to think about what's going on with the crushed bone beneath the raw skin of my injured leg. I can't feel my toes, but even after three painkillers my shin still announces its throbbing presence. A forbidden sip from the Civil War canteen from last year's re-enactment, cleverly hidden behind the towers of DVDs in the wall unit, can't stop it, either.

I rise on the crutches and stumble around the room, back and forth, back and forth, dragging my Eiffel Tower of a leg. It's good resistance training, I tell myself. By the time I get the cast off, my other leg should be made of iron.

Then I bench press. Ten times. Twenty times. Fifty. Until my arms burn and my neck sinews are about to snap.

I fall into the chair, soaked with sweat, and watch the birds some more.

It doesn't work. The pain is still there.

I flick on the TV and turn to the local news. The media feeding frenzy over Susannah's disappearance has reached a fever pitch. Trudy Durban's pleas have hit a chord. She is convincing, a grief-stricken mother, begging for word of her daughter. Even the town which had rejected her pleas to her pleas. But there's no sign of her. Thirteen days and counting since Susannah disappeared. Since my leg began its battle for survival.

Kabbalah. Susannah's latest in a continuum of shifting passions. Before her trip, I'd found an old book on it. I'd made a passing effort to bone up on it so I could appear interested, but it's not enough to help me now.

Are the clues to her disappearance somehow linked to her interest in ancient Hebrew mysticism? Lately, Susannah's art had taken on a distinctly spiritual quality. She'd started an amazing drawing, a brightly colored diagram of numbers, circles, and Hebrew letters superimposed over a gnarled tree drawn with gray ink on black paper. She'd smiled cryptically and told me it was the Tree of Life. She'd never shown me the finished art.

I think about what little I learned of Kabbalah, or know about the Jewish religion in general. Dad never pushed for much except for a menorah at Chanukah and Passover dinners at my aunt's in New Jersey. Mom wasn't much of a Christian, either, except at Christmas, when her exquisitely traditional ornaments emerged from attic boxes. Every December they'd hung from a live spruce Dad and I chopped down from the woods behind our house. It has been a long time since we've had one of those.

I close that door fast. Memories of my mother are not safe terrain.

Religion was never a big factor in my upbringing. As far as I knew, it was even less so in Susannah's; according to her, her mother was raised Jewish, but converted to Catholicism. Susannah claimed she was everything and nothing.

But while I immersed myself in history, running, and other less acceptable pursuits, Susannah was searching for something more.

What was she looking for? Had she found it?

I review what I've learned and find nothing to help me. The writings of the Kabbalah are high spiritual teachings intended to explain the workings of the universe, the connection of the earthly plane to the divine, and the human soul's relationship to all of it. Very positive stuff. Nothing diabolical or demonic in there that I could find.

Yet I remember Susannah was particularly interested in the explanation of what happened to the soul after it passed to the next plane.

I shiver and think of the velvet pouch, buried at the bottom of my gym bag. What other, dark roads had Susannah's quest led her down?

During my hospital stay, someone from Durban Realtors kept calling my cell and hanging up. Probably Mrs. Durban or Marisa, wanting to know what was in the package Susannah left me. I wonder if Marisa ever told Trudy Durban about the package in the first place. I imagine she would have torn it open, even if it was addressed to me.

I shudder. I can't face Mrs. Durban. Then I'd have to admit I was there that night. That I failed to help Susannah because I'm a drunk.

Time is rapidly taking on a new shape. Instead of the smooth lake of history, a place I can wade into and do the backstroke, it's a whirling funnel that tapers to a single point, impaling me on the memory of the night Susannah disappeared.

Suddenly, I can't get away from the surge of memories that press against my skull, threatening to crack it wide open. I fight the useless urge to run. Birds with clipped wings can't fly.

*Then*

Ryan didn't call, text, or show up on Facebook that night. But I did see he'd added a new Facebook friend to his impressive stable. I stalked Susannah's privacy protected profile, learning nothing and not daring to add her. At midnight, the friend request from her came in, and without hesitation, I accepted and jumped to her page. Photos of her. Photos of her art. Crazy art. Wild art. Towering constructions of junk teetering in unknown backyards, a much skinnier, younger Susannah smiling beside them. And then a chat window opened.

Hey, thanks for adding me. Sorry about what happened today. I get easily distracted.

I was seething, aching, worse than the aftermath of any marathon run. But I knew from the start that girls like Susannah didn't go for dorks like me. It wasn't the natural order of things. And there she was, offering an olive branch. Maybe even offering a chance at friendship.

And so, for fear of getting blocked from her circle, I became a satellite, a planet caught in her orbit. Agreeable Jeremy Glass, who didn't care if his heart was passed through a meat grinder, as long as he got to breathe the same air.

No problem. I typed, each idiotic keystroke like a nail hammered into a coffin of my own making. See you in class tomorrow.

*Now*

My phone trembles on the unmade bed. A text. Probably Ryan again. He's been checking in every day, sometimes twice, along with a few other kids from the track team. After pressure from Dad, I've long since apologized for my outburst, claiming it was the drugs that loosened my tongue. Under the circumstances, Ryan forgave me. Now he and the guys want to visit, but I'm just not in the mood to see anyone.

I propel my wheelchair to the bed, rolling over and around the clothes and other crap scattered across the floor. Though Dad has tried to straighten up, the mess has grown to epic proportions and leaning down from the wheelchair to pick up my clothes makes my leg explode with pain.

I freeze, staring at my phone until my eyes burn.

The text is from Susannah.

Maybe, I tell myself, she's finally getting in touch. Maybe this entire episode really is an elaborate prank of hers, some ill-conceived attempt at the performance art she'd admired after a class trip to visit trendy galleries in Chelsea. Eventually, everything Susannah saw, learned, or thought about filtered into her art.

She wouldn't go back to her brother in Rhode Island. Maybe she's got other half siblings, or estranged uncles. Maybe she's located her mysterious father. By now, she's realized the whopper of a mistake she made by running off. Maybe this whole thing is about punishing Trudy Durban, payback

for being a lousy mother. It's a well-known fact that Trudy is a bitch with a dangerous temper and violent streak. In one notorious incident, Trudy shot a neighbor's dog that had wandered into her yard, claiming the dog was possessed. Susannah claimed that one time Trudy had even threatened her.

Improbably, I picture Susannah by the ocean in a white dress, her bronze curls lifted in the salt breeze.

The vision crumbles. Instead, I see her closed eyelids, paper-thin and bluish, dried leaves and bits of dirt caught in the snarled strands spread around her like seaweed.

My temples throb. I open my eyes and read the text. I'm breathing hard. No actual response to my repeated texts. No confirmation that she's read them. Nothing but another private link to a stop-action animation.

Ryan does a herky-jerky hula across a colorized photo of a backyard. It's my backyard. He stops at my tire swing and strikes an Egyptian-like pose by the gnarled oak tree at the end of our driveway, and then pulls off his smiling face like a mask to reveal a frowning face beneath. A flowering bush sprouts. A sign is pitched into the ground.

## SECRETS—DIG HERE

Shaking, I sit in the chair and watch the sun sink between the naked trees. I doze and wake up, my neck cramped, back stiff. It's late now. Dad has left me dinner on a tray and probably gone to bed. We've spoken so little since I got home. What is there to say that won't dredge up the stuff we can't talk about?

I lie back on the reclining leather lounge in front of the flat screen and flick on an old movie from Netflix. Some study. I'm pretty sure this is where Dad kicks back and watches porn, though sadly I can't find any evidence of that. Instead, I watch some stupid eighties movie about girls and nerds which hits a bit too close to home.

I don't realize I've fallen asleep again until I wake gasping, heart thudding against my ribs. My lungs are filling with water. I claw at my throat, unable to breathe. Unable to scream, until I finally choke out a cry for help.

It's starting again.

With my usual defenses stripped away, I'm powerless to stop it. Now there's nothing to hold back the return of the terrors.

### *Then*

I was nine when Mom picked me up from camp that afternoon, the summer after encountering the Pirate Queen. It was just an ordinary day and Mom was there, like always, but that day something sharp scraped inside my stomach, ordering me not to get in the car. On occasion, Dad left the office for a bit and drove me home for Mom. For some reason I couldn't explain, I distinctly remember wishing this were one of those days.

Even though the loop of that day has replayed so many times in my head, I can't remember anything particularly unusual about Mom as she strolled over to my cluster of unruly campers. She was neatly groomed as always, prettier than most of the other moms, that army of frowzy, chubby, and harried women who emerged from their refrigerated SUVs, clutching their containers of iced coffee to claim their young.

Mom's blond hair was pulled into a crisp ponytail, her refined features free and clear of makeup. She patted my head and kissed me on the cheek. I caught a whiff of her French perfume and a splash of cinnamon mouthwash, but as she pulled away I saw that feral wildness in her eyes, the empty hopelessness I'd sometimes glimpse when she thought I wasn't looking; the glazed look of a wounded

deer as it lies dying on the forest floor.

~~Her hands gripped the steering wheel so tightly the knuckles were white. She glanced at me in the rear-view mirror and smiled, but her eyes were puffy and red.~~

~~If I'd refused to get in the car with her, maybe it never would have happened.~~

~~Mom might still be alive.~~

*Now*

I hear myself screaming.

Hair unkempt, Dad comes skidding into the study in his bathrobe. I fight to draw breath into my constricted airways. He settles beside me on the chair's armrest and pulls my sweaty head against his chest. "It's okay, Jeremy. It's okay," he murmurs.

I force my breathing to calm and pull away.

"Was it one of those nightmares again? I thought you stopped having those."

My heart speeds up again. I want to run. I want to run.

I want to drink.

"I'm okay, Dad," I finally manage to say. "It happens sometimes, but not as much as—you know—when it happened. I'm kind of used to it, I guess."

He stands, pats my head, and then steps back and stares at me for a beat before he speaks. "The doctor tells me that these things are normal after a trauma. And you've just been through another. . . He stops, the words that almost slipped out trapped safely behind his teeth. "Get some sleep. You sure you don't want me to help you onto the daybed?"

I meet his gaze, questions sizzling on my tongue. The ones I'll never ask.

*Why? Why did she do it?*

Dad looks so earnest. So concerned.

Yet no words have ever been spoken between us about what caused my mother to drink every afternoon—and drive her car off the road into the Riverton Gorge with her nine-year-old son strapped into the backseat.

I feign sleep and listen to his slippered feet retreat to the hall, back to the world beyond this room.

And now I can't stand it anymore. Dad's study has become the inside of Mom's car as we sailed over the embankment and plunged into the Gorge, dark waters rising to my eyes, filling my mouth and throat. The pressurized silence as Mom's hair floated free from its binding in slow motion, like the sea anemones I'd seen at the aquarium.



I wait a half hour until the house noises go silent. Until I'm certain Dad has gone back to sleep. Grabbing the crutches, I throw them over my lap and wheel myself into the kitchen.

Dad's stash is in the pantry. He thinks I don't know that he's never tossed out the contents of Mom's well-stocked bar, the rows of Absolut lined up like my collection of tin soldiers. He's hidden the treasure trove behind a few massive bags of barbecue charcoal. Over the years I've been refilling them with water.

I can't imagine why he keeps them.

A shrine to Mom? A test for me?

I raise myself gingerly onto the crutches, appalled how tough it is to balance, even with my workout regimen. I hobble into the dark pantry, careful not to scrape the crutches or fall. I'm shaking, the need for the liquor's cold warmth calls out from deep inside my bones, drowning out the shame I feel as I reach for what killed my mother and almost killed me eight years ago.

I find the bottle I've marked as having the purest undiluted vodka. I've only turned to the pantry

a last resort, so there's plenty to last me.

~~Uncapping the bottle, I take a swallow, knowing how the liquid will dull my mind, slow my reflexes and make balancing on these crutches an Olympic challenge. But I've run marathons after downing half a bottle. And won.~~

*Then*

The next day at school, Susannah was wearing an identical black T-shirt, this time with white cargo pants and flip-flops. Her toenails were painted black; though I tried not to stare at her feet, I couldn't help but notice there were tiny words painted on each nail. Her hair was piled high on her head and it took all my strength not to reach over and pull out the contraption that held it all there, so it would tumble around her shoulders in a shimmering waterfall of curls.

Her T-shirt had the same tiny word "*laugh*", which was now joined by two other words, "*and weep alone*..."

"Is that a time released T-shirt?" I asked, and was treated to a Mona Lisa smirk.

She pointed her foot and wiggled her toes. "Look."

I leaned in closer and read the message on her toenails. "...*world laughs with you. Weep, and you weep alone.*"

"Is that your motto?"

"Yep," she said, already bent over a box of found material, from which we were all expected to emerge under the reptile gaze of Mr. Wallace, to create a self-portrait that was both breathtakingly original and meaningful.

"It's mine, too."

I stared miserably out the window, pondering the exact number of crows that perched on the telephone pole, trying not to think that my self-portrait should be a rusting old car at the bottom of the Gorge.

By the time I'd snapped out of my reverie, Susannah had constructed a figure with a protruding nose, cage and outstretched arms entirely from tiny bits of windshield glass and a coat hanger.

"Is that a portrait of me?" I asked, smiling. "You know, Jeremy Glass?"

Susannah slanted her head, dead serious. "You're a real kidder, aren't you? Where's yours?"

"I'm still thinking." I said, actually wondering why this sunshiny girl was making a portrait of herself with broken glass. "I guess I'll do a running shoe. That's what I am. A runner."

She smiled, then said, "Aren't we all?" Returning to her efforts, so deeply engrossed in her work that she didn't even notice when the bell rang.

When I think of Susannah, this is how I like to see her—deep in concentration, her brow furrowed, I wonder if art for her is like running is for me, an escape from the dark things that always threaten to black out the sun.

*Now*

The sharp edge of my panic dulls. I'm ready to face Susannah's treasure hunt now.

I hobble unsteadily to the back door and peer out. A black void looms beyond the three steps from the stoop to the driveway and the oak tree beyond. Navigating the steps with crutches is a skill I've yet to master. Doing so with a half-bottle of vodka sloshing through my veins is a whole other level of challenge.

But I have to know if there really is a message in the animation, or if Susannah is just playing with me. Why would she send me animations and not get in touch? Anger flares unexpectedly.

She's abandoned me in my time of need.

Where the hell is she? I have to know.

One precarious step, two steps, three. My sneaker touches asphalt a few seconds before the rubber crutch tips catch up with it. I'm still standing.

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I pause, mustering the courage to cross the dark driveway to the old oak tree that was so clearly the one in the animation. I imagine the air rushing by my face as I run, muscles pumping as the pavement purrs beneath my rubber soles. The ground slants. It's the longest few yards I've ever faced. Longer than the final leg of the marathon I'd run last summer, gripped by fever and violent stomach cramps.

Across the dark gulf of pavement, I reach the tree. My tree. I wonder if the animation is a map that will guide me here. *But why?*

I'm at the base of the tree, moonlight falling on its tangled roots. The night wind nips at my T-shirt and flaps my pajama pants. Ragged clouds frame the moon's taunting smile. A few raindrops fall. My shattered leg registers nothing, only the steady ache from within the crushed bone, pounding to its ominous drumbeat.

The vodka is wearing off and I'm hit by a wave of exhaustion. If I could run, I'd sprint back into the house and crawl under the covers. But coming out here is a commitment. Now I have to follow through.

I glance up to the second-floor windows. Dad's room is still dark. The wind kicks up. Cold rain slaps the driveway, plastering my hair to my scalp. Gingerly, I lower myself until I am sitting on my butt, the scaffolded leg jutting out like a bridge to nowhere. Rain muddies the place where the growth of moss has been disturbed not so long ago.

Using the tip of my crutch as a spade, I loosen the dirt. The rubber tip bonks something hard. Swiveling, I dig with both hands and feel the corner of what appears to be a box or something.

Rain slams me with repeated thuds. Muddy water fills the hole I've made as I pull a cigar box out of the ground. Though the colorful paper label has nearly disintegrated, I recognize the box as the one from Susannah's animation. I open it. There's nothing inside except a plastic baggie with a photo of Ryan sealed within. Someone has defaced it with markers and Wite-Out to give him long eyelashes and a mouthful of Dracula teeth. There's a strip of paper in Susannah's neat printing that reads:

*Ryan has secrets, too.*

I close the box, let the rain wash away the grime, and tuck it under my arm. My mind revs, but then stalls. It's as oversaturated as my T-shirt, unable to process the fact that the box in Susannah's video link actually exists.

Water eddies down the slope, pooling around my butt. Cold liquid streams off the metal contraption holding my leg together. I feel nothing but a vague burning itch as I laboriously make my way back inside the house.

# CHAPTER

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## five

*Now*

I wake to quiet. Slivers of light creep across the clothes and papers strewn around my floor. I'm sprawled on the daybed, naked save for the strip of sheet draped over my privates like in Renaissance nude. I don't remember peeling off my soaked clothes or where I'd put them. My head vibrates like a rhapsody played on steel drums. My leg thrums, the swelling skin between the pins hot to my touch.

Dad has left my daily fix of Vicodin on the mini-fridge with a glass of water, a banana, and a bowl of dry cereal. There is a carton of milk inside.

I dress and chase down the two pills with gulps of water before the grumble of pain becomes scream. I settle on the bed and wait for the Vikes to kick in and keep the gnawing pain at bay.

Watching my chest rise and fall, I imagine Susannah wiping my brow with a cold compress. What I really need right now is a nurse. A very pretty nurse.

My thoughts skim through lazy fields of memory and imagination. Susannah cavorts through the tall grass flinging flowers at me. My stomach rumbles. I'm starved.

But I'd rather drink before the golden memories turn ugly, grow fangs and bite me.

I consider reaching for the few remaining dregs of vodka in the canteen above my head, but not that idea. Too much effort. The Vicodin will have to do.

Hours drift by. If I don't move too much, the numbing haze of my meds masks the grinding gear in my leg well enough that I'm almost comfortable. I reach for the Civil War history book on the night table. Mandatory reading for some, guilty pleasure for me. My thoughts flow back to a different age. I pore over battle trivia and primary documents. At first, I think the rapping at my door is artillery fire. The book flies from my hands.

"Dude! It's me!" says a muffled voice through the closed door. "The back door was open. Can you come in?"

Ryan. "This isn't a good time," I call out weakly. My leg slowly heats like a sausage on a spit. I realize it's been hours since I last took a painkiller. There's an aching heaviness between my ribs. My hands are like weights at the ends of my arms.

"You in there, Jer?" Ryan calls through the door.

I try to answer, but before I have the chance, the door bursts open. Ryan peers at me, arms folded. "Dude. You look like crap."

"Thanks for clearing that up. I was just sitting around wondering if I really do look as shitty as I feel."

"Sorry." Ryan smiles and sets a box on the night table. "The guys and I thought you'd like the complete set of Ken Burns' Civil War documentary. To kill the time while you recuperate, you know?"

My gaze flits to the boxed set of DVDs on the table. I'm kind of touched they picked something I'd really like. Normally my heart would leap at such a treasure. But it can't even muster a flutter. "Cool. Tell them thanks."



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