



THROUGH

TO

YOU

EMILY HAINSWORTH

# THROUGH TO YOU

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**EMILY HAINSWORTH**

BALZER + BRAY

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# DEDICATION

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*To Stefan, for showing me another world,  
and to Courtney,  
for helping me find my way there*

## EPIGRAPH

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*For this is Wisdom; to love, to live,  
To take what Fate, or the Gods, may give,  
To ask no question, to make no prayer,  
To kiss the lips and caress the hair,  
Speed passion's ebb as you greet its flow,—  
To have,—to hold,—and,—in time,—let go!*

—Laurence Hope, “**THE TEAK FOREST**”

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IT'S THE SAME DREAM I'VE BEEN HAVING FOR THE PAST TWO months—Viv walking away from glass and fire, her laughter echoing through the night. She's coming toward me, her lips stretched into a seductive smile. Her hips sway and I want to touch her so much it hurts. I want to bury my fingers in her black hair. She's a dark, stunning contrast to the bright flames rising behind her. I anticipate breathing in her scent—it's like spring—and running my hands over her skin, never letting go. But then she stops and looks away from me. The fire dances on her cheek. I want to scream, but I am mute. I reach for her, but I can't move. She turns back toward the flames.

I've lost her again.

I close my hand into a fist and I crack one eye open. Mike Liu stands at the end of the library table, looking uncomfortable.

"Hey, Cam. The bell rang."

I wipe drool from my mouth and peel my face off the spiral notebook in front of me. I rub at the deep ridges it leaves in my cheek. "Thanks."

He hesitates, adjusting the backpack on his shoulder. "See you at lunch?"

I don't look up. "Yeah."

As he walks away, I wish for a second I'd said more than two words to him. But two words are all I manage to give anyone these days.

Other students filter out of the library. I'm alone.

I slump back in my chair and stare out the window. It has a good view of the street corner. I stare at it until something sweeps by the glass—a tangle of black hair. I stand up too fast, nearly knocking the chair over. My legs freeze; I blink, and it's just a raven flying by. I exhale. Viv has been dead for two long months, but she's still everywhere.

And nowhere.

Outside it's too warm for early October. Indian summer. The leaves are still hanging on to the trees, the flowers are still blooming. Everything is so *alive*. I wish winter would hurry and freeze it all. I'm supposed to be in trig, but I make a beeline for her corner. I changed my schedule so I could see that wedge of concrete from every class. By all appearances, it's an average intersection where two sidewalks meet. The old utility pole that snapped in two has been replaced, the landscaping patches put back together. The cards, pictures, and drooping stuffed animals are even beginning to blend in. The flowers I brought this week have wilted.

It's been two months exactly. Today.

Tonight.

I try not to look at the smiling photographs, but one of them catches my eye, taken straight out of the yearbook. It's from freshman year, when she was still cheerleading. Her curves didn't quite fill out yet in her uniform then. She wears red and white ribbons in her hair. Her cheeks are pink and healthy, her smile even wider than I remember. I force my eyes to the notes, though I've memorized them all.

*Viv, you are missed*

*Can't believe you're gone*

I dig my fingernails into my palms. They don't *miss* her. I recognize every one of the signs, every name. None of them would have called her their friend to her face. You're not supposed to opt out of the popular crowd like she did. Either you're never in, or you fall from it, like me.

I need a cigarette.

There's a pack at the bottom of my bag, and I rifle through notebooks and loose papers searching for it. My fingers graze cellophane and I withdraw the half-crumpled box, tapping it against my palm. I flip back the lid, place a cigarette between my lips, and fumble for a lighter. My pockets are cluttered, and I get annoyed when I don't immediately find one. I pull the bag off my shoulder and dig through it until I notice a slight bulge in the lining—eureka. There's a small tear that I hastily widen, itching to light up, but when I pull my hand out and see my Zippo instead of the cheap Bic I was looking for, I stop.

My thumb traces over the monogram she had engraved on it for my seventeenth birthday—C.P. I close my fist so I won't have to look at it, but the *feel* of it is worse. Cold, smooth, and hard. My knuckles turn white. Before I can think, I chuck it into the semi-mangled shrubs where Viv's front tire came to rest. I'm sure that's the spot, because when I woke up next to her lifeless body, covered in rain, glass and smelling of gasoline, I stumbled around the car and *fell* into those bushes. They were prickly and unforgiving, and I found scratches under my shirt days later. I don't remember much of that night besides her bloody shape slumped against the cracked driver's-side window, but I remember those fucking bushes.

If I hadn't dropped the stupid lighter—if Viv hadn't laughed at me for being a klutz and reached for it herself—if she hadn't been going quite so fast so we could get to my house and into bed—and if it hadn't been raining—I might not be standing here staring at her pathetic shrine on the sidewalk.

I wish it were mine.

Stupid fucking lighter.

Coming here was a bad idea. It always is.

I'm brushing past the utility pole when I hear a voice over my shoulder.

"Cam?"

I turn, but no one's there.

I turn again, all the way around, and I see no one, but I could swear a girl said my name. The voice had a metallic quality, as if spoken through a spinning fan blade.

"Mr. Pike." A deep new tone takes me by surprise. I whirl around to see Coach Reed—*Mr. Reed*—the vice principal of Fowler High. He gives me this assessing look as he approaches, the one where you're supposed to feel like he can see inside your very soul. It hasn't worked on me since I quit the team.

"Pike, you're standing on school grounds."

I wait for the punch line.

He plucks the cigarette from my mouth and hands it to me. Shit.

"Even if you were eighteen, smoking on school grounds *is* prohibited." He gestures across the street to the graffitied bus shelter, where the smokers of Fowler High seek refuge, kids and teachers alike. "If you're going to cultivate the habit, do it *off* campus."



I stare at the bench under the shelter, at the beat-up safety glass that's so scratched it doesn't qualify as a window anymore. I look back to Viv's shrine, to the cards, the bushes, the utility pole. You wouldn't be able to see any of it through that glass. I look down at the unlit cigarette in my hand. Did I think I would have enjoyed it without her? I toss it into the gutter.

"Just quit, sir."

What do you know—three words. I walk away before Mr. Reed—I will not call him Coach—has time to answer. I can *feel* his concern. Since I'm supposed to be in trigonometry, I stroll back toward school, pulling open a beaten metal door down the hall from the art room. He calls out to me.

"Camden—"

I throw the half-smoked pack of cigarettes into a trash can before the door clicks shut behind me.

The cafeteria overflows into the main hall, as usual. Budget cuts or bake sale mismanagement have forced the school to *maximize space* rather than expand. The sad thing is, almost everyone prefers eating out here in the dim, outdated hallway than eating at the tables in a brightly lit room that reeks of stale pizza. Almost everyone, including me.

There are alcoves along the wall for the numerous double doors leading into the auditorium, and the doorways are always hot property because they're more private, but I snag one early. Two girls glance over when I sit down. They go quiet, and I can feel one of them staring at me. I sit cross-legged and don't look up. The other one mutters and I hear them zipping their backpacks. I relax a little—they're going to move.

But then one of them comes and kneels by me.

"Hi ..." She's a redhead with a heart-shaped face. I don't recognize her. Probably a freshman or sophomore who doesn't know any better. I turn my head and don't acknowledge her. She continues softly, "I just wanted to say ... I'm sorry. I didn't know her, but it's really sad. She was so pretty."

My hair hangs in my eyes. I don't look up, don't even act like she's there.

She stays next to me for an awkward half minute, waiting for me to respond while I study the floor tiles and wish people would stop trying to pretend they care. Finally, she gets the message. She quietly picks up her bag and joins her friend again.

"See?" the other girl says. "Now do you believe me?"

They walk away down the hall. I exhale.

I don't eat. Viv and I used to leave for lunch, or at least go outside to smoke. I was just assigned a book for English, so I take it out of my backpack. I don't know what the story's about, but people are way less likely to talk to you if you look busy. There are no windows in the hall, and the cafeteria faces the athletic field. This is the only part of the day when I can't see the street corner. I keep the book open and try to disappear in my alcove, waiting for the period to end. The lunch voices meld in chaotic chatter around me.

I'm dozing off when a backpack thuds down beside me. Mike. I forgot he said something about meeting for lunch. I return to the book and try to look like I'm really into it until I notice I'm holding it upside down. Mike notices too, but he pulls out a sketchbook and doesn't say anything.

An obnoxious set of voices breaks through the lunch hum, drawing my attention from the upside-down book. Logan West and Sharif Rahman lead a group of my former teammates; they're pushing their way down the hall.

Sharif hollers at Mike, "Hey, Liu!"

"Rahman," Mike returns. "What's up?"

"Hey, Pike!" Logan shouts at me. He flips me off.

I look away. If Viv were in the alcove with me, I wouldn't have even seen him.

~~After they're gone, I don't move. Mike is absently sketching. He takes out an energy bar and starts to chew. I can't believe he still eats those things. I wouldn't play a game without them once upon a time, but they taste like chocolate sawdust. He leans back into the shadows of the alcove, chewing while he draws, and it's all I can do to sit there with him not saying anything.~~

"Look, Cam—" he says suddenly. "Is there anything I can do?"

I straighten. "I'm fine."

He puts down his pencil and gives me a sidelong glance. The kind he used to give me if I called in a bad play. I tense up, and he sees it. "I just—I see you out there on the corner all the time. It isn't healthy, man."

This is what separates Mike from those other guys walking away down the hall: He's the only one I stayed friends with—who stayed friends with *me*.

And right now, I hate him for it.

"I'm fine. I'll be fine," I repeat.

Mike shakes his head. His voice gets low. "Have you thought about maybe taking down the things outside? The notes and stuff?"

I raise my head and really make eye contact for the first time.

He takes one look at my face and starts backpedaling.

"I just thought—Maybe it isn't helping?"

I clench my teeth. We'll both regret it if I open my mouth now. I pick up my backpack and head away down the hall. The bell rings and the space around me floods with people pressing in on me. I shove my way back to my locker at the other end of the building to get my history book for fifth period. When I finally get there, I mess up the combination twice and have to mouth the numbers myself to get them right.

17 ... 08 ... 31.

On the third attempt, I lift the latch, and my locker swings open. *World History II* sits atop the stack of books at the bottom. Just as I reach to get it, a large hand flashes out and slams the door shut again. The meaty fingers stay splayed over the metal in front of my face. French-fry breath is hot on my neck. I turn and stare into Logan's flared nostrils. He reminds me of a bull, and I'm standing between him and a bank of red lockers. His arm blocks my escape. He stares me down, tight-lipped and unblinking. His blond hair is spiked into daggers. I look away. Two years ago, I might have been him. Two months ago, I wouldn't have cared. He laughs and high-fives Sharif over my head. I watch them leave. Logan jumps to touch the ceiling halfway down the corridor. They move down the emptying hall like they own it.

I abandon my locker, ignoring the bell as I head back through the halls. I don't even glance at the secretaries in the main office as I walk out the front doors, away from the whole fucking school.

MY HOUSE IS EMPTY. I WANDER THROUGH THE ROOMS, UNSURE OF where I want to be until I realize I don't want to be anywhere. Every room has a hole in it—where a chair was, a stereo, a set of books, a closet of clothes. Mom never filled them in after Dad left, and I guess I didn't care. But since the accident, all I can see are the holes in things.

I end up in the kitchen. Open the refrigerator, stare into it, close it. Finally, I read the note in the fruit bowl, wedged with some cash between a too-soft pear and a brown banana. Mom hasn't learned to text, so the fruit bowl is our courier.

*Cam—*

*Don't forget your appt. with Dr. Summers again.*

*Late tonight. Here's money for pizza.*

*Love,*

*Mom*

I count the cash and stick it in my pocket. She's never changed the amount. Still enough here for me and Viv. I stare at the number for the pizza place on the fridge. It's called Pizza Emergency, and they actually deliver pizzas in an old converted ambulance. Viv used to think that was hysterical. She'd call up and say, *You've got to help us—we need pepperoni, STAT!*

We both laughed at the dumb joke every time, but now all I can picture is the broken pole on the street corner and an ambulance driving slowly away, with its lights off.

I walk to my room, fall on the bed, and sleep.

I have the dream of Viv again. I'm almost thankful for it. She looks so beautiful, so carefree. Only this time something's different. She's still walking toward me, away from the flames ... but I can't hear her. Everything is silent.

She gets to that place by the pole where she always stops, but there's still no sound. I see the look in her dark eyes, the light of flames dancing on her cheek—and then I hear a voice. But it isn't her. It's metallic.

“Cam? Camden!”

I wake up reaching for her and she isn't there. I'm alone in my bed. I bury my head beneath my pillow and hate everything, whisper every impossible thing I've wished for since that night in August. All I get is a damp pillow. When I feel like my eyes are going to swell shut, I walk blindly to the bathroom and stand under the shower. I let cold water force my eyes open, numbing my skin until I'm isn't burning with longing.

I don't realize I'm still in my clothes until I shut the water off.

Dr. Summers's office is located in the basement of her split-level house, ten blocks over from mine.

Her golden retriever, Lance, meets me at the door, wagging his tail. The office is furnished with two ~~incredibly soft leather couches and a rolling desk chair. The carpet is beige. Pictures of her husband and son dot the walls.~~

Right away, I can tell something's up. Dr. Summers doesn't sit in the chair like she always does. She perches casually on the other couch, resting her elbow on the arm. Her clipboard is in her lap. Her short, fading-blond hair is still tucked neatly in place, but her glasses are next to her on the table, and she studies me with careful eyes.

"It's been a couple weeks since I saw you, Cam." Her smile stays in place. "How are things going?"

"Sorry, I forgot last week."

This is such a shitty lie, I'm embarrassed. I've been coming here every Friday at four o'clock for the past two years, since I quit the team. Since my dad took off. She knows how I feel about him, about football, and about people at school. I've always told her the truth about things, but each week for the past two months, I've been telling her lies. I don't *want* her to know how I really feel about Viv. I mean, she knows how I felt before, but I can't tell her what goes through my head these days. That my life ended when Viv's did. That the accident was my fault. That every day I wake up and wonder why I'm the one still here.

Lance shoves his nose under the door, and I glance over.

Dr. Summers sees this, and her face brightens.

"You know, I'm going to break my own rule. Let's let Lance in, just for today."

Before I can say anything, she opens the door and the dog runs into the room like he's just won the jackpot. He plants himself on my feet, tail wagging furiously, and stares up at my face with his tongue lolling out. I glance at Dr. Summers, who is back on the other couch. She nods, and I pet her dog's head, because how could I not with him looking at me that way?

"It's a good day for *you*," I whisper into his ear.

Dr. Summers leans forward. "But not a good one for you?"

I shut my mouth, look from her to her dog, and see how perfectly she set that up.

"No," I say, defeated.

"It's been two months today, hasn't it?"

I don't say anything.

"How do you feel about that, Cam?"

I grit my teeth. I have bunches of Lance's reddish fur squeezed into both my fists. I loosen my grip and pet him normally. He looks at me with huge brown eyes and licks my arm.

"You've been trying so hard *not* to talk about Viv since she died ..."

My eyes sting. I stare into nothingness and bite hard on the inside of my cheek. I've never cried here and I'm not about to start. I'm almost positive she knows I've been lying to her, which makes this even worse. Lance rolls over for a tummy rub.

"Cam," she says gently, "I'm here to listen."

I focus on Lance, skimming my fingers over the soft gold hairs on his belly. I feel her watching me, waiting for me to speak. I can't stand it.

"I have this dream—about Viv," I say. Dr. Summers's shoulders relax, and I know this will be enough, for now. "I keep having it, over and over, where she's coming toward me, but then she turns away...."

She talks about what the dream might mean to me. I sort of listen. It's mostly psycho-babble, but I have to seem interested or I'll never get out of here. By five o'clock, I'm exhausted, but it's worth

because Dr. Summers looks pleased when she walks me to the door.

~~“Thank you for sharing the dream with me, Cam.” She squeezes my shoulder. “I know you’re in a lot of pain, and it’s *normal* for you to feel that way ... but I also think Viv wouldn’t want you to go on like this forever.”~~

I’m petting Lance on the head, but my hand halts on his ear.

“What do you mean?”

“Just that *you* still have so much life to live ...”

“And Viv doesn’t?” I say flatly.

Dr. Summers pauses. “That’s not what I mean—”

“What then, you want me to forget her?” My skin prickles.

“No, nothing like that ...” she says. “I just think Viv would want what’s best—”

“How do you know what she’d want? You never even met her!”

The dog tries to lick my hand, but I pull away and slam the door behind me. I can’t believe my shrink tried to put words in my dead girlfriend’s mouth. I storm down the sidewalk for one block, then another, but pretty soon my bad leg twinges and then my eyes start to burn. I slow to my normal pace, trying to remember how to breathe—on my own. I can’t even figure out what to do next, where to go. I close my eyes and try to think what Viv would want. If she were here, she’d tell me ... I’d know.

# THREE

---

FALL MIGHT MAKE AN APPEARANCE AFTER ALL THIS YEAR. I WANDER around town for hours but find myself on the corner again. I wish I'd brought a jacket. It's eleven o'clock, almost exactly the time it happened. The moon is bright in the sky, illuminating the pictures of Viv, and I can't tear my eyes away. It's just a cluster of plastic-sheathed photographs, but in them she looks *alive*. They make her feel real, like she's only out of town, and when she gets back, this will all have been a dream. A nightmare.

I stand in front of the utility pole, arms locked around my torso. With my luck, Reed will show up to chastise me for being on school grounds after hours, but I had to come. I don't really know why two months should matter so much, but I guess that's like asking why every second that's passed since the awful night matters. There's a large rock at the edge of the bushes that I sit on and shiver. If Viv were here, we'd share a cigarette and put our hands inside each other's clothes to keep warm. I smile at this, lose myself in the thought of her skin ... until I realize if Viv were here, we wouldn't *be* shivering on this stupid corner. I press my palms against my eyes.

Tires squeal in the distance, and I look up to see headlights streaking down the road. The car turns the corner, running the red light. They swerve into the wrong lane and they're pointed right at me. Someone shrieks. I close my eyes. A breeze gusts across my face, exhaust rushes into my nose ...

*The car accelerates through the rain. The light ahead is green. I place a cigarette between her lips, but the Zippo slips through my fingers, landing somewhere by her feet. She takes her hand off my thigh with an exasperated laugh and reaches for it—the light turns red. She slams on the brakes, grab for the wheel—the rain slides sideways across the windshield. I never hear her scream.*

I open my eyes. The taillights are small now, disappearing down the road. A beer can bounces three times across the pavement and comes to rest in the middle of the street before I exhale. Friday night fun.

I lean against the pole, hidden by the shadow it casts in the moonlight. The wind picks up, needling through my clothes. The street is empty now, but I blink at the place where the car disappeared. I was hoping it would hit the pole and kill me, too.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

I pace back and forth in front of the teddy bears, notes, and dead flowers.

Maybe Mike was right ... maybe I should take them down. A shrine won't bring her back. Or make the accident not my fault.

My body aches with memory. I'm desperate to talk to her. She'd understand how I feel—she always did. It used to be like we each knew what the other was thinking: I'd complete her sentence and she could anticipate my thoughts. I remember a time at the Coffee Haus when she stopped me in front of the counter and stared deep into my eyes. She turned to the barista and said very seriously, *Vanilla latte and a bagel*—like she could see inside my head. She filled in the gaps, made me feel complete.

The only person in my head now is me.

“Cam?”

Viv?

I stop pacing and look back toward the pole. A new light cuts through the darkness beyond it. I squint at it, expecting to see another car, but it isn't headlights. This glow is different.

It's not coming toward me and it's not in the road.

"Cam!"

That voice again. I turn around—and around.

No one's there.

But I still see the glow. I take a few steps sideways, because the light looks like it's coming from behind the wooden pole. A fire? I approach it quickly, but when my jeans brush the bushes on the other side, I freeze. One by one the hairs stand straight on the back of my neck. There are no flames.

A green light glows behind the utility pole.

In it stands a girl.

A girl I can see *through*.

"Cam!"

Her skin, clothing, and hair are transparent and tinted green in the strange light. Through her body I watch leaves on the bushes rustle in the wind.

I've lost my mind.

My stomach feels like it's digesting a cannonball, but I raise my gaze to her face, waiting for it to shape-shift into something demonic and horrifying, because I've seen more than enough horror movies to know this is what I should expect. She stays girl-shaped, for now, but she has an odd expression. There are streaks down her face—as if she's been crying.

This is definitely *not* Viv. I don't know who this is.

I panic, trying to decide what to do. The most obvious thing would be to run.... My left leg aches with the urge to pound pavement, but my right one disagrees. Injury always wins. For the moment though, neither fight nor flight seems necessary.

She stands still, staring at me.

"Cam?"

I'm not sure how to respond to an apparition that knows my name, so I just nod.

She clasps her hands together and wipes her face. "Oh my God."

And then it hits me—I'm hallucinating. I've finally cracked. I reach for the phone in my pocket, ready to call Dr. Summers, but before I can think of how I'll explain this, the girl says something else that shocks me.

"Are—are you a ghost?"

I hesitate, and look her up and down. She's still transparent, still slightly green, but her clothes seem normal enough. She's got on boots and a short skirt with a jean jacket. Her hair falls straight around her shoulders. For good measure, I inspect my very opaque arm. Am *I* a ghost?

"Are *you*?" I say.

My hallucination bites her lip.

Why didn't I hallucinate Viv?

And then a new thought occurs to me: That car that drove by—maybe it didn't swerve in time. Could it have hit me? Am I dead? Did I get my wish after all?

And if I'm dead, where's Viv?

The wind whips my hair, slicing through the fabric of my shirt. I must be hallucinating. I'm too goddamn cold to be dead. I stamp my foot and shove my hands in my pockets. She just stands there, wiping at her face, not speaking.

"I *said*, are *you* a ghost?"

The girl's eyebrows knit together, which is disarming because she stands between me and the school, and I can see the art classroom window through her forehead.

Her lip quivers. She reaches into her pocket and holds something out to me. I take a step closer, think better of it—in case she *isn't* part of my brain—and squint. There's a metallic green rectangle in her palm. On the front, in block letters, it's engraved—*C.P.*

A ghost is holding the lighter I threw away this morning.

Holy shit.

“Cam—”

“Where did you get that?” I snap. “How do you even know my name?”

Her face crumples, and she covers her eyes with her hands.

I run. I don't even consider my old injury until I'm halfway down the street. All I can think is *go-GO, get away*—but can you even run from your own brain? Pain shoots through every bone in my right leg, and my muscles buckle to a stop. I clench my jaw so tightly the tendons in my neck compete in agony with my leg. I look back, terrified I'll see some ghost-girl vision coming down the road after me.

But I'm alone.



## TWO MONTHS, ONE DAY.

Halfway through my shift at Smith's grocery store Saturday, I give in and let myself think. Sleeping didn't make the memory of what I saw go away, and herding shopping carts is a shitty distraction for my brain. Every time I turn around, I half expect to see the girl—hear her voice. Maybe I was mistaken and she's a normal human being. Ghosts don't wear jean jackets. You'd hardly think that's what she was ... except for the whole transparent green thing. I try to stay focused on the shoppers, the parking lot, but my mind keeps leaping from the rows of plastic carts to what did *not* happen on the corner last night.

Maybe none of it was real. It might have been a dream, except I'm walking with a limp today because my right leg aches—like I actually ran from something.

Or am I imagining the pain, too?

I wasn't prepared for the two-month anniversary, that's all. I try to forget there will be more anniversaries—three, four, five, six months, a year—one thing at a time. Dr. Summers says stress does weird things to people. She'll never leave me alone if she thinks I see ghosts and hear voices.

I could call Dad.

The thought catches me so off guard, I'm almost hit by a cart a lady shoves in my direction. As he and I could even have a normal conversation.

I snake my earbuds up the collar of my jacket and crank the volume. No lyrics, just synth, drums, and bass. Everyone entering and exiting the grocery store walks in time to the drumming in my ears. No, I won't call. There's nothing to tell. I had another messed-up dream about the corner, like I have ever since Viv died, that's all. I'm not buckling now. I limp out to the farthest parking spaces, retrieve a cart marooned on a curb, and crash it into another basket.

I wouldn't call him even if the girl I saw *was* a ghost.

When I clock out of work, I don't head right home. I wander Fayetteville without any real destination except I stay far from the corner and the school. My calf muscle is still sore, but walking will stretch it out. I go down First Avenue from the grocery store, past all the fast-food places and a couple of strip malls. Our local grease pit, Fast Break, reeks of chili fries even from the street. They're playing *Casablanca* at the Chez Artiste—the first place Viv and I kissed. She got a job there one summer because it was close to Smith's Grocery. She'd sneak me into the projection room when I got off work and we'd stuff ourselves with popcorn, making up dialogue for the foreign films instead of reading the subtitles. She used to stroke the nape of my neck during the credits to make me shiver, and I'd trade kisses over the arch of her brow just to hear her gasp.

Eventually I find myself heading away from the bright restaurants and shops, following the road up the highest hill around until the pavement runs out. The water tower stands there, sentinel over town. Its massive gray cylinder isn't a destination in itself, though there's plenty of colorful graffiti around the base proclaiming who's been here and when. The dirt lot just beneath it is the real draw. When you drive up here at sunset, the sky is spectacular—not that anyone spends that much time actually admiring the view. Viv and I came our fair share in her little blue car. It's one place no one bothers

us because they had better things to do.

~~I hang back when I reach the edge of the lot. Saturday night it gets pretty full. Music pulses in the darkness from several vehicles. The windows are mostly rolled up, but every now and then I catch a murmur of voices, laughter ... two voices for every car.~~

I have no right to be here.

My lungs feel like they're filling with quicksand. Without Viv, I'm a creepy guy lurking outside other people's cars while they make out. I can't do this; I don't remember how—to get out of bed, to live my life, to *breathe*. I listen to the laughter, the conversations, and imagine the things gasped too low to hear. Things I used to have, that somehow made me complete.

Something brushes my neck, and I almost fall backward down an embankment. I paw behind my head—turning around and around, looking for ghosts, hoping for Viv. But there's nothing there. I step back up to where I'd been standing, under a low branch. The naked twigs on the end reach out to touch my neck. I break them off—tear at the branch until it twists and bends, but that part is alive and doesn't give in.

The house is quiet. I lie with my eyes closed, but sunlight streams onto my pillow. I sit up, swing my right leg over the side of the bed, and rub the scar that runs from the top of my thigh over my knee. My head still throbs. I close my eyes and try to remember if I dreamed, but if I did, it's blissfully forgotten. I'm starting to debate which is worse: the part of my life I spend awake, the part I spend in nightmares ... or maybe the part when I can't tell the difference. I glance around at my bare walls, the pile of clothes next to my bed. My desk is still a mess, the chair still knocked over from when I came in last night. But *no one* else is here—real, imaginary, or dead.

The newspaper is spread all over the kitchen counter. The dishes are starting to pile up in the sink and the dishwasher is beeping despite the fact that it hasn't been run since last week. I pull it open, close it, and the beeping stops.

There's a new note in the fruit bowl.

*Cam—*

*Trial Monday, working all weekend.*

*I'll be at the office if you need me.*

*Sorry! Miss you. XOXO*

*Love,*

*Mom*

I drop the note back into the fruit. Lawyers always work *more* on weekends, especially single parent lawyers. I pour some leftover coffee into a mug, stick it in the microwave for thirty seconds and drink it black while I stare at the business section of the paper. It beats the sports section, and I haven't looked at the full-color front page ... well, since August.

My stomach growls. I open a cupboard and pull out a box of Toasty O's and one of our mismatched bowls. Half of them are gone, as are half our plates, half our silverware, half our glasses. Dad might as well have taken them all; Mom and I hardly eat at home anymore.

I grab the kitchen phone and dial his number to tell him off.

It rings twice—

“Hello ...?”

I yank the phone from my ear and hold it at arm’s length, shocked that he *answered*—what was going to say? In the milliseconds that pass, I hear him breathing, waiting ...

“Cam? Buddy, are you there?”

I squeeze the receiver—I want to choke it.

I smash the phone into the cradle, stare at it, and repeat, slamming plastic against plastic, over and over until a piece of it snaps off. I let go, and the receiver crashes to the floor and starts to beep through its off the hook.

I lean against the counter and look at the shattered plastic on the floor.

My leg hurts.

If Viv were here, she’d make this all go away.

Or at least she’d know what to say.

I have to go back to the corner. Tonight. If there’s any chance I’ll see her again, this is it. I *saw* a ghost, there’s no other explanation. And even though it wasn’t Viv—there are lots of dead people—she has to be there too. Because if she isn’t ...

The universe just wouldn’t *do* that to me.

I STAND ON THE STREET CORNER BY THE SHRINE, AND THE STARS are out.

Viv smiles at me from her pictures.

I walk halfway down the block and back, in both directions. No one's here.

Nothing happens.

The air is finally starting to get that crisp, fall texture in addition to being cold. At least this time I have a jacket. I sit on a rock and blow into my hands, itching for a cigarette. There's a pack in my pocket, but I don't take it out. I guess I could look for ghosts anywhere, but the only time I've seen one, I was here. I wish I'd paid more attention to those ghost-hunting shows Viv always wanted to watch. *We should be prepared, Cam, she'd say. What if someday we need to catch one?* I swallow hard and try to remember any episode where people actually made contact with the supernatural, but it seems like it was all lights turning on and off and crackly audio recordings. I don't remember an apparition showing up on camera and speaking.

But I know what I saw the other night. Why couldn't it have been Viv?

I stand up, pace, and peer around each side of the utility pole.

Nothing.

I feel slightly pathetic, desperate, but somehow close to her.

And then a faint sound reaches my ears. I strain to listen. It's soft at first, but grows more distinct as if it's getting closer. There's a grating quality to it, but the tone is unmistakably human. It sounds like someone ...

Crying?

In three strides I've made it from the sidewalk, past the shrine, and into the bushes where it's louder, and I'm wondering if I should run again. There's a green glow behind the pole where there wasn't *anything* before.

Until the girl steps into view.

The light intensifies and it's impossible not to stare when she wipes a tear from her transparent cheek.

She studies me with the same haunted look as yesterday and holds my gaze a second too long. I have to glance away. The ghost girl wraps one arm around her waist and covers her mouth with the other, muffling a noise that seems to echo, like someone sobbing far away.

"Is there anyone else there with you?"

She looks confused. "What?"

"Is anyone *else* there?" My skin is cold and sweaty.

She fidgets uncomfortably. "Don't you recognize me?"

My mind races but comes up blank again and again. Her hair is long and smooth, though the color is simply a darker green than her skin. She's petite—with curves, but she's no Viv. I think I remember this girl's face, eyes huge and dark, but not weighed down with heavy makeup. She has a small, upturned nose and a pouty mouth that looks like it'd be cute if she smiled.

I've never seen this girl before in my life.

I shake my head.

Her eyes go flat; her hands fall to her sides.

~~I feel like I'm missing some huge puzzle piece. If she's a ghost, there should be some reason why I'm seeing her and not Viv.~~

Unless this is some kind of joke....

The girl keeps fidgeting, rubbing something in her palm, and then I see what it is.

The lighter was a birthday present from Viv, and I *hate* how this strange girl is clutching it, like she owns some part of me. As if it belongs to her. Anger surges through my chest. I snatch at it before I can even consider *how* she might be holding it, and I watch my own hand *turn green* in front of me. My fingers brush hers—solid, warm—I pull back. My mouth is open. No sound comes out.

I hold my hand up. It looks normal again.

But it tingles where we touched.

She's staring at her hand too. I can see the green-tinted whites of her eyes, they're so wide.

I back away fast.

"Cam, wait!"

My heel hits a rock, and when my ass hits the ground my heart almost stops, but I'm on my feet a second. I get to the middle of the empty blacktop, glance back, and stop.

She holds my silvery-green lighter in the palm of her outstretched hand, like she's offering it to me. This can't be happening—I'm *not* going back there. I don't want to go anywhere near this girl. But it's *my* lighter ...

Viv gave it to me.

The girl's face is unreadable, and all I can think of are the Greek myths from humanities class last year, where men fall prey to monsters in female form. I'd think that's what would be happening to me now, if the monster had thought to appear as Viv.

She stretches her hand out farther. The Zippo looks big in her tiny palm, the metal eerily green. My initials are familiar in the neat, square script.

I swallow hard and walk toward her, hesitate, and reach into the light. Every nerve in my hand is tingling, but I grab the lighter, clutch it ... and I can breathe. A fresh spring scent reaches me, like Viv's perfume, and I can almost feel the warm silk of her skin. I close my eyes.

"Cam, I've missed you...."

Viv?

My skin tingles when we touch; I can tell she feels it too. It has to be her ... isn't it? I don't want to open my eyes. I want to lay my lips on the soft skin beneath her wrist, trace up her arm to her mouth and melt into a never-ending kiss.

But she pulls me forward.

"Come back," she whispers.

I open my eyes and she *isn't* Viv. Two small, unfamiliar hands wrap around mine, and I can see through all three. The ghost girl is tugging me toward her, gently but firmly. My hand and arm up to my elbow are green. The strange translucence creeps up to my shoulder, across my chest, and it's like electricity under my skin. I look down, viewing my whole body green, and I think ... I'm ready. I'll give myself up to whatever this is.

I'm about to close my eyes again when I glimpse Viv's face in a picture to my left. The colors are drab and earthy against the solid wooden pole—in contrast to the bright flash of green. Her expression seems to say, *Don't leave me.*

My eyes pop open. I pull back and dig my heels into the ground.

"No—" The girl falters, and I turn to see the panic in her eyes. I open my hand to shake her off, but

she won't let go.

*The monster's got me.*

---

I shove her—as hard as I can. My hands connect with her shoulders, and she goes down. I haven't hit anyone that hard since football. For an excruciating moment, I don't think I'll make it back out the green light. But I see the photos, I see Viv, and it's as if she guides me to safety. My body is buzzing all over. I hang on to the pole, press my face into her picture when I'm safely out, praying for the energy to burn out of my skin. When it subsides enough that I'm no longer afraid to move, I sink to the ground. I crawl down the sidewalk until I'm far enough away, and throw up in the bushes.

IF I DON'T GET MY SHIT TOGETHER SOON, I'M SCREWED. I DECIDE the best thing to do is act normal, pretend none of it ever happened. I'll ask for extra hours at the grocery store in the evenings so I don't have too much time alone; maybe I'll start paying attention in class again—do homework. I've never seen *ghosts* while surrounded by people at school ... I rub at the skin where she touched me, and I shudder. Whatever that girl was, she wasn't trying to help me find Viv.

If I try to explain what happened on the corner to Dr. Summers, she'll probably call it a "trauma trigger." She's mentioned it before, that places associated with bad events can make people crazy or do something.

Only I *know* what I saw.

So I have until Friday at four o'clock—my next shrink appointment—to get under control. Which means no more corner, and no transparent girls.

I walk between cars in the parking lot with my head up. Today is the first day all year I can't wait to get to school. People slam doors around me and I listen to them complain about the parties that got busted this weekend and the quizzes they have this week.

They sound so *normal*.

Monday-morning announcements drone on while I stare at my desk. Something about a fundraiser for the Model UN, exciting new items on sale at the school store, and a mandatory pep rally Friday afternoon. I've always wondered how they get away with calling it that—*mandatory*. Like they're going to make you go by holding a pom-pom to your head?

*Everyone wear red and white for the team! Go Rams!*

I see my shrink on Fridays for a reason.

I take a shortcut through a hallway that runs past the gym, trying to make it to trig on time for once. I avoid these particular halls when I can, and my leg gets me out of phys ed, but the familiar tile outside the locker rooms and the smells of sweat and weathered athletic equipment bombard my senses now. I get a burst of endorphins and have to remind myself that my playing days are over.

I'm holding my breath as I pass the locker-room doors, swinging and screaming on their hinges. Kids filter in and out. I'm almost clear of them, ready to take a gulp of stale rest-of-the-school air when someone calls my name.

"Pike!"

I stop, letting my breath out through my teeth.

"Yeah, Co—Mr. Reed?"

"Can I see you a moment?"

"I'm going to be late for trig," I say.

"I'll write you a pass. It'll just take a minute."

He's gesturing to the nearby athletic office most of the coaches share, as opposed to his daytime vice principal's digs. Not that it matters to me anymore. I step into the empty office.

Reed closes the door after me and stands behind the desk. He's wearing a gray suit and blue tie, which makes him look like he belongs in the coaches' office about as much as I do. Instinctively, m

eyes wander everywhere else in the room. There's the shelf that's always been littered with mismatched, broken equipment. A box of brand-new uniforms sits open on the floor. Looks like girls volleyball won the budget argument this year.

On the wall behind Reed is the trophy shelf. It's a little more crowded than last time I was in here, holding tall brass tributes to everything from swimming to basketball to golf, going back decades. My gaze is drawn to a huge framed photograph standing off to one side. I swallow hard, taking in the familiar red jerseys from freshman year, the first year we made States. I'd made junior varsity at middle school, but ninth grade was the year Andy Lowery hurt his shoulder in the first game. The other varsity quarterback had moved over the summer, so Logan and I were called up. He won some of his games—I won all of mine.

There's a tennis trophy in front of the photograph, but when I tilt my head to the side I can see, and I remember. Andy's standing at the back, holding my arm high. Logan's kneeling in the foreground, with that familiar scowl on his face.

Blood roars through my ears. Reed gestures to the chair, and I sit down hard, trying to get my adrenaline in check. I feel like I'm about to run out on the field.

"How are things going, Cam?"

His voice brings me back into the room. I rub my right knee.

"Fine."

He hesitates, sits down across from me. "Look, I know I'm not your coach anymore, but this has been a tough couple of months for all of us since Viv—since Miss Hayward ..."

I clench my teeth. If *I* had died, would he be saying these same things to her?

"I'll be fine," I manage.

His forehead crinkles. "You've said that to me before."

I stare hard at the box of volleyball jerseys.

"I just can't help thinking about ..." he continues, "after you broke your leg—"

"I was fine then, too," I say as evenly as possible. "Look, is this about what happened two months ago, or two years?"

He tugs at his tie where his whistle would hang at practice.

"It's about *you*. Today. Right now."

"And I told you, I'm *fine*."

"I bought that before, Camden. But your girlfriend isn't here to pick up the pieces for you this time."

I look up. "What is that supposed to mean?"

His face turns red.

"Is there a problem, Mr. Reed? I make it to classes; I turn in assignments; I'm not doing anything wrong."

I'm not doing much, but I should still graduate.

"No, you're right. Your grades are passable." Reed has been tapping a pen on the desk between his hands. He sets it down and sits back in his chair. "I only asked you in here because I'm worried. When you quit the team after your injury, you shut everyone out except Viv, but now—" He breaks off. No one ever wants to say *she's dead* out loud. "I just ... don't want to see you give up like you did before."

I meet his gaze. "I appreciate the concern, Mr. Reed, but I *do* have a shrink." I rise from my chair. "Can I have that pass to trig?"

My heart pounds when I leave the office, but I ignore it, making a mental note never to come ne



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